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*Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de
langue française*, Vol XVIII, No 2 (2010) pp 65-85.

Vol XVIII, No 2 (2010)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2010.213
<http://www.jffp.org>



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University of Pittsburgh Press

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Presence, Obscurity, and the Breakdown of Discourse in Godard's *Notre Musique*

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The dream of the individual is to become two.

The dream of the state is to become one.

- *Notre Musique*

Setting and Siting—Frames for Discourse

Notre Musique includes a lengthy sequence that involves a presentation by Godard on the relationship between text and image. The occasion of the lecture is a conference in Sarajevo titled European Literary Encounters, an annual event first organized in 2000. Godard gave his lecture in 2002 and the long middle-section of the film offers a "lightly fictionalized restaging" of his address and of other encounters surrounding the conference.¹ The narrative setting of the majority of this film, then, is a space of discourse (a conference and a lecture), but I suggest that the film is conceptually sited more generally and abstractly in the "space" or "frame" of discourse itself. Because it ponders various parameters—spatial, historical, conceptual—that allow or disallow discursive connection, I regard *Notre Musique* as an extended meditation on the possibilities for and barriers to discourse. By siting the film in Sarajevo, Godard is clearly highlighting a frame for this meditation—a frame that includes a history of violence and reconciliation. The conference is decidedly international and takes place in a city with a rich cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic history, even as it bears the scars of violence and ethnic division. Sarajevo, moreover, is a city with a complex relationship to the state—having been a nucleus to various formations of state and empire in the last century. In its history and in the present, Sarajevo is a site of discourse and discord; of the union and clash of influences (be they religious, political, or ethnic). Hence, Sarajevo's relevance to the film is not merely one of documentary fidelity (because it was the host city for the

conference). It is a perfect site for Godard to pursue a line of reflection on discourse and its breakdown in the frame of changing formations of power. Sarajevo as a site also calls attention to how the parties or constituencies for discourse remain in states of flux—either through processes of self-definition from within or misrecognition (or nonrecognition) from without.

Sarajevo, as setting and site, also encourages another emphasis: that discourse “takes place” in the frame of military violence and its aftermath. The film addresses this construct both in formal and thematic terms. *Notre Musique* is structured in a Dantesque triptych form and literally places the long middle section on discourse (which the film labels “purgatory”) between one “panel” which features ongoing war (labeled “hell”) and another imagining a state of blissful permanent militarization (labeled “paradise”). The violence that the film foregrounds is organized, communal, and sanctioned. It is the violence of state, and the epigraph for this essay, quoted from the film, implicitly regards the state as a barrier to any form of discourse. The state is a formation trending to the solipsistic and subjecting the “other” to various forms of erasure. Following the sentiment offered in epigraph, formations of state (which we can regard as a collective subjectivity) challenge individual subjectivity, which seeks out and even requires difference (and therefore, discourse).

Notre Musique is fundamentally preoccupied with scenes of listening, speaking, interviewing, interpreting, translating, reading, hearing, mis-hearing, recognition, and non-recognition. It is a polyglot and quotation-laden film that foregrounds language difference, as well as spoken and written texts. Important sections of the film, moreover, take place amid two sets of ruins—a library (Bosnia’s national library in Sarajevo) and a bridge (the 16th-century bridge in Mostar)—both of which were destroyed in the Bosnian war and both of which assumed high symbolic value. These physical sites work as concrete, visual entities that further the film’s representations of discourse, impasse, connection, and disconnection. These ruins (which are also scenes of re-construction) serve as constant reminders of the breakdown of discourse (during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina) and of the fundamental difficulty or even impossibility of reconciliation and forgiveness. And although the film is deeply engaged with geo-political conflict as experienced in such places as Sarajevo, Mostar, and Srebrenica, it would be an oversight to say that the film restricts itself to such a topic. Godard’s lecture in the film on text/image offers a compelling reminder that the breakdown of discourse, as well as moments of impasse and non-recognition, remain a pervasive staple of daily life, among allied constituencies and even more so among divided ones.

Fragmented Space

Well into the film, during a short and seemingly transitional sequence (it would be a misnomer even to call it a scene) Godard presents us with two voices mired in conflict. We do not see the speakers, but are offered instead a busy street scene of Sarajevo in the early evening, as if this conflict is background noise to everyday life. We do not know the substance of the quarrel; the very notion of a quarrel's "substance" seems in fact to be part of the quarrel. What, after all, constitutes the content or substance of a conflict? What kinds of conflict can be reduced to clear and unchanging components? The two voices in this exchange suggest that the need to agree on terms for communicating have overtaken the quarrel itself, which has become almost entirely a meta-conflict. The exchange is brief:

Voice 1: You never answer. But I will say nothing. What I say is nothing.

