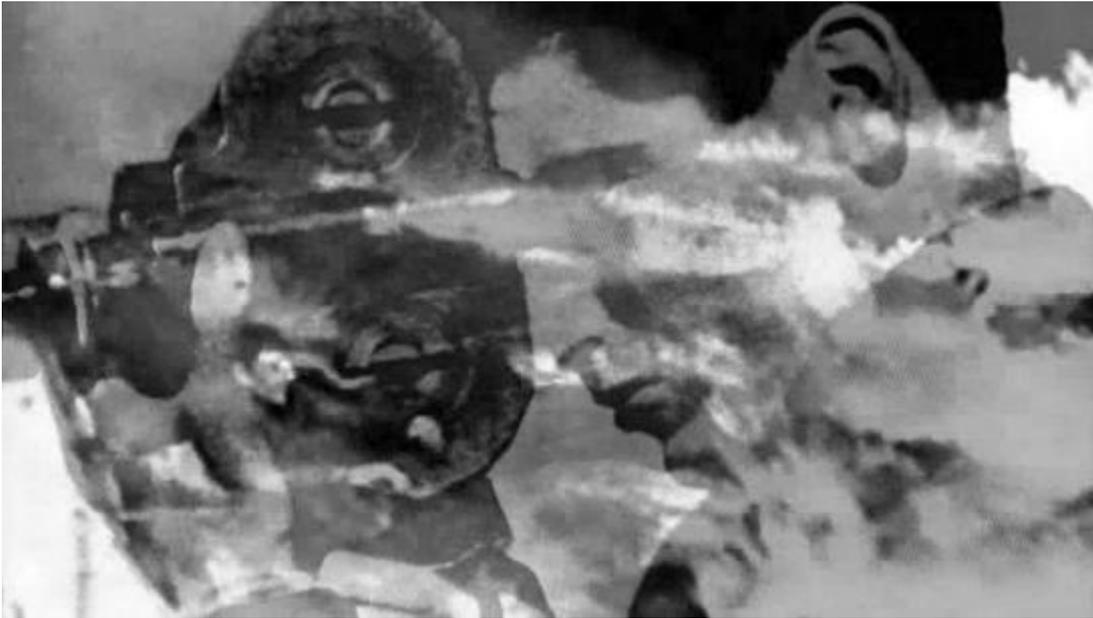


A Photograph and a Camera: Two Objects in Film Socialisme

By Roland-François Lack



Film Socialisme, 2010 [Figure 1]

Godard's films have been making a distinction between photography and cinema at least as far back as the moment in *Le Petit Soldat* when a photographer, as he takes pictures, says that photography is truth and cinema the truth 24 times per second. This famous phrase is more ambivalent than its aphoristic force may suggest. It could mean that cinema is merely an intensification of photography, but might be read ironically, meaning cinema is something quite different from photography, something not defined in Bazinian terms by a relation to truth: it might be more apt to lie (it might even be lying about photography). In *Le Petit Soldat* the ontology of the photographic image is opposed to the epistemology of montage through the deployment of elements of cinema that photography lacks: movement (chiefly through whip-pans) and sound (through the play of post-synchronisation). This applies on other occasions where Godard juxtaposes cinema and photography, and applies in *Film Socialisme*.

The cinema-photography opposition in *Film Socialisme* takes at least six forms, familiar to us from so many other films where photography acts as *mise-en-abyme*:

1/ The appearance on screen of photographs, either in the *mise-en-scène* or montaged in as inserts.

2/ The figure of the photographer, contrasted with the makers of the film in which it appears and also with the figure of the cinematographer, the camera-woman, who appears in the film.

3/ Images of photographic apparatus, especially close-ups where it becomes an object distinct from its function as an adjunct of a photographer-figure. In *Film Socialisme* they contrast with the camera-woman's examination of the video camera, as she discusses the need to produce, rather than distribute.

