

Article

Jean-Luc Godard's Europe: Digital Orientalism and Geopolitical Aesthetics

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Abstract

This essay contends that Jean-Luc Godard's late digital cinema elaborates a geopolitical aesthetics in which Europe confronts the return of its repressed histories through the very instability of the digital image. While Europe has long functioned in Godard's work as both theme and epistemic horizon—echoing the Hegelian cartographies—*Film Socialisme* (2010) and *The Image Book* (2018) transform this Eurocentrism into a site of crisis. In these films, what Fredric Jameson terms the “political unconscious” (1981) emerges through the spectral return of Palestine and the Arab world, compelling a reckoning with colonial legacies and the limits of representation. The digital turn proves decisive. Godard mobilizes pixelation, saturation, glitch, and decomposed sound to reveal what might be called the technological unconscious of the medium. I develop the concept of “Digital Orientalism” to designate how Orientalist chronotopes persist in the digital age yet are unsettled by Godard's experimental manipulation of audiovisual fragments. Through close readings of *Film Socialisme* and *The Image Book*, which incorporates works by Arab filmmakers including Youssef Chahine, Nacer Khemir, Ossama Mohammed, and Wiam Simav Bedirxan, I show how Godard's fractured montages produce symptomatic cartographies of the world-system where repression, memory, and accident collide.

Keywords: Jean-Luc Godard; digital cinema; political unconscious; geopolitical aesthetics; digital Orientalism; Palestine; Arab cinema; intermediality; post-colonial studies

1. A Flicker Between Parousia and Repentir: Godard's Digital Turn

In 2011, Jean-Luc Godard offered a characteristically elliptical yet incisive response to Europe's financial crisis in an interview with the British newspaper *The Guardian* (Gibbons 2011).

“The Greeks gave us logic. We owe them for that. It was Aristotle who came up with the big ‘therefore.’ As in, ‘You don't love me anymore, therefore. . .’ Or, ‘I found you in bed with another man, therefore. . .’ We use this word millions of times, to make our most important decisions. It's about time we started paying for it. If every time we use the word therefore, we have to pay ten euros to Greece, the crisis will be over in one day, and the Greeks will not have to sell the Parthenon to the Germans. We have the technology to track down all those ‘therefores’ on Google. We can even bill people by iPhone. Every time Angela Merkel tells the Greeks we lent you all this money, therefore you must pay us back with interest, she must therefore first pay them their royalties.”¹

Godard was always ahead of his time. His provocatively modest proposal may read as satire. Yet beneath the wit lies a diagnosis: a Europe unable to reconcile its material economy with its historical and political debts. The closing jab frames late capitalism as



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cultural expropriation. Godard disappeared from the Cannes premiere of *Film Socialisme*, leaving only a cryptic note: “Because of Greek-style problems, I cannot oblige you at Cannes. I would go to death for the festival, but not a step further.” These words, like the therefore joke, condense a longer critique: Europe’s contradictions are not external shocks but internal symptoms. The quip thus becomes a critical preface to *Film Socialisme*, where the logic of equivalence—money for meaning, debt for logic—collapses into aesthetic contradiction.

Europe, as both a thematic concern and visual geography, runs throughout Godard’s oeuvre. From the reappropriation of German Romanticism in *Contempt* (Godard 1963), to the post-Wall wanderings of *Germany 90 Nine Zero* (Godard 1991), and the Mediterranean itineraries of *Film Socialisme* (Godard 2010a), Godard maps the continent across shifting axes: North/South, West/East, and eventually Europe/Arab world. As Junji Hori has shown, most of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*’s cinematic geography echoes Hegel’s in *The Reason in History*, where history—and by extension cinema—unfolds only within a restricted Europeanness, one that excludes Africa, the Arab world, and Asia (with the partial exception of Japanese modernity) (Hori 2003). In Godard’s final digital works, however, this Eurocentrism fractures.

This article contends that Godard’s late digital cinema, and more especially *Film Socialisme* (Godard 2010a) and *The Image Book* (Godard 2018), elaborates a fractured cartography of Europe and its Others through what Fredric Jameson terms a “geopolitical aesthetic.” If *Histoire(s) du cinéma* addressed cinema’s incapacity to narrate and prevent the twentieth century’s tragedies, the later works reorient this historiographical impulse toward a wider geopolitical frame, figuring Europe not as a stable locus but as a fault line, where modernity’s disavowed legacies resurface in digital forms.

To account for this shift, this essay draws on the term “Digital Orientalism”. By this, I do not mean a digital reproduction of Saïd’s (1979) *Orientalism*, nor do I use the term to describe digital media discourse in general—where it has appeared in studies of online representation (Alimardani and Elswah 2021; Tombul and Sari 2021)—but I name a specifically cinematic condition within the digital age. In Godard’s work, Orientalist visual regimes persist, yet digital technology undermines their authority: pixelation, saturation, compression, and glitch expose the instability of images that once claimed ethnographic clarity. Godard does not simply depict a fantasized Orient; he stages the collapse of the Western gaze that once produced it.

