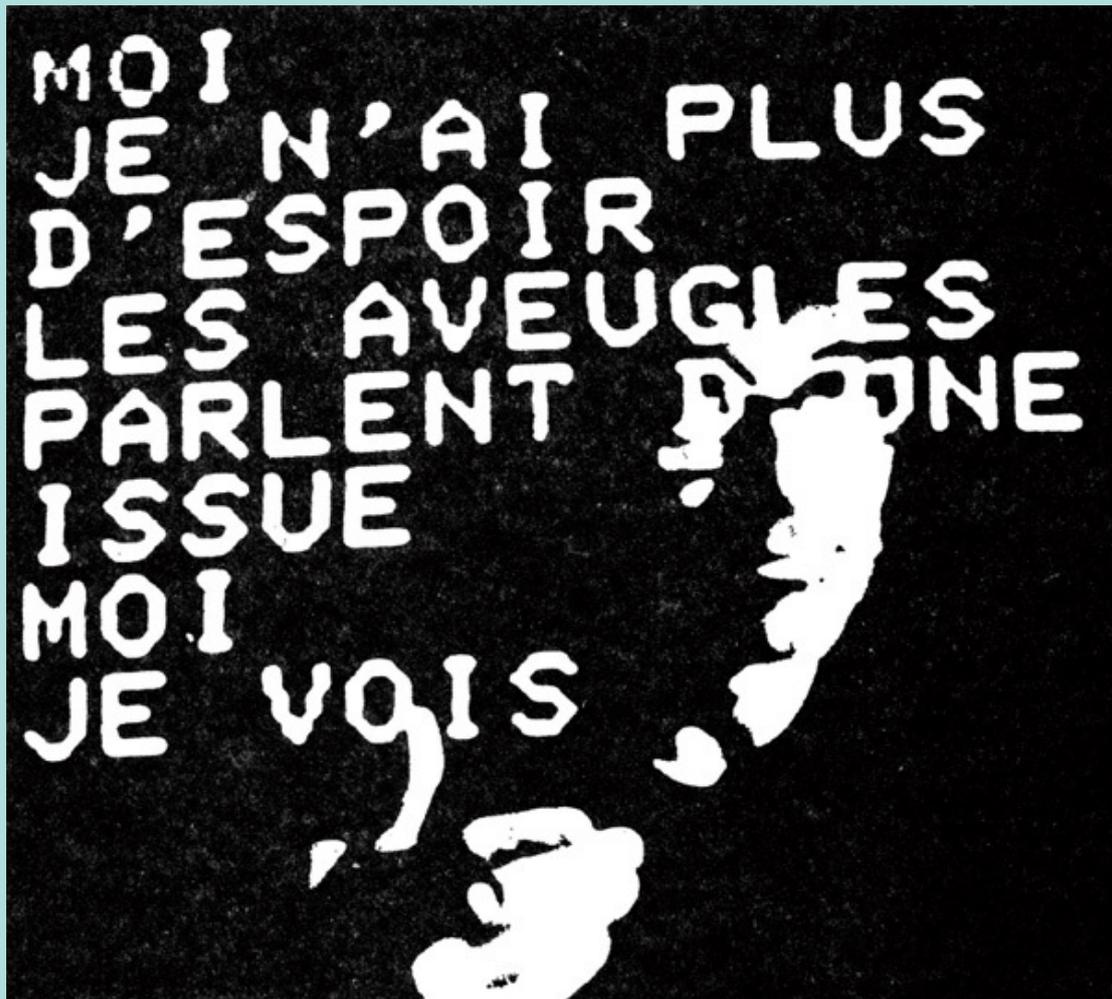


Jean-Luc Godard

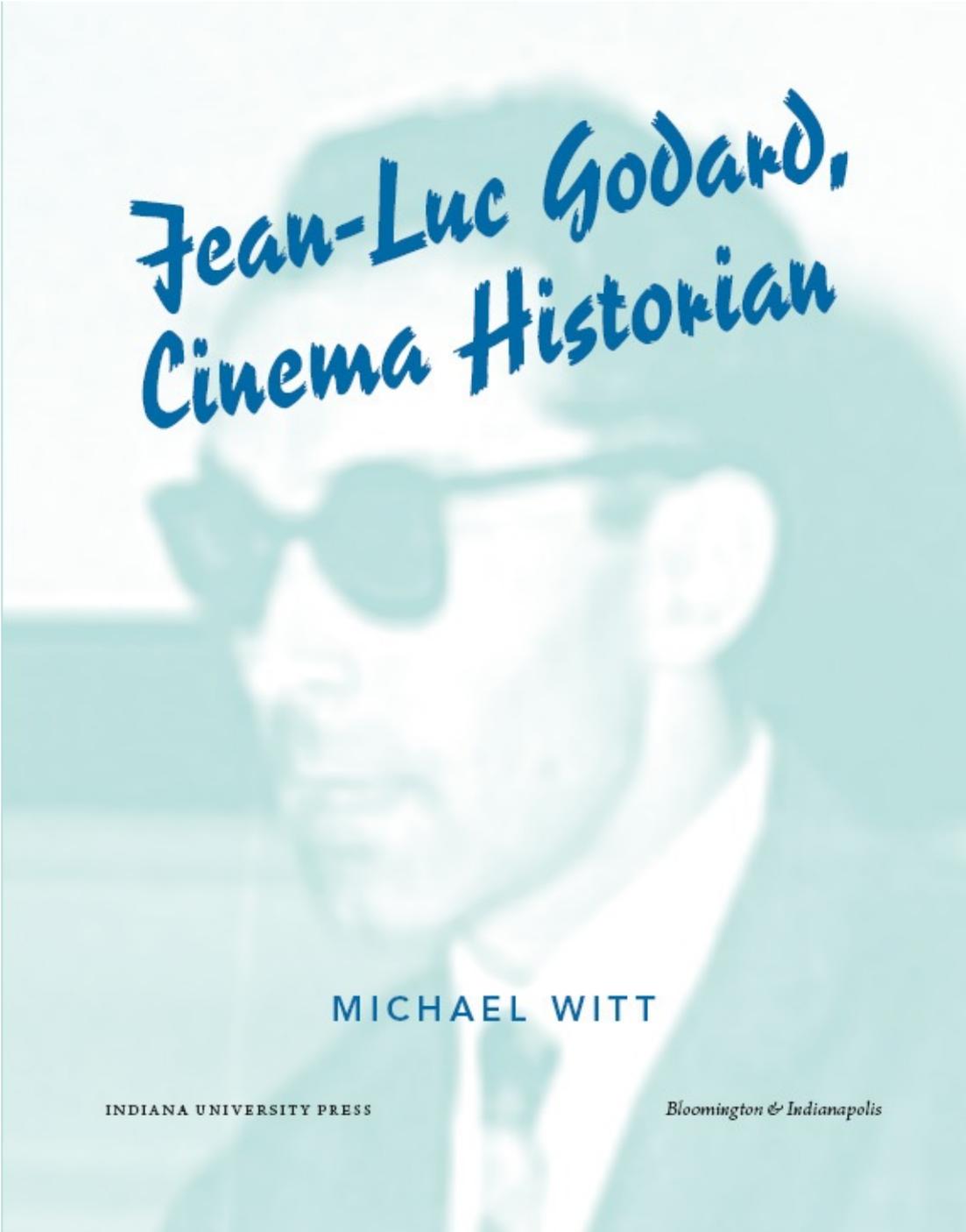
Cinema Historian

MICHAEL WITT

Jean-Luc Godard,
Cinema Historian



“Me /I no longer have any / hope / the blind / speak of a / way out / me /I see.” From *Jean-Luc*, episode 2b of *Six fois deux (Sur et sous la communication)* (Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Godard, 1976). Reproduced in Godard, *Introduction à une véritable histoire du cinéma* (Éditions Albatros, 1980).



