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Chapter 6

Spectres of Dada: From Man Ray to Marker and Godard

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A recurrent motif of early experimental films associated with the Dada movement in Paris consisted in the playful reference to the mechanism of the recording camera and the processes involved in creating the illusion of movement through the rapid succession of static images projected on the screen. Almost forty years later, the protagonist of Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* (1960) was to announce, in typically provocative manner, that "cinema is truth 24 times per second". However, neither Godard nor the Dada filmmakers of the 1920s ignored the careful manipulation of both technical and psychological conditions of visual representation that went on behind the truthful reproduction of reality "24 times per second". For Dada artists as well as for some New Wave directors (such as Chris Marker and Godard) the debates over the faithful or the contrived nature of cinematic realism can be said to undercut any simple opposition between the documentary and the fictional traditions. In seeking to subvert the conventions that ensure the viewer's belief in the factual or fictitious sequence of events presented on the screen, Dada as much as New Wave practitioners of avant-garde cinema invite the audience to question the status of photographic and film images. It is no longer a matter of deciding whether moving or still images, documentary or fictional modes of representation have more chances of providing an accurate and reliable account of reality. The very possibility of capturing reality through photographic or cinematic means is called into question and denounced as illusion. As the cartoon bubble above Godard's photograph on the cover of the 1976 special issue of *L'Avant-Scène Cinéma* famously states: "Ce n'est pas une image juste,

c'est juste une image" [This is not an exact/just image, this is just an image]. Dada cinema prefigured most strategies of disruption and distancing that became incorporated into the New Wave onslaught on classical cinematic narrative and viewing conventions.

The legacy of early filmmakers such as Man Ray can perhaps be best appreciated in light of his experiments with cameraless photography (rayographs) and optical illusion that led to the elaboration of an "aesthetics of spectrality" – as I would choose to call it – with reference to static as well as moving images. Man Ray stumbled upon the rayograph technique when he accidentally mixed in an unexposed sheet of photosensitive paper with exposed sheets in the developing tray in 1921. Having waited in vain for an image to appear on the photosensitive paper, he placed a few objects on it (probably intended to serve as paper-weights), then turned the light on. The contour of the objects that began to emerge on the paper was an image produced not only without a camera, but also without the need to use photographic film: the shadow or the spectral trace of an object was directly impressed on the photosensitive paper support by means of light alone. In a similar manner, Man Ray made *Retour à la raison*, in 1923, partly without a camera, by applying his technique of the Rayograph to the film celluloid:

On some strips I sprinkled salt and pepper, like a cook preparing a roast, on other strips I threw pins and thumbtacks at random: then I turned on the white light for a second or two, as I had done for my still Rayographs. (Man Ray 1963: 260)

The opening sequence of Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* (1926) includes the rayograph strip of film first used in *Retour à la raison*, with the addition of a figurative shot of a field of daisies spliced between two abstract rayograph images. It is also worth mentioning that Man Ray started to experiment with solarized photography in 1929–30 and possibly earlier. However, the final sequence in *Retour à la raison* can already be said to illustrate a strikingly similar technique in the medium of cinema. The image of a nude female torso, filmed from chin down with arms raised, is shown turning to face the light filtered through the curtains of a window. The moving torso serves as a screen on which shadows of the curtain pattern are projected. This stunning transformation of the human body into a quasi-spectral apparition, through the play of light and shadow, is then further enhanced by the sudden reversal of the contrast values in the negative version of the

same set of shots, repeated twice at the end of the film. Technically, the partial reversal of contrast values in solarization is similar although not identical to the eerie aspect of negative images in motion. One of the early examples of a series of negative shots used to great effect in silent cinema was the accelerated arrival and departure of Count Orlok's phantomatic coachman in *Nosferatu the Vampire* (1922). It is not surprising that the caption, which exerted the most powerful fascination on the Surrealists, came from Murnau's legendary feature of 1922: "Passé le pont, les fantômes vinrent à sa rencontre". Desnos's articles on cinema, no less than Man Ray's avant-garde films, point to the diffuse yet consistent preoccupation with the possibility of defining the nature of the cinematic *merveilleux* in relation to notions of spectrality.

