

Article

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A Word or Two about Godard's *Hélas Pour Moi*

Jean-Luc Godard's absence is an even more excellent reminder of his magnanimous presence, forcing one to canvass his intellectual exploits further. Reading his films never seems so inexorable as it is now – when people are needlessly cray and times are dangerously strange, and even though you are sick of Godard, still and all, you are destined to be in the thick of him. He remains true to himself as well as the medium of art to which he is committed till his very last breath, without doing any violence to his conscience by preaching a particular system of tenets. His cinema is always marked by a powerful undercurrent of striving for Change, exploiting the medium's possibilities to the hilt. He excogitates his outlandish path by the seat of his pants, embracing subjects that are not easy to deal with. Many savage storms, arranged chiefly by the almighty dollar, buffet his coast, but he does not allow any concession. It's an exalted dedication to liberty that he bequeaths to posterity.

Rarely ever do we chance upon a European film that offers a visual conceit of chorality, which

brings analytical testimony to rebuilding a discourse between myth and the post-war zeitgeist. Godard's *Hélas Pour Moi* (Oh, Woe is Me, 1993, France/Switzerland) is one such off-the-wall experience that breaks the mould, makes you just gawk at it with all your senses, bewitches you root and branch with its exquisiteness and sensitivity, and brings about a feeling that you are running across the length and breadth of the composition whose sublimity unmasks the experience that lies beyond rhetorical propositions, provided you are ready to come to grips with openness. As an aside, no good literature concerning this film is available online; cine-savants seem indisposed to chew over Godard films made after the late 80s.

The great artists are certainly the ones whose names come to mind when it is not possible to explain in any other way the variety of sensations and emotions that plague you in some inexplicable and exceptional circumstances, faced by either a wondrous landscape or an unforeseen event, and who are relentless in their search for new ideas. Their yen

for appropriation and abandonment knows no season. They are pretty conscious of the tools of meaning and communication and employ them as second nature, and their style and form change with time. Godard once asserted that “there are two kinds of filmmakers. Those who walk along the streets with their heads down and those with their heads up.”¹ Godard seems to be both despite every shortcoming on the cards. His often-changed stances, marked by his exceptionable self-righteousness and temerity, throughout his glorious cinematic exploration bear testimony to that fact. The sentiments are not bound merely to the radical overhaul of moral or political anguish, as often thought, and the technique unashamedly welcomes new avenues. The artist (I am not concerned much about the abject revolutionary) in him destroys himself every day and starts afresh. Contrary to popular belief, seeking to shock is not always his *raison d'être*. *Hélas Pour Moi* is a befitting example of that fact.

Godard's journey from a construction worker to a Cineaste is nothing less than cinematic, making him one of the most glamorous (ironically, the word 'glamour' is related to 'grammar') artists that cinema ever begets. And it must be reiterated that he evinces quite a great partiality for studying history, philosophy, and other liberal arts. Like second-generation English writers, he ends with questions rather than answers. In this film, he questions myth and the absurd opposition, or conjunction, between man and god. He is *au fait* with the negotiations re the history of human intellectual development, or downfall, as far as religion is concerned; therefore, he aptly frames the tale of emotional and spiritual desires in the face of the remorseless decline of faith.

So how is that different from Godard's previous pieces? The sentiment and approach, I believe. Loosely connected with the Greek legend of Alcmene and Amphitryon, *Hélas Pour Moi* attempts a narrative in which form cannily abstracts itself from the immediate socio-political milieu that causes its very appearance to keep a tryst with mythic reality without bothering about commitment to communicativeness. Like many other Godard films, this film is also compact to the point of ellipsis, oft abstruse, persuading the reader into an intellectual

assent, and therefore, any attempt at a ruly synopsis of this film is dubious, which is why I wish not to do that.



The film plays out in a small Swiss lakeside village and shuttles between past and present. A middle-aged publisher – Abraham (Bernard Verley) – repairs the village to investigate the truth behind an incredulous incident – of godly impersonation that is said to have taken place a few years ago. A local couple – Rachel (Laurence Masliah) and Simon (Gerard Depardieu) – is connected with this incident. God assumes the earthly existence of Simon to plumb the depth of physical pleasure (correspondence between Indian and Greek lores is quite appealing, recall *Duvidha* (1973)). This is the only narrative excuse Godard needs to re-examine the new possibilities of cinema instead of going for the jugular against Hollywood, or the established capitalist ecosystem, for which he has gained more-than-enough infamy and further his theological quest (after *Hail Mary* (1985)).

Are time and space infinite? If they weren't, that would mean there is nothing before it, which means they came out of nothing. Contrary to this, it could be stated that time and space must be finite, or there would have been an infinite succession of events between any two given points or spaces, and everything would have been infinitely far apart. There would be no life, no construction.

