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Introducing Godard and Philosophy

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Introducing Godard and Philosophy

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Space has inscribed itself on film in another form, which is not a whole anymore, but a sum of translations, a sum of feelings which are forwarded, that is, time.

- Godard, *Ici et ailleurs*

Jean-Luc Godard is nothing if not an enigma. His image has a life of its own, especially in its younger form: cigarette, sunglasses, smirk, rambling revolutionary slogans, and important books. It wasn't just an image, we all know, for it reflected perfectly in iconic image the more substantial revolutionary recklessness with the camera we see from *Breathless* forward. Filmmaking is never the same after Godard. *Images and their sequencing* – Godard cloaked them in sunglasses and made them smirk. He made them revolutionary. That's his *thing*. And even the older Godard makes for an iconic photograph: rough facial hair, the artist's glasses, smirk, and important books. His films continue to be unpredictable, compelling, and revolutionary.

It never hurts to be handsome and charming in photographs. Iconic presence and attitude move the eyes and mind. Cinema, after all, is that peculiar blend of image and publicity, often too blended at the expense of the art form – *commercialism and fame*. For cinema is of course also an art, crafted in the intersection of technology and the human imagination, whose possibility is tied to the limitations and possibilities of both. Something about Godard's genius overrides his iconic pose. Sure, he works outside the major studio system and mass cultural venues – even for television, he would produce the unnerving and complex *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* – and he has that signature cinematic voice, but Godard's genius and enigma is tightly bound up with the *ideas* he brings to sound and image. His cinema and cinematic language is *philosophical*. Iconic pose, charisma, style, and

important books. Just as there is Godard the icon and the iconic shots, faces, and angles in his films, there is also the look and charm of big ideas: Godard moves from icon to thinker. Important books accompany so many important moments in Godard's work; we see works by Derrida, Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and others. The books signal ideas, of course, and provide a complicated map of detours, fragmentations, and even just edifications. Why Derrida's *Of Grammatology*? What is evoked by Levinas' *Entre Nous* at the moment of crisis in *Notre Musique*? And so on. Many of those moments have been written up by theorists and commentators. Many more stand in need of more attention.



Books mean something in Godard, and it is interesting to note how many of those featured books bear the name of a philosopher. It is enough to consider Jean-Luc Godard as filmmaker and innovator of cinematic technique and trend. That is plenty, for the immensity and intensity of his cinephilia, technical innovation, and infusion of the art of cinema with quirky, often radical politics offers an intellectual a lifetime of work. Indeed, we could say that even the finest work written about Godard's cinema is itself always only a beginning. Who would pretend to have exhausted the meaning of his films? No one. There is more to be said, more films to see, more nuance to explode into fully developed aesthetics and politics. *The old man is still making films. Those films still call for commentary.*

Tracking Godard's references and allusions – whether in a shot, a book on the margins of the frame, a turn of phrase, or a whole sequence and montage – is surely plenty thought about his cinema. There is some of that in the pages below. Yet, as a general feature, the essays collected in this volume begin a slightly different conversation, one begun, from the very beginning, *inside* Godard's cinematic work itself. Four guiding questions. What does Godard's work have to say about philosophy? What does or can

philosophy say about Godard's work? Or, further even, how can we see Godard's work as itself a form of philosophy?¹ Can philosophy be a kind of cinema? Philosophers talk about film. Film theorists talk about philosophy. But part of what is important in thinking through cinema and philosophy is the problem of the question: what does it mean to think cinema and philosophy at the same time, rather than in instrumental terms that would simply lay philosophical concepts over a film or series of shots?