Although negative images come up only twice in Man Ray's films, both times in the closing sequences of *Le Retour à la raison* and *Les Mystères du château du Dé* (1929), it is obvious that he continued to experiment with means of subverting the realistic appearance of cinematographic representation. Virtually all the films he made during the 1920s display this aesthetics of spectrality. For example, he includes the double exposure shot of fish swimming in *Emak Bakia* (1926) or the mottled-glass effect consistently used in *L'Etoile de mer* (1928). An explicit thematic concern in *Les Mystères du château du Dé*, the spectral condition of photographic and film images is rendered through the peculiar use of silk stockings to conceal the identity of the actors. Apart from the striking resemblance with Magritte's painting, *The Lovers* (dating from 1928), this simple device reminds one of the much-celebrated screen heroines of Feuillade's serials, Musidora and Irma Vep. But what seems by far the most significant allusion to *Les Vampires* and *Fantômas* is Man Ray's accumulation of visual and verbal designators of phantoms, spectres and shadows. The effect of a dissolve transition between shots, that makes the masked characters disappear, resonates with the earlier image of shadows cast by steps near the swimming pool, then with the silhouettes of bathers projected on the wall, that are coupled with the enigmatic caption: "Passe, il faut que tu suives cette belle ombre que tu veux" [Pass by, you must follow this beautiful shadow that you want]. Most conspicuously, another caption in the film links the visual motif of ghosts or fleeting apparitions to the temporal condition of photographs and cinematic images, as impressions or traces of the past: "Existe-t-il des fantômes

d'action?... Des fantômes de nos actions passées? Les minutes vécues ne laissent-elles pas de traces concrètes dans l'air et sur la terre?" [Are there phantoms of actions?... Phantoms of our past actions? Are there not concrete traces of lived instants in the air and on the ground?]

In his 1980 essay, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1993: 77) was to provide added theoretical support to Desnos and Man Ray's reflections on the cinema, through his analysis of the uncanny superimposition of reality and of the past that is the essence of photography. Although Barthes repeatedly denied cinema the spectral status that he attributed to the stillness of the photographic image, defined as "the living image of a dead thing" which induces the "perverse confusion between the Real and the Live" (Barthes 1993: 79), his conclusions accurately match the subversive strategy of avant-garde filmmakers such as Man Ray and Chris Marker. In exploring the subtle interference between still and moving images, or in denouncing the mechanical artifice and optical phenomena that create the illusion of cinematic movement, Man Ray and Chris Marker highlighted the contradictory status of both photographic and filmic representation. Fraught with memory, death and what Barthes (1993: 119) calls "intractable reality", cinema as well as photography present us with a closed world, a vestige of actual existence, to which movement can only surreptitiously, and ephemerally, attach the openness of life. If Desnos and Man Ray found more reasons to rejoice in the potential blurring of the boundaries between lived experience and the spectral manifestation of characters on the screen, it is nevertheless true that their conception of the cinema finds adequate expression in Barthes's description of photography as "the ectoplasm of 'what-had-been': neither image nor reality, a new being, really, a reality one can no longer touch" (Barthes 1993: 87).

Chris Marker's photo-roman, *La Jetée*, persuasively queries and unsettles the assumed "intractable reality" of photography through the hypothesis of time travel, and the possible interaction between different temporal dimensions: present, past and future. Still images in *La Jetée* are not only the conveyors of a retrospective account of events, unfolding in the characteristic snapshot mode of disjointed or loosely connected memories, but also the means by which the scientists of the post-apocalyptic world depicted in the story seek to access the past. The voice-over commentary that accompanies the montage of frozen pictures informs the viewer from the outset that

“this is the story of a man marked by an image of his childhood”, a violent scene that he witnessed on the main pier at Orly, “sometime before the outbreak of World War III”. Having set the narrative about to begin in the near, yet indistinct, future of a post-nuclear war struggle for survival, the rest of the commentary proceeds in the past tense, not so much to project the viewer’s standpoint further ahead along the temporal axis, as to draw attention to the implacable reality of the photographs, “a reality one can no longer touch”. The aorist, as Barthes (1993: 91) pointed out, is the tense of the Photograph, and the diegesis in *La Jetée* subtly appropriates this signifier of documentary evidence in order to turn a sequence of utopian images of holocaust into the implacable still-shot reminiscence of what has come to pass:

And soon afterwards Paris was blown up. Many died. Some fancied themselves to be victors. Others were made prisoners. The survivors settled beneath Chaillot in a network of galleries. Above ground in Paris, as around the world, everything was rotten with radioactivity. The victors stood guard over a kingdom of rats.