However, through this dialectical reasoning, men would arrive at an impasse that would demand them to either make a giant leap or create an inexplicable vacuum. Is this how God comes into being? Or is this where God came from? Could we ever formulate a synthesis beyond the realm of the sensuous, perceptible world? Here, Godard's cinematic proposition pivots on these questions. He

wants to counter the geometric social horizon with expanding circles appertain to otherworldliness. In search of God, we see the rural lives (he's done with Paris, I guess) and the strange relations between the villagers.



Eighty-sixing the hitherto explored alleys of dialectics, he takes insane risks. His modernism is now filled with incalculable interpretations of myth to inquire into the present, sometimes entering the story and incarnating the characters and, at other times, merely observing from the outside. That God takes the form of Simon to get sexually engaged with Rachel is what the fractured narrative, decorated with colourful bric-a-brac, intends to tell us. Why would God wish to experience the vignettes of physical love? The lens examines the need for God as well as the need for Him. The questions here are nearly theological, multiplying Godard's wish to go beyond the myth, beyond narrative, and the obvious.

The entire film is shot on location, and the story is recounted by the gaze of a publisher. Its production design makes a conscious effort to make myths available across the long epochs of the dialectic conditions that they were narrativised, emphasising the fact that myth may contain historical material and therefore needs to be revisited for historical data – pretty unlikely of Godard (he is no serious student of Indian school of thoughts, to him Sri Ramakrishna is just a Hindu wise man (*Le Mépris*, 1963)). But, his politics of cinema never stops its search for new possibilities.

However, the myth is never spelt out directly in the film (I must mention here that Zeus is a contentious character). Instead, it is a cinema of ideas and visual tropes that aims to engage with reification. Godard freights his scenes with mythical references and ponderous symbols, employing allegory with brazen literalness. The investigation by Abraham

becomes clear as mud since the locals come up with differing views of the same story (comes to mind *Rashomon* (1950)). Myth takes history into account but cannot be based on history to complete the narrative. Truth and fantasy share a parallel space here, uttering the concerns about faith and desire, leaving both the protagonist and the viewers stranded. The process of exploiting myth becomes the means to ascertain its aesthetic condition without any intention to reduce it to its use-value; the auteur keeps not himself away from certain 'realistic' temptations. We shall come to that part later.

In one extraordinary scene – a camera track – we see a ship crossing the frame from right to left. Some ruminating figures in different postures, silhouetted against the light, are in the foreground, indifferent to the ship's presence. The mortals represent various strata of society, offering different sentiments and acting as mere observers as if they could 'cast their skins and slide into another time.'² The ship and the camera move in the same direction, creating a silent chorus – a perfect allegory to explain the relationship between myth and mankind. Godard once asseverated that tracking shots are a "matter of morality" (in 1959) – a reversal of the opinion of Luc Moullet, his peer in *Cahier du cinéma*, that stated, "morality is a matter of tracking shots."³ His attitude remains unchanged. This particular composition takes the wraps off the characters in the process of their living, exploring the essence through existence.

This approach becomes historical in how it tends to free the myth (and its significance) and, thus, frees our moral axioms. As an intermediary between the private lives represented on-screen and the public interests of the audience, the chorus makes the general appeal of the said Greek myth certain by translating the drama into lyrical shorthand. Cinema "replaces the gaze of the gods" here.

In the garb of a mythical story, the filmmaker plans to capture the tension between the intimation of metaphysical presence and awareness of its mechanical representation. Both the characters – Simon and Rachel – have shades of unperturbed innocence and the indomitable rebel inside, and Depardieu and Masliah do exactly what they are asked to do – they do not act but behave.

Godard, as usual, fuses extended camera movements with disjunctive shots, which he is known for; however, the long takes are put on the creative agenda (that boldly differs with the so-called ‘early Godard’) ‘where times become the actors’⁴. Caroline Champetier’s camera skilfully echoes her director’s needs, acknowledging slender obligations to Raoul Coutard – Godard’s quondam cinematographer whose contribution to cinema is peerless. The accent is shifted between the foreground and background, unnoticed, with the nudge of the camera or a slightly displaced character. The editing (is in charge – the director himself) techniques have an organic quality that comely created the flow of fragmented images (of past and present), acknowledging and overcoming the paradoxes, capturing the modern anguish, and the multivalence of colour captures the mood perfectly, seeking contact with life in all its pathetic beauty. That said, the sound (François Musy) is not as ambitious as the director’s earlier works and sometimes fails to complement the intricacies of the images, primarily aiming at rendering the images intellectually transparent rather than intensifying their density. Deleuze noted, “Man is in the world as if in a pure optical and sound situation. [...] Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link.”⁵ The agencies of sound render little to re-establish the link between faith and the material texture.