Film Socialisme and *The Image Book* expose the double-bind of digital culture. On the one hand, the medium accelerates the circulation of Orientalist clichés which Godard samples and refracts. Edward Saïd had already noted the proclivity of “the electronic, postmodern world” to reinforce “the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed.” He remarked: “So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of the ‘Mysterious Orient’” (Saïd 1979, p. 26). On the other hand, Godard’s disruptive layering, abrupt montage, and formal distortions prevent these images from congealing into fantasy. Digital Orientalism precisely names this tense and vacillating aesthetic regime. It thus describes a paradox: the endurance of Orientalist tropes in the digital age, disrupted by the medium’s own technical and affective failures.

This destabilization has a longer genealogy. Already in *Here and Elsewhere*, Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville transformed the abandoned militant project *Until Victory* into a radical critique of cinematic testimony and political representation (Godard et al. 1976, Deleuze 1989). The film exposes the structural violence inherent in speaking for others, laying the groundwork for the self-interrogation that defines Godard’s late cinema. *Here and Elsewhere* marks the first articulation of a media-conscious critique of Eurocentrism that continues in *Our Music* (Godard 2004) and resurfaces, intensified, in the late digital

works where Palestine and the Arab world function as unresolved sites of ethical and historical reckonings.

In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Jameson 1992), Jameson suggests that cinema, especially in the postmodern period, attempts to construct “cognitive maps” of the world-system. These maps, however, remain allegorical. The sheer scale and abstraction of global capitalism exceed direct representation; hence, films can only register its contours symptomatically.² *Film Socialisme* (2010) and *The Image Book* (2018) materialize such allegorical mappings. They offer not synoptic maps, but symptomatic ones: montages that foreground epistemological limitations rather than spatial mastery. Godard’s 2011 provocation in *The Guardian*, issued on the eve of the *Film Socialisme*’s release, anticipates this framing. His jest encodes a deeper tension: Europe’s persistent refusal to reckon with its cultural and historical debts. Through close readings of *Film Socialisme* and *The Image Book*, this essay argues that Godard’s digital images form fractured cognitive maps in which repression and accident collide. Read through the lens of the geopolitical aesthetics, the films’ disjointed cartographies become what cannot be directly acknowledged; the displaced contradictions of modernity returning in shattered forms. Europe in Godard is a palimpsest of crises: colonial repression, late capitalism’s abstractions, and the ideological ruins of a wounded modernity.

This article further argues that this geopolitical aesthetic is inseparable from Godard’s recurring engagement with the nineteenth century, a period to which he returns obsessively.³ Godard’s restlessness with regard to Europe, its culture, and its destiny in a phase of late global capitalism particularly feeds on manifold references to nineteenth-century literature and iconography, hence reenacting the fundamental issues of European modernity. Through his recourse to sources related to the previous century, Godard constantly tackles European and global political events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, thus questioning the tragedy of history and the possibilities of revolutionary actions. Yet, far from being simple symptoms of reactionary tendencies, the survival of nineteenth-century literature and art in Godard’s work is profoundly ambivalent: these returns manifest utopian impulses that provoke aesthetic experiments. This obsessive untimely gesture is intrinsically intertwined with a specific use of the digital which goes against the grain of any teleological reading of cinema’s technical genealogy.

In his late works, Godard turns to digital compression as a resource of distortion and material plasticity. Pixels, glitches, degraded transfers, and oversaturated colors become his aesthetic grammar, a visual register that exhibits mediation itself. The digital here is a “subjectile,” in the meaning given by Derrida in his reading of Antonin Artaud, a trembling matter “at once a support and a surface” (Derrida and Caws 1994, p. 158). Godard enacts a kind of *Aufhebung* of cinema through the digital. In embracing the potentialities of the medium, he does not abandon cinema’s painterly legacy; rather, he intensifies it by pushing the medium to its technical and aesthetic thresholds. This *Aufhebung* produces a boomerang effect: what seems a break from cinematic origins resurfaces as a reflection on them (Bonfand 2007, p. 223). The digital rupture becomes the site of return, a reengagement with the *arkhè* of the image, understood not as pure visibility, but as pictorial materiality itself. This return is less nostalgic than speculative: a theory of the image embedded in its texture.⁴

As Nicole Brenez suggests in her most recent work on Godard, this late experimentalism does not merely extend cinema, it interrogates its foundational relationship to medium and support (Brenez 2023, p. 259). *The Image Book* performs for geopolitics what *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (Godard 1988–1998) once did for historical memory. It shifts from a historiographic to a geopolitical paradigm, and in doing so, from videographic to digital aesthetics. The digital, in this transformation, emerges as a philosophical rupture. It becomes both

pharmakon and critique: a medium that preserves by deforming, that renders visible only through failure.

If cinema once exoticized the Arab world through monumental forms and fetishized figures, digital aesthetics fissures these forms into flickering surfaces. Godard's shift to digital marks what de Baecque and Mouëllic call a "cinematographic and technological *parousia*" (De Baecque and Mouëllic 2020, p. 12). The so-called errors of the digital are turned into aesthetic principles. In embracing the digital's capacity for dissolution, Godard reveals what the medium typically seeks to suppress: accident, unpredictability, and bias. These disruptions function as apertures through which repressed histories resurface. In *Film Socialisme* and *The Image Book*, the digital is a *of repentir* in the pictorial, psychological and political meanings, a pictorial correction and a revision of Godard's earlier, monolithic Western gaze. Palestine and the broader Arab world return, less as objects of knowledge than as vivid spectral presences that haunt both filmmaker and continent, demanding a reckoning with the ethics of representation.

