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YOU NEED VIOLENCE AND SINCERITY:  
GODARD AND THE MANUFACTURING OF A REVOLUTIONARY CINEMA

by

MATTHEW BALLINGER

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2017

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You Need Violence and Sincerity:  
Godard and the Manufacturing of a Revolutionary Cinema

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Matthew Ballinger

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in  
Satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

You Need Violence and Sincerity: Godard and the Manufacturing of a Revolutionary Cinema

By

Matthew Ballinger

Advisor: Professor David Gerstner

Godard's cinema of the mid-to-late-sixties offers a compelling body of work in which we can witness the director making a more conscious effort to renounce the tendencies of what Peter Wollen terms 'orthodox cinema,' through a more disruptive and textual approach, which, of course, mirrored his increasingly radical politics. This attempt to marry politics and art raises the question of what a genuinely revolutionary cinema would look like, or if it is even possible at all. This thesis will attempt to tackle just such a question, discussing three of Godard's films from the period to examine this evolving radical tendency: *Bande à part*, *Masculin féminin*, and *La Chinoise*. Such a notion of revolutionary cinema as separate from the bourgeois norm will be complicated by thinkers such as Derrida, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Debord, who, within the context of this argument, are far from suggesting that such a break or negation is impossible, but that the pieces for such a split may be present already. An idea that will be explored through Godard's use in the films of pre-existing cultural/political material. It is Godard's implementation of the aesthetic tools at his disposal which proves so critical, a fact which may ultimately serve to confirm the intent. The emphasis, therefore, will be on 'manufacturing' as much as it will be on 'revolutionary cinema.'

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## Part One: The Horatii of *Bande à part*

### I. How Do We Kill Time?

Godard, Wollen tells us in his essay “Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent d’est,” fits squarely within a key modernist impulse: “Godard is like Ezra Pound or James Joyce who, in the same way, no longer insist on speaking to us in their own words, but can be seen more as ventriloquist’s dummies, through whom are speaking—or rather being written—palimpsests, multiple *Niederschriften* (Freud’s word) in which meaning can no longer be said to express the intention of the author or to be a representation of the world, but must like the discourse of the unconscious be understood by a different kind of decipherment” (423). A modernist text then, as Wollen outlines and attributes to Godard, is one in which multiple voices converge, and where any clear-cut attempt to grasp its meaning as such fails. The key, then, to approaching such a text is found in the “discourse of the unconscious,” which must “be understood by a different kind of decipherment.” These terms, discourse and decipherment, will thus allow us to better examine this modernist impulse within Godard, and what it means to understanding his discourse as seen through a particular scene.

One such modernist tactic is a familiar trick often associated with the *Nouvelle Vague*, namely that of re-staging genre. With it, Godard appropriates and subverts familiar cinematic genres in order to rehearse his own aesthetic and stylistic—or better yet, intellectual—impulses. *Alphaville* (1965), for instance, adopts the science-fiction format, while *Les Carabiniers* (1963) plays on the war film, *Une femme est une femme* (1961) the musical, and *À bout de souffle* (1960), of course, the gangster genre. But with all these examples, and as with most things cinematic, Godard brings something more significant and ambitious than mere homage, or even symbolic deconstruction, to the cinema. His cinematic quotes operate within a discourse that, as Wollen reminds us, require “a different kind of decipherment.” The film *Bande à part* invites an analysis of this kind.

On its surface, *Bande à part* arguably resembles *À bout de souffle* in both genre and theme. The plot in *Bande à part* follows the relationship between two criminals, Franz and Arthur (Sami Frey and

Claude Brasseur), and their young-love interest Odile (Anna Karina), as they contrive to pull off a robbery. Their plan, in the best tradition of the pulp novel and the *film noir* (textual parallels to which the film itself makes explicit gestures<sup>1</sup>), fails. Arthur is shot during the film's climax by his gangster uncle, while Franz and Odile leave for South America. In the end, *Bande à part* teases out the promotion of its pulp-novel characters within the Hollywood hierarchy of genres when we are told that "an upcoming film will reveal, in CinemaScope and Technicolor, the tropical adventures of Odile and Franz." Godard is playing with the promise to color the dark shadows of the film noir. With this open threat to transgress the genre stylistically (to rob it of its coded imagery), such a promise echoes a line delivered earlier in the film by an unidentified narrator (presumably Godard): "We'll let the images speak for themselves." It is from this seemingly evasive line that we will begin our investigation.

Hence, and not dissimilar to Godard's other films from the period, *Bande à part* adopts a playful, inquisitive attitude with its form, particularly with its aforementioned relationship to the crime genre; at the same time, Godard's film is reluctant to break entirely with its narrative structure, another technique common to his earlier work (especially *À bout de souffle*). Indeed, Godard never completely abandons a certain "representation of the world," while rethinking "film as a process of writing in images" (421). But these playful modernist tendencies become more and more pronounced throughout the course of the film, which allows—if not demands—that such a playfulness with cinematic form seriously compete with the narrative's overall progression. Of course, for Wollen such transgressions are always at the expense of the narrative, and act as a counterweight to "narrative transivity" and "dramatic equilibrium," which he posits as the cultural custodians of more orthodox-minded cinema (i.e., Hollywood).<sup>2</sup> The narrator's imperative, then, to "let the images speak for themselves" makes clear the film's preference for playing with form over plot, and to this end the most enduring scenes of the film are precisely those that do not—if only circumstantially—advance the narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> *Bande à part* is a very loose adaptation of Dolores Hitchens's 1958 novel *Fool's Gold*.

<sup>2</sup> He explains: "By narrative transivity, I mean a sequence of events in which each unit (each function that changes the course of the narrative) follows the one preceding it according to a chain of causation. In the Hollywood cinema, this chain is usually psychological and is made up, roughly speaking, of a series of coherent motivations. The beginning of the film starts with establishment, which sets up the basic dramatic situation—usually an equilibrium, which is then disturbed. A kind of chain reaction then follows, until at the end a new equilibrium is established" (419).

In this regard, the emblematic scene that best represents this appeal to “let the images speak for themselves,” and thus the scene that is significant to this project, occurs when the narrator, referencing the genre at hand, informs us that Odile, Franz, and Arthur decide to wait until nightfall to conduct the robbery, “in keeping with the tradition of bad B movies.” The narrator’s announcement, made during the day, prompts Odile to then ask: “How do we kill time?” Their solution? Break the previous record of an American who sped through the Louvre at “9 minutes and 45 seconds.”

In their quest to “kill time” they are going to kill (beat) the American’s (record) time. The shot which accompanies this narrative explanation, in which the narrator (as if reading from a crime novel) momentarily assumes the voice of both the third person and Odile, is presented with a conventional pan of the Louvre as it sits across the river Seine. Thus, Godard sets an establishing shot of the palace-turned-museum-turned-tourist-destination that would befit any narrative seeking to utilize recognizable Parisian icons as its romanticized backdrop. A contrast, however, is created through what the camera cuts to next.

The scene becomes transgressive in the subsequent shot when we see the three characters run down the museum hall. Cinematographer Raoul Coutard’s steady panning shot of the building’s exterior is juxtaposed with a shot that concentrates on the trio as they charge toward the camera and then run past it. The camera briefly follows them (left-to-right), but then, and without conventional cinematic warning (or narrative precedent), pauses and allows the characters to pass out of frame. When the camera pauses to allow the three characters to rush out of frame, it instead holds its attention on a painting.

With the camera focused on this single painting, the traditional work of art then appears as a new character, replacing the film’s protagonists who have just fled the scene. To be sure, *Bande à part* can be said to take seriously its assertion to “allow the images to speak for themselves;” with this pause in the action it becomes clear that the stopped cinematic camera insists we pay attention to what the image has to say. The three characters, more interested in winning the race, have left the camera—and by extension the spectator—to dwell momentarily on the painting.



Figure 1 -- The painting the camera captures: David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784).

This cinematic image at rest thus gives us the opportunity to grasp this other image, a painting by Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii* (1785). The lingering camera holds on the painting just long enough for a museum patron to enter the frame from the left, which is of course emerging against the direction from which Arthur, Franz, and Odile have exited (see: Fig. 1). Godard is in effect presenting us with two competing figures of contemplation: the traditional spectator slowly admiring the traditional work of art, which is visually contrasted with the haste of the youthful characters, who do not even stop to appreciate art in the 20th century. The painting's position on the wall of the Louvre thus contains a certain (historical, social) weight, but in Godard's film this tradition appears to be permanently superseded, so that even the museum patron is drawn instead to the momentum of the passing characters. Only the camera seems, at least for the moment, curious in whatever seduction the painting might be expected to project. Or is there something more complicated at work, as evidenced by the fact that as soon as the patron redirects his gaze toward the painting the camera leaves him behind, and cuts to the next shot?

