



*Notes Toward an Analysis
of the Late Works
of Bob Dylan and
Jean-Luc Godard*

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I.

Origins: b. 1941 (as Robert Allen Zimmerman), Duluth,
Minnesota; b. 1930, Paris, France

Period under study: 1997- ; 1988-

Key works from period under study: *Love and Theft*
(2001), *Modern Times* (2006); *Nouvelle Vague* (1990),
Histoire(s) du Cinéma (1988-98), *Eloge de l'Amour*
(2001)

Other major works from period under study: *Time out of Mind* (1997), *Masked and Anonymous* (2003) [film, dir. Larry Charles], *Chronicles: Volume One* (2004) [book], *Together Through Life* (2009) [unheard];

Germany Year 90 Nine Zero (1991) [unseen], *Hélas Pour Moi* (1993) [unseen], *JLG/JLG* (1995), *For Ever Mozart* (1996), *Notre Musique* (2004)

Historical fixation: the American Civil War; the Holocaust

Musicians/Filmmakers/Writers/Artists alluded to in work (incomplete):

Lewis Carroll, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Merle Haggard, Billie Holiday (unconfirmed), Robert Johnson, Kansas Joe, Memphis Minnie, Ovid, Charlie Patton, Junichi Saga, Shakespeare, Frank Sinatra (unconfirmed),

the Stanley Brothers, Henry Timrod, Muddy Waters, Tennessee Williams;

Georges Bataille, Charles Baudelaire, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Sergei Eisenstein, William Faulkner, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, James Joyce, Fritz Lang, Edouard Manet, F.W. Murnau, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Marcel Proust, Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini, Shakespeare, Orson Welles

Random convergence: motorcycle accident

Converging characteristics of work under study: keen attention to forms, penchant for quotation, reverence for old masters

II.

and appropriating lyrics from Memphis Minnie's "Ma Rainey" for the song's second verse, substituting the name and birthplace of the young R&B musician Alicia Keys for those of the titular blueswoman. Such borrowings can be found all over *Modern Times*: two songs, "Rollin' and Tumblin'" and "Someday Baby," are adaptations of traditional blues numbers popularized by Muddy Waters; two others, "When the Deal Goes Down" and "Beyond the Horizon" borrow melodic fragments from a pair of 1930s pop standards—respectively, "When the Blue of the Night" (sung most famously by Bing Crosby) and "Red Sails in the Sunset." And "The Levee's Gonna Break" is an update of the 1929 blues classic "When the Levee Breaks" by Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie, a song previously reworked by the English rock band Led Zeppelin. The album also features lyrics traceable to the Civil War-

era lyricist Henry Timrod and the classical Roman poet Ovid, among other sources. Narrowly speaking, *Modern Times* could be deemed the least "original" Bob Dylan album since his self-titled debut. And, perhaps inevitably, there were complaints about plagiarism from certain elements in the popular press, apparently ignorant of the fact that such borrowings and adaptations have been commonplace through the histories of blues and folk music. The controversies elicited no response from either Dylan or Sony BMG.

Godard has made similar use of unattributed quotations from literary and other artistic sources, which have formed the substance of most of his screenplays since *Nouvelle Vague*. But in seeking to release *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* on DVD, Godard faced difficulties of another order. The eight-part, 265-minute video work consists mostly of hundreds of film clips, culled from throughout the historical and geographical range of film history, none of which

are identified onscreen. The soundtrack takes a form typical of Godard's late-period work, featuring snippets of music and copious narration, including philosophical and historical digressions as well as gnomic commentary on a wide range of subjects. The relationship between the images and soundtrack is one of constant flux, with the voiceover only occasionally commenting directly on the images onscreen.

Gaumont's four-disc set was finally released in April 2007, following numerous delays reportedly prompted by copyright issues related to Godard's usage of

III.

All these stories, now mine, how can I tell them? Show them, maybe.

Don't show every side of things. Allow yourself a margin of indefiniteness. Forms making their way toward speech. Precisely: a form which thinks. *Entre la real et la fiction.*

All I am is a song-and-dance man; I practice a faith that's been long abandoned. The party's over and there's less and less to say.

I wanna establish my rule through civil war. Poetry is resistance; cinema must exist for words stuck in the throat.

The world of research has gone berserk. Neither an art

nor a technique. A mystery. Man's true condition is to think with his hands.

The living dead of this world are constructed on the former world. Their reflections and sensations are from before. They got a prayer permit and a police escort.

Governments ignore what humanity knows. I'm drowning in the poison, got no future, got no past. The dead send the plague to the living who sent them to slaughter.

They suspected they were in a history. They wanted to know what it was.

The flame went out for good at Auschwitz. Death, old admiral, up anchor now, this country wearies us.

The earth came out of the sun. We came out of the

earth. The writing on the wall come read it, come see what it say.

I'm not quite as cool or forgiving as I sound; in anger I am torn by insurmountable irony.

Light falls where it must, neglects what it must. I've already confessed, no need to confess again.

Forms tell us what is at the bottom of things.

IV.

Most of the tracks employ musical forms dating from the 1930s and '40s. And although I initially missed the astounding stylistic range of *Love and Theft*, the relative lack of musical variety on *Modern Times* arguably helps make it the aesthetically purer work.

Modern Times shares with *Love and Theft* a penchant for allusion and quotation. The many references to folk, blues, and traditional pop sources in Dylan's late work simultaneously locate it within old-school folkie tradition and place him in the company of much younger postmodernists like Beck and M.I.A. But what those artists have done with musical styles and genres, Dylan does with whole folk discourses. In "Workingman's Blues," for instance, the title's reference to Merle Haggard's classic evocation of hardworking white Americans puts an ironic spin on the song's more dominant Woody Guthrie-ish elements.

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In *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, Godard's borrowings are both more literal and more diffuse in their overall effect. As with Dylan, Godard declines to reveal his sources, leaving it to his audience to do the legwork required to disentangle the myriad threads of this exceedingly dense series, which represents the purest illustration of Godard's career-long belief that the best way to critique a film is to make another film. Organized around the principle of collage, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* is the perfect late Godard work, just as the perfect late Dylan album would consist of nothing but quotations, musical and lyrical. And who's to say that he hasn't already made it?

The density of the *Histories(s)* can be daunting for even the hardiest of first-time viewers. Consider a remarkable, if by no means exceptional, two-minute sequence in Episode 3a that encompasses Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*, documentary

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footage of dead bodies, bird attacks from Hitchcock's *The Birds* superimposed against black-and-white footage of bomber planes, a shot of Godard reading Wittgenstein's *On Certitude*, and a Goya painting. The whirlwind of allusions is typical of the film's method: Godard collects a range of artistic and cinematic representations of war and its consequences in the service of a meditation on the role of art in historical memory and the epistemology of history in general, blurring traditional demarcations between fiction and documentary, imagination and fact. An onscreen title asks Andre Bazin's venerable question *Quest'que-ce le cinéma?* (What is cinema?) Godard's answer: *rien* (nothing).

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