Perhaps philosophy and cinema form an important language for fashioning the very ideas we call *philosophical*. Consider, for example, what Gilles Deleuze has to say about Godard in a short interview discussion of Nietzsche from 1968. Deleuze's concern in this remark is the fate of the image – how the image functions in philosophy as a site of critique, but also as a critical site for intervention against the Western tradition's obsession with certain metaphysical notions of reality. This provokes a remark on Godard's cinema, as Deleuze claims:

Godard transforms cinema by introducing thought into it. He doesn't have thoughts on cinema, he doesn't put more or less valid thought into cinema; he starts cinema thinking, and for the first time, if I'm not mistaken. Theoretically, Godard would be capable of filming Kant's *Critique* or Spinoza's *Ethics*, and it wouldn't be abstract cinema or a cinematographic application. Godard knew how to find both a new means and a new 'image' – which necessarily presupposes revolutionary content. So, in philosophy, we're all experiencing this same problem of formal renewal.²

It is difficult to know what he has in mind here, as Deleuze makes these remarks just as Godard floods the film world with a series of important films, including *Week-end*, *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* and *Le Chinoise*, following *Masculin-féminin*, *Made in U.S.A.*, and *Pierrot le fou* in the years just prior – to mention only a handful. Those are all provocative films, inventive and quirky, yet we could say that Deleuze’s characterization of Godard is as prophetic as it is descriptive. In the decades that follow Deleuze’s remarks, Godard composed some of the most challenging, self-reflective, self-critical, and highly theoretical works in his *oeuvre*. Difficult works like *Comment ça va?* and *Numéro Deux*, put together in that decade following, function more like essays than interrupted narratives, and the self-critique we find in films such as *Ici et ailleurs* and others, where the problem of representing the Other is put in such stark terms, sit squarely within the troubled, anxious, and urgent philosophical tasks of the 1970s in France and elsewhere. What is shown as a philosophical promise in the late-1960s becomes philosophy brought to a dense, polysemic cinematic language in the 1970s and after. If philosophy, as Deleuze has it, is primarily concerned with the creation of concepts, then Godard’s cinema can be said to create concepts in sound and image – that other, altogether neglected, mode of philosophizing.

Now, let’s pause and consider what’s really at stake in cinema as a kind of philosophy. Deleuze is making a genuinely incredible claim here, even if it is still suggestive and not yet systematic (though his scattered treatments on Godard in the two *Cinema* books help flesh out this claim). According to Deleuze, it is not simply that philosophy might be an especially rich site for reflection in Godard’s cinema, but that *a philosophical work itself* is or could be produced in Godard’s deployment of the image. In the context of Deleuze’s work, of course, this makes perfect sense and embodies his claim that the task of philosophy lies in the creation of concepts, not faithful (conventional) interpretations of texts and rehashing the tradition alone. Cinema, in that context, is a perfectly and reasonably viable candidate for the creation of concepts at the level of image and sound. And so cinema is also a candidate for a medium that *does*, and therefore *invents*, philosophy. But it means that philosophy is not wielded as an interpretative instrument, overwhelming the unicity of the cinematic work with an alien set of ideas. Rather, cinema is a kind of philosophy. Philosophy is a kind of cinema.

Let us assume Deleuze is right in his characterization. What this would mean, of course, is that we philosophically-minded commentators have to re-strategize our reading of Godard’s work; it is not enough to apply philosophy to his films or detect an idea or two in the cracks of a given montage or character. We have to address Godard’s cinema as philosophical discourse. To that end, and within that frame, the following essays gathered by my co-editor Burlin Barr and me take up three general strategies for thinking Godard as philosophy. In these strategies we see important possibilities in the chiasmic meeting of philosophy and cinema. First, there is

the strategy of engaging Godard's cinematic play and language with particular philosophers – here, Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Alain Badiou – which produces a portrait of Godard's image and sound alongside contemporary theorists. What does the philosopher have to say to cinema? And what does cinema say to the philosopher? Second, there is the question of how cinematic language functions as a transmission of meaning, meaning that can register across the philosophical spectrum, asking questions of language, writing, history, and so on. How does cinema function as a theoretical discourse? How are we to theorize cinematic language and its transmission of affect, concept, and the lesson(s) of ideas? And third, there is the question of where to situate Godard in terms of larger philosophical (and broadly theoretical) endeavors. How does Godard relate to the history of film and poetics more generally? And how is that relation the condition for the possibility of his crafting a singular image?