The film's narrative transgression may appear obvious enough, considering that this is a Godardian "narrative," reinforced in *Bande à part* by the immediate juxtaposition between the scene's action and the sudden appearance of the painting. Godard's deliberate (for what else could it be?)

insertion of the *Oath of the Horatii* within the context of a crime film challenges the assumed conventions inherent to the traditional genre film. The painting's arrival in the film thus disrupts the expectations of the genre. Or to put it another way: If a traditional work of art such as the *Oath* is highlighted as at once a historical remain and within a remain of the generic crime film, then it serves to better modernize the terms and expectations for art such in the 20th century. In other words, art meets pulp.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, this singular moment in the cinematic text makes way for a complex threading of meaning. The three wannabe-pulp-characters recklessly fly past the painting, with the simple desire to "beat an American record."<sup>4</sup> At the same moment that they fly past the traditional work of art within the cinematic frame, their momentum is halted as the camera ignores their movement and, counterintuitively, stops the kinetic energy of the film. In effect, Godard brings cinema to a halt as if to remind the spectator that cinematic movement belongs to a historical impulse in the arts more generally, to in fact "capture" movement.<sup>5</sup> But in what way does Godard's cinematic pause on the traditional work of art whose very properties disallow movement emphasize the significance of aesthetic movement? Why linger on a painting that can only *suggest* movement when the very art form that records "still life/*nature morte*" depends on movement for its very definition? Indeed, why insist that the camera that records movement turn away from its mobile subjects to concentrate itself, to itself stop the recording of movement, on the static image? It may be, in fact, that what appears stopped in time and place is not the entire story.

To be sure, the painting that grabs our—and the camera's—attention suggests multiple passages of time and space, the aesthetic traces that traverse the history of art and the work of art itself. Since its debut at the Paris Salon of 1785, *The Oath of the Horatii* conjures imagery of neo-classical austerity and grand tragedy.<sup>6</sup> *Bande à part*, on the other hand, presents amateur crooks, more interested in edging the previous record to run through the halls of the Louvre, and who race past the immutable representation of palatial sacrifice. For these characters, then, there is no sacrifice in movement. Godard's characters

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<sup>3</sup> Godard is here working within the larger context of pulp's place within modernism, especially with the rise of pop art by figures like Lichtenstein and Warhol.

<sup>4</sup> The word 'record', both in the sense of a race, and as a commercial album, will be important for the following chapter on *Masculin féminin*.

<sup>5</sup> See "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles" by Erwin Panofsky in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955).

<sup>6</sup> "It [the *Oath*] emphasized patriotic dedication and sacrifice of the individual to the state" (Roberts 17)

transform the Louvre into a race track. One in which cultural capital is re-invested à la the postwar-economic recovery.

Although, it is worth considering that perhaps the painting on which the camera trains its eye is less static than what first meets the spectator's eye. Do, in fact, the "images only speak for themselves"? Or does Godard's earlier assertion—and to recall Wollen's claim for decipherment—require that we take it as something more than its word? If the images do "speak for themselves", then what is it that they are saying? To address these questions, it is worth presenting some historical context to illuminate the text's static but quite vibrant frame.

## II. The Oath's Posturing

David's *Oath of the Horatii* was the sensation of the Paris Salon in 1785, but his success was owed to its (then) relatively unorthodox style.<sup>7</sup> Even the size of the painting's canvas was larger than what was previously allowed. David's goal was likely for his painting to project to the Salon's audience—and fellow members—well and above the competing images. In a technical sense, we can see it as the painted equivalence to CinemaScope (which, of course, Godard has acerbically promised for the 'sequel' to *Bande à part*). We sense the size of the canvas as Godard attempts to fill the shot with it—although, we must not forget, there is still room to move within the frame.

The film—and the Louvre—re-writes the painting's traditional position on the walls of the museum with its position on a 'new' wall, which is the projected image of the film. Godard does not resurrect the *Oath's* radicality as much as he re-inscribes it. That being said, much of the painting's lingering historic affect comes from its status as a "prerevolutionary" work<sup>8</sup>; the idea that the *Oath of the Horatii* was anticipating the approaching revolution. It is possible that Godard sees in David a kind of fellow traveler,

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<sup>7</sup> "David's rivals threw their support behind J.-F.-P. Peyron's *Death of Alcestis*, but even those unfriendly to David judged the *Horatii* the better painting. Nicolas Cochin, secretary of the Academy, no backer of David, acknowledged that 'M. David is superior.' In his opinion, 'David was the real victor of the Salon'" (ibid. 17).

It is important to remember that it wasn't the subject matter (heroic antiquity) that was new, but rather the content's presentation, i.e. the painting's style.

<sup>8</sup> An idea popularized by Thomas Crow in his *Painters and Public Life* (ibid. 19).

especially considering that the same (revolutionary anticipation) might be said of Godard's pre-1968 cinema, which includes *Bande à part*.<sup>9</sup> David's tendencies thus seem somewhat akin to those of the Nouvelle Vague. The director's inclusion of the painting thus reiterates this question of a movement's trace, not only of physical movement, but also a political one.<sup>10</sup> For, as we will see, what David has portrayed is the exact moment of the 'revolutionary act' as such.

The painting's subject matter is the patriotic oath sworn by the three Roman brothers of the Horatii to their father, who acts as an avatar for the Roman state. The three brothers are about to engage in ritualistic combat with three siblings of the Curiatii clan, from a neighboring city hostile to Rome.<sup>11</sup> The oath is a 'death oath', with only one of the six combatants (of both Roman and Curiatii) ultimately returning home alive. The sisters, one of whom is married to a Curiatii, the other a blood relative, are slumped in the corner of the painting's frame, consumed with despair. The *movement* is, of course, confined to the Horatii men, who give their father the Roman salute while holding on to one another.<sup>12</sup> This image, of austere sacrifice, would find a great resonance with the proceeding revolution, particularly among the Jacobins, of which David was an ardent member. We can say that, in a way, neo-classical became for 1789 what the Nouvelle Vague was for 1968.

The *Oath of the Horatii*, then, contextually associated with the struggles (and perhaps also the failures to come?) of the French Revolution, stands not so much as a counterpoint to the 'Coca-Cola generation<sup>13</sup>,' represented by Franz, Arthur, and Odile (and the *Nouvelle Vague*), but as a kind of corollary, even if it is one in need of greater decipherment. If anything, *Bande à part* filters the painting through the film's pop sensibility—a sensibility which, as we've seen, plays heavily with its genre. The painting, in the cinematic era, is nothing less than pop. Godard, as a kind of self-appointed art chronicler,

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<sup>9</sup> And will culminate with *La Chinoise*.

<sup>10</sup> Both of which can be kinetic in their own ways.

<sup>11</sup> David pulled much of the narrative from Livy and Dionysius. The rest, such as the oath, are his own embellishments (Brookner 70).

<sup>12</sup> The salute, which became associated with Italian (and later German) fascism in the mid-20th century, probably bears little historical resemblance to actual Roman practice, and is widely thought to have instead originated with David's painting.

Similarly, this scene from the myth, in which the men salute their father, was David's creation, and not referenced in any of the sources he pulled from.

<sup>13</sup> Godard's reference to the youth in *Masculin féminin*.

is at once having fun with the contrast between these two images while also opening up the possibility for their overlapping relationship in the twentieth century.



Figure 2 -- The brother's oath, today known as a 'Roman Salute.'

We should be careful not to oversimplify the relation between 'image' and 'playfulness' as something simply fun; 'playfulness' has historical and aesthetic implications. If Godard enacts a narrative transgression with this scene, we would do well to remember the intricate conceptualization he makes between image and word, primarily through the formal dimensions of the shot.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Hollywood films would most likely feature a character's interaction with the painting as a surface (shot/reverse-shot), Godard's characters instead dismiss the painting entirely by charging past it. But whereas they ignore the *Oath*, the camera does not. Nor does the lingering viewer who remains standing at the painting's side.

This sudden intrusion then of the *Oath of the Horatii* in Godard's cinema suggests what Wollen coins as the cinematic process of "writing in images." This, he tells us, "presupposes a different concept of 'film-writing'<sup>15</sup> and 'film-reading.'" This kind of 'film-writing,' or *écriture*, identifies "'image-building' as a

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Henderson is a good reference for this avenue of thought, particularly in his "Towards a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style" (1970).

<sup>15</sup> Here Wollen points to Astruc's *la camera-stylo* as his theoretical reference (421).



kind of pictography, in which images are liberated from their role as elements of representation and given a semantic function within a genuine iconic code, something like the baroque code of emblems” (421). This concept of a cinematic pictography is an appropriate one here, especially considering that our scene under investigation takes place in a hall of pictures—the paintings on the wall of the museum. Godard thus uses the camera to *reframe* David’s painting in another hall of pictures—the cinema.

### III. Sketches and Scratches

Keeping Godard’s cinematic re-framing of the *Oath* in play, we are prepared to revisit the purported immobility of painting, the stasis staged in David’s painting as an opposition to Godard’s cinema. Does the *Oath of the Horatii*—and the painted arts in general—truly sacrifice the concept of movement as such? How might we reveal movement as process, as a critical concept to David’s painting? What marks, or what aesthetic traces imbricate across the two frames, and open the texts to interpretation on multiple fronts? By posing these questions, we may approach David’s *Oath* as yet another mobile and malleable frame within Godard’s cinematic frame, despite the painting’s apparent lack of mobility. Yet, it is only through Godard’s moving-image (the cinema) that we see the painting in action. And this imbricating of screens has an immediate material dimension: just as the painting’s surface has a texture with its own wear and scratches, so are they supplemented with the scratches of the film.<sup>16</sup> Godard has, then, not so much resurrected the *Oath*, if we consider the classical arts to be ‘dead’, but he has instead re-inscribed it into the dimension of the cinematic, which is to say that he has rewritten the terms for its place in the history of the moving arts.

