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## BLOOD IN THE WATER: JEAN-LUC GODARD'S ADIEU AU LANGAGE

Douglas Morrey

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Are Jean-Luc Godard's films saturated with citations, drowning in liquid imagery or politically motivated? Film scholar Douglas Morrey analyzes Godard's *Adieu au langage* by taking a closer look at one scene Godard quotes from *Piranha 3D*, inquiring into the filmmaker's overall relation to postmodernism, capitalism and contemporary cinema.

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Among the more unusual sources in the dozens of texts – novels, philosophical essays, films, paintings, songs... – cited in Jean-Luc Godard's most recent feature film *Adieu au langage* (2014) is a clip from *Piranha 3D* (2010). In a slow-motion close-up, we witness a woman thrashing around in the water. It may not be obvious from the out-of-context quotation in *Adieu au langage*, but the woman's distress is caused by the fact that her long hair has become wrapped around the propeller of a boat's outboard motor (and, of course, there is the additional off-screen threat of super-evolved killer piranhas).

While critics were not slow to identify this citation, few bothered to speculate on its significance for Godard. The first, and most obvious, point of connection resides in the fact that *Adieu au langage* is Godard's first film made in 3D (with the exception of the short *Les Trois Désastres*, made for the 2013 compilation film *3 x 3D*). With this citation, then, Godard would appear to be deliberately demarcating his own work in 3D from the average run of Hollywood production, somewhat in the way that he mocked *The Matrix* (1999) in his earlier *Éloge de l'amour* (2001), at one point showing a poster of the Wachowskis' film next to one for a revival of Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), allowing the starkness of this juxtaposition to speak for itself.

This tight-lipped commentary on contemporary Hollywood becomes all the more intriguing when one considers that *Piranha 3D* was directed by a Frenchman, Alexandre Aja. Aja, together with his writing partner Grégory Levasseur, built their reputation on the French slasher movie *Switchblade Romance* (also known as *Haute tension* or *High Tension*, 2003), before moving to Hollywood to work on the remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006, remaking Wes Craven's 1977 film). In a sense, then, Aja and Levasseur could be seen as twenty-first-century inheritors of the filmmaking model of the French New Wave, taking their inspiration from American genre cinema, scoring a low-budget success and moving on to greater things. The difference, however, is that where Godard and his New Wave comrades gave a peculiarly French inflection to generic narratives, there is little identifiably French about Aja's work. *Switchblade Romance*, although filmed with French dialogue, adopts a thoroughly American genre and conforms to familiar Hollywood narrative patterns (at least until the rather ludicrous surprise ending) and Aja and Levasseur have shown little interest in returning to France since finding a modicum of popular success in the US. In interviews around *Adieu au langage*, Godard has stressed his regret at the way that international English has effectively erased linguistic diversity. This may perhaps explain his implied critique of Aja and Levasseur's cultural conformism, inserted awkwardly into the radical formal experimentalism of Godard's film, which would no doubt not even be recognized as 'a movie' by most Hollywood producers and spectators.

Yet the significance of this intriguing citation could be taken further still. For *Piranha 3D* is arguably not just an 'average' example of Hollywood genre cinema's exploitation of this recently fashionable technique. Instead, Aja and Levasseur's film is profoundly self-aware, to the point of self-parody; *Piranha* is pure postmodern meta-cinema. This can be seen in its casting that gleefully references popular film history. The film opens with the grisly death of a fisherman played by Richard Dreyfus, thereby both evoking and dismissing the memory of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), the most obvious avatar of the killer-fish sub-genre. Christopher Lloyd, most famous for his role as Doctor Emmett Brown in *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), plays the mad scientist who uncovers the prehistoric origins of these deadly piranhas. The film also has fun with the contemporary horror genre: Eli Roth, the director largely responsible for instituting the 'torture porn' cycle with *Hostel* (2005) here plays the judge of a wet-T-shirt contest who is later unceremoniously decapitated by a speedboat. Meanwhile, the shared audience for horror and porn is openly acknowledged by the casting of adult-movie stars Riley Steele and Gianna Michaels (together with glamour model Kelly Brook), who, in keeping with the sadism of both genres, die particularly cruel and lurid deaths. *Piranha*'s use of 3D also delights in mocking itself, its genre and the wider industry: among the objects launched at the spectator's gaze – aside from the inevitable killer fish – are a drunk teenager's vomit, spewed over the side of

a boat, silicone-enhanced breasts, and a disembodied penis, victim of a piranha's jaws.

