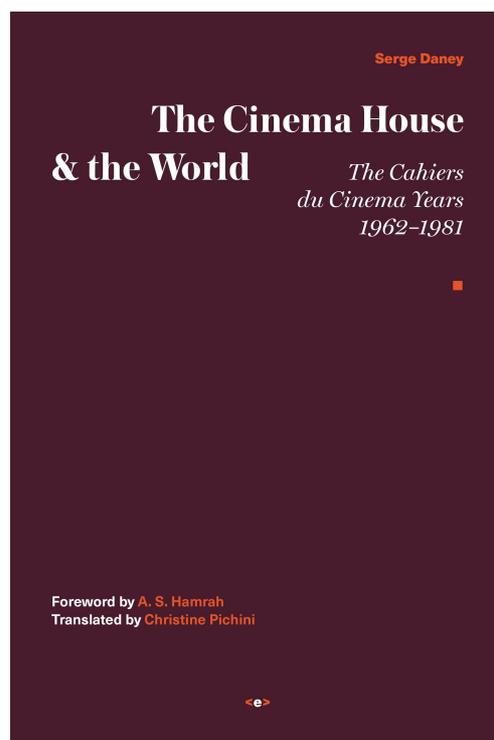


BOOK REVIEW: Serge Daney,
*The Cinema House & the World:
The Cahiers du Cinema Years
1962–1981*

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Somehow the first of these projected four volumes of translation of the late French critic Serge Daney's film criticism, a door stopper coming in at just under 600 pages,¹ is a monument to the incommensurable. Daney – who died of complications from AIDS at the early age of forty-eight in 1992, was a critic, then editor at *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1974 before moving on to *Libération* in 1981 and founding *Trafic* in 1991 – had already more than made his mark in criticism and in the generalising cultural diagnoses that could emerge from meticulous and ruthless, sometimes daily journalism. Yet the full import of that achievement is not so easily digestible. In his introduction, the critic A S Hamrah riffs on Daney's quip that cinema is never on time, and its applicability to the factum that a critic with as enormous importance for cinema as Daney is only now, a few decades into the twenty-first century, finding his way into English translation. For Jean-Luc Godard, Daney was one of the few critics who 'described the actual thing' at issue in a given film, and was the culminating endpoint of a tradition in French literary criticism that began with Diderot and had ended with François Truffaut and Daney.² Yet translatability is only one aspect of the difficulty in Daney's reception, or indeed his very project – Daney would have had an impossible career in, say, the United States for a host of reasons – and there are other impossibilities that hover over his project.

It is there in the torsion of his sentences, each capsule review itself a struggling, contradictory *mise-en-scène* of its own. Sometimes it is the all-too-personal acting out of the auteur at stake; at other moments the author, or the film, is barely mentioned in a description of the circumstances

¹ The next installment in the series, covering the *Libération* years, 1981–1985, in French, comes in at over 1000 pages

² See Jean-Luc Godard, 'The Future(s) of Film', in *The Future(s) of Film: Three Interviews 2000/01*, John O'Toole, trans, Verlag Gachnang & Springer AG, Bern, 2002, pp 17, 21

of its appearance or production. Ferociously concentrated, at times wrangling philosophical significance from the smallest detail, *The Cinema House & the World* is filled with stringent judgments. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968), for example, proves only that 'It is increasingly clear that a film only ever tells the story of its own genesis (shooting, preparation, production)' (p 101). So it is that *Teorema* provides 'the metaphorical account of its own viewing' (p 101). The reactions to any film, with Pasolini, Daney argues, are included and accounted for all the better to avoid them in the final product, leaving *Teorema* as a 'film that almost doesn't exist, a tautology that shows only the faces of the people who are watching it, at the moment that they watch it' (p 101). The paths the film's audience will take in its interpretation are the different paths the splintered family takes (whether religion, art or sex) – 'Have we ever seen a more reflexive film?' (p 103). The destinies of the individuals in Pasolini's upper middle-class family are thus, for Daney, a reflection of the audience's purported reactions, but 'disproportionately magnified... in short, utopic' (p 104). Finally, it is possible to see *Teorema* as also a stand-in for the filmmaker himself – Pasolini, who is 'Too intelligent to be without remorse, purveyor of drugs (art films – also and especially). Too complicit with what he opposes' (p 104).

