

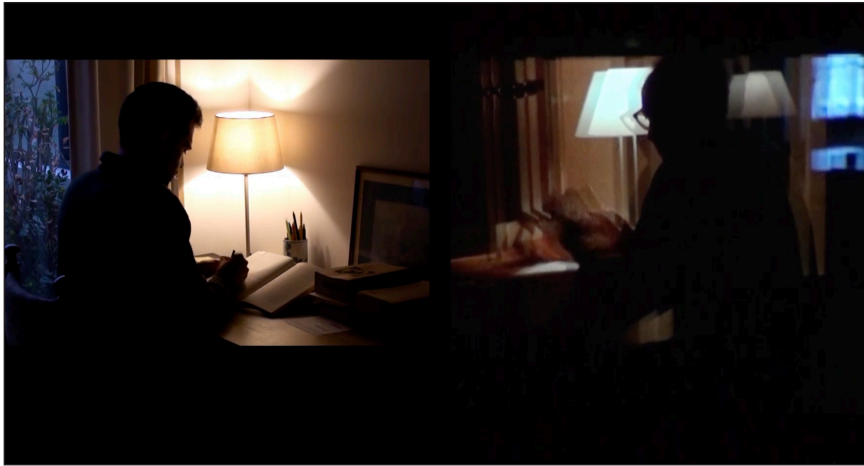


Three Short Letters to Godard

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What led me to write these letters to someone I never met privately, whom I never even knew, and whom I addressed after death? How audacious! Was it the desire to do justice to someone who, in my view, would have deserved a different kind of posthumous tribute, one much more honourable and distinguished? Or was it merely a means of materializing a genuinely felt emotion? Or, perhaps, an opportunity to perpetuate and keep alive a conversation that had endured for years? Isn't it true that, in a way, Godard was always dead to me, that is, inaccessible to me, and yet, or for that very reason, more open in his thought, but preserved in the silence and confidence of the unknown?





Creator's Statement

Exergue: What led me to write these letters to someone I never met privately, whom I never even knew, and who I address after death? How audacious! Was it the desire to do justice to someone who, in my view, would have deserved a different kind of posthumous tribute, one much more honorable and distinguished? Or was it merely a means of materializing a genuinely felt emotion? Or, perhaps, an opportunity to perpetuate and keep alive a conversation that had endured for years?

I can't say I've ever been interested in Godard's life. I mean, I've never been interested in what is commonly referred to as an author's life and work—only his work. I was particularly moved by his autobiographical films: the way Godard inhabits the screen, the way he experienced himself in this appearance through the image, the way he achieved a fusion between the moving image and the movement of thought. Isn't it true that, in a way, Godard was always dead to me, that is, inaccessible to me, and yet, or for that very reason, more open in his thought, but preserved in the silence and confidence of the unknown?¹

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The **first letter** of the piece revolves around the myth of Orpheus. Orpheus's turning back casts a fleeting light on Eurydice's face just as she emerges from the darkness of the underworld. However, this brief glimpse seals her fate, as Orpheus had been expressly forbidden to look back. Apparently, in cinema it's not quite like that. Cinema, says Godard, allows Orpheus to look back without killing Eurydice. By this, Godard was referring to the almost miraculous capacity of cinema to preserve the past and to resurrect the dead.

¹ This passage is inspired by an excerpt from Blanchot's *farewell* to Georges Bataille in the book *Friendship* (cf. Blanchot 1997, 289–91).

But this also suggests that cinema entails a descent into hell, as it guides us through the catastrophes and horrors of history. Jacques Aumont said it is possible to identify something akin to an Orpheus complex in Godard (1999, 40). While cinema bears witness to past crimes, it also risks transforming these images into petrified icons of horror, devoid of true meaning for the present. Therefore, cinema grapples with the same ambiguity inherent in Orpheus's gaze. In both cases, saving reality means saving loss; bringing the past to life also means returning it to death and oblivion.

Thus, the perspective of the historian-filmmaker must embrace absence as an integral part of historical inquiry, rather than repressing absence and alterity (fiction) as undesirable facets of the historical past (White 2005).

