

SEEING FROM SCRATCH

with

THE POSTCARD GAME

SEEING FROM SCRATCH ◇ 15 LESSONS WITH GODARD

with

THE POSTCARD GAME ◇ RICHARD DIENST

CABOOSE ◇ MONTREAL

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LEARN

- 3 In 1979 Jean-Luc Godard filled a page of *CAHIERS DU CINÉMA* with the word LEARN (*APPRENDRE*).¹ It appears twenty-two times. What do we do when we look at this page? Is it a story, a poem, a dialogue, or a mantra? Is it just one word repeated over and over, or is it a different word each time? Are we reading a text or seeing an image? Maybe the eye will take just a moment to ‘get it’ and move on, or maybe it will linger a while, never really deciding what it is looking at.

This page of words appears in the middle of a report from Mozambique, where Godard’s company was advising the government about setting up the newly-decolonised country’s first television system. We can read ‘*apprendre*’ as an imperative verb addressed to Mozambicans as they build a new society, but also as an infinitive verb that defines a need and a situation that everybody faces. What do we (all) have to learn?

The easiest way to read the page is to see it as a syllabus or a to-do list. Learn one thing, then another, then another. When you reach the end of the list, you take a test, get a degree, and start the next list. That is what education usually looks like: a seemingly never-ending series of lists. In that setting, the word ‘LEARN’ will always look like a command, because the first goal of every lesson is obedience. Some people like to learn, just as some people like to obey.

- 4 But what if we see the repetition of the word ‘learn’ in a less authoritarian and more improvisational way? We learn, we re-learn, we learn again. It is not a matter of learning ‘the same thing’ over and over, or learning a series of things in the proper order, but of starting over and over, always facing the possibility that the next round will bring something unexpected. As long as the process runs in twists and turns rather than a straight line, each moment of learning can recast everything that came before, even to the point of unlearning it. In that setting, it is hard to say whether the first ‘learn’ could possibly know what the twenty-second ‘learn’ might call for.

That is the kind of learning that Godard is recommending: not a continuous, finalised sequence, but a persistent, iterative practice. Not a regime of tests but a protocol of experiments. We have to keep learning, not because of some pious reminder that we can never know enough, but because we want to cultivate a certain attitude towards the world that is both actively engaged and attentively reserved. At every turn we have to test what we already know against whatever prompts us to think things through all over again.

Each time the word ‘learn’ appears, it asks something different of us, depending on what came before and what might come next, on what’s right over there and what’s somewhere else, what’s visible and thinkable and what’s out of sight and out of mind. Sometimes the word is a solid stepping stone, sometimes it slips in unpredictable ways, sometimes there are little rhyming passages, and sometimes the pattern flies apart. As we read down the page, the line of words becomes a tenuous string of images; it doesn’t compose a sentence because it is actually a movie, where every image asks us to see something else.

LEARN TO SEE BEFORE LEARNING TO READ.²



To learn to see before learning to read.



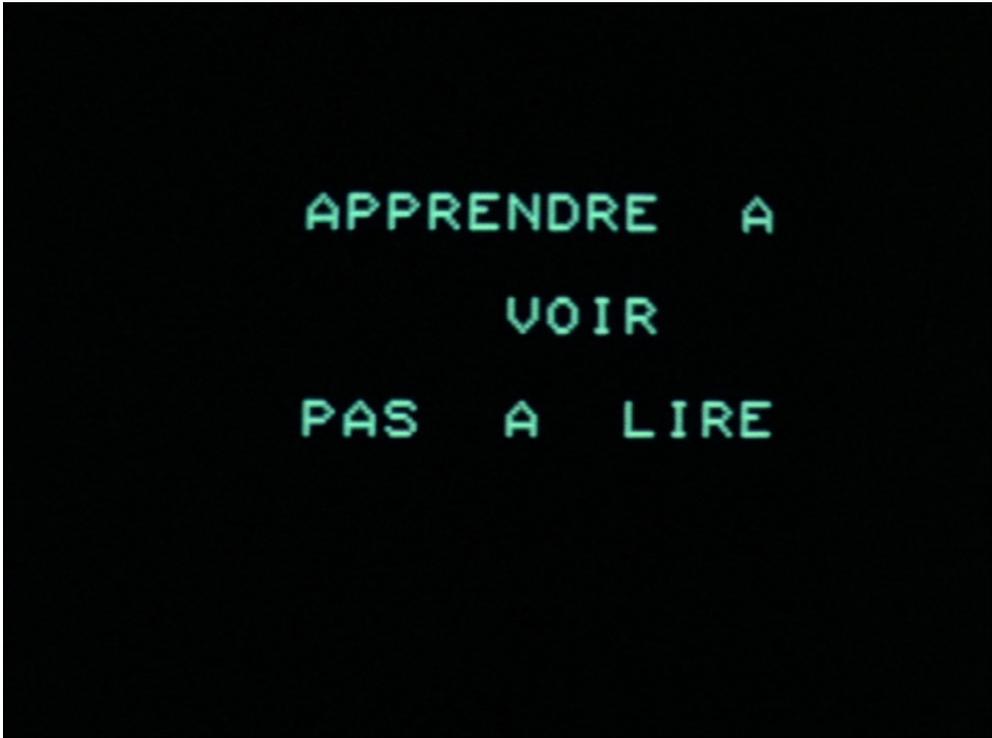
Isn't that cool?

