

2. Celluloid

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Celluloid cracks, tears, disintegrates, and spontaneously combusts without proper care. Exposed to heat, sparks, flames, or friction, it might ignite with explosive violence. Contact with celluloid may cause burns to the skin and eyes. Its chemical formula— $C_6H_7O_2(ONO_2)_3$ approximatively—denotes, through the added “approximation,” the instability and impurity of the combination of cellulose nitrate and camphor. Filmmakers have metaphorized these material properties to describe their practices. For instance, Pier Paolo Pasolini famously called making films “writing on burning paper” (109). While the Italian master deployed this metaphor to describe the political and aesthetic potential of narrative cinema, Jean-Luc Godard (1930–2022) took these material properties as a call to arms in exploring political filmmaking as manipulative labor. This essay focuses on his understanding of film as a material of art and of filmmaking as material labor. He describes filmmaking as “thinking with hands,” which in his late-style-essay films takes the form of unrelenting work with film plastics through cutting and rearranging disparate fragments of visual, textual, and sonic material (fig. 1). The ubiquitous presence of hands throughout his last film *Le livre d'image* [*The Image Book*] (2018) reinforces the notion that thinking for Godard is a physical, even violent, activity. As Beugnet and Ravetto-Biagioli argued, “Godard associates the hand with mastery and potential to destroy or act violently” (12). Through this thinking with hands, Godard wishes to make of cinema “a form that thinks” and to emancipate the medium and its audience from dialogue, plot, and spectacle; in short, from being a mere object to be consumed and then discarded.

As a form that thinks, film is intimately tied to the material existence of moving images in institutional and personal archives, in forgotten corners of attics, on tape, and in digital repositories. While curatorial practices of film preservation are one way to safeguard material cinematic culture from disappearing, the active reuse of celluloid and other film stock in new works seems more in line with the malleable nature of these sturdy thermoplastics and the moving-image culture it made possible. To Godard, cultures of cinephilia can only survive if something is done with these materials: the musealization of cinema is the death of the art as a living, revolving, and revolutionary practice. He takes his inspiration from Chris Marker and

Alain Resnais's warning in *Les statues meurent aussi* [*Statues Also Die*] (1953) that “when people die, they become history. When images die, they become art. This botany of death we call culture.” To prevent cinema from becoming culture, Godard keeps images in constant movement through montage and collage. This implies a radical appropriation of other people’s images on a variety of materials: he cuts up celluloid, other plastics such as VHS, and paper to create image-clashes that serve to define and demarcate what can be considered cinematic or not: racial stereotypes, cultural or artistic clichés, and unethical camera movements should be excised from its original context and be re-exposed in a new work. These uncinematic elements can be considered forms of pollution, turning Godard’s act of appropriation into a cinematic ecology (Aubon 12). This critical gesture should not be confused with striving for cinematic purity: like the chemical compounds of celluloid, cinema itself thrives on the impurity of form in its mix of sights, sounds, movements, stills, colors, and its necessarily collaborative nature as a creative medium.



Fig. 1: Jean-Luc Godard, *Le livre d'image*, 2018. Casa Azul Films.

While celluloid has long been replaced by digital formats as the main aesthetic and economic choice in shooting and showing films, it is anything but obsolete. Things, it seems, are never past: the near obsolescence of celluloid is exaggerated. Celluloid attracts attention for at least two reasons: as a material of culture, it fails to call attention to itself. In painting or sculpture, one cannot separate the visual object and the material from which it is made. The same cannot be said for cinema: one does not look at a strip of celluloid in the hope of encountering a cinematic experience. The carrier of film is not the experience of film; the material existence of film is not film itself. Raymond Bellour calls this the “irreducibility of the filmic sub-

stance” that “serves to limit analysis” (54). Moreover, experiments with celluloid in the narrow confines of the contemporary art space contribute to what Kim Knowles describes as an interest in “the aesthetic and potential of celluloid as it shifts . . . from the dominant to the residual” in an art economy of “recuperation, re-use, and recycling of old matter” (Knowles), which can be said to provide an alternative to disposability but could also be seen as an act of appropriative preservation. This calls attention to the deep ties between obsolescence and medium specificity, specifically in practices that are now retrospectively labeled “analog.”

