

# France

Jeanne Pansard-Besson interviewed **Jean-Claude Carrière**

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**Pansard-Besson:** Where did you grow up, what's your native country?

**Carrière:** I was born in 1931 in a tiny village in the South of France, Colombières sur Orbe, in the Hérault region, and I am from a family of very small-scale farmers, a form of agriculture which nowadays has completely disappeared – I was about to say a poor and today unprofitable agriculture. Nobody could live off the property we had. But at the time, in that village, 550 inhabitants lived off the land. Today there isn't one cultivated plot of land left; everything is wasteland.

So, I was born there in 1931 and I was destined to be a peasant, like my ancestors, when my schoolmistresses made me apply to a fund which I got and which allowed me to continue my studies, first during the war in a religious college, and then in Paris.

What was striking about Europe in my childhood was that Europe was a source of war. It was absolutely impossible to talk about the Germans without seeing them as enemies; as we had been at war before, and one of my uncles had been killed in the 1914-18 war. There was France but there wasn't Europe. We didn't use to talk about Europe. We didn't even know what it was. We used to learn at school that it was a continent amongst others, quite a big one, but during my childhood there wasn't, what appeared after the war, the European spirit. The more or less arbitrary idea of unification, of a group of countries that are very different from one another – which, didn't wait long before they divided, tore themselves apart into two blocks, etc. I mean, all we know now about the history of Europe in the second half of the 20th century.

For me, initially, I have to say Europe didn't exist. I was French. Step by step in my studies I was learning about ancient civilizations – Latin, Greek. I did 9 years of ancient Greek. I have a BA in Latin. It was the so-called 'Classical Humanities'. One can't say that it was European. One can't say that Pericles' century was European. This term was never used about ancient Greece, even less so [in the context of] Egypt or Persia – those countries which we learned about, for I had chosen History as I made my way up the university levels.

So, Europe arrived more as a new idea than a fact – as it was fiercely and bloodily divided during the war. It arrived from the 1950s onwards, in diplomats' speeches, in diplomats' meetings: why not put an end to this divided Europe and make a united Europe? It started, as you know, with the Coal and Steel deal [in 1952], and with France and Germany as the founding couple, with their choir children around them, and then very soon this 'Europe' was divided again, torn apart into the Eastern and Western blocks.

So, for me Europe isn't a peaceful and unified place. If it's either an advantage or a disadvantage, I leave it up to other people to decide, because the clash of cultures can sometimes be a good thing. You know? It allows for us to understand 'the other' even if it is through the process of trying to destroy them – we saw this in particular with the wars that came with the breakup of Yugoslavia. At the end of the 20th century, the hatreds that awoke there were dreadful. We mustn't assume that because we are European, we will adore our neighbours.

Actually, Europe, if we look at it on a map today, is a series of small feudal systems, some more important than others, which have a tendency to close themselves off more and more. To say I am better than my neighbour, and therefore I will despise him, close my doors to him, not do him any favours, and most of all, close myself off to people who come from further away – there's been a sort of strange return to the Middle Ages in the past few years, encouraged by very nationalistic, extreme right parties.

And this new tendency came after what has been the heart of my life – I am 88 years old – the heart of my life has been The Cold War, the two blocks, West and East. This was all everyone talked about when talking about Europe. Europe was communism on one side, market economy on the other. With the Cuban crisis, which almost became extremely serious – thankfully Kennedy made the right decision at the last moment – discussions began. And little by little, from Gorbachev onwards, say in the 1980s, we witnessed something getting milder in the relationship between these two blocks. Until eventually in '89 the Berlin Wall fell, and then there was a sort of hope again that Europe would have a weight as Europe, as a solid unit, economically prosperous. Europe has invented the modern world.

In the 18th century, which we still rely on today, Europe invented two notions, democracy on the one hand and industry on the other. The alliance of democracy and industry is irresistible. It conquered the world. This tiny bit of land which was called Europe conquered – think of the British Empire – extravagant colonial empires in the 19th century which, of course, were later dismantled. But the strength of Europe lay in those two, I believe, founding ideas which, when brought together, are irresistible. Because one allows the

people to choose their representatives, making the people sovereign, whilst industry was triumphant; the arrival of railway tracks in central Asia was quite an unexpected event. I am married to an Iranian woman. My wife's family still remember it as an extraordinary event – machines working on their own.

There is an event I've always found striking. It's after France conquered Algeria. Algeria was led by a man who was called Abdelkader, who was a descendant of the prophet. He was a very clever, educated man, who wasn't a fanatic at all. He was defeated by the French troops and was brought to France [in 1848]. And there, he asked himself a question, which he immediately said and wrote down "Who is this god who defeated me?". Because he himself was descended from the prophet, so he was convinced he was in the right, and supported by the most powerful forces of the universe and therefore, certain of his victory. So, "Who is the god who defeated me?" And do you know what his answer was? Science. He asked to visit the Academy of Sciences, where he made a famous speech, after which he was exiled to Lebanon where he defended Christian interests until the end of his life. This was a really good man. So, Abdelkader is an interesting example, to see the secret relationships rarely mentioned amongst people from the Arabic world. When he spoke, an entire population followed him. [But] had he spoken about one god being defeated by another god, the consequences could have been far-reaching.

**Pansard-Besson:** You were saying that Europe gave rise to a new hope after the reconciliation. Did Europe make you dream, too?

**Carrière:** We should always be careful not to draw general conclusions from one's personal experience. I used to work in theatre and cinema, and I worked in Russia, in Poland with Wajda under communism, I worked in Czechoslovakia. For us 'artists' of the cinema and theatre, borders were more porous than for others. I lived well under the communist regime without being a rebel, without carrying a weapon, but working, making films and plays there.

