

## ***Differential automatons: history telling as cinematographic heterogenesis in Histoire(s) du cinema by Jean-Luc Godard***

by PABLO GONZALEZ RAMALHO\*

### **Abstract**

*Histoire(s) du cinéma*, Godard's 90's series on the history of cinema in the 20th century, has virtually infinite perceptions to be extracted from. Considering the specific editing effect of speed differentiation, which Godard uses to bring out hidden virtualities from the classic cinematographic imagery, this article will focus on the direct relation to Gilles Deleuze's actualization on Henri Bergson's philosophy, specifically concerning the critics on cinema of the last one. Bergson's "instantaneous crosscuts" of perception are inherent in the character of differentiation, and as Deleuze shows, even having a mechanical automatism face, the cinema images, in the immediacy of its result, are also inherent in the perception. Thus, it can be deduced that cinema images present a differential kind of automatism. It happens that Godard's interventions in the images perverts the equidistance of their compositions, by means of differential speed manipulation, facilitated by video technology. By doing so Godard also actualizes Bergson's critics regarding the cinema, and just as Deleuze, he demonstrates the differential character inherent, or virtually hidden, in the images of the history of cinema. The present article will reveal different aspects in some of the "differential automatons" created by Godard in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.

### **Differentiation as machinic pulsation**

The very first moments of the chapter 1A of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* show the reels of an editing table, where a stripe of film moves forwards and backwards, in different speeds. Right after that, Godard is shown at his desk adjusting a paper sheet in the reel of a typewriter. As it is an electric typewriter, it types automatically in the paper sheet after Godard writes the titles of films with his fingers and then pushes the starting button. The concurrence of the two machines as a method of production, in Godard's history of cinema, puts the problem of the automatism in a double manner. Both text and film production have two moments regarding the automatism of the respective machine. The typewriter receives Godard's fingering writings, which have a human rhythm, so to say, and then, after Godard pushes the correct button, it types in a mechanic rhythm. Besides working between these two rhythm poles, the

---

\* Doctoral candidate at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and associate at Configurations of Film (Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany).

typewriting also makes the programming out of Godard essays, so that the separation between what he thinks and what and how he expresses, depend on a composite criterion. The same with the editing table that has a normal playing velocity, but for the editing selections, cuts and pastes, it works at different levels of acceleration back and forwards. One machine for the writing/reading (saying/hearing), and the other for the analysing/synthetizing (seeing/being watched). It is clear that what is at stake is a composite of deterritorialized and reterritorialized human body, attached to its machines. Here, it might arise the question on the function of this body in the production of history. Is it comparable to a software that makes the hardware works? Or, on the contrary, wouldn't it be a hardware amongst other hardware, obeying to a mind-software?

From Bergson's point of view, though, the activity of thinking would never be reduced to the cause/effect model, because he makes all the human faculties depend on sensori-motor questions. This choice opens a whole new range of logic parameters such as subtraction, reciprocal dependence and selection. When criticizing the way in which other philosophers put the relations between matter and perception, Bergson suggests that this problem should be put not in terms of the rising of perception, but in terms of its limitation, that is, how it makes its selections: "the sole question is, then, to know how and why this image is chosen to form part of my perception" (Bergson 1991: 42). Throughout its machinic pulsation method, Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* can be seen as an answer to this question.

### **Machinic pulsation as the rule of the game**

In the very beginning of Godard's history of cinema, the firsts titles of film, written by him in his typewriter, are "The Rules of the Game" (Renoir 1939) and "Cries and Whispers" (Bergman 1972). Why and how did he choose these two titles? The fact that this selection is made within the machinic dynamic as seen above, with the two poles of automatism, lead us to think about two different qualities, a slower, graver, close to a whisper, and another one, faster, sharper, close to a cry or a scream. This would be Godard's rules of the game for his history of cinema. A manipulation between two qualitative poles, inherent in the production of his history of cinema.

The pulsation from one pole to the other can be stated as a way of showing the historical images. They are manipulated, edited and shown as the history of cinema between two kinds of speed which gives them, at each appearance, the quality that expresses Godard's thinking about history. Shortly after the repetition of the two titles seen above, we see the image of Nicholas Ray in the tribute by Wim Wenders, "Nick's Film" (Wenders 1980), with a finger in his mouth, and as the image has its velocity manipulated in the way described above, Nicholas Ray's eyes opens and closes, also his mouth, as he would gain life and then stay immobile, repeatedly. A kind of puppet in Godard's hands, just as the following images of the soldiers

from “Ivan the Terrible” (Eisenstein 1944), wielding their spears, in and out. This should rely on the two main themes that Godard learned with the American director D.W. Griffith, as being the proper field, that history made cinema enter, that is, love and death.

