Chapter Title: Orientation At the End of the History of Cinema and Television Prolegomena to a History of Audiovision

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Orientation

At the End of the History of Cinema and Television Prolegomena to a History of Audiovision

The innovation of cinematography in the last decade of the nineteenth century was the expression and media vanishing point of technical, cultural, and social processes that are generally referred to as industrialisation. In the rhythmic projection of photographs arranged on perforated celluloid strips that outwitted human visual perception, in the anonymity of publicly accessible spaces vested with a highly intimate ambience, the human subjects who had been through industrialisation apparently discovered their appropriate and adequate communicative satisfaction. Reproducible dream worlds, staged for the eye and the ear, provided these subjects who had been rushed through the century of the steam engine, mechanisation, railways, and, lastly, electricity, with the material for satisfying their desires for rich sensory impressions, variety, diversions, escapism, but also for orientation.

Yet even before the first noisy and flickering celluloid projectors began to run, before cinema was actually institutionalised, theoretical work was already in progress to supersede this stage of achievement in audiovisual events - although, obviously, not at first with this express purpose in mind. Twenty years before the first cinematographic shows in Paris, Berlin, London and New York, models for 'seeing machines'! were designed, models for a medium where the production of visual reproductions and their reception would almost coincide in time even though transmitter and receiver were spatially far apart. Telegraphy and telephony, respectively, were the models with regard to the positioning of the users of this communications teclmology. They were to be owners of their own equipment.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, electricity aided the progress of experimentation on this tele-vision in a number of countries and was even installed in a few as a mass medium on a trial basis - notions as to its use were still undecided and located somewhere between public and private event, between cinema and radio, as expressed in Germany, for example, in early terms such as 'Filmfunk' [film radio] or 'Femkino' [telecinema] That which was a general characteristic of the teclmological change-over impacted communicative conditions in an exemplary and spectacular fashion: the transition from mechanical to electronic reproduction. After World War II, the televisualliving room medium of familial privateness became established rapidly as the (mass) communicative vanishing point of a con-

siderably disillusioned modern age: after the experience of a public sphere that had been appropriated and perverted by fascism, this was a concomitant and result of people's retreat into the intimacy of their own four walls, and was flanked by the spread of individual mobility through the automobile, both developments being directed at the individual as a machine-owner and a machine-user.

This piece of domestic furniture with the electronic picture tube (which became progressively larger as time went on) in which staged and non-staged facets of the world were transformed into images at an incredible speed, pixel by pixel, and evaporated just as quickly once they had been visible, rose to become the projection space and the gravitational centre of communicative desires of people who were captives in satellite towns, public sector housing developments, and the homes they owned. There, it fostered their familial private sphere in the commodity paradise of advanced capitalism. This televisual process had already passed its peak by the mid-1970s. Since that time, production, distribution, and utilisation of technically mediated worlds of sound/images have all been caught up in a fundamental process of transformation:

The filmic has arrived at the age of its unlimited electronic reproduction and thus its unlimited exploitation as well. Cinema has essentially become degraded to a pressure cooker, a *Ourchlaujerhitzer* and promotion machine for about a dozen or so big international productions a year from the factories of the subsidiaries responsible for entertainment of finance and industrial consortia, like American Express, Coca-Cola, General Electric, Gulf & Western, Matsushita, Sony, or the new dynasties of Berlusconi, Bertelsmann, Kirch, Murdoch, and Turner. Their audiovisual exploitation interests lie in launching their products world-wide with a minimum of effort and expenditure, for example, via global direct-satellite networks, through which films can be sent n billion times for cash to private households or to the new film theatres of public intimateness. On the one hand, the conventional television set is now on its way to becoming electronic home cinema, with new techniques of visual reproduction, higher and faster definition of images as well as expanded possibilities of auditory perception. On the other, it is undergoing a permutation to an apparatus that can be deployed anywhere and everywhere as a companion of increasingly singularised individuals. At home, it is becoming the centre for conducting exchange transactions, including electronic choice of mate. Importantly, at the monitor - particularly when it is a component of a personal computer system - the tendency for work-time and rest-time to coincide is once again at work. However, the new networks and the end-apparatus of audio-visions are not only suitable as distributors of fictions and instructive

'I believe that television will help the film producer. Today. it takes a year before a film has run in all the cinemas; televis·lon makes it possible to show a film everywhere on the same evening. Films that are televised take a year to make and one evening to screen: (Sam Goldwyn of MGM, 1935, cited in Blemmec 1935, p. 287)

Television set shown at the Radiolympia exhibition in london, 1936:
Ekco.Scophony Model 202 (Price: £I00).

informations of all kinds, they are also 'dialogue-enabling'. In plain words, this actually means that they can also be used interactively in all kinds of work processes.