- 7 Do we really need to learn how to see? We usually assume that seeing comes naturally, while reading comes by good fortune and hard work. Being able to see would be a matter of physical capacity, however complex and variable, while being able to read would depend on more specialised skills, from training the eyes to follow a line of letters to learning enough vocabulary and grammar to assemble phrases. In logic and in life, reading supposedly presupposes seeing, like listening presupposes hearing, or whistling presupposes breathing. Seeing, along with the other senses, helps to orient us in our bodies, but reading orients us in language, which offers access to worlds beyond our own perceptions and experiences.

In fact, John Berger begins his book *WAYS OF SEEING* (1972) with this statement: 'Seeing comes before words'. As a statement about child development or world history, that might sound obvious, but it is not quite right. Each of us may be able to see long before we are able to read, but that does not mean that words keep a distance, waiting for us to grow up. Words are already there from the moment each of us is born, shaping what is seen and who sees it. For infancy and history alike, in this day and age, seeing and reading are always entangled, never one without the other.

- 8 Evidently something important happens when we stop seeing words as strange marks and start reading them as meaningful signs. From that point on, the haphazard process of learning one's 'mother tongue' becomes codified, and the learning curve bends towards reading. And henceforth it is not only words that we will try to read, but everything else too, including images. With the acquisition of language, we look at the world as if it might already be something other than it appears. Reading comes 'after' seeing and hearing in that special sense, because it is supposed to engage our higher faculties of cognition, capable of tapping into invisible layers of meaning over and above mere perception. It promises mastery over all kinds of knowledge about the world and the cosmos, from brute facts to subtle mysteries. Certain specialists in reading—judges and critics, for example—exercise decisive social power, adjudicating and appraising the significance of everything they survey. Whatever concessions may be made to the power of images, the power of words (and numbers) still triumphs, as it has for thousands of years.

That's the usual story, anyway. But by now it should be clear that things are not so simple. Perhaps seeing and reading are neither sequential nor complementary, but actually *antagonistic*. Perhaps we need to wonder whether reading actually destroys our ability to see. In fact, that is the context in which these words appear in *FILM SOCIALISME* (2011): a young woman asserts, as a political right, the demand children should learn to see before being taught to read. It is just one step away from challenging the supremacy of reading altogether.



Godard had already raised this possibility in *HERE AND ELSEWHERE* (*ICI ET AILLEURS*, 1976), when these words appeared on the screen:

**LEARN TO
SEE
NOT TO READ**

Now the lesson becomes clearer and more harsh: we ought to learn to see first, because as soon as we learn to read, it's too late. Or again: we have to learn to see in order to counteract our having learned to read. To unlearn the wrong lessons.

- 10 This refusal of reading is hard to grasp unless we admit the possibility that we have forgotten how to see, or that we never really knew in the first place. Moreover we would have to suppose that this blindness is cultural and historical rather than physiological. 'Learning to see' would thus demand constant vigilance, if not outright hostility, towards all of the privileges invested in the act of reading—all those individual acts of discrimination and judgment that add up to the whole edifice of scriptural authority. The accusation is not just that reading directs all questions of knowledge to some higher power or some deeper meaning, as if we ought to leave behind the shared world of the senses; it is that people who embrace the higher value of reading thereby lose the ability to *see*, to *think*, and to *act on* whatever they encounter. So the 'enemy' is not reading as such, let alone language as such, but the whole system of procedures and apparatuses that wields a monopoly power over whatever counts as reality. Godard is very clear about that authority: in one place he calls it 'the state', and in another he calls it 'capital'.

