



The filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin talks about how the director of *Land in Trance* became an actor in *Vent d'Est*, which is to be shown this week for the first time in Brazil.

Jean-Pierre Gorin is known for his partnership with Jean-Luc Godard in the 1960's and 1970's. They directed six films together, four of them with various left-wing revolutionaries of the day, as an exercise in collective labor and under the name of the Dziga Vertov Group, a tribute to the Russian filmmaker, to serve as opposition not only to Hollywood, but also to the tradition of Eisenstein. The first film born of this partnership is *Vent d'est* (1969), a western made in Italy with the participation of Gian Maria Volonté, as an actor, and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, as a screen writer, as well as an appearance by Glauber Rocha. Part of the film shows a number of people gathered in a deserted spot reflecting on what it is to make movies and, as this was the major concern of the group, what it is to make movies politically. And it is Glauber who, at a crossroads, shows the different paths of cinema, including the one of the Third World, which is "dangerous, divine and wonderful".

The other three films made by the group are *Lotte in Italia* (1969), *Vladimir et Rosa* (1971) and *Jusqu'à la Victoire* (1970), which was unfinished. No longer under the name of Dziga Vertov, Godard and Gorin directed, in 1972, *Tout Va Bien*, with Yves Montand and Jane Fonda, and *Letter to Jane*, a caustic reading of a photo taken of Jane Fonda in Vietnam. The film warranted the attention of

A Friend of Glauber [and Godard]

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special article for the newspaper Folha de São Paulo

Susan Sontag in her famous essay *On Photography* (republished recently by Companhia das Letras), presenting it as a lesson in the deciphering of an apparently innocent framework.

Gorin met Godard some time around 1965 when he was the literary editor of *Le Monde* and one of the creators of the supplement "Le Monde des Livres". He had studied philosophy and attended the lectures of Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. He was an eminent participant of the new generation of the French left-wing, which was to culminate in the revolution of May 1968, and represented an innovating force in the thinking of Godard at that time, so much so that he was one of his confidants and advisors for *La Chinoise* (1967) and *Le Gai Savoir* (1968), films that were made before those of the Dziga Vertov Group.

Since 1975, Jean-Pierre Gorin has been a professor for the department of visual arts at the University of California, in San Diego, and he still directs, writes and produces films. Gorin took the trouble to answer the questions below and said that they brought back fond memories. He also said that, if he could, he would take a plane straight away so that he could see the presentation of *Vent d'est* in Brazil.

Glauber Rocha's part in Vent d'Est is small but crucial, as he is the one to point to the paths of the cinema at the crossroad? How did you and Godard meet Glauber, and what was in your mind when you decided to invite him to play that part?

Glauber, Glauber, Glauber. At the crossroad always. He pops up first in my life in Paris a few months after I watched *Land in Trance* some 30 times in a row over a period of ten days. We meet through Raphael Sorin, now Houellebecq's publisher, who would after be linked to *Vent d'Est*. An immediate connection. It translates into endless roaming through Paris streets (Glauber knew how to push the night away!) and a disheveled fifteen-day crash course in "Tropicalismo". Then a year later, as *Vent d'Est* is being shot, he emerges from the night, sits at our table in this dingy Roman trattoria and knots the threads of our last conversation as if we had just left each other the night before. I remember introducing him to Godard. I might be wrong on that one, they might have

nodded to each other prior in some festival or other. I know the idea to enlist Glauber and offer him this cameo as the talking signpost at the crossroad of the various ways of cinema came from me. What was in my mind? Pretty obvious, isn't it? Things were splitting at the seams. It felt that everything could be and was being put on the table to be examined anew. The ways of images and sounds were being questioned all over the place. In a sense we were all (I mean those of us for whom film mattered both in and of itself and in relationship to the convulsions of the world it lived in) at the crossroad. The question was not the question of a "true" path, but the question of the type of dialogue that could be knotted, folded from all this disparate questioning that was going on. Nobody could simply dream to adopt wholesale the experimentation of anybody else, precisely because these experimentations refracted the specificity of experience. That's why the guys of the Cinema Novo were so important: for how Brazilian they were determined to be, for their specificity and how it forced us to interrogate our own and sent us in a direction that had not been mapped out. Glauber's apparition in *Vent d'Est* is both an homage to the Cinema Novo and an affectionate piece of naïve theater that indicates that the works done in Brazil forced us to bushwhack our way out of the thicket (Hollywood, the New Wave, the Ice Age political cinema of the Cold War etc...) toward the specificity of our time and place.