The narrative then focuses on the experiments carried out by a team of unidentified scientists led by Herr Doktor Frankenstein. Through an advanced form of psychoanalysis that seems to have accomplished the Surrealist aspiration of capturing and visualizing unconscious phenomena, the scientists aim to send “emissaries into time”, and thus “call past and future to the rescue of the present”. After various failed attempts resulting in madness or death, a man with “very strong mental images” is selected on account of an obsessive dream relating to a childhood memory. His initial forays into the past generate compelling tableaux of life in the pre-war world, and the voice-over commentary insists on the heightened reality of these images as compared to the nightmarish underworld of the man’s waking consciousness: “a peacetime morning, a peacetime bedroom, a real bedroom, real children, real birds, real cats, real graves”. Not surprisingly, the enumeration of photographic remnants of real life builds up to a designator of death, the very eidos of photography as manifestation of “a defeat of time”, according to Barthes (1993: 96). At first, the protagonist in *La Jetée* remains confined to the position of a voyeur, whose time travel possibilities do not extend beyond the passive contemplation of closed and inaccessible images of the past. However, soon he starts looking for the face of the woman that he remembers seeing as a child on the main pier at Orly. The status of

this image is uncertain, as the prologue of *La Jetée* informs us: “he often wandered if he had ever seen it or if he had dreamt a lovely moment to catch up with the crazy moment that followed it”, the death of a man shot down on the pier. It is only when he eventually manages to conjure up the image of the woman during one of the sessions of induced sleep that his travel into time really starts. For he does not simply go back to the event he witnessed as a child at Orly, but he somehow becomes capable of accessing the “intractable reality” of frozen moments in the past, as his present, adult self, and meet with the woman in several different surroundings.

Barthes’s remark on the “temporal hallucination” of photography (Barthes 1993: 115) is taken one step further when the man and the woman in *La Jetée* freely converse about their incompatible spatio-temporal frameworks. She calls him her ghost, and he tells her “the truth” about his journeys through time by referring to “an unreachable country, a long way to go”. The most disturbing reflection on the superimposition of past, present and future that the protagonist experiences during the sleep experiments comes up in a scene which is a direct quotation from Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958): like the haunted Madeleine (Kim Novak) and Scotty (played by James Stewart) in Hitchcock’s feature, the man and the woman in *La Jetée* look at the rings in the cross section of a sequoia tree. Unlike Madeleine, who pinpoints the moments when she was born and when she died in a previous existence, the man in *La Jetée* shows his companion a point beyond the tree and, “as in a dream”, hears himself say: “This is where I come from”. The sudden disclosure of an incongruous temporal reference breaks down the reality of a shared moment in the past, and the man, exhausted, regains consciousness in the present-time underground lab. But the meaning of the latest sequence of frozen frame images has radically altered the status of photographic representation. Far from merely prompting the “vertigo of time defeated”, as Barthes (1993: 97) claimed, still images exceptionally acquire the protensity of film shots in *La Jetée*. The crucial difference between photography and cinema, according to Barthes, resides in the melancholy and spectral nature of the former, which “is without future”. If cameras can be understood as “clocks for seeing”, the only relationship to the future of a photographic image corresponds, in Barthes’s account, to a “prophecy in reverse: like Cassandra, but eyes fixed on the past” (Barthes 1993: 15, 87). To a certain extent, this

description matches the function of the obsessive childhood memory in *La Jetée*. However, the man's gesture pointing beyond the cross section of the sequoia tree to a moment in the future explodes the closed temporal frame of the image. The viewer is intrigued by the very possibility of the protagonist's coming back as an adult to moments in time when the woman is no older than she was in his childhood memory. The still frame narrative of such meetings cannot logically belong in the past, for its protensive meaning exceeds even Madeleine's assumed anamnesis of a previous existence in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. These are no memories, properly speaking, since no one can recall events that have not yet, or rather, have never actually come to pass. The exploration of the past through photographic snapshots of reality in *La Jetée* brings recollection, and its visual documentary evidence, displayed as fragments of arrested time, much closer to the proleptic mode of certain dreams or of premonitory visions, to delirium and the psychoanalytical projection of desire. Contrary to Barthes's assertion, the suggestion or the actual use of cinematic movement in this case does not exclude or "tame" the spectral potential of photographic images. The man's apparent recollection of his meetings with the woman in *La Jetée*, just like the only instance of animated vision in Marker's photo-roman (when the woman opens her eyes and blinks looking straight into the camera), or – again – Madeleine's anamnesis in *Vertigo*, properly pertain to the notions of ecmnesis and hallucination, that Barthes opposes to the essentially oneiric illusion of film. Cinema, no less than photography, can be spectral and ecmnetic, can explore phenomena of paramnesis and temporal hallucination, especially when it deliberately highlights the illusion of cinematic movement, or when it employs both still and moving images to subvert the realism of photographic representation.

