Francesco Zucconi
Assemblage and anatopism according to Jean-Luc Godard

Abstract
Frequently described as a reflection on the traumatic history of the 20th century, the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard has managed to call attention several times to the geographical atlas, forcing us to conceive the practice of assemblage as an unceasing juxtaposition of different places. This article sets out to rethink his cinema as a large assemblage laboratory, where the spatial component of the image as well as the geographical and political ones are called into question. In speaking of assemblage, we turn to the concepts of "anachronism" and "anatopism", the latter seemingly never granted due theoretical prominence.

Keywords
Cinematic Editing — Anachronism — Anatopism

Layouts of a thought in images

In the autumn of 2019, the 89-year-old Franco-Swiss director Jean-Luc Godard was invited to present his latest film, *The Image Book* (2019), in the form of a multi-media visit at the premises of the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, on the outskirts of Paris[1]. The idea to design an exhibition from a film might appear to be the umpteenth reflection on the relationship between the forms of the cinematic experience and that of the museum: a new episode of that "*querelle des dispositifs*" (Bellour 2012) which has so enlivened the theoretical and critical debate of recent years. However, those who know Godard also know that the only controversies which count are those launched by his films, by his stance; ingenious and difficult to totally marry into in equal measure. So it was that the transformation of *The Image Book* into an exhibition project mostly inspired reflections on the influence of Godard's work on contemporary theatre, on the possibility of putting on show the creative laboratory of an artist and therefore on the idea of looking into his working method. The latter themes were explicitly included in the exhibition "*Jean-Luc Godard: Le Studio d'Orphée*", which opened in December 2019 at the Fondazione Prada in Milan[2].

In an explicit quote from Philippe Quesne, director of the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers,

«L'idée n'est pas de surenchérir en inventant des décors, mais de restituer le trouble qu'il y a à parcourir une arborescence. Ce bâtiment n'est ni un musée ni une crypte. C'est un lieu de travail, très fantomatique, on peut s'attendre à voir surgir d'autres images et des acteurs invisibles. Mais il n'y a pas le côté mortifère d'un lieu d'archive»[3].

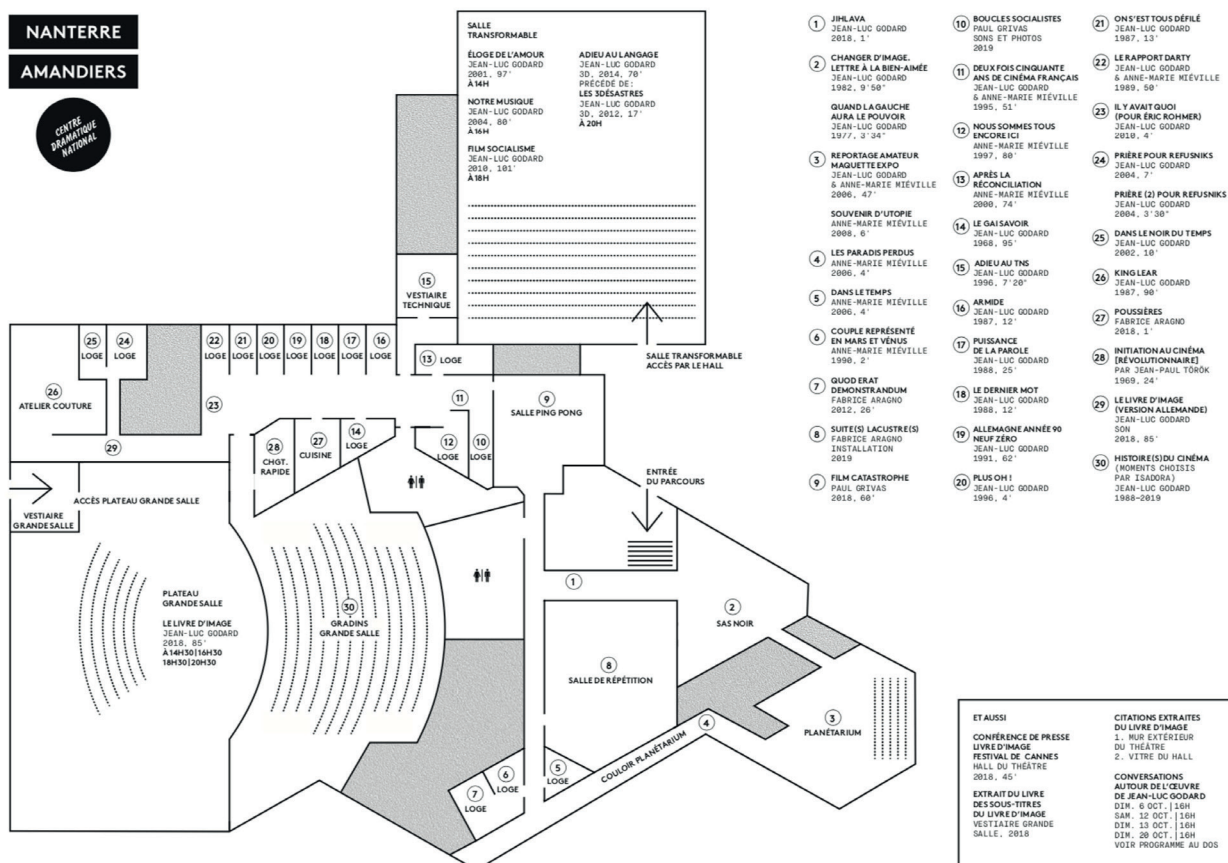The idea of spatializing his film work, rethinking it as a path that opens

