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Daniel Morgan, *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2013. xvi + 308 pp. Notes and index. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-520-27333-7.

Review by Codruța Morari, Wellesley College.

“This is a book about Jean-Luc Godard’s late work, in particular the films and videos he made since the 1980,” reads the first line of *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema*. The ambitious enterprise of a lucid writer, this book sets the stage for a timely and well-informed remapping of film aesthetics: “It is also a book about the place of aesthetics in cinema.” Not a trivial task to apply oneself to, especially when the relationship between aesthetics and history needs to be recalled, for how else could one write a serious book that is also “about the persistence of modernism, political radicalism and late nineteenth-century artistic and philosophical concerns into the end of the twentieth century?” (p. 1). The book’s argument emphasizes Godard’s importance for understanding not only twentieth-century art, but also twentieth-century history. There is a danger, the book argues, of overlooking tremendous consequences of Godard’s project of and for history, if this “late,” different and difficult work, is not fully accounted for.

Over three hundred pages of high-reaching prose, Daniel Morgan’s acute critical sense will convince you, if you let him, that a seismic and dramatic shift seals the history of cinema with the opening of Godard’s *Soigne ta droite* (1987); moreover, this moment gathers a massive energy that will carry on for the next two decades of Godard’s career, and, in the process, will mirror the very interstices of history, just like French realist writers dreamt that the novel could reflect the historical changes and challenges of nineteenth century. Without giving away too much of the book’s central arguments, it is fair to say that Morgan systematically defends Godard’s position that film is the twentieth-century aesthetic form *par excellence*. Morgan takes Godard’s cinema as the matrix not only of film history, but of history itself and elaborates extensively on Godard’s claim that cinema identified the tragic symptoms of WWII and should have prevented the atrocities of Holocaust. As history unravels, his senses always alert and showing his philosophical potential, Godard moves away from the political concerns of his earlier cinema. In tune with the historical narratives surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin wall, he puts his cinematic project to the service of history. In Morgan’s own words: “Godard sought to find a cinematic form that would be adequate to the political concerns he wanted to express and at the same time tried to discover a politics that would be adequate to the formal innovations he was exploring” (p. 35).

The political concerns in play in *Late Godard* are very different from the ones that run across his earlier films, and Godard’s formal and aesthetic choices testify to it. So strong is Morgan’s position on this matter that he draws a conceptual incompatibility between “political” and “historical” that the reader will have to bear in mind for the remaining of the book, as counterintuitive as it might appear to be. Godard has said goodbye to the engaged, interdependent political aesthetics of the 1960s and, aware of the “pressing political need to rethink the basic elements of film practice,” vowed his art to the project of “history” (p. 35). What this “history” might be, how it might be understood and what possibilities it holds for the future, are some of the running threads of *Late Godard*.

Morgan's project is rooted in a well-defined corpus constituted by *Soigne ta droite* (1987), *Nouvelle Vague* (1990) and *Allemagne 90 neuf zero* (1991). These films are taken to articulate Godard's new aesthetic mode, meticulously explicated, explicated and exhausted in the first three chapters, thus preparing the writer and his readers to engage for the remaining of the book, in a proper and well-informed manner, with Godard's stunning *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998), his major video work of the period. Throughout the book, this "late" Godard is situated within the filmmaker's repertoire and, most importantly, within a larger intellectual context. Clearly articulated, the issues at the heart of Morgan's argument penetrate this phase of Godard's work: "the interrelation between history and the history of cinema, an engagement with aesthetic categories that focuses on the more historically situated mode of the beautiful, and a concern with the role of film in the age of television and new media" (p. 21).

Trained at the University of Chicago, Morgan bears all the talents of a rigorous scholar of film theory and history. His cinephilic penchant will not entirely undermine the big intellectual stakes of his book, and he knows how to engage with a larger readership, slaloming the paths of philosophy, aesthetics and history of ideas. There is no doubt that he mounts a strong argument for Godard's philosophical potential. His work is images and sounds and text and senses intertwined. He belongs to a noble lineage started by idealism and romanticism: he is right there with Kant on matters of "nature"; and with Hegel, albeit throughout the entire first chapter Morgan could not settle for either a Hegelian or an anti-Hegelian Godard, and instead painstakingly makes lists of pro and cons; and later on in the book with Benjamin and Heidegger, for "the classics always work," as Godard himself utters in *Prénom Carmen* (1983), a resonant title for one of Morgan's subchapters. If the reader seeks taxonomies and categorization, he's in for a treat.

