Utopia through Likeness
Godard's Logic of Similarity

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1

In *Notre musique* (2004), Jean-Luc Godard acted as himself giving a lecture in Sarajevo. The Lecture was on "texts and images." At the end of the lecture, one of the students asked Godard: "Can the new digital cameras save the cinema?" But he did not answer. His face was sunk in the darkness [fig. 1].
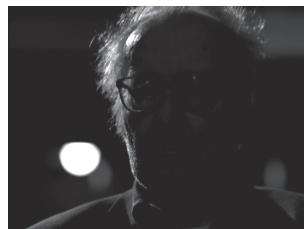

fig. 1

Many reviewers have taken this "silence" to be some kind of sarcastic attitude. Godard just did not believe in digital technology, so he ignored the question. Jonathan Rosenbaum suggested a different view claiming that this is the attitude of "modesty"[1]—Godard did not answer because he did not know the exact answer.

But if we look at the shot carefully, we can find these interpretations miss the point; Godard's performance is not a mere silence. Looking and listening carefully, we will notice that he is breathing

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1. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The Winter of His Discontent," *Chicago Reader Movie Review*, http://www.chicagoreader.com/movies/archives/2005/0105/050128.html.

heavily on the screen. The sound of his breath guides our eyes to his mouth. There, we find that he is keeping his mouth half-open and baring his teeth for 15 seconds behind the shadow, without moving his lips. Although this strange gesture is hard to see on the screen, we can see it clearly when we capture the shot from DVD and enhance the contrast of the image digitally [fig. 2].
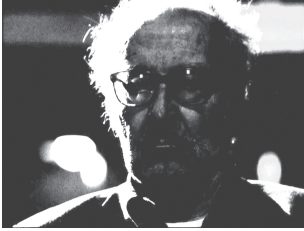

fig. 2

This face is very unusual for Godard, because he always closes his thin lips tight, except when he is smoking. This is a clearly intended performance but the intention is extremely vague. What does this performance exactly mean? Is it, after all, a kind of sarcasm? To know the answer, we need to put Godard's face in the context of the lecture of *Notre musique*. The key concept is similarity.

In the lecture, Godard deals with similarities as the fundamental logic of the association of images. For example, he shows one of Giotto's paintings, Flight into Egypt [fig. 3], and next, he shows a photo of the people in Kosovo [fig. 4], which resembles the painting. After that, he shows a photo of Israelis walking out of the water onto the land, and a photo of Palestinians, walking down to the water. These are different images in the original context, but they look like each other in their appearances. Through these likenesses, Godard associ-

fig. 3

fig. 4

ates and mixes the different images together.

In this context, he shows two faces of men. One is a photo of a thin Jewish person [fig. 5]. The other is also a Jewish person but who is called "Muslim" [fig. 6]. As Giorgio Agamben discussed in *Remnants of Auschwitz*,[2] the dying Jewish person in Nazi's concentration camps were called "Muslim," probably because they fell down onto the earth as if they were praying. The man in the photo seems to be one of the dying bodies in the camps. The men in the two photos are keeping their mouths half-open and baring their teeth. We can notice the similarity in their physiognomies. Also the label "Muslim" might indicate the similarity between Jews and Muslims.

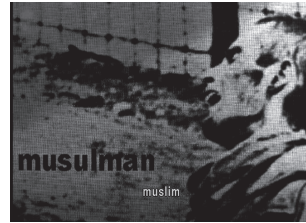fig. 5   fig. 6

Close to those two faces, Godard puts his own face. The similarity is apparent: all three of them are keeping their mouth half-open with their teeth showing. He makes his face similar to the faces of a Jewish person and a "Muslim," and mixes them up. This strange way of using similarities is at the heart of Godard's thought on images.

2

In *Ici et ailleurs* (1974), Godard gave the first "lecture" on images in the film. What we find in the lecture is, for Godard, "to see images" is "to see the similarity of images." After the blinking caption which says "learn to see, not to read," Godard shows the faces of

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2. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 41–45.

Lenin, people of popular front, Hitler, and Golda Meir one after
another [fig. 7, 8, 9, 10]. Gilles Deleuze discussed this sequence in his
famous book on the cinema as follows:

> Images like those which bring together Golda Meir and Hitler in *Ici
> et ailleurs* would be intolerable. But this is perhaps proof that we are
> not yet ready for a true "reading" of the visual image. For, in
> Godard's method, it is not a question of association…. This is not an
> operation of association, but of differentiation…. In other words the
> interstice is primary in relation to association, or irreducible differ-
> ence allows resemblances to be graded.[3]

He called this method "the method of BETWEEN" or "the method
of AND."[4]

fig. 7

fig. 8

fig. 9

fig. 10

　Here Deleuze emphasizes the operation of "differentiation," not of
"association," and denies the "resemblances" as a primal logic of

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3. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta
　 (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 179–80.
4. *Ibid.*, 180.