Voice 2: See to it that I can speak.

Voice 1: Any idea how I can go about it?

Voice 2: Convince me that you hear me.

Voice 1: Talk to me.

Voice 2: How can I talk if you don't hear me?

Concise as it is, this exchange is laden with different varieties of speech acts, from commands (see to it; convince me; talk to me) to accusations (you never answer; how can I . . . if you don't). Assertions and questions overlap and each utterance is highly overdetermined. We are left with two parties, both of which appear to be aggrieved, in a conflict seemingly beyond reconciliation. The exchange, moreover, remains abstract. Aside from the fact that one voice is male and the other is female, the speakers are unidentified and could be speaking from almost any position of estrangement (the alleged offenses could be political or personal). Additionally, the film never positions itself in relation to either voice. Spectators are not offered this exchange as a conflict of one established character versus another; subjectivities remain abstracted and generic. There is no mechanism of identification available to the viewers. It is a conflict of other/other. This sequence, when considered with other sequences of the film (most notably the lecture sequence and the sequences involving the native Americans—which I discuss below), shows Godard introducing the question of being "placed" in terms of constituency or subjectivity. From what position do people speak? And how does the position of enunciation allow, disallow (or both) the conditions of hearing, recognition, and discourse?

Godard's lecture sequence, though much longer and less abstract than the brief sequence mentioned above, ends in a similar moment of impasse. The sequence concludes with a question/answer period that follows Godard's lecture. A student (who remains unseen) asks, "Can the new little digital cameras save the cinema?" Godard never answers the question. His

response is one of stony silence. As Godard sits in silence we see him from the front, but he is backlit and in near darkness (figure 1).



(An image of inaccessibility. Godard in stony and unresponsive silence during the question/answer period.)

It is an image of profound inaccessibility, and at the heart of the image is Godard himself. Godard's silence is cancelling. His silence has the effect of not acknowledging the other—even as the image reaffirms his own presence. The tenor of inaccessibility, however, extends to the student as well whose question is a non sequitur: it responds to nothing from Godard's lecture and falsely presumes a shared agenda with Godard. The student's question seems less an inquiry than a wish to be corroborated. Godard's silence strikes me as response to this unstated desire for corroboration.

By including this image of impasse and inaccessibility, with himself at its center, Godard creates a *mise-en-abyme* in which the process of filming and the filmmaker are folded into its representational field. It is important to the scene that we do not see the student ask the question. While Godard is visually confirmed, the identity of the student remains suppressed and deferred (we learn her identity much later near the conclusion of the film—she is one of the film's fictionalized characters—and with that knowledge her question assumes a gravitas that was absent at the moment of its iteration). Although the scene does not make light of the student's question, it never fully acknowledges her person or her position of enunciation. Visually, she is without place. Yet her voice emerges from this unseen space of obscurity with an urgent force. Although Godard is not employing a formal practice to heighten or diminish either side of the exchange, the scene creates an undeniable structure of identification with the Godard

“character,” and it leaves us with a sense of impasse and imbalance. Because the identity of the student is deferred, her position of enunciation is obscured and the possible relevance of her question is lost. With this sequence, Godard creates planes of action or planes of time, which cause individual subjectivities to “flicker”—to emerge or to disappear. The student and her question seem irrelevant at one moment, and urgent at another. This presentation of time is not used to describe cause and effect, or to produce a historicist grid, or to apply a sensible linearity to events, but to demonstrate the radical contingency of subjectivity itself. Godard repeats this formulation of time and space in the unusual sequences which feature the Native Americans as they strive to be recognized. Godard represents processes of both self-definition and recognition as highly fluid and unstable in the film, and he does so specifically through cinematic thinking: through his renderings of time (and also space) which grant a character voice or which leaves her in obscurity.

Just as Godard creates discrete planes of time, he also creates planes of space, and he does so most acutely during the lecture sequence. The sequence features a lengthy discussion of the cinematic staple of the “shot/counter-shot” sequence, and interrogates its most classic and commonplace application. As part of the lecture, and as part of the lecture scene, we see Godard re-configure both cinematically and theoretically the apparatus of that construct (I use the term *apparat* in the sense of *dispositif*—not as a technical assemblage, but as an ensemble of factors that regulate the relation between viewer and image). Godard reminds his audience that “the shot and reverse shot are basics of film grammar.” Producing two stills from a classic shot/counter-shot sequence he states, “but look closely at these shots from the Hawks movie. You’ll see that it’s the same thing twice. That’s because the director is incapable of seeing the difference between a man and a woman.” Godard clearly eschews the well-used shot/counter-shot formula as a means to articulate continuity of space—to render a shared space for two people. Godard sees the shot/counter-shot sequence as an analytic instrument for revealing and interrogating difference and renders instead a contested and even fractured space. The sequence features several pairings of shots that de-emphasize the shared physical architectural space of the lecture hall and call attention instead to a contested space of discourse. The shots emphasize space in planes or layers that invariably isolate some participants as objects of focus while holding others in a position of obscurity (figures 2-3).