The 'classical' institution of mass communication, television as public broadcaster, is visibly being replaced by a gigantic audiovisual department store. Armed with a remote control, individual storage and playback devices for sounds and visions of all kinds as well as their own image-synthesisers, the actors of televisualleisure in front of the screens/monitors stroll through this electronic dreamland rather like the bourgeoisie once did through the arcades where capitalism put itself on display. Only the main difference is that, subjectively, they now appear to have even less time. They are exhausted from rushing from one everyday control panel to the next. What is delivered to them via satellite, copper or optical cable, from the videodisc, the CD-ROM, or the magnetic tape cassette, are rhythmised patterns and carpets of images, increasingly woven and programmed digitally: simulations of all kinds of surface phenomena resulting from highly complicated computation. Additionally, they are offered appropriately styled fragments from traditional spheres of culture, where both the new and the older audiovisual media behave as though they were in a rich quarry that has to be worked right down to the last scrap of ore. Merrily and seemingly unselectivcly they re-cite, re-edit, and re-coUage the reality of media representations – representations that used to be obviously distinguishable as secondary, but now appear to be gradually promoted to primary or, at very least, seem to have equal rights in the competition with the other realities.

This process is not the expression of some fantastic discourse of disappearance, its core is quite concrete, still: the industrial culture. The method of audiovisual reprocessing is cheaper and faster than creating elaborate new constructions. It helps to manage a situation according to economic rationale where, on the one hand, creative resources are at best stagnating and!or artificially keptin short supply, and on the other, the multiple markets' voracious and insatiable appetite for material needs feeding.

Audiovision has become an amalgam of many media communication forms that used to be separate and is thus, for the interim, the fulfilment of that project to occupy the minds and hearts with culture-industrial commodities, which was begun in the nineteenth century.

When Jspeak of the end of cinema and television, I am not announcing the imminent departure of the two most important institutions of sound and image generation to date. Rather, I seek to define their historically delimited significance as specific cultural configurations within the wider framework of audiovisual praxis. It means that we are confronted with the subsumption of epoch-determining qualities of the filmic and its mediation
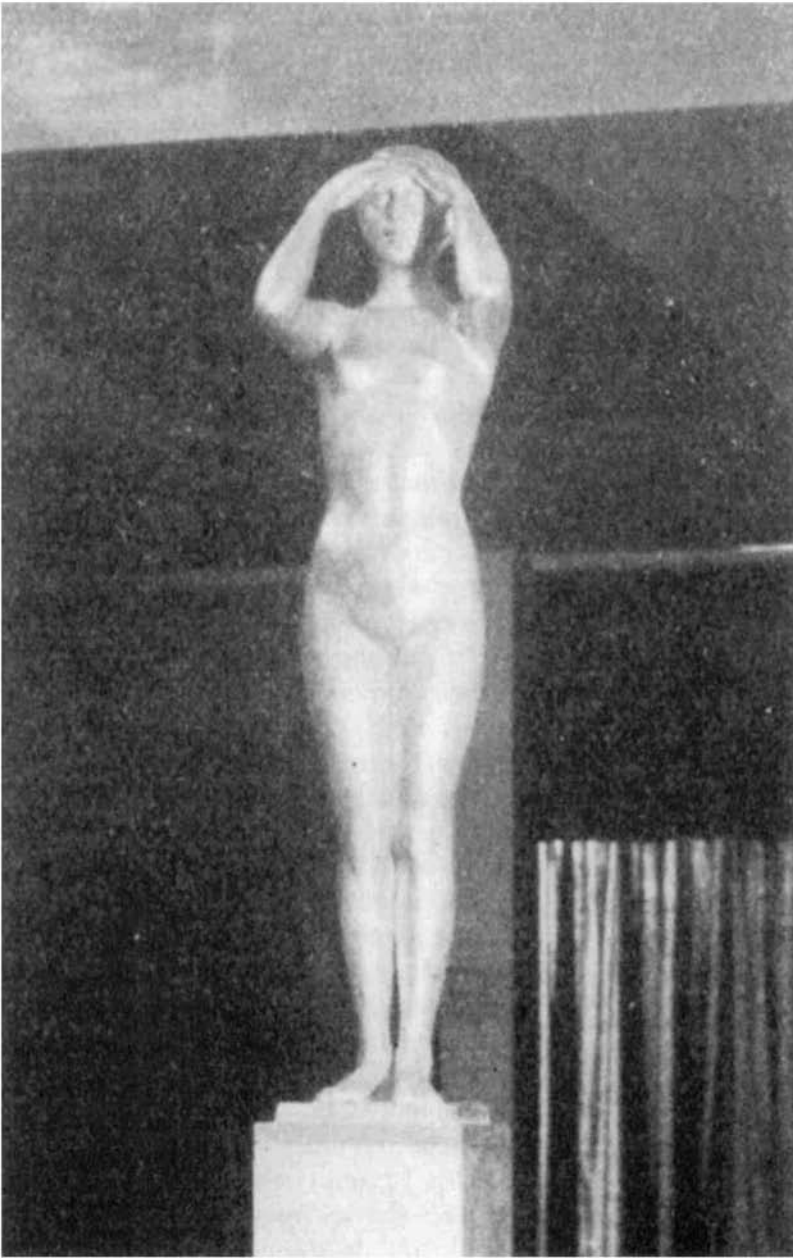
Allegorical portrayal of television by the Berlin sculptor August Kattentidt. The sculpture was created to decorate the entrance to the television section of the Berlin Radio Exhibition of 1930. (Source: Fernsehen, Vol. I, No. 10, 1930.)