Judgments on Pasolini aside, Daney's savagery often made a direct hit, as with Elia Kazan's *The Visitors* (1972). From the start, Daney was a stickler for illuminating the politics of a given film, outside of the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist phase of *Cahiers du cinéma*, roughly 1968–1973.³ Billed as a 'personal' film, Kazan shot *The Visitors* on a small budget, using first-time actors (however well-known they were later, like James Woods and Steve Railsback) and 16mm cameras. *The Visitors* largely got a pass at the time, and later, even Jonathan Rosenbaum, while admitting it was a 'disappointment,' waved it away as it 'showcases Kazan's strengths as well as his weaknesses'.⁴ It appears Daney was one of the few critics to unerringly dissect it for its utter fascism. On one level another installment in Kazan's filmic parables about informing, in *The Visitors* two ex-GIs, having served time for the rape and murder of a young woman in Vietnam, 'visit' the GI who reported them, and after some extremely ambiguous and queasy dynamics of an afternoon and evening one of the GIs ends up raping the 'pacifist' wife of the GI who turned them in. In the course of a detailed, complex analysis, Daney argues that the film 'is constructed such a way that the spectators must sooner or later dissociate themselves from the "positive" characters (the couple) and confusedly wish for what then seems to be inevitable: the rape. In short, the spectators must, also, abandon their convictions over the course of the screening' (p 137). Regarding the scene where Martha, the wife, begins to close-dance with one of the newly released GIs, thereby setting herself up for the attack, Daney observes, 'Kazan doesn't bad-mouth pacifism, he doesn't even claim that a woman, having a sex, could scarcely have any

³ For a history of the journal that shares many of Daney's value-judgments, see Emilie Bickerton, *A Short History of Cahiers du Cinéma*, Verso Books, London and New York, 2011; for its 'Marxist' phase, see Daniel Fairfax, *The Red Years of Cahiers du cinéma (1968–73): Volume 1, Ideology and Politics*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2021

⁴ See Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'The Visitors', from *Chicago Reader*, 1 May 1988, posted November 26 2019 <https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2019/11/the-visitors/>

ideas; he simply shows us that ideas must be renounced – as soon as desire is taken into account’ (p 137). It is only with this capitulation (in a rape scene that is as dubious and troubling as the one featured in Sam Peckinpah’s 1971 *Straw Dogs*, since here, as well, it is suggested that the victim enjoys it) that Kazan establishes his horrible contiguity. Somehow the ‘faraway’ rape in Vietnam is ‘explained’. Daney, in his damning conclusion, writes, ‘As for the famous slippage from the political to the sexual that belongs to American cinema, Kazan could (in another time, with more courage, under another political regime) articulate it like this: you may not be my political enemy, but even if I’m wrong for raping you, you can’t tell me you didn’t like it: a good Vietnamese is a dead Vietnamese’ (p 138).

Other American films do not fare much better (aside from Kubrick’s, which are not reviewed here). As has been remarked, despite his often eirenic focus (and Daney was ahead of the curve in recognising the cinemas of the Global South, especially perhaps of Africa), New Hollywood in the US is largely off his radar,⁵ as, earlier, British ‘New Wave’ is conspicuous only by its absence. Of Richard Brooks’s *In Cold Blood* (1967), Daney writes that it illustrates ‘American cinema’s inability to assume a coherent message (especially in “message” films)... the impossibility of saying something precise, the eternal appeal to metaphor and implication’ (p 100). This is a cinema that relies, almost entirely, on the ‘truth of the spectacle’ (as in *In Cold Blood*’s expository/explanatory ‘flashbacks’) that goes into the core of the film, and, according to Daney, renders ambiguous all other aspects. Brooks’s *Elmer Gantry* (1960) mastered and avoided this problematic, while *In Cold Blood* fell back into it. This was American cinema’s ‘problem with engagement... violent films against violence, militaristic films against war, racist films against racism, etc’ (p 100). This critique kept its relevance nearly two decades later when Daney engages with *The Deer Hunter* (1978). Not surprisingly, Daney found the film ‘A withdrawal of America into itself and an unbridled refusal to understand anything, to analyze anything about the situations into which it is thrown and mired by its own imperialism’ (p 459).

A film he is called upon to take far more seriously is Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Reaffirming that the history of cinema ‘goes in hand in glove with the history of war’, Daney can group Coppola’s film with *The Deer Hunter*’s ‘political amnesia’, except that in *Apocalypse Now* any ‘historical dimension is immediately short-circuited at the outset by a direct passage from the physical to the metaphysical’ (p 244). Tracking the four different ‘ascents’ in the movie, Daney concludes ‘there is no possible ending’ to these treks, despite Coppola’s unsatisfying final third, in a film that is both ‘extraordinary’ and an ‘average American film of the post-Vietnam era’ (pp 243, 247). Yet, despite that, this ‘treasure hunt leads nowhere, really’; Coppola remains an ‘extraordinary entrepreneur of *spectacles*’, and Willard’s journey upriver to Kurtz is one from ‘spectacle to spectacle, almost from “show to show”’ (pp 248–249). Nothing