(Multiple planes of space during the lecture sequence. Godard uses shallow focus and highly restricted lighting to create numerous planes for the different constituencies of the scene. Several individuals are always in visual obscurity and become phantom-like. This is one means by which Godard posits otherness.)



Godard clearly renders six (and perhaps more) different layers of space in the lecture hall in which he is speaking: the spaces of Godard, the interpreter, the image-texts under discussion, and at least 3 starkly different articulations of students and on-lookers. These differences are reinforced as well through the sound mix, which layers the voices of Godard, the interpreter, and the students as they respond to Godard or speak and laugh

among themselves. No master shot unifies these planes of space, and we are left with a space that is persistently fractured and literally out of focus.

Godard's cinematic practice in this scene – in terms of focus, sound, and editing—does not merely establish a *mise-en-scène* in which he communicates a set of ideas in the form of a lecture. Indeed, the lecture—which is accompanied by a gallery of images—is substantive and fascinating in its own right, but it remains fragmented (the scene runs just over 6 minutes—a fairly long scene, but a very short lecture), and to limit the scene's content to the transcribed content of the lecture itself would be to overlook the major work Godard undertakes here. This scene, and others in the film, clearly support Deleuze's comment that "Godard transforms cinema by introducing thought into it. He didn't have thoughts *on* cinema, he doesn't put more or less valid thought *into* cinema; he starts cinema thinking."² The complexity of this space, with its various planes of focus, time, and sound, serves only to underscore the greater complexity of contested spaces beyond the protected confines of the university forum. One could say that the connection between Godard and the students is tenuous because there is a connection, one created to a large degree by the socio-cultural apparatus of the university. This institution provides a space whose primary purpose is the expression and contestation of ideas, and this space is delimited and defined by consensus.

Militarized space and the subject of violence

If this space is as fractious as Godard creates it, then how does one consider, think about, and render other public spheres—those defined without consensus and delimited by military force and its afterlives. I use the term "afterlives" here to invoke a notion of consequence and remainder, because much political process is an afterlife of military force: military force has established a set of conditions in which politics must operate. Indeed, early in the second part of the film as we see different participants arriving in Sarajevo for the conference, several look off-screen and remark on the presence of SFOR (Stabilisation Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina). "What is that?" asks one character. Another responds in a matter-of-fact tone: "SFOR. Germans today. Americans tomorrow. Next week: Russians, French, Italians." To follow this off-screen look, one might expect a counter-shot to reveal the off-screen space. Not surprisingly, Godard withholds it and thereby SFOR becomes a kind of invisible frame held off-screen. To say that Godard "withholds" the counter shot may be a misstatement because it implies that the shot has been posited; in many respects one could say that the shot has never even been conceived. Yet, it is true also that this shot already has been asserted: extrinsic norms and generic conventions of narrative cinema have already done so; as Godard states in the lecture sequence, "the shot and reverse shot are basics of film grammar" and when

the characters look off-screen and make statements on the presence of SFOR, Godard has presented viewers with a compelling set of expectations. Yet Godard's resistance to (or rebellion against) the classic shot/reverse-shot structure emerges in a context of assertion, because he establishes other cinematic norms in this film. So what is accomplished here? What kind of cinematic thinking is Godard accomplishing through the intrinsic norms of this film? In his interview on the film, Godard speaks in a Vertovian vein about the uniqueness of the camera as an analytical instrument:

One needs a camera to see certain things. The majority of films today are filmed without using the camera as an investigative tool - instead of drawing on this analytical power during filming, people substitute a great mass of explanation: 'I meant to do this. I meant to do that.' Whereas a scientist or chemist who uses a microscope needs that microscope.³

I assert that here, and elsewhere in the film (especially the lecture scene and the bridge scene), Godard is configuring the cinematic apparatus with several ideas in mind: *One* idea takes into account the profound social/subjective ramifications of the classic two shot system. One may easily take for granted how the point-of-view shot—or the classic counter-shot, which Godard almost categorically refuses to use in this film—establishes the individual point-of-view as valid and essential. It posits a model of subjectivity that is simplistically stabilized and in which the individual is placed in arbitrarily polarized and rigid contexts. The shot/counter-shot formation is exquisitely isolating in its narrowness. It is a system in which autonomous, individual egos exert an almost totalitarian power over viewer perceptions. Such a system eradicates alterity, by attempting to contain it. Otherness is channeled into the classic shot/counter-shot formation, and never allowed to resonate *as* otherness. Countering such a formation, Godard offers, for example, the fractured formations of the lecture sequence. Other scenes rethink the counter-shot as well. The initial conversation between Godard and the interpreter at the beginning of the second part of the film is presented as an exchange witnessed by a silent third party, rather than as an isolated conversation between two individuals (figures 4-5).