I'm going to tell you a story, one of those films is adapted from Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. It is a film we made in the 1980s, and during the writing and the shooting of the film Gorbachev came to power, so things were getting softer already. Naturally it was impossible to shoot in Czechoslovakia [The plot of the novel written in 1982 is closely linked to the Prague Spring and criticises the political regime and ideology. Kundera had already emigrated to Paris in 1975. The first Czech version was only published in 1985 by an exile publishing house.] We reconstituted the film in France, in different places. We even almost shot in Zagreb, but the novel was strictly forbidden there, therefore the film was, too. But when the film was finished, so many things had happened in Moscow that the man in charge of Soviet cinema, a filmmaker I knew quite well, who was called Klimov, and is now dead, was

put at the head of Soviet cinema by Gorbachev. And he organised a festival that I went to several times and where he invited us to screen our film. That was in 1980, yes, before the fall of The Wall.

It was a very significant event – a film which had been forbidden to be shot in Soviet countries which was invited to the Moscow festival. That was an honour. So, we arrive in Moscow with Philippe Kaufman, the director, and Klimov tells us that they wouldn't be able to screen the film in the official theatre of the festival, but they'd screen it in another room. Philippe said, "but why not in the official theatre?" And the answer says it all "We are afraid that the Czech delegation might leave the theatre." In other words, we are afraid that those who claimed to still be communists in the countries that we used to call satellites might be more communist than the new Muscovite leaders. That was something that struck us very much, and the film was screened in a big cinema in Moscow [instead].

Afterwards the film came out in theatres, but two or three years later, I believe. There are many stories like this we can link together, through one's job – we can follow, if interested, the political life simply through what happens in your job.

For another film, with Peter Fleischmann, a German film, which was shot in Russia as well, we got invited to the Ukrainian Hotel in Moscow, one of those big hotels, with Soviet architecture. We knew there were three mics in each room, in the bathroom, everywhere. But in that hotel, at the same time, there was a big bar with prostitutes sat on stools and an international congress of priests and bishops. It was a scene out of a Buñuel movie, even Buñuel would not have dared to make. [Carrière and Luis Buñuel collaborated over several decades, which generated over a half-dozen films.] But I saw this with my own eyes, the priests and prostitutes were having conversations, over several days. You know? It was incredible. It was quite surprising.

In the same way that, in Warsaw – that's a small European problem, but sometimes looking at the small angle is interesting – in a bar in Warsaw where I was working with Wajda on *Danton*, there were Polish prostitutes who complained about the arrival of Russian prostitutes who were less expensive which provoked dumping; and there were fights between them. We don't think of that, but that is Europe: a constant hubbub, a strange mix of good will, of ferocious hatred, even within the same racial families, of absolute generosity, of openness ...

At the moment, for instance, Europe looks like it's closing up. If we trust the uprisings or – well it might change tomorrow, it often changes very quickly – the rising popularity of the extreme right in Europe today, we are in the process of

closing ourselves off to what always was our strength; our welcoming quality – democracy and industry attracted the entire world to Europe, after which the USA took over, and Japan a bit later, a hundred years later. But at first England, France and a bit later Germany were countries dominating the world by their prestige.

When Lafayette went to help American Independence for the Constitution of 1776, before the French Revolution, there was nothing in the US, no industry. There were Englishmen, English officers who were the only ones allowed to carry a weapon. You know that's the reason why the Second Amendment of the American Constitution today states that each American has the right to carry a weapon? And that's why there are all those massacres, it comes from then, from this constitution. So, the Revolution took place. During the Revolution they invented steam locomotion. First of all, I believe the first [steam locomotives] were wagons in England, then boats in France. When Lafayette was in the US before the Revolution, there was none of that. When he comes back, I believe, say in 1820, in the New York harbour, he sees 80 steamboats. And all of this, of course, came from Europe.

Democracy – the idea that the people will vote, for the first time (in Greece it wasn't all the people) – and that we can make machines that work on their own thanks to what we call energy, those are two absolutely extraordinary discoveries. There are texts [about how] it was demonstrated to people from Central Asia; they brought chiefs of tribes together to show them the arrival of a railway train, like a hallucinating show. And the first railway line there was the famous BBB – Berlin-Byzantium-Bagdad. Berlin-Byzantium was the first connection because during the first World War Turkey and Germany were allies, and after that Bagdad was added. That was a massive event: to move, to vote. The fate of the world is at stake there – the industry-democracy is at stake.

And the other phenomenon is the first laws: the legal and legislative work of the French Revolution. For six years the best French jurists, sometimes putting their lives at risk, worked like crazy to create laws, and laws which they wanted to be universal. The Civil Code which we stupidly call the Napoleonic code – he (Napoleon) went there twice for half an hour - took six years of work. And all the members, if you look at the list of the Constituent Legislative Assembly, are all men of the law, people who have this Republican ideal of the law – *lex* above *rex*, above the King, which is why he had to be beheaded. That is unique. There was the American Constitution beforehand, but it didn't abolish slavery. The French constitution suppressed slavery and the Abbé Grégoire [French priest and abolitionist (1750 - 1831)] played a big role in this, but Napoleon abolished the abolition - it is not until '48, 1948, that slavery was abolished in France – it

seems astounding today, when this abolition had been voted in, in the 18th century.