2. Access Denied: Figuring Palestine Through Europe's Political Unconscious

Film Socialisme, shot in the beginning twenty-first century, achieves a triple return for Godard. First, a return to the Mediterranean, in discreet homage to Pollet's (1963) *Méditerranée*. Second, a return to what he frames as the "primitive scene" of Europe: "Hellas/Democracy and tragedy were married in Athens/Under Pericles and Sophocles/A single child: civil war." (Godard 2010b, p. 87). And third, a return to Palestine, construed as the repressed core of postwar Europe. Europe is the film's overt concern. "Poor Europe not purified but corrupted by suffering, not exalted but humiliated by its re-conquered freedom" (Godard 2010b, p. 37), a line attributed to Curzio Malaparte, exposes the continent not as triumphant but wounded. Godard states from the outset: "And we/When once again we abandoned/Africa." (Godard 2010b, p. 7) These statements coalesce into a broader indictment of Europe's historical amnesia and postcolonial debts.

This concern is inseparable from Godard's longer engagement with Palestine. Indeed, the film marks the return of Palestine construed as a repressed figure underlying postwar Europe, a perspective largely and infamously explored by Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville in *Here and Elsewhere*, an uncompromising critical reflection on the earlier failed project *Until Victory* co-directed in 1970 with Jean-Pierre Gorin that was commissioned by militants of the Palestinian Liberation Organization to support the Palestinian uprising in Jordan. The film was conceived, as the Dziga Vertov Group's notes state, "as French, just as no film on the Arabs was made during the Algerian War" (*Cahiers de Notes de Jusqu'à la Victoire*, Michel Dixmier Collection, cited by Antoine de Baecque in Godard, Dixmier n.d., p. 469).⁵ Clearly, Godard sought to revise the ethical ambivalence evident in *The Little Soldier*, a film he later deemed "fascist". The original shooting took place only months before Black September (Aylūl Al-Aswad), the Jordanian Civil War in which many of the Palestinian militants filmed by Godard and Gorin were later killed. As Beugnet and Ravetto note: "The film that finally emerged six years later was Godard's initial attempt at using montage to juxtapose images from the Middle East with those of the West."

Yet *Here and Elsewhere* is equally a work of "repentir", as Godard and Miéville confront the shortcomings of a project weighed down by a priori ideas. Their film reveals a fundamental failure to truly see or listen to the Palestinian people whose struggle it claimed to represent. In her voiceover, Miéville condemns their effort as propaganda, noting how they imposed a Maoist predetermined script on their subjects, transforming a lived struggle into a didactic tableau. Elias Sanbar, poet and translator, who accompanied the filmmakers during production, later echoed this critique (Sambar 1991, pp. 109–19). Irmgard Emmel-

hainz's analysis of *Here and Elsewhere* is illuminating in this context: "the juxtaposition between France and Palestine creates a cartographic cognitive map of Palestine seen from the point of view of 'France'." (Emmelhainz 2009, p. 651; Emmelhainz 2019). While her observation concerns the earlier film, it is equally revealing for *Film Socialisme*, whose digital montage remounts—under new technological conditions—the same asymmetrical cartography. The later film inherits this structure of vision, revealing the extent to which Europe's image of Palestine remains conditioned by its own epistemic frame. Reading *Film Socialisme* in this longer trajectory thus clarifies how the later film's digital regimes become a medium for revisiting and reframing an older ethical failure.

Where *Here and Elsewhere* critiqued the ideological misalignment of militant cinema, *Film Socialisme* turns to the materiality of the digital image to reveal the limits of representation itself. As Lauren Du Graf points out, *Film Socialisme* "deftly parades the possibilities created by new technologies to capture and copy from an immense range of source material" (Du Graf 2014, pp. 535–36). The film purposefully employs a varied mix of digital image formats. Over a period of four years, four cameramen—Jean-Paul Battaglia, Fabrice Aragno, Paul Grivas, and Godard himself—filmed images for the project. In the opening credits, all four are equally credited under the title "logos," with Godard's name listed first. The film was shot using a wide range of digital technologies, including high-definition professional cameras, handheld camcorders, and mobile phones. It also incorporates a diverse selection of found footage, ranging from internet videos to excerpts from classic films and direct-to-DVD releases. As Niels Niessen succinctly observes: "*Film Socialisme* thus seems to inscribe itself in the digital age in all ways imaginable. The film does so in the sense of being an object that is or has been produced, distributed, advertised, and projected by means of digital technologies" (Niessen 2013, p. 12).

The film's aesthetic relies on the technical and affective instabilities of digital images: oversaturation, pixelation, compression artifacts, jittery sound. As scholars of digital materiality such as Nicholas Rombes have argued, these instabilities mark the digital as an eruptive field in which "error becomes expressive" (Rombes 2019). They also resonate with Nicole Brenez's account of "objection visuelle," where digital textures confront spectators with the material resistance of images (Brenez and Jacobs 2010). In Godard's hands, digital media becomes a means to excavate—and trouble—the twentieth century's geopolitical aesthetics.