At the frames’ surfaces—the painting and the film—we can observe the following: The three protagonists traverse the cinematic frame, movement that is in stark counterpoint to the rigid gestures we see in David’s painting. The characters in the painting, instead, stand arms stretched toward the center of the frame as they take their oath to fulfill their patriotic duty and, ultimately, their sacrifice (or—like the security guard in the following shot—to try and halt the three characters from running). The neoclassical

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<sup>16</sup> Prior to the advent of digital projection, it is important to see cinema as a material medium considering the actual celluloid strip of film.

posturing notwithstanding, the figures appear poised to move—their oath is, after all, a call to action. The three Horatii's heroic gesture unequally reflects Godard's three figures, who, as they run through the Louvre hall, lock hands forming their own bonded gesture (see: Fig. 4). But Godard's layering of potential movement runs deeper.



Figure 3 -- The painting's material surface, scratches and all.

If we are to discern the painting as one brought to movement by Godard's camera, then we must ask if it didn't also contain some inherent propensity to move between the scratches, the remains of art history? And how do we see the desire for movement in that which is ostensibly static? In what way does the cinema make for such a seeing? To this end it is valuable to consider some of David's preliminary sketches for the *Oath of the Horatii*. The sketches were prepared by the artist as he charted his preparations for the final work. With these supplemental images we can follow—indeed trace—the artist's desire for movement. The sketches reveal the attempt on the part of the artist to allow his figures to escape the confines, push the boundaries, of the frame. The implications to impute this impulse are significant since the oath taken is one to inaugurate an act of movement, of political movement.



Figure 4 -- The inverse postures.

The sketches seen alongside one another highlight the artist's rendering of movement (see: Fig. 5). Almost like the classical Disney animation process, we see the arms of the figure make the transition in one image from lowered to raised. These points of interaction between frames (both the sketches and the finalized painting)—even those that are technically absent—impressed upon one another, brings us back to Wollen's reference to a palimpsest, in which these images are layered on top of one another, yet permeate one another at the same time, their inference's colliding. While Wollen's concept of palimpsest evokes textual interpenetration, we might more provocatively look toward Derrida's notion of the trace, which instead invites us to consider permeation as more imbuing—more mobile. The limitation of palimpsest as a concept here is its reliance on a buildup, whereas Derrida's trace is much more multidimensional, and, subsequently, more haunting like the cinematic image itself.

In his essay on Freud's 'Mystic Writing Pad' ("Freud and the Scene of Writing," from *Writing and Difference*), Derrida draws out the trace as the lingering excess that marks the text. By its very lingering, the trace yields a supplement, a remain, one where meaning expands rather than contracts. *Écriture*—writing—is a process that involves a leaving behind. Seen this way, the mark is not unique; rather, it is

always already a supplement to that which came before and will come after.<sup>17</sup> The “scratches” that mark David’s sketches, followed by the scratches on the canvas, and then on Godard’s film stock (not to mention any on the projected screen) commingle, enabling complex and multiple meanings, which of course facilitates decipherment. In this sense, the scratches are both ‘left behind’ and already pregnant with their future supplement. Thus, we can trace the images backwards (and forwards). But the cinematic camera—in its constant search for moving subjects—has the propensity to animate this trace to the extent that we no longer are confronted with two (or in the case of the sketches, more) distinct frames. We encounter multiple relational folds that reward the viewer with precise, yet ever-widening meaning. Indeed, the frames no longer exist because meaning has moved beyond the frame.

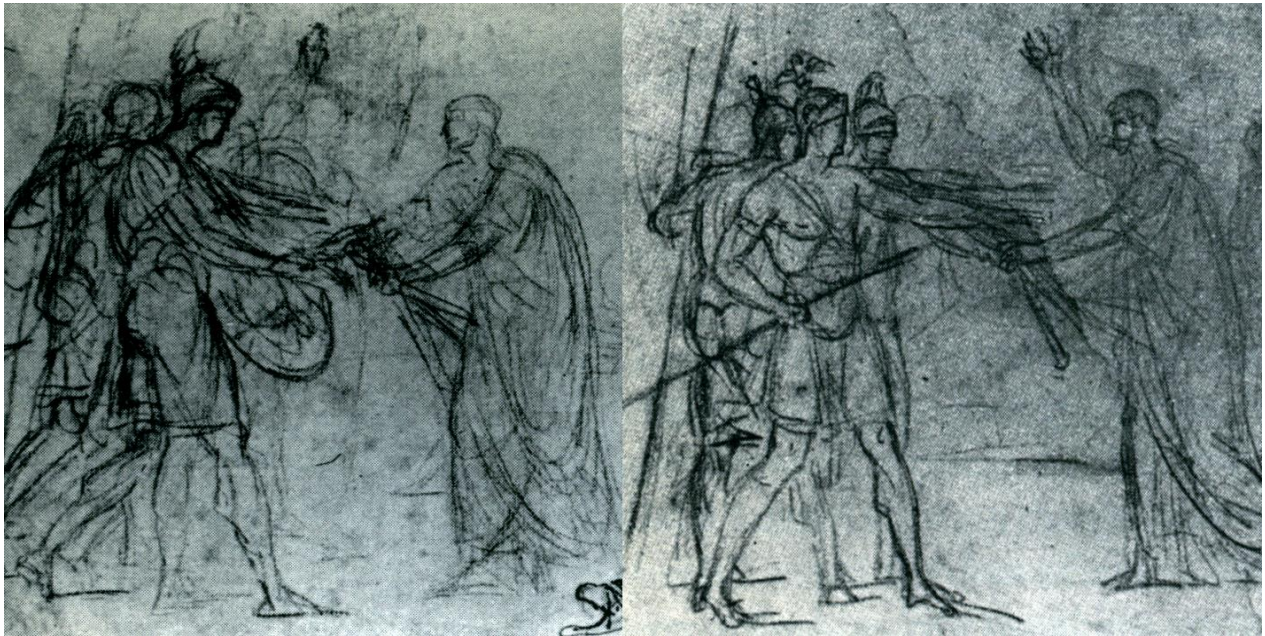


Figure 5 -- Some of David's early sketches for the *Oath* (from Robert's biography).

It is thus Godard’s camera, that is to say his use of cinematic *écriture*, that animates this propensity toward motion, the tracing of movement that generates meaning. The unseen sketches nevertheless clearly form the unseen supplement that lingers within Godard’s shot. His camera, in other words, traces art-history’s desire for movement, already available in David’s painting. Simply put, Godard

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<sup>17</sup> “Trace as memory is not a pure breaching that might be re-appropriated at any time as simple presence; it is rather the ungraspable and invisible difference between breaches” (Derrida 253).

is (re)animating the image *and* the history of art. The sketches—which were only ever there as a scratch—disappear from the film as such, but their ‘disappearance’ is fundamental to the way the trace functions.<sup>18</sup> As Derrida reminds us: “Traces . . . produce the space of their inscription only by acceding to the period of their erasure” (284). “Writing,” he continues, “is unthinkable without repression.” Godard’s use of *écriture* as cinematic writing reminds us that the cinema is the return of the repressed.

#### IV. The Final Trace of Movement

Wollen’s pictography and Derrida’s trace is critical to the concept of decipherment, a process through which signs must be read. Godard, in his juxtaposition between and integration of pictures—the painting and the film—presents us with two fronts, or rather, two kinetic frames. How is it possible to claim lineage of two distinct works of art, developed with very different aesthetic properties, if one work is static while the other is kinetic? We are, as Godard prefers to situate the spectator, engaged on two—nay—multiple fronts. Following through the Derridean notion of trace, movement is revealed (released?), in the political, the physical, and the aesthetic. Movement permeates Godard’s film as it does in David’s *Oath of the Horatii*. Godard’s cinema proves the point.

*Bande à part* certainly has fun with such implications, but as mentioned the play is complicated. Godard is operating under an assumption of, playing on, two-fronts, which is again to say two-screens, and it is the ‘difference’ between them that the supplement (of a movement’s potential) is to be traced. Godard’s discourse, then, is one that only yields itself through a careful threading of his ‘writing in images.’ We return once more to the concept of decipherment —albeit with the Derridean reminder that this is no definitive task. Through its inclusion of *The Oath of the Horatii* and the trace at play in such a use, *Bande à part* thus complicates and asks us to inquire deeper into the seemingly simple assertion to “let the images speak for themselves.” The question, then, revolves around what the ‘political’ implications of such a reading are, or if there is already a more totalizing trend at work in the history of art?

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<sup>18</sup> Interesting to consider a museum that would place an artist’s sketches and drafts side-by-side (in equal importance) to their completed works.