**Pansard-Besson:** So today we still live on...

**Carrière:** Today we live on...well I suppose it would be the same thing for other continents – I worked a lot in Asia, in India, in Iran, in Japan – we live on stacked layers of populations, periods, fashions, techniques which are added one onto the other – the first printing (work) is Chinese, the first printed text is Chinese, long before us. But they didn't use it as we did, that is, there was this amazing period of discoveries which roughly speaking goes from the 16th century to the 19th century, technical discoveries: until then technology was fully despised because man wasn't allowed to know the secret of things. For (Jacques-Bénigne) Bossuet [French bishop and theologian (1627 – 1704)] to pursue knowledge was a sacrilege, that is the word he used: God does what he wants, he makes everything and he decides on the life and death of this or that person; it is of no use to interfere, to try and heal someone, etc. In the 17th century Bossuet, a great writer and orator, - Jean Luc Godard can recite pages of Bossuet by heart - still writes (this). And little by little these new ideas will, especially from what we rightly call the Enlightenment, that is thirty years after Bossuet, be taken up and developed by the Encyclopaedists – by Diderot, by D'Alembert [Co-founder, chief editor, and contributor to the Encyclopaedia along with Denis Diderot], by the others, by all those who collaborated. The Encyclopaedia was a major work in the world's history because they were drawing attention to technology, to the fact that we can, if we want to, control nature – even if today we regret it as nature is taking its revenge.

**Pansard-Besson:** Would you say this is very European behaviour?

**Carrière:** Yes. We only find it in very few comparable things in our world. In China, societies were very traditional, techniques were the same. Nothing comparable in Greece: no industry. There was only one scientific research led in Alexandria, by a woman, Hypatia – do you know Hypatia? [Hellenistic Neoplatonist philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician Hypatia (c. 350-370 – 415)] Murdered by the Christians precisely because she wanted to know about the world around her. Hypatia was a true scientist, she was a mathematician, she was an astronomer, she really wanted to know the secrets of the world. But otherwise there wasn't really any scientific research.

What is most striking in the history of Europe is that, from the moment the Roman Empire takes over – the Romans are great technicians, builders, etc., but there isn't one single scientist. In six centuries, you cannot name one single Roman scientist, not one. Lucretius [Roman poet and philosopher] makes a few allusions but that's about it. The world is what it is, and one does one's best,

one builds the best possible bridges, but they didn't do any more research. And it starts again under the Arab influence, from the moment when the Arabs bring the precious stone they found in India – the “zero”. For Roman mathematics ignored the zero. And without zero, technical progress was impossible.

**Pansard-Besson:** What about Cultural Europe?

**Carrière:** Scientific Europe was born at the end of the 17th century, it is there that everything explodes, and nothing will stop it until perhaps full destruction; until the atomic bomb. The artistic, intellectual Europe is more diverse, varied. It must, like St Thomas of Aquinas and the great theologians of the Middle Ages, either obey to a faith dictated by a credo, by a dogma, follow a dogma, or, at their own risk, look for another way – that is much more difficult and dangerous. We have been through all this. Not only have we been through this in our own countries, but we transported our own problems to the countries we colonised.

The idea today, if you think about it, that we decided in the 19th century to conquer Africa, which we did not know, or know very little of, and to impose our laws, our customs, our food, our clothes... it is absolutely crazy. Civilisations like the Chinese, Persian or Egyptian are infinitely older than ours. The Egyptian civilisation lasted 3000 years and got all it needed and didn't need. Whereas Europe is a bit like a stone thrown into calm waters. This explosion at the end of the 18th century, of the Enlightenment and the beginning of the 19th century, shook the entire world because each person wanted to fight against it or, like Abdelkader, try to understand and imitate, or just copy, like Japan, and do better if possible.

**Pansard-Besson:** How is one European today? Do you feel European?

**Carrière:** I don't feel European, nor French actually, no. I am trilingual: Spanish, I lived in Spain a lot, I spoke Spanish all day yesterday, so I was like a Spanish man. I know the History of Spain which actually, with the Arabs, there would be a lot to speak about there as well. You know that it was the Arabs who brought the (concept of the numerical) zero, which they had found in India. The Indians invented it simultaneously or almost, strangely, with the Maya, in America; the world didn't know about the Maya at this time. That's one of history's great mysteries, the Maya and all pre-Colombian civilisations. I have worked a lot on this. And when the Spanish conquered Mexico (what is Mexico today), the Maya had already almost completely disappeared, they were in decay. The Spanish passed by the Maya without seeing them, basically. They saw the Aztecs, yes, and some others. They didn't beat them, but the Maya, who were a great people, their peak was already over.

**Pansard-Besson:** Spain? Would you feel at home there?

**Carrière:** I've happened to ask Spanish people: do you feel like you're part of Europe? You are separated from Europe by a chain of mountains. You are very, very close to Africa – there are chameleons in the South of Spain. In many ways you are quite arabized, even in the language, the '*halla*', the guttural sound they have. "No," they say, "no we are Europeans, we are Europeans". But one cannot have a clear and definitive answer to your questions. It would be simplifying the world, and the world is everything but simple.

For instance, what is happening in Catalonia at the moment. There are anti-Spanish and anti-Arabic elements. And I remember how Bunuel used to be surprised to see Spanish people of his generation, born around 1900, who were converting to Islam. For him it was something completely bizarre, like the jihadists today, you see. It happened in Spain before France. Anyway, it's never possible to put history in an order that is artificial, this is the historian (in me) speaking. If we look at the history of the dislocation of Europe in the time of Yugoslavia, Montenegro, well, all those new countries that arose, the discussions that took place about Alexander the Great Airport in North Macedonia, all those discussions seem more than ridiculous, and the opposite of all the attempts at unification.

The question hidden behind all you're asking is whether Europe would gain from being united. It will never be united, it's impossible. Everything goes against it: the past, the present, the future, everything. There will always be a thousand pretexts to disagree with this one, with that one... So, we can sign agreements. Like at the moment, we live in a Europe which - look at Brexit - is threatened by a load of bullshit like that. I have English friends who are in despair, really, with all that's going on. Because all countries have a minority – I don't even know whether it is a minority – of people who believe they are better than the others, the other people. So some British think, "we conquered the world, our Empire used to dominate the entire planet, we owned India, we owned South Africa, we owned Canada. It is not possible for us to be allies with Bulgaria, it can't be that we get the same amount of votes (as them)", you see? There are people who say this and will always say this. So, as always, the future of Europe will be chaotic and unpredictable. We cannot tell what will come out of this or that decision. We cannot tell that it depends on this or that person, for nothing was more French than De Gaulle, even his name, and yet he was very European. Will Madam Merkel, who is a great woman of politics, of great talent and great skills, still hold out for a while, without bending, even only physically? No one can predict the future, it would be too simple. No one can tell what the future will hold or even whether there will be a future. For your generation, you might see, ecologically speaking, terrifying things, which we can't imagine.