(A shot/counter-shot sequence from early in the second part of the film. These are two shots from a conversation between Godard and an interpreter. The young woman is a third and silent party to the conversation. She is in both frames of the shot/countershot and acts as a kind of witness, while Godard and the interpreter never appear together in the frame. This sequence posits the young woman as an "other" or a third eye, and breaks down the dominant positions of the classic shot/countershot system.)



Such formations posit otherness without accounting for it or attempting to assimilate it.

A *second* and related point turns to another of the principle features of cinema itself: how does one represent time and space on the screen? As mentioned earlier, Godard's cinematic renderings of space and time in the film have nothing to do with establishing narrative continuity, but concern the establishment of subjective presence, attention to subjective erasure, and how such presences and absences figure discourse and conflict. When one of the film's fictionalized characters— an idealistic reporter from Israel— arrives in Sarajevo, she seeks out the French ambassador for an interview. As she tries to convince him to be interviewed, they have the following exchange:

Reporter: I want to speak to the man, not the ambassador.

Ambassador: Which man?

Reporter: Lyons, 1943.

Both the ambassador and the reporter implicitly agree on the certainty of split subjectivities, and the reporter's focus on "Lyons, 1943" posits a subjectivity defined by time, space, and war. These renderings of space and time in the context of the film finally beg several broader questions. What are the delimiters of space? Can we conceive of geopolitical space without the military establishment and patrol of the borders of that space (one could pose a similar question about the delimiters of time)? Godard's answer to such a question, at least by way of *Notre Musique*, would appear to be a categorical "no."

Returning to the appearance of SFOR in the film, SFOR remains a strong presence that establishes the conditions for the literary encounters conference and for the presence of the characters/persons in this geopolitical (and narrative) space. Their attendance at the conference is made possible by the security provided by SFOR and by the perimeter/border that SFOR established. Godard seems to be insistent about presenting the coexistence of these different terms and he undeniably reiterates this duality of force/discourse, violence/intellectual exchange throughout the film. Indeed, this imbrication of what some may consider mutually exclusive terms resonates with the film's title. In his interview on the film, Godard remarks:

I called it Notre musique: theirs, ours, everybody's. It's what makes us live, or makes us hope. One could say 'our philosophy' or 'our life', but 'our music' is nicer and has a different effect. And then there's also the question of what aspect of our music was destroyed at Sarajevo? And what remains of our music that was there?⁴

I also suggest that "our music" or "our life" includes more broadly this ongoing framing of discourse by violence. Indeed, in terms of this film, we are inclined to regard Sarajevo itself as an ongoing construct, defined in turn by the city's ethnic and religious presences, as well as by siege, by both hostile and peaceful occupation ("peaceful occupation" embodied by SFOR

in Sarajevo, to give one example, is a concept I return to when I discuss the “Paradise” section of the film), and by impulses of cosmopolitanism and parochialism. In keeping with the aesthetics of neo-realism that have consistently informed Godard’s work, the film presents Sarajevo as living and dynamic space and not as a mere set or backdrop (there are two prominent exceptions—the initial views of the National Library and the bridge at Mostar, which Godard frames as ready-mades or symbols). In rendering Sarajevo’s complexion in its various textures, Godard includes not only images of everyday life, architecture, and commerce, but also offers brief glimpses of past violence: bullet holes and scorch marks are visible on numerous buildings. Godard does not dwell on these details, nor are they even once the subject of commentary, but their presence in the visual field amid the details of daily life is unmistakable. They appear as scars of past traumas that remain present in daily life.

The presence of Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo in the film emphasizes these dynamics surrounding force, discourse, and trauma. Goytisolo appears as himself, one of several conference participants who gather at the Sarajevo airport early in the second part of the film. His novel *El sitio de los sitios* (1995; the English translation, *State of Siege*, was published in 2002) and several essays collected in *Landscapes of War: From Sarajevo to Chechnya* (2000) deal extensively with the Bosnian conflict, and his presence in the film continually references two different time periods: the present conference and the time of the Bosnian war. He and his work have been defined by the past violence. In the film, just after the above-referenced comments on SFOR, several conference participants drive to their destinations in the city and Goytisolo, interpreters, and other passengers have the following exchange (the editing and framing of the scene makes attribution of the different statements difficult at best, emphasizing instead a web of speakers, subjectivities, and interpreters):

When Mr. Goytisolo was here in 1993, the Serbian front lines were here. Killing a man to defend an idea, isn’t defending an idea. It’s killing a man.