No writes or wrongs, no cause and effect, but qualities differences, that’s what these images manipulated by Godard show. Nevertheless, because this history is made by one of the most active men in the field of cinema, we could not expect any kind of neutrality from it. On the contrary, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* turns out to be a kind of manifesto. Between the series of double qualitative poles, as seen, fast and slow, grave and sharp, love and death, cries and whispers, or “splendour and misery” as inscribed in this chapter, Godard thinks about the ways in which the cinema had to go, historically, hideous ways that affected both the films and the life of people who worked with cinema. Because of the editing method, though, the moral judgment can hardly be extracted out of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. It is as if the feelings concerning the history of cinema, expressed through the two qualitative poles of the machinery, would not extend as far as a moral statement, because of the same machinery. A great deal of anger, for example, can be felt through the manipulated images. This stands for Godard’s affections, and that’s what he is machinically working with the typewriter and the editing table.

### **“Affection” and cinema research**

It is well known that Deleuze used to make torsions in order to extract ideas from the philosophers he made alliances with. Deleuze did that with Bergson and one of the best examples showing this procedure refers to the concept of “affection.” Bergson describes the function of pain in the sensori-motor scheme. According to him, pain is a kind of motor tendency that, in the face of an unbearable stimulus that makes the motor response urgent and impossible, tries to solve things in its own way: “(...) pain, which, in our view, is nothing but the effort of the damaged element to set things right – a kind of motor tendency in a sensori nerve” (Bergson 1991: 55-56). Deleuze quotes this sentence from “Matter and Memory” but exchanges pain for affection: “Bergson’s wonderful definition of affection as ‘a kind of motor tendency on a sensible nerve’” (Deleuze 1997: 66).

There are several characteristics we could extract from Deleuze’s theory, in order to say that Godard’s procedures in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* are pretty much determinable through the concept of “affection.” According to Deleuze, for example, “affection,” as the final avatar of the “movement-image,” is a turning point where movement becomes expression, and it does so by filling up the interval between perception and action. Here, we could easily evocate Godard’s intervention at the editing table, eyes on the screen, hands on the buttons, in order to express his own thoughts about the history of cinema.

But if Godard himself expresses the status of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* in a self-centred

fashion, as we could interpret by extracting only the last term from the famous inscription in chapters 1B and 4B, “Cinéma toi moi” (cinema you me), this would be without further interest. We have seen just a little example that helps to state Godard’s method, his manipulations of the images between two poles of velocity, and how they become like puppets in his hands. As he states in his interviews, in the essays of “Introduction to a True History of Cinema and Television,” and also what can be deduced from some of the superimpositions from *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, cinema research for Godard is “exactly like scientists in a laboratory” (Godard 2014: 9). Therefore, these automaton puppets are lead into very specific research objectives. What are these objectives? What possible results can we extract from Godard’s researches with his differential automaton puppets?

### **Qualities of pulsation**

Philosophically, there is the need to establish the nature of resemblance here, because the pulsation from fast to slow goes further than just demonstrating the capacity of the gear. The full capacity of research is targeted when Godard reveals notable points through the automaton puppets lines of movement. The gestures, scrutinized by Godard, reveals little singularities, unfolded from the original film. These singularities do not exchange position with the original one, because they turn into another kind of image by the differential speed manipulation. The movement is then constantly dissociated, and the still frames which sometimes marks the notable positions, as we will see, seems to have the function of emergencies that never synthesize.

We must pay attention to that, because some moments just appear to be something we recall, but as they are unfolding singular points, that do not have just one kind of rhythm, they are always turning into something else. We do recall something, but always something of another nature. The philosopher Jacques Rancière calls “Hyper Resemblance” (Rancière 2007: 8), a resemblance which is not just formal nor mechanic, but as Roland Barthes’ “Punctum” (Barthes 1981: 25), it jumps out of the image, it calls for attention, not because it fits a static memory or perception. Exactly as the nature of the metaphor in Marcel Proust, that is, a transport, a transformation, the kind of resemblance that appears through the kind of manipulation that Godard does, is never exactly what it recalls, but always something else. As Rancière put it, “the original resemblance, the resemblance that does not provide the replica of a reality but attests directly to the elsewhere whence it derives.” (Rancière 2007: 8).

So, for example, when Godard, still in chapter 1A, tells the history of the beginning of Hollywood, the powerful production and the correlate kinds of human relations that was practiced there, specifically concerning the relationships between men and women, he manipulates Rita Hayworth’s image from *Gilda* (Vidor 1946). Godard is talking about the great Hollywood producers like Irving Thalberg and Howard Hughes, the way they imposed their ideas

and the way they treated the actress that worked with them. Rita Hayworth appears dancing, and through Godard's manipulation we see moments of self-exhibition, and then the image is lowered when she touches her forehead in order to put back the hair. Most notable is the historical fact, which Godard doesn't mention here, that she went through a painful treatment that enhanced her forehead in order to change her appearance and respond to the beauty demands of the star system. Furthermore, with her hand on her forehead, she seems to be militarily saluting.