Godard's editing. This view is consistent with Deleuze's philosophical thought on comparison and association of two things. In *Difference and Repetition*, he discussed early 19th century biological taxonomy, and said, the difference between the things is the primal, and the similarity comes after the difference.[5]

However, focusing on Godard, we need to say there is an obvious problem in Deleuze's theory. Because in the sequence we see "resemblance," not "difference," and what makes this sequence critical is the *similarity* of images. In other words, in the sequence we are disquieted because their right hands rise in exactly in the same way. Even the Palestinian dead body raises its hand in a similar manner [fig. 11]. Through this likeness, Godard mixes the bodies of Hitler, Lenin, and the others together. Actually, the meaning of this similarity and mixing is not clear and Godard gives us no explanation, but the visual link between them is unmistakable. "Learn to see (the similarities), not to read (the differences)." This is Godard's method of "AND," which is to see the likeness beyond the different ideologies, and he mixes them up on the surface of their appearances.

fig. 11

In order to figure out what Godard does with similarities, we might need to draw on another Deleuzian cinematic concept, "the earth." The earth is described in Deleuze's *Cinema* as the bottom layer of memory where all the reminiscences are mixed up into one, and the "power of false" is liberated. This power enables one remembered image to "become" another.[6] It is the locale of raging "simulacra," where every being slips into other incessantly.

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5. Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 154–58; 318–22.

6. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 105–25.

What Godard does in the sequence of *Ici et ailleurs* is in a way very close to Deleuze's concept of "the earth," where *ici* (here) and *ailleurs* (elsewhere) become indiscernible on their bodies; however, Deleuze denies the similarity in the sequence. Why? This is probably because, in "the earth," there is no way to distinguish Hitler from Lenin, and Golda Meir from Hitler. It would be "intolerable," Deleuze says—and it is actually intolerable ideologically, because it would come close to some kind of ontological fascism where every beings dissolve into one and same thing.

In *Comment ça va?* (1975), again Godard shows photos of people raising their hands. At the last of the sequence, one collaged photo of Hitler is exhibited. Below is the same collage Godard used in the scenario of *6x2* (1976) [fig. 12].
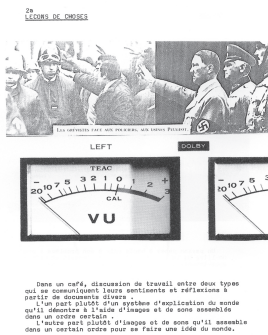

fig. 12

On the right, we see the body of Hitler raising his right hand, but his hand is cut at the wrist. To the left we see workers striking in the factory of Peugeot. As we look at the boundary carefully, we will notice that one of the worker's hands is joined with Hitler's hand naturally. This is the perfection of one salute. There is no "interstice" between the two bodies. Beneath the two photos, there we see the sign of "DOLBY" and the images of volume gauges. The gauge of "LEFT" speaker is under the photo of striking workers. Here, the bodies of "left" and "right" wings are mixed, as if the sounds from left and right speakers merge into one sound. The mixing is performed through their bodies' apparent likeness.

In another sequence of *Comment ça va?* Godard shows a face of a Portuguese in the revolution of 1974 [fig. 13], and a face of a French striker [fig. 14]. Their faces are dissolved translucently, and he slides one face on the other. In one instance they become one overlapped face, and in the next, they fall apart. Along with this indeterminate face, a man's voice says, "there are two problems and one solution." And at the exactly same time we hear a voice uttering the word "solution" and we see the two faces fuse together [fig. 15]. This is the face of "solution," namely the face of "dissolution," which fuses two faces/places together. But we cannot be sure what kind of problems is "solved." Each face refers to its own origin and problem indexically; however, the (dis)solved face has no reference in reality. We could not grasp the exact meaning of this non-existent face. But later Godard uses this (dis)solved face for a specific end. That is *redemption*.

fig. 13

fig. 14

fig. 15

3

The end of the cinema and its *redemption* are the theses of Godard's largest work, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98). The cinema is dying according to *Histoire(s)*, because nobody filmed the Nazi's concentra-

tion camps in operation. The first section of *Histoire(s)* asserts that
"the fall of the cinema came about not through the transition from
silent to sound films but as a result of the absence of images made
during World War II, in fictional films—especially from Holly-
wood—of the concentration camps."[7] It is the original sin of the
cinema, and because of it the cinema is decaying today.