## Part Two: Culture's Shadow in *Masculin féminin*

### I. That Awful Music

In the shot presenting the Louvre, *Bande à part* implies that not only is the building itself a museum, but that its iconic façade is itself another piece in the museum that is Paris.<sup>19</sup> Godard's camera pans across the structure much as the following shot pans down the Louvre's interior. With this identification of the museum with those works in its repository, it is useful to return to the patron in the film with whom we see standing before David's painting. This figure, whose contemplation of the traditional work of art is temporarily halted by the spectacle of Godard's characters running past, is indicative of the cultural postwar tension in which France found itself. The role of culture—and what counts as culture—is thus in question.

*Masculin féminin* (1966) takes up this question of the ideological and aesthetic challenges that defines cultural capital in postwar France. The film's plot centers on Parisian youths, specifically around Paul (Jean-Pierre Léaud), a young radical, armchair philosopher, and cultural snob, and his attraction to Madeleine (Chantal Goya), an aspiring pop singer who lives with two other women, Elisabeth (Marlène Jobert) and Catherine (Catherine-Isabelle). Paul enters a ménage-à-trois of sorts, based on his attraction for Madeleine who shares a space with Jobert's Elizabeth. The film's iconic scene is of the three in bed together. Paul continually uses his self-purported cultural superiority to try and impress the women, with the film's dialectic, through the character's conflicting desires, revolving around France's postwar condition as created under the Marshall Plan.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, it is with the museum patron from *Bande à part* that we may begin our discussion of Paul's role within *Masculin féminin*, inasmuch as both figures represent the good bourgeois connoisseur amidst more modern pop sensibilities. In the same way that the patron strolls through the Louvre, Paul wanders around Paris, but much as the latter is distracted by an outside intrusion, so is Paul's gaze constantly

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<sup>19</sup> For a further elaboration on this idea see the work of Fredric Jameson, particularly his *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (1998).

<sup>20</sup> Which was officially titled the European Recovery Program (the ERP).

averted by—and his desire fixated upon—Madeleine who, although she bears the name that represents classical France, embodies postwar popular culture.



Figure 6 -- The Museum Patron and Paul.

In a scene from the film that best exemplifies this postwar cultural fraying, Paul plays a Mozart LP (a selection from the Clarinet Concerto in A) for Catherine-Isabelle's character (see: Fig. 7). Madeleine, the pop singer, reacts to the record with, "Not that awful music again!" Paul agrees ("you bet"), prompting her to exclaim "Then I'm off." Madeleine leaves the room while Paul performs his appreciation of the Mozart track by miming the part of amateur conductor.<sup>21</sup> His performance—or even the music itself—merely bores Catherine, its audience. Paul rebukes her disinterest by instructing her, "The orchestra is fantastic!" He then walks out of frame.

Here, in the film and elsewhere, Godard highlights Paul as the banal Romantic; he is the archetypical pseudo-intellectual bourgeois purveyor. Where the Marshal Plan (forcibly) opened the doors of 'old' Europe to new American capital and culture, Paul is instead the hipster-arbiter of what he

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<sup>21</sup> This scene calls to mind a similar one in Terrance Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011) in which the disciplining father shows off a Brahms's record to his children. The father, much like Paul, is attempting to 'cultivate' his more modern(pop)-aligned children to the classical arts. Catherine-Isabelle's character occupies a similar child-like position in Paul's assumed lecturing.



perceives to be a more classical foundation of France (which will paradoxically inform his politics). His notion of culture would seem to come mainly from what it is not, how it contrasts with the ‘low’ culture of Madeleine’s pop songs, which correspond to a general Americanization of postwar-France.<sup>22</sup> It is a dichotomy the film explicitly references, vis-à-vis Godard’s intertitle which clearly announces the conundrum in which the question of art and politics finds itself: “les enfants de Marx et de Coca-Cola” (the children of Marx and Coca-Cola).



Figure 7 -- Paul as cultural instructor.

Which brings us back to the museum patron, just as that figure stood in seeming contrast to the speed in which the pulp-characters rush past him and the painting, Paul stands in to reinforce the cultural significance of these works of art, such as Mozart’s music, and to assert his bourgeois-educated acknowledgement of art. Where the characters from *Bande à part* have no time (in trying to beat a record) for the historical image, the *Oath of the Horatii*, Madeleine and Catherine have no apparent interest in Mozart’s (‘awful’) music. Madeleine’s flight from Paul’s consecration of “classical music” is contrasted with his confinement of Catherine who must (begrudgingly) bear the lesson in “true” art. Paul is actively

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<sup>22</sup> Chantel Goya was, of course, an actual *yé-yé* singer, which is French for “yeah! Yeah!”, and as a genre of pop music was best exemplified by Françoise Hardy.



attempting to assert good bourgeois knowledge and taste, which, against the auspices of the Marshal Plan, has acquired for him a radical urgency. He sees himself as a child of Marx, while the women are then the offspring of Coca-Cola.



Figure 8 -- 'The Children of Marx and Coca-Cola.'

But Godard's oft-quoted intertitle does not present us exactly with a divide between the two positions; it is the children of Marx *and* Coca-Cola, the twin gods of the postwar cultural predicament. Paul's presumed stance against the influx of American-based, pop culture is that of a more authentic, classically-mediated snobbery, but his admonishment "it's fantastic!" is no more reassuring than Madeleine's exasperated distaste. For this question of authenticity is already always at the heart of the *Kulturindustrie*, as discussed by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The assumption that, in the postwar period, there can be a distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture is a false one, especially as all culture is broadcast via the apparatuses of capital.<sup>23</sup> Thusly does the text proclaim that "culture today is infecting everything with sameness" (94).

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<sup>23</sup> Paul likewise calls the recording of Mozart 'fantastic', placing the emphasis on the music's technical reproduction as opposed to the quality of the composer himself.

The fact that Paul plays Mozart to Catherine through a recording is where Godard reveals the false dichotomy that defines so-called high and low culture, especially as we consider the scene later in the film in which Paul and Catherine visit Madeleine in the act of recording her own album. Whether Mozart or the Top-40, the culture industry annihilates difference. Godard's inclusion of this process is a deliberate glimpse into the automated sameness that blankets culture in the postwar period. And the appeal of the pop star, to seduce through style that Paul ostensibly rejects, is one in fact that Paul mirrors in his own seduction attempts when he uses his knowledge of (high) culture to try and impress the women. But this attempt, to use Mozart (the classical artist) to charm, fails. This brand of reproduction instead drives Goya's Madeleine out of the room, and consequently the scene.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, Madeleine's repulsion at the threat of the classical recording is not a consistent one, as her later remarks attest. Her character precipitates this breakdown in cultural distinctions via the automated process when she is asked by a reporter to name her favorite singers, and answers with "The Beatles; and in classical music, Bach." "Bach is certainly very classical, but nothing like your songs," the surprised reporter answers back. She tells him "They're not mutually exclusive."<sup>25</sup> It is here that Madeleine, representative of the American, consumer-driven POP-identity, succulently articulates this sameness that the culture industry reproduces in everything. It is a sameness that Paul, holding on to his own identity as the radical Romantic—and where he fulfills a similar function as the museum patron—cannot discern from the realm of supposed authenticity or cultural value. Madeleine, on the other hand, earnestly takes at face value the broad legacy of greatness, even if this label has only come down to her via word of mouth.<sup>26</sup> And what is Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of the culture industry—and perhaps also Debord's spectacle society—if not one totalizing, endlessly repeating automated system of 'word of mouth'? In her own blissful ignorance, Madeleine is thus able to see Mozart, Bach, The Beatles,

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<sup>24</sup> "Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape" (Adorno and Horkheimer 97).

<sup>25</sup> For Horkheimer and Adorno such an eradication between the position of high and low culture isn't a negation but rather a kind of nightmare sublation (*Aufheben*). They say "The culture industry has developed in conjunction with the predominance of the effect, the tangible performance, the technical detail, over the work, which once carried the idea and was liquidated with it...although operating only with effects, it subdues their unruliness and subordinates them to the formula which supplants the work. It crushes equally the whole and the parts" (99).

<sup>26</sup> Especially today, one can see the humor in 'great artists' like Bach and The Beatles both competing for 'listens' on streaming applications such as Apple Music and Spotify alongside more contemporary acts.

her own music, and so on, as all forming a ubiquitous part of the mass-produced reproductions of the culture industry.

This fact is further illustrated in a scene in which Paul produces a personal recording for Madeleine (which, significantly, occurs after he exists a photo booth with a prostitute). Frustrated by his mostly unrequited advances on her, Paul records his admonishment—as the booth says, put it on record—to live with her via a ‘poem’ that contains a montage of advertising slogans (“Astor, the modern man’s cigarette”), consumer narratives (“The same record was playing”, “We’ll play table football!”), and a mock-radio control operator (“Boeing 737 calling Caravelle”). Finishing the recording, Paul grabs the record, shrugs, and walks away. This is, for him, another mediated attempt at seduction, and, correspondingly, his mannerisms in the booth resemble the mime-conducting he performed earlier for Catherine. In a sense, it is the era of electronic circuitry’s response to the Romantic soliloquy distorted by an overabundance of possible messages.<sup>27</sup> Paul may think himself clever by stooping to her level, but he is in fact performing on the same playing field as Madeleine, for the culture industry—and the technology that aids it—totalizes every field of engagement into one, even if this consolidation appears as its opposite, i.e. differing mediums/genres/etc. It is here that we have the essential contention Godard establishes throughout *Masculin féminin*: the false dichotomy between high and low culture as mediated through the automated apparatus. If cultural superiority cannot negate the monopoly of the culture industry, then what role can erotic desire, Paul’s presumed motivation, play in this functioning?