Fig. 1
Layout of the "Parcours Livre d'image". Source: https://nanterre-amandiers.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/plan-parcours-livredimage.pdf.

up and comes into contact with other works, therefore seems an invitation to observe the "*système de pendant*" according to which one film is juxtaposed with another, projected immediately afterwards or in an adjacent room: the extraordinary short film *Jihlava* (2018) found alongside *Quand la gauche aura le pouvoir* (1977), with *Notre musique* (2004) in the same room as *Film socialisme* (2010) and *Adieu au langage* (2014). By observing the layout of this exhibition (Fig. 1), we can see that Godard's filmography resembles the surface of a map, as full of gaps as of overlapping regions with a palimpsest that produce effects of material density. Already described and investigated as a reflection on the history of the 20th century[4], the art of Godard manages to call attention to the geographical atlas, forcing us to conceive the practice of assemblage as a ceaseless juxtaposition of different places[5].

Out of the plan of the exhibition dedicated to *The Image Book* came the idea of considering his cinema as a great "geo-aesthetic" laboratory[6]; a laboratory of assemblage, where both the spatial component of the image as well as the geographical and political ones are called into question, interweaving the very notion of anachronism with its less fortunate companion: that of 'anatopism', the latter seemingly never granted due prominence.

Here and elsewhere

The division into periods – the "Karina" years, the "Mao" years, the "video" years, etc. – presents an image of Godard's work which is much more dated than the individual movies are. Yet, as Serge Daney noted (2001, p. 372), *Ici et ailleurs* (1976) is a «Film charnière. Cinq ans de réflexion pour Godard, qui commence le film au Moyen-Orient avec Gorin et le finit à Grenoble avec Miéville. Nous sommes au milieu de la décennie: le cinéma

Fig. 2
Still from the film "Ici et ailleurs" (1976) by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville.

militant ne remportera plus de victoires».

As is well-known, *Ici et ailleurs* was born as a piece of propaganda, commissioned by Yasser Arafat in 1969 from Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, members of the Dziga Vertov Group, and aimed at showing the forms of life and struggle in Palestinian refugee camps. But the political situation soon deteriorated: King Hussain of Jordan ordered a series of massacres, fearing that the Palestinians would attempt to overthrow his monarchy[7]. So what was to be done with the images of the struggle of the late '60s now that many of the men and women filmed had been killed? How was the film, originally titled *Jusqu'à la victoire*, to be completed in a political scenario that had changed so dramatically?