Man Ray's exploration of the rayograph technique, along with his use of arrested motion and the decomposition of cinematic movement, prompted Breton's compelling remarks on the spectral quality of both photographic and film images which reveal the paradoxically immaterial presence of perceived reality:

Almost at the same time as Max Ernst, but in a different and, at first sight, almost opposite spirit, Man Ray also derived his initial impetus from photographic precepts. But far from entrusting himself to photography's avowed aims and making use, after the event, of the common ground of representation that it proposed, Man Ray has applied himself rigorously to the task of stripping it of its positive nature, of forcing it to abandon its arrogant air

and pretentious claims. [...] The same considerations apply, indeed, to the taking of cinematographic images, which tend to compromise these figures not only in an inanimate state but also in motion. (Breton 1972: 32)

Most interestingly, in a short text on Max Ernst, dating back to 1921, the heyday of Dada manifestations in Paris, Breton (1978: 7) provocatively identified photography and automatic writing, whose revolutionary impact on poetic language he described as the advent of “a genuine photography of thought”. In the same article, Breton turns his attention to the possibility of transgressing the mimetic and utilitarian aspect of photographic images in the manner in which Duchamp’s readymades attributed a poetic functionality to everyday objects:

It would be equally sterile for us to reconsider the ready-made images of objects (as in catalogue figures) and the meaning of words, as though it were our mission to rejuvenate them. We must accept these conventions, and then we can distribute and group them according to whatever plan we please. (Breton 1978: 7)

Although the passage itself gives no clear indication of the kind of images Breton was referring to – whether mental images or actual photographic prints – another text he wrote about the same time, entitled “Caractère de l’évolution moderne et ce qui en participe” (1922–23), unambiguously establishes the analogy between Man Ray’s rayographs and Duchamp’s readymades, such as the bird cage filled with marble sugar lumps, entitled *Why not Sneeze?*.¹ The sensorial effect of estrangement achieved by means apparently intended to reproduce or display everyday objects brings to light, according to Breton, the undeniable affinity between such “properly speaking poetic experiments”. Similarly, in Breton’s 1921 article on Max Ernst, the notion of “dépaysement” or estrangement relates the opening remarks on photography and automatic writing to a landmark statement about the new spatio-temporal conditions of Dada visual representation:

It is the marvelous faculty of attaining two widely separate realities without departing from the realm of our experience; of bringing them together and drawing up a spark from their contact [...] and of disorienting us in our memory by depriving us of a frame of reference – it is this faculty which for the present [holds the attention]. (Breton 1978: 8)

In inviting the viewer to query the assumed documentary evidence and conventional spatio-temporal framework of photographic and

cinematic means of expression, Man Ray's as well as Chris Marker's experimental films deliberately highlight the estrangement potential of images that can "nous dépayser en notre propre souvenir" [disorient us in our memory]. Far from merely reproducing the flow of mental images prompted by the reminiscence of past events or by the direct perception of reality, photographs and moving pictures, in this case, bring into view the full range of unconscious processes that constantly re-arrange and interpret what we see. The snapshots illustrating the man's recollection of his meetings with the woman in *La Jetée* have little in common with actual memories. They remain outside time, as the voice-over commentary points out ("no memories, no plans"), so that one can reasonably surmise that the spatio-temporal paradoxes outlined by the narrative properly pertain to an unconscious exploration of the past, more akin, for instance, to Brassai's engravings on exposed photographic plates, that he entitled "latent images", and that went on to inspire his interpretation of the Proustian "remembrance of time past" as a recurrent preoccupation with the latent, or as Annick Lionel-Marie (2000: 159) described it: "what could have been and what has not been, what is buried, and yet close at hand, beneath reality". The virtual rather than factual meaning of unconscious images thus forms the object of *La Jetée*'s journey across the disconcerting spatio-temporal conundrum of events that take the viewer deep into the protagonist's mind, and make him share the experience of what Brassai (1997: 20) aptly called, with reference to Proust, "the photographer of mental images with his own being as the sensitized plate". Several verbal and visual allusions to Brassai's photographs of Parisian graffiti (among which arrow shot hearts and skulls figure prominently) punctuate the narrator's comments on the freeze frame perception of suspended moments in the present: "They have no memories, no past. Time builds itself painlessly around them. As landmarks they have the taste of this very moment they live, and the scribbles on the walls". Significantly, time flows "around" rather than within such vividly evoked images of Paris, filled with the premonition of both love and imminent death.