*

Godard's films are always composed of layers so diverse that entering them implies, in a certain way, remaking them, recreating them. In this first letter, I intended to follow some of the paths proposed in *Histoire(s)* by reproducing images from the eponymous book, rather than resorting to fragments from the film. My intention was to create another time for the images, presenting them as fragments of ideas that can be analyzed, deepened, and discussed as I literally delve into them.

By simultaneously displaying the images as they appear in the book, reproduced on a mobile phone screen, and reduplicated on a TV screen, producing a sort of *mise-en-abyme* reflective structure, I aimed to underscore the following idea: the meaning of these images hinges on how we see them, the timing of our viewing, our gestures of moving forward and backward through the images, and our level of engagement with them. It is also about transforming the audiovisual device into a writing apparatus, understood as a system of inscription-reinscription (Derrida 1967) subject to delays, deferrals, and displacements. Rather than offering a complete reading, the unfolding of images across different screens introduces crucial ambiguity, generating meaning and enabling the interplay between images and words.

(In French, the word "histoire" contains "toi" (you), which for Godard was a way of saying that viewers are active participants in the production of meaning, and that each of us is an active witness and agent of the historical process).

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In the **second letter**, I made use of an altered textual fragment by Céline Scemama, in a gesture reminiscent of Godard's practice of modifying quoted text to better adapt it to the expression of specific ideas and emotions, combining it with anamorphic images obtained from video feedback processes (Scemama 2006, 12).

These images allude to a way of thinking through visuals, highlighting areas of shadow and uncertainty related to processes of failure, invisibility, and suspension, which are integral to the act of thinking itself. To think through images means embracing uncertainty, error, and wandering. It involves a reflection on the past that, as seen through Godard's lens, cannot be reduced to the certainties of a text, which is typically guided by principles of coherence and rationality. Whereas in textual history the logical chain of ideas is given priority, with text regulated by the analytical power that considers the event as a whole, imaginal writing produces a fractured vision of the whole, creating constellations of multiple fragments irrationally combined. In Godard, to truly see an image is equivalent to saying, "voilà ... voi(r) là ... voi(r) là ..." It restores a sense of infancy of art, connected to genuine wonder and curiosity (Verdeure 2017).

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The images I use in this video essay are fundamentally precarious, fragile, grainy images, to the point where it seems like they could shatter at any moment. They challenge the criterion of sensory pleasure by which we normally evaluate the correctness of an image, and, by extension, the technical competence of the one who produces it. As a matter of fact, the images I currently favor are increasingly spontaneous images, captured with rudimentary cell phone cameras and low-tech handy cams; they are the ones with scars and technical defects; they are the ones that are mediocly framed, but that, for some reason, speak to me. These are images that constitute a minor practice, as they are produced with amateur home-video technologies to position themselves in a space close to cinema, while also reflecting on cinema from an exterior perspective, from a marginal area of technical, narrative, and artistic discreetness.

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The images that compose the **third letter** are a perfect example of what I am referring to. They are shaky, weakly framed images, in which it is possible to detect the presence of pixels due to the low resolution of the recording device. But, at the same time, I felt that these images could have something "to say" and "to show" about the time of the now and (again Orpheus) the time of the glimpse.

In this letter I employ the same strategy of appropriating and transforming quotes, as I did with Scemama's text, but taking it a step further. Here, I draw from an excerpt from Jon Fosse's play, *Sterk vind / Strong Wind* (2021) where the character ponders on the concepts of now and glimpse. I not only relate these two concepts, visually presenting

them as reciprocal, something that is not immediately present in Fosse's text, but I also delve into the question of the now to give it a different meaning than that contemplated by the Norwegian writer.

(Reflecting on Godard's cinema is not about explaining his work or finding conclusive answers to the visual enigmas he presents in his films. It is, above all, a practice that delves into the questions he raised and keeps them as questions, prompting us to reflect on a multitude of other voices and thoughts that converge around shared concerns about time and history.).