**Pansard-Besson:** What do you see happening in France in 50 years' time?

**Carrière:** I will always refrain from answering such a question [*laughs*]. I hope that there will still be good wine being produced, that's all. Because the heatwave right now is useful, at least, for that. The quality of wine has been very good this year. There are already people ordering wine that will be produced this year. Because the heatwave arrived exactly at the right time, for reasons that are too long to explain here, but being from a wine-makers family, I can tell you, and being a member of the Tastevin Chevaliers (Knights of Tastevin), it's a good thing.

**Pansard-Besson:** Have you always known you would write, tell stories, work in cinema?

**Carrière:** No. I received a very solid education in classical humanities, a classical base, perhaps a little bit old-fashioned, which at some point I had to renew when computing arrived.

**Pansard-Besson:** Did this have a strong impact on your work?

**Carrière:** Not on the way I work, not on the stories we tell, but the technique yes, computers were a blessing for us, because when I used to go and work with Bunuel in Mexico I would bring a portable typewriter because we needed two or three copies of the script, and I can tell you that to find a replacement ribbon in Zitacuaro, wasn't easy!

I spent 10 years, from 20 to 30 years old, studying at a high level, publishing a few books, but I did 29 months of military service, of which more than half in Algeria, in the Algerian war. Girls don't know what that is. You are, at 25-26 years old already married and when what you want is to start your life and you're forced.... to go away for two and a half years to a country where, when you arrive, you can immediately tell that you are not at home – that's for sure, it's not Europe there.

I was only able to really start working, making a living, at 30 years of age. See I made my first short films, with very little money. Then it took off quite quickly with Pierre Etaix [French clown, comedian and filmmaker (1928-2016)], Jacques Tati [French mime, filmmaker, actor, and screenwriter (1907-1982)], and I managed to spend my whole life without a salary, only living off my authors' rights, with ups and downs of course.

So, everything I received from the grant I got when I was 9 and a half etc., I owe it to the Republic, and I feel like saying long live the Republic! And what strikes me the most in today's youth – because I founded *La Femis* [film and television school in Paris], presided it for 10 years, I know quite a lot about

educational matters. I travelled a bit everywhere in the world, I directed hundreds of scriptwriting workshops, a bit everywhere, because I chose to stick to writing, not to direct, contrary to many of my colleagues. But when I see what happened to those who expect for things to remain the same because everything always changes, and not only techniques: ideas, the stories we want to tell, the ways of telling them, the people we tell them to etc. I let it happen, I have nothing more to do at 88 years old, but I've had an exceptional life. To satisfy a curiosity - there wasn't anything better.

**Pansard-Besson:** What would you recommend to someone who would want to lead a life like yours today, who wants to write, to tell stories?

**Carrière:** One can never have the same life as somebody else. Writing can mean very different things. I stuck to writing because I didn't want to become a director, because theatre attracted me a lot. I worked for 37 years with Peter Brook [English theatre and film director]. That's the ultimate foundation. I can tell you that it's a very, very good education. So, by staying at that level of writing, first of all you make more movies than as a director – a director makes a film every 3 or 4 years, sometimes every 5 years, whereas I would write 2-3 scripts per year, I still do. I am working with Louis Garrel at the moment, who could not even be my son but my grandson. I had already worked with his father. And he could have been my son [*laughs*]. No, but what I would recommend is not to go against your desire – if you want to write, there are a thousand ways to write. The simplest one is the novel, a book, because it is what costs the least to produce. An editor can bet a certain sum of money on a young author, it will cost them much less than it would for a producer to bet on a first film. That's what I would recommend. But it depends, if you want to make films you have to learn the cinematographic language which is very particular and requires a lot of work.

**Pansard-Besson:** Is writing in danger today?

**Carrière:** People might not read in the same way, but one still writes similarly. Well we can write by dictating, at least we know we won't make spelling mistakes! But writing is something that hasn't changed for a very long time, writing systems, from right to left, from left to right, from top to bottom, there are many but we haven't yet found anything that could replace this except for speaking, the phone, that is a hearable, speaking communication. But it is difficult. I tried the e-book, which was a complete failure all around the world, it was similar to read but with a strange feeling, with books there was something more than the text. Each person has their way of writing. I know that when I write a script, there are scenes I can write directly on the computer, but as soon as it is a dialogue, something alive, I need to handwrite. I need to be able to cross off, to take off a word here, there, which the computer can't do. The

computer's big weakness is the lack of the quality of a draft. Everything looks immediately like a clean copy [*laughs*]. Whereas oh, I put a word there, I crossed it then the next day, ah but what did I write there. It happens to me a lot. I realise that what I had written down in a place where I am not using it leads me somewhere else, it's full of zigzags that our mind will thankfully never be able to analyse.

**Pansard-Besson:** In what language do you feel at home? French?

**Carrière:** Yes, French in general, well English, as well, for certain scenes, for certain topics. I worked with Milos Forman in the United States, we used to write directly in English. But we used to have our work read through by an American. Because there are always small things, nuances, the position of a word that need editing. As well as you might know a language, which is the case for me with Spanish, there are always things that '*non so precisamente quero que ...*' (don't work).