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Of course, few filmmakers are more 'postmodern' than Jean-Luc Godard, if we take as key characteristics of postmodernism acute self-awareness, magpie-like cultural appropriation and the blithe marrying of high and low culture (in *Adieu au langage*, *Piranha 3D* sits alongside quotations from Derrida and Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust and Ezra Pound). Although Godard has arguably always been postmodern in this sense, it is since about the mid-1980s that his films have become truly saturated with citations. From this point on, in Godard's feature films, practically every line of dialogue will be directly quoted or adapted from another source (making them, necessarily, an endless series of non sequiturs). His plots often contain buried remakes or homages to other narratives while, in parallel with his work on the monumental video collage *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (completed 1998), he begins increasingly including clips from other films within his own work. *Adieu au langage* contains images and sounds not just from *Piranha* but also from *Les Enfants terribles* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1950), *Only Angels Have Wings* (Howard Hawks, 1939), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1931) and *By the Bluest of Seas* (Boris Barnet, 1936), as well as various television broadcasts.

So what, if anything, makes Godard's playful, postmodern 3D movie more significant than Alexandre Aja's? As Fredric Jameson famously argued in his seminal work on postmodernism, the danger is that the playfulness of many postmodern texts accompanies, and even signals, a form of political surrender; since political debate has become a depressing dead end, let us instead gambol freely in the fields of cultural memory and try to ignore the oppression and inequality that continues to characterize our present moment.[1] *Piranha* may invite us to laugh at the spoiled rich kids whose hedonistic enjoyment of spring break is curtailed by swarms of flesh-tearing prehistoric fish, but there is no political message underpinning this massacre. After all, the film's nerdy heroes enjoy just as much decadent fun before, in some cases, meeting an equally grisly end. *Piranha* is, ultimately, a film designed to be enjoyed by cine-literate, but nonetheless probably drunk teenage boys exactly like the ones depicted on screen and the undercurrent of nasty misogyny is the most telling sign of this target audience.

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The enjoyment of such macabre entertainment may be an understandable expression of the anger of a generation whose access to housing is blocked by their parents' stranglehold on the market, whose access to politics is dictated by the needs of big business, and whose access to work is stymied by rampant casualization. It remains that *Piranha 3D* has nothing to say about any of these problems. But, as Jameson insisted, any political artwork worthy of the name must take as its goal the mapping of the unimaginably complex play of capital in our lives in the present moment [2].

Jean-Luc Godard, who abandoned mainstream cinema in 1968 to spend several years with a Maoist filmmaking collective whose films had explicitly revolutionary goals, has never forgotten this lesson. Although his densely allusive and difficult recent films may not feature the targeted materialist analysis of the Dziga Vertov Group's Marxist-Leninist works, the deliberate and critical evocation of a political and social context has never been absent from his films in later years.

It is striking that Godard's – admittedly oblique – criticism of contemporary capitalism seems to go hand-in-hand with a profusion of water imagery in his late work. As regular Godard watchers will know, since the director's return to Rolle in his native Switzerland at the end of the 1970s, practically all of his features have been filmed on the shores of Lake Geneva, and shots of the lake surface and lakeshore in different seasons have become ubiquitous in his films.

But the more symbolic value of this water imagery can perhaps be traced to 1990's rich and recondite *Nouvelle Vague* (a film that, in the memorable words of Philippe Garrel, takes about ten years of repeat viewings to offer up its secrets[3]). This film takes place among the super-rich in a private estate on the shore of Lake Geneva where they discuss abstruse financial deals, worry about the value of the dollar and, at one point, appear to be involved in the black-market purchase of Goya's *La Maja desnuda* (1797-1800). At the heart of the narrative, however, is a combative love affair between the Countess Torlato-Favrini (Domiziana Giordano) and a man called Lennox (Alain Delon). The two meet when the countess nearly runs Lennox over in her sports car and, halfway through the film, she takes him out on the lake, pulls him into the water and (knowing that he can't swim) watches him drown. But Lennox, or his twin brother, returns to claim ownership of some of Torlato-Favrini Industries...

