

Tribute: Jean-Luc Godard

Pranjal Borah

*Au revoir to a prodigious **politique des auteurs***



“The cinema is optimistic because everything is always possible, and nothing is ever prohibited: all you need is to be in touch with life. And life itself must be optimistic. Otherwise, everyone in the world would promptly commit suicide.” (Let 's Talk about Pierrot, *Godard on Godard*, p233)

“**Everything is cinema.**”, a brooding Godard once told Richard Brody, the New Yorker film critic and author of the acclaimed ‘**Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard**’. For Godard, cinema was indeed the art of the arts, embracing and encapsulating the complete range of what is human, from the most prominent political currents and other creative forms to the most personal depths of his own life. Godard always felt that the film was inextricably linked to his life experiences and sense of self. His early love of cinema had the force of intense and all-devouring piety, and his overpowering contact with it influenced his insightful analysis of the special psychological power of the film medium. As a filmmaker, he devised ingenious and increasingly

elaborate ways to connect the substance and form of his work to his own inner and outer life. It may now seem redundant to credit Jean-Luc Godard with reinventing film, but that is a eulogy, a recognition he rightfully deserves. Godard altered the art form, gave it a fresh lease of life, and created a new language still tangibly pervasive in contemporary cinema at varying degrees.

Needless to say, cineastes of our generation will never have an inkling of scepticism to concede that our relationship with Jean-Luc Godard is somehow central to our collective love of quality cinema. Each of his films serves as a point of reference in what we recall and quickly figure out about the past and present of our lives. None of them leaves us indifferent. His films amaze and stun. They provoke, enrage and even make

us introspect at times. Some inspire, while others leave us wondering why we are caught up in tedium and fury or ready to engage in dialogue. As a result, the essence of the works of one of the greatest auteurs of the last 50 years, the director of close to 100 films whose names are so familiar that they can be said to belong to their viewers' mindscapes, probably consists in the profound bearing his films and works have on everything that cinema epitomises. Godard's films are what stimulate us, the spectators, to formulate a sense of the space and time of our lives. They are points of reference and markers from which we frequently critique ourselves and what we do or how we have lived with cinema. His films are invariably redolent of their time. But as essays and critical objects, they often transcend their context and interact with us in a variety of ways-- as cinema qua cinema, as an engagement with political issues, and, at the same time, awaken us into musing on different modes of thinking of writers, poets, and philosophers, who have been part of the tremendous intellectual upheavals that we associate with modernism, structuralism, deconstruction, post-structuralism and even postmodernism.

From its inception, cinema somehow caught the attention of art critics and philosophers in France. Henri Langlois began collecting old movies at the Cinematheque Française in 1936. It is where the legendary New Wave prodigies spent their adolescent years after WWII. The thriving 1930s cinephile subculture of film societies and reviews resumed with vigour in France. When Jean-Luc Godard moved to Paris in 1946 to enrol at the famous Lycée Buffon, he could virtually marvel at the emergence of a vibrant and developing film space, one that was teeming with a vast quantity of films available as well as the quality of novel ideas about the much raved about art and enterprise of cinema. A somewhat riveting and interactive involvement of literary, artistic, and intellectual elites with a penchant for cinema added an unprecedented impetus to the milieu, frequently ruffled by political debates and overtones reflecting post-war France's political divisions. Some of them were even sparked by the movies themselves. Movies, particularly American movies, were plentiful in post-World War II Paris. After being denied access to both classic and recent Hollywood productions while living

under German rule, moviegoers flocked to the screens. Gallimard, France's most prestigious literary publisher, published a special journal called *La Revue du cinéma*, in which these films were frequently scrutinised. In the 1950s, France was strewn with art houses and venues showing old and non-mainstream films. Specialist film critics, most of all the great Andre Bazin, founder of *Cahiers*, established a clipped, precise, informed writing style that set a healthy and profoundly influential trend in film criticism.