With the waning of the Dziga Vertov Group, Godard came into contact with Elias Sanbar and also met Anne-Marie Miéville, with whom he developed the idea of transforming the *propaganda film* into a *film of assemblage*: seeing each image as purely mediatic and not as if it were a candid representation of the Palestinian cause. Inviting the viewer to do the same: to become aware of the compositional frames that give form to public debate and visual culture alike. The images of Arafat's militants therefore alternate with others of daily life in France, or the soundtrack is used to dissolve from one to the other situation. The *here* of which the title speaks is the France of 1975, while the *elsewhere* is Palestine in 1970. To attempt an impossible mediation between the two places we find a TV set switched on before the eyes of a French family (Fig. 2).

In this way, with this film, Godard anticipated certain issues of post-colonial thought, focusing on the problem of the endoscopic position as a geographical and political issue[8]. Where is the one who is observing and speaking with respect to what is being talked about? And does the latter then have the opportunity to exchange words and gaze, or is he/she merely spoken about by others?

Like an "American Indian"

Dictionaries have difficulties when dealing with the concept of anatopism. They identify it with an "error of place" or with an inability to adapt to the uses and customs of the group of which it is part, as when we say that someone is a «stranger in his/her homeland».

Talking about *anatopic assemblage* in the cinema of Godard does not refer to its rebellious character, nor does it point to the alleged errors of setting. Instead, starting from at least *Ici et ailleurs*, Godard seems to have conceived his filmic practice as a juxtaposition and overlaying of images that relate to different places in order to bring out both the distance that separates them and the elements that unite them. Against the shortcuts of militancy and "empathetic" identification, it is necessary to appreciate the scraps, the *and* present in the title, so as to develop new criteria when it comes to juxtaposition, new forms to politicize both the images and the assemblage[9].

This is surely the case of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-98), where the images of fictional cinema from previous years and following WWII are treated as if they themselves were symptoms of the advent of Nazism[10]. We can think of the images of the laborious combing of the territory during the hunt in *The Rules of the Game* (1939) by Jean Renoir and of the unanticipated reverse shot: a short extract from Kenji Mizoguchi's *The Lovers Crucified* (1954). Clearly, these images are nothing more than euphemisms with respect to the horror of the killing fields, nonetheless, through this approach, Godard invites viewers to observe the structure, the diagram of the extermination, as something that concerns them intimately; the relationship of the metaphor between History with a capital 'H' and all other commonplace histories alludes to the totalitarian exception in the daily routine of civilian life (Fig. 3).

Certainly the most debated, most discussed of Godard's assemblages is that involving the Nazi concentration camp and the Palestinian refugee camp, suggested in *Ici et ailleurs* and reprised several years later in *Notre musique* and *Film socialisme*. A bold juxtaposition, even more questionable given the provocative reiterations by the director in numerous public statements. Furthermore, this assemblage was the starting point for Georges Didi-Huberman's lengthy criticism (2015, pp. 86-119) of Godard's attitude to this political issue, after affording himself – a few years later and using much more controlled argumentative methods[11] – the possibility of a juxtaposition of concentration camps and European refugee camps of the new millennium.

However, Godard's work was not limited to associating various places and events with Nazi camps. In *Episode 3A* of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* – made in the '90s and reprised with variations in the first part of *The Image Book* – he assembled a series of media images relating to the massacre of Bosnian populations by the militia of Slobodan Milošević together with a reading of the intense article *Pour la Serbie*, written by Victor Hugo in 1876 in defence of some Serbian towns destroyed by the Turkish Empire[12]. From *Hélas pour moi* (1993) to *Je vous salue Sarajevo* (1993), from *For Ever Mozart* (1996) *Notre musique*, up to *Le Pont des soupirs* (2014) this was a theme which Godard returned to constantly: the relationship between Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Catholics in the heart of Europe.