that were inextricably linked with its realisation in the context of cinema and television. In the historical perspective, when older constructions are subsumed into new ones, individual elements of the old are nearly always preserved in the new. Both forms of concretion for the realisation of illusions of motion will continue to be present for the foreseeable future, albeit within changed structures. However, they will be ousted from the centre of filmic everyday reality. Traditional television is fast losing its hegemonial function. Cinema relinquished its long ago, even though there are periodic eruptions of its enormous force as the sound and image medium that activates the human senses the most.

At this point of fracture in media history, which at the same time marks a fracture within the cultural process as a whole, it is both necessary and useful to undertake the task of (re)constructing. The technical systems and artefacts, which are currently proliferating and being marketed, plus the changes in aesthetics and modes of perception are, in many aspects, quite spectacular. However, this spectacle-quality is itself superficial to a great extent, often mere packaging and an element of the mise-en-scene of advertising. To expose the exaggerated promises of use-value in the advanced audiovision project, to trace its development, to disclose at least to some extent its context of relations, and to look for possible new qualities of use-value there, offers one vantage point for confronting the phenomena and for understanding them as historically mutable.

With its back to the wall and confronted with a massive surge of technology under the sign of the binary code, it is indeed imperative that new and / or further developments of concepts in historiography be developed. Apocalyptic visions have the same paralysing effect on thinking as a prerequisite for intervention* as mythologising ones do. Their epistemological essence is the same, anyway. Debates, that forecast the demise of Western civilisation due to the rise of new media, have been around since the first storage media for language intervened in the cultural process. Since the important semiological change from a more literary to a more visually characterised (mass) culture in the nineteenth century, and particularly since the beginning of the non-stop industrial production of pictures and images, such debates have emerged at ever shorter intervals. They have become more vitriolic but not more convincing. Including those waged under the sign of the new semiological change-over to the essentially text-based cultural technology of the computer.

