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Review Essay

Daniel Morgan, *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema*
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While a substantial literature has accumulated on the work of Jean-Luc Godard, commentaries tend to focus on his most popular period, from the classic French new wave of the 1960s. Stylish and entertaining as well as provocative, these films wear their inspirations on their sleeve, characterized by the theories of André Bazin and sly borrowing from Hollywood auteurs. As the decade progresses, Godard's perspective makes a steady transition from the worldview of existentialism to the structuralist outlook associated with the journal *Tel Quel*. Godard's work of the subsequent decade, conspicuously dry and difficult, is not widely seen but has made a substantial mark on academia. Despite its apparent opacity, the viewer can discern the theories of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser undergirding Godard's approach. Laura Mulvey, Colin MacCabe, and other figures in the burgeoning discipline of film studies have meticulously studied the innovations he made in the 1970s, especially with regard to a radically political interrogation of popular culture and its stock images.¹ More recently, John Drabinski has contributed a distinctly ethical view of these films. For him, Godard's work in the Dziga Vertov Group period precipitates a crisis of representation that mitigates the violence of philosophical thought.² These critics share a non-aesthetic or even anti-aesthetic approach to Godard's contribution; he produces conceptual effects by avoiding beauty, sublimity, or sensory enjoyment.

Godard's so-called "second wave," a return to popular cinema in the 1980s, is often seen as something of a regression. As Drabinski puts it, in these films

The gaze moves from object of so much critique – culminating in *Comment ça va?* – to a refreshed and renewed curiosity about bodies, music, and nature. Although it is too much to say that Godard *abandons* the Other of ethical cinema, he does put that concern on hold for better or worse.³

While prominent figures, such as Mulvey, Gilles Deleuze, and Fredric Jameson, have written about individual films from the early to mid-1980s, Godard's turn toward a richer aesthetic has lacked comprehensive

engagement (25-26). Daniel Morgan's new book challenges this consensus, drawing attention to Godard's approach to the changes in the awareness of the natural world produced by modernity, a complex view of the individual's search for solitude as inevitably conditioned by history, and his continuing exploration of the formal possibilities of his art form. As Morgan summarizes it, Godard's late work "combines striking visual power, an overwhelming sense of loneliness and solitude, and an apparently endless proliferation of references to European culture (both high and low)" (126). He locates a decisive shift in concerns in the late 1980s, in which a difficult re-politicization takes place.

In Morgan's view, after 1987, "Godard moves away from a range of concerns that preoccupied him earlier in the 1980s: about the limits of representation and its relation to the idea of the sublime, for example, and about the role of traditional narratives and conventions in the contemporary world" (20-21). His study is especially devoted to Godard's films at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s: *Soigne ta droite*, *Nouvelle vague*, *Allemagne 90 neuf zéro*, and *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Morgan notes the indelible marks made on these films by philosophy. However, in his view, the work of the late 1980s and early 1990s is not essentially conditioned by the concerns of French post-structuralism, but rather by German critical thought, from idealism to the Frankfurt School (11, 67). These films share an elegiac quality, especially concerned with the end of at least a certain notion of cinema and its potential applications (7).

No longer a litmus test for cultural shifts, Godard's late work turns "instead to the legacy of classical European art. He appears as a kind of cultural mandarin willfully avoiding changes in the world around him" (12). *Soigne ta droite* introduces the motifs of fragmentation of experience alongside a complex relation between solitude and history (21). Aporetically, Godard's film sets forth a series of personal or aesthetic desires to show how they are frustrated and rendered impossible by the modern context (22). *Nouvelle vague* makes clear the interaction between nature and economics as the basic context for relations between individuals (23). Morgan identifies this concern with the natural world as a distinct element of Godard's work in this period. In his view, *Allemagne 90 neuf zéro* shows "how deeply intertwined the category of natural beauty is with the history and politics of the twentieth century" (23). While Godard had long included the pastoral as a narrative counterpoint to the urban settings of his early films, he begins to include images of natural beauty with great frequency in his late work (69-70). Countering Jameson's claim that Godard's cinema is "transaesthetic," Morgan demonstrates that Godard's philosophical accomplishments are closely linked to his aesthetic approach (26).

Rather than discarding the aesthetic dimension of cinema, as many of the theorists he inspired are tempted to do, Godard continues to explore the

visual properties of the medium in order to explore concepts and problems. Morgan contends that rather than producing an experience of the sublime, Godard's aim is to present the iconography of nature (76). He uncovers, among other techniques, Godard's application of extended focus pulls, shots that shift the foreground and background in and out of focus, as a crucial element in Godard's approach to nature and personal experience (45). Later, he achieves a similar effect by means of the incongruity between film and video (60). In Morgan's view, these effects of aesthetic disjunction underscore Godard's meditation on the false sense of resolution accompanying the end of the twentieth century (62). By creating a comparison on the level of imagery between the waves of the sea and the traffic of automobiles, for example, Godard is able to imbricate technological modernity with the sublimity of nature (77). He reveals our identification of nature as fundamentally linked to changes in human history (105). Paradoxically, he also emphasizes tactility in order to isolate the materiality in understandings of nature; a fundamental indifference on the part of things to subjective awareness (83). In particular, this concern with the reality that exceeds understanding is crucial to Godard's interest in aesthetic responsibility before the disasters of twentieth-century modernity. For Morgan, these films enact the continuation of an essentially Marxist approach to cinema, in that its basic subject is the nature of work and its reliance on a complex interrelation between the human history and natural possibilities (110).

