

***Decades Never Start on Time: A Richard Roud Anthology.* Richard Roud. Edited by Michael Temple and Karen Smolens. Preface by David Thomson. London: British Film Institute / Palgrave Macmillan, 2014 (280 pages). ISBN: 9781844576265.**

A Book Review by Laura Busetta, Sapienza University of Rome

Richard Roud has not only been a figure of great influence on American filmmakers, he has also significantly affected the taste of the cinema audiences of his time. Born in Boston in 1929, he was a film journalist, programmer, festival director and the author of important books, among which the biography of Henri Langlois, *A Passion for Film*, and the monograph on Jean-Luc Godard for which he is best known. Coedited by Michael Temple and Karen Smolens, *Decades Never Start on Time: A Richard Roud Anthology* presents for the first time a collection of heterogeneous materials taken from the vast trove of Roud's writings, documenting his activity as a film critic and curator. Roud became programmer for the London National Film Theatre and the London Film Festival in 1959, and then director of the New York Film Festival from 1963 until his dismissal in 1987. During his prolific and passionate career, he travelled extensively between Europe and America, often visiting Paris, London and New York, and never missing a major international film festival. Particularly close to French directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut and Agnès Varda, he was able to draw the attention of the North American audience to European cinema, and particularly to the French New Wave. This noteworthy collection published by the British Film Institute is organised chronologically, ranging from Roud's various newspaper and magazine articles to his notable texts as *The Guardian's* principal film critic from 1963 to 1969, and as a contributor to *Sight and Sound*, the publication with which he had the longest working relationship. This already substantial collection is enhanced by a vast amount of previously unpublished materials, the addition of which provides a thorough insight into Roud's attitudes and tastes.

What is remarkable about the organisation of the anthology is that it gradually leads the reader through the development of Roud's conceptions and ideas of cinema. Divided into five sections, corresponding to the different stages of his career, the collected texts demonstrate Roud's keen dedication, a distinctive and confident personality, and a writing style that always and easily adapts to the different editorial frameworks, including critical, journalistic and nonspecialist publications. From one article to the next, the reader gains access to a vast series of thoughts on cinema and on a broad array of new films and directors.

Given his key role as a programmer and curator, Roud was particularly well aware of the emerging figures and movements of his time, as is clear from his long reviews of films which were to become canonical, such as *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964) and *Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965), his fond outlines of *The Conformist* (*Il conformista*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970) and *Il posto* (Ermanno Olmi, 1961), and his detailed report of the audience's reaction to a screening of Bertolucci's *Last Tango in*

*Paris (Ultimo tango a Parigi, 1972)*, to mention but a few of the collection's more effective pieces. Always intrigued by new developments, Roud had a keen affinity with the French New Wave and with 1960s Italian cinema, and wrote with great passion not only about their most famous directors, such as Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Antonioni, Bertolucci and his beloved Godard, but also about filmmakers who at the time were less known in the English-speaking world, such as Chris Marker and Varda. In an article written for *Sight and Sound* at the beginning of the 1960s, entitled "The Left Bank" (57–61), he drew a distinction between such a group (including Resnais, Varda and Marker) and the directors of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* group (Claude Chabrol, Truffaut and Godard). Roud commented on the filmic production of Left Bank filmmakers, who were concerned with political urges and collective stances, and driven by the belief that "personal problems and emotions should be seen in a social context" (57–62).

The pieces contained in this book, hence, provide an insight into the trends and debates of the time, while the numerous festival reports effectively recall the prolific cinematic decades of the postwar era. The reflections developed in the final years of Roud's life are contained in the last part of the volume, comprising two sections of writings similar in tone and contents, both of which look to the past and display a more personal writing style. In particular, the concluding section contains extracts from books and unpublished projects, produced at a time in which Roud's role became closer to that of film historian rather than critic, marking the shift in his career from a commentator of contemporary cinema to a chronicler of the cinema of the past. This shift commenced with the publication in 1977 of his obituary of the cofounder of the Cinémathèque Française Henri Langlois; as Michael Temple points out in the Introduction to the anthology, there is in this text the sense of a conclusion:

It is a sense of an ending, the end of that modern movement in film history beginning with Italian neo-realism in the mid-1940s, then flowing through the various and successful new waves of European and world cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, before finally losing the historical initiative to the resurgent Hollywood mainstream of the mid-70s. ... In terms of the evolution of Roud's work, it is striking that, from the elegiac obituary that he writes for Henri Langlois in early 1977, there is henceforth almost nothing really new that he writes about with great enthusiasm, no entirely new film phenomenon that will change his understanding of what cinema is, no groundbreaking new film-maker whose next film he will be looking forward to review. (13)