Two suggestive sequences that can qualify as "ecmnetic" encounters with the past, in Barthes's terms, explicitly deal with sleep and death. The first occurs just after the sequoia tree scene, when the man goes back once more to the pre-war world and finds the woman sleeping in the sun. "He knows", the voice-over commentary informs

us, “that in this world where he has just landed again for a while, in order to be sent back to her, she is dead”. The mise-en-scène and montage of still images take up the verbal hint at the photographic temporal hallucination and subtly render it through the initial positioning of the characters on a deep focus visual axis (that foregrounds the woman’s profile); then through a middle shot of the man and the woman aligned, as it were, horizontally across the screen. The sudden change of direction, amounting to a jump cut in filmic terms, brings the two characters together in a homogeneous spatio-temporal frame, after having allowed the viewer to contemplate the woman’s death-like stillness in her sleep and the temporal distance, rather than merely spatial depth of field, that separates her from the man. The second sequence uses continuity editing across a swift succession of still images linked through dissolves, that build up to the only instance of animated vision in *La Jetée*. The background sound of birds chirping gradually swells along with the increasingly rapid pace of fluid transitions between shots and leads to the moment when the life-like cinematic movement is miraculously restored. When the woman opens her eyes, looks into the camera and blinks, the viewer witnesses the ecmnetic coincidence of the present and the past, as the cinema fleetingly brings back to life the spectrality of still photographic images.

The symbolic “awakening” of a freeze-frame portrait to life-like movement in *La Jetée* displays a strong formal similarity with the final sequence of Man Ray’s *Emak Bakia*, which features a high-angle shot of a woman who opens her eyes and smiles to the camera. However, the second pair of eyes painted on Kiki’s closed eyelids in *Emak Bakia* accomplishes an astounding mise-en-abîme of photographic and cinematic vision, by confronting the viewer not just with the denounced illusion of presence-as-absence, wakefulness-as-sleep, but also – ultimately – with the staring, deadly gaze of the cinema. For what is staring back at the viewer, in this obvious recall of the opening sequence which shows Man Ray filming himself in a mirror while the image of his eye appears superimposed upside down in the camera lens, is the blank, unyielding eye of the camera. As Godard later remarked in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1998), by paraphrasing Blanchot’s own considerations on the image in *L’Amitié*:

Cinema [...] was not sheltered from time, but was a shelter for time. Yes, the image is joy, but alongside it nothingness lingers, and the entire power of the

image can be expressed only by appealing to that nothingness. One ought perhaps also to add: that the image, which has the capacity to negate nothingness, is also the gaze of nothingness upon us. The image is light, and nothingness immeasurably heavy; the image glimmers, while nothingness is the diffuse impenetrability in which nothing shows up. (Blanchot 1971: 48, 50-1; tr. Temple, William and Witt 2004: 411)

At the limits of visual representation, cinema, no less than the stillness of photographic prints, ceases to be the faithful “mirror with a memory” and returns the viewer’s gaze, along with his or her reminiscent re-enactment of the past, as the unconscious premonition of death: nothingness that lingers and shows up on the edges of our intermittent presence in the camera-eye. Unlike Barthes, Godard has explicitly and repeatedly expressed, since the early 1960s, his belief in the hallucinatory, death-laden potential of film:

The cinema is the only art which, as Cocteau says (in *Orphée*, I believe) “films death at work”. Whoever one films is growing older and will die. So one is filming a moment of death at work. Painting is static: the cinema is interesting because it seizes life and the mortal side of life. (Milne 1986: 181)