Jean-Luc Godard, Cinema Historian

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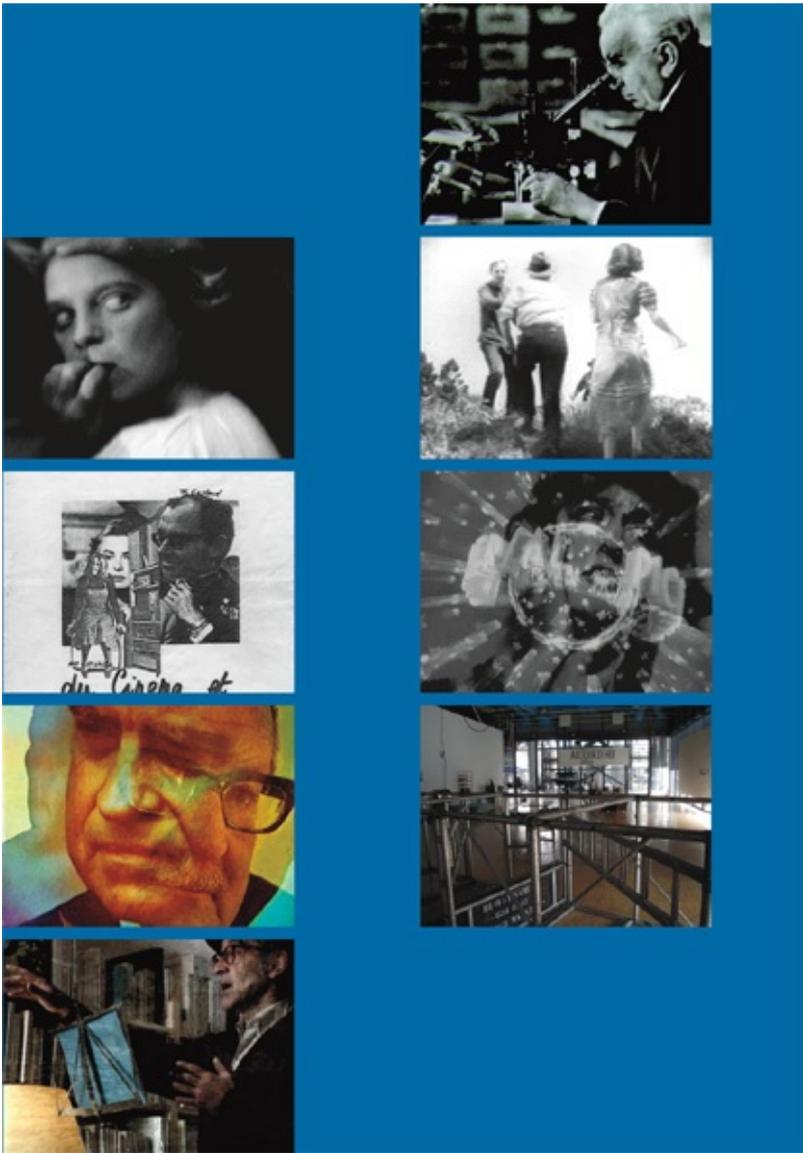
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FOR ALEX, WITH LOVE