The film's triptych structure organizes this exploration. The first movement "Things Like That" unfolds aboard a Mediterranean cruise ship, filmed partly with iPhones. Pixelated images and Godard's signature oversaturated blues, yellows, and reds mingle with the battered sound of winds and waves, recalling Rimbaud's *Drunken Boat*. A chorus of rumors circulates: the lost gold of Moscow, allegedly shipped from Carthage to Odessa in 1936, resurfaces as a founding myth of the twentieth century. As Arthur Mas and Martial Pisani point out in their exploration of the maze of citations that compose *Film socialisme*, the various gold legends running through the film draw on Fernand Braudel's essay "Monnaie et civilisations: de l'or du Soudan à l'Argent d'Amérique", which traced the role of gold in the rise and fall of empires (Braudel 1946, p. 39). Echoing Braudel's attention to geography as the matrix in which historical events take shape, *Film Socialisme* shifts to the spatial as a mode of history and cinematic thought. In Godard's film, the Spanish Republicans' gold constitutes a parable of modernity, a story of circulation and loss. Beneath this legend lies another: Palestine as Europe's repressed core. If the gold haunts modern history, Palestine haunts modern Europe. The film's second movement "Quo Vadis Europe" shifts to a petrol station run by the Martin family (in a homage to the resistance underground network of the Musée de l'Homme), where children plot a revolution. Their manifesto, half recited, half scribbled on scraps of paper, insists that politics must begin with language. They demand:

“What have you done with your money? What have you done with your ideas?” Their voices are tentative, stammering, like the subtitles that render their speech in “pidgin” English. Godard ironizes political pedagogy: the children’s “revolution” can only be fragile and provisional.

The third movement, “Our Humanities”, lists the ports visited by the cruise ship: Egypt, Palestine, Odessa, Greece, Naples, Barcelona. This circular voyage becomes a fractured montage of civilizations and conflicts, a counterclockwise movement through histories of betrayal, colonization, and resistance: The geography first appears as that of fratricidal wars. The chosen places are historical loci of socialism which also draw the contours of eternal fraternal struggles. *Film Socialisme* is less concerned with the materiality of socialism—as *Germany Ninety Nine Zero* was—than with a hermeneutic horizon. The collage of heterogeneous digital sources articulates the romantic fragment and its aspiration towards a configuration of the European space. The idea of socialism is most directly and clearly addressed by the humanity represented by Odessa, which begins with reedited shots from Eisenstein’s *October* (1927). The ship becomes the contemporary avatar of the battleship Potemkin. Godard, in a homage to Chris Marker, underlines the near-mythical importance of Eisenstein in the utopia of film.

The film is nevertheless still animated by a utopian impulse. As [Mas and Pisani \(2010\)](#) note, the geography of *Film Socialisme* is also that of resistance: that of the Egyptians against Napoleon in [Youssef Chahine’s \(1985\) *Adieu Bonaparte*](#), that of Neapolitans against the German garrisons, and of course that of the French Resistance through the allusion to the network of the Musée de l’Homme, “la famille Martin.” Europe might be still a collection of heterotopias, of “counter-spaces” and localized utopias that Foucault defines as “singular splitting of time”. This is particularly true of the middle section in which the children want to be candidates for the cantonal elections. Florine’s name is borrowed from character of Balzac’s *Human Comedy*, who starts her acting career in *Lost Illusions* ([Balzac and Hunt \[1843\] 1971](#)). Godard’s Florine, who seems ideally suited for revolutionary romanticism, claims Balzac’s novel to be the best in the world while discussing the future of Europe at a gas pump, framed by a llama and a donkey. “If you criticize Balzac, I will kill you!” ([Godard 2010a](#), p. 51).

These images are inflected by digital Orientalism. Europe’s gaze drifts South and East, and its digital mediations falter. Twice in the film, the line “What has changed today is that the bastards are sincere” punctures the narrative, an ironic echo of *Germany’s* “Oh! the bastards” ([Godard 2010a](#), p. 59). In this repetition, sincerity becomes its own cynicism. The cruise ship where a third of the film takes place seems at first to condense the horrifying logic of the late capitalist world. It is a floating dystopia where the basest forms of entertainment are pursued, and the logic of money pervades all activity and all sensibility. The Costa Concordia (which would tragically sink in 2012) seems to go against the grain of Foucault’s most lyrical heterotopia, the nineteenth-century big ship, this “floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea” in which Foucault identifies “the great instrument of economic development and the greatest reserve of the imagination” claiming at the end of his short text: “The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates” ([Foucault 2008](#), p. 29).

Within this architecture, the two Palestine sequences emerge as conceptual hinges. Palestine returns through displacement, as if its political and historical charge renders it too volatile to appear without detour. As Niels Niessen observes, Palestine surfaces in two crucial sequences ([Niessen 2013](#), pp. 16–17), where it functions as an unassimilable kernel. It emerges simultaneously as the absent core of *Film Socialisme* and as the political unconscious

of Europe, an element whose force is registered only indirectly. These sequences are mediated through the nineteenth century, specifically through the visual technology of the daguerreotype. My analysis concentrates on this mediation, diverging from Niessen's reading, which overlooks the centrality of nineteenth-century media to the film's figuration of Palestine.