4/ The stilling of the cinematographic image, as if cinema were remembering its origins, e.g. those passages of *Film Socialisme* that recall the stop-motion sections of *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* or simply those passages where the immobility of the camera suggests the stillness of photography.

5/ The publication with or after a film of a textual supplement with photographs that relate to the film. See the novelisation of *Le Petit Soldat*, or the *Journal*, co-signed with Macha Méril, comprising texts and photographs taken from the film *Une Femme mariée*. The book of *Film Socialisme* revises the format, using the film's texts but presenting photographs of those texts' authors, rather than images that correspond to what the film shows us. Only Robert Mapplethorpe's portrait of Patti Smith connects with an image in the film, and the difference between Smith in 1975 and her image now is quite evident.

6/ The contrastive deployment of elements of cinema that photography lacks (e.g. movement, sound), for example where the act of producing a still image with a photographic camera is filmed against a background of movement and sound (the sea and the wind), or where someone is shown photographing a screen on which moving images are being projected. [Fig. 2-3]



Film Socialisme, 2010 [Figures 2-3]

Each of these six types could be expanded upon to produce a reading of *Film Socialisme*'s preoccupation with its own photographic form, and with each of them could be associated further operative contrasts – with painting, with verbal narration, with screen text, etc. – to make such a reading the more comprehensive.

Thirty-one minutes into *Film Socialisme* a photograph appears both as element in the *mise-en-scène* and as montaged-in insert. [Fig. 4-5]

It is presented to us as an illustration of a moment in the history of photography:

The photograph of a land and its people.(...)

After Arago welcomed Daguerre into the Académie des Sciences (i.e. in 1839), a largely British armada – long before the Balfour Declaration (i.e. in 1917) – rushed to Palestine.

Here is one of the first photographs of the bay of Haifa. (Godard, 2010: 30, 33)

At this point we only see the photograph from behind, held in the *mise-en-scène* by a woman who then passes it on in order to be able to take a photograph for herself, with a digital camera. As in almost every instance of photographing in *Film Socialisme*, we do not see what she has taken a picture of. Two images later we see as an insert, and from the front, the photograph she had been studying.



Film Socialisme, 2010 [Figures 4-5]

The deployment of this image is highly charged. From the passage quoted above, we might associate it with that British armada that apparently arrived in Palestine immediately after 1839, but the photograph is in fact by a Frenchman, the Beirut-based Félix Bonfils, and is dated c. 1880. It is ostensibly a view of the city of Haifa, though this human, historical subject is effaced by the dominance of a-historical nature: sea, land and vegetation. There is evident irony in illustrating the history of a people by an image from which agency is absent, an irony insisted upon when *Film Socialisme* follows Bonfils's picturesque landscape with Joss Dray's explicitly political image of an olive tree in Palestine, photographed in 1989. [Figure 6]

The source of both images is Elias Sanbar's 2004 book *Les Palestiniens: la photographie d'une terre et de son peuple de 1839 à nos jours*. (Sanbar is on screen in *Film Socialisme* as the title of his history of photography in Palestine is alluded to on the soundtrack.) Dray's simple photograph is emblematic, a photograph of a land *without* its people. In Sanbar's book its silhouette is transposed into a vignette separating the 12 sections of the introductory text, and the vignette is reproduced once more as the book's final image. The processing and transformation of images are recurrent themes of *Les Palestiniens*, for example in its discussion of Bonfils's 1880 view of Haifa. Sanbar does not, curiously, identify the photographer, discussing instead a transformation of the image effected at some point later (at least after 1887) by the Zurich-based company Photoglob. It was this company's practice to take existing monochrome photographs and to colourise them (in the process replacing the photographer's signature with its own initials). The result, in Sanbar's words, was "a deep mutation of the gaze".