Among the best examples of radical Dada nihilism in Godard’s work, *Week-end* (1967) provides not so much a direct meditation on human mortality as a wider-encompassing exploration of the outer frontiers and death of cinema itself. The caption that precedes the title shot describes *Week-end* as “a film found on a scrap heap” [à la ferraille], and the grotesque, yet visually arresting, accumulation of car and plane crashes, traffic jams, burning or calcified carcasses, clearly signals an aesthetics of debris, of waste and disintegration. Although *Week-end* and *La Chinoise* (also made in 1967) have primarily attracted critical attention on account of their analysis of a social and political state of affairs that foreshadowed the violent upheaval of May 1968 in France, there is certainly a lot more that goes on under the ominous ideological discourse of these two films. *Week-end*, in particular, evinces a powerful affinity with the subversive illogicality of Dada pronouncements. The collapse of the established social order, and of the mode of thinking associated with it, is not only anticipated but also actually effected through the systematic dismantling of the entire edifice of bourgeois axiology. Nothing is spared, from aesthetics to religion, from ethical values to political convictions, and the ferocious sarcasm of destruction in *Week-end* gradually and self-consciously acquires apocalyptic undertones that hark back (well

beyond Chris Marker's bleak utopian vision) to Picabia's *Manifeste cannibale Dada* of 1920:

You are all indicted; stand up! Stand up as you would for the *Marseillaise* or
God Save the King....

Dada alone does not smell: it is nothing, nothing, nothing.

It is like your hopes: nothing.

like your paradise: nothing.

like your idols: nothing.

like your politicians: nothing.

like your heroes: nothing.

like your artists: nothing.

like your religions: nothing. (Picabia 1975: 213)

Considerably more Dada than committed left-wing party manifesto, *Week-end* is a sweeping indictment of humanity, of modern "civilization" and technological progress. From the moment the two protagonists leave their bourgeois apartment and set off on a cross-country pursuit of frustrated consumerist desires to the cannibalistic epilogue of their adventures, *Week-end* traces the accelerated decline of so-called "civilized" human society, and its regression to an uncontrolled state of anarchy and bestiality. Halfway through the film, a striking reference to Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel* (1962) makes the viewer aware of the similarities between Godard's anthropological study of social behaviour and his predecessor's absurd parable of bourgeois values rapidly backsliding into murderous savagery, when the guests to a dinner party find they are trapped in the drawing room. The manner in which Godard consistently uses intertitles to provoke the viewer's spatio-temporal disorientation and highlight the disruption of film narrative and editing conventions is also highly indicative of his affinities with both Man Ray and Buñuel's experimental practice. Intriguing temporal markers such as "The Week of 4 Thursdays" or "One Tuesday in the 100 Years War" that punctuate Godard's increasingly fragmented narrative in *Week-end* unavoidably seem to recall the groundbreaking impact of Buñuel's intertitles in *Un Chien andalou* (1929): "Once upon a time", "Towards three in the morning", "In the spring". However, Godard is more often treading in Man Ray's Dada footsteps when he uses verbal puns and graphic effects of word division on the screen in order to enhance or even accelerate the dismantling of linguistic codes and cinematic grammar. Man Ray and Duchamp's rotating disks with spirally printed verbal puns that featured first in the *Rotary Glass Plates*

(*Precision Optics*) installations then in the short film *Anémic cinéma* (1926), effectively managed to denounce the illusion of cinematic movement and make the verbal constructs compete with the hallucinatory effect of images. The samples of *Rose Sélavy*-like word games and automatic writing that Man Ray later added to Desnos's scenario for *L'Etoile de mer* (1928) further emphasised the intended discrepancy between intertitles and the visual narrative of the film. Godard similarly explored the effects of asynchrony in *Week-end* by allowing incongruous written messages to compete with the visual information for the viewer's attention, and frustrate any attempts at assembling the vestiges of narrative continuity in line with established rules of cinematic syntax. The enigmatic hitchhiker that Roland and Corinne encounter during their journey, and that a repeated intertitle identifies as the "exterminating angel", confirms Godard's intentions, when he declares, in unadulterated Dada fashion: "I am here to proclaim to these modern times the end of the grammatical era and the beginning of an age of flamboyance in every field, especially the movies".