The philosophical issues of Godard's "late" work are incisive and ponderous: the fragmented nature of his films in relationship with the fragmented vision of history; the status itself of images and clips never used "as they are," but rather significant for how "they're being used" (p. 9); the ontological status of cinema, since everything with Godard is an account of the medium; authorship and self-reflexivity; and especially nature and natural beauty, questions that permeate Morgan's book from cover to cover, as a "tool for thinking about politics and history" (p. 11). The weight and sharpness of these questions are given full justice in Morgan's methodology. From the very first pages of the introduction, the reader would have understood that this is a serious book, thoroughly researched by a writer in full command of his material, conceptually and analytically alert. It is an uncompromising book too, which, for all its resounding merits, is both illuminating and frustratingly limited. Daniel Morgan is resolute and steadfast about his method, and operates sharply and precisely. A tasting sample greets the reader from the very beginning in order to reveal its possibilities and no less to gratify initial desires and expectations. The method, simple, rich and unavoidable to any film scholar, experienced or novice, is called sequence analysis. No example of his procedure is more elucidating than the one that allegedly marks the shift from Godard to "late" Godard.

In the second chapter, "Nature and Its Discontents," Morgan argues that "[In Godard's films from the early 1980s] images of nature stand above and against shots of mundane activity that are interspersed with them. This changes with *Soigne ta droite*. The first shot of the film is of a forest slowly emerging from a dense bank of fog, the camera looking down to the earth from an aerial perspective, as if perched on a helicopter or slowly moving plane and gliding above and over the trees" (p. 78). After a lengthy paragraph describing every detail of the opening sequence of *Soigne ta droite*, the reader would hope this method to have an analytical payoff. Morgan proceeds, and he proceeds slowly by dissecting, comparing, dissecting again, emphasizing ambiguities that others might overlook if they rush through Godard. Keen reader, he warns us, don't fall for appearances: "The opening of *Passion* and *Soigne ta droite* employ on the surface at least, a similar structure....But where *Passion* uses shots of the sky to set up its narrative development, *Soigne ta droite* employs shots of the earth. It is a neat iconographic reversal. *Passion* has shots of the sky taken from the ground level, *Soigne ta droite* has shots of the earth taken from above" (p.78).

The overly detailed analysis of the visual dimension is doubled by an equally detailed attention to the text, which signals “that the film will be emphatically about this world, concerned about the earth and life on it” (p. 79). Unfortunately, the unpacking is almost always disappointing, and does no more than repeat what was already suggested in the description: “The blues and whites of those films, associated with images of sky and waves, are here replaced by browns and greens, more earthy tones. Where the shots of the sky had a tendency toward a stark purity, the shots of earth generate a quiet messiness: the profusion of colors and objects blocks any tendency toward abstraction or the absolute. It’s this world, not the heavenly one, that matters” (pp. 78-79).

Except for the first chapter, “The work of aesthetics,” that positions Godard as “an aesthete at heart” (p. 37), the rest of the book proceeds in the manner reproduced above. Morgan dismantles Godard’s work with a surgical precision and then draws his conclusions. The facticity of his analysis is meant to fight off other interpretations that are “simply wrong,” as Morgan is often fond of saying (see for example, pp. 48, 178, 222). There is no doubt, when duelling with other scholars, textual analysis is the best way to argue and Morgan does it brilliantly, but like every duel, it involves risks and the enactment of a larger arsenal and exchange of shots.

Morgan’s fine knowledge of aesthetics and film theory risks suffocation in these long descriptions. The iconographical reversal of images of the sky and the earth, the significance of colors, the insertion of the text all lead to an allegorization eager to contain the very soul and truth of Godard’s work. Because Godard turns to matters of this world (and he does it by reversing a mechanism that governed his previous attempts to represent natural beauty), his usage of images of nature serves an aesthetic of the beautiful instead of one of the sublime. The chapter, “Nature and its discontents” will reiterate this specific argument many, many times, using other examples from the three films in question. By the end of the book the reader will be convinced that this “late” work truly is Kant *à la* Godard, but partly because of an applicationist exercise that defeats the purpose of Morgan’s textual approach.