When it’s all over, nothing is the same. Violence leaves a deep scar. A trace of the oblivion always remains. The trust in the world that terror destroys is irretrievable. To see your fellow man turn on you breeds a feeling of deep-rooted horror. Violence severs the lifeline. A survivor is not only changed, he’s someone else. The dream of survival becomes a nightmare for he who is on the journey. Each of us can become a danger for others. The body is a potential weapon. Knowing where we can be harmed, each of us can harm another.

The counterpoint in the film between physical and psychological traumas (between ruined physical structures and battered subjectivities) exceeds a mere assertion that these two conditions co-exist in the aftermath

of violence. The film dwells instead on the radical transformation of day-to-day connections and relations that attends such traumas. "Violence severs the lifeline. A survivor is not only changed, he's someone else. . . . Each of us can become a danger for others." Such statements point to a categorical break in connections between subjects, but also to radical transformations of subjectivity. This break however is not absolute. Yet, the conditions for productive discourse have to be both salvaged and recreated, as if (to paraphrase the film) entire languages need to be rediscovered.

The Bridge: Finding Language

This metaphor concerning language emerges most prominently in the film in the sequence involving the bridge at Mostar. Indeed, this sequence, which involves the bridge's destruction and restoration, provides a template for the working of the entire film along the arc of destruction/trauma, possibilities of recovery, and imagined futures. It's an approximately 7 minute-long sequence that breaks down as follows:

- documentary footage of the bridge's destruction in 1993
- a scene of pedagogy in a primary school in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- a scene involving the physical recovery and reconstruction of the bridge
- a scene in which we witness a journalist (one the film's fictional characters) visit and document the reconstruction site.

That this series of events and processes is initiated by and framed by violence is certainly in keeping with the film's commentary on discourse and violence. The documentary footage, moreover, has been slowed down and color-enhanced creating a highly aestheticized image of destruction. The effect of this video manipulation is to reduce the documentary quality or so-called "truth content" of the image and to replace it with a seemingly irrational sensory appeal. These images of the bridge's destruction could easily be described by some viewers as "beautiful" or "breath-taking;" there is an arresting aesthetic texture to them. Godard's treatment of this footage echoes the entire first section of the film (discussed below) in which images of violence have been "contaminated" with color and motion. The image of the bridge's destruction becomes a founding image for the sequence, followed by various scenes in which numerous constituencies of different generations, ethnicities, religions, and nationalities try (in some cases quite literally) to pick up the pieces. The film shows an enormous forensic scene with the ruins of the bridge laid out over a large expanse. A worker at the scene says, "the stones were salvaged and each stone was identified in terms of its position in the original bridge and where it had fallen in the river."⁵ This operation literally attempts to bridge the ruin or the aftermath with the

original state—tracking every component of the bridge as it fragments and falls (figures 6).



*(The forensic scene at the Mostar bridge. Each stone is identified.
“It was like re-discovering the origin of language.”)*

The voice-over continues, “it was like rediscovering the origin of language . . . we must at once restore the past and make the future possible.” This statement, linking a salvage operation to the creation of the new, may reveal some of the reasoning by Godard’s 4-part structure of the sequence. It’s not just a scene of destruction and rebuilding, but also of pedagogy and reporting. With the narratives created by the teacher and the journalist, the trajectory of the scene points from the past into the future. The teacher instructs young students on the history of the bridge back to its design and construction in the 16th century, whereas the idealistic journalist is on a mission to tell a story about reconciliation and an emergent future.

But the film categorically refuses any clear pathway to reconciliation, forgiveness, recovery or reconstruction. Reconstructing the bridge in its pure original form from the original stones turns out to be an impossibility. Godard reminds us that the reconstructed bridge required newly-quarried stones. Godard also puts especial scrutiny on the work of the journalist. She is introduced early in the film as a young idealist, travelling to Sarajevo because she “wanted to see a place where reconciliation seemed possible.” Her self-imposed assignment includes interviewing the acclaimed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and the French ambassador to Bosnia who had sheltered Jews from Vichy authorities during WWII. The journalist is clearly committed to opening up channels of discourse among numerous parties. She openly states that she wants to take part in “conversations that no one can have. Not even in one’s heart, because that heart is alone.” Her

conversation with Darwish is marked by long periods of listening allowing Darwish's points to slowly and convincingly unfold. In spite of the fact that this journalist would appear to offer a model for open discourse and reconciliation, Godard's portrayal of her at the Mostar bridge shows her in a somewhat myopic state, embracing ready-made formulas and seeking verification of pre-conceived ideas. She casually takes snapshots of the bridge with a small camera, and upon seeing three native-Americans that appear at different moments of the film, she snaps a photo of them in the vicinity of the bridge (but the bridge is not in the background). Godard breaks down the sequence into four components: 1) the journalist photographs the bridge (figure 7);



(The journalist with her viewfinder, seeking the ready-made.)

