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Modernist Visions

Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*

Introduction

Two different art forms, two different eras; different discursive agendas and different subject matters: such are the remarks one is likely to make when asked to compare Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. And these observations are entirely accurate. Proust's work is a 3,000-page novel written in the early twentieth century, which tells the story of a bourgeois Parisian boy who gradually realizes his vocation as a writer after a delay of many years.[1] Godard's eight-part video was made between 1988 and 1998 for French television, and offers a quasi-documentary, thematically structured take on the history (and stories) of cinema.[2] What, therefore, could possibly unite these two seemingly unrelated works of art? Quite simply, the response to this question is cinema. It is cinema that provides the tools with which to recognize Proust's and Godard's shared poetic enterprise and the Modernist underpinning that leads in both cases to the simultaneous rejection of and yearning for artistic transcendence.

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1   *A la recherche du temps perdu*, which I henceforth refer to as *A la recherche*, has been divided into a range of volume numbers depending on the edition. There are, however, seven book 'titles' that are commonly referred to. These are listed in the bibliography, and I refer to them in this way. The final volume of the novel was published posthumously in 1927, five years after Proust's death in 1922.

2   The eight episodes each have their own title that corresponds (often loosely) to the nature of the episode: 1A – 'Toutes les histoires'; 1B – 'Une histoire seule'; 2A – 'Seul le cinéma'; 2B – 'Fatale beauté'; 3A – 'La Monnaie de l'absolu'; 3B – 'Une vague nouvelle'; 4A – 'Le Contrôle de l'univers'; 4B – 'Les Signes parmi nous'. Future references to specific chapters will be made using the number and letter only. The video is also accompanied by a four-volume book published by Gallimard that features most of the text and some stills extracted from the image track. A separate five-volume CD set of the soundtrack was made available by ECM in 1998.

Cinema lies between Proust and Godard both historically and formally, and it shares characteristics with both in terms of its treatment of time, memory and space; its reliance on montage and image superimposition; and its structuring of the gaze. Yet the use of cinema as a methodological lens more importantly reflects the aesthetic that underpins each work. My engagement with theories and philosophies belonging to a form that lies between literature and video demonstrates the importance of this in-between and of the movement between forms, spaces and contexts. Such notions are also native to cinema, an art that – at its most basic level – places images next to one another in series, thereby producing the effect of movement in time. The approach adopted in this book is demonstrative, therefore, both of the aesthetic connection between *A la recherche* and *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, as well as the processes inherent to the operation of cinema. Cinema encapsulates within its form concepts that might equally pertain to other art forms. The aim is not simply to bring Proust and Godard together by highlighting their *similarity* to cinema. It is rather through responding to the questions posed by the philosophies, theories and concepts that arise from filmic analysis that I hope to illuminate the ways in which *A la recherche* and *Histoire(s) du cinéma* communicate across the formal and historical gulf that separates them.

The relationship of life to art is a central concern to both the novel and the video. The notion of artistic transcendence fuels discussions concerning structures of memory, the poetics of substitution and contiguity, the expression of subjectivity, and related theories of artistic redemption – themes which act as focal points in the following study. My argument rests on the contention that for Proust and Godard art is not an enriched recreation or reflection of life, but instead it is part of the fabric of experience. This is to say, for Proust and Godard, art *is* life: it cannot reproduce it nor does it transcend it. As Joshua Landy rightly states, Proust encourages readers to view 'literature *as* life not *in* life',[3] and Godard's misquotation of Blanchot in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* suggests a similar proposition: 'le

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3   Joshua Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 48. Italics in original. All future use of italics within quotations is not my own unless otherwise stated.

cinéma n'est pas à l'abri du temps, il est l'abri du temps' (4B). Both suggest (albeit with reference to divergent media) that art is inscribed with the same spatio-temporal coordinates as life itself. Yet the desire for art to transcend this realm is ever-present not only in terms of the discursive enterprise of the novel and the video, but also in the reader-viewer's transferral of this desire onto his or her own experience of the artworks. This shared (paradoxical) creative impulse highlights the Modernism of each work and of cinema itself – an art form that stages, through its unceasing movement, both the glimmer and the impossibility of transcendence and of redemption through art.

Due to an increased interest in the interaction between different media, caused to a certain degree by the all-encompassing digital appropriation of so many art forms (including literature, film, visual art, and music), the discipline- or field-orientated research model is increasingly challenged as disciplines trespass on each other's terrain. Specific comparisons between the literary and cinematic forms, however, have preoccupied scholars and filmmakers alike ever since cinema's appearance on the artistic stage, due in part to its apparently synthetic nature as both a visual and verbal art form.[4] Aside from the question of filmic adaptations of literary works, a practice which was defended in the post-war period by film theorists such as André Bazin (provided that the *auteur* asserted his own *cinematic* style in the translation from text to screen),[5] analyses of the relationship between literature and film were long dominated by the question of how to overcome or manage the differences between cinematic 'language' and natural language.[6] The conclusions drawn by Christian Metz's semiotic

4   Robert Stam, 'Film Language/Specificity: Introduction', in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 31. In his introduction to Part II of the anthology, Stam points out that nearly all the previous names used to designate the modern term 'cinema' included a variant on 'graph', meaning 'writing' or 'transcription' in Greek.