The following chapter, “Politics by other means,” carries on the rhythm already in place and for the sake of logic, continues the reflection on nature. The chapter’s title is surprising after the introductory claim that “late” Godard is no longer interested in politics. The other means of politics are, at least to my understanding, nature and the “earthily” beauty of nature, the beauty of the landscape animated or alienated by characters of all sorts, from Don Quixote, Lemmy Caution, Lotte Kestner, et cetera: “The woman in a hard hat is shown in medium close-up, facing us with her body angled away from the camera. Far below her, we can see a wide, flat valley stretching out into the distance, moving from the bottom left of the frame to the top right; its sides have been artificially flattened into severe diagonals” (p. 122). Simply put, the argument is that the organization of landscape is political, because geography refers to nation and nation refers to history.

The writing of history is the major concern of both Godard’s work and Morgan’s account. It is fundamentally linked to nature, to repeated images of nature. History is enacted through repetition: Repetition of shots of nature in films, but also repetition governing the work of projection in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. After keenly dealing with Godard’s genealogy of cinematic medium—Godard is adamant that cinema must re-evaluate its photographic legacy in the light of the sensuousness it inherited from painting—Morgan addresses the important issue of projection. “What projection does,” the second-last chapter, delineates and defends the notion of projection as part of history itself. The graceful articulation between two chapters dedicated to the most arduous topics in film theory gives an exhilarating quality to Morgan’s text. But the dangers of sequence analysis become apparent too soon. What does projection do? It validates cinema’s specificity, it elevates it above television and its broadcasting nature, but also it allows a reflection on temporality.

These conclusions are elegantly drawn in the first part of the unpacking process. However, because sequence analysis provides an interminable set of descriptive elements, Morgan is forced to consider them. As a result, the specificity of the argument suffers, the chapter needs more propping to be sustainable. Photography is static, but projection rescues cinema from the realm of the static and unsensuous and makes it part of history because it is a reflection on time. By the end of this chapter, the argument becomes full circle: we are back to the famous quote from *The Magic Mountain* that generated Morgan's enterprise. "What is Time?," echoes the voice-over in *Allemagne 90 neuf zero*. Morgan becomes Godard's scribe and will spell out the complexities of the question.

For the sake of conclusion, Morgan insists on the breaks and shifts of Godard's career. If before 1980 Godard used repetition to suggest the mode of the sublime, after the 1980s, repetition is used to suggest timelessness or mythical time, time before history. In other words, mythical time, as it is made comprehensible by Mircea Eliade and later by Paul Ricoeur. But Morgan does not shy away from giving a fuller and more historical account of the understanding of the mythical time by others, like Jean-Paul Sartre, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Gérard Genette, before the invocation of Gilles Deleuze.[1] Godard contributes to this lineage by surfacing the intrinsic relation between cinema and projection, one that decisively rescues temporality from the claws of that-which-has-already-past and generate an experience of "presentness." The patient reader will now wonder how Godard and Morgan can justify and sustain the project of a mythical time while dealing with breaks and shifts. "Late" Godard comes before what is suggested to be a "post-late" Godard, showing his marks with *Éloge de l'amour* (2001). But "to do these more recent films and videos full justice would require another book, paying the same kind of attention to the intricacies of their construction and the way their broader ambitions emerge through those very details" (p. 254). The remaining ten pages of the current book will thus set the tone for the next one. One could not but look forward to it, to the joy and exhilaration it will bring to Godard fans and admirers, but also to the unavoidable aggravations it will inflict on the sceptics.

#### NOTE

[1] See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return*, trans. Willard Trask (London: Routledge, 1955); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Penguin Books, 1973); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Gérard Genette, "Discours du récit," in *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

Codruța Morari  
Wellesley College  
[cmorari@wellesley.edu](mailto:cmorari@wellesley.edu)

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