**Pansard-Besson:** What did you mean when you said that you felt neither European nor French?

**Carrière:** No, no, I feel very French. I feel no more European than Indian. I've stayed in India 47 times in my life. I have really lived there, including in villages, spending nights with the people of the villages, working with small Indian theatre groups. The last time I went there, with Emmanuel Macron, I was received by the Prime Minister who took me in his arms and said, "India is your country". So, what could I say, "no, I am European"? I wasn't going to say that. [*Laughs*].

It's the particular and the general, it's always the same, those two ancient notions: there are people, I don't even say authors, but individuals, men or women, who are the only ones to feel something. I remember, as I did a lot of Latin, Lucretius was an author who was very difficult to translate, because he was the only one to use certain ways of relating words, of putting the words in a certain position. It was very difficult. It's a lot of work to try and find an equivalence, whereas Cicero is much easier, you see. There are always particularities of this or that culture, civilisation, of this or that language, that we will never know. I will never fully know India. First of all, I don't speak Hindi, it's useless, half of India doesn't speak Hindi so even between themselves, they speak in English. "English is a very good language to speak between people who are not English. But the moment you speak English with a real Englishman, you get lost" – I've heard that, and there is something true in it, that English is a very easy language, simple to use, provided that you're not English.

**Pansard-Besson:** The idea of Home, untranslatable in French, where do you feel at home...

**Carrière:** For me it's the place where I was born because I was born in a house that I kept and where I spend two months each year. I can say that I was born there, on the floor, because back then women would give birth at home, not in a hospital. The doctor was the one who came to help the mother deliver the baby, so I was born there, and I will be buried there. My grave is ready, 250 metres away. Actually, a Mexican documentarist made a film about me called 250 metres – those 250 metres that separate (that) one place from the other.

**Pansard-Besson:** And do you feel at home there?

**Carrière:** Yes, completely. I have been living here [referring to his Parisian flat] for more than 40 years, I love Paris, but the place, actually I am going there next week, where I am myself, where nobody can say that I am not at home. You see what I mean? Nobody can treat me as a foreigner even if they haven't seen me for months, which is often the case. When the older ones meet me and say are you coming for a drink, ah you're the son of thingy, the grandson of so and so there aren't that many left now because I am amongst the oldest ones.

**Pansard-Besson:** You still know everybody there, then...

**Carrière:** Yes, well up to a certain generation. And the one before, not the one after. You know there are 500 inhabitants, it's a very small village.

**Pansard-Besson:** You left when you were quite young?

**Carrière:** I left at thirteen and a half years of age, at the end of the war, in the month of April, the war wasn't over – it ended in May – because I had to do a last trimester at a high school. My parents couldn't live off the land anymore, it wasn't possible anymore, they went to share the running of a bar in Montreuil sous Bois, the change was Immense. They sent me a few days before on my own, at thirteen and a half years, in the month of April, the first of April, it seems like a joke. I arrived in Paris in '45.

**Pansard-Besson:** And you discovered it with joy, curiosity ... or something else?

**Carrière:** 1945 in Paris is an indescribable year, because it was the year of victory. It was extraordinary. The 14 July 1945 in Paris remains with me. Especially coming from the country, a small peasant arriving there, discovering everything, and I even used to be mocked because of my accent. But for instance, it was the first time I saw black people. They were American soldiers.

I had never seen a black person before. It might seem incredible but that's how it was.

**Pansard-Besson:** It was the first experience with what was foreign?

**Carrière:** I think so, because I hadn't gone outside of the *departement* of Hérault – maybe once to go to Nimes... *[laughs]*.

**Pansard-Besson:** Your first trip on a plane?

**Carrière:** Oh, that was very late, during the Algerian war. We didn't use to take the plane. We couldn't afford it. My family was poor, it wasn't worth dreaming of taking a plane. The first time I took a plane was during the Algerian war, from Algiers to Paris and vice-versa. A gigantic plane. A lieutenant who was an adventurer and who, so they said, used torture, came to get me at the office one day and asked me "Are you coming with me to Paris tomorrow?" We were deep in the Sahara. I said, "What for?" "To accompany the Blue [French soldiers] coming back". Not something I could refuse. So, I arrived in Paris on a gigantic double decker plane, you know the planes which used to transport tanks; with just the two of us in it, two passengers. And we took the train and the boat to get back. It was my first plane. What an event! And what a plane! They don't make that type anymore I think, it was called Breguet double decker, with an infernal noise! I remember that noise. To go from where we were in the middle of Algeria to Algiers, we needed an escort.

So after the Algerian war I wrote a book on the Algerian war, *The peace of the brave*, which was quite successful. It received prizes, and thanks to Lakhdar-Amina, who is an Algerian filmmaker, I met commander Azzedine [also called Rabah Zerari]; Azzedine was the chief of the Wilaya, the most dreaded of all the four fellaghas chiefs. [Groups of armed militants affiliated with anti-colonial movements in Algeria] 13 wounds, 3 escapes where each time he killed his guards with his own hands. He came to see me here one day, brought by Lakhdar [Brahimi, Algerian diplomat], and I told him we could make a film together on our common experience, on the Algerian war, the only film that would be made by both countries, co-produced, co-directed, etc, and we did it. It was called *It was war*, it got some prizes, and commander Azzedine is still alive, I saw him last year in Algiers. We fell into each other's arms 'my brother my brother'... To tell you how famous he was: one time that he was made prisoner he made the front page of *Paris Match*. That's why I was looking for my phone, I might have some recent pictures of him. He was a *kabil*, he was a fearsome warrior.

**Carrière:** *[looking at his mobile phone]* I never know how to look for things because my wife organises the pictures in a very peculiar manner. That's Macron in India, ah, here he is, he is on the left. It's Algiers.

**Pansard-Besson:** What were you doing in Algiers on that occasion?

**Carrière:** A conference at the film school. It was extraordinary because the war was over, we were going back together in a car, and we passed by sites of war; and he was telling me there was a machine gun here, another one here, etc. I was in the middle of it all. It worked out quite well.