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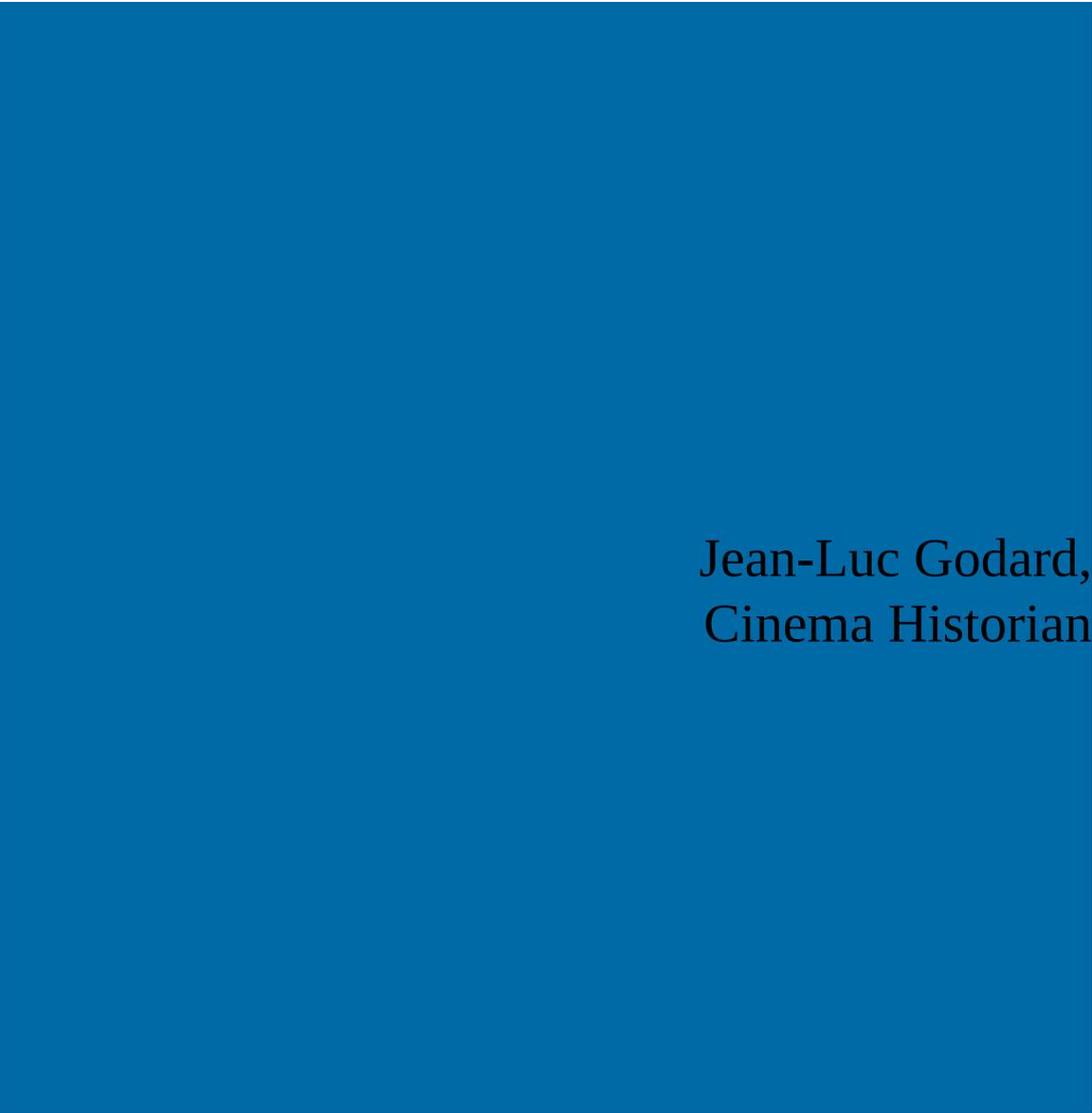
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Jean-Luc Godard,
Cinema Historian

Introduction Godard's Theorem

For the Past four decades, Jean-Luc Godard has pursued a sustained investigation of the theory and practice of audiovisual history. At the heart of his project lies one of his most ambitious and significant achievements to date: the monumental, labyrinthine cinema history series *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. This is simultaneously a set of essays on the history of cinema and television; on Godard's life, and his place within that history; on the history of cinema in the context of the other arts; on the history of film thinking; on the history of the twentieth century; on the interpenetration of cinema and that century; and on the impact of films on subjectivity. It is also a critique of the longstanding neglect by historians of the value of films as historical documents, and a reflection on the narrow scope and limited ambition of the type of history often produced by professional film historians. "All I want to say," as he summed up this aspect of the series, "is that history is badly told."¹ In addition, it offers an exploration of the possibilities of audiovisual historiography generally, and of what Godard has described as a "theorem" regarding cinema and history in particular.² This theorem is premised on two main ideas: first, that the cinema, a product of the inventions and discoveries of the nineteenth century, assumed the role of historian of the twentieth, documenting it from beginning to end; and second, that every moment of the past remains potentially available to history. "The past is never dead. It's not even past," he says at one point in the series, citing William Faulkner's celebrated dictum.³ If the fundamental challenge facing all historians is that of bringing the past to life, Godard's response to that challenge – the central tenet of his theorem – is the proposal and demonstration of a cinematically inspired method of fabricating history based on the principle of the montage of disparate phenomena in poetic imagery. "Bring together things that have as yet never been brought together and did not seem predisposed to be so," he suggests simply, citing Robert Bresson.⁴

The polysemic *histoire* (meaning both "history" and "story") and *du* in the title *Histoire(s) du cinéma* are central terms. Their combination suggests not only a project about both cinema and history, and about all the stories told by cinema, but also the principle of a form of history derived materially from, and composed out of, the very stuff of cinema. Godard's point of departure for the series was the idea of an audiovisual history of cinema based on the principle of reprojection or reproduction:

The history of cinema appears to be easy to do, since it is after all made up of images; cinema appears to be the only medium where all one has to do is re-project these images so that one can see what has happened. In "normal" history, one can't project, because it's not projectable; one has to codify in one form or another, write, make manuscripts; whereas here it would seem that all one has to do is reproduce.⁵