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*   I refer here to Brecht's poetic concept of 'eingreifendes Denken', which he used to distinguish the kind of thinking that intervenes in historical processes to promote change.
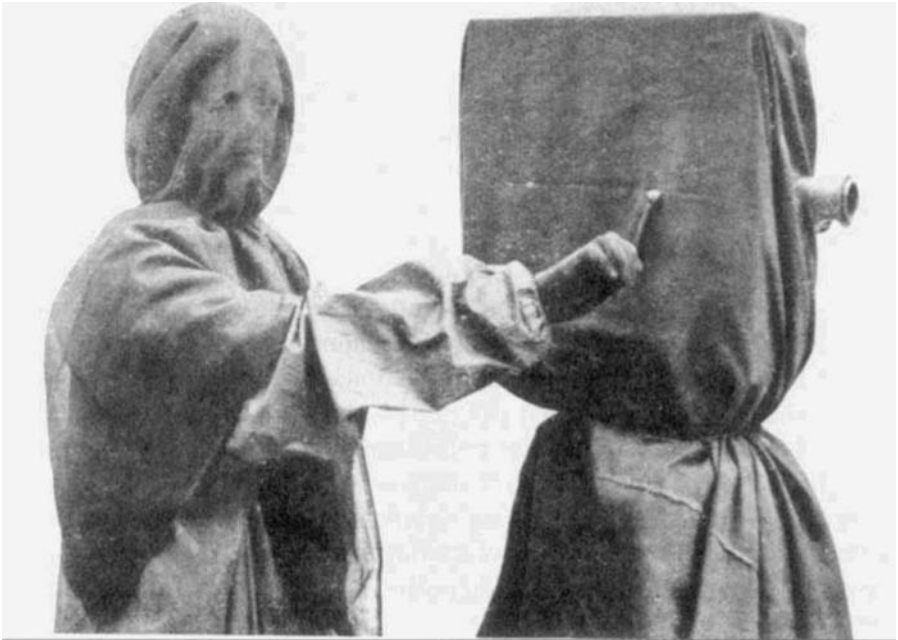
Dr. Raymond Ditmars prepared for filming an aquarium subject. The scientist and camera are draped in black to prevent reflection. (Talbot 1923. p. 200)

The stylisation of cinema into a myth, its sanctification as the ritual space of filmic experience, its aureole in contradistinction to dissolute televisuals - which also dissociates cinema from its origins - is not just a progressive loss of the ability to relate to the structure and presence of what remains of itself in everyday reality. This fixation on the mythos of cinema, which goes hand in hand with a closer affinity to the classic bourgeois art tradition in the cinema, has itself played a considerable role in hastening the dismantling of the cultural significance of cinema. Moreover, it becomes fully anachronistic in view of the fact that the negative point of reference of such myth-making itself represents a form that is historically obsolete. This, in turn, has led to the defence of public broadcasting as the only proper place for televisual messages and to strange alliances, where cultural critics and makers of programmes and films for television all rally to its defence. In this constellation, those who up until now have tended to push traditional television entertainment aside as a cultural waste product, can at long last go on the offensive and enjoy consuming it. A further, revealing indicator is that television has now been promoted to a recognised subject for academic study.

The long history of illusions of motion by means of technical apparatus demands great stamina but the air is getting thin. At a time when academics and private researchers who professionally engage with the media are busily either providing policy- and/or technology-planners of the media future with studies to legitimate and orient the implementation of new techniques, affirming public acceptance of those already installed, or - if their interest is historical- writing chronologies of works, men, and institutions deemed to be great, my study insists unashamedly on being ambitious in a way that is almost a luxury: it is my interest and desire to proceed as far as some of the fundamental questions about the course of the media-historic process; at the very least, I aim to layout material for this interrogation so that it is indeed possible to pose such questions. To illustrate this: in view of the fact that it is apparent that the perspectives are becoming ever more opaque, I shall embark on a quest to the drawing-board models which represent the bedrock of the topology of a section of the media map: models constructed by amateurs, technicians, researchers, industrialists, cultural planners, producers, and critics, which have so far only appeared peripherally and disconnectedly in historiography, and which should be decoded from the media material, also from the artefacts themselves, i.e. to discover the machine from the screw which may be a part of it. Yet reconstructions such as this are not only a luxury. They necessarily provide contentions. Models are offers to engage in debate.