And it is conceivably in Bosnia, at the foot of Mostar Bridge, destroyed by Croatian militias during the Balkan conflict, that we need to remain in order to reflect on the «assemblages of the world» created by Godard. It is the second part of *Notre musique* when a group of Native Americans suddenly appears posing under this bridge – then undergoing reconstruction at the behest of UNESCO – like a postcard (Fig. 4).

Godard's reflection is firstly on the stereotype with which Western culture has fixed in a proud image those peoples it has systematically annihilated[13]. But it is also a way of saying that after the conflicts of the '90s, the multi-

Fig. 3
Still from the film "Histoire(s) du cinéma" (1988-1998) by Jean-Luc Godard.

Fig. 4
Still from the film "Notre musique" (2004) by Jean-Luc Godard.

ethnic melting pot of cities such as Mostar or Sarajevo was profoundly downsized if not totally destroyed and the little that remains has become a "reserve" for tourists. The shot of Mostar Bridge with the Native Americans is ultimately an invitation to consider the underlying bonds between the different forms of colonial and post-colonial violence, between the conditions of all those who have suffered privation and deportation. It is the "American Indian", as the figure of the deported and dispossessed – even in name, the result of a famous error attributed to Christopher Columbus – that constitutes a potential geographical and political paradigm.

Heuristics of anatopism

Within French culture, the notion of anatopism has seen explicit conceptualization in the work of the writer Michel Tournier and, in particular, in his book on the photography of Edouard Boubat:

«L'anatopisme serait donc l'equivalent pour l'espace de ce qu'est l'anachronisme pour le temps. Anachronisme: violations de la chronologie. Exemple: les canons que Shakespeare fait intervenir dans sa pièce Jules César. Anatopisme: violation de la géographie (ou de la topologie) Exemple: la crèche de Noël situé par un peintre hollandais ou allemand dans sa propre ville. […] Pour un photographe comme Édouard Boubat, qui ne touche jamais à rien ni à personne, et photographie les choses et les gens comme il les trouve, l'anatopisme a le sens d'un signe, d'une offrande spontanée que lui fait personnellement le hasard»[14].

Tournier's definition has the merit of associating anachronism and anatopism. However, in his conception, the latter tends to coincide with something "spontaneous" or is the result of a modernization in the staging. Nothing similar seems to happen in Godard's cinema, which is not so much about modernizing or antiquing nor, for that matter, respecting or infringing a geographic reference. Instead, Godard tends to take up a position within a threshold space, trying to observe and understand what makes specific times and places stand out with respect to themselves and with respect to their historical and geographical field of reference (the city of Batak during the Serbian-Turkish conflict of the 19th century, the Barcelona of the Civil War and the '60s refugee camps in Amman, Mostar and Sarajevo in the last decade of the 20th century…).

Over the course of the 20th century, in the same years that the director was experimenting with his assemblages, semiotics had developed the concept of "isotopy" borrowed from physics/chemistry and transferred to semantic and syntactic analyses. In particular, using this concept we can observe the persistence of a theme or a series of figures, or a given topological, eidetic and colour category through different works or in different parts of the same work[15]. So it is that in the visual arts, the term isotopy lends itself to identifying the persistence of certain spatial, temporal and actorial configurations, such as redundant phenomena of the plastic components characterizing different images and visual objects[16]. However, on a closer look, this same term can lend itself to analysing the ways of establishing possible juxtapositions of two or more events, of two or more locations, through representations of them, leading us to recognize the profound configurations that substantiate the assemblage of different images, rather than restricting ourselves to superficial iconic analogies[17].

