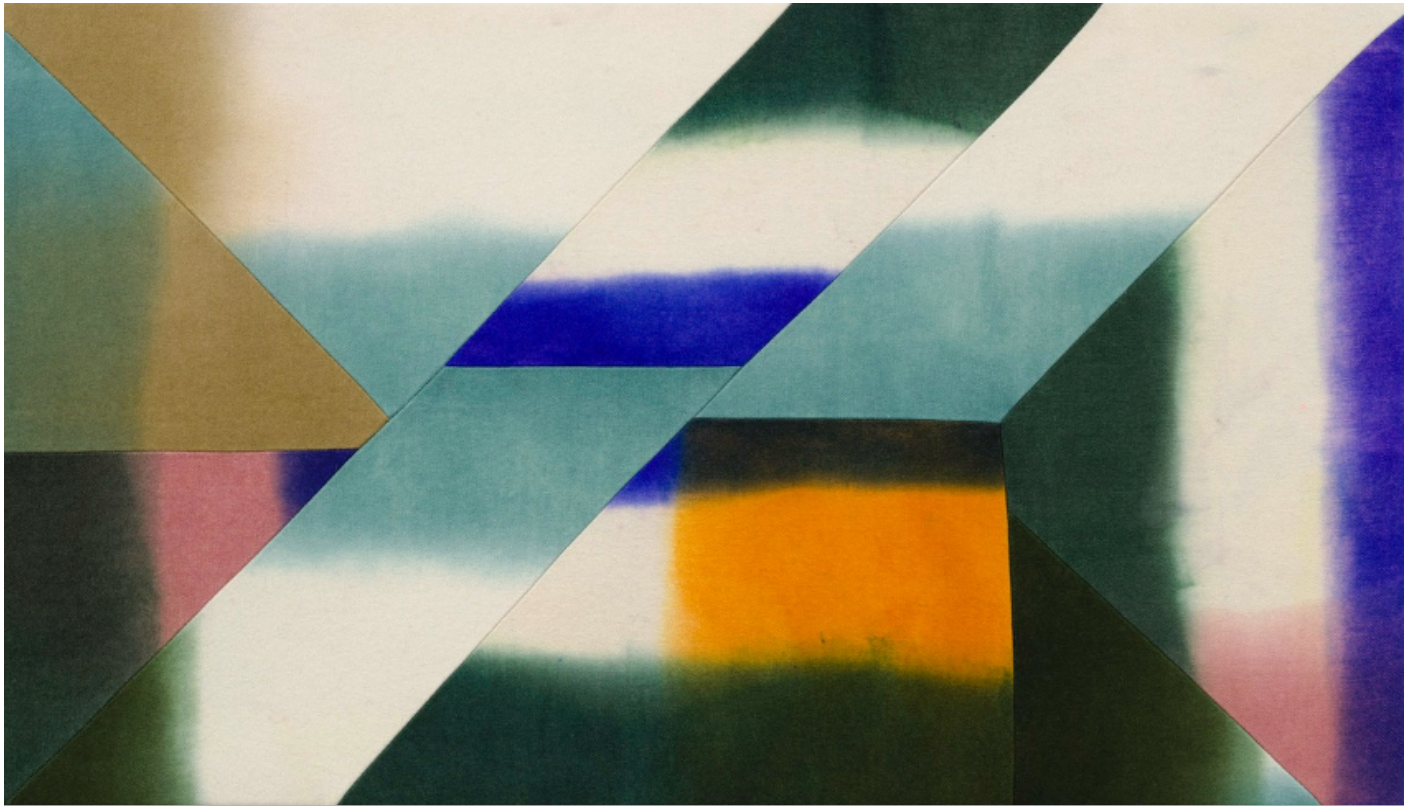




QUORUM

Published on January 3, 2023

Lacunary Films



Monique Wittig, with a foreword by Theo Manton

Today, on the 20th anniversary of her passing, we are excited to present Monique Wittig's essay on Jean-Luc Godard. Her first piece of criticism, it appeared on July 15, 1966, in The New Statesman. Over a half century later, Libération published a French version on September 28, 2022, translated by Theo Manton. Here at Quorum, the essay is accompanied by an illuminating foreword by Manton. Profuse thanks to Sande Zeig and the Monique Wittig Literary Estate; The New Statesman; and the artist Wilder Alison.
—Editors.