In a condensed form and without evoking the intellectual ancestors that have all shared in influencing it, my conceptual starting point is: over the past hundred and fifty years, in the history of the industrially advanced countries, a specialised, tending to become ever more standardised, institutionalised area of expression and activity has become established. I call it the audiovisual discourse. It encompasses the entire range of praxes in which, with the aid of technical systems and artefacts, the illusion of the perception of movements – as a rule, accompanied by sound – is planned, produced, commented on, and appreciated. This special discourse is both embedded in and defined by the superordinate process of an ongoing *attempt* at culture-industrial modelling and subjugation of the subjects – those who are (supposed) to use the artefacts and the messages appropriated by these. This culture-industrial dimension thus has the character of a dispositif, in Foucault's sense of the term. For the purposes of analysis, its relevance is not that of an ominous superstructure, but rather as an identifiable historical concretion where the fractures and fissures are visible. Culture industry has reified the audiovisual discourse in a number of arrangements, which thus also possess the characteristic features of a dispositif, From a media studies perspective, these arrangements are better comprehensible and ex-

plain more than considering isolated types of apparatus and, moreover, in the wider sense as Jean-Louis Baudry has defined for cinema, for example: a construct with a complex structure in which the technical basis of the film equipment, the concrete conditions of projection in the cinema, the film itself, and the 'mental machinery' of the subject in the cinema auditorium all combine.'

In the historically different arrangements, the audiovisual overlaps with other specialist discourses and partial praxes of society, such as architecture, transport, science and technology, organisation of work and time, traditional plebeian and bourgeois culture, or the avant-garde. The particular constellations that arise in this way under the hegemony of the culture industry, structure the process historically. Four dispositif arrangements can be distinguished in the course of this history thus far:

> the production of illusions of motion in space and time with the aid of a heterogeneous ensemble of picture machines employing various techniques, where the rudimentary imaginings are produced using painted visual surfaces in combination with changes in light levels, movable elements of the original pictures themselves, or moving elements of the artefacts, whereby the level of technological development, physiological, and psychological research at the time did not permit the illusions produced to be brought into line with the perception of real movements. The culture industry already made its presence felt in various ways, but it was not very far developed within the relative anarchy of the forms of expression and the positioning of the subject;

> the cinema, where in effect the filmic discourse of perfect illusionisation of motion in space and time in the intimate-public sphere became concretised and where the culture-industrial element came to dominate;

> television as the institutionalisation of a broadcast flow of illusions of motion controlled from outside for a scattered audience in the private sphere; and, finally,

> advanced audiovision, as a complex construction kit of machines, storage devices, and programmes for the reproduction, simulation, and blending of what can be seen and heard, where the trend is toward their capability of being COlmected together in a network but which, for the time being, at a more advanced stage of development display a similar heterogeneity to that which was characteristic of a large part of the nineteenth century.

Although the temptation is great to reconstruct these four arrangements in a simple chronological order, it would be the wrong approach. In history, they interlock, overlap, and periodically attract and repel each other. To understand them as historically distinguishable dispositifs means, first and

foremost, to characterise the socio- and techno-culturally dominant arrangement of a particular time and, at the same time, to bring out the social and private relations which led to this type of hegemony, including how it came to establish itself.

Thematically, the chapters do not simply follow the four-part structure of the historical process either. They focus on the 'classic' dispositifs of cinema and television, their origins and origination, their contradictory constitution, as well as their gradual dismantling over time. The first chapter also refers back to the development of early machines for producing images, a field of study which, to date, has had only scant attention paid to it, and the fourth chapter already maps the most recent historical developments. The developed forms of cinematographic and televisual expression have been written about extensively elsewhere; here they are only dealt with marginally.

Even if one disagrees with the intellectual premises of this study, it is my hope that my work will benefit an integrated history of the media, in a two-fold sense: up to this point in time, study of the most important strands of culture-industrial development of the last hundred years, cinema and television, has artificially separated the two and investigated them in this configuration, whereas here the focus is an overall one. Aspects, which up to now have been excluded from historiography but which arc essential soda-cultural mortar for audiovisual praxis, arc expressly included here.

It is not to be denied that the text makes considerable demands on the reader. My focus is on the materiality of the media within the triadic relationship of tcchnology - culture - subjcct. In view of the high standing that technology has acquircd, not only as the means and object of cultural expression but also as the prerequisite and outstanding context of applications in cultural practice, this reference frame appears to be particularly suitable as a central point around which to group the analysis and description of media processes. Its most significant quality, which the historic phenomena do not simply reveal to us but which is, instead, an ongoing task to be always tackled afresh, is interdependence. To put it in the negative and in plain words: it did not happen that the artefacts and technical systems (for communication) were invented first, then they usurped culture, and in a further step, they brought their influence to bear on the subjects. Or conversely: technology is not an accidental outflow of cultural determinants, which on their part condition the existence, consciousness, and unconsciousness of the subjects in a one-dimensional way. Between the three terms of reference there is, however, a constant reciprocal relation, which is influenced by individual factors in different historical constellations to a greater or lesser extent.