In addition to this underlying emphasis on audiovisual form, Godard frequently stressed the centrality to his vision of visual and audiovisual history of montage as a key compositional tool. Video allowed him not only to copy and combine archival film clips, but also to incorporate all manner of extracinematic sounds and images and to make these speak cinematically through montage:

In a striking manner, film was able to recount its own history in a way quite different from the other arts. And in montage alone, there was a story, or attempts at stories, told in film's own language. One can put a Goya after an El Greco, and the two images recount something without the need for a caption. One doesn't see that anywhere else. Literature can't do it: I've never seen a history of literature that simply puts a Cervantes and a Sartre side by side. That's cinema. And for cinema, little by little, it could be done, and this principle would establish a cinematographic history.⁶

Besides editing, the full palette of cinema's expressive resources is at the disposal of the filmmaker-historian: light and shadow, color, shape, altered motion, angles, music, sound, and voice. Godard has long been a passionate advocate of cinema's ability to express the ineffable in a manner distinct from that of any other art-form (its capacity for articulating "the words that stay in the throat," as he puts it in the fourth episode, 2B).⁷ This idea is represented visually in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* by a handful of emblematic clips: the dance scene from *Bande à part* (1964), which is used to illustrate this sequence in 2B; the shot of the anxious embracing couple from Aleksandr Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930), which is cited in 1B; and a brief extract from Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948), in which Catherine "Keechie" Mobley (Cathy O'Donnell) is shown rising and turning in the half-light, which Godard uses in 1A and 4A. In addition, he sees audiovisual history as offering not only a different means of articulating the past, but also a qualitatively different experience of the past for the viewer-listener to that produced through the reading of history books. The key thing, he stressed to historian Eric Hobsbawm in 2000, is that the meaning should emanate directly from the combination of images and sounds rather than from an explanatory or interpretative text written about or imposed on them.⁸ The task of the spectator in this context, he emphasizes, is not necessarily that of understanding, but rather of hearing, receiving, and "seeing" the effects of his compression and concatenation of his disparate source materials in the intuitive, emotional, and visceral way one might experience a piece of music.⁹ He has been reiterating the importance, for filmmakers and audiences alike, of learning the creative art of seeing for nearly four decades now: "one should see, and remain in the realm of vision," as he already summarized this central strand of his thinking in 1980.¹⁰ It comes as no surprise, therefore, that he should position *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, in the opening episode, in the tradition of sensuous, rhythmic, visual communication – one exemplified here by the medieval image-based *Book of Kings*.¹¹ He also relates his project to the later innovatory practices of art historians such as Élie Faure and André Malraux. In addition, we should note in this context an example about which Godard has remained curiously silent: Aby Warburg's pioneering experiment in visual art history, the unfinished *Mnemosyne* "atlas in images" project, in which the latter sought to investigate and chart the memory and transmission of Antique iconography in the art of the Renaissance, via the symphonic arrangement of disparate photographic reproductions on large black panels.¹² If Warburg, as Giorgio Agamben has argued, can be considered the founder of a hitherto "unnamed science whose contours we are

only today beginning to glimpse,” Godard is his successor and has a word for that science: “cinema,” or, better in the context of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, “video” – literally “I see.”¹³

WHAT IS *HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA*?

Histoire(s) du cinéma was released by Gaumont in 1998 as a four-and-a-half-hour video series, and has been reissued since by a number of companies on DVD (by Imagica in Japan in 2001, by Intermedio in Spain in 2006, by Gaumont in France in 2007, by Artificial Eye in the United Kingdom in 2008, by Olive Films in the United States in 2011, and by Madman in Australia in 2011). Materially speaking, it is a labor of love, involving the painstaking orchestration of thousands of clips from films, television, and radio; details of drawings, paintings, photographs, cartoons, and texts; extracts of songs and music; and a number of recitations and staged sequences.¹⁴ Through the weaving and layering of what are, for the most part, unprepossessing scraps of reproductions, Godard has produced an audiovisual tapestry of astonishing sumptuosity. The series is divided into eight parts:



The cinema alone: *Earth* (Aleksandr Dovzhenko, 1930) in 1B, *Bande à part* (Godard, 1964) in 2B, and *They Live By Night* (Nicholas Ray, 1948) in 4A.



From the thirteenth-century picture bible *Book of Kings*, cited in 1A.