2) We see and hear the native Americans getting into their car; 3) the journalist turns 180 degrees and photographs the native Americans; 4) We see the fabricated reality of the journalist—the impossible image of the native Americans in full regalia standing in front of the bridge (figure 8).



(The native Americans appear as a phantasm in full traditional regalia, rather than as flesh-and-blood, contemporary subjects.)

Not only have the clothing and physical bearing of the native Americans changed, their position in relation to her has changed. This progression of shots highlights the difference between the material reality of the world before the journalist and what she chooses to see. With this sequence Godard calls attention to the difference between the datum of vision and the discursive and imaginative realm of the visible. The scene before the journalist is not what she actually sees. Her efforts at documentation result in another moment of erasure as the native-Americans are cast according to her preconceptions and not by their on-going efforts at self-definition. The journalist with her viewfinder, seeks the ready-made or the already understood. She is not using her camera to see (or to return to Godard's remarks about using a camera, she is not using it as analytical instrument), but to reconstruct what she already knows.

Hauntings in the Library

The native-Americans appear, somewhat inexplicably, at various moments of the film and remain all but invisible to those around them. They wander through the film like ghosts, attempting to engage others and to be heard. Although they are noticed, they are never acknowledged (with the exception of somewhat hostile encounter in the library where a member of the library staff attempts to wrest a book away from the native-American woman). Their presence is actually a narrative disturbance. Upon watching the film, one is inclined to ask, "what are they doing in the film?" They are

never integrated into the film as other characters are. They have no “place.” They appear not to be conference attendees, tourists, residents, nor journalists, but specters. Yet, they are categorically flesh-and-blood. They appear first and most notably during the scene in which Juan Goytisolo visits the burned-out National Library in Sarajevo. There they attempt to speak to another library visitor. This encounter, however, is entirely asymmetrical. The man they address never acknowledges their existence or appears to hear their words, but remains at the table bent over a book, while the native Americans become more and more emphatic, frustrated perhaps that their words seem to be falling on deaf ears. At this point, because of their seeming invisibility, it may be tempting to regard these characters as apparitions. Yet, as mentioned above, a library worker approaches the group and confronts the native American woman, thereby confirming their physicality. They are part of the diegesis but also outside of it.

By setting this encounter in the ruins of the Bosnian national library, Godard is once again placing viewers into a *mise-en-abyme*. The native Americans are attempting to fight off systematic erasure and to gain a voice in the very site of another episode of genocide and erasure. The destruction of the library was not a form of so-called, “collateral damage” during the Bosnian war, it was deliberately targeted with incendiary shells by Serbian forces in August 1992. Because it was a non-military target having no strategic value and because the incendiary ordinance was clearly meant to destroy the library’s contents, the destruction of the library is often regarded emblematically, as an example of the exceptionally high civilian and cultural Bosnian losses during the war. A *New York Times* article on the reconstruction of the library reminds us that only three months before the shelling of the national library, Serbian forces “shelled the Sarajevo Oriental Institute, devastating a collection of medieval literature in Arabic, Persian and Turkish and priceless works in four alphabets -- Latin, Arabic, Cyrillic and an alphabet that predated Cyrillic, known as Old Bosnian.”⁶ Similarly unique and irreplaceable artifacts were lost from the destruction of the national library. Facts such as these, along with the high number of crimes (rape, murder, destruction of property, and forced displacement) against the civilian population, corroborate the notion that much of the Bosnian war concerned cultural erasure and cultural survival. The same *New York Times* article states that “the burned ruins of Bosnia’s national library have stood for the last four years as a wrenching symbol of an attempt to destroy a city and its culture.” Yet, in this very space, Godard stages a confrontation that highlights the invisibility of yet another constituency. Godard presents the native-Americans as remainders, outside of the realm or possibility of discourse. They are suddenly and categorically “placed” by the journalist in the scene involving the Mostar bridge, where they become exotics and instantly recognizable as symbol or type. In becoming “visible” they again are placed into obscurity. One has to wonder why the native Americans remain “out of place” throughout the film. The fictional portion of the film

begins in an airport where people arrive from around the globe, for the sake of “encounters.” Numerous images and scenes foreground linguistic difference. Yet, in the context of this cosmopolitan setting, Godard introduces an element of radical alterity. The native Americans disturb the narrative and disalign straightforward readings of the film. But this is the point, I believe, in their appearance. They remind us of the fact of alterity and of the necessity of its presence.