It’s not wise to figure out a comprehensive meaning here (it is not advisable as far as Godard is concerned) since it would be as inexpressible as the nature of God, or the rationale behind the belief of God, rather it would be prudent to appreciate his never-fail-to-challenge attitude and renewed energy.

However, Godard could not shun the traps of postmodern realism, for he unceremoniously indulges in signifying the role of commodification, presenting experience as a ‘thing’ and relying on the gimmicks typical of the 1960’s young cinema – for example, a transformed Simon carrying a copy of *The Observer* or a character covering the lens with his hand – reducing human action and relationships to secular, often ersatz, objects. A legit way to comprehend such routine commodification – nothing

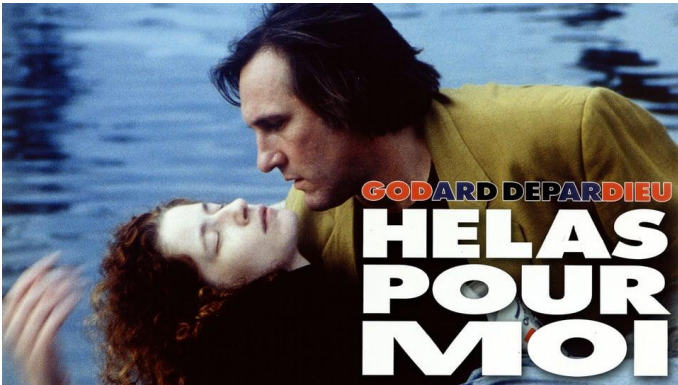
new to the European masters to whom ‘Marx is the opium’ – is whether the context of the commodity refers to the potpourris of social domains, within and between cultural – on a more extensive sense – units; anyway, Godard could have been given these tendencies a wide berth as he already has taken them to the extreme in his earlier works.



In *Hélas Pour Moi*, the thematic statement is carefully inflated at the expense of narrative density, accenting the fact that formal considerations should be connected not only to ideation or the subject matter but to socio-historical circumstances as well, else it will be tantamount to a narrative of events or a buffet of noetic abstractions. Godard explores image schemas that sometimes mute the flow of drama within a scene, creating recessive perspectives and denying representational depth. He hardly represents the temporal tendency to elucidate and mould things to suit the ‘appearance’ of the image in our mind, that is, to appear as it should satisfy common sentiments, which is why the film demands multiple readings. Although Godard could not be accused of making this deliberately incomprehensible in this film, it is essential to state that pretentiousness is the risk he runs for believing that only the serious takers are worthy of this medium and the questions a filmmaker has to ask.

Apart from politics, what always troubles Godard is man's innate diffidence, his powerlessness to organise the world anew amid an almost certain defeat, the futility of his common judgement, and above all, his inability to comprehend the nature of reality. Groping in the world of little knowledge and excessive insensitivity – the two colossal gifts of the market economy – he has addressed, throughout his ‘career,’ several ports of possible junction wherefrom he might find a way to a life of substance and reality,

without bothering about the fact that his works will seem intelligible as well as distraught.



“A wise man's kingdom is his own breast: or, if he ever looks farther, it will only be to the judgment of a select few, who are free from prejudices and capable of examining his work. Nothing indeed can be a stronger presumption of falsehood than the approbation of the multitude” – David Hume⁶

A man is known as his thought reveals him to be, and the thought becomes what everybody would display about him – his belief and belief as being. It is not what anyone understands or interprets, but it is instead what inspires one to communicate, as such, in an unambiguous language. And true artists reveal what they believe to be true irrespective of method, approach, and reflection.

In today's world, when capital's terror writ large, greed romps in the nude, hatred roves the globe, pusillanimity is rewarded routinely, skulduggery is celebrated in every sphere of life, and art loses all its seriousness, Godard's lifelong contumacy and adamantine politics seem indubitably apposite. Curtains have got the best of him, but the waves will continue to erode the shore. There are no two ways about it.

“I frame the world; other people encircle it...”⁷

NOTES

1. Godard on Godard, Godard, Jean-Luc, Da Capo Press, 1986
2. The Sleepers, Plath, Sylvia, Sylvia Plath Collected Poems, faber and faber, 1981
3. Cahier du Cinema, The 1950s, Edited by Jim Hillier, Harvard University Press, 1992
4. A Talk by Caroline Champetier, Notebook Interview, 2013
5. Hume, David. A Letter to Adam Smith on the Life, Death, and Philosophy of His Friend by David Hume, Wentworth Press
6. Deleuze, Gilles, Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, the University of Minnesota Press, 1997
7. Quoted in Notebook Interview, 2013

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1. John Caughie, Theories of Authorship, Routledge, 1981
2. The Oxford Guide to Film Studies, Edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, Oxford University Press, 1998
3. Edgar-Hunt, Robert, Marland, John, Rawle, Steven, The Language of Film, ava academia, 2010

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