However, at the end of the first section of *Histoire(s)*, Godard per-
forms the possible *redemption* of the dead body in the camp, namely,
the dead body of cinema with the technique of editing. What makes
it possible is again the similarity. Godard shows two films shot by
George Stevens. One is *A Place in the Sun* (1951) featuring Elizabeth
Taylor [fig. 16], and the other is a documentary film on the concen-
tration camps which shows a dead man's horrible face [fig. 17].
Godard says, "if George Stevens didn't shoot the concentration camp,
then Liz Taylor couldn't find *A Place in the Sun*," and switches the
shot from Taylor's face to the dead man's face.

fig. 16

fig. 17

Georges Didi-Huberman noted in *Images despite all* that their faces
are different and it is the sequence contradistinguishes happiness from
unhappiness.[8] The basis of Didi-Huberman's simple argument echoes
Deleuze's point, namely that Godard always uses the differences. Alan
Wright supports the same idea of emphasizing the difference between
those two faces, referring to Deleuze's concept of the method of
"AND."[9]

7. Richard Brody, *Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard* (New York:
Metropolitan Books, 2008), 513.
8. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2003), 181–
82.
9. Alan Wright, "Elizabeth Taylor at Auschwitz: JLG and the Real Object of Montage," in

But the opposite is the case. Their faces are apparently similar. Godard cuts the shot of Taylor at the very moment when she opens her mouth and throws her eyes up, and cuts into the dead man's face who is keeping his mouth open and looking up in the exactly same way. This is Godard's betting for impossible redemption. He catches, so to speak, one-twenty-forth second likeness in Taylor's face and dead man's face, and through this likeness and swift cutting narrowly conducted, their faces are mixed up virtually. There, we could say, superficial redemption of the victim occurs on the surface of the film retroactively. Godard gives a "life" to the body of the concentration camp through likeness, and at the same time, he tries to redeem the history of cinema.

The same redemption is staged again in *For Ever Mozart* (1996), and there the redemption is doubled. *For Ever Mozart* is a film on film-making. The director in the film, Vicky, left his daughter in Sarajevo during the war. She was raped and killed by an international voluntary army in the woods. Soon after that Vicky who is filming *Fatale Bolero*, finds a dead woman's body in an abandoned building who looks like his daughter. He robes the body with a red dress whose color resembles his daughter's clothes. Then she is revived and performs as the leading actress of his film.

He retakes the shot of the actress 608 times, and she screams her line. At the end of the film, the face of the dead man in the concentration camp which we have seen in *Histoire(s)* [fig. 18] is connected to the face of the crying actress [fig. 19] who is keeping her mouth

fig. 18   fig. 19

The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Works of Jean-Luc Godard 1985–2000, ed. Michael Temple and James S. Williams (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2000), 53–54.

open although her body rotates 90-degrees. Godard=Vicky conducts the doubled revivals of the dead daughter in Sarajevo and the dead man in Auschwitz.

4

   In the same context, Godard uses his own face as a medium of redemption in *Notre musique*. If we mix the faces of three men—a thin Jewish person [fig. 5], a "Muslim" [fig. 6] and Godard himself [fig. 2]—in a Godardian way, we can see that their faces are framed exactly in the same size so that the eyes and mouths overlaps each other, and make the one, (dis)soluble face [fig. 20].
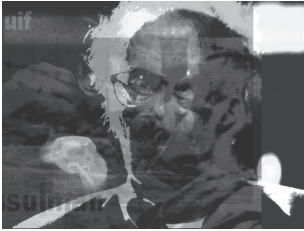

fig. 20

   Of course this face does not exist in reality, but in virtuality these faces become dissolved and constitute one face. This is the face of *redemption* which opens a new passage to *utopia*, a non-existing locale where the different bodies, different creeds, and different ideologies find the one, virtual dissolution.

   Can the new digital cameras save the cinema? We do not have the answer yet; however, the mixed face of Godard-Jew-"Muslim," which is *digitally* developed from the darkness of the film here, might respond to the predicament of history of cinema and history of humanity, to open the other, utopian histories elsewhere.

Picture Credits

fig.1, 3, 4, 5, 6: *Notre musique*, 2004. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. Produced by Jean-Paul Battaggia, Alain Sarde and Ruth Waldburger. Production: Avventura Films/Périphéria/Canal Plus/Arte/Vega Film/TSR/France 3.

fig.2: Contrast enhanced photograph from *Notre musique*.

fig. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11: *Ici et Ailleurs*, 1974. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville. Produced by Jean-Luc Godard, Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Pierre Rassam. Production: Sonimage/INA/Gaumont.

fig.12: Collage by Godard. Published in *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard I* (1950–1984), ed. Alain Bergala (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1998), 390.

fig. 13, 14, 15: *Comment ça va?*, 1976. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville. Produced by Jean-Luc Godard, Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Pierre Rassam. Production: Sonimage/Bela/SNC.

fig. 16, 17: *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1998. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. Production: Gaumont/Périphéria.

fig. 18, 19: *For Ever Mozart,* 1996. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. Produced by Alain Sarde. Production: Avventura Films/Périphéria/Vega Film/CEC Rhône-Alpes/France 2 Cinéma/Canal Plus/CNC/TSR/Eurimages/DFI/ECM Records.

fig. 20: Mixed photograph from *Notre musique*.