- 11 Godard is also clear about the alternative: he calls it 'socialism', and it is immediately connected to seeing. As he says in 1978: 'The newborn child is, I think, a socialist; she needs to see first and to touch what she sees and to see what she touches'. But the child doesn't stay like that: she learns to read instead, and henceforth knows the world only through what can be said about it. There would be socialism, then, when people can 'get along on the basis of what they have seen' and produce their everyday lives by relating their own seeing and touching with those of others.³ In this sense, all of Godard's films since the late 1960s could have been called **FILM SOCIALISME** (and not just the one he released in 2011) because all of them propose seeing and touching as fundamental social bonds, for better and for worse—bonds that cinema alone can teach us to make.

What had first seemed like a gentle proposal about our sensory education has turned out to be a call for insurrection. Perhaps this lesson will seem too combative, but there is no going back: we can never again view the relationship between seeing and reading as a natural division of labour or a peaceful compromise. Here, then, is a new starting place for our lessons: we do not yet know how to see, and our ignorance is part of our oppression.

**WE CAN SAY ALL WE WANT ABOUT WHAT WE SEE,
BUT WHAT WE SEE IS NEVER LODGED IN WHAT WE SAY.⁴**





The gap between seeing and saying cannot be reduced to the difference between images and words, or between visual perception and language. What we say can go on and on, as precise and profuse as you like, without ever capturing or enclosing what we see. Likewise, what we see opens up its own kind of zone, irreducible to the efforts of speech to give it form and meaning. Indeed, there appears to be such a rift between seeing and saying that nothing can guarantee a connection, let alone an equivalence.

- 14 And yet, most of the time, the split between seeing and saying seems untroubled. Without worrying too much about it, we carry out a loose and apparently adequate translation between them all the time. Sometimes the distinction between seeing and saying seems to be a matter of personal preference: some people like to talk, others like to look. Even if we assume, based on some philosophical prejudice, that saying is fundamentally truer than seeing (or vice versa), we usually switch between them as if they were overlapping or complementary ways of dealing with ‘the same thing’. And as long as we assume that seeing and saying are grounded in this ‘same thing’—which may be either an external world to which they refer, or an internal thought process around which they circulate, or both—the difference between them would be simply a matter of inconvenience.

Only in certain charged moments—like trying to describe what happened during a soccer match or a bank robbery—do we admit the inadequacy of words to what we have seen. Or it can happen the other way around—say, during a game of Pictionary or a conversation without a shared language—when we are forced to make a picture of something that we could have spoken quite easily. Whenever speaking or seeing—or the ability to toggle between them—fails us, we typically ‘internalise’ the flaw by blaming our eyes, our memory, our talent or our vocabulary. If we do not find a way to work around it, the gap can seem like an abyss, prompting us to doubt whether it is ever possible to make ourselves understood.

- 15 Some might say that seeing and saying remain dissociated only because we have not yet learned how to integrate them. Of course both *description*—exact verbal notation—and *observation*—careful visual examination—can be practised and improved. Perhaps we can design an educational program to combine seeing and saying, cultivating a kind of articulate attentiveness. And so we might hope for a virtuous circle: the better we can say what we see, the better we can see whatever we are able to say. And so on, round and round, until all things are seen, spoken and thereby known.

Contemporary theory would suggest that we have to jettison this whole model. There is no 'mind's eye' or 'fixed reality' where seeing and saying can be reconciled. We might even begin to suspect—to anticipate the argument a little—that seeing and saying do not belong to the same person, let alone the same world.

Let's return to the original statement: 'We can say all we want about what we see, but what we see is never lodged in what we say'. This line is spoken in Godard's film *LE GAI SAVOIR* (1969) by Patricia, who is instructing her friend Émile on the basic principles of 'joyful wisdom'.

In fact, this is an exact quotation from Michel Foucault's book *THE ORDER OF THINGS (LES MOTS ET LES CHOSES)*, first published in 1966. It appears in the middle of his celebrated explication of the painting *LAS MENINAS* by Velázquez. (This is not the first time Godard has quoted a text about Velázquez, but that's another story.)