### **Indiscernibility as heterogenesis**

As the image changes from point to point, a great amount of sense is unfolded constantly. This is not as if the editing procedure reveals the truth behind the original image, but it shows through the differential speed, from fast to slow, all kinds of singularities and "Hyper Resemblances" that belong to the images and are rather expressions from its dynamics than mere facts. They are living researches, never attached from the passage from one frame to the other, always in becoming, and "there is nothing regrettable in the uncertainty about the outcome of research" (Deleuze 1994: 144) – this is a clue to the point of interest about applying Deleuze's theory, from which we could properly talk about opposition to morals, in Godard. Composite moments that attest only tendencies to be revealed through differential kinds of resemblance and recognition. In the limit, we can say that Godard's differential automatons inhabit an indiscernibility as their heterogenesis.

One of the great examples for the indiscernibility is the scene from "The Searchers" (Ford 1956), where Lucy, the kidnaped white girl who becomes half indigenous due to the conviviality with her indigenous raptors, is held up by Ethan, her uncle that searches for her, but hesitates to take her home, when he sees that she had turned half indigenous. The scene where Ethan holds Lucy in John Ford's film already has a moment of indiscernibility, a very little one when we don't know if Ethan is going to hold or hurt Lucy. Godard just makes this moment last longer through the speed manipulation. But for all automatons in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* it is the same operation.

Speed manipulation is a well-known procedure in Godard, made famous mostly through analysis on the 80's production, especially in films like "Passion" (Godard 1982) and "Heil Mary" (Godard 1985). According to the critic Alain Bergala, it first appeared in the TV series "France/tour/detour/deux/enfants" (Godard 1978). Bergala attests the astonishment he felt watching for the first time a little girl undressing through manipulated speed: "at the same time so familiar and strange" (Bergala 1999: 32). Whatever other reasons inherent to Godard's manipulations on speed, when it comes to the history of cinema, its legitimacy brings out the need for differential logic parameters. Not simply an artistic experiment, indiscernibility goes further in Godard, as it implies also, we could say, a differential faculty of

judgment. In other words, its heterogenesis consists in creating new visibilities, therefore new kinds of discernibility.<sup>1</sup>

### **Towards differential judgment**

In “Introduction to a True History of Cinema and Television” Godard talks about the reasons for the cinema to be taken as a way of research and judgment. And most importantly, how editing works, why it can create this kind of judgment. Godard says, in a very bergsonian fashion, that editing is important because it makes us see twice. Editing is what happens in between, and it creates a perception which doesn’t reduce itself to either one or the other image. Godard says that a family filming themselves could take profit out of it by filming not only the kid at his birthday but also his father smacking him.

The possibility of a certain judgment on the life of a family would be provided by this kind of editing, which privileges the indiscernibility. What would be then the nature of it? Certainly not a common one. At least since Kant we are used to take judgment as a kind of excluding choice of one term in detriment of the others, for example beauty or ugliness, right or wrong, culpable or innocent. Godard’s editing, if it is allowed to say, points out a kind of judgment which would unfold its global effects only secondarily. He shows that editing is a never ending research. But to make profit out of that, Godard says, a family would have to be interested in really looking at its own life.

The moment of indiscernibility matches the differential function in which Godard places his images in order to see the singular moments of history of cinema. The global perspective of history is secondary, and there is an indiscernibility between the telling and the history that is told. That is the purpose of the “s” between parenthesis in the title. It is a form of making the virtualities inherent in the cinema images to jump out and appear as they are, indiscernible from the forms that are created by their actualization. In cinema this happens with the speed, and by changing them in a differential way, Godard amplifies the possibilities of images already created, and that is how he renovates the history of cinema.

---

<sup>1</sup> The new visibilities or new perceptions of history of cinema lead by Godard imply a deepening of the project, originally headed by Henri Langlois, the founder of the *Cinémathèque française*. Due to the fact that for Langlois and others, cinema was or could engender new kinds of sensibility. In this sense resides the value of Éric Rohmer’s “Louis Lumière” (Rohmer 1968), in which Langlois and Renoir express their belief towards cinema as an instrument for the transmission of human thinking.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bergala, A. (1999). *Nul mieux que Godard*. Paris: Editions Cahiers du cinéma.
- Bergson, H. (1991). *Matter and Memory*. New York: Zone Books.
- Deleuze, G. (1997). *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Godard, J.-L. (2014). *Introduction to a True History of Cinema and Television*. Montreal: Ca-boose Books.
- Rancière, J. (2007). *The Future of the Image*. London: Verso.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Jean-Luc Godard, 1989-98, France.
- Passion*. Jean-Luc Godard, 1982, France.
- Heil Mary*. Jean-Luc Godard, 1985, France.
- France/Tour/Detour/Deux/Enfants*. Jean-Luc Godard, 1978, France. (TV series).
- The Rules of the Game*. Jean Renoir, 1931, France.
- Cries and Whispers*. Ingmar Bergman, 1972, Sweden.
- Nick's Film*. Wim Wenders, 1980, USA.
- Ivan the Terrible*. Serguei Eisenstein, 1944, Soviet Union.
- Gilda*. Charles Vidor, 1946, USA.
- The Searchers*. John Ford, 1956, USA.
- Louis Lumière*. Éric Rohmer, 1968, France.