Foreword

Theo Manton

LACUNAE LACUNAE LACUNAE

AGAINST TEXTS

AGAINST MEANINGS

WHAT IS TO BE WRITTEN VIOLENCE

OUTSIDE THE TEXT

IN ANOTHER WRITING

THREATENING MENACING

MARGINS SPACES INTERVALS

RELENTLESSLY

GESTURE OVERTHROW

— *Les Guérillères*, Monique Wittig

Monique Wittig, visionary novelist and author of the foundational collection of essays in gender studies, *The Straight Mind* (1992), was also one of the great formal innovators of the second half of the 20th century. Following the prestigious Prix Médicis, which she received after storming the French literary scene with her debut novel *The Opopanax* (1964), Wittig repeatedly and publicly confessed the influence of Jean-Luc Godard's cinematic research on her writing.

In her first piece of criticism, an op-ed published in *The New Statesman* in July 1966, at the peak of Godard's influence, Wittig goes into further details about his practice. A highly prescient essay, most likely written with Godard's explosive 1965 road movie *Pierrot Le Fou* in mind, her "Lacunary Films (on Jean-Luc Godard)" develops an analysis that long predates *Cinema 2. The Time-Image* (1985), in which Gilles Deleuze puts forward the consonant language of "interstice" in Godard's cinematic

technique.

Praising discontinuity as the driving force and major innovation in Godard's films, Wittig calls them "lacunary," a mineralogical term she borrows from Jean-Marie Straub. Contrary to the continuity at work in conventional character and narrative development, there is no internal logic in such films, Wittig argues. The "wholehearted de-dramatization" of Godard's films instead displays a broken, open-ended sense of "mood," where events are juxtaposed rather than subordinated. The resulting "delirium of images" thus appears as an image of radical, absolute cinema inventing itself. Eventually, discontinuity establishes an aesthetic regime where the subjectivity of the reader-spectator is relieved of its contours, paving the way for Wittig's oeuvre to come.

Besides its precursory critical dimension, Wittig's text charts out some of her most profound interrogations, at the crossroads of film and literature. The consistency of her filmic concerns across her writing career is tangible thirty years later when Wittig returns to this early idea of a lacunary poetics: "Applied to literary writing, this designation indicates for me the fact of creating intervals, putting holes in the sentence at the grammatical level, of destabilizing the conventional order of discourse."

Already in 1964, Wittig uses a third-person narration with the evasive French pronoun "*on*" to distill the discontinuous feeling of childhood, the mood of this first novel that she mysteriously calls *The Opopanax*. In 1969, Wittig's second book *Les Guérillères*—anecdotally, it can be glimpsed as Delphine Seyrig's bedtime reading in Luis Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972)—offers a kaleidoscopic assemblage of textual clips about the revolutionary deeds of a hero designated by "*elles*" (the plural form of the pronoun "she" in French). To distort the narrative timeline and geographic continuity of the traditional novel genre, she mobilizes "a technique of montage ... as for a film" where "all the fragments [were] spread on the ground and organized."

Wittig would use the same process to piece together *The Lesbian Body* (1973), a collection of poems paying tribute to the Ancient Greek poetess Sappho, whose work only survived as fragments. In 1984, her interest in montage found its way into her play *The Constant Journey*, a feminist rewriting of Don Quixote staged in collaboration with her lifetime partner, American actor and filmmaker Sande Zeig. In this play, disjunction between sound and image is further evidence of a

Godardian-cinematographic inflection at the heart of her creative process.