The novelist and journalist Alexandre Astruc, who himself was an aspiring filmmaker, predicted the era of the "Caméra stylo," or "camera-pen," with which "*an artist can express his thought, as abstract as it may be, or can translate his obsessions exactly as is done today with the essay or the novel,*" in "Birth of a New Avant-Garde," published in *L'Ecran français* on March 30, 1948. Astruc, who was involved in creating *La Gazette du cinéma*, argued that cinema had already revolutionised intellectual history. He famously claimed that even Descartes would lock himself in his room with a 16mm camera and film and write the discourse on method on film. Godard perhaps suitably embodied the philosophical filmmaker of Astruc's fantasy. He began as a defender of *politique des auteurs*, a champion of the film director's autonomy and the integrity of his labour. In this early period, freedom, for Godard, meant doing what he wanted to do when he wanted to. Later on, it was, however, viewed and explained as a strategic policy for putting up a consciously and creatively contrived resistance mechanism, a deliberate endeavour to combat and curb the advancing tide of American hegemony in the international market of the film industry, and in the domination of the studio system. Thus, the *Nouvelle Vague* (New Wave) films that loomed large in France from 1959 onwards were not just the outcome of unadulterated talent, gorgeous monochrome cinematography, daringly improvised jump cuts, revolutionary editing styles and other innovative stylistic techniques. Their storytelling strategy had a self-conscious theoretical quality readily palpable in their diageses. The New Wave was a tangible expression of the distinctive French cinema, whose evolution had been analysed in the columns of *Les Cahiers du cinéma* and its forerunner *La Revue du*

cinéma for more than ten years. While Jean-Luc Godard's landmark debut feature-length film *A bout de souffle* (Breathless) hit the screen in 1960, Francois Truffaut's much-eulogised *Les quatre cents coups* (The 400 Blows) was released in 1959.

Both had written for *Cahiers* from the beginning. Bazin was often at loggerheads with the magazine's young group of film critics whom Bazin himself had mentored and promoted enthusiastically. And no one in the group was more openly antagonistic to Bazin or more vehemently opposed to Bazin's ideas than Godard. Indeed, as he developed his ideas about cinema in preparation for his work as a director, Godard continued to engage in a more profound theoretical debate with Bazin than his colleagues. The conflict was brought to light in the December 1956 issue of *Cahiers*, which included an article by Bazin titled "*Montage Interdit*" (Editing Forbidden) and one by Godard titled "*Montage, mon beau souci*" (Editing, My Beautiful Concern). Godard's position was even more radical than his initial reaction, and their discussion was a sharper, more aggressive continuation of their past disagreements in the pages of *Cahiers*. Godard explained classical film editing in terms of modern philosophy from Heidegger to Sartre, building on his earlier claim that editing produced an acute psychological reality through its spatial discontinuities. He asserted that editing can "make the heart prevail over intelligence in destroying the notion of space in favour of that of time." He claimed that "if direction is a look, editing is a heartbeat" in a somewhat clumsy statement. And finally, Godard reiterated the philosophical significance of editing, or "montage," by arguing that it is a reality of both life and cinema.

1958 was a year of crucial significance in Godard's growth since it was the time of his final short films before he embarked on *A Bout de Souffle*, and it was also a time of intense critical activity. Godard was simultaneously contributing often to *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Arts*.

Touted as a French New Wave milestone in cinema history, *Breathless* is one of those movies that featured the auteur-director's break away from filmmaking and societal norms. Most importantly, it paved the way for new film aesthetics, sense and perspective that broadened what filmmakers could do

with their films and filmmaking zest. *Breathless*, with its cheeky visuals, fragmentary editing, and narrative flexibility with all its personal and philosophical diversions, was a pathbreaker in the truest sense of the term. In the 1960s, after *Breathless*, Godard made a dozen more movies that brought about an epoch-making and life-altering change to the look and feel of the film. He experimented with different genres, styles, and forms of storytelling and filmmaking. If he made a romantic drama, *Masculine-Feminine*, *A Woman Is a Woman* (1961) was a musical and *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) a drama about a sex worker. While *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965) is a colourful, subversive, and intriguing narrative, *Alphaville* is an experimental sci-fi with no special effects. Godard settles his angst against French society and the broader human condition in the morbidly hilarious *Weekend* (1967), an abstract road trip to damnation. This quintessential road movie infamously ends with two title cards – 'End of the film' and, then, "End of Cinema", as if declaring his renouncement of commercial work almost officially. Godard's first feature-length film, "*A bout de souffle*" (Breathless), was indeed his fifth movie. Since directing his first short film, *Operation Beton* (1954), and frequently serving as producer and screenwriter, he produced over a hundred pictures, including more than 40 full-length features up to his death. Some of his creations—particularly those from his so called Maoist period between 1968 and 1973, received virulent criticism, while others were widely praised by both the critics and connoisseurs. Only a few of them had spectacular commercial success. However, Godard, a master director, continued to produce movies, frequently ones he wanted to. Everyone working with Godard felt he was an expert filmmaker who always knew what he was doing. Even by New Wave standards, he immediately established a reputation for making films swiftly on shoestring budgets.

Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is an extraordinary work, a unique endeavour with profound significance. It is essentially a history of cinema and the twentieth century, one inside the other. In the filmmaker's own 8-part video series *Histoire(s) du Cinema*, the history of cinema and the twentieth century, in general, are examined through the juxtaposition of clips and images drawn from a diverse

menu of popular and otherwise artistically significant international films and artworks. Henri Langlois was due to give several lectures at the University of Montreal on the history of film when he passed away in 1978. The lectures Godard delivered in place of the original speaker were released in 1980 as *Introduction an une genuine histoire du cinéma*. A common criticism of these lectures was that verbal discourse alone was insufficient for the task. Godard believed that an image should be used to tell the history of film. Even though Godard's and other filmmakers' film excerpts had been used as examples in the lectures, he believed this misrepresented the image's subservient position. Finally, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, the focus of the two pieces that follow, a four-and-a-half-hour television production, saw the light of day. The work is widely regarded as one of Godard's exquisite ones.

No other contemporary filmmaker had the audacity, prowess and proficiency to conjure up a microcosm in the work of his age's biggest philosophical and political debates. Compelling and muddling issues of World War II and its political aftermath in France, the uses and abuses of much-hyped existentialism in the post-war years, the structuralist revolution, the demolition of Stalinism and the rise of the New Left, the cubical growth of modern consumer society and its political fallout in May 1968, the sea change and social heritage of the late 1960s, the hopes and disillusionments of contemporary masses, Holocaust consciousness and its repressed historical memory, new modes of conflicts following the end of Cold War, and the current era of Big Media and the American cultural occupation of Europe all crept into his cinematic matrix. Despite Godard's ongoing attention to the pressing issues of the day, his approach to them became so intricately intertwined with his obscure and somewhat muddling advanced aesthetic methods that many critics and viewers have lashed out at these later efforts outright, claiming that he had become detached from political reality. Indeed, Godard's later work is distinguished by his preoccupation with living history. However, this obsession resulted in a baffling set of seemingly monolithic ideas in an otherwise vibrantly dynamic filmmaker. True that Godard's last few movies are complicated, challenging and even

deliriously muddling at times. But deriding them as somewhat lacklustre and unrewarding an experience of film viewing would be a sheer injustice to Godard's ever-evolving brilliance and mastery as an avant-garde filmmaker. Quite conspicuously, Godard's early oeuvre in the 60s, which he is famous for, stands out for its consummate blending of trendy entertainment and mind-bending intellectualism, which renders them a magical touch of timelessness and freshness. Godard's New Wave stunners frequently take the shin from Godard's work during the 1980s and beyond. The savour of Godard's early frothy, and freewheeling works may be conspicuous by its absence in his later works. It, however, never nullifies the essence of these highly experimental efforts as cerebral examples of innovative and rewarding cinema. One of the fascinating aspects of Godard's career is his refusal to conform to popular and dominant norms or play by the rules of the game.

The quintessential Godard was always a daredevil innovator, a diehard experimentalist constantly in flux as a filmmaker focussing on what, why and how he wanted to make what he made. By the time the octogenarian Godard was at the fag end of his long career, he had wilfully shunned most of his signature styles and attitudes. He embarked on a series of boldly experimental films that dismantled the medium to which he had given virtually everything of his life. Thus *The Image Book (2018)*, Godard's final film, completely deconstructs the structure he had been experimenting with since *Breathless*. In his famous *Histoire(s) du Cinema*, Godard is driven by an insatiable desire to enliven the extraordinary story of cinema's first eight decades. *The Image Book* takes upon itself the burden and responsibility of delving into and even subverting the mysterious power of the Image itself. Godard's swan song critiques the duties and obligations of filmmakers and artists in their attempts to relate to and represent the world around them. It is a film in which the form itself is cryptic and elliptic.

As Richards Brody had a rendezvous with the aging and yet agile Godard in his Rolle habitat amid placid and tranquil nature, he still pondered over and viewed the burden of cinema, its future, to be his. "If nobody makes good films, if nobody can make good films, then it will disappear. But as long as I'm alive, it

will last. I still have ten or twenty more years to make it last a little longer.” (Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard, p719). No matter if Godard proved prophetic or not in his tall claim, that his legacy is here to stay alive so long as cinema, as it is today, thrives on is a given. As the legend breathed his last at the ripe age of 91, what strikes us, the

cinephiles, the most about him is that he never came to a halt as a filmmaker. His quest for probing into and discovering what a film could epitomise and stand for continued unabated throughout his long career. Godard is sure to linger on in the collective memory of our generation of film buffs.

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Dr. Pranjal Borah is an Associate Professor, Dept of English, Dikhowmukh College, Sivasagar. He is also serving as the Guest Faculty in Film Studies at Dibrugarh University, North Lakhimpur College, and Jagannath Barooah College. He is based in Jorhat, Assam.