

"Memories of Utopia: Jean Luc Godard's
'Collages de France' Models"

Miguel Abreu Gallery

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The vogue for multimedia installations with video art as ambient wallpaper and disarrayed hybrid objects that accrue meaning only from catalogue copy has steadily rigidified the once interruptive use of durational techniques. So it is refreshing to see a pioneer in a specific medium doing a multimodal experiment that eludes expectation and convention. This is precisely what Jean-Luc Godard has accomplished with his models for an unrealized nine-room accompaniment to his 2006 film retrospective at the Centre Pompidou. Some years later, far from the formidable Pompidou, Miguel Abreu's New York gallery offered a close up on the models, which were originally exhibited in a cluttered fashion. The makeshift, prospective form of the model is an apt way for Godard to avoid turning his moving pictures into alienated, ready-to-buy pastiche. From above, the models appear like mouse mazes or tiny film sets; inside are hand-painted wall texts, incongruent TV monitors, and art prints from a deep historical archive. Small corridors with stacked monitors looping films suggest neither surveillance nor narcissism but an autotelic meditation on allegory in the tradition of Duchamp's non-reproductive "bachelor machines" in his work *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–1923). Godard's nods to modernist art, such as riddles on glass, and full-scale readymade books, aren't a fashionable comment on reification but rather, a glimpse into the cinematic nature of iconic figures from aphorist Karl Kraus to Rodin's *The Thinker*.

The models are spaciouly installed across multiple rooms in Abreu's upstairs gallery, while a companion view offered in his street-level space displays a full-size monitor on a podium showing a video of stills taken from within the models, which makes them look *as if* they were life size. It is the "as if" that matters most – the cinematic experience of re-viewing art, the way we are compelled to animate fragmented images in our mind, and blow them up to scale. We have a compulsion to make heads or tails out of allegory, to find the *message* of each room. Of late, critics tend to reduce the deformed, formless, and inter-formal work of the contemporary to a latent humanism. The very didactic taxonomies that were eschewed by Michel Foucault have come back with a vengeance, despite ditching all traces of classical formalism. Given Godard's complex map to his show, one is tempted to stitch together an underlying truth;

to find the authorial light outside the cave, especially given the grandeur of his room titles – *Myth (allegory)*, *Humanity (image)*, *The Camera (metaphor)*, *The Alliance (the unconscious, totem, taboo)*, *The Real (rêverie)*, and *The Tomb (fable)*. In contrast to stable decoding, utopia quintessentially must remain nowhere, though it is pointed to in reverie, memory, and confabulation.

Godard's scattered footnotes, tiny prints, and scribbled exegeses of philosophy could certainly guide the building of a comprehensive museum of moving image. But why have a concrete museum, where displaced inspiration only goes to die, when an imaginary one could more continuously incite desire (à la André Malraux). Yet, these works do not easily encourage one to take a side on the real versus the imaginary. The show seems structured by the very irresolvability of antinomies. For example, on display is an annotated Emmanuel Levinas passage, in which the philosopher pits the finitude of "impossibility of possibility," against Martin Heidegger's utopian definition of death as "the possibility of impossibility." Levinas calls this an important but Byzantine distinction, one that gets more complex, when Godard annotates the latter as *Maquette* (manufacturing) and the former as *Fabrication* (model). Rather than choose one or the other, the models play out both possibility and impossibility in a manufactured memory palace that can include singular concepts alongside their negation.

Godard brilliantly folds his own narration in and out of the boxes. Caption (supertitle) and action (cinema) are blurred, just as figure and ground are collapsed in Matisse's *Red Room* (*Harmony in Red*). Texts, even full-sized books, are brought into what Dominique Païni aptly calls in his catalogue essay an "assemblage of durations." This assemblage is not a post-modern blender or epistemic comment but an ontic model that constitutes not just the auteur but also the filmgoer, both players in this "theater of mind." You can't stand outside of allegory – in Godard's show, you rather look out from within allegory. Interiority and exteriority are negated in favor of thought structured like a room, a set, a shot list.

While some reviewers find Godard's show to be a parodic inversion of utopia, on the contrary, it is the undecidable interlacing of utopia and dystopia that is at stake in his quotational objects. His filmmaking has always been a mind trip, revealing that Marxist critique, Brechtian alienation, and Hollywood archetypes all seductively interchange tactics in ways not wholly predictable by the auteur. Film's multifaceted plays of light and dark (which Godard has lamented have been eliminated by digital compression) are here brought to the fore. The varying symbols refuse to add up but also refuse to flee ethical concerns. Godard's answer is "yes/both" to the question "politics or aesthetics?" And like one of Marcel Broodthaers's final works, *La Salle Blanche* (1975) (a roped-off white room painted with word pairs), Godard shows how the lexicon of our indecisive thinking is itself aesthetic, a part of the very rooms we inhabit and that inhabit us. The room/setting then becomes an aesthetic unit, and cinematic thinking becomes a style of being. **Felix Bernstein**