5   See André Bazin, 'Pour un cinéma impur: défense de l'adaptation', in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, 10th edn (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1997), 81–106.

6   Stam, 'Film Language/Specificity: Introduction', 31. Stam notes that the first conception of 'film language' is developed by Riccioto Canudo and Louis Delluc in the 1910s and 1920s.

approach to film in the early 1970s, for example, show that the cinematic
form is made up of a combination of codes and sub-codes, some of which
are like those found in natural language (such as the combination of units
in a signifying sequence), and some which are specific to cinema itself
(images, unlike words, for example, have no double articulation – the
signifié and the *signifiant* are joined).[7] On account of the insurmountable
disparity between the 'language' of cinema and that of literature, studies
that combine the analysis of film with a literary work either focus on the
translation of one to the other, or they are concerned with the broader
conceptual questions involved in inter-formal comparativity.[8] Jeanne-Marie
Clerc's *Littérature et cinéma*, for example, counters the idea that cinema
is in some way an imperfect substitute for literature[9] and instead exam-
ines the ways in which comparisons drawn between the two forms simply
highlight their differences.[10]

    Advances in videographic and digital technology over the latter half
of the twentieth century have meant that the stand-off between literature
and cinema has been sidelined to some degree as the boundaries between
different media are increasingly problematized. As words, images and
sounds are appropriated by electronic culture, which allows these formats
to cohabit the same artistic space, the criteria for formal categorizations are
forced to adjust. Lev Manovich's informative critical guide, *The Language
of New Media*, provides an overview of new media and its relationship
with older cultural forms and languages, particularly those of early avant-
garde cinema. It offers new approaches to thinking about cinema in the

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7   Christian Metz, *Langage et cinéma* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1971), 76–8.
8   See Keith Cohen, *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (New Haven; London:
      Yale University Press, 1979). Cohen considers the specificities and the affinities of and
      between the literary and the cinematic form, focusing on various twentieth-century
      literary works including Proust's *A la recherche*.
9   Jeanne-Marie Clerc, *Littérature et cinéma* (Paris: Nathan, 1993), 4. Clerc refers, here,
      to Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier's *De la littérature au cinéma* (Paris: A. Collin,
      1970).
10   See also Jean Cléder, 'Ce que le cinéma fait de la littérature', <http://www.fabula.
      org/lht/2/Cleder.html>, from 'Ce que le cinéma fait à la littérature (et réciproque-
      ment)', *Fabula LHT (Littérature, histoire, théorie)*, no. 2, <http://www.fabula.org/
      lht/sommaire189.html> [accessed 2 October 2009].

post-analogue era, including most notably the ways in which cinematic techniques, such as montage and superimposition, have been appropriated and expanded by new media. Citing Dziga Vertov – whose *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) provides a constant point of reference throughout the book – Manovich suggests that the manipulation of the image made possible in digital cinema has transformed the 'kino-eye' into the 'kino-brush'. This is to say that the previously privileged relationship between cinema and reality is overshadowed by a new affinity between cinema and painting, as realism becomes 'merely one option among many'.[11]

Since it is the comparison between a literary and a videographic text that provides the substance of the following analyses, both Manovich's and Raymond Bellour's work on inter-media exchange have proven formative. Bellour's insistence on the significance of passages *between* images, for example, is useful in thinking about the role of montage in our multi-media landscape.[12] Indeed, recognizing the significance of cinema's impact on the way we understand the world necessarily includes the way we read literature. I acknowledge the continued relevance of cinema's specificity through an engagement with its related theories and philosophies, which act as conceptual bridges between literature and video. At the same time, however, using cinema in this way also challenges the impermeability of the boundaries between these three media, which in turn recalls Bellour's concept of a virtual space where all forms interconnect on the same terms. This book distinguishes itself both from the dichotomizing or purely meta-phorical synthesizing of literature and cinema, and from the conceptual fluidity of Bellour. For two different media are approached through the agency of a third without assuming either formal collapse or formal impen-etrability. Not wishing to ascertain how one form might be translated by or into another, I instead consider the extent to which thinking cinemati-cally might uncover links between literature, cinema and video, and, more importantly, between *A la recherche* and *Histoire(s) du cinema*, without glossing over the specificities of each.

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11   Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 308.
12   See Raymond Bellour, *L'Entre-images 2: mots, images* (Paris: P. O. L., 1999).