



REDCAT

Jean-Luc Godard

- **Le Livre d'image (The Image Book)**

Film/Video

JANUARY 30, 2023
8:30 PM

PRESENTED BY

REDCAT
Roy and Edna Disney
CalArts Theater
CALARTS
California Institute of the Arts

We gratefully acknowledge that we operate on the traditional lands of the Tongva, Tataviam, and Chumash peoples—including the Gabrieleño, Fernandeño, and Ventureño; members of the Takic and Chumashan language families; and other Indigenous peoples who made their homes in and around the area we now call Los Angeles. We honor their ancestors past, present, and future, and recognize their continued existence and contributions to our society.

Jean-Luc Godard

• Le Livre d'image (The Image Book)

REDCAT is proud to present *Le Livre d'image (The Image Book)*, the last film by Jean-Luc Godard (1930-2022) after his passing last September. “We all feel orphaned now,” said actress Isabelle Huppert. Probably the most influential filmmaker of the last six decades, Godard was both the conscience and the revolution of cinema, borrowing from film and art history to invent novel forms of cinematic expression. He directed *Breathless* (1960), *Une Femme est une femme* (1961), *Vivre sa vie* (1962), *Contempt* (1963), *Band of Outsiders* (1964), *Alphaville* (1965), *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), *Masculin Féminin* (1966), *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), *La Chinoise* (1967), *One Plus One (Sympathy for the Devil)* (1968), *Wind from the East* (1969), *Vladimir and Rosa* (1971), *Tout Va Bien* (1972), *Here and Elsewhere* (1976), *Comment ça va* (1976-78), *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (1981), *Passion* (1982), *Prénom Carmen* (1983), *Hail Mary* (1985), *King Lear* (1987), *Nouvelle Vague* (1990), *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro* (1991), *JLG/JLG Self – Portrait in December* (1994), *In Praise of Love* (2001), *Film Socialisme* (2010) and *Goodbye to Language* (2014), among others. He also explored the relationship between film and video in *Numéro Deux* (1975), and produced epoch-making episodic essays about image, sound, language, and the history of cinema: *Six fois deux: Sur et sous la communication* (1976), *France/tour/détour/deux enfants* (1977-78), and *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998). A final essay film, *The Image Book* is a montage of film excerpts, archives, television reportage, and fragments of text and music, whose beauty consists in the way he transfigures the original material.

Special Palme d'Or, Cannes Film Festival; Special thanks to George Schmalz, Kino Lorber; Piers Handling, Toronto International Film Festival

ABOUT THE FILM

(...) *Le livre d'image* is another Godardian encyclopedic history survey that continues his late-career interest in language—its gaps, overlaps, and deficiencies—employing contrapuntal cadence and the associative use of fragments. He weds and wrests images, text, and music into a thrilling, gnomic salvo, returning to the protracted three-decade late style of his magnum opus, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-98). Quoting Brecht's dictum “in reality, only a fragment carries a mark of authenticity,” Godard renders a moving account of two centuries’ worth of history that signals a deeply disturbing human tendency toward colonizing, annihilation, and warring. That JLG’s account is entirely subjective is without question. It draws upon a bevy of critical and literary texts as much as the histories of cinema and modern art, yet many of the references are those that we’ve seen before: Vigo, Nicholas Ray, Max Ophüls, Vertov, Balzac, Rilke, Rimbaud, Nicholas de Staël, André Derain, Masaccio. His distinctive lexicon is expanded here to include Hollis Frampton (aphoristic text) and Gianikian/Ricci Lucchi (clips, but also the notion of cinema archaeology and the analytic camera), with thanks to Google and Al Razutis, and citations from thinkers and writers from the Middle East and North Africa, such as Edward Saïd and Albert Cossery. Godard assembled the film from a vast image archive, including his personal collection, footage from a number of his own films, but also viral videos, and pre-existing shots of his hands unspooling celluloid at an editing table. He delivers the bulk of the text in his signature, cigar-deepened voice, noticeably more faint and fragile than it was in *Histoire(s)*.

(...) Beginning in total darkness with a startling and loud beep of audio feedback as if sounding out an alarm, the first image in *Le livre d'image* is a static one of a rounded hand with the index finger pointing upward. A cropped detail from Da Vinci's thought-to-be-final painting *St. John the Baptist*, the hand looks Xeroxed as it floats in a dark abyss. Is the hand about to teach us a lesson, lead the way, or suggest something more divine, like creation itself? Creation and destruction—the hand that builds and the hand that decimates. "The war is here..." Godard tells us, both in the maelstrom of images that follow, and out in the world at large. Oscillating between explosions and murmurs, the film has the paradoxical effect of being both an extraordinary barrage and strangely soothing. Godard's voice is intimate, and with a sophisticated multi-channel sound mix that isolates sound from image (or *Image et parole*) like never before (...)

A film in five chapters with literary titles, but also one that feels like a partition in five movements plus a coda, *Le livre d'image* is supremely dense as both meta-text and individual fragment. It is a moving handbook—or book of hands (the iconic singular "image" behind the title?)—that conceptually adheres to the five fingers, but also to the five senses and five parts of the world. Early on, Godard invokes the ethics of the archive with a title card and mixes popular imagery (like the comic-book character Bécassine) with a phalanx of clips that are extremely disparate in their content. (...) The first section, titled "Remakes," uses cinema not only as witness of history but also its copy and its fabricator. RIM(AK)AKES. The wordplays abound, some easier to decode than others in their double entendres. *Adieu au langage*, then, as Godard meditates on the invariable idea of war repeating itself (a "divine" war), catastrophes recycled and recast. His digital images, some striated with color degradation and considerable fading, are consistently reframed. It's a nervy stylistic device, which recurs throughout the entire film. Pan and scan—is that what we do to historical representation, to history itself?