## II. A Visit to the Kingdom of Shadows

To answer this question, we must return to the scene involving the Mozart recording. After Paul insists to Catherine that the music is “fantastic,” he walks out of frame. We see him leaving the room, while the blasé Catherine looks up and remains immobilized by what she experiences as dulling music. The

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<sup>27</sup> The entire scene plays out very much like the composition of Marshall McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Message*, with its montage-like assemblage of text and images, meant to better convey the broader implications of an ‘electronic circuitry’ age.

From that work: “Print technology created the public. Electric technology created the mass. The public consists of separate individuals walking around with separate, fixed points of view. The new technology demands that we abandon the luxury of this posture, this fragmentary outlook” (68-69).

camera then pans, music continuing, until Paul re-emerges from the kitchen. His attention is suddenly arrested by a sight off-camera. We abruptly cut where we see this new frame.



Figure 9 -- Paul decides to "put it on record."

What Paul “sees” is a silhouetted set of glass-paned windows, through which the shadows of two women are visible. The shadows of the women are erotically suggestive —presumably naked, they are fooling around. The tenebrism-like effect of the shot can’t help but invoke the early spectacle of cinema, remembering the voyeuristic component inherent to the medium, and especially insofar as the flickering light (of the bathroom/projector) contrasts with the dark (of the building/theater). And on the ‘screen’ are shadows, much in the way Maxim Gorky first described his encounter with the films of the Lumière brothers: “It is terrifying to see, but it is the movement of shadows, only of shadows ...”<sup>28</sup> Paul, and by extension the film viewer, is presented with such a ‘movement of shadows’, and the promise they might hold. The question, of course, is what exactly such a promise would be, and if it can ever be properly delivered upon.

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<sup>28</sup> “On a Visit to the Kingdom of Shadows” (1896)

It is important to consider that Godard does not provide Paul's reaction shot, as might be expected from a scene such as this; instead, Godard holds the image, uninterrupted, until he cuts to an entirely differently located shot of Paul. Paul's gaze, precisely like that of the museum patron's, becomes diverted from the classical work to the counter-spectacle. Such a gaze is assumed to be the view of the camera as the shot fixes itself firmly on the silhouette of the two shadows, but the lack of a reaction shot, which generally functions to assure the camera's representation of the character's vision, complicates this assumption.



Figure 10 -- The cinematic-like shadows of the women.

By providing us with Paul's presumed gaze, but refusing to then also furnish a reaction shot to quantify his look onto the erotic scene, Godard creates a much more jarring cut. The attention of Paul—and the camera—is forcibly diverted, like that of the museum patron's. When we 'return' we do not return to same place from which Paul cast his look onto the proto-cinematic scene, this shadow of frolicking women. What Paul sees is the erotic promise that cinema endlessly projects, enticing enough to divert the cultural gaze, but ultimately one that cannot be fulfilled, and Godard's cut from it, and any kind of resolution on Paul's part, makes this clear. There are promises, but not rewards.

Godard, as he often does, furnishes this complication with his soundtrack. Mozart's music, which had followed Paul as he walked out of the room, abruptly comes to a halt precisely at the moment that the camera cuts to the erotic shadows. The music is thus replaced with the diegetic sounds of the scene — the women laughing, cars on the street, and a man's muffled voice. The tendency in traditional cinematic practice, and if indeed the POV is presumed to be Paul's direct vantage point (practically or thematically), would have the music continue its course, to establish continuity. That it ceases with the cut creates a more definitive break between the two experiences, cultural and erotic.

Hence, the sudden jump from Mozart to the cinéma vérité-like soundtrack operates in a similar capacity to the introduction of the *Oath of the Horatii* in *Bande à part*, except here the terms are reversed; i.e. it is the traditional representation of culture (to Paul at least) which is disrupted—or at the very least diverted—by an unexpected component. Paul's stake in the classical recording (and in delegating it to Catherine) is replaced with the tantalizing, cinematic hint of foreplay between shadows. This confrontation, like the inclusion of the Oath, raises the question of both the break and similarity between the 'classical' arts and the more mechanized ones, such as cinema. What Paul sees is something of the original promise of cinema, a promise which, as we've seen, is neither completely negated, nor completely complimented by the older, classical arts. In fact, such a cut tells us that Godard is increasingly constructing a cinema composed of competing—yet cooperating—images and sounds, an aesthetic which we see unfold in the museum patron's choice between classical art or vibrant French youth.

But, as we've also seen, such a choice is always inevitably subsumed under the totalizing auspices of the culture industry. The promises, be them erotic or classical, are still ultimately promises of consumption (for what else can they be with Coca-Cola as a parent?) Godard is dealing with the all-consuming plain of culture, in which all culture *as such* is consumer culture. The question, then, becomes to what extent eroticism—and the cinematic shadows that might elicit it—can act as a *break* from the culture industry, or if it is just another unfulfilled promise (remembering Adorno and Horkheimer's warning

that the culture industry will always leave such desire unfulfilled<sup>29</sup>)? Certainly, Paul's encounter with these shadows in the bathroom literally stops the cultural flow of the film inasmuch as it puts an immediate halt to the music, which, again, is replaced with the diegetic sounds of the scene. Can this break constitute any kind of a *negation* from such 'cultural sameness'?

Adorno's concept of the shudder in *Aesthetic Theory* proves useful. The shudder is akin to a primal response—if not the only remaining response—to art in postwar culture. It is “as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic images” (331). It might seem as if the unsettling, uncanny dimension that the otherwise erotic image of the frolicking shadows presents is reminiscent of Adorno's shudder, and the abrupt cut to this image, along with the lack of a reaction shot, would seem to confirm this intuition. But such a presupposition fails to see what is truly startling about this, and other attempted breaks, in the film.

We must return to the fact that this break, this drastic cut from Paul and his Mozart to the erotic tease of the shadows, is only a temporary one. After about half a minute of the shadows, the scene cuts *back* to Paul, albeit from a different angle. In fact, the shot that follows would seem not to obey a temporal or spatial structuring, not in so far as the grammar of sequential film editing is conventionally conceived. In the shot prior, we see Paul wearing a jacket standing near the kitchen, yet after cutting back to him he is minus the jacket and standing in a seemingly different part of the apartment. Gone with the jacket is the music.

Catherine's re-emergence and the continuing of the narrative track (the girls going to bed) would indicate that this *is* the same temporal sequence overall, but we must assume that the disorientation of cuts is deliberate on Godard's part. Much like Kubrick's impossible-to-place structure of the hotel in *The Shining* (1980), Godard purposefully disorients any sense of compact narrative cohesion. The scene in function imitates the disjointed cohesion of Paul's recording, which is itself indicative of the cultural/technological landscape that the film contextually occupies. Thusly, the erotic promise that Paul witnesses—and the underlying erotic promise that runs parallel to the plot of the film with Madeleine—

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<sup>29</sup> “In every work of art, style is a promise” (103). Sex is, we must not forget, another tool from which to sell.

evades him with this 'return'. The 'shudder' (of Paul, the film) would seem to be the only fitting response to this lack of erotic fulfillment—but abundance of promise—that exists under the culture industry.

And it is this return as such that encompasses the shudder. The failure to achieve a definitive *break* from the monopoly of the culture industry—and for such a break to last—is the failure of the erotic itself to stand outside of the culture industry. It is the failure to satisfy, obtain, and fulfill, and correspondingly Paul's gaze cannot help but quickly 'cut back', which it does in a discordant manner. In this sense, the shudder encompasses the failure of mediation as such, in the quest to meaningfully break the cultural deadlock of the postwar, technological society. For instance, the women in the shadows are not only seen here as 'cinematic', but they can only be seen through the cinematic. There is also Paul's recording for Madeleine. With art or technology, eroticism and desire are mediated through culture, and because it is the culture industry which dictates this mediation, the promise cannot be fulfilled. With the abrupt cut back, it is gone.



Figure 11 -- Paul before and after the cut.



### III. Framing the Republic of Cowards

Doors, windows, and mirrors play a fundamental role in *Masculin féminin* because they provide an insight into the interplay of framings between the erotic/playful and shudder/disorientation. As we've seen, the shudder comes about as the failed promise of Eros to be satisfied within—and through—the culture industry since the apparatus proves to be only a promise and nothing more. Paul's gaze out one window into another doesn't offer up its (erotic) promises, but is instead only a glimpse through the peep hole. In this way, frames, screens, and passageways illuminate the all-consuming and deceitful nature of the culture industry. At the same time, the limitations of frames are filled with cinematic movement, lights and shadows. A mirror in one room provides a screen within the screen while Paul leaves the scene and the soundtrack fills the space. This scene in which I have concentrated also utilizes doors as a focal point through which the characters move in-and-out. If the frame in which the *Oath of the Horatii* holds—and, as we have seen, reveals—the painter's desire for movement, then it is the images and sounds of a hyper-mediated culture industry that vibrate and illuminate the cinematic doors illustrated in *Masculin féminin*.