*Nouvelle Vague* presents a remarkable portrait of the world of high finance as an elusive milieu, oddly without content, signaled principally by hasty telephone calls, haughty airs and luxury cars. A grumpy old gardener (played by Roland Amstutz) circulates throughout the film as though to suggest the distance between this world and actual work. Within this context, the many gorgeous shots of sunlight glistening off the surface of the lake seem to suggest something of the intangible, ungraspable nature of finance capital, yet its potential as a deadly medium for sadistic brinksmanship is made clear through the film's central (attempted) murder.

Twenty years after *Nouvelle Vague*, Godard made a striking return to the imagery of water in *Film socialisme*, the first half of which is set on a cruise

ship touring the Mediterranean. Godard thus juxtaposes the idle consumption of bourgeois tourists (some of it rendered particularly ugly through deliberately poor-quality images and sound recorded on a mobile phone) with the sites and memories of European civilization. The film evokes everything from ancient Egypt (in Alexandria) through the Russian Revolution (in Odessa) and the Spanish Civil War (in Barcelona) to the contemporary financial crisis and its effects in Greece while passengers on the boat discuss the history and philosophy of money. The effect is a rather pointed critique of the sorry state of Europe today, where millennia of history and generations of popular struggle have been relegated to a kind of tourist museum while the fate of the continent is handed over to the short-term concerns of big business.

Although water is not central to the plot of *Adieu au langage*, the film nonetheless seems saturated in liquid imagery. Again, it is shot by the shores of the lake, with repeated images of ferry boats coming and going, but many of the film's most memorable images are of Godard's (or Anne-Marie Miéville's) dog, Roxy, playing by the water. Indeed, *Adieu au langage* often resembles a home movie: when it isn't shot in the woods and lanes of Godard's neighbourhood, it is shot in his own bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. Water is often used to highlight the relief-effects of the 3D camera, as in a shot where a girl drinks from a public water fountain and is splashed in the face. Elsewhere, Godard shoots the water from a showerhead as it sprays directly into the camera or films a sunrise from inside a car as windscreen wash squirts into the image. Meanwhile, one of the most frequently recurring images in the film is of rainy streets.

As elsewhere in late Godard, politics is approached in *Adieu au langage* only tangentially, and in a melancholic mode. The dialogue and references in the film evoke the turbulence of twentieth-century history (German fascism, Italian resistance, the Soviet gulag), but the film ends by reaching further back in history to stage a tableau of Byron and Shelley's visit to Lake Geneva where Mary Shelley began work on *Frankenstein*. The cry 'Stand up children of holy Greece!' that ends this segment, with its evocation of Byron's death during the Greek War of Independence, recalls an age, now impossibly distant, in which political commitment could be lived as heroic adventure, and in which Greece itself stood as the cradle of European civilization, the necessity of whose defense could be seen as self-evident to artists and intellectuals. Godard invites us to meditate on the contrast to Greece in the early twenty-first century, bullied and blackmailed by European leaders (and banks), the sovereign will of its people scornfully disregarded.

"Capitalism is at once the matter through which we move and the terrifying trap in which we are caught, the warm waters of our leisure and hedonism and a noisy machine that would tear us to pieces without a second thought"

We are a long way, it seems, from *Piranha 3D*... But, if Godard's quotation of this film appears, as suggested earlier, to imply a critique of Hollywood's blissful ignorance of political realities, one important point remains to be made about it: Godard nonetheless quotes what is probably the best shot in the entire film. The image of the panicked woman with her hair tangled in the boat motor is, despite the crass stupidity of much of the rest of the film, a genuinely inspired visual idea (what the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics of the

1950s might have called '*une idée de mise en scène*') and a properly disturbing image. For, if the CGI piranhas are too daft ever to be truly scary, the image quoted by Godard appeals to different and more primal kinds of fear: of drowning, of entrapment, of the malevolent possibilities of technology. As such it might be seen, in the new and unexpected context of Godard's film, as an image of our capitalist moment itself: capitalism is at once the matter through which we move and the terrifying trap in which we are caught, the warm waters of our leisure and hedonism and a noisy machine that would tear us to pieces without a second thought. By inserting the image into his film, Godard not only dispels the supposition that he may be out of touch with contemporary cinema, he also shows that he has maintained the acute critical eye that made him such an incisive critic at *Cahiers du cinéma*. Finally, the very possibility of giving this new symbolic reading of the image from *Piranha* testifies to the cinema's undiminished capacity to make images signify afresh through their original combination in montage. *Adieu au langage* shows us how, even with Godard well into his eighties, the cinema continues to allow him, and us, to see the world with new eyes.