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In the original text, Fosse's character says that the past and the future do not exist because the former depends on memory, and the latter can only be imagined; the now almost does not exist due to its transitory and fleeting nature. And yet—this appears to be Fosse's conclusion—the now is the only time that can exist for human beings, because it is the only time that is truly experienced. Consequently, the only possible idea of eternity would reside in an extension of the now that suspends the past and the future.

My reading diverges from this conception. The now implies not a suspension of the past and the future, but a suspension of the present, in which the now unfolds in a continually bifurcated line between before and after. The now implies a dilation and prolongation of time, but only as the repetition of a past desire that extends and metamorphoses into overlapping times and places.

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Coda: What does this have to do with Godard? Much more than it may seem, as I have explored in other places.² And what does this have to do with my private relationship with Godard—not Godard as an individual, but what he, as the personification of a certain cinema of transgression and novelty, represents for me? Almost everything.

In "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," partly a reflection on the theme of death in Barthes, partly a heartfelt tribute motivated by his disappearance, Jacques Derrida (2007) writes something close to this: I don't remember when I first read or heard his name, but the act of bringing him to memory (anamnesis) constitutes the promise of a new beginning, the re-actualization of that remarkable and irreplaceable moment of the first time.

² On Godard and Deleuze's philosophy of time, see Duarte 2021a, 12–14; on Godard and Warburg's time of survivals (*Nachleben*), see Duarte 2021b; on Godard and Benjamin's redemptive philosophy of history, see Duarte 2023.

Within the space opened by the place of death, there where the ones we address are inaccessible to us, there where what is said about them remains between us and them (within us), the intensity of the first time (the first encounter) gives way to substitution. But such replacement is made through the actualization of a mark, a wound (*punctum*) that preserves “of the irreplaceable [...] a past desire” (Derrida 2007, 277; 298).

Similarly, each time I hear or write Godard’s name, I sense that the repetition of his name carries a kind of foundational moment, as it inevitably repeats itself as an inaugural experience of cinema, carrying the *renewal* of an (un)expected encounter open to amazement and surprise (now, now, and now ...).

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Biography

Duarte’s research examines the relationships between film, memory, and history, with a particular focus on the role of archival images and oral discourse in non-fiction cinema and essay film. He addresses the limits and possibilities of film—photography and cinema—in conveying traumatic historical events and in constructing non-

normative multi-directional memories. In an interdisciplinary approach, Duarte explores issues related to aesthetics and the politics of memory; the interplay of images and words as forms of testimony; constructivist history in early twentieth-century and contemporary art and cinema; and the relationships between visual writing, autobiographical memory, and the place of autofiction in historiography and autoethnographic construction.

Review by Johannes Binotto, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts

I remember when as a student I read the letters that Frank Kafka wrote to his fiancée Felice Bauer and how their feverish intensity made me suddenly understand that letters are not just means of communication but also distancing devices: letters are written to circumvent, to postpone, and to foreclose an all too immediate contact.

The three audiovisual letters Miguel Mesquita Duarte addresses to Jean-Luc Godard work in a similar way: they are tokens of love and attachment to the deceased director as much as safeguards against his overpowering presence. Crucially, Duarte watches and re-watches Godard's work from a distance, through windows, viewers, and masks, as if to make sure that his own video will not be swallowed up by these legendary images. For his methods, it is true what the voice-over says at the beginning about death: "it opens up a space of non-relationship."

The first and longest letter, addressed to Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, is looking at its recipient through a series of media veils. Instead of directly quoting Godard's film/video, Duarte is looking at the Gallimard book version of the *Histoire(s)* with its screenshots, which Duarte then films with an iPhone, whose footage is shown in real time on a screen in the background, with the voice-over talking about cinema's Orpheus complex, the irresistible desire to look back.

Any letter is a temporal paradox: written at one moment in time but read at another it thus fuses the separate moments like on a Moebius strip. And so too is Duarte's letter: happening in so-called real time, with the iPhone images being screened while they are taken yet capturing the pages of a book from the late 1990s, showing screenshots from a film from the late 1980s, which itself captured moments from the whole history of cinema. When the voice-over was recorded, we don't know. But I doubt that it was at the same time the videographer shot his footage.