Given the postwar situation, it should not come as a surprise that one of the most consistent frame found throughout the film is that of the television frame. By the mid-60's the television posed a serious ontological threat to the traditional role of the cinema. Being the 'children of Marx and Coca-Cola', the televised screen is everywhere in the film, and what medium better illustrated the postwar circulating influence of American consumerism better than that which broadcast American Bandstand and the first images of the Vietnam War?<sup>30</sup> Considering the latter, it was only through these smaller screens that a young French bourgeois radical such as Paul would have been exposed to them.<sup>31</sup>

It is thereby alongside the film's visual reminder of the creeping existential threat of the television screen that we may properly locate Paul's radical politics, which operate, insofar as he uses it for

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<sup>30</sup> Marshall McLuhan comments on the seeming inevitability of the television's particular cultural domination: "Even so imaginative a writer as Jules Verne failed to envisage the speed with which electric technology would produce informational media. He rashly predicted that television would be invented in the XXIXth Century" (124).

<sup>31</sup> It is worth considering Kubrick's scene in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) in which the soldiers are interviewed by the news crew, and adopt humorous, distancing attitudes to the situation because they are going to be on TV.

seduction and authenticity, in very much the same manner that his cultural snobbery does. For they are one and the same; Paul's mistaken assumption is that the parental figure of Marx can outweigh that of Coca-Cola. He presumes that his knowledge of radical politics and the classical arts can act as a weight to hold him up and above the cheap commercialism of the United States. But given the film's ubiquitous presence of the television screen, especially how it looms over him and his views (see: Fig. 13), we can trace the same explicit distance and failed promises that inhabit his other preferences. Much as David's *Oath* stands in the halls of the Louvre pregnant with the idea of movement (political and physical), so then does the film's repetition of the TV screen warn of the unrelenting—and inescapable—presence of the culture industry where, to follow the argument McLuhan makes in his text of similar title, “the medium is the message.”



Figure 12 -- A shot in the film of a store selling television sets.

And so, this proliferation of television frames invariably mocks Paul's bourgeois radicalism. When he performs as the conductor for the Mozart recording, a painting hangs on the wall above him, and to the right. The painting (which reminds one of Domenico Tintoretto's *Magdalena penitente*) is placed in such a way as to mimic his exaggerated gestures in conveying (good) culture to the bored Catherine (see Fig. 13, far-right). Invoking Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, and

bringing us back to Godard's inclusion of the *Oath*, this image would seem to belie the sanctity of the classical work, for Paul is literally standing in the sarcastic shadow of what everywhere else becomes a television screen. The image, of Paul pontificating with the screen above him, repeats itself across *Masculin féminin*, except with televisions in place of the painting. Always to the top-right, and in the off position, the film places these smaller frames-within-the-frame as a grounding—or a conduit—for the hyper-mediated world in which Paul exists.



Figure 13 -- A few examples of Godard's placement within the frame of the television screen. In the above examples, Paul is either trying to vocally argue a political or cultural point.

There is an obvious impotency to be found in such a bourgeois distance.<sup>32</sup> Outside of the recordings (both Mozart and his own), Paul finds another mediated device in his use of chalk and spray paint to pronounce his 'activism'. In one scene in which an American General departs his car—with Françoise Hardy playing the woman on his arm—Paul sneaks around and spray paints "Peace in Vietnam" on the vehicle, although he is careful not to be seen. Alongside the futile implications of the gesture, there also exists the significance that Paul, a Frenchman, is actively 'protesting' the US war in

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<sup>32</sup> Which, as we'll see with *La Chinoise*, isn't to imply that its immediate counter, the working class or national liberation struggles, offers any more obvious an escape from the domination of late-capitalist ideology under the guide of the culture industry. At least not in their aesthetic portrayal or representation.

Indochina, yet remaining silent on his own country's brutality in Algeria. As previously mentioned, Paul is free to contest the struggle being waged on television, but not the one in his own proverbial backyard.<sup>33</sup>

We find such tendencies apogee in a scene in which Paul accidentally discovers two homosexual men making out in a bathroom stall. After unwittingly discovering the pair, Paul simply stays and watches, as if opening the door to the stall is simply another frame through which he is observing something he has no active part in—as if he has finally turned on one of the film's abundant television sets. Noticing him, one of the men says "Beat it, asshole!" and the other closes the door (see: Fig. 14). With this explicit gesture of exclusion, and being formally denied access to this world of seemingly perceptible eroticism and sexual promise, Paul pretends to utilize another stall before pulling out a piece of chalk and hastily scrawling "down with the republic of cowards" (*a bas la république des lâches*). Following this, he calmly fixes his hair and leaves to return to the film the group are watching (notably the 'film' being viewed is an extended rape scene). It is here in Paul's scribble that we have something of the film's discourse, particularly as it pertains to the constraints of the culture industry and the impossibility of breaking free from them. Paul's graffiti is then a perfect sign of his futility and impotence. It is ultimately an act more directed at himself and his banal, bourgeois existence, than it is at the two men existing—momentarily liberated—in this corner of shadows. And it is from this ineffectual act of 'resistance' that we may turn our attention to the question of radical aesthetics as *La Chinoise* frames them.

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<sup>33</sup> Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003) inverts the form when it is an American who wanders into the political scene of Paris in 1968 while, in a scene from the film, actively arguing against the condemnation of the US in Vietnam by the French.



Figure 14 -- Paul scribble his 'resistance' to the two men.

### Part Three: The Unity of Politics and Art in *La Chinoise*

#### I. What is a Word?

If *Masculin féminin* inherits from *Bande à part* the alleged cultural conflict between high/classical and low/popular art, with the manufactured 'sameness' of the culture industry superseding the difference, a concept the former film makes explicit with its intertitle of 'the children of Marx and Coca-Cola', then we can say that *La Chinoise* (1967) picks up from that film's political disorientation, with its characters going one step further and drinking Marx as if he were Coca-Cola. Whereas we can begin to locate *Masculin féminin*'s character of Paul in the museum patron from *Bande à part*, the critical component of *La Chinoise* may first be sought in the activist slogans that Paul subsequently litters around Paris. But though *La Chinoise* may adopt the radical politics Paul espouses, these same politics are filtered through the pop culture sensibilities of Madeleine; if the underlying—and sardonic—implication was to try and

televised the revolution in *Masculin féminin*, then it is here presented in all the vibrancy and color of the pulp image, further blurring the distinction between Madison Avenue and the revolution.<sup>34</sup>



Figure 15 -- The revolution advertised.

And much like Madison Avenue's advertisements with their commands and appeals, *La Chinoise* presents the viewer with the seductive—and perhaps dangerous—possibilities of the political *slogan*. Paul's protestations are literally given color in *La Chinoise*, and the film's quotations bleed from one frame to the next. Although Godard's use of quotations play an essential role throughout his filmography, including, as we've seen, the two films previously under discussion<sup>35</sup>, *La Chinoise* becomes especially reliant on them, with a particular focus on the power that texts, slogans, and even *words* themselves possess—a power that could potentially invoke radical action. Godard is still, perhaps more than ever, playing with the interplay between word/image/sound, but it is in *La Chinoise* that his interest in the

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<sup>34</sup> Much like *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), and in contrast to the previous films discussed, it seems impossible to imagine *La Chinoise* in black and white, if only for the necessity of the color red.

<sup>35</sup> From Wollen: "His [Godard's] fondness for quotation has always been one of the distinguishing characteristics of his films" (423).

material condition of the word finds itself a text from which to wrap the entire film around. This text is Mao's *Little Red Book*.<sup>36</sup>

Wollen acknowledges Godard's increasingly fundamental reliance on the use of quotation in this period of his career, and we can see how their function has evolved since *Bande à part*: "these quotations and allusions, instead of being a mark of eclecticism, began to take on an autonomy of their own, as structural and significant features within the films" (423). References and quotations form an integral part of the 'Godard brand' prior to this point, but they do not constitute the films *as such*. *La Chinoise* isn't simply a work which acknowledges that Mao's *Little Red Book* exists (and proves this by quoting it), but rather, to some degree, the entire aesthetic and thematic core of the film is built around it.

Although the film is formally an adaptation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1872 novel *Demons*<sup>37</sup>, it can perhaps more accurately be claimed to be an adaptation of Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*. The film takes from Dostoyevsky's source the loose configurations of the plot (just as *Bande à part* nominally borrows from *Fool's Gold*), in which several radicals, each of slightly differing convictions, conspire to overthrow the government through violent terror. But outside of this, *La Chinoise* acts as a color swatch for the New Left as it existed in France on the verge of the May 1968 insurrection. The apartment that Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud), Véronique (Anne Wiazemsky), Yvonne (Juliette Berto), Henri (Michel Sémeniako), and Kirilov (Lex de Bruijn) share becomes for Godard's camera a mausoleum filled with radical iconography—just as David's *Oath of the Horatii* ex post facto illustrated the proceeding Revolution, *La Chinoise* seems particularly prescient in its display of the symbolism of May '68 and the broader Western articulation of Maoism.