There is no doubt that the apocalypse prefigured in the opening sequence, which portrays a dysfunctional couple in a social environment ridden with greed, violence and resentment, will sooner or later spill over into the worn-out mechanism of cinematic representation, and lead us from the first intertitle announcing "a film adrift in the cosmos" and "a film found on the scrap heap" to the inevitable conclusion written on the screen: "end of story", quickly followed by "end of cinema". Several times during Roland and Corinne's journey from Paris to Oinville we are reminded, in typical Dada fashion, of our own voyeuristic position as spectators, and of the artificial nature of narrative conventions based on the viewer's suspension of disbelief. When Roland fails to get directions from Emily Brontë and Tom Thumb (two of Godard's ghostly mouthpiece contraptions that provide vocal and visual support to an intricate web of literary, philosophical, or filmic quotations in *Week-end*), he vents his frustration like any run-of-the-mill, naïve member of the audience: "Ça fait chier ce film, on tombe que sur des malades!" [What a rotten film, all we meet are crazy people]. To add to the confusion, Corinne tries to put an end to Emily's nonsensical discourse by pointing out: "That's enough. This isn't a novel, it's a film. A film is life". Having exhausted all their arguments, Roland and Corinne set Emily's dress

on fire and watch her die, while musing on the possibility of her – and implicitly – their real existence:

Corinne: It's rotten of us, isn't it? We've no right to burn even a philosopher.

Roland: Can't you see they're only imaginary characters?

Corinne: Why is she crying, then?

Roland: No idea. Let's go.

Corinne: We're little more than that ourselves.

Later on, when they try to hitch a ride after days of walking through a desolate landscape strewn with the remains of car crashes, that they mercilessly scavenge, they are confronted with a riddle every time a driver stops. The first time, a woman asks Roland: "Are you in a film or in reality?" As Roland promptly replies: "In a film", the woman snaps back: "In a film? You lie too much", then drives away without a look back at Corinne and Roland who are helplessly shouting: "Salauds! Salauds!" The joke not only destabilizes the characters' already precarious status within a self-referential narrative, but also forces the viewer to reconsider his or her presuppositions at each stage.

It is not by chance that the only vehicle which eventually offers Corinne and Roland a ride is a garbage truck, and that the longest political speeches in the film are delivered, in turn, by the two drivers, one of whom is black, and the other of North African Arab origin. For the aesthetics of debris, of junk yard accumulation and social decay in *Week-end* meets the postmodern ideology of collage, citation, pastiche and parody in a truly flamboyant remake of the Dada anarchistic warfare on bourgeois civilization. When the Arab driver praises the effectiveness of guerilla tactics, of "bloody acts of sabotage", and then goes on to provide a crash course in Morgan and Engels' account of the evolution of mankind from "primitive barbarism" to the "confederation of tribes", a flash-forward brings into view the members of the so-called Seine and Oise Liberation Front, whose cannibalistic rituals will bring Corinne and Roland's initiatory journey to its gruesome conclusion. If the two protagonists' murderous intentions are clearly stated throughout their cross-country drive to collect Corinne's inheritance by speeding her parents' death, the final answer to their reflections on reality and fiction, on the origin and aims of civilization, comes as an equally explicit debunking of the viewer's expectations and of narrative conventions. The savage mores of the Seine and Oise Liberation Front represent not only a sarcastic

fulfilment of the proletariat's utopian aspiration towards an egalitarian, classless society, but also an illustration of the violent demise of old visual codes of representation, within a process of cinematic cannibalism. *Week-end* literally feeds on several established genres and traditional editing and narratorial strategies that it slowly and deliberately pushes to the point of self-destruction. All political and ideological concerns are explored as part of a parodic and self-referential engagement with visual narrative form that subverts rather than upholds any expected propagandistic clichés. One salient example is the comical rendition of the fatal crash between a farmer's tractor and a Triumph sports car that constitutes the first overtly political sequence of the film. Labelled by an intertitle which reads, in turn "SS", then "SS STRUGGLE" and, eventually, "THE CLASS STRUGGLE", this episode displays an extravagant use of the interaction between words and images, as well as a form of extreme asynchrony between sound and image. The violent argument between the middle-class girl who survived the accident and the tractor driver who killed her boyfriend in the accident starts offscreen, while the camera lingers on Corinne and Roland who have stopped their car nearby, and are discussing what to do in case Corinne's father has dictated an updated will on his "little Japanese tape recorder". When the emphasis on the soundtrack shifts to the rather incongruous exchange of insults off-screen: "You bourgeois turd!", "You disgusting fat rat of a peasant", the intertitle appears, shortly followed by still images of the dead driver in the red sports car. Then, instead of an establishing shot that would bring the two interlocutors together, the girl alone is shown in close up against an advertising billboard, looking pensively into the camera, while the tractor driver continues angrily off-screen: "Why drive so fast? This isn't St Tropez!" The increasingly comical illogicality of the situation is underscored by another image of a group of three working-class men posing for the camera in front of the same billboard. Cutting back and forth between the car crash and several images of unknown and motionless characters looking straight into the camera, the editing fragments the ongoing argument, and makes the viewer aware of the cartoon-like succession of photographic portraits gazing back at the audience, as it were, with the mirror-reflection of their apathetic or amused participation in the events. Every time a recall shot of the dead driver in his sports car threatens to disrupt the parodic mood of the scene, the

