Steve Choe

One between Two: Godard's *Goodbye to Language* (2014)

Abstract: This article reads Godard's video *Adieu au langage* [Goodbye to Language] and highlights how it foregrounds the non-human between the two main human protagonists. The non-human is understood through allegories of technology (3D cinema) and animality (Godard's dog Roxy). In doing so, *Goodbye to Language* proposes that such a being may be understood as a model for thinking the ethics of the other.

Keywords: cinema, ethics, Godard, Heidegger, posthuman, Rilke

Jean-Luc Godard's seventy-minute video work *Adieu au langage* [Goodbye to Language] premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2014 and won the Jury Prize that year. Filmed in 3D using a custom-built camera rig, *Goodbye to Language* appeared at a moment when films such as *Avatar* (2009), *Hugo* (2011), and *Pina* (2011) had appeared in commercial and arthouse theatres. In this paper, I would like to trace one line of argumentation through Godard's work and show that it proposes a model for non-human otherness through its meditation upon animality. We will see that this 3D video work attempts to elucidate an ontological form that extends beyond our global, quantified notions of the human being, thus preparing new ways of thinking while opening up the possibility of thinking the ethics of the other.

Goodbye to Language tells the same story about two couples separating, both mingled with images of the filmmaker's dog, Roxy Miéville. The first couple is signified in the film with the intertitle "1 Nature," and involves Josette (Héloïse Godet) and Gédéon (Kamel Abdelli), while the second is signalled "2 Metaphor," and features Ivitch (Zoé Bruneau) and Marcus (Richard Chevallier).¹ In both episodes, the husband of the woman discovers her infidelity and shoots her lover. A tweet from Godard himself in April 2014 summarizes the story:

The idea is simple/ A married woman and a single man meet/ They love, they argue, fists fly/ A dog strays between town and country/ The seasons pass/ The man and woman meet again/ The dog finds itself between them/ The other is in one,/ the one is in the other/ and they are three/ The former husband shatters everything/ A second film begins:/ the same as the first,/ and yet not/ From the human race we pass to metaphor/ This ends in barking/

1 All translations are from the DVD version of the film.

and a baby's cries/ In the meantime, we will have seen people talking of the demise of the dollar, of truth in mathematics and of the death of a robin.

The film ends with a recording of Roxy howling with a crying baby, as if they were communicating with each other through yelps and screams, in a manner beyond language.

In films such as *Breathless* (1960), *Contempt* (1963), and *Pierrot le fou* (1965), Godard has explored the ways in which the melancholy that accompanies the deterioration of a love relationship precipitates reflection upon life and cinema. In *Numéro deux* (1975) he critiques the dynamic between men and women in a working-class family, aligning the number 2 and its subordinate position with the video medium and the status of women within patriarchy. The relationship between the men and women of these films stands in for the fragile relationship that Godard seems to have with cinema history and the moving image itself. These relationships wither away as individuals become bored with what the other can offer, sensing that it falls into repetition and formula. Hollywood cinema could also be understood in a similar way, such that the generic formulas that characterize the kind of productions that come out of it seem to lose their vitality as time goes on. Moreover, throughout his career, particularly after his production of *Ici et ailleurs* in 1976, Godard has explored the heterosexual couple as a model for thinking ontologically beyond Twoness, beyond thinking relationality as an either/or proposition. Between the terms of the dialectic, between life and death, the face-to-face encounter, the link between signifier and signified, between one shot and the next, Godard has repeatedly worked through relations between two entities by conceiving them through the relation between men and women. In doing so, he has sought moments of contingency and ephemerality that escape binarized thinking. In the reiteration of reified ways of thinking, feeling, and loving within our neoliberal culture, the commodification of difference forecloses the possibility of the new and the otherness of the other.

As the couples in *Goodbye to Language* come to realize the limits of human language in consolidating relations with their ostensibly loved other, Godard seems to propose animal being as key to thinking otherness beyond language, beyond the mere givenness of human discourse. In an interview with American National Public Radio (Dowell 2014), David Bordwell states that animality is key to Godard's film: "I think what he's talking about – and this is one of the reasons the dog Roxy is very prominent in the film – is that he's trying to get people to look at the world in a kind of an unspoiled way." And to think the animal, to question the relationship of otherness between human and animal, and then to ponder how animals might perceive and experience the world, is to love in a manner that

does not conform to a human-centred, narcissistic form of loving. Godard seems to aspire to this impossible alternative, to becoming-animal, through the non-human means of the cinema.

At the first key moment when animal-being is mused upon in *Goodbye to Language*, Godard features images of Roxy, footage he took while they went walking together. As is the filmmaker's wont, the film cites philosophical and literary references, and here provides passages from Levinas, Solzhenitsyn, Derrida, and even Godard himself. "No one could think freely if his eyes were locked in another's gaze," Godard says in a voice-over, citing Paul Valéry: "As soon as gazes lock, there are no longer exactly two of us. Staying alone becomes hard."² As the filmmaker recites these words, he shows us a close-up of Roxy looking into the camera. We are encouraged to wonder what the animal may or may not be thinking as it looks back at us. Simultaneously, we may also discover the truism of Valéry's claim: that two individuals, looking into each other's eyes, seem to become one through a continuous circuit of vision, between self and other, human and animal, bound together through a shared act of looking and being looked at. The second movement of Beethoven's seventh symphony then comes on in the soundtrack. A shot of a train arriving at a station follows, recalling the famous actuality film of the Lumière brothers, *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, from 1895. Here it is Roxy on the platform, not the modern human beings exiting the train in the original actuality film. "Staying alone becomes hard," Godard says again over shots of the animal: "It is not animals who are blind. Man, blinded by conscience, is incapable of seeing the world. What is outside, wrote Rilke, can be known only via an animal's gaze." The last line references the eighth of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, which appeals to a non-human, egoless gaze. At this juncture, I would like to take a philosophical detour to explicate how this gaze may be understood from the perspective of our human-centred ways of knowing.

In first few lines of this particular elegy, Rilke introduces a category much discussed by scholars. The poet writes:

All other creatures [*Kreatur*] look into the Open
with their whole eyes. But our eyes,
turned inward, are set all around it like snares,
trapping its way out to freedom.
We know what's out there only from the animal's
face [...]. (Rilke 2005, 8.1–6)

² I am grateful to the website organized by Ted Fendt (2014) for providing starting points for identifying Godard's myriad citations.

Here, the “out there” is apparently referenced in Godard’s film, and, notably, the translational slippage between “gaze” and “face” pivots around the German *Antlitz*, which may be translated as “visage” (related to vision). The key term for Rilke however, is *das Offene*, or “the Open.” The Open names the “pure space” that emerges as life is lived in absolute congruity, egoless, in a manner most proper to its specific capacities for living, within its worldly surroundings and in accordance with the cyclical time of birth and death. The Open does not simply refer to openness, as an expanse of sky or the ocean, for these remain mediated by human language, metaphysical ideas, and culture, always already informed by openness as such. The Open itself is not an entity, but has to do with the comportment of a living being toward its immediate surroundings. Thus “all other creatures,” plants and animals, may be said to be naively embedded within particular contexts in which the Open comes forth through a mutual collaboration, as a fluid continuity between creaturely life and its environment.

“But our eyes,” Rilke continues in these opening lines, are “turned inward.” The human being, particularly the human embedded within modernity, has fallen away from this mutual co-existence of itself and the surrounding world, blocking off a clear path toward the Open. Instrumental rationality and representational thinking have set the human being off from the world, setting up a spectatorial relation in the epistemological gap between human and non-human life:

And we: spectators, always, everywhere,
looking *at* everything and never *from*!
It floods us. We arrange it. It decays.
We arrange it again, and we decay. (Rilke 2005, 8.66–69; emphasis in original)

The Open cannot be unconcealed by an objectifying vision, yet modern human life cannot fully relinquish its ontological destiny, for it necessarily sets the world up as representation in order to rationally comprehend the outside. How to represent the unrepresentable? This remains the aporia.

In his reading of the Open in his essay “What Are Poets For?,” which has been brought to our attention more recently by Giorgio Agamben (2004) in *The Open: Man and Animal*, Martin Heidegger concurs with the spectatorial position set out by Rilke. By asserting his ostensibly rational and scientific will, man inadvertently posits the world as a series of objects, ready for exchange and exploitation:

Man interposes something between himself and things that distract him from his purpose [...]. The Open becomes an object, and is thus twisted around toward the human being. Over against the world as an object, man stations himself and sets himself up as the one who deliberately pushes through all this producing. (Heidegger 1975, 108)

By standing over against, man turns the Open into an abstract concept, thus “turning inward,” and away from its own lived life. Cinema clearly plays a key role in this turning inward, back into the prison house of language, by representing the world as a picture, as an ontological thing that may be reproduced and manipulated at will. It compels humans to look voyeuristically at others, encouraging a relationship of mastery toward the beings and diegetic world represented on screen.

The paradoxical metaphysics that constitutes the Open, which is both visible and invisible, and delineated by human-centred representational thinking, is at the heart of the problem of otherness in Godard's *Goodbye to Language*. Roxy embodies this possibility of otherness, the otherness of the animal and of animal-vision, which lies between human coupling. Beyond notions of gender and the culture of desire, beyond our overdetermined “war” between men and women, this other way of being opens up the possibility that we do not in fact “see” the other. Illustrating this, Godard remarks that “Roxy began to think” and then quotes Proust (words which the filmmaker misattributes to Claude Monet) over shots of the animal as he looks out on the water and sniffs at the bank of a river:

As the sun pierces, the river is still asleep in a dreamy fog. We see it no better than it sees itself. Here is already the river. But there, no more can be seen. All we see is the abyss. A fog that stops us from seeing further. At that spot on the canvas, paint not what we see, for we see nothing, nor what we cannot see, for we must paint only what we see. But paint that we don't see.

At moments like these, one is responsible not for painting the objects of the world, but for painting the nothingness that lies beyond the limits of human vision. Only by affirming the limits of human perception can one “see” the other. One must acknowledge the fact that such a vision cannot see nothingness, since it looks, to quote Rilke once more, “*at everything and never from.*”

Godard works with 3D cinematography, between two eyes, as well as stereo sound, between two ears, to continue his enquiry into themes of difference, non-uniformity, and the movement between worlds. It perhaps goes without saying that Godard does not utilize 3D technology in *Goodbye to Language* simply to create a greater sense of spectatorial immersion by heightening the reality effect of the cinema. In this respect, Godard does not toe-in the cameras slightly as do other filmmakers working with 3D. At certain moments in the film, he isolates one visual track from the other to produce the dizzying effect of difference between the left and right eyes, and then superimposes the images to propose the production of an in-between other. In the “Metaphor” section of the film, the husband of Ivitch yanks her away from Davidson, who was apparently her professor the previous semester. The left eye remains on Davidson looking at a book about the artist Nicolas de

Staël, while the right eye shows Ivitch's jealous husband pointing a gun at her. He says "I will finish you," and she responds that she doesn't care. At this dramatic moment, the viewer is made bewilderingly aware of the fact that human sight typically involves the use of binocular vision, of two organs that converge in one act.

With the use of 3D here and throughout the film, Godard seems to remind us of how binaries, here between left and right, are constantly being overcome, that the one between the two, which I am characterizing through animal-being, is always already a part of our comportment toward the world. Despite our binocular vision, we tell ourselves that we are to perceive the world as one ego, from a single perspective circumscribed by human discourse. And in contrast to the fantasy of a monocular, total vision, typically underscored in the history of film by the presence of a single projected image, produced by a single camera, Godard's unconventional use of 3D reminds us of the facticity of embodied vision. *Goodbye to Language* seems to be showing how thinking beyond Twoness means perceiving first the radical otherness that persists between two individuals, between men and women, left and right, and then resisting the "phenomenological reduction" that almost inevitably follows. To resist reducing the Two means also to resist the dialectical either/or, the all-too-human zero-sum game, that subtends the two terms of the binary. In this, Godard seems to be attempting to think a form of relationality, and proposing a form of otherness, that extends beyond the human toward another form of being. The animal seems to have a privileged perspective on this, in that animal-being seems more appropriate for adopting an appropriate apprehension of the Open, of the possibility of life beyond language, and of the ostensible nothingness of non-human being. And indeed, to be able to think the aporia of the other from within human discourse, according to Rilke's words on creaturely life, is to affirm that language both reveals and conceals this empty ontology. This affirmation seems to be aligned, for Godard, with the act of saying goodbye to human language, releasing one from it toward the otherness of the other. In order to explicate this, I return to Rilke and see how he describes how the creaturely gaze allows humans access to that which remains invisible and thus indeterminable.