And the symbol that stands at the heart of this political exhibition is Mao's *Little Red Book* itself. It is through this text, including the physical copies of the book scattered around the apartment, that Godard has found an effective conduit for the radical possibilities—and potential failures—of the '68 political

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<sup>36</sup> Which is officially titled "*Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*" (毛主席语录, 1964), but will be referred to as the *Little Red Book* throughout the course of this chapter because that is the name it is most commonly associated with in the West, and holds the most symbolic weight for the purposes at hand.

<sup>37</sup> In Russian: *Бесы*. Sometimes called *The Possessed* in English.

impulse. But as we've seen with his inclusion of David's *Oath* and Mozart's recording, Godard complicates this seemingly singular function, with the *Little Red Book* becoming in *La Chinoise* part-commodity, part-sacred text, part-physical utility, and part-humorous prop. As Wollen says, Godard's quotation of the *Little Red Book* (textually on both a physical and literary level) has here 'taken on an autonomy of its own,' with the film's interest chiefly revolving around the question of how one text—one little book—could have such a big influence on the political/cultural scene, and how exactly is it goes about such an influencing?

Whereas Paul's scribbles in *Masculin féminin* might be seen as an attempt on his part to counter the spread, and perceived threat, of television as a totalizing force (which itself stands for American culture under the Marshall Plan), insomuch as he, somewhat lamely, attempts to advertise his own thoughts, *La Chinoise* presents us with a decidedly different form of painted slogan. Namely, one that potentially derives its power from collective repetition. And Mao's quotes—and Godard's subsequent quotation of them—also carries with them the weight of an implied authority, at least as far as those who take the text seriously are concerned, as most of the film's characters do.<sup>38</sup> They possess something of a heavenly mandate, and much of the film's humor/subversion comes from the various ways in which Godard chooses to reference them.

In this sense, one can potentially conceive of Mao's *Little Red Book* as perhaps one of the last printed works to invoke the power of the printing press which had henceforth conceded in potential to cinema, radio, and, especially, television.<sup>39</sup> Godard is presenting us with a text that, however briefly, has overshadowed, at least within the content of the film, the twentieth century dominance of these other, mediums. Even the radio is presented as a means in which to better convey Mao's words. Marshal McLuhan says of the introduction of print technology:

"A ditto device [printing] confirmed and extended the new visual stress. It provided the first uniformly repeatable 'commodity,' the first assembly line—mass production.... It created the

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<sup>38</sup> It seems particularly fitting that Godard's act of quotation in this film is mainly derived from a book which has the process of quoting in its very title. It's a book printed with the sole intention of quoting.

<sup>39</sup> Outside of the radio (and record player), and especially when compared to their central role in *Masculin féminin*, the television and the cinema screen are nowhere to be found within the film.



portable book, which men could read in privacy and in isolation from others. Man could now inspire—and conspire” (50).

Printing, therefore, is simply the “first assembly line,” and Mao’s book is only the return of this initial ‘mass produced’ medium to the sphere of influence. But it is the character’s constant verbal repetition of the book at hand that asks us to reconsider Godard’s questioning of the text as something that can be “read in privacy and in isolation.” The characters, and the film by extension, are bringing a certain oral quality back to the printed word—a notion further complicated by the film’s own textual use of Mao’s quotes.

It is important to remember that Mao—and his cult of personality which the book, at its most fundamental level, represents—is not the main target of Godard’s cinematic probing. The director is invariably more interested in the revolutionary’s text, and what can be done with it. This, as we’ve mentioned, also applies to the physical copy of the book itself, which Godard turns into a cinematic prop. In one instance, he has a small wind-up toy American tank bombarded by a barrage of copies of the book, and in another Yvonne ‘plays’ Vietcong, safely positioned inside a fortress constructed out of them (see: Fig. 16). Much like the sudden appearance of David’s painting in *Bande à part*, the director is having fun with what would be otherwise conceived as static and rigid pronouncements coming from a text of the same standing.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the group’s absurdly earnest dedication to the Chairman’s slogans is where a great deal of the film’s amusement resides. Especially when, before embarking upon the assassination plot, the group must choose lots, and the way they accomplish this is by reciting a passage from *The Little Red Book* in the style of ‘eeny, meeny, miny, moe.’<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> As an obvious counter, Michelangelo Antonioni’s documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972) certainly doesn’t show any inhabitants of the late-Maoist regime using the mandated text in such ironic faculties.

<sup>41</sup> Or an earlier scene in which their exercise routine quotes the text.



Figure 14 -- Mao's 'Little Red Book' as a literal stronghold.

But Godard's quotation of the book extends beyond its use as a character and prop motif —as Wollen reminds us, it has become 'structural and significant features' within the film itself. This extends to the film's title cards, one of which becomes a reoccurring motif, a quote (of course) from Mao that slowly reveals itself during the course of the film through a continually expanding intertitle. The passage, which does not become 'complete' until nearly the end of the film, is a kind of theoretical backdrop, which at least outwardly informs the film's central political objective. In total, it reads:

"The imperialists are still alive. They continue a reign of despotism in Asia, Africa and in Latin America. In the West, they still oppress the popular masses of their respective countries. This situation must change. It is up to the peoples of the world to end the aggression and the oppression of imperialism."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> In French: "Les impérialistes sont encore vivants. Ils continuent a faire regner l'arbitraire en Asie, en Afrique et en amerique latine. En occident, ils oppriment encore les masses populaires de leurs pays respectifs. Cette situation doit changer. Il appartient aux peuples du monde entier de mettre fin à l'agression et à l'oppression de l'impérialisme."



Figure 17 -- The first word of a much larger, extended quote.

Before this quotation is introduced to us, the film begins with a similar, opening pronouncement, read aloud by Henri, in which he articulates—through conventional Marxist terms—this essential ‘deadlock’ toward revolution in the West:<sup>43</sup> “the bourgeois will never give up power without a fight.” This is then immediately followed by the large title “LES” (the), which is the first piece of Mao’s quote (see: Fig. 18), and which is accompanied by the disruptive bangs of Karl-Heinz Stockhausen’s music. Much like the prologue to the *Gospel of John* (1:1), which begins with “In the beginning was the Word,” Godard establishes from the very beginning of *La Chinoise* the actuality of the Word, even if it is here only the first word—the—of the full quote.

But it is precisely Godard’s fragmenting of Mao’s text that complicates its inclusion as a structural component of the film. The ‘heavenly mandate’ of Mao’s slogan is deconstructed as Godard segments the quote into individual words, and fractured sentences. It is only through the unfolding film that we become aware that ‘the’ refers to ‘the Imperialists,’ who ‘are still alive.’ If, as Wollen tells us, “language wants to be overlooked,” Godard is making such a neglecting impossible as he draws individual attention to each word, but by splintering the passage within the film’s own structural cadence, he is simultaneously

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<sup>43</sup> A deadlock which informs both the film and the following real-world events of May ’69.

questioning the role text, even Mao's text, has within the cinema. Godard is utilizing Mao's words, but unlike the characters of the film, he is not beholden to them. For in-between the introduction and completion of this passage stands the film itself, and any meaning it may have is therefore contingent on the film.

## II. We Must Struggle on Two Fronts

Godard's use—and deconstruction—of Mao's *Little Red Book* highlights the central question of the film: how to produce (genuine) political art? Or as Mao puts it:

“We demand the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and an artistic form as perfect as possible. Works lacking artistic value, no matter how political advanced, are ineffective. In literature and art, we must struggle on two fronts.”<sup>44</sup>

This ‘struggle on two fronts’ is invoked within *La Chinoise* in a scene in which Kirilov reads aloud from Mao's *Little Red Book* as he strides about the room, his voice obscuring that of the seated Guillaume and Véronique, who converse at a table. Eventually Kirilov, who has finished reciting the above quoted-passage, leaves the frame while Véronique resuming her reading and Guillaume his writing. Soon, after Kirilov has exited the room, Guillaume announces his disagreement to Véronique: “fighting on two fronts, I find too complicated.” He follows this up by reminding her that he prefers to do one thing at a time (see: Fig. 18).

As Guillaume voices this concern, Véronique is playing ragtime jazz over the record player, which he remarks upon by saying: “I don't understand how you can listen to music and write at the same time.” She considers this, before switching the music off and calmly asking “do you love me?” Startled, he immediately tells her that he does. She quickly responds with “I've decided that I don't love you anymore.” He pleads emphatically for an answer, but she is resolute. “I don't understand,” he says. “You

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<sup>44</sup> This quote, slightly abridged, is taken from Chapter 32 ‘Culture and Art’ of *Quotations from Mao Tse-Tung*.

will,” she tells him, before turning the music back on, except that instead of ragtime it has been replaced with a classical piece.



Figure 18 – Guillaume’s struggle to engage on multiple fronts.

During this musical interlude, she continues to outline the reasons that she has stopped loving him, before turning the music off once again and asking if he understands. He complies, telling her “I’m very sad, but I understand.” With this, Véronique finally reveals the game: “you see, you can do two things at once. To understand you had to do it. Music and language.” Once again turning the music back on, she reiterates the central task that “you must struggle on two fronts.” It is the classical piece which resumes on the record player. “But you really scared me,” he tells her.