The first Palestine sequence begins with a conversation between two men—one claiming, at last, a photograph of a land and its people; the other replying that, after Daguerre was received by Arago at the Académie des Sciences—and thus before Lord Balfour's declaration—an armada made up mostly of British men scrambled to Palestine. Then, a shot of a young woman taking pictures with a digital camera aboard a cruise ship. Another woman, looking at a postcard, reads a quotation by Novalis, translated into Arabic, about the lost land: "My country, is this true? It was thus that I imagined you for so long, happy and splendid country! Oh land that I love, where are you now?" In the original text, the exclamation reaches far beyond geography or a mere declaration of love for a homeland. It speaks of art, the real country of origins, that is, the poetry of the world. Interestingly, this mirrors the condition invoked by the character Lemmy Caution in *Germany Ninety Nine Zero*, in his quixotic quest westward following the fall of the Wall. The woman then takes another photo with a digital camera. A title card appears: "Palestine," accompanied by a black-and-white photograph of Haifa Bay, taken shortly after Daguerre's 1839 invention of the daguerreotype. The sequence cuts to a hand-colored photograph of a tree. A black frame follows, then a detail from Grünewald's (1503–1505) early-sixteenth-century *The Mocking of Christ*, in which Christ, blindfolded and bound by a rope, is tormented by grotesque figures. Then a title card "ACCESS DENIED", the first word in red, the second in white. Footage of the cruise ship, now seen from the coast, runs for about five seconds, followed by a title card that reads "ODESSA."

The second sequence is significantly longer, lasting nearly three and a half minutes. Here, the focus falls specifically on the role of the daguerreotype. It begins with a title card displaying the word "Palestine" in both Hebrew and Arabic: the Hebrew text appears in red, superimposed over the Arabic in white. In the first shot, we see, and hear, a man's hands operating the shutter of a camera reminiscent of a daguerreotype, pointed directly at the viewer. A voice-over states: "It was in 1839 that Palestine welcomed its first photographer/The squaring of the circle was found in the famous metaphor $X + 3 = 1$, which Einstein sought all his life/Clarum per obscurius." Next, a color photograph appears showing a line of blindfolded and handcuffed Arab men being dragged forward by a soldier, followed by shimmering footage of seascape, taken from Jean-Daniel Pollet's *Méditerranée*—filmed from behind barbed wire along the coast.

The repeated emphasis on the year 1839 and the daguerreotype, both of which recur in the two central sequences where Palestine is referenced, positions the Western photographic medium at the core of the region's historical orientalist representation. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, although Palestine was a neglected province of the Ottoman Empire, it drew increasing Western interest after Napoleon's 1798 campaign due to its religious significance and strategic location. French and British explorers, captivated by the exotic and the sacred, led expeditions to the Holy Land, often accompanied by early photographers. Among the first were Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet and others, who arrived in 1839, just months after the daguerreotype was introduced, to capture some of the earliest images of Jerusalem (Merli 2012, p. 24). By foregrounding nineteenth-century modes of representation and their entanglement with Orientalism within a digital montage, *Film Socialisme* makes Europe appear as a space that simultaneously reveals and destabilizes the limits of its own ethnocentrism. Godard seeks to challenge this material framework, yet his cinema ultimately remains caught within its confines.

This logic recalls a much-commented moment in *Our Music* (Dyer and Mulot 2014), where Godard develops his thesis on the dialectical relation between text and image—extended metaphorically to Israelis and Palestinians—through a close reading of still photographs of Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell from *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks 1940). Two separate photographs—each depicting a character looking off-screen—are edited together so that they appear to speak to one another, producing a fictional continuity out of material discontinuity. In *Our Music*, Godard extends this logic to the political sphere, cryptically comparing two photographs of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war suggesting that the Jewish exodus and the Palestinian displacement stand in a similar relation. Each “face” of history derives its significance from the other, yet the cut that binds them—like the cut between the two images—remains a site of rupture. As Olivia Harrison argues in *Natives Against Nativism* (2023), Godard’s engagement with Palestine consistently foregrounds this structural entanglement: a fractured relationality shaped by colonial histories and uneven regimes of visibility (Harrison 2023). This “truth with two faces” reframes binary oppositions such as text/image, fiction/documentary, and Israel/Palestine as relational constructs whose meanings emerge through montage. Seen from this angle, the daguerreotype passages in *Film Socialisme* replay the dialectic of *Our Music* under a new technological regime. The nineteenth-century images of Palestine and the contemporary digital fragments respond to one another as if in a historical shot/reverse shot, yet their sutures have failed: the interval between them remains visible, unhealed, and politically charged.

Godard does not film Palestine but its absence. In these two sequences, Palestine emerges as what Freud would call a screen memory: a composite formation that conceals even as it reveals. In his 1899 essay, Freud insists that screen memories are not faithful reproductions of the past, but “constructions, often combining fragments of different impressions, displacements of affect, and distortions of time and space” (Freud 1953–1974, SE vol. 3, p. 303). Godard’s images are precisely such constructions. This optic of displacement shifts the question from what is shown to what resists being shown. Palestine, in this sense, is not just a geopolitical absence but an epistemological blind spot, a limit condition of European self-representation. It is precisely at this limit that *The Image Book* begins. If *Film Socialisme* maps the Mediterranean as a fractured and fragmented geopolitical unconscious, *The Image Book* takes as its starting point the mangled and spectral status of the Arab image in Western archives. The trajectory from one film to the next thus charts a progression towards the collapse of the visible itself.