For her last novel *Across the Acheron* (1985), Wittig lesbianized Dante's *Divine Comedy* and drew inspiration from Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), where topological discontinuity allows Orpheus to slide from the real world into hell by means of mirrors. Likewise, Wittig's narrator and Manastabal, her guide, jump from one dimension into the other, swapping Dante's circular progression for a discontinuous, "hopscotch" spatiality, as she explains in her Guggenheim Fellowship application letter.

In the late 1980s, film as a medium gained significant importance for Wittig. Teaming up with Zeig on an unfinished project for which French film director André Téchiné was hired as artistic advisor, she wrote a script for a film called *Jeanne d'Arc, ou plutôt Jeanne Rommée, car dans mon pays les filles prennent le nom de leur mère* ("Joan of Arc, or rather Joan Rommée since in my country daughters take their mothers' names"). Cocteau's influence runs throughout Wittig's scenario, from the tentative title *Le Testament de Jeanne d'Arc*, a reference to Cocteau's *Testament d'Orphée*, to handwritten notes about the "coctian" dimension she wants to give to some of the scenes she has in mind. Directions in the script mention "synchronous" and "non-synchronous" elements, such as sound interferences during scenes. Had the film seen the light of day, it would no doubt have furthered Wittig's lifelong lacunary style.

Although Wittig's pioneering literary and theoretical work has enjoyed a substantial rediscovery in recent years, essential aspects of her oeuvre remain in the dark. Her cinematographic reflection is one such area. In addition to being a valuable acknowledgment of Godard's vast impact, "Lacunary Films" will hopefully also illuminate unexplored corners of Wittig's oeuvre.

Lacunary Films

Monique Wittig

This a-rhetorical, broken speech ... The units of speech ... are—and must be—so perfectly mobile that by shifting them about at large in his poem, the author creates a kind of large animate body whose movement comes from perpetual

change, not internal 'growth.'

— "Literature and the Discontinuous" (1962), Roland Barthes

Jean-Marie Straub calls his film *Nicht Versöhnt* ["Not Reconciled," 1965] a "lacunary" film, quoting from Emile Littré: "Lacunary body, body composed of agglomerate crystals with spaces between them." It's a description which may reasonably be applied to the films of Jean-Luc Godard. They are lacunary in that their structure undergoes a process which operates at every level of the film and becomes a system: the process is discontinuity. Since it acts upon the development of the plot, we can no longer talk about plot development in discussing Godard's films, in which there is no single plot but several distinct events not necessarily linked one to another. This way of handling plot is contrary to that classical continuity of action which is a convention of French theatre, as it also is in those novels where the events recorded are joined together by links of necessity. Likewise, films may be subordinated to a continuity of action and often are.

Discontinuity works decisively at the level of character. People are no longer regarded in terms of character but in terms of mood. Clearly this process offers rich possibilities for a film, since mood is by definition variable and an invitation to movement. Unlike those classical "characters" which are as fixed as we once thought the stars were, a character's mood can never be given once and for all. If we wished to represent this kind of film graphically so as to emphasize its discontinuity, instead of a straight line we would sometimes find a broken line, and at other times widening circles such that to get from one to another would require the jumps made by protons and negatrons traveling from one orbit to another inside an atom. This discontinuity, affecting as it does the whole structure of the film, has internal consequences of varying order and importance. The film offers itself as a sustained explosion. It doesn't try to convince you of its own validity. In this respect it's unlike those works which are spoken of as spontaneous, true, natural and so on. Here, for example, is Voltaire in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique*: Corneille, Molière, Racine, Boileau "are the only geniuses to have adorned French poetry in the *Grand Siècle*. Almost all the others lacked naturalness, variety, eloquence, precision and that secret logic which should lie behind all thought." This can't be said of Godard, who is readily reproached with being inconsequential, incoherent, uneven, boring. He turns absolute discontinuity into a way of working and this way of working upsets what I shall call, for want of a better phrase, those articulate or rhetorical

systems we are more accustomed to, even in modern films. That is, we're accustomed to seeing character and events linked together in the cinema, whether character influences events or vice versa.