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- 1A *Toutes les histoires* (All the [hi] stories), 51 minutes;
- 1B *Une histoire seule* (A solitary [hi]story), 42 minutes;
- 2A *Seul le cinéma* (The cinema alone), 27 minutes;
- 2B *Fatale beauté* (Fatal beauty), 29 minutes;
- 3A *La monnaie de l'absolu* (Aftermath of the absolute), 27 minutes;
- 3B *Une vague nouvelle* (A new wave), 28 minutes;
- 4A *Le contrôle de l'univers* (The control of the universe), 28 minutes; and
- 4B *Les signes parmi nous* (The signs amongst us), 38 minutes.

The episodes bleed into and at times repeat one another, and a number of images and sounds recur in several different contexts, conveying distinct meanings each time. Despite their formal similarity and shared idiom, however, the episodes differ considerably from one another in theme, density, mood, and tone. The first two-part chapter, made up of episodes 1A and 1B, is the series' cornerstone. 1A, whose title derives from a comment made by André Malraux about the early achievements of photography (besides being an art historian, Malraux was a celebrated novelist, filmmaker, and politician), presents in condensed form the principal lines of thinking that run through the remainder of the series, especially in relation to Hollywood and

World War II.¹⁵ In 1B, Godard examines his own place within the history of cinema, and pursues a number of theoretical reflections – each of which he presents twice through reference to different examples – on what he considers some of cinema’s defining characteristics. The subsequent six episodes are what he has termed “localized case studies.”¹⁶ 2A develops the metaphor of “projection,” which he had already introduced in 1B; and 2B, whose title, *Fatale beauté*, recalls that of the French release version of Robert Siodmak’s *The Great Sinner* (1949), *Passion fatale*, explores the relationship between cinema and the expression of beauty.¹⁷ 3A, whose title *La monnaie de l’absolu* Godard borrowed from the third volume of Malraux’s philosophy of painting, *Psychologie de l’art* (*Psychology of Art*, 1947–49), focuses on cinema and the representation of war in the context of the Western pictorial tradition, through particular reference to Italian Neo-realism;¹⁸ and 3B offers a personal account of the French New Wave. 4A reflects on cinema as art through the example of Alfred Hitchcock; and 4B, which derives its title from a fable by the Swiss author Charles Ferdinand Ramuz, is less a further case study than a combination of somber, intimate self-portrait and meditative stocktaking in relation to the series as a whole.¹⁹ Running throughout is a three-way tension among a bleak overarching narrative of cinematic decline, the vitality of the crystalline forms through which that narrative is expressed, and a recurrent thematic emphasis on artistic metamorphosis and renewal.

It is important to recognize that the title *Histoire(s) du cinéma* does not just designate the videos or DVDs, but that it is also the title of two further artifacts derived from them: a four-volume set of art books published in 1998 in Gallimard’s prestigious Blanche collection (republished in a single volume in 2006); and a box set of five audio CDs and multilingual books released by ECM Records in 1999. Godard had initially hoped that Gaumont would also release the series on CD, but when they declined, he turned to ECM Records, who had already issued the digitally remixed soundtrack of *Nouvelle vague* (1990) on CD in 1997.²⁰ Not solely an audiovisual series, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is in fact a more complex integrated multiform work. The quotations from the series used in this book are generally my translations of the abbreviated poetic French-language text derived from the soundtrack, which Godard arranged for the Gallimard books.²¹ In addition to the three main versions of the series, we should also note a number of further related projects realized, or sometimes simply imagined, by Godard following completion of the videos. Godard was particularly critical of the quality of the videos, especially the mono soundtrack, which had destroyed his creative investment in stereo. His original wish had been for the series to be shown initially on television, and for this television broadcast to be followed by publication of the books and then release on DVD (his preferred choice of format for domestic release from the outset, primarily because of the superior sound quality).²² Almost exactly the opposite occurred: the books appeared first (on 9 October 1998), a month prior to the audiovisual version (which, contrary to his preference, was released on VHS), and a year before the release of the CDs and broadcast of the series on Canal Plus. Two years later saw the first screening of a 35 mm “best of” compilation of “selected moments” from the series commissioned by Gaumont for theatrical distribution, *Moments choisis des Histoire(s) du cinéma* (2001). This abbreviated 35 mm version, he suggested in 2001, was kept buried by the production company, “like everything Gaumont makes.”²³ It was screened once at the Pompidou Center in