Beyond the respective and opposing etymological roots, the notion of isotopy (from the Greek roots ἴσος and τόπος, "equal place") and that of anatopism (from ἀνά, against, plus τόπος, place) work together, thereby substantiating
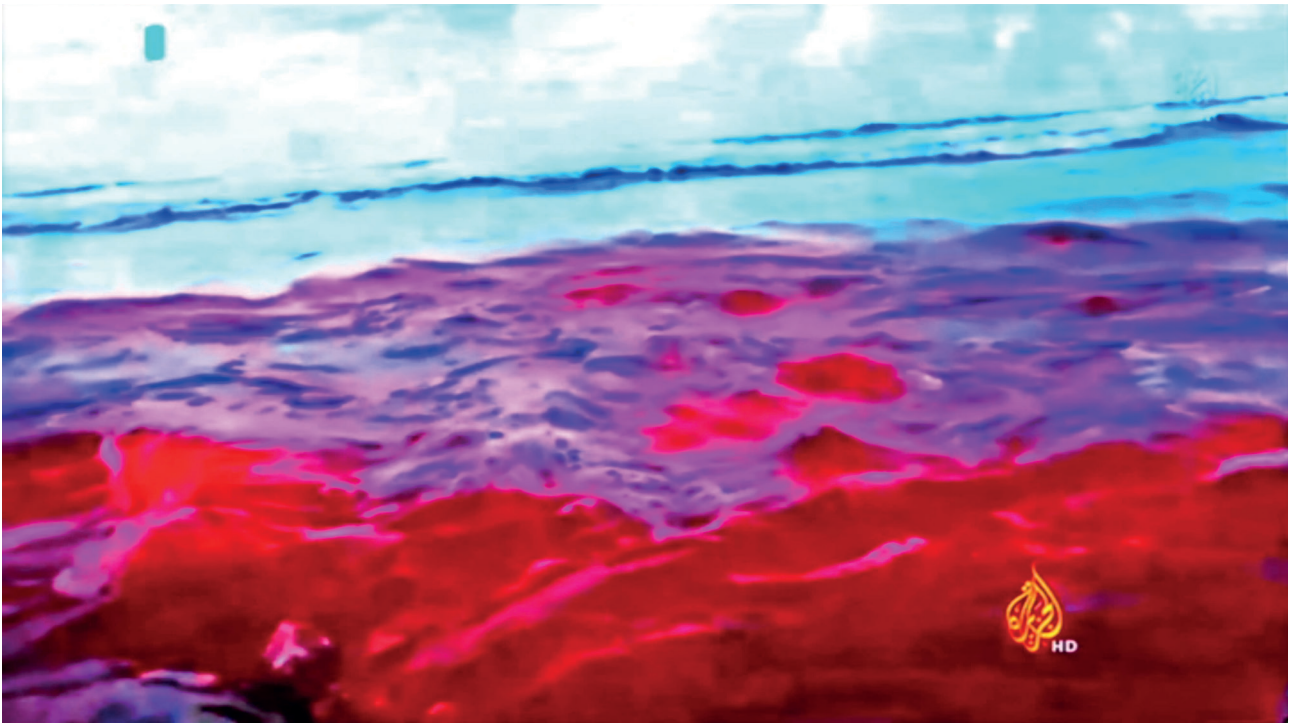
Fig. 5
Still from the film "Le livre d'image" (2018) by Jean-Luc Godard..

the possibilities of combinations or substitutions of images that are not necessarily linked by predefined typological relationships. Precisely in virtue of the figurative and plastic configurations that characterize them, two or more images relating to different events, at different times and in different places, can be juxtaposed if not overlapped. Drawing the due conclusions from this consideration, it is possible to note that the very notion of "anachronism" – widely investigated and used in the theoretical debate of recent years – rests in reality on that of anatopism and on the isotopic relationships which make it possible to juxtapose different images; on the very fact that, beyond the reference to a particular place, each image in itself constitutes a system of relationships between different elements while the persistence of such a system allows exercises of assemblage and permutation.