**Pansard-Besson:** Were you on the front line?

**Carrière:** I wasn't on the front line; I was secretary to a colonel, but the colonel used to go to the front line from time to time and I used to follow him. I had more specific missions, bringing him this or that. I wrote a whole book on this; I'm not going to tell you. One day I even went to get a cow in a market for a peasant in return for a cow we had killed – the regiment had killed the cow for fun, they killed the cow. The things one sees, you know? Yes, the Algerian war was something that fortunately you haven't experienced, and which isn't to the glory of Europe.

**Pansard-Besson:** I grew up with the illusion that now that Europe was there, peace was going to reign.

**Carrière:** But you're saying two words that don't belong together: peace will reign. When one reigns, one necessarily has opponents, and revolts. So, peace can't reign. I don't think that peace, it's very pessimistic, what I am saying, but I don't think – I wrote a whole book on this – that peace is something fundamentally necessary to us. Sometimes it is. Everybody says "ah to live in peace", but peace is boring. There are many more texts written to the glory of war than the glory of peace.

**Pansard-Besson:** Well those texts are also part of propaganda...

**Carrière:** Yes, also, and they are more masculine than feminine, yes, that's true.

**Pansard-Besson:** Can we hope that the discourse on peace will grow?

**Carrière:** I don't know, I hope so for your sake, for your generation. I hope that something will happen for you, but the planet is so overpopulated, there are so many ecological problems that sometimes I am a little scared, nevertheless. I won't see it, but I have children, grandchildren. My youngest daughter who just

passed her Bac exam this morning with a Japanese text – “It’s today’s world”, Murakami.

**Pansard-Besson:** Bac français [*French literature exam*]?

**Carrière:** Yes. She got 17 [17/20] I think, a very, very good grade. She is very happy. She is on holiday, next year she enters her final year.

**Pansard-Besson:** Does she know in which direction she’d like to go yet?

**Carrière:** It’s very difficult, given the home in which she’s lived, to take her away from theatre, which she’s attracted to, from cinema and writing. I will help her as much as I can. Her mother will as well. Her mother is much younger than I am. But I trust her completely, she is clever, she is resourceful, she knows how to defend herself. She is half Iranian.

**Pansard-Besson:** One has to know how to defend oneself. Do you remember times in which you had to defend yourself, to defend your work? Times when you were opposed, when you had enemies? When you felt in danger?

**Carrière:** The thing is, as I told you, well it looks like I’m gloating, I have wanted to give back to the Republic a little bit of what she had given me. I founded *La Femis*, I voluntarily presided over it for 10 years. For 30 years I have been the president of the *Printemps des Comédiens*, the theatre festival in Montpellier, etc. I do many voluntary things to give back a little of what I received.

But within *La Femis* yes, there were battles to fight, with the regulatory authorities, and what I always tell my colleagues is that, when I talk to a minister of culture and he suggests something to me, I can tell him no and he can’t do anything against me because I am a volunteer. He can’t cut off my salary, I don’t have any, and it’s the general assembly who elected me and they are the only ones who can disqualify me, contradict me. So, he can’t do anything. That’s quite funny.

I have known 14 ministers of culture, since Jack Lang who first appointed me. At a certain point – I don’t know how old you are – you think life is so long, I have done so many things in my life. Well I have lived a long time, longer than previous generations, and you will live a minimum of 100 years, so get ready for a lot of things to happen to you!

Who knows what Europe will become? The idea of a European unity is utopian. Because Europe is not one. Europe is plural, many people from different directions, different pasts, even the Neandertal man is part of it [*laughs*]. We’re not alone, the Cro-Magnon men, we cannot be alone.

**Pansard-Besson:** And the idea of borders?

**Carrière:** The philosopher who was Castro's prisoner, who's about my age (Régis Debray); he wrote quite a clever book on the praise of borders. I'd say a border is good when we can sneak through it!

**Pansard-Besson:** Well, right now there are many people trying to do that.

**Carrière:** Yes. But what is striking, and it's the same in the US, what is very odd in this migrant story, is that migrants are a very small problem, and someone like Marine le Pen cannot say one sentence without the word immigration in it. It's her only argument, there is no other. Whereas if you look at what a state like ours has to accomplish, immigration will be in the 12th or 15th position on the list of priorities, it's only a few hundred people to assimilate per year, it's nothing, and there are as many who leave the country. I don't know how many French people live abroad. No, the idea of an invasion of Europe by foreigners from Africa or elsewhere is completely mad. It's to take power, that's all, it brings out the lowest element of our soul, if we have one.

**Pansard-Besson:** So, freedom doesn't depend on borders?

**Carrière:** The issue of borders is at stake in the state of Israel. I don't know the details well enough to talk about it, but I do know that, even amongst Palestinians, there are people in favour of borders, and others against them. It's always the same problem: do we live together, do we try to live together, to form a country for which the United States are a model, a debatable model – but there could be an independent California, an independent Virginia etc, or do we try to live separately. I must say I don't have the answer. I have the question, it's already something. That's the question.

**Pansard-Besson:** Your first trip was to Algeria, and what was the second most significant one, was it to India?

**Carrière:** I first travelled to communist countries. I have a theory, there are two things one shouldn't do before the age of 40: first, going to India – because if you go to India before you reach 40, the rest of the world will seem dull and boring to you.

**Pansard-Besson:** I made that mistake.

**Carrière:** You did? Then you're lost [*laughs*]. And the second thing not to do is reading Proust, because Proust, before 40, you cannot get into it. You must have a certain sense of time, you see. I always say don't read Proust at 22, it's useless, you'll be bored, he will tell you things in which you won't be interested



at all, he's a great writer but not for the young. And don't go to India, go elsewhere.