November 2001, but then not distributed until December 2004, when it was shown for several weeks at the same venue. In it, Godard has reordered the source material significantly. Although there are few major textual changes, and the film is divided into eight numbered sections bearing the titles of the original episodes, these sections are of variable length, and do not follow the original order. Moreover, on several occasions the material included under a given heading derives from a different episode altogether, and 1B does not feature at all.²⁴ Once the series was finished, Godard also expressed an interest in pursuing the project in a number of further directions. He regretted, for instance, not having mounted an exhibition to accompany the release of the videos and books, as a means of demonstrating what he described as “the different modes of entering and leaving what one can call History.”²⁵ He also talked of having considered staging *Histoire(s) du cinéma* as a play.²⁶ This, he suggested, would have had to have taken place in a cathedral square, and to have combined a recitation of the text of the series’ soundtrack with the projection of its image track onto a vast book, the pages of which would have had to have been turned by unknown actors. Moreover, inspired by Chris Marker’s *Immémory* (1998), he apparently considered the possibility of making a CD-ROM.²⁷ And finally, although in some respects a separate project and fresh departure, the exhibition he staged at the Pompidou Center in 2006, *Voyage(s) en utopie: JLG, 1946–2006, À la recherche d’un théorème perdu* involved the redistribution of shards of many of the series’ constituent ideas, arguments, sources, and references within the three-dimensional space of an art gallery.

THE AIMS AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

This book examines the development, forms, themes, and concerns of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* in its various manifestations, and the historical propositions made within it, against the backdrop of three decades of related work by Godard. My understanding of this wider body of work, and of the centrality of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* to it, was shaped by my encounter with Godard’s films and other output in the 1980s – when I discovered his early feature films alongside essayistic works such as *Le gai savoir* (1968), *Numéro deux* (1975), *France tour détour deux enfants* (co-dir. Anne-Marie Miéville, 1979), the three-hundredth issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* he edited in 1979, *Scénario du film Passion* (1982), and *Soft and Hard: Soft Talk on a Hard Subject between Two Friends* (co-dir. Miéville, 1985); together with the transcription of the film history lectures he had delivered in Montreal in 1978, *Introduction à une véritable histoire du cinéma* (Introduction to a true history of cinema), which appeared in 1980.²⁸ During my subsequent doctoral research on Godard and Miéville’s collaborative work of the 1970s, I came to realize that the former’s emerging *Histoire(s) du cinéma* formed part of a broader interest in history and audiovisual historiography that reached back, via films such as *Ici et ailleurs* (co-dir. Miéville, 1974) and *Moi je* (1973, unfinished), to the image-text “scenario” that he had proposed for an audiovisual history of cinema to Italian television in the early 1970s, and even beyond that to the late 1960s.²⁹ Living in Paris, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to view and review the virtual entirety of Godard’s audiovisual output at the “Tout Godard” retrospective in 1989, including then recent video works such as *On s’est*

tous défilé (1987), *Puissance de la parole* (1988), and *Le dernier mot* (1988). Fascinated by these, I obtained copies from the production companies and recorded *Soigne ta droite* (1987), *King Lear* (1987) and the initial versions of the first two episodes of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* from television. Thus, by 1990, I had already unknowingly gathered almost all the key initial traces of a vast work in progress – whose scale and scope would only come fully into focus almost a decade later.