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## References

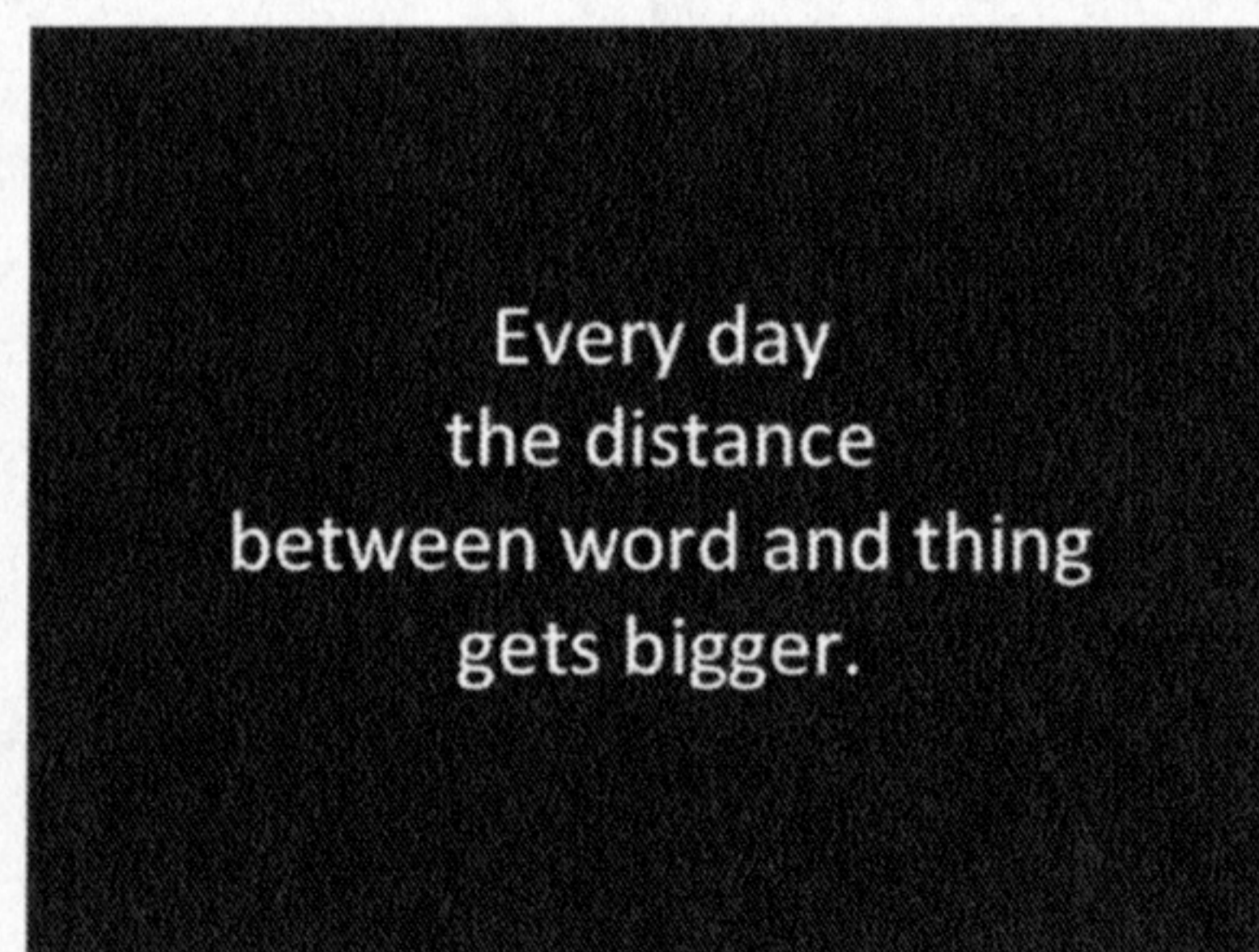
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