Obviously, Duarte's videographic letter not just reflects on, but re-enacts and continues the very gestures and methods of Godard himself. It is not so much telling me something "about" Godard, his reflections, and practices, but rather sending me back (or forward) right into them—like Duarte's video essay made me go back to the

book version of the *Histoire(s)*, browsing, searching, and pausing in it in order to check what passages had been used. And of course, in doing that I am myself also re-enacting Duarte's process. I am continuing writing the letter by reading it ad infinitum.

This endless mise-en-abyme is then also taken literally (or rather visually) in the second letter which uses the (delayed) video feedback of the camera filming the screen to produce a stacking of images. In a particularly delicate moment, the words "pas celui" are thus multiplied: "not this one." The duplicated images are not identical to themselves. The stacked-up images illustrate, paradoxically, what the voice-over dreams about: "the promise of a vision that eludes possession by the gaze."

The third letter finally seems to look out to a horizon asking the question, "What is a glimpse?" The glimpse as a moment of pure presence seems to put an end to this endless regress of diverging times falling into each other that the other two letters enacted. It sends me back to how this video essay began, even before the first letter: with footage filmed from a television or computer screen, so closely that we see the individual light dots of the machine (inadvertently reminding me of Christian Keathley's seminal "Pass the Salt." Regardless of how old the images may be that are playing on your screen, this flickering of light and darkness—this, this is now, now, now.

I doubt that we can learn something from Miguel Mesquita Duarte video essay if "learning" is meant as the ability to reproduce a clearly circumscribed body of knowledge presented to us in an audiovisual form. Like in his earlier video essays "The Birds After Hitchcock" where he erased the characters from the titular film so that its empty rooms can become populated by ghosts or in his "Grammatology of the Nymph" where he literally re-imagines Aby Warburg's montage technique, this video essay, instead of teaching, is doing. And instead of teaching us this video essay is also "doing us": making us aware how much we are already doing these very image processes that we thought we are just witnessing. Or to misquote Jacques Lacan: a letter not only always arrives at its destination, we are actually already writing it.

Review by Laura Rascaroli, University College Cork

What's in a letter? Epistolarity is a significant tradition in the essay film, starting with Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1958) and continuing with Jean-Luc Godard's own *Letter to Jane* (1972, with Jean-Pierre Gorin as Dziga Vertov Group), Marguerite Duras's *Aurélia Steiner* (1979), and Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977), to cite a few early examples. In experimenting with the letter, essay films inscribe at least three elements into their text: a measure of distance, both physical and temporal, between addresser and addressee; a trace of affect, for letters are an attempt to bridge

just that distance; and a component of materiality, that of the letter itself, seen as form of writing and as envoy.

All such aspects are compellingly at play in “Three Letters to Godard.” An exploration of Godard’s legacy, and some of his ideas on the image and the cinema, Duarte’s video is addressed at once to Godard and the spectator, so creating a triangulation of mutual intelligence. Affect circulates through a lyrical mode of writing, the voiceover’s studied, pensive delivery, and the exploration of themes including the line between dream and reality, love, loss and death, temporality and the impossibility of experiencing the present moment. Materiality is produced through the grain of both the voice and the image. The latter is often pixilated, mirrored, slowed down, reproduced and remediated via multiple screens.

Letters always have an intention, a motivation that transcends what is written in them. The intention behind Duarte’s letter, as the author acknowledges, is audacious. It is, I would say, nothing less than to make a video essay about Godard as Godard would have made it. “Three Letters” raises to this challenge, and it is at once generative of filmic insight and wistfully elegiac. It illuminates some of Godard’s themes and modalities through processes that are inspired by, but which also creatively extend, those of Godard himself, as in the tactile “caressing” of images via a mobile phone in Letter 1 (“Around the Myth of Orpheus”), and their simultaneous projection on a screen which creates an inner montage, a dialectics. And it elegiacally reverses time, as only the cinema can do, bringing Godard back from the dead, for a moment or forever—yet without annihilating Eurydice all over again.