3. Counting on Fingers, Seeing Through Fragments: Godard’s Digital Orient

According to Nicole Brenez the film manages “to send the train of History off the rails, to reset all the switches, to reboot the geopolitical imagination [...]”. (Brenez 2023, p. 182. translated by Elliott).⁶ To do so, Godard redeploys fragments in unexpected constellations, subjecting them to the vagaries of reproduction. He explores the distorted, the degraded, pointing to the mobility and permanent mutability of digital images in contemporary visual culture. In many ways, *The Image Book* could be approached as a form of sequel, continuation or excrescence of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. It meditates again on the failure of cinema, its original sin being for Godard its inability to bear witness to the atrocities of the modern world and to prevent them from happening. More importantly, it openly revises the Eurocentrism that pervades *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. *The Image Book* responds to the specific geopolitical mappings of the twenty-first century. It reprises Godard’s concerns with the twentieth century as the century long framed under the paradigm of war but comes to encompass contemporary wars and forms of terror. Throughout his plundering and pirating of the multimedia archive, Godard further deepens Europe’s relation to the Arab

world. The film directly addresses the question of Orientalism in the twenty-first century. Godard cites Edward Saïd “the world is not interested in Arabs or Muslims. In Islam maybe.” Godard’s method is recombination and distortion. The film lacks professional actors and narrative, and is riddled with cryptic aphorisms and decomposed sounds, mixing as it does a vast array of distorted and coruscating images, ranging from pirated clips from legendary films and fragments of paintings to ISIS propaganda and raw news and archive footage. Such material heterogeneity reflects a visual ecology in which images bleed into one another, destabilizing any singular viewpoint or stable referent.

The film’s tactile schema, drawn from the Swiss philosopher Denis de Rougemont’s *Penser avec les mains* (1936), provides its conceptual motor. At the beginning we hear Godard’s quavering voice stating: “There are five fingers, and five senses, five parts of the world. The fairy’s five fingers. Together they make up the hand”. The hand reminds us that the digital is rooted in touch, in counting, in the body’s interface with the world. The digital images of *The Image Book* bear this tactility: they flicker and scrape against one another. Montage becomes haptic. Accordingly, *The Image Book* unfolds in five unequal chapters: “1. Remakes”, where the remake becomes less a form than a curse, the endless replay of imperialist violence across time; 2. “The Evenings at Saint-Petersburg” referring to Joseph de Maistre’s somber dialogues on war; 3. “Those Flowers Between the Rails, in the Confused Wind of Travel”, a line by Rilke carried through images of trains, locomotives rushing through landscapes, departures and deportations mingling, digitally saturated flowers trembling between the tracks as the last trace of beauty; 4. “The Spirit of Laws”, where law itself, be it political, moral or cinematic, appears as both measure and betrayal, as cinema makes and unmakes the rules of perception, promising freedom even as it bends to domination; and finally “The central region”, opening with Michael Snow’s vertiginous experimental vision in the film by the same name. This last section represents the film’s second half. The title is a double-entendre reference to the Middle East and Snow’s (1971) film.

In this last chapter, Godard draws from Cossery’s (1984) science-fiction novel *An Ambition in the Desert*, that was retrospectively considered as a foreshadowing of the Gulf War. The novel imagines a Gulf kingdom “blessed” by the absence of oil and cursed into irrelevance. Cossery’s irony is double-edged: he skewers both Western imperial fantasies and Arab authoritarianism. This offers a form of deconstruction of the Arab narrative imparted to the West by nineteenth-century literature and painting. This narrative is later on continued in film in the form of the Western control of cinema history, which has resulted in a large body of Middle Eastern filmmaking being underexposed outside of the “central region”. The fact that the latter category is mostly composed of movies that will be unfamiliar to the European viewer is revealing of the erasure of Middle Eastern cinema in the Western World.

Godard underscores the ubiquity of the oriental stereotype, explicitly citing Saïd and using collages of films from the Arab world writ large. He juxtaposes familiar, Westernized images of the Arab world with a number of Arab films that have eluded the Western-dominated canon. Chahine’s (1958a) *Cairo Station* and *Jamila, the Algerian* (Chahine 1958b) appear briefly, juxtaposed with Western films that capitalize on Middle Eastern wars, such as *Syriana* (2005) and *13 Hours. The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (2016). The recurring train motif recalls Chahine’s crowded Cairo hub, where modernity collides with obsession. *Jamila*—a biopic on one of the most famous figures of Algerian liberation Djamila Bouhired—evokes Algeria’s war of independence, repressed in French national memory. The latter also acts as a critical counterpoint to Godard’s earlier *The Little Soldier* and its ideological equivocation, now reframed through montage, as footage from this early opus reappears in the first

section of the film. These fragments surface as counter-archives: shards of a cinematic history Europe had suppressed or misread.