- 16 Foucault is explaining why a verbal description of the painting, in particular an inventory of the people represented there, would be unhelpful in an effort to understand what it makes visible. '[The] relation of language to painting is an infinite relation', he writes, not simply because words are inadequate to convey the richness of the visible, but because 'the space where one speaks' and 'the space where one looks' operate differently. Here is the passage where Godard found his phrase:

[It] is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax.⁴

- 17 Foucault suggests that we should take the ‘incompatibility’ of language and vision as a starting-point rather than an obstacle. It is this incompatibility that makes the act of representation, such as the painting itself, both possible and necessary. (If we could reliably say what we mean and show what we have seen, we would not need to worry about the limits of representation.) His reading of Velázquez proceeds to demonstrate how the visible spectacle of the painting is structured by several gaps and blind spots. On one hand, the scene presented by the painting can never quite anchor (though it tries very hard) its relationship to both the painter and the spectator, who stand outside and look; on the other hand, it can never quite register its relationship to the royal figure whose power it was supposed to make manifest. Either way, no matter how full the spectacle may be, the painting can never fulfil its visual agenda. The painting does indeed ‘show’ us quite a bit, and it does indeed ‘say’ quite a lot, but there is no actual ‘place’ where all this showing and saying comes together. There’s nobody there: not Velázquez, not the king, not us.

Again, we should remember that Foucault was writing about this particular painting in order to begin his examination of the regime of ‘classical representation’. He wants to explain how different regimes of representation have, in different historical periods, reconfigured the relationship between seeing and saying. Like Godard, Gilles Deleuze wants to draw a more general conclusion from Foucault’s argument.

18 Here is Deleuze's commentary on Foucault:

There is a disjunction between speaking and seeing, between the visible and the articulable: 'what we see never lies in what we say', and vice versa. The conjunction is impossible for two reasons: the statement has its own correlative object and is not a proposition designating a state of things or a visible object, as logic would have it; but neither is the visible a mute meaning, a signified of power to be realised in language, as phenomenology would have it. The archive, the audiovisual is disjunctive.⁵

Notice how Deleuze has shifted the terrain from 'seeing and saying' (which are too easily confined to individual subjects) and 'images and words' (which are too easily mistaken for objective raw material) to 'the visible and the articulable'. For Foucault and Deleuze, these new terms are dynamic and constitutive 'strata' of knowledge, historically specific and variable.

19 Deleuze elaborates:

As long as we stick to things and words we can believe that we are speaking of what we see, that we see what we are speaking of, and that the two are linked: in this way we remain at the level of an empirical exercise. But as soon as we open up words and things, as soon as we discover statements and visibilities, words and sight are raised to a higher exercise that is *a priori*, so that each reaches its own unique limit which separates it from the other, a visible element that can only be seen, an articulable element that can only be spoken. And yet the unique limit that separates each one is also the common limit that links one to the other, a limit with two irregular faces, a blind word and a mute vision.⁶

Having pushed the opposition this far—where ‘visibilities’ and ‘statements’ operate apart from the particular subjects who witness or utter them—Deleuze wants to ensure that we do not resort to any metaphysical compromises or reconciliations to re-centre or reunify them in the name of some invisible, inexpressible Beyond. Never fully synthesised together, never fully separated from each other, seeing and saying operate according their own modalities, whether collaborating or not. That is why we cannot ascend to some higher seat of reason where their limits could be authoritatively judged. Every attempt at knowledge encounters the disjunction between ‘the visible’ and ‘the articulable’, which is configured in various ways, even as it marks out (or leaves out) an uncertain third dimension that they both traverse.

20 For Deleuze and Foucault, this third dimension has nothing transcendental or trans-historical about it. Instead it can be defined as the open-ended space where knowledge deploys itself strategically, where the differential relations of seeing and saying must be grasped in terms of 'power', or rather 'power relations'. As Deleuze puts it: 'Seeing and Speaking are always already completely caught up within power relations which they presuppose and actualise'. For all of their stratifications, statements and visibilities compose a non-stratified 'scene' where thinking finds new potentialities. Deleuze: 'Seeing is thinking, and speaking is thinking, but thinking occurs in the interstice, or the disjunction between seeing and speaking'.⁷ This is a very useful formulation, because it indicates all of the work that has yet to be done: for every act of making-visible or making-articulate, we have to examine what powers are in play, what asymmetries and imbalances are at work, how those relationships might be altered, and what remains unseen and unsaid.

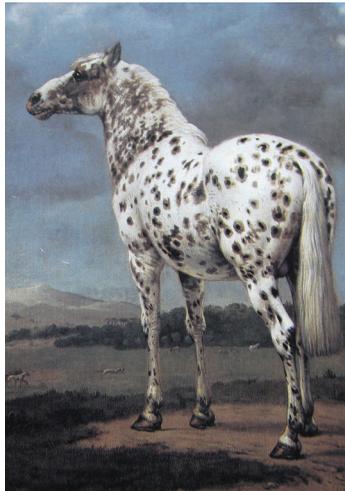
Godard's path takes a somewhat different route. No sooner has Patricia finished telling Émile about the difference between what-we-see and what-we-say than she offers an alternative statement. You will have to turn the page to see what she says.