This is especially evident in terms of Godard's monumental project, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, and the controversial issue of the attempt to represent, illustrate, or think the enormity of the Shoah. As Morgan puts it, Godard "revises the terms of the debate, moving away from the question of whether one should make films that engage the Holocaust at all and toward the question of what lessons can be learned for filmmaking from the history of cinema's failed engagement" with this problem (67). For Godard, cinema fundamentally failed the test of its relevance as an art form because it failed to document or to warn its spectators. However, a second moment of his argument introduces greater complexity; he contends that cinema did, in fact, anticipate the genocide in form of images and moments captured in distinct fictional narratives (179). Clues can only subsequently be uncovered so that cinema's awareness of the direction of history might become evident, at the same time that its lack of consciousness of the horror it foreboded remains culpable.

The second part of Morgan's study focuses on the formal principles of cinema, and the questions Godard is able to raise about its future. He emphasizes painting, rather than photography, as the essential competitor with and teacher to cinema. Godard views video, the potential replacement for film, as a new recourse to "pure painting" (156). Morgan draws out the

serious break with Bazin's theories, often applied to the early Godard, according to which cinema is essentially "filmed reality" (159). Rather, Morgan shows that Godard was skeptical about the recording properties of the camera even in the 1960s; in the post-film period, Godard sees indexicality as vanished, and cinema placed in a much more mediated and complex role regarding the events of history (166). While Godard emphasizes the death of a certain sequence of cinematic possibility, he does not present this termination as eschatological (205). Rather, it opens new avenues of thought regarding the representation and aesthetic experience, and the ethical and political ramifications of these possibilities.

This requires extensive engagement with a rare previous attempt to come to grips with the late Godard, that of Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, Godard himself falls into an ahistorical formalism because the decontextualized mode of reference on which he relies in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* erases the elements of historical reality from his presentation.⁴ As Rancière puts it, Godard sees "in the films of Renoir, Chaplin, Griffith, Lang, and Murnau the figures that announced the realities of the war and extermination to come."⁵ Regrettably, this is only uncovered by means of a "new sacralization," as Godard's video re-presentation of the cinematic past "renders all images polyvalent," discerning clues to the unconscious awareness of the death camps at the expense of utterly erasing the original conditions of production of these images.⁶ As a result, in Rancière's view, Godard re-baptizes cinema as innocent at the same time that he castigates its guilt; his formalism is ultimately redemptive in a manner that unsettles the case he means to present.⁷ However, Morgan counters that the appearance of total decontextualization in Godard's dizzying array of sources is actually a "practical difficulty" rather than a "general principle" (175). In fact, Godard expects the viewer to be aware of the narrative context of the films to which he alludes, and at times supplies reminders to orient the spectator. While this expects a great deal of erudition and cinephilia, Morgan demonstrates the value of Celine Scemama's recently compiled "score" to the film, which catalogs all of the many references Godard edits together.

Morgan makes provisional suggestions for understanding Godard's most recent phase. He sees *Éloge de l'amour* "in overt conversations with *Histoire(s) du cinéma*," extending the themes of remembrance and historical trauma, and cinema's commercially-inflected failure to properly respond to the challenges of history. Both this film and *Notre musique* explicitly take war and ethnic cleansing as their subject, as Godard articulates a comparison between Sarajevo and Palestine in the latter of these (261). I would suggest that this last phase of Godard's work seems to return to French twentieth-century sources in thinking through these problems, drawing on the radical ethics presented by Georges Bataille, Emmanuel Levinas, and Simone Weil in order to think devastation and erasure. While Rancière argues that

Godard is enthralled by “the schema about the ‘destiny of European culture,’ inspired by Valéry and Heidegger,” Godard’s twenty-first century films, including *Film Socialisme*, call into question the apparent Eurocentricity of his previous aesthetic outlook.⁸ Insisting on Palestine as a privileged site of contemporary consideration of the ethical, these latest Godards demonstrate a further inquiry into the conditions of the aesthetic, the natural, and the ethical questions to which these give rise.

¹ Colin MacCabe, ed., *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980).

² John E. Drabinski, *Godard between Identity and Difference* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 2-3.

³ Drabinski, *Godard between Identity and Difference*, 117.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, “A Fable without a Moral: Godard, Cinema, (Hi)stoires,” *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 173.

⁵ Rancière, “A Fable without a Moral”, 180.

⁶ Rancière, “A Fable without a Moral”, 185.

⁷ Rancière, “A Fable without a Moral”, 186.

⁸ Rancière, “A Fable without a Moral”, 180. This claim also must confront the evident presence of the non-European world throughout Godard’s *œuvre*, particularly the U.S., China, and Vietnam.