After almost 40 years, how do you see the propositions and the production of the Dziga Vertov Group?

In 1989, at the time of the bi-centennial anniversary of the French revolution a newspaper interviewed various world leaders to get their one line assessment of its legacy. Deng Tsiao Ping, then the leader of China, hesitated for a while and then answered: "Too early to tell!" All joking aside, and with due modesty, I'll use the same answer. I recently looked at *Vent d'Est* and sent the following note to a friend:

Long e-mail from a Brazilian Cultural Center that seems bent on showing *Vent d'Est* for the first time in Glauber Rocha land (got a Japanese DVD edition of the old chestnut and I was blown away by the fact that it looked so fucking gorgeous, not to mention the fact that it felt in turn like a) the only true adaptation of the *Iliad* (sorry I'm coming out of *Troy*, and pretty pissed off at that!)...I mean *Vent d'Est* as the Culture War seen by two Cassandra(s) (two for the price of one at

that! JLG/JPG), b) a small scale Shakespearian epic (nobody cared/cares to read the late 1960's as a Rosencrantz and Guildenstern romp, but I did then/do even more so now...my generation put poor Y. (a.k.a. Marxism and its avatars) into the grave...it was dead then but it did not know it...almost 30 years to wait for the ghost to dissipate into the wind (Tien An Men + the crumbling of the Berlin wall), c) one the best science fiction pieces ever (if *2001* is Dullards in space, *Vent d'Est* is Dullards in the roman countryside, the postscript to *Bouvard and Pécuchet* that Flaubert never quite wrote where he intended to collect the writings of his two blockheads... a perfect complement to *La Chinoise* in that respect).

So, "too early to tell" ... I am sure that in ten years I'll see *Vent d'Est* and the work I did then through a different set of welder's goggles. The affection, the irony, the infuriation they generated in me then and they generate now will still remain, but the works will seem to address yet another set of preoccupations. There are works that do that; they remain mysteriously alive and capable to address times beyond their time. I call them "decent". They are works that display a director's embattlement with the task at hand, show him/her sweating the details, juggling several balls at the same time and not afraid to drop a few on the floor (out of incapacity as well out of showmanship just to get the audience on his/her side). All in all I have made "decent" works.

Do you think that the crossroads metaphor is still valid, after the "winds from the east" stopped blowing so strongly, and considering that the cinema nowadays rarely questions the cinema itself, as it did back then?

I beg to differ. The questions are there. I can hear them in the films of Lars von Trier like I can hear them in the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. I can see them snake through and shape the films of Abbas Kiarostami and the films of Hou Hshiao Hshen or Tsai Ming Liang. And whether I like or dislike these films is completely beside the point. I could add to the list. Known names and names yet unknown. I tend to think that filmmakers fall in two groups the people of the idiom and the people of the grammar. The people of the idiom tend to function best in the stability of conventions; the people of the grammar are bent on interrogating them. Once in a while, the members of one tribe wander (even if for a frightened moment) in the territory of the other. And the ebb and flow of history tend to favor alternately one tribe over the other. Enough with the armchair anthropology! The fact is that a lot of questioning is going on. It always was going on. It will always

be going on. Always...it is inherent to the practice be it of film, writing, music, painting. The question might be more squarely put on the critics. What makes them so unwilling to pick up on the questions that are being asked, so incapable to trace them, to amplify them? What makes them so determined to reinforce the vapidty of the status quo? A little less "thumbs up/thumbs down" and a little more reflection might help. If anything, I think that filmmakers should take the vow to grab the pen and make the effort to speak of the films of others (or the moments or gestures in these films) that move them aesthetically and emotionally. A little less insularity and a little more generosity might help to reclaim the territory that has been lost with the collapse of criticism.