The sequence displaying shots of La Marsa in Tunisia epitomizes this interrogation. Fabrice Aragno's digital camera captures the Tunisian coast imbued with Godardian colors. These shots collide with Orientalist sketches: Delacroix's *Moroccan Notebook* (Delacroix 1832), Derain's unfinished watercolors, Macke's *View of a Mosque* (1914), Manet's *The Balcony* (1868). But these are not romantic monumental canvases like in *Passion* (1982), they are unfinished works, sketches, notebook pages, marginalia. Digital instability intensifies this incompleteness. Digital editing privileges saturated contrasts, like a Fauvist palette. Martine Beugnet and Kriss Ravetto argue that Godard's choice of such minor works suggests his awareness of complicity: the risk of reinscribing Orientalist fantasy (Beugnet and Ravetto-Biagioli 2022, p. 150). Brenez already indicated the risk in her working notes on the film (Brenez, p. 180). In the Marsa sequence, digital Orientalism is indeed fully staged. Yet, nineteenth-century Orientalist and modernist paintings are further juxtaposed with pixelated images of torture taken from Ossama Mohammad and Wiam Simav Bedirxan's *Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait* (Mohammad and Bedirxan 2014), pirated on the net and smuggled from Syria and narrated from exile in Paris. Godard juxtaposes these fragments with Delacroix's sketches, Derain's watercolors, Macke's orientalist studies. The clash dramatizes digital Orientalism: nineteenth-century fantasies colliding with twenty-first-century atrocities. As Beugnet and Ravetto underline this use "points back to a history that reduces the Arab world to scenery and landscapes, and much worse, to the site of torture and atrocity" (Beugnet and Ravetto-Biagioli 2022, p. 150).

Godard foregrounds how extensively the digital medium both conveys and recycles Orientalist tropes and sceneries—arches, domes, desert sands, flying carpets, pyramids, busy souks, odalisques and dancers, wars, torture, and terrorism—but simultaneously destabilizes them. As de Baecque and Mouëllic note "from these images often shaky, stripped down, blurred, scratched, raw, in any case 'badly made' with regard to the technological canon of digital know-how, merges an astonishing formal renewal, a resurrection of cinema in painting, explicitly referring to early pictorial modernism contemporary with cinema" (De Baecque and Mouëllic 2020, p. 12) This results in a paradoxical "high-tech archaism." La Marsa sequence is both an Orientalist spectacle and its very undoing.

The schema of the hand is also performative. From the outset, Godard reminds us that the word digital traces back to the Latin *digitus*, "finger", an evocation that even the most abstract codes of our digital age are rooted in the tactile act of counting on the body. Counting, touching, assembling fragments: these operations also structure the film's encounter with Arab cinema. Godard incorporates fragments from Khemir's (1986) *Desert Trilogy*. Ravetto and Beugnet have analyzed the multilayered presence of hands imagery and pay close attention to a specific sequence from *The Wanderers of the Desert*: a young Saharan woman raises her hands in a gesture that is at once surrender and captivity, rotates her body, and presses to her chest a mirror that suddenly materializes in her palms. The gesture is enigmatic and allegorical. Ravetto and Beugnet read such tropes in Godard as haunted by Orientalist overdetermination, but reconfigured through montage (Beugnet and Ravetto-Biagioli 2022, p. 152). Yet, in Khemir's film, a mysterious dark red handprint laced with verses on a wall functions as a riddle and an oneiric trace of the village's curse. Placed against Godard's symptomatic appropriation, Khemir's original trilogy also offers a counterpoint. *Wanderers of the Desert* (Khemir 1986), *The Dove's Lost Necklace* (Khemir 1992), and *Bab' Aziz: The Prince Who Contemplated His Soul* (Khemir 2005) unfold as fables. They weave motifs of wandering, apprenticeship, and death but are suffused with Sufi cosmology. In *The Wanderers*, a schoolteacher arrives in a desert village where dream and reality blur. In *The Dove's Lost Necklace*, a young calligrapher searches for fragments of a

love poem. In *Bab'Aziz*, infused with Sufi music, a blind dervish and his granddaughter traverse the dunes in search of a gathering of dervishes, a journey that is also a passage toward death. For Khemir, the “desert is a character in itself” not a picturesque scenery. He explains, citing a Tuareg proverb:

“The desert is a literary field and a field of abstraction at the same time. It is one of the rare places where the infinitely small, that is a speck of sand, and the infinitely big, and that is billions of specks of sand, meet. It is also a place where one can have a true sense of the Universe and of its scale. The desert also evokes the Arabic language, which bears the memory of its origins. In every Arabic word, there is a bit of flowing sand. It is also one of the main sources of Arabic love poetry.”. (Khemir interviewed by Nawara Omarbacha 2006; [Khemir and Omarbacha 2025](#))

While the desert constitutes a physical and fabular presence in Khemir, in Godard it appears as an orientalist relic. Digital Orientalism emerges in this gap: Godard reframes Khemir’s poetics symptomatically, exposing Europe’s repression, while Khemir constructs a mythopoetic cinema of soul and sensation.

Cossery’s novel becomes the fulcrum for this contradiction. Godard adapts Cossery’s fable into montage, weaving it with passages from [Conrad’s \(1911\) *Under Western Eyes*](#), Dumas’s *L’Arabie heureuse* ([Dumas 1860](#)), which is not without evoking the Aden Arabie cell of *The Chinese Girl* (1967), Flaubert’s *Salammbô* ([Flaubert 1862](#)), and theoretical fragments from Saïd’s *Orientalism* (1979). But Cossery’s irony, his laughter at the absurdities of power, becomes in Godard something bleaker. Digital Orientalism here is acute: critique survives but only in dissonant montage. At one point one title card contains the question: “Can the Arab speak?” in a direct reference to Gayatri Spivak ([Spivak 1988](#)), and to which a female voice answers “à demi-voix” (“in an undertone”). Godard seems to acknowledge that he cannot retrieve other people’s voices as he failed to do in *Until Victory*, but he rather explores the possibilities offered by Arab cinema, all too aware of the limits of his own positioning. Godard relies on “digital affects”: distortions, decompositions, and ruptures that refuse transparency. Montage is less about connection than disjunction, less about knowledge than affective shock.