The second section, "Les Soirées de St. Pétersbourg," [St. Petersburg Nights] takes its title from a book by Joseph de Maistre and features a somber meditation on trains (and annexation and death). Endemic to cinema itself—its origins as much as its theoretical steam—trains are the traumatic carriers of death but also symbols of modernity, transitoriness, collectivity, migration, and exile. Exquisite black-and-white scenes from Tourneur's *Berlin Express* (1948) to von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1932) are juxtaposed with locomotives penetrating a glitch art aesthetic rainbow-colored landscape (...) Connecting history and images through serial movements, the successive frames like train tracks, Godard's sense of movement through time and space is (...) "almost beyond." The images are uncontrollable to the screen and spill out forward, backward, and in the round, as the isolated yet immersive sound amplifies the sense of collective grief, despair, and pain, but also hope, love, and romance to which humans are susceptible. At the heart, as in so many films, there lies a love story between a man and a woman, here suggested by Dovzhenko's masterpiece *Earth* (1930).

The third chapter is a distilled verse from Rilke: "Ces fleurs entrent dans les rails, dans le vent confus des voyages." This line is, perhaps unsurprisingly, missing a bunch of words. Of all the text in the film—the spoken monologues as well as the dialogue in the clips—only a fraction of sentences are translated and subtitled into English. (...) *Adieu au langage*, yet again. (...) Godard offers fragments and mixes his citations at will, often without credit, consistently excising words like a lettrist. The ethics of the archive? Or the transfiguration of life into art? Godard also makes use of the canvas here like never before, his impasto Fauvist interventions onto the image acknowledged with actual images of paint brushes applying paint. He is rewriting, remixing, recoloring, revising, reinterpreting, yet why does it feel so novel, so alive, so vital?

The fourth segment, “L'esprit des lois,” [The Spirit of the Laws] from a text by Montesquieu, suggests justice rather than the law. Godard seems to be answering his own questions as he goes along, searching material for clues to understand the madness in the world (while also replicating it to some extent), and being forever seduced or comforted by the inner calm and wholeness of certain images because within them lies “ardent hope,” beauty, or the drive for assurance—maybe even truth. The “internal calm” of representation is disrupted through an image flow that is set alight. Unleashed and wanton, Godard’s images nevertheless signal an inexhaustible belief in art. “All is grace”—like the solemnness of hands in Bresson. Who are the guilty ones? Who are the infidels? An indictment of Europe, whose colonizing past is coming home to roost? The hand’s central region is the palm. (...)

The fifth chapter is named for Michael Snow’s masterpiece *La région centrale* [The Central Region] (1971), whose primordial and otherworldly landscape is seen quoted as a world upside down, canted, barren, dizzying. But here, at last, is where Godard comments on the Arab world, a notion he refutes in exchange for the “central region,” and where Albert Cossery’s novel *Une ambition dans le désert* and Edward Saïd’s essay “Dans l’ombre de l’occident” provide inspiration for a fictional, nested story which ultimately derides Western or Orientalist representations of “Heureuse Arabie” (after Alexandre Dumas), or “barbaric” Arabia, from Pasolini’s pageant play *Arabian Nights* (1974), through rebroadcasted ISIS news bulletins. “The war is here,” and there is need for revolution—that hasn’t changed. But the cycles of violence have migrated across time and space. “Can the Arabs speak?” Pilfered by Western archaeologists and oil pirates, the Middle East has been profusely invaded, and its voices construed as soft and poetic (in other words, exoticized) in most European art films. (...)

For all its apocalyptic doom and gloom, *Le livre d’image* has moments of great tenderness and melancholy, and exhilarating, even transcendent, rhythm. Though it lends itself to being construed as elitist by some for its willful opacity, the film acknowledges its own construction, and argues that inherent and dangerous power hierarchies exist within representation itself. Whose version of history are we receiving, what are the limits and permeability of interpretation, and who gets to tell what story—via the news, via film, via art, via personal testimony? An idiosyncratic call to (utopian?) revolution and widespread empathy, the film’s cryptic Dadaist proclamations exist both in and out of time, in monochromatic black and white and acid, feverish colors that ultimately sound a stirring humanist lament for a world too stubborn to learn from its mistakes, or perhaps simply one that is alarmingly, compulsively drawn to violence and the oppression of the Other. A terrific post-credits coda, which devolves into a smoky cough and a blunt, heart-stopping dance of death courtesy of Ophüls’ *Le plaisir* (1952), is too perfect and too blunt a last word (and image) to be the end. There will be Godard forever.

— Andréa Picard, “Le livre d’image” in Cinema Scope 75 (Summer 2018)

The Jack H. Skirball Series is organized by Jheanelle Brown and Bérénice Reynaud.



KCRW is the Official Media Sponsor of REDCAT

Find us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram @calartsredcat

For more information, email redcat@calarts.edu or visit redcat.org