It may be no coincidence if the first of the five episodes that make up *The Image Book* is dedicated to the concept of the "remake" and to war as something that relentlessly reproduces itself in space and time. As always, Godard is not afraid to deal with both the most trivial and the most violent images of the present. So it is that one of the most shocking sequences in *The Image Book* consists in alternating assemblages of executions/drownings in the episode from Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946) filmed in Porto Tolle, with images of ISIS propaganda (Fig. 5). The detail of the water rippling from the falling of the bodies in the former finds a partial correspondence in the rough seas of the latter, where the accentuation of the colours forces the image beyond the merely referential, attempting to elicit the underlying diagrammatic component: the paradigm of the sinking as the thing that kills and hides[18]. Immediately afterwards, with just enough time to recognize it, we see the extraordinary sequence filmed by Rossellini, in that same film, inside the Vasari Corridor: a place of high culture connecting the two banks of the city of Florence under Nazi occupation suddenly loaded with the political function of resistance. Almost as if wanting to expound his method of assemblage, Godard therefore inserts a sign with the inscription "RIM(AK)ES" a pun which refers at the same time to the idea of creation and to that of a figurative and plastic rhyme [*rima* in Ital-

ian] between two or more images.

As Didi-Huberman (2007, p. 24) maintained, this is the «heuristic power of anachronism», treating the latter as a tool for art history, and it is thus that Godard's work can be interpreted as a heuristic of anatopism. Instead of producing a compressing to distinguish between *here* and *elsewhere*, rather than giving rise to an absolute distancing between what is near and what is far, it is about conceiving assemblage in a dynamic way, as an «art of displacement»[19].

Undoubtedly, many of Godard's juxtapositions remain cryptic if not difficult to tolerate. However, even in the face of provocation, it should be recalled that assemblage is precisely that which *does not* establish equivalences, instead inviting us to understand *in what way* and *how* distinct and distant events may be related and especially to assess what the *conditions for possibility* are that it has again been possible to put back together, elsewhere. It was Godard himself, in a long interview published on the occasion of the exhibition at the Théatre des Amandiers, who returned to the anachronistic and anatopic character of assemblage, further complicating the terms of the issue: «J'ai même fait un'équation, très simpliste, comme Euclide avait fait ses cinq axiomes: x+3=1. Pour obtenir un, il faut supprimer deux. Ce n'est pas vraiment un'équation. Quand je l'ai montrée à Badiou, il ne savait pas trop quoi en faire»[20].

If "Godard's theorem" remains unresolved, then we need to keep watching his films. At times, juxtaposing one image with another is like producing a multiplication of two places or two times, producing an incredible, provocative result. At other times, the exercise is instead to introduce – by putting on the table, on the editing bench – a series of elements with a subtractive goal, to push the gaze even further, towards a third dimension, another space whose deepest structure can be recognized but whose historical and geographical coordinates are as yet unclear.

Notes

[1]   https://nanterre-amandiers.com/en/evenement/nanterre-amandiers-ouvre-le-livre-dimage-jean-luc-godard-2019/

[2] http://www.fondazioneprada.org/project/jean-luc-godard-le-studio-dorphee/

[3] Lepastier 2019, p. 34.

[4] See, at least, Cervini, Scarlato, Venzi, 2010.

[5] On the relationship between history and geography in Godard, see Aumont 1999, pp. 160-162.

[6] On geo-philosophical thinking, see Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, pp. 77-107.

[7] For a reconstruction of the steps to realize the film and the controversy that followed its release, see De Baecque, 2010.

[8] As a point of reference, see Said, 2008.

[9] On the "between" as a key concept of Godard's method, see Deleuze 1989, p. 201.

[10] As a theoretical reference, see Krakauer 2007.

[11] See Didi-Huberman Giannari, 2017, p. 50.

[12] For an analysis of this sequence, see Zucconi 2018, pp. 28 to 43.

[13] See the classic by Todorov, 2014.

[14] Tournier 1981, unnumbered pages.

[15] Greimas, Courtés 2007, p. 171.

[16] For a fresh look at the concept of isotopy in the field of semiotics and art theory, such as the idea of a "geography of images", see Calabrese, 1985.

[17] On the idea that film editing can work on the "profound figurativeness" of images, see Mengoni 2009, pp. 187-231.

[18] On the colour manipulation in *The Image Book*, see Béghin 2019, pp. 23-24.

[19] On the idea of "assemblage" and "displacement" as methods, see Zucconi 2018.

[20] See Delorme, Lepastier, 2019, p. 9.

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