voice-over dialogue and the smiling or laughing expression of the anonymous bystanders take the edge off any potentially dramatic statements, such as: “He had the right of way”, when the argument quickly degenerates into more colourful interjections: “You big lump of shit!”, “You wretched little tart!”, “Your cut-price tractor”, and so on. Failing to get Roland and Corinne to intervene as witnesses to the crash, the girl and the farmer end up uniting against the hateful couple who drive off amongst incongruous protestations and insults: “You can’t leave just like that! Aren’t we all brothers like Marx said? Bastards! Bastards!”, to which the girl adds: “Jews! Dirty Jews!” [Juifs, fascistes, pourris, dégueulasses!]. The conclusion to this double-edged lampoon that puts Communists on a par with anti-Semites (indeed, Fascists), comes up in the form of a quizzical intertitle: FAUX/TOGR/APHIE, which introduces the last picture-like shot of the sequence, showing the girl, the tractor driver and all the dislocated bystanders in one group happily posing for the camera, while the instrumental, yet badly out of tune, version of *L’Internationale* (the anthem of International Communism) is played on the soundtrack. The ironic insertion of *L’Internationale* at the beginning of the sequence (when the farmer is heard whistling it joyfully off-screen just seconds before the car crash) and at the end of this parodic interlude on the “class struggle” matches the constant visual play on the illusory realism of both photographic and cinematic images, apparently meant to convey a straight political message.

Revolutionary in its subversion of film narrative and representational practices rather than in its false attempt at flogging the dead horse of Russian agitprop, *Week-end* successfully tackles the discrepancy between the assumed realism and the spectrality of film images by literally making cinema “the only art that films death at work”, that can film not only the death of its own mimetic conventions, but also the inevitable decline and demise of the worldview which engendered the naïve belief in the “mirror with a memory”. Far from simply recording and preserving reality, the camera prefigures, through a palimpsest of filmic and literary quotations, the end of a “chapter in the history of humanity”, as Godard argues in Pierre Desfons’ documentary, *Vie et mort de l’image* (1995), based on a scenario by Régis Debray. A “montreur d’ombres”, a conjurer of shadows, according to Godard, the cinéaste-filmmaker knows that the memory of the camera does not capture Proust’s

madeleine but the image that each viewer has formed in his or her mind of the madeleine. So that if one were to throw, as Godard literally (and symbolically) does in *Vie et mort de l'image*, Proust's *Remembrance of Time Past* to the unfathomable waves of generation upon generation of viewers, what will eventually come back to the shore of postmodernity is not the mirror reflection of a resurrected moment in history but James Joyce's *Ulysses* – or the ever-changing puzzle of what our unconscious cinematic memory makes of man's passage through time.

Notes

- ¹ “Through a personal technique, Man Ray arrives at a similar result on a sheet of paper. Without any doubt this opens up the perspective of an art that has more surprises in store than painting, for example. I think of Marcel Duchamp who went to fetch his friends to show them a cage that seemed birdless and half-filled with sugar lumps. When he asked them to lift the cage, they were astonished to find it was so heavy, because what they took for sugar lumps were in fact little pieces of marble. [...] This anecdote paraphrases quite well the novelty of Man Ray's experiments. And it is from this point of view that it becomes difficult to distinguish them from properly speaking poetic experiments” (Breton 1988: 300).

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