The focus, in the sense of the triad mentioned above, corresponds to three more recent intellectual traditions, which have influenced the text in a more implicit than explicit way.) I am underlining them here because, in my opinion, they have quite wrongly been largely ignored by the modish media-theoretical and -historical models of the last decade, especially in Western Europe and the USA. First, there is the cultural studies approach of Marxist-oriented British cultural research and critique, as represented in exemplary fashion by the life's work of Raymond Williams.' Culture as a quality of a relationship between life activity, social living conditions, and actual development of the individual; culture as an expression of ways of life; a concept of media processes as a special social praxis - these are the essentials of this approach that interest us here. The second tradition is more recent historiography of technology and the more recent systems-theoretical approach to the subject; an outstanding exponent in Germany is Gunter Ropohl.' Here, the artefacts and their material individuality are not considered as isolated entities - this separation is only possible anyway through an intellectual act of force - but can only be fully understood as a unity of origination/production and utilisation. The third intellectual tradition, is the meta-psychological approach to the media discourse, as developed particularly by Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Louis Comolli, and Christian Metz[6] with reference to cinema, and its critique and further development by, for example, the British media theorist and critic Stephen Heath.[7] The friction between this approach and the first two is only superficial. They share a complex concept of apparatus; and the latter complements exceptionally well the other approaches which emphasise the social aspects, because it prioritises the position of the subject in the media discourse. The development of a concept of apparatus with cultural dimensions, a concept of culture where the technical is an essential component, and the integration and constraining of the subject within this complex of relations, roughly delineates my theoretical interest in this outline of a history of audiovision. It does not intend or seek to compete with other models that emphasise more strongly the techno-structure of media processes (like, for example, those of Friedrich Kittler and his pupils), but is to be understood as supplementary.

However, heuristic procedure needs to be put into practice with examples. Here, problems arose, the scope of which only became clear while I was actually writing. Many of the old bricks that I needed for building my construction proved to have been inadequately dug-up and treated by previous cinema and television archaeology. Others, particularly from the traditions of television, I had to excavate myself. This resulted in much more attention to the concrete details of the media material than I had originally planned for the text.

Re-constructing an integrated history of audiovisionowes a great debt to
the creative and emancipatory praxis of making films in conjunction with
reflections on their foundations. Outstanding exponents arc the exemplary
directors, theorists, conceptualisers, and critics, like Alexander Kluge or
Jean-Luc Godard, with their dogged persistence in exploring film history,
their insistence on the relationship of tension that exists between filmic and
non-filmic external reality, their constant interrogation of their own lan-
guage, their resistant attitude toward the power of the culture-industrial
dimension, and their productive undermining of the established arrange-
ments' sense of security in both the cinema and television contexts. Other
guarantors of this are those among the avant-garde of electronics in whose
heads and hands the new techniques do not become independent ends in
themselves, but are constantly irritated and reflected upon: artists like Valie
Export, David Larcher, Nam June Paik, Steina and Woody Vasulka, or Peter
Weibel. Further, publishing projects like the French *Cahiers du Cinéma* and
Screen and *Afterimage* in the UK also stand for this. In Germany, for many
years this tradition was at home in the journal and yearbooks of *Film* and,
later, in *Filmkritik.* Their compendia, which represent a formidable archive,
should not be left to the fast-growing museum and certainly not to the pile
of rubble of media history. They are of no use as an index for a vanished cul-
ture of the cineastic. On their pages, much advanced thinking was pub-
lished, particularly in highlighting discussions from the international
forum, which is still waiting to be taken up, re-appropriated, and devel-
oped, in the context of the radical changes taking place in filmic culture. For
example: Gideon Bachmann's often scathing and incisive questioning of the
cinema apparatus in the late 1960s; Hartmut Bitomsky's brilliant collage,
Das Goldene Zeitalter der Kinematographie....[8] [The Golden Age of Cinematog-
raphy], written more than twenty years ago, or the first sketches of
Godard's HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA ET DE LA TÉLÉVISION.[9]

Histoire(s) du Cinéma et de la Télévision