Experiments with celluloid in art cinema seem to be motivated by a search for the physical breaking point of the material. In the case of celluloid, this might be the point of combustion or disintegration. Developing celluloid in bodily fluids, such as spit or urine, scratching the photosensitive surface, or long-term exposure of the film plastics to earth are examples of radical acts that have taken place within a highly artistic discourse. Many of these experiments are in reaction to digitization and the fear of the dematerialization of culture in cinema as well as in other arts, such as literature and painting. Godard’s practice takes place outside the white cube and is engaged with digital and technological developments rather than being dismissive of them: *Le livre d’image* was first shown in 2018 in a Swiss theater on the flattest available state-of-the-art HD screen chosen for its exquisite rendition of black. To him, the digital serves as a promise that needs to be creatively developed in practices of filmmaking and showing: Godard has explored the function and possibilities of 3D as well as played with varying screen sizes of phones and tablets. Digitization, to Godard, offers new possibilities for current cinema and visual culture.

Le livre d’image is Godard’s most radical experiment with film material. One of the first images is of a filmmaker’s hands behind an editing table, moving around spools of film. While Godard has always experimented with montage, his collaging using the archives of visual culture took flight in his monumental *Histoire(s) du cinéma* [*Histories of Cinema*] (1988–1998) and (essay) films such as in *Les enfants jouent à la russie* [*Children Play Russia*] (1993) and *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro* [*Germany year 90 nine zero*] (1991), *De l’origine du XXI siècle* [*Origins of the XXI Century*] (2000), and narrative works such as *Film socialisme* (2010) and *Adieu au langage* [*Goodbye to Language*] (2014). In a commemorative text after Godard’s passing in September 2022, Jean Narboni describes Godard’s artistic development as removing from films what seemed, at first, essential to cinema: story, characters, narrative unity, dramatic development, closure, and, finally, the originality and integrity of the visual material (10). *Le livre d’image* is an archaeology of our visual culture and is at times so tightly sealed that it seems impossible to glean any meaning from it. Whereas the montage form itself asks the utmost of the viewer, Godard’s reworkings of the celluloid, VHS, or digital file add another difficulty to understanding even the intention of the auteur. At times, the image is pure white, hermetically black, noisy, or pushed to the utmost limits of color saturation (fig. 2). The viewer is also invited to engage ac-

tively and creatively with the object, in an insistent need to continuously reflect on the necessity and ethics of images. Although tempting, this active viewing cannot take the form of an intellectualized game of identification: knowing that a certain fragment is extracted from, for example, *The Night of the Hunter*, is unproductive in making sense of *Le livre d'image*. The fragments do not want a reconstructive reading to function. Rather, it is the loss of original context that releases meaning potentialities, foregrounds the fluidity of interpretative processes, and creates a space that enables cinema to become a form that thinks. This carving out of a literal and metaphorical space within and between images is at once the emancipation of the medium, the viewer, and the academic vis-à-vis their object.¹

Throughout his oeuvre, Godard tried to emancipate the image, saving it from the repressive hands of a culture that infantilizes (cinematic) images by limiting their polyphonous potential. Famously, in *Le gai savoir [Joy of Learning]* (1969) Godard integrates a minute of image-silence in commemoration of “absent images, censored images, prostituted images, criticized images, delinquent images, fucked images, images beaten down by all governments, by television and all westernized cinemas that make rhyme information with repression, ordure with culture.” The references to these forms of wasted potential call to mind the material properties of celluloid: as a plastic it can easily be considered trash, like other plastics. Reusing these physical remains is a recycling of ideas as much as of materials and serves as the foundation upon which to construct a new world.

Godard’s ideology of montage needs further elucidation and contextualization, as here the actual labor with film plastics takes cinematic form. Montage—the only feature that distinguishes cinema from its ancestors, photography, and theater—is deeply political for Godard. While his intellectual father André Bazin defines montage as nothing other than the organization of images in time, Godard would add that it is also the laborious (re-)organization of material in space. He shows a fundamental revision of ideas on cinematic organization: images are not only edited sequentially in time but are overlaid, juxtaposed, and intercut and have undergone other such material interventions. This is all to show that the image is flat (Godard, “Candide” 13), just as the screen on which *Le livre d'image* was shown was the flattest available at the time. He rejects perspective, or the original sin of Western art as Bazin so eloquently called it (“Ontology” 7) as well as the “fantasy of referentiality” derided by Didi-Huberman (“Index” 74). The possibility of critique is not inherent in individual images but can be brought out by montage. An image needs a counter-image to speak beyond words: $1 + 1 = 3$ is Godard’s didactic formula for explaining how a third image is born from two separate ones (“Candide” 13). Unlike Bazin’s “montage interdit” or prohibited montage (“Montage”), Godard is inspired by Serge

1 For various approaches to art as a form of thinking, see Grootenboer; Warner; and Rancière.

Daney's ideas of "obligatory montage" as the sine qua non of critical thinking and as the ultimate resistance against a society at war with polyphonous meaning (fig. 3).

