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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Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Discipline of English and Creative Writing

The University of Adelaide

December 2013
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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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Acknowledgements

Thanks go to my supervisors, Drs. Heather Kerr and Ben McCann, for their infinite patience, to my parents, for their infinite trust and support, and of course to Jean-Luc Godard and William Gaddis, for (even if only on occasion) managing to hold to the belief that other people exist.
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”