Paradise, Hell, and the Loss of Otherness

They say our language arbitrarily divides up things in reality, and they say this as if it were our fault.

—Godard speaking, from *Notre Musique*

The film itself is organized by images of violence and military presence, with three clearly demarcated parts, labeled Kingdom 1 Hell, Kingdom 2 Purgatory, and Kingdom 3 Paradise. It is noteworthy that Godard uses the term kingdom (*royaume*), rather than “part” or “act.” The emphasis is not on literary or dramatic organization but on a format that emphasizes arrangements of power and the state. Moreover, Godard adapts the Dantesque journey through the realms of the dead into a journey through different geo-political possibilities. All of the sequences discussed so far in this essay appear in “Kingdom 2 Purgatory.” “Purgatory” is the space of discourse in the film; it constitutes the majority of the film (about one hour of the film’s 80 minute running-time), and establishes the semi-fictionalized diegetic world of Sarajevo, the conference, and its participants. The other two sections remain abstract in terms of space and time; each is roughly 10 minutes in length and they book-end the purgatory section with worlds in which discourse appears to be either impossible, unimagined, or undesired.

Kingdom 1 (Hell) is a striking ten-minute montage primarily of military violence. A narrator states, “And so, in the age of fable, after the floods there appeared on earth men armed for extermination.” The montage that follows combines a plethora of images that intercuts passages from fiction films with documentary sequences (this montage bears many similarities to Godard’s *De l’origine du XXI^e siècle*, discussed by Michael Walsh in this volume). There are scenes of actual conflict and of conflict’s aftermath; of material damage and of human death; of weaponry and of individual soldiers. The fictional footage offers images of historical periods spanning centuries, as well as ethnic and religious clashes (colonial wars and crusades). There are images of children “playing war” and of child victims of war. It would be an understatement to say that the montage is visually arresting. As mentioned earlier, Godard often manipulates the images—aestheticizing them with intense color saturation or by slowing the film speed. The resulting images are often suffused with an uncanny sensual

beauty and offer explosions of color and compelling pyrotechnics that overlay the photographic documents. With these effects, the sequence highlights the very texture of cinematographic representation. Moreover, the different image types (fictional stagings and historical actuality) are intercut and placed side-by-side as if they are two parts of an intimate conversation: two different qualities of the image—one documentary and one not; one premised on a faith in the real, and one premised on a discourse (something other than a lens) that produces images; the real and the imaginary; documentary and fiction; shot and counter-shot. The montage refuses hierarchies; neither image type is privileged. In fact, each image type is pulled into the realm of the other, and both remain emphatically images: not historical documents, not documentary evidence, and also not mere dramatization.

The sequence dwells on the notion of perception and the field of representation in other ways as well. It calls attention to the materiality of the medium itself by foregrounding “broken” images. Several of the archival images are scratched, almost to the point of illegibility, and take on a Brakhage-like quality (figure 9).



(The scratched and broken images call attention to the materiality of the medium.)

The damaged film stock and intense contrasts created by color saturation lend the images an almost palpable texture. Godard evokes yet another strata of perception with a brief image that features the shadow of a military helicopter, photographed from inside the vehicle itself (figure 10).



(Photographing one's own shadow. Three strands of representation: self-portrait, shadow, helicopter.)

Perhaps a sly reference to the shadow images in Plato's allegory, it certainly references apparatus and materiality at once. Upon seeing this image one might immediately say "helicopter", "shadow" or even "self-portrait," each of which would be accurate and each of which calls attention to a different aspect of the image and its creation.

By making the "Hell" sequence "thick" with textuality and presence, transparency and materiality, Godard is doing more than simply rehearsing the long tensions concerning truth and actuality, and whether the external world is 1) discovered and recorded as so much data, or 2) discursively created. This montage, on its own and in the greater context of the film, insists on a synthesis of visions. Godard appears to be systematically broadening the practice of montage, from the collision of image content to include the collision of content, image type, color, texture, and matter. Montage practitioners including Sergei Eisenstein, Alexander Dovzhenko, Dziga Vertov, Stan Brakhage, Chris Marker, and Abigail Child, have plumbed these various depths for some time, but Godard's sequence is remarkable in its scope. This specific practice of montage speaks to my earlier remark concerning the journalist's "misperception" of the native Americans. By calling attention to the difference between the datum of vision and the discursive and imaginative realm of the visible, Godard seems to be suggesting not that the journalist is "seeing improperly" but that such "misperceptions" are a fact, just as difference is a fact. Godard's collision of images in the montage sequence are not an attempt to make us see the world in a particular way, nor to celebrate (in a Vertovian vein) a range of visual possibilities that extend the range of human vision. Instead,

the montage interrogates perception itself and offers a meditation on the limits of vision. The film insists, by my reading, that perception always requires eye and mind together. In his lecture sequence, Godard states:

Try to see.