Death begins to be at once a source of reflection and an inspiration, as can be seen in "A Passion for Film" (206–11), the text prompted by the passing of Henri Langlois, and in the critical biography of Truffaut, started shortly after the death of the French director. The obituaries written for Charles Chaplin, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Lotte Eisner and Joseph Losey belong to this period as well, as does the piece titled "The Left Bank Revisited" (164–8), in which Roud builds a connection with his article for *Sight and Sound* written a decade earlier, both reporting a change in the reception of the filmmakers, who were still undiscovered at the time of the first piece, and reflecting on the evolution of their filmographies thereafter: "Since those days, many things have changed: 'Right Bank' Godard became perhaps the most left-wing of all, and the differences between Chabrol and Truffaut became greater than the similarities" (164).

Roud's never-completed autobiography, *Decades Never Start on Time*, which gives the anthology its title, is from the same period. This book project was rejected by The Viking Press and what remains of it is an outline, two proposals and a couple of chapters. The

personal and confessional tone of the extracts that are published in the anthology gives us an idea of what the project would have looked like. Conceived as a first-person memoir, the book was meant to be a narrative of Roud's life in cinema, recounting his reactions to film screenings, his travels around festivals, and his memories of encounters with filmmakers. This is what already comes across from many of Roud's articles, where the descriptions of significant events and memorable personalities tell us both about the history of cinema and about the story of a man who was aware of having been a true cultural force at a certain time: "Throughout the period from 1958 to 1972 my job placed me at the very centre of the film scene and I was able to observe many things which, I think, should be remembered" (223). Roud's writings often recount details and anecdotes, as in the following examples: "My happiest and most rewarding times with Langlois were at restaurants" (207); "the first foreign-language film I ever saw was French. ... The film was Sacha Guitry's *Pearls of the Crown*, and it was playing at the Thalia. I liked it so much that I went to see it again two days later" (211); "It [*Last Tango in Paris*] was something of an event. ... [T]here was a special air of excitement that night because there was some doubt if anyone who wasn't there would ever see the film in its original form" (135–6). In so doing, they provide a history of film reception and film-going practices, granting the reader access to one viewer's experience of the cinema.

By telling the life story of a noted figure in cinema culture, Roud's writings and notes also build a history of the cinema of the 1960s, "the model of the film memoir—that is 'my life in cinema and cinema's role in my life'—was very much in the cultural mood of the times for cinephiles of his generation" (14), as Temple suggests in his Introduction, with reference to other personal writings of the time in-between memoir and criticism, such as Serge Daney's *Postcards from the Cinema*, and subjective filmic projects, such as Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998). The major contribution of this anthology lies indeed in the configuration of a sort of literary genre: the film memoir, a combination of thoughts and considerations and a narration in which the personal experience is never separated from the critical reflections on film. The book encompasses a first-person mode of film criticism that weaves together personal experience, self-examination, and cinematic, aesthetic and political reflections.

## Works Cited

*Alphaville* [*Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*]. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. 1965. Film.

*The Conformist* [*Il conformista*]. Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci. Mars Film, 1970. Film.

Daney, Serge. *Postcards from the Cinema*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007. Print.

*Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. Canal+, 1988–1998. Film.

*Last Tango in Paris* [*Ultimo tango a Parigi*]. Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci. United Artists, 1972. Film.

*Il posto*. Dir. Ermanno Olmi. 24 Horses, 1961. Film.

*Red Desert* [*Deserto rosso*]. Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni. Film Duemila, 1964. Film.

Roud, Richard. *Jean-Luc Godard*. 1967. London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.

---. *A Passion for Films: Henri Langlois and the Cinémathèque Française*. New York: Viking, 1983. Print.

### **Suggested Citation**

Busetta, Laura. “*Decades Never Start on Time: A Richard Roud Anthology* by Richard Roud” Book review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 10 (Winter 2015). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

**Laura Busetta** holds a PhD in Film Studies from Sapienza University of Rome (2013). Having published on subjective cinema, she is now pursuing research on self-representation in digital film and media. She has cofounded a research group focusing on Self-representation in Visual Culture and has recently coedited an issue of *Networking Knowledge* entitled “Be Your Selfie: Identity, Aesthetics and Power in Digital Self-Representation”. She is currently coediting a collection on *The Self-portrait in the Moving Image*.