Scene: a classroom, mid-afternoon

Cast: a group of people

Step One. Pick a card, any card.

Take a stack of postcards, at least a hundred or so. It is best if they have been collected over many years from various places: postcards bought but never sent, postcards sent from distant friends, postcards that turned up for no reason at all. Shuffle them like a deck of cards. Then ask someone to pick a card, any card.



Ask: what is this? 'A horse', someone might say. 'An Appaloosa horse', someone else might add. Good answers, but not quite right: try again. 'A painting', someone will suggest. 'A photograph of a painting', to be more precise. That's closer but still not there. 'It's a postcard', someone always says at last.

105 Here is the first lesson: *Learn to see the card before the horse.*

Step Two. What is a postcard?

The answer seems simple enough. There is usually an image on one side and writing on the other. But before we can talk about one side or the other, it is necessary to ask—what holds the image and the writing together? It is important to notice the fact that it is literally a card, a piece of cardboard or a sturdy kind of paper. (It's possible to conceive of postcards made of other stuff, too.) We don't usually pause to think about the 'stuff' whenever words and pictures appear: we are so eager to read and to look that we don't think about the material that makes it possible—paper, screens, ink, electricity. Are images and texts always made of 'stuff'? Yes, always. It may seem obvious to talk about the clunky materiality of a woodcut or a Daguerreotype, but the sleek glowing screen of a MacBook Air hardly registers as 'stuff' at all. No matter how flashy they are, even digital images are really postcards: that is to say, images and texts passing by way of chips and pixels, even when the texts are unreadable codes and the images move and multiply across the web faster than we can see.

—First hypothesis: *Every image has the attributes of a postcard. For that matter, so does every text.*

—Second hypothesis: *We can use postcards to help us define not only images in general and texts in general, but the general principles of their relationship.*

Now, again: pick another card, any card.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Dienst is Professor in the Department of English at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. He is the author of **THE BONDS OF DEBT: BORROWING AGAINST THE COMMON GOOD** and **STILL LIFE IN REAL TIME: THEORY AFTER TELEVISION**. His essays on Jean-Luc Godard, Bertolt Brecht and cultural theory have appeared in numerous anthologies and journals.

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Seeing from Scratch: Fifteen Lessons with Godard Richard Dienst

SEEING FROM SCRATCH ◇ **15 LESSONS WITH GODARD**
with
THE POSTCARD GAME

SEEING FROM SCRATCH: 15 LESSONS WITH GODARD arrives on our virtual bookshelves at the perfect time. Never have we needed to rethink how we teach and learn about images more than we do now, a time when we are buried beneath bewildering imagery and when higher education is being transformed in dispiriting ways before our very eyes. Richard Dienst offers us a series of provocations infused with a wit and intelligence equal to that of Jean-Luc Godard, whose work is the inspiration for this ambitious attempt to rebuild a pedagogy of images from the ground up. It should inspire students and teachers of film alike in ways that will surely surprise them.

— Christopher Pavsek, Simon Fraser University

In **SEEING FROM SCRATCH: 15 LESSONS WITH GODARD**, Richard Dienst teaches us how to *see* and thereby think through the Swiss filmmaker's cinematic imaginary. Combining his acute critical lens with a more playful example from a postcard game, Dienst illuminates Godard's strategic deployment of a system of montage in which a careful selection of images is set in motion, generating a series of profound meditations. Dienst persuasively demonstrates how images, even when isolated, are never alone but exist in complex relationships with each other, forming everchanging constellations. **SEEING FROM SCRATCH** traces the evolution of the nonagenarian's image theory from the 1960s to more recent iterations in **THE IMAGE BOOK** (2018) or **GOODBYE TO LANGUAGE** (2014). The lessons we learn from Dienst extend beyond an understanding of Godard and make us rethink the way in which moving images can produce critique in the twenty-first century.

— Nora M. Alter, Temple University

RICHARD DIENST is Professor in the Department of English at Rutgers University. He is the author of **THE BONDS OF DEBT: BORROWING AGAINST THE COMMON GOOD** and **STILL LIFE IN REAL TIME: THEORY AFTER TELEVISION**. His essays on Jean-Luc Godard, Bertolt Brecht and cultural theory have appeared in numerous anthologies and journals.