It's rather like a wave and its trough: now events ride on the crest of the wave and character represents the trough, now the positions are reversed—yet both are still tightly linked by some principle. They validate each other, both tending towards a final cause which keeps the film in suspense and validates it retrospectively. Events, character and dénouement, then, are based on a unique, fixed situation which underlies the whole structure of the film. You might say, without trying to be funny, that such films obey the convention of continuity of action, a convention as valid for modern works as for classical ones, for novels, plays and films alike. Littré defines “continuity of action” as “that convention which means that the main plot of a play should not be interrupted by any unnecessary episode.”

Let me quote another opinion of Littré's:

In *Le Médecin Malgré Lui*, Act Three, Scene Two—where two peasants come to ask Sganarelle for a remedy for their mother and he gives them cheese—is completely episodic. This is a sin against the continuity of action, although from another point of view it may be read as complementary to the portrait of the main character. As it stands, it could be cut from the scene without the audience realizing that anything was missing.

This testifies to what the spectator is generally looking for in the cinema: the portrayal of a real character and a running plot unimpeded by pointless episodes. I can't help feeling that Godard's films are made up of the episodes Littré was so unhappy to find in Molière. What's more, those episodes are not linked by any inner logic. Yet the mere fact of choosing to juxtapose them is enough to give them an order, the order which I call discontinuous and which represents the way the film's sequences exist together. In this context, Godard simply isn't interested in what we normally think of as the psychology of his characters. He gives us pictures of characters in motion which reflect nothing more than moods. His films contain no great and eternal human sentiments. There is no main plot, no single situation, but rather a multiplicity of situations. The events have no necessary, inevitable connection one with another. Instead of a development, there is a succession. No more inner logic: the necessities of the work are no longer at the level of character

or plot but of the film's images. It's not related events which justify the film: their forward march may be interrupted at any moment. In this kind of film nothing justifies anything, the film itself is not its own justification: it invents itself, it is absolute cinema. From a few items it produces a multiplicity—a delirium—of images.

We are faced with the exact opposite of what Brecht called Aristotelian dramaturgy, whose forms live on in many modern dramas. Godard's films make no effort to persuade the spectator to identify with their characters or acknowledge that before his eyes are the very finest specimens of the eternal human being, whose every feature is carefully drawn from nature. He makes no effort to please by offering a plot with only one possible development. And so we are involved in a wholehearted de-dramatization. Death and the fortunes of love are treated in the same way as making a cup of coffee, reading the paper or getting up in the morning. These are facts. The way Godard juxtaposes them produces a highly original rhythm. This rhythm is characteristic not only of the relationships between the units of the film but also of those lacunary bodies, which similarly include spaces. Challenging both logic and rhetoric, Jean-Luc Godard's films might develop in many different ways: their progress is broken, interrupted. Fritz Lang remarks in Godard's *Le Mépris* [1963]: "it's logical that the illogical should go against logic." He is quoting—from a preface by Corneille.

Monique Wittig (1935–2003) was a French avant-garde novelist. A central figure in the French lesbian and feminist movements, Wittig also wrote theoretical essays foundational to gender studies.

Theo Manton (Harvard University) is completing a PhD on Monique Wittig's oeuvre.

Image credit:

Wilder Alison: *vio/etrimmed a /hermit /sun— a good f/iend* (2021)

21" x 36.6"

Dyed wool and thread

Photo credit: Pierre LeHors

Share this:



Like this:

THIS ENTRY WAS POSTED IN: [Quorum](#)

PREVIOUS POST

Winter 2022: Volume 76, Number 2

SEARCH FILM QUARTERLY:

Type to search...