My doctoral research afforded me two essential insights into Godard's work, which remain central to my understanding of it. The first was a realization of the extent and variety of Godard's work in different media and contexts: he was, and remains, less a conventional feature-film director than a multimedia poet, philosopher, critic, and essayist who, over the years, has produced a unique form of expanded cinema, comprising television programs, video scenarios, feature films, audiovisual pamphlets, found-footage poems, written and audiovisual self-reflective metacritical essays, critical articles, books, talks, and interviews. As I have argued elsewhere, there is no significant difference in his practice between research, work in progress, and finished artwork, and the disparate manifestations of his varied output and interventions are best thought of as the interconnected components of a vast installation under continual development on multiple fronts.³⁰ In this perspective, considerations such as budget size or conventional hierarchical distinctions between major and minor works (e.g., feature films versus short commercial commissions) or media (e.g., 35 mm versus video or photocopier) are redundant. The second insight concerned the integrated nature of his project, and the flow and metamorphosis within it of references, ideas, motifs, and themes. Each of his works, as Jacques Doniol-Valcroze observed perspicaciously as early as 1965, is "to be continued" in the next³¹ – or, as Jean-Louis Leutrat aptly put it, Godard's output as a whole constitutes a sort of infinite "protoplasmic œuvre," one characterized by the constant circulation of matter from one constituent work to the next.³² Indeed, often the larger individual works can themselves be broken down into a series of separate but interrelated artifacts – all made by Godard – such as written documents, graphic collages, video scenarios, trailers, and pressbooks. This organic, transmedial model is reflected in the relationship between the different versions of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, which are in turn indissociable from the cognate satellite works that Godard made alongside them, and with which they are in close conceptual and textual dialogue. With these two insights in mind, this book combines a diachronic approach to the series as it developed over time with a synchronic engagement with it in the context of his overall project. These approaches are complemented by three others: source criticism; an engagement with selected sequences from the series in the context of its overall rhythms, flow, and different manifestations; and a concern for the broader lines of thinking that feed into and run through it. An important source of information regarding the latter is Godard's commentary on his project in interviews. Despite the contingent nature of these documents, the strategic posturing they sometimes contain, and the occasional divergence between what he says and the evidence of the work, they provide an invaluable record of the genesis and development of his thinking. Finally, the task of speaking about Godard is in my view considerably aided and enriched by the creative and critical use of images. I have, therefore, incorporated in this book a form of iconographic criticism, which seeks, variously, to complement and further my

discussion of Godard's work, to extend or reinforce a line of argument developed in the text, and to suggest associations through the creation of visual rhymes between images situated in different parts of the book.

The first two chapters adopt a diachronic and synchronic approach, respectively, to the genesis of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. [Chapter 1](#) offers a history of the series from its inception, via Godard's film history lectures in Montreal and Rotterdam through his production of draft episodes in the 1980s and completion of the various versions in the late 1990s. It includes an analysis of his theorization of cinema as an intrinsically, ontologically historical medium and an examination of the significance to the series of his longstanding intellectual dialogue with the critic Serge Daney. [Chapter 2](#) focuses on his overall output since the early 1970s in terms of its thematic and stylistic relationship with *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, and explores the emergence in his work of the 1980s of a key metaphor, that of projection. Turning to Godard's role as historian, [chapter 3](#) begins with a discussion of his use in the series of the myth of Orpheus, and goes on to relate the principal features of his historiographic method to a range of guides: historians such as Jules Michelet, Georges Duby, Fernand Braudel, Georges Canguilhem, and François Jacob; philosophers such as Emil Cioran; philosophers of history such as Charles Péguy, Walter Benjamin, and Alexandre Koyré; art historians such as Élie Faure and André Malraux; cinema historians such as Georges Sadoul and Jean Mitry; the film collector, curator, and co-founder of the Cinémathèque française, Henri Langlois; and a range of audiovisual essayists and historians of cinema – such as Santiago Álvarez, Guy Debord, Hollis Frampton, Chris Marker, Artavazd Peleshian, Mikhail Romm, Dziga Vertov, and Orson Welles. [Chapters 4](#) through [6](#) focus on the substance of Godard's thinking about the history of cinema and television and explore the perspectives he adopts, the topics he covers, and the propositions he advances. [Chapter 4](#) unravels his discourse on silent cinema and on the unrealized potential of the cinematograph as a revolutionary tool for the revelation of the world afresh to a mass audience. It concludes with an analysis of his theorization of the power of cinema to anticipate social upheaval and change, and of its failure to adequately confront and reflect what he considers to be the pivotal historical event of the twentieth century: the Holocaust. [Chapter 5](#) explores his conceptualization of the interrelationship of cinema and nationhood and of filmmaking as a popular, collaborative art-form. It examines the reasoning behind his focus on a handful of national cinematic traditions (American, Russian, German, Italian, and French) at the expense of virtually all others, and pays particular attention to his treatment of French cinema and the New Wave. [Chapter 6](#) analyzes his longstanding discourse on the deleterious effects of television, and the role played by television within the dramaturgy of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. It goes on to explore the origins of his approach to the fabrication of history through videographic montage, which it relates to his development of a poetics of the image in the televisual and digital ages, and to the range of poetic, scientific and cinematic models on which he draws. [Chapter 7](#) returns us to the various manifestations of the series and the relationship between them. It focuses in particular on the books and CDs, which it considers through reference to Godard's antecedent output as a graphic and sound artist and to his recurrent concern in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* for artistic metamorphosis.