⁵ See, for example, in his 1977 conversation with Bill Krohn that opens the book, where Daney, while acknowledging the achievement of directors as disparate as Robert Kramer, John Cassavetes, Paul Newman (who had directed three films by the time of this conversation but was already on a hiatus), Stephen Dwoskin and Monte Hellman, says ‘there hasn’t been any real innovation in American cinema in nearly twenty years’ (p 28). Symptomatic, then, is his dismissal of Robert Altman (p 27), or of Paul Schrader’s *American Gigolo* (1980) (pp 270–271).

could more effectively demonstrate that for the Americans the war was a ‘spectacle without a director’, a series of showbiz tableaux vivants (p 249). Targeting the film’s incredible identification of Willard with Kurtz, Daney makes an unfavourable comparison to the analogous relation in Nicholas Ray’s *Wind Across the Everglades* (1958), despite the fact that Martin Sheen and Marlon Brando are superior actors to the Christopher Plummer/Burl Ives pairing in the earlier film. Yet, with all these auteurist dilemmas (Coppola’s choices and indecisions), its placement within the film industry (generational, and with Brando as the Kurtz of Hollywood), the revelation of the ‘homosexual bond’ fundamental to society and to war (p 246), a palimpsest of psychoanalytic and all-too-Freudian themes, *Apocalypse Now* still ‘bears witness’ to the Vietnam war (p 244), and Coppola demonstrates that he is ‘often a very great filmmaker’ (p 249). This is since, in one crucial sense, he has shown what ‘makes it *technologically* an *other* war’ (p 244). This goes beyond the use of helicopters and the sound of helicopters, partially inspired from Emile de Antonio’s use of such noise in the Vietnam documentary *In the Year of the Pig* (1969), but in the scene where Willard and his men meet a battalion preparing to napalm a field, ‘it is primarily a spectacle for the characters in the film’. Here the special use of Dolby sound doesn’t anchor or make more intelligible the image, but ‘by tearing it open from the inside, by keeping it from becoming a refuge for the audience, by inspiring fear’ Coppola has in such spots abolished the ‘offscreen’, creating an effect that is ‘completely breathtaking’ (p 245). Moving from this utter concreteness of war to an abstract, metaphorical dimension (that somehow justifies what went before)⁶ is ‘where the film runs aground’ (p 245).

Daney often represents the critical/journalistic counterpart of the argument throughout Jean-Luc Godard’s eight-part television series *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998) of a still-born cinema. As Gilles Deleuze wrote in his *Cinéma 2*:

Cinema is dying, then, from its quantitative mediocrity. But there’s a still more important reason: the mass-art, the treatment of masses, which should not have been separable from an ascension of the masses to the status of true subject, has degenerated into state propaganda and manipulation, into a kind of fascism which united Hitler and Hollywood, Hollywood and Hitler.⁷

Deleuze goes on to cite Daney’s 1983 book *La Rampe*, also a collection from *Cahiers du cinéma*, where Daney argued that cinema went into question due to the ‘great political *mise-en-scènes*, state propaganda turned *tableaux vivants*, the first handlings of masses of humans⁸ – and the

⁶ In this connection, see Kevin E G Perry’s 2019 interview with Coppola, where he attests to the obvious, that a film as based on the thrill and adrenalin of armed conflict as *Apocalypse Now* could not be ‘anti-war’ (Kevin E G Perry, ‘Francis Ford Coppola: “Apocalypse Now” is not an anti-war film’, *The Guardian*, 9 August 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/aug/09/francis-ford-coppola-apocalypse-now-is-not-an-anti-war-film>

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: The Time-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1989 [1985], p 164

⁸ Serge Daney, *La Rampe*, Cahiers du cinema/Gallimard, Paris, 1983, p 172; cited in Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, op cit, p 164

death camps.⁹ As Godard treats in some length in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, the art form that had the ambition to see all, to cinematograph all aspects of life, did not film the extermination camps. What Deleuze called ‘the movement-image’ (or first phase of cinema) was linked, historically and essentially, as Paul Virilio argued,¹⁰ to the organisation of war and state propaganda, which under fascism transforms the whole of civil society into a *mise-en-scène*. According to Deleuze, the ‘big difference’ between classical and modern cinema lies in this. The ‘people’ are on the move in an Eisenstein or Pudovkin film, as they are, in a different manner, in the ‘unanimism’ of King Vidor, Frank Capra and John Ford movies. The false unanimism and subjugation of Hitler or Stalin put an end to this becoming. For a modern filmmaker, ‘the people no longer exist, not yet... *the people are missing*’.¹¹ In this new situation of the image, Daney cites what Walter Benjamin in 1931 recognised as ‘the right of the gaze’, this ‘new selection in front of the camera: the ones who emerge victorious are the star and the dictator’ (quoted on p 372) – in this instance, an image is taken, Daney adds, not given.¹² There is no reverse shot, in Daney’s example, from a B-52 that is simultaneously filming and bombing a Vietnamese field.