Do you believe it is still possible to experiment with the very language of the cinema, as it was back then? Is it still possible for the cinema to question itself? How? If differently from that time, in which way? If you believe it is no longer possible, why not?

Yes, emphatically so. A few summary disconnected pointers. The digital, first. What does it bring? When will it come into its own, the properties of the digital being explored and not simply considered as an expedient form of filming? What esthetic does it carry forth? How does that esthetic will affect and transform or sense of storytelling? Sound design, second. When are filmmakers going to acknowledge the sophistication of their audience as far as sound design is concerned? When are they going to actively understand that the average viewer has now a familiarity with the complexities of sound layering, sampling, mixing that they derive from their familiarity with popular music? And when is this understanding going to translate into new and different narrative strategies? The 1960's were marked by a shift that saw filmmakers move away from literary models (high and low) and find their point of reference in painting. Early Godard is a pretty good example of what it meant: how many times did he force us to read a frame like we read a painting by Matisse, flat expanses of primary colors lit as if by the sun at noon? And how much did this strategy gel into a new form of narrative? It seems inevitable that music (or more aptly said, sound) will offer the next referent. Alleluia. The era of the sound film is upon us. Look, I could go on and line up the signs of hope (i.e. the shifts and changes that force filmmakers to embrace their time). The shifts in the political winds would figure prominently on the list but it would take us many nights around the campfire.

You made six films with Godard. How was working with him as a partner? What characteristics from Godard do you see in your work after having produced so many films together?

I'll take a rain check on this one. Understand that one of the curses my youth has imposed upon me is that people address me as if I was caught in its eternal present like a deer in the headlights. I suspect that if I had been a) a tad less naïve, b) a bit less ballsy, I would have joined forces with someone who would not have concentrated on his head the mystic of the author with a capital A. But so be it. I felt he was the one whose practice could accommodate my questions. This being said, it is both flattering and tiresome to be brought back to one's youth with such unnerving consistency.

A few years after your partnership with Godard, you moved to the U.S. and began to teach in a university. Still, you directed four films (please correct me if I am wrong: Poto and Cabengo, Routine Pleasures, My Crazy Life, Letter to Peter), and also wrote some scripts. How do you manage your academic life and your cinematographic production?

As best/as badly as I can. Teaching is fairly simple. It consists in persuading people that they don't need you. As all things simple it requires time and effort to achieve. I also saw it as political duty as I felt the need to pass something on and to show young folks to "never underestimate the revolutionary power of the past", as Pasolini once said. Besides, it keeps one on the ball of one's feet and one's brain finely tuned if one does it with passion. Few do, alas. As for the films I got more slowed down by the incapacity of producers to take risks, the absurd cecity of critics, my almost pathological disdain for playing the game and (let's be honest) my own procrastinating ways.

What are your latest works (or projects)?

I have just finished a script, *The Devil's Dicks*. It is a straight genre film that I wrote with my partner Patrick Amos, and that I don't intend to direct. A kind of *Ghostbusters* meets *Saló*, cartoonish to the nth power. It came out one of some sense that this format might best suited to tackle these times of ours.

Some authors consider you to be a kind of resistance between the wearisome grandiloquence of Hollywood movies and the cynicism of the American "independent" cinema. How do you feel about that?

Hey, I'll take them where I can get them! Look I make the kind of films I make out of necessity. By default would be a more appropriate term. That's my palette. That's my voice. My little music. Can't do anything else. It's both my glory and my curse. A limited and yet ambitious way to function in the world.

And now, as long as I have answered your questions, a request. Thank Caetano Veloso, Tom Ze, Gilberto Gil, Jorge Ben. Without them it would more difficult to think. And pay a visit to Glauber's grave. The last time we talked, he called me collect for two hours to tell me "we were right". He never gave me enough space to answer. And I was so broke then that the only thing I could think of was how I could get him off the line. Now, in hindsight, I think he might have called it. Not exactly as he meant it then, but who cares...