Godard’s obsessive return to the nineteenth century is necessarily double-edged. It reveals the persistence of his revolutionary romanticism and the Eurocentrism that subtends it, the two inextricably entwined, and simultaneously indexes the limits of that very optics: the internal Other continues to be approached through the weight and visual sediment of Orientalist fantasy. As Alain Badiou writes in *The Century*, “What is the shift of the century? It is that it occurs with the romanticism of the Ideal, to stay in the abruptness of the effectively real” ([Badiou 2007](#)). But this shift, Badiou insists, still proceeds with means that are always romantic. Godard’s films remain suspended in this contradiction. They attempt to elaborate a relational geography, one that maps Europe’s epistemological condition not as coherence but as partiality, not as totality but as fragment. As such, Godard’s late cinema offers a dialectic without synthesis, a montage of utopia and dystopia, symptom and archive, opacity and memory. It is from this unstable space that his ethical aesthetics of the digital emerges.

Digital Orientalism, as this essay has shown, names the paradox that runs through these films: the persistence of Orientalist fantasy undone by the very medium that transmits it. Godard does not escape these fantasies. He disrupts them. Beyond critique, his cinema offers something else, a practice of seeing otherwise, of insisting that there is something in the image that we do not, and perhaps cannot, see. The final gesture in *The Image Book* is one of excessive melancholy. After the allegory of Dofa, after the constellation of Arab cinema, Godard cites Elias Canetti: “We are never sad enough for the world to be better.”

(Canetti 1960) Later on, in his own trembling voice, he adds: “And even if nothing turned out as we had hoped, it would change nothing of our hope.” Hope, here, is persistence, the endurance of critique in the face of impossibility. The image fails; the montage interrupts; the archive stutters. Yet still, the hope endures.

4. Coda: “To Paint That One Does Not See”

As Sterritt (1999) noted in his aptly titled monograph *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard. Seeing the Invisible*, Godard has long pursued the image’s capacity to reveal what resists direct representation, whether through his filming of music, where sound becomes a mode of vision, or through his films of the 1980s and 1990s that probe the question of the sacred. The debates surrounding Holocaust representation that crystallized around *Histoire(s) du cinéma* further anchored this interrogation: the image as site of both revelation and prohibition. I would like to end this essay with a brief coda on *Goodbye to Language* (Godard 2014), a film in which Godard radicalizes his inquiry into perception through the possibilities of digital 3D. By widening the distance between the camera’s twin lenses far beyond the spacing of human eyes, Godard produces a warped bifurcation of vision, a form of doubled consciousness in which the world no longer coheres but splits, as though perception were being attuned to dimensions normally withheld from us. After images of Godard’s dog, Roxy Miéville, wandering through intensely chromatic landscapes, an impersonal voice intones: “At this point on the canvas, paint neither what one sees, since one sees nothing, nor what one does not see, since one must only paint what one sees, but paint that one does not see.” The words are drawn from Proust’s (1952, p. 488) unfinished novel *Jean Santeuil*, where Monet’s method is described as a painting not just of the subject, but of the medium’s own limitations. This paradox encapsulates Monet’s—and, by extension, Godard’s—vision. In the context of Godard’s digital cinema, this paradox becomes programmatic. It echoes the tensions traced throughout this essay, from the nineteenth-century daguerreotypes in *Film Socialisme* to the fractured Arab archives in *The Image Book*: not a reproduction of the visible, nor an invention of the invisible, but the aesthetic and ethical pursuit of what remains unseeable within the visible itself.

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Notes

- ¹ “Jean-Luc Godard: ‘Film is over. What to do?’” Jean-Luc Godard (quoted above) interviewed by Fiachra Gibbons, 12 July 2011 (Gibbons 2011).
- ² Jameson (1981, p. 3), *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press: “Under these circumstances, the operations of some banal political unconscious clearly continue—we map our fellows in class terms day by day and fantasize our current events in terms of larger mythic narratives, we allegorize our consumption and construction of the object-world in terms of Utopian wishes and commercially programmed habits—but to that must be added what I will now call a geopolitical unconscious. This it is which now attempts to refashion national allegory into a conceptual instrument for grasping our new being-in-the-world.”
- ³ For an exhaustive analysis of the role of the nineteenth century in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* specifically, see Silverman (2002) “The Dream of the Nineteenth Century.” *Camera Obscura* 17, no. 3, pp. 1–29.
- ⁴ For an extensive analysis of Godard’s paradoxical “Aufhebung boomerang,” see (Bonfand 2007, p. 223): “Le dépassement de la peinture par le cinéma ouvre pour Godard une Aufhebung du cinéma par lui-même: une Aufhebung boomerang.” My own reading departs from Bonfand’s by locating this paradoxical movement not in the pictorial portrait itself, but in pictorial materiality.
- ⁵ Archive cited by Antoine de Baecque in his biography of Godard. De Baecque Antoine (De Baecque 2010, p. 469).

- ⁶ I have relied on Nicholas Elliott's forthcoming English translation of Nicole Brenez's final work on Godard, scheduled for publication by The Film Desk in 2026. All other cited works in French are translated by me, unless otherwise indicated.

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