No, India is certainly the country I've felt most attached to, together with an unforgettable 5-day trip to the Amazon for a film. I spent 5 days at the origin of the world, with a group of Yanomami who had been discovered four years earlier. We knew nothing – neither their language nor their habits, and I lived with them, using my village origins to show that I could stretch a net. That's an extraordinary memory, striking. I even managed to make a fire; you know by rubbing sticks together. They showed me. Because it was for a film and I wanted to know what nobody had told me: the Indians living in the forest, under those latitudes, there are twelve hours of night, from 6pm till 6am. You can't sleep 12 hours. So, what do people do at night? That's what I wanted to find out. Well at night people tell each other stories, from hammock to hammock... That's a very, very strong memory. Because they took me to get some manioc, etc, well I was lost very, very far in another time. And I depended on them entirely. I ate some grilled iguana.

**Pansard-Besson:** Any good?

**Carrière:** It's a bit like lizard, you see? *[laughs]* No it's not good, I can't say it's good, especially as there was no salt. But it's a bit like the flesh of a lobster or shellfish, but less good, in my memory. I didn't eat much of it but I made the effort. There, Europe, they don't know what it is, it's a word, but with a certain prestige to it. And the Eiffel Tower is one of Europe's distinctive elements. In Calcutta I found, in a suburb of Calcutta, quite a big establishment called the Moulin Rouge. It's quite something. One has to take the prestige from where one can *[laughs]*.

**Pansard-Besson:** Before India you mentioned your travels in the communist bloc.

**Carrière:** I had done my military service in Algeria; I already knew Africa. The experience of communist countries is very particular. I was spending all my time with opponents to the regime. I never met anyone who supported the regime, which is rare, because even in India there are people who support the regime, everywhere, in France as well. There, whether in Poland, in Czechoslovakia or even in Russia, everyone was against the regime, even if they didn't always say it. So, one can wonder how it held together, and it lasted for such a long time, a very, very long time.

When you're in a country that is foreign in every respect – language, custom, etc, gender sometimes - if working with a woman – you have one thing in common which is cinema, which is the language of cinema. If you say

'travelling', if you say any film term, you are speaking the same language. And that, that's the most important thing. It's to know what one is talking about, what one wants to show, what one wants to say, what story one wants to tell.

When I was working on *Danton* [1983] with Wajda, a massive filmmaker, it was absolutely fascinating to see their point of view. I had always refused to make a film about the French Revolution with a French person, because we'd have read the same books, we'd have had the same reactions or aversions etc. Whereas making it with a foreigner, especially from a country under Soviet rule, was absolutely fascinating. To see Wajda's point of view on Robespierre, for instance. That was really very interesting. It wasn't any value judgements, but rather what they thought of their work, of what they had accomplished, of what they had risked – for they all payed with their life.

**Pansard-Besson:** So, did you feel in a 'resistance state of mind' when you went to work there?

**Carrière:** I didn't take part in the political life of the country itself. Journalists who used to ask me questions, there were a few, except perhaps in Czechoslovakia. They never mentioned the regime, they talked about cinema, about what I was doing there.

When I was in Prague with Milos [Forman], or in Warsaw with Wajda, everything was against the regime, everything. Any conversation – there was nothing good. And it was true. They couldn't understand why. It was a little bit like the cultural revolution in China, where I also was, that was an incredible experience.

I went to do a story in China for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* on new Chinese cinema, and at the same time on Bertolucci's shoot of *The Last Emperor* and the reopening – which I found fascinating – of the school for classical ancient musical instruments, made of bamboo. I see the director of that school; it was the end of the cultural revolution – the cultural revolution was about turning everything upside down. I asked him 'how did you live through that period?' and he said 'it's very simple, I was expelled from here, I was sent to a village to cultivate the land' – he must have been over 60 years old – 'and the peasants quickly realised that I didn't know how to hold a pickaxe and that I was slowing them down, so they recommended that I stayed in the common house, and for seven years I played dominos'. The most capable man in China. That's the cultural revolution. Mao used to say all intellectuals must become builders. Supposedly to put an end to prejudices, class superiorities, inequalities, everyone must swap places.

Ivan Passer, a Czech director and scriptwriter, still alive, was of aristocratic origin. He came from a Czech aristocratic family – he had had a German governess, well you see, when the Bolshevik Revolution happened, he was sent to a coal mine. He used to tell me “What was I to do? I didn’t know how to hold a pick.”

**Pansard-Besson:** Did he learn?

**Carrière:** He did, well he didn’t stay very long because he had health problems, I think.

**Carrière:** The 20th century was the century in which Europe was torn apart twice in an incredible way. You know that today we still don’t know the causes for the First World War. I worked on it with German historians – how could the murder of the Austrian archduke by a Serb anarchist in Sarajevo lead to the Americans intervening?

**Pansard-Besson:** Yes, I remember when we learnt it at school, it was quite obscure.

**Carrière:** It’s very, very obscure.

**Pansard-Besson:** Did you use to talk about it with your grandparents? Did you know your grandparents?

**Carrière:** Yes, I knew my grandparents, but they didn’t know about that. They were peasants, they didn’t even know what an archduke was.

**Pansard-Besson:** Did they talk about the war?

**Carrière:** Yes, because I had an uncle, as I told you, who died in the war we call ‘Great’, and my father had been discharged – he had a heart condition, he was discharged in ‘39. But during the war, people naturally only talked about the war, we used to listen to *Radio Londres* [London radio], and we used to pin little flags on the map of Europe to show the progression of the Soviet troops. At the end, the last year, yes.

**Pansard-Besson:** At home?

**Carrière:** Oh yes. There weren’t any Germans around, it was a tiny village. There were very small chances of being denounced. Besides, everybody was doing the same thing.