The essays below by David Sterritt and Michael Walsh put Godard's work in conversation with the critical works of Deleuze, Guattari, and Badiou. Sterritt's essay "Schizoanalyzing Souls: Godard, Deleuze, and the Mystical Line of Flight," which opens our collection, takes up the resonance of Godard's cinematic work and principles in Deleuze and Guattari, describing the image as, in the latter's turn of phrase, the "link between man and the world." In particular, Sterritt shows how Godard's 1985 film *Hail Mary* works through the problem of materiality in opposition to the abstract in the recasting of Mary as incarnate, desiring, and holy, and therefore Mary as operating in the plane of immanence. For Walsh in his "Happiness is Not Fun: Godard, the 20th Century, and Badiou," it is Badiou's work that resonates across so much of Godard's work, ranging from the films of the 1960s up through a cluster of recent short works, especially the enigmatic

short film *De L'Origine du XXIe Siècle*. With special attention to Badiou's work on the same theme, Walsh examines how the notion of "the century" gathers together so many important sites between Godard, Lacan, and Badiou, all of which are instructive for those working in cinema or philosophical inquiry more widely. In both essays, what we see is how the conceptual apparatus of a given thinker functions like theoretical discourse always functions: to illuminate what could not quite be seen otherwise.

Cinema enacts its own particular transmission of philosophical meaning; the play of sound, image, and the frame provide the architecture for another sort of theoretical language. In developing and exploiting the possibilities of this language, Godard is of course complex and often perplexing. David Wills' essay "The Audible Life of the Image" tracks Godard's use of sound as its own kind of image. Through a meticulous reading of Godard's vanishing of the visual, with particular emphasis on *Histoire(s) du cinéma* and *Éloge de l'amour*, Wills shows how cinematic language, in Godard's hands, produces meaning in the aural, which both interrupts the visual and works outside the visible economy of image making. In his "Shot and Counter-Shot: Presence, Obscurity, and the Breakdown of Discourse in Godard's *Notre Musique*," Burlin Barr examines how the play of shot and counter-shot produces a peculiar transmission of meaning through historical, memorial, and, ultimately, provocatively political signs and signification. The result, in Barr's analysis of *Notre Musique*, is a cinematic work and discourse whose force and meaning derives from the play of interruptions. Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield takes a different, if intimately related, approach by emphasizing Godard's explicit and sometimes exhausting citation of written texts. What are the "sources" of Godard's work and how do those sources function in his cinematic productions? Dronsfield's essay, "Pedagogy of the Written Image," takes these citations as an initial point of departure, developing from that point a larger theory of how the written image – intertexts, photographed books, blackboards, and so on – intervenes in Godard's work as its own kind of image, untethered (and so more radical in its function) from the expected play of moving image and sound. From Wills, Barr, and Dronsfield, we see the seriousness and subtlety of Godard's approach to cinematic language as a site of the transmission of affect and idea – which is to say, Godard's production of philosophy and a philosophical discourse in sound, image, and frame.

Gabriel Rockhill's "Modernism as a Misnomer: Godard's Archeology of the Image," the essay that closes our collection, offers a broad take on the meaning of Godard's revolutionary rethinking of the image. Through an extended meditation on and dialogue with Baudelaire's aesthetics, Rockhill circles around much of Godard's early work – *Breathless* in particular – in order to document Godard's struggle to craft another sort of image that is both experimental and innovative, but one that also "rediscover[s] the

essential power of cinema by returning to its origins.” In this treatment of Godard, Rockhill is able to situate Godard in that difficult space which defines so much of twentieth century philosophy’s attempt to renew itself with modesty and a robust sense of finitude: aesthetic strategy, the time of the image, and the aspirations and failures of modernism as a poetic project.

*

In all, then, this collection is the beginning of a conversation. It is the beginning of a philosophical conversation whose orientation is complex from the beginning, entwined as it is in the complex theoretical questions of the meaning of commentary and the transcendent, provocative address from Godard’s films themselves. And yet there is absolute clarity on the most crucial issue: between spectator and film, Godard produces a certain kind of philosophy. Cinema as a kind of philosophy. Yes. But also philosophy as a kind of cinema.

¹ I outline my assessment of this possibility in “Cinema as a Kind of Philosophy,” which functions as the Introduction to *Godard Between Identity and Difference* (New York: Continuum, 2008).

² Gilles Deleuze, “On Nietzsche and the Image of Thought,” trs. Michael Taormina, in *Desert Islands and Other Texts (1953-1974)*. (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 141.