This too late/too soon destiny of cinema shadows Daney’s entire career, although the interregnum years of this collection were also those of an apex of a certain kind of art cinema Godard eulogises in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (Roberto Rossellini, Robert Bresson, Michelangelo Antonioni, Orson Welles, Alain Resnais, and others – for Daney, it was, above all, Jean-Luc Godard).¹³ It is no accident that his journey as a film critic starts out with a 1964 trip to Hollywood, interviewing the great ‘dinosaurs’ (among them George Cukor, Howard Hawks, Jerry Lewis, Leo McCarey, Jacques Tourneur, Josef von Sternberg, Buster Keaton); and in an early 1963 review he proclaims Otto Preminger ‘America’s greatest living filmmaker’ (p 38), as in this early period Godard would say the same of Howard Hawks, Truffaut or Hitchcock. The irony of the Nouvelle Vague, Daney commented in 1980, was ‘to challenge – from the inside – a classical model assumed to be in good health... what have we done to our plaything? Have we not broken it?’ (p 285). Yet *Cahiers du cinéma*’s beloved director Nicholas Ray told them in 1962: ‘we are only scratching the surface of the extraordinary adventure that is cinema’ (quoted on p 95). In *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, part of Godard’s autopsy is the fate of montage, what he considered made cinema unique in comparison with painting and the novel. Neither D W Griffith or Sergei

⁹ For the extraordinary effect of World War II, and the Holocaust in particular, on the image-world, its flattening out of the image, and the ensuing phases of the status of the image, see Deleuze’s ‘Letter to Serge Daney: Optimism, Pessimism, and Travel’, in *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, Martin Joughin, trans, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995 [1990], pp 68–79; this served as the preface to Daney’s 1986 book *Ciné-Journal*

¹⁰ See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, Patrick Camiller, trans, Verso Books, London and New York, 1986 [1984]

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, op cit, p 216

¹² For a complete translation of this Benjamin text, see Walter Benjamin, ‘Little History of Photography’, in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, part 2, 1930–34*, Michael W Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, eds, Rodney Livingstone and others, trans, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1999, pp 507–530

¹³ Daney goes so far as suggest that in terms of cinema history, one could put every major and minor filmmaker on one side, and Dziga Vertov and ‘maybe’ Godard on the other (p 431)

Eisenstein really demonstrated montage; in fact, ‘cinema has never discovered it’.¹⁴ This led to Godard’s experimentation in television and video: ‘to use video as you would cinema, and to use cinema as you would television, is to make a television that doesn’t exist, and a cinema that no longer exists’.¹⁵ So the revivification of cinema involved its transformation. This path of opening up to other media (and other cultures’ media) is only suggested toward the end of this collection, with Daney’s path from cinema to the larger, competing, if not succeeding realm of the televisual, with his concern for the Bazinian ‘real’, pursued through his significant journeys (taking a breather from *Cahiers*) to India and Africa and his reports here on film festivals and colloquia in Tunis, Damascus, Lisbon, Gdansk, New Delhi, Manila and Hong Kong. Indeed, this is the prelude to the Daney of the 1980s, with his television channel-surfing, proto-blogging, sports reporting and global trekking, maybe better known to an English-speaking audience if only by reputation and word-of-mouth (given his scarcity in English)¹⁶ than these often conflicted reviews whose twists and turns often batter and strain if not exhaust the form. Yet his obsessive eye for what is within the frame, the transport between the documentary and the fictive,¹⁷ the entanglement of the intimately personal (Daney is writing openly with a queer eye), the political and the mythic, are already being worked out here in bits and pieces in this collection, both Mandarin and vernacular.

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¹⁴ See Jean-Luc Godard, ‘*Histoire(s) du cinéma: à propos de cinéma et d’histoire (1995)*’, *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard tome 2 1984–1998*, Alain Bergala, ed, Cahiers du cinema, Paris, 1998, p 403

¹⁵ Godard, quoted in Philippe DuBois, ‘Video Thinks What Cinema Creates: Notes on Jean-Luc Godard’s Work in Video and Television’, in *Jean-Luc Godard: Son + Image 1974–1991*, Raymond Bellour and Mary Lea Bandy, eds, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1992, p 403

¹⁶ This is despite the dedicated work of translators Laurent Kretzschmar and Srikanth Srinivasan at <https://sergedaney.blogspot.com/>; the single previous English translation of Daney is Serge Daney, *Postcards from the Cinema*, Paul Grant, trans, Berg Publishers, Oxford, 2007

¹⁷ Some of the most germinative pages here are in the section ‘Image-Proof’ (pp 385–396), dating 1976–1981, where Daney is already examining the image *qua* image, as in his ‘Direct Cinema in Six Images’, in which once again Godard’s *Ici et ailleurs/Here and Elsewhere* (1976) comes up as exemplary for discussion