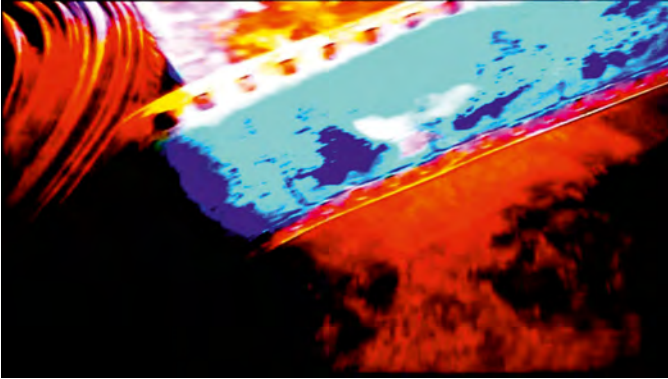


Fig. 2: Jean-Luc Godard, *Le livre d'image*.



Fig. 3: Jean-Luc Godard, *Le livre d'image*.

Godard's material labor should not be seen as a purely formalistic practice similar to the above-mentioned contemporary art practices. By naming his last film *The Book of Images*, he calls attention to materials and objects in the transfer and survival of forms and ideas. For him, montage always stands in the service of ideas. The essence of history, to Godard, is montage. Both connect elements that were not con-

nected before: “Like when Cocteau said: had Rimbaud lived longer, then he would have died in the same year as Pétain” (Godard, “Geschiedenis” [“History”] 181; my trans.) (fig. 4). Through material labor, Godard is “à la recherche du siècle perdu” (“in search of the lost century”) (fig. 5). This, without doubt, is the twentieth century, with cinema’s complicity in genocide and mass murder. Cinema was not only unable to show the Shoah, let alone prevent or stop it to prevent. In fact, it even helped prepare the world for genocidal murder by perpetuating stereotypes and spectacularizing violence. Godard’s relationship with images is complexly related to that of Georges Didi-Huberman, who in his critical study of the former *Passés cités par JLG* (2015), writes that history is an assemblage, a montage. Images do not resurrect the past but are material remains of the past that imperfectly and incompletely witness a foregone age. They are a *survivance*, like archaeological remains that are incompletely recovered from layers of earth and debris, and that only come to mean connection with other ideas and materials.

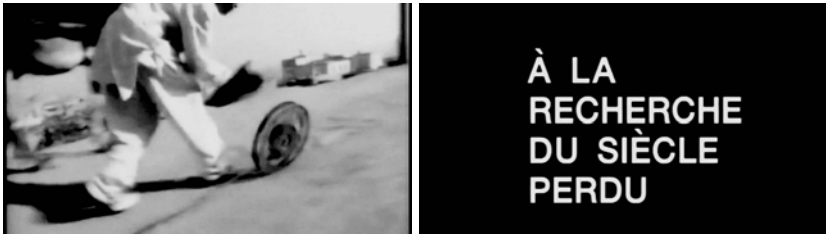


Fig. 4: Jean-Luc Godard, *Le livre d'image*; Fig. 5: Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, *De l'origine du XXe siècle*, 2000.

Godard’s work cannot be enjoyed from the position of pseudo-passivity usually summed up as the willing suspension of disbelief, which in the final analysis is nothing but a form of bad faith. His work demands an active, cinephilic attitude. This attitude at its most extreme calls for iconoclasm not as the destruction of all images but as a critical gesture that questions the ethics of visibility, reflects on visibilities, and resists uniform, repressive meaning. Through acts of material destruction, one rids the loved object of anything wrong and harmful. Celluloid and film plastics are an integral part of this attitude, as they ground not only the creation but also the critique of films in materiality and, therefore, in history. For Godard, working with material, hands-on, is physical labor that ensures the survival of cinematic cultures. His work, in which engaged making and reflecting are inseparable, is all that remains after his death in 2022. The strength of his oeuvre is precisely that it does not

speak for itself but that it provides the methodological and theoretical tools to pry open its potential and approximate meanings and that of cinema and visual culture as a whole. The end of cinema as a cultural form and practice haunted Godard. Now that he is gone, we should listen, again or for the first time, to his words in the film essay *Lettre à Freddy Buache* [*A Letter to Freddy Buache*] (1982): “Cinema is going to die soon, too young, without having been able to give what it could have. So, we must go quickly to the heart of the matter. There’s an urgency to do so.” This call for action is no less relevant today than it was in 1982.

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