**Pansard-Besson:** There weren’t any Germans in that zone at the end of the war?

**Carrière:** In the South of France, which was for a long time a so-called free zone, the Germans arrived with fewer men than in the North, and from '43 onwards. And they left in '44, when the landings happened - so they wouldn't be cut off from Germany. All the Germans who were in the Bordeaux region went quickly back up towards Germany, and they were attacked by resistance fighters. Actually, there was a battle in my village.

**Pansard-Besson:** Were you there?

**Carrière:** Yes, yes.

**Pansard-Besson:** You were 12-13 years old?

**Carrière:** I was, yes, I was about to turn 13. We were climbing the mountain with my father, we heard the bullets whistle, yes, yes. The battle lasted a whole day. They were harassed. It is odd because four days later a group of disarmed German soldiers arrived at the village townhall, starving, to surrender. 'Feed us, we can't take it anymore'.

**Pansard-Besson:** And they were welcomed?

**Carrière:** Yes, they were welcomed, they were probably brought to the military authorities, they were prisoners of war. No, they weren't killed, no.

**Pansard-Besson:** How was it to work in Germany?

**Carrière:** I wrote *The Tin Drum* with Volker [Schlöndorff] and *Die Faelschung*.

**Pansard-Besson:** It wasn't very long after the end of the war, was it?

**Carrière:** Volker and Günther Grass wanted a foreign perspective on that period just before the war, which wouldn't be German. It was very interesting to do. That's what we're useful for, right? To come together and think about what happened to us. Volker had gotten a first prize at the Concours Général in France, in French. When he comes to Paris he lives on the other side of the courtyard, he has a small flat, just there. We're very good friends.

**Pansard-Besson:** Do you speak some German?

**Carrière:** No. I understand it, but I don't speak it. No, English and Spanish are enough for me. And a bit of Italian, because of Italian cinema, you feel like you understand it. Volker is extremely polyglot; I think he speaks Italian. He speaks French very, very well, English, German, and I think Italian as well.

**Pansard-Besson:** You have translated from Persian as well?

**Carrière:** Yes, but with my wife, with the help of my wife and her mother, who was an expert in ancient Persian.

**Pansard-Besson:** Do you remember the first time you voted?

**Carrière:** Yes, but it was a local election, in the village, so they weren't of major importance, we already knew who would be elected. After that I started to vote in Paris.

**Pansard-Besson:** Were you politicized, politically involved?

**Carrière:** I always had the reactions and behaviour of a man of the left, always, but without ever belonging to any party, which used to cause the despair of my communist friends. Do you know Gérard Genette [literary theorist]?

**Pansard-Besson:** Yes of course.

**Carrière:** We were together in Khâgne [preparatory class]. He died not long ago, we'd seen each other all through our lives, and we used to talk about this a lot. He regretted his involvement at that time a lot. But I have met people of that generation, who then were 20-22 years old, and who, for having been evicted from the cell of a party, were in tears and talked about suicide. It was an incredible degree of conviction, as if their own life was at stake. Yes, we've known that.

I never vote for an extreme, because I don't believe in extremes, whether they're called Mélenchon or Le Pen. I believe that the big mass of a country wishes to feel calm, reassured. There are so many examples of countries which after a vote – like Germany – have thrown themselves in completely mad adventures at the end of which the country was destroyed. I feel like Macron is fine where he is, you see, in the middle, a little centre right, a few concessions to the left, a right-wing Prime Minister etc. Plus, there is no economical reason in France to give power to an extreme, whichever it is. There is no misery, compared to other European countries. I go to Bulgaria from time to time, for instance, and I see the living standard, it's really not like here.

One country I really liked is Slovakia. I knew Czechoslovakia, but Slovakia alone is very, very charming. The atmosphere was very agreeable there as well. Small. Slovenia is also quite good. They're a little bit like small Medieval seigneuries, as we were saying earlier on, which, maybe that's the solution, small entities living amongst themselves some way or another, managing their relationship with their neighbours, without the budget necessary to maintain a big army or a considerable armament, this might be the best solution.

**Pansard-Besson:** Without any global entity?

**Carrière:** Yes. As soon as it becomes too big, it breaks somewhere. The idea that the USSR had to invade Afghanistan, that was a delirious idea. To invade, impose communism in Afghanistan. I mention it because I am very good friends with Atiq Rahimi, the writer/filmmaker with whom I worked on *Syngue Sabour*, and who is of Afghan origin. He told me that they couldn't believe it, they had no idea of what was going on. And the Russians got some fingers burnt. That's when the decline started.

**Pansard-Besson:** You went to the USSR?

**Carrière:** Yes, to St Petersburg, to Moscow and other places. I've been to St Petersburg three times, because we went to perform at the theatre. And I went to a strange country. I've spoken too much, I am starting to get tired. But yes, we used to go there a lot, we had the possibility to go there quite a lot. I liked Poland very much. Krakow is a marvellous city.

**Pansard-Besson:** So, you almost travelled to all of Europe?

**Carrière:** Oh, I think so yes, even to Switzerland [*laughs*]. And God knows how dangerous it is [*laughs*].

I don't know central Africa, equatorial Africa, that's an area I haven't been to. I know South Africa quite well, we worked there a lot in the Townships with Peter Brook and our troupe. Of course, North Africa, Senegal, the Sahel countries, but not equatorial Africa, that's missing. Well, but I have time to go. I know Dakar but not Burkina Faso, for instance. But what does knowing mean? You get on a plane, you arrive say to the Cape, Johannesburg, you take a taxi, during the time to go from the airport to the hotel everything you thought you knew about the country is destroyed. You're told the opposite. The worst opponents to the regime are white people, etc. It's very often the case, that's how our world is, one should never look for logic and coherence in humankind, especially because that leads to automatically following of the law, to tiny robots which we think are similar to each other but are actually all different. That's the way it is, we are not ants.