This scene, in tone and execution, bears a striking resemblance to the one previously discussed from *Masculin féminin*. Again, at the center of the interaction is the record player, here also occupying the central point of the frame. Once again, it is from this device that culture (*Masculin féminin*) and politics (*La Chinoise*) is negotiated for the characters. And, just as Paul struggles in *Masculin féminin* to employ cultural/political pretension as a united front against the threat of American commercial hegemony, utilizing the record player to ‘educate’ Catherine (on Mozart), so too does Véronique seek its mediating

qualities to teach Guillaume of the need to struggle on simultaneous fronts. The record player in *La Chinoise* is then shadowed by an unplugged radio.

Just as Catherine must be subjected to the sophistication (in multiple senses of the word) of a new Mozart record, Guillaume must be exposed to the twin occurrences of “music and language,” a ‘complication’ the film preforms as previously discussed. Building off *Masculin féminin*, the scene implies the presence of the culture industry, specifically in the device’s ability—or inability—for mediation, but there also exists the explicit contest between art and politics; between form and content. The assumption is that Guillaume cannot see the need for ‘artistic value’ against political pertinence—he likes to do one thing at a time. But Véronique’s trail-by-ordeal on Guillaume exposes, in a comical manner, his romantic insecurity, and his “ability to do two things at once.”

As we’ve seen, Godard has previously applied a strategy of engaging on multiple fronts to his films, especially when we consider his inclusion of the other arts as re-contextualized through the cinema, such as David’s *Oath* or Mozart’s music. But the question of what exactly “the unity of content and form” would entail demands a deeper investigation. The most obvious assumption is that it would entail a complete break—negation—from bourgeois art (assuming the content is radical); that a genuinely revolutionary art would offer a ‘way out’ from the totalizing constraints of the culture industry and reactionary ideology.<sup>45</sup> Obviously for Godard, if such a break is to be made anywhere it is to be in the cinema.

But where *Masculin féminin* presented, through Paul, the false dichotomy of bourgeois culture against consumer culture, both of which are supplanted under the culture industry, the characters of *La Chinoise* are all too eager to condemn culture as such, as they do in a scene in which (an image of) Novalis is, against Véronique’s wishes, brought to the wall of ENNEMIS PUBLICS (public enemies) for mock execution (see: Fig. 19).<sup>46</sup> Despite the broad parody of the scene, the underlying notion, that

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<sup>45</sup> One is reminded of Herbert Read’s famous proclamation: “Revolutionary art should be revolutionary” from his *What is Revolutionary Art?* (1935)

<sup>46</sup> Véronique, unsuccessfully, tries to plead his case: “But he’s a scholar, not a poet!”

contemporary culture as a whole must be purged, was consistent with the aims of the Cultural Revolution, which was at that time being forcefully implemented in China.<sup>47</sup>



Figure 19 -- The wall of Public Enemies.

As always, the lingering question is one of negation, namely if such a break or ‘way out’ is even possible. It is a question of *what* to break, and what *not* to break. Véronique has misgivings about ‘condemning’ Novalis, and Guillaume—and Paul before him—cannot give up romanticism, even if he is ready to condemn it elsewhere. At one point in *La Chinoise* Guillaume interrogates Yvonne about a melodramatic magazine, “The Party’s Woman’s Magazine,” she is reading: “No point in being Communist to use that soap opera language. I forbid you to read that.”<sup>48</sup> Guillaume, meanwhile, is causally reading the *Little Red Book*.

<sup>47</sup> Officially labeled the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the period followed the failure of the earlier Great Leap Forward.

<sup>48</sup> It is a publication of the Communist Party.



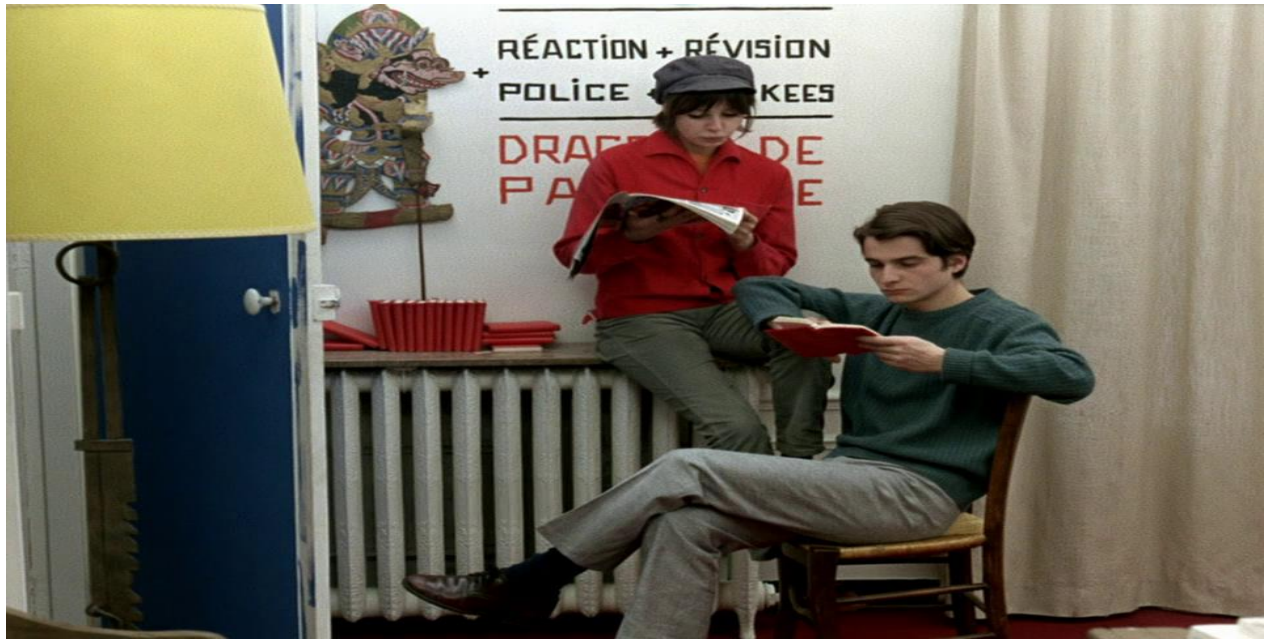


Figure 20 -- Casual reading material.

But the death of Romanticism as a bourgeois sentimentality seems to be one of the film's red herring. Just as Godard attacks what Wollen terms 'orthodox cinema,' this simple negation does not on its own produce a revolutionary alternative (426).<sup>49</sup> As we've seen with the *Oath of the Horatii*, these works leave a trace which extends in both directions, and their subsequent reading is as much a political act as their initial writing is. Likewise, the character imploring another not to use "soap opera language" is the one most susceptible to its hidden influence, in much the same way that Paul the snob is the most desperate to connect with Madeleine 'on her level,' i.e. through the recording. Guillaume slapping the paper out of Yvonne's hands is ultimately a powerless gesture; condemning 'bad' art does not immediately guarantee the space for good art.

Later in the film, while Véronique is debating Francis Jeanson (playing himself), she asks "Shouldn't we start from scratch?" He warns her that "you're heading toward a dead-end." Godard, through scenes such as this one, is complicating such an ambition of 'starting from scratch,' even if his cinematic style continues to move further and further away from its so-called 'orthodox' counterpart. But

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<sup>49</sup> A fact made apparent in China by the subsequent rise and 'reforms' of Deng Xiaoping following Mao's death.



perhaps the frequent inclusion of the passage from Vivaldi, which comes and goes throughout the film with the same regularity as Stockhausen's modernist score<sup>50</sup>, serves as a kind of persistent reminder that such a total negation or 'break' from the pre-revolutionary culture—assuming, that is, that the revolution is indeed coming—may be more difficult than imagined. Is it possible to truly offer multiple fronts in a work of art?

### III. We Must Confront Vague Ideas with Clear Images

Just as it is useful to investigate those aspects of culture the prospective revolutionary would willingly discard, it is equally advantageous to see what, if anything, that would be willingly kept behind.<sup>51</sup> In this capacity, *La Chinoise*, being a film explicitly about radicals and the culture they reject (and retain), may afford us a unique opportunity to discern Godard's own aesthetic and intellectual views on the matter. Since the negation of bourgeois culture cannot be completed in total, we must assume that this is partly because there are already radical elements imbedded within it, and Godard is eager to pull from these.<sup>52</sup> In a scene that mirrors the 'ennemis publics' one, we see Guillaume methodically wiping clean from a slate the names of artists and intellectuals, which Godard finally cuts away from when only one name remains: that of Bertolt Brecht (see: Fig. 21).

Why Brecht? Why is it that out of this compilation of Western artists and intellectuals that only Brecht's name would remain, to survive Guillaume's purge? Brecht's credentials as a radical artist may seem obvious enough, but perhaps it is in his technique that Godard finds him worthy of amnesty. Brecht's distancing effect, the *verfremdungseffekt*, is crucial to his separation from the bourgeois theater

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<sup>50</sup> Not to mention Claude Channes pop-parody song 'Mao-Mao' written explicitly for the film.

<sup>51</sup> During one of the 'interviews' with Véronique (*Dialogue 3 Véronique*), she is asked, presumably by Godard, "should books should be burned?" "No," she responds, "they shouldn't. We couldn't criticize them then."

<sