

Histoire(s) of Art and the Commodity:
Love, Death, and the Search for Community
in William Gaddis and Jean-Luc Godard

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Declaration.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction	3
Methodology.....	7
Topography	11
Godard, Gaddis.....	17
Commodity, Catastrophe: the Artist Confined to Earth	21
Satanic and Childish Commerce / Art and Culture	22
Formal Protest, Formalism	29
Forging the Authentic: Art and Anamnesis	38
Broken Windows, Fallen Stairs: Transcendence Denied.....	47
Aristotle and Anagnorisis: Living with Catastrophe.....	52
Rauschenberg and <i>The Recognitions</i>	55
The Artist Alone.....	67
Secular Saints, not Salesmen: Art, Thermodynamic Fire, and Sacred Fire	72
Art, Sensations, and Atoms	73
Faith in the Image, Despair of the Word	82
Ambiguities: Forgers and Confidence Men.....	87
Under the Sign of Goya's <i>Saturn</i> ?	94
Malraux, Romantic / Malraux, Nihilist?	100
Art and Fire: The Phoenix and the Torch.....	106
Community: The (Sacred) Image and the Imaginary	112
Advertising, and Other Smoke and Mirrors: the Phantasmagoria of Everyday Life	117
The Age of Publicity.....	118
A Time to Love Desire and a Time to Die Buy: Advertising as Fascism.....	121
Beauty, The Phantasmagoria and the Sublime	133
Exchange, the Null Point of Community	143
Utopian Entertainment, Addictive Pleasures	147
"Deconstructing" Entertainment, Educating Desire.....	150
<i>Au Revoir, Travail</i> : Weil, Bataille, Malraux.....	155
Love and Death: Corpses <i>Sous l'Eau</i> , Community <i>Sur l'Eau</i>	162
<i>Histoire(s) d'amour</i>	163

<i>Nouvelle Vague: Community Saved From Drowning</i>	167
<i>Nouvelle Vague: A Récit of Two Lovers</i>	175
Gaddis' Love: <i>Agapē Agape</i>	181
Catastrophe: Godard's Love Poem	187
Voluntary Death: Gaddis' World of Strife	194
<i>Quelques Mots Injustes: Film Socialisme, Dissensus</i>	206
Concluding Remarks	216
Works Cited	223

Abstract

In the absence of a transcendental, communal ground for art, Hermann Broch declares that the artist no longer knows if he is “a saint or a salesman”. The works of William Gaddis and Jean-Luc Godard expose the limits of thinking in terms of such an opposition. Both dramatize the artist’s “imprisonment in immanence” after Kant, while also insisting on the strict separation of art and commerce to the point of devising formulations of art and truth best described as secular absolutes. Both artists desire to somehow “save” or “redeem” the world. However, by embracing the all or nothing of the Romantic “sacred flame” of art, both risk achieving only the latter. This is demonstrated via both artists’ responses to the perceived social effects of the commodity: the challenge to the *sensus communis* posed by the phantasmagoric world of advertising, and the disintegration of community in a world of relationships reduced to exchange. Though on opposite sides of the *sensus communis* debate, and working from two different conceptions of love, both artists attempt to outmanoeuvre the commodity by defining an ethics of love and the gift that is also an ethics of the Other. Despite the initial attraction of Godard’s formulation of love as eros over Gaddis’ use of agapē, ultimately both ethics are vulnerable to a similar critique: where one looks infinitely backward, the other looks infinitely forward, and both can be accused of an incompatibility with politics. That neither position is inevitable is illustrated through the work of Michel Serres and Jacques Rancière, philosophers whose critiques of harmony and consensus demand an art based not on unity, order, and truth, but on democracy, chance, and fiction.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Gold in the mountain
And gold in the glen,
And greed in the heart,
Heaven having no part,
And unsatisfied men.

— Herman Melville, "Gold in the Mountain"