Try to imagine.

In the first case, you say: "Look at that."

In the second, you say: "Close your eyes."

But keeping eyes closed and open at once poses some challenges. How is a synthesis of imagination and seeing to be arrived at? Godard's formulation appears to offer a simple binarism, but perhaps it also calls for a third term. Another statement from the lecture carries a similar tone: he states that if one simply looks at "two pictures of the same moment in history then you see that truth has two faces." This statement is not an assertion of subjective relativism, but of concrete reality. And often the third position or the third term is the means of acknowledging the existence of each of the two faces.

I maintain that the third term is ever-present in the film. It is there, in the form of a silent witness, from the first conversation of Kingdom 2, when Godard and the interpreter meet and converse in the airport (see figures 4-5). This conference worker, who remains unnamed and unaddressed throughout the film, hails the attendees as they arrive (holding a sign in the airport lobby), and she is a visual focal point in the conversation between Godard and the interpreter, even though she never speaks (or only to say that she is checking on the status of a flight). A caterer during the scene of the embassy party receives similar attention from the camera, as he moves through the room with glasses of champagne. Although such moments as these serve to make visible the subaltern, it would be insufficient to leave the reading there. With Godard's studied refusal of the classic shot/counter-shot system and by positing these so-called "marginal" subjectivities throughout the film, the film is constantly positing alterity as a position of witnessing and perception. The speakers often don't look. Those who look often don't speak. Be it in the form of a translator, a secondary audience, or a person waiting in the wings for the end of a lecture, there seems always to be a third or fourth eye on each exchange. This position of alterity becomes the space both of invisibility and perception.

Kingdoms 1 and 2 are rife with otherness, and even radical otherness. But, the final section of the film—labeled "Paradise"—offers a world of seemingly banal coexistence: it is an anonymous, bucolic, rural setting, lush with greenery, and featuring people in states of play and leisure. The colors of paradise are vibrant, and the light is uniform and brilliant. With the exception of the US marines, who guard the entrance, there seem to be no roles and no constituencies. Paradise is a protected space, not unlike a gated community. The ongoing conflict of Kingdom 1 has been replaced by a state of peaceful occupation. Although the sequence is playful in many respects, it

also has an elegiac tone. And in keeping with the rest of the film, even the fanciful tone of this sequence resonates with actuality. Currently, with U.S. military bases in over 150 countries, the vision at the end of the film is hardly far-fetched, and if one adds NATO forces to the formula then it's easy to conclude that much of the globe is under a state of permanent militarization that theoretically advances peace. It seems that no space, even paradise, can be conceived of without the delimiters of the military force.

If Kingdom 1 is a state in which no form of alterity can be acknowledged except through violence (hence eradication) then Kingdom three is a state in which alterity seems to be absent altogether. This vision of paradise offers a non-violent form of eradication. Paradise is a place where misperceptions no longer occur because there is no form of alterity. I mentioned earlier that many of the shots from the film hold some subjects in sharp focus and leave others in visual obscurity. This use of planes and shallow focus creates a series of visual phantoms that populate many frames of the film (figure 3) and threaten to emerge from the shadows or from unfocused planes. Likewise, the Native Americans emerge unexpectedly, and seem to appear from a zone inflected by reality and a cultural imaginary. The overly secured paradise, however, seems to clear up the picture. Like the sanitized shot/counter shot formulation so reviled by Godard, this paradise finally serves up visual clarity, but there is nothing to see.

¹ This and other basic information about the film can be found at Witt, Michael, "The Godard Interview: I, A Man Of The Image," *Sight and Sound*, BFI, June 2005. Available at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/313>.

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.

³ Witt, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/313>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Probably the voice of French architect Gilles Péqueux (responsible at the time of filming for the rebuilding of the bridge).

⁶ Perlez, Jane, "Sarajevo Journal: A Lovely Library in Ruins, but With a Will to Live," *New York Times*, August 12, 1996. <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/12/world/a-lovely-library-in-ruins-but-with-a-will-to-live.html?scp=1&sq=ruins%20sarajevo%20library%20bosnia&st=cse>