In the eighth elegy, the poet notes that the experience of death's proximity brings human beings closer to the Open, looking both out and from the world with a creaturely gaze:

[...]. As a child,
 one may lose himself in silence and be
 shaken out of it. Or one dies and is it.
 Once near death, one can't see death anymore
 and stares out, maybe with the wide eyes of animals. (Rilke 2005, 8.19–23; emphasis in original)

These lines recall the interaction between the baby and dog that concludes *Goodbye to Language*. The thought of mortality brings the language-wielding human to the brink of a profound ontological paradox, to the spectral presence and absence of worldly, transient entities, the definition of the mortal human who stands precariously at the precipice between life and death. This metaphysical contradiction expresses that which lies at the heart of modernity itself, a contradiction that may be expressed by the vacillation between concealing and unconcealing that revolves around the question of technology. What is unconcealed in the Open is precisely reason's implicit tendency to obscure and eclipse the essential worldhood of worldly objects.

While Rilke suggests that the Open emerges as that affirmative possibility of being which sees the boundlessness of its worldly existence, Heidegger also criticizes Rilke's anthropocentric understanding of non-human being. Because such creaturely life does not possess language, it simply cannot be assumed that animals and plants see what has been concealed by representational thinking. Rilke thus idealizes animality without criticizing the anthropomorphism that assumes that we, as speaking humans, can know what and how the animal sees. In a footnote to his lectures on Parmenides, where he discusses the eighth elegy, Heidegger bluntly asks: "For Rilke, human 'consciousness,' reason, λόγος [*logos*], is precisely the limitation that makes man less potent than the animal. Are we then supposed to turn into 'animals'?" (Heidegger 1992, 154n1). Because animals do not poeticize, do not incorporate language into consciousness, and therefore do not have an instrumental relationship to the world, "the animal is excluded from the essential domain of the strife between unconcealedness and concealedness" (Heidegger 1992, 159–160). Yet this strife describes the precariousness of mortal being standing in the midst of the Open, for it is only man's instrumental relationship to the world, armed with his *logos*, that paradoxically allows the concealed-unconcealed Being of the Open to appear as an object of representational thought. "And never would it be possible for a stone," Heidegger concludes, "no more than for an airplane, to elevate itself toward the sun in jubilation and to move like a lark, which nevertheless does not see the Open. What the lark 'sees,' and how it sees, and what it is we here call 'seeing' on the basis of our observation that the lark has eyes, these questions remain to be asked" (Heidegger 1992, 160).

Godard's enquiry leads him back to the origin of the question of human being beyond language, toward the invention of the human and the realization that it is simultaneous with the production of its other. In our neoliberal age when notions of otherness have been co-opted as an institutional and metaphysical norm, *Goodbye to Language* delineates a radical critique of otherness, by affirming the one animal between the two human beings, that simultaneously helps guide us back to our own humanity.

During the scenes that take place in the living spaces of the couple, the man and woman debate about philosophy, Europe, mathematics, and the status of their relationship. Recalling a similar lengthy scene from *Breathless*, language allows them to engage with each other while also announcing their separation. “The reason for their being together,” Josette remarks in the third person, “seemed, although they claim the opposite, to each of them devoid of any future.” Over shots of Roxy, she asks Gédéon whether he has lived in his flat for a long time. He snaps in response, “Why ‘long’? ‘Do you live here’ is enough.” Roxy lies on a sofa, as if bored of their contentious back-and-forth. They continue to confront each other without clothing while the camera films their torsos in medium shot, depersonalizing their nude bodies. Later they converse while Gédéon sits on the toilet. “I talk about equality and each time you talk about shit,” she says, bringing together the transcendent and the profane. “Because that’s where we’re all equal,” he responds. As they face each other the sounds of defecation appear in the soundtrack. Godard seems to be stripping away the guise of disembodied thinking and enlightened speech that is concomitant with the human being in these moments. Rather than an abstract concept of universal equality, Gédéon appeals to a corporeal universality, a commonality that circumscribes language and brings the human being close to animal being. Between the Twoness of the heterosexual couple persists this possibility of animal life, a way of looking at and being in the world with the “animal’s face.”

As is the case in his previous works about heterosexual coupling, we can understand this relationality by turning to Godard’s meditation on the history of film and, in the case of *Goodbye to Language*, to his unusual use of 3D. Andrew Utterson reads this as one of many times that the director said “adieu” to the history of cinema itself. This is a history that has become the other of the myriad imaging technologies that dominate our culture: smartphones, video games, and videos that stream without end. Utterson writes:

In linking together notions of death and departure, in narrative as well as linguistic, formal and historiographical concerns, the very language of cinema – the “language” of the film’s title – is reimagined precisely at the moment of its perceived farewell – the “adieu” of the film’s title. (Utterson 2016)

In contrast to most commercial films, which utilize 3D in pursuit of the realization of what Bazin (1967, 17) calls “total cinema,” Godard uses 3D technology to mark the end of a film history that has largely been rendered in 2D, and the beginning of another. Appropriating an insight from Levinas, an intertitle from *Goodbye to Language* reminds us that the “adieu” in the film’s title also signifies a greeting to God or the Gods – “à Dieu” or “Ah dieux.” That is, the death of cinema also

makes possible its rebirth. It is not death or life, the death or life of cinema history, but death and life, death in life. From this it could be argued that cinema is, and always has been, in the process of dying. "In the context of technologies whose existence suggests the potential demise of one linguistic mode in the utterance of another," Utterson notes, "the word 'adieu' bridges the past – as a cinematic goodbye, farewell or departure – to, and via, the cinema of the present – as a cinematic greeting, welcome or arrival" (2016). Godard utilizes 3D, not to heighten the impression of reality in the cinema, but to interrogate the destiny of cinema history, to speculate whether, in a radically changed moving-image landscape, cinema has a future. And by affirming technological progress, of which 3D cinema is but one example, Godard affirms the life of cinema within this changed landscape, opening up the possibility of looking, as Rilke put it, "with the wide eyes of animals."

Above all, the implementation of 3D in *Goodbye to Language* provides an opportunity to pose essential questions about the essence and role of the moving image in human life. This opportunity comes at the end of film history, as it transforms into a new technological epoch. Analogously, it could also be said that questions about essence arrive as the speaking human being approaches the end of his or her life, in the inevitable encounter of life with its other, death. Once more, the turning point is the comportment of the human being toward language at the moment one says "adieu" to it. Toward the end of *Goodbye to Language*, Godard interpolates a reference to the preface from a 1952 novel by American science-fiction writer Clifford D. Simak called *City*. Images of Roxy and a long shot of an urban parking lot appear as Godard reads these words from the fictional work:

These are the stories that the Dogs tell when the fires burn high and the wind is from the north. Then each family circle gathers at the hearthstone and the pups sit silently and listen and when the story's done they ask many questions:

"What is Man?" they'll ask.

Or perhaps: "What is a city?"

Or: "What is a war?" (Simak 1952, 3)

City depicts a post-apocalyptic world, one more ethical and humane, that is populated, not by humans, but entirely by dogs. Such a world remains a fictional creation, but both *City* and *Goodbye to Language* remind us of the urgency to critically think the otherness of animal beings that coexist with us in our present world. Their presence as companions teaches us to continually question how we perceive and represent this world to ourselves.

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Steve Choe is associate professor of Critical Studies in the School of Cinema at San Francisco State University. He is the author of *Afterlives: Allegories of Film and Mortality in Early Weimar Germany* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) and *Sovereign Violence: Ethics and South Korean Cinema in the New Millennium* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).