An analogous mutation occurs in *Film Socialisme*. We see first of all, as I have said, a woman holding the back of a photograph to the camera, and through the paper we can see Bonfils's image, reversed (with the palm tree to the left). This copy of the photograph is of its coloured version (the blue of the sea is perceptible), as in Sanbar's book. When the photograph is reproduced two images later as an insert, we see it from the front with the palm tree to the right. The image is now in black and white, as if restored to its original condition, before the Swiss image-manipulators had appropriated it to their own ends. (The pressbook of *Film Socialisme* also reproduces this image, but in its coloured version.)



Film Socialisme, 2010 [Figure 6]

We can assume that this transformation is the result of digital manipulation – a shot of the woman's digital camera inserted between the shots of colour and black-and-white photographs suggests as much. Hence the return to a purer point of origin, effacing technology, is only imaginary and partial (no attempt was made to restore an 'authentic' sepia tone to the image). In *Film Socialisme*, Godard is effectively another Swiss image-manipulator, different only in the pathos engendered by acknowledgement of the thing lost. As "*une sombre fidélité pour le choses tombées*" (a sombre fidelity towards things that have fallen) (Charles Péguy, as quoted in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* 4B), that pathos is identified by Godard with history. He follows the two photographs of trees with Grunewald's blindfolded Christ – already in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* 4B an image of Jewish victimhood – and with the screentext "ACCESS DENIED", closing off the discussion of Palestine's access to history (as denied by Israel).

Emblematic though he may be of Palestine's claim on history, Elias Sanbar is a presence in *Film Socialisme* firstly as investigator of the image. One image he discusses in his book, under the heading "to make visible", concerns Godard particularly:

In the nearest plane of this photograph, the group of filmmakers, despite the fame of one of them, doesn't have the weight of the furthest plane. Pre-eminence of the background over the characters, intended as much by the photographer as by the three filmmakers who, in the end, are not so much the subject of the photograph as, rather, an extension of the gaze of the unseen photographer. These gazes interconnect in an attempt to say what is a Palestinian refugee camp in 1969. (Sanbar, 2004: 76)

Sanbar is commenting on Mustapha Abou Ali's photograph of the Dziga Vertov Group (Godard, Gorinand Armand Marco) filming *Jusqu'à la victoire* in 1969, footage from which would form part of *Ici et ailleurs* five years later. His figure of the image of filmmaking as prolongation of the gaze of the unseen photographer, Abou Ali (who was himself, at other times, a filmmaker), can be appropriated for a reading of the first part of *Film Socialisme*, aboard ship, where images of at least nine different photographers photographing function as prolongations of the gaze of the unseen filmmaker (Godard).



Film Socialisme, 2010 [Figures 7]; *Ici et Ailleurs*, 1976 [Figure 8]

The contrast is strong with the second part of *Film Socialisme*, on land, where there are no still cameras, no photographers nor even any photographs, but only the camera-woman and her moving-picture apparatus. Here the visual other of filming is the painting, the nineteenth-century artwork that the boy is recreating. That the camera-woman mistakes the painting for a Renoir invites us to consider for a moment the formal difference between Pierre-Auguste Renoir's medium and that of his son Jean, though that difference becomes continuity when we remember that the painting is in fact by Manet, i.e., according to *Histoire(s) du cinéma* 3A, "the cinematograph" (Godard: 1998).

Photographers and cameras return in the final part of *Film Socialisme*, with tourists capturing images of sites visited (Odessa and Barcelona) and a shot of two hands operating an ancient Kodak No 2 Brownie (model F, c. 1930). This camera reinforces the opposition of still and moving pictures by being presented as a moving picture: the hands move as they operate the shutter release, and the shutter moves in response, accompanied by the sound of its clicking.

While the film-photography opposition informs the three-part structure of *Film Socialisme*, occasional motifs suggest an effacement of their difference, or at least a continuity of practice. On the ship, for example, a group portrait is being taken both by a filmmaker and a photographer. Here *Film Socialisme* returns to a motif from *Ici et ailleurs*, where a filmmaker and photographer were presented alongside each other, seizing the same image. [Fig. 7-8]

Elsewhere, in the only image of a known photographer shown in *Film Socialisme*, Gerda Taro's portrait of Robert Capa, the continuity of filmmaking and photographing is suggested by his having a moving-picture camera in his hand (a Bell & Howell Eyemo) [Fig. 1]

Furthermore, where we see tourists pointing with their digital cameras for any length of time, we are uncertain whether they are taking moving rather than still pictures, at which point the distinction collapses. Some parts of *Film Socialisme* seem to have been filmed with the video function of a still camera, as if in mockery of the time-honoured distinction.



Film Socialisme, 2010 [Figures 9-10]

Whichever type of apparatus is used in *Film Socialisme*, the camera barely moves, at most reframing or shaking slightly. This mimicry of still photography is not, however, a further erosion of the difference between the two practices. If *Film Socialisme* doesn't affirm the otherness of filmmaking through camera movement, as Godard had done fifty years before in *Le Petit Soldat*, it does make the affirmation through another formal device from his earlier period. A striking feature of *Film Socialisme* is the return of the jump cut, associated with Godard because of the seventy or so instances in *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*), but in fact relatively rare in his films since then. In *Le Petit Soldat* the defining formalism is the whip-pan, rather, and the few jump cuts in that film occur when the protagonist is photographing, initiating the cliché (see Antonioni's *Blow Up*) whereby jump cuts can represent the act of taking photographs because they too are breaks in temporal continuity. *Film Socialisme* appears to revive that cliché with the four jump cuts that separate shots of a woman photographing passengers, about thirty minutes in, but an earlier sequence, about six minutes from the beginning, had already introduced a more complex relation of the device to photography. In close-up, a pair of hands is shown manipulating an object, switching lenses on a camera (an Olympus OM-2), but the sequence is itself a manipulation. The image is cut up and rearranged, with its constituent parts separated by jump cuts. Since *À bout de*

souffle, the jump cut has affirmed ellipsis as a formal device, interrupting temporal continuity for aesthetic ends. This sequence in *Film Socialisme* goes further, not just removing pieces of time but, seemingly, reordering those that remain while adjusting the speed at which the images appear. [Fig. 9-10]

Despite its brevity (twenty seconds), this sequence is hard to read, it is hard even to count the cuts. What does seem clear is that, in showing that a still camera can respond to light (changing and adjusting lenses, affixing a lens hood), a continuity with cinematography is suggested. However, in subjecting that camera at the same time to the manipulations of montage, the sequence establishes a radical discontinuity between photography and cinema. The layering of sounds during this sequence makes the same point, and brings us back to the premise of this essay: that photography and its associated objects (cameras, photographs, photographers) are, in this film, "things there" (in Rossellini's phrase), there to be manipulated by cinema.

Endnote

A Spanish translation of this piece appeared in the *Film Socialisme* special issue of the online journal *Lumière*: http://www.elumiere.net/lumiere_FS.html

References

- Godard, Jean-Luc (1960) *À bout de souffle*
- Godard, Jean-Luc (1963) *Le Petit Soldat*
- Godard, Jean-Luc & Anne-Marie Miéville (1975) *Ici et ailleurs*
- Godard, Jean-Luc (1980) *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*
- Godard, Jean-Luc (1998) *Histoire(s) du cinéma*
- Godard, Jean-Luc (2010) *Film Socialisme*
- Godard, Jean-Luc (2010) *Film Socialisme: dialogues avec visages auteurs*, Paris: P.O.L.
- Meril, Macha & Godard, J.L. (1965) *Journal d'une femme mariée*, Paris: Denoël
- Sanbar, Elias (2004) *Les Palestiniens: la photographie d'une terre et de son peuple de 1839 à nos jours*, Vanves: Hazan

Dr. Roland-François Lack is a Senior Lecturer in French at UCL. For more information on his research around cinema and place, visit: <http://www.thecinetravelist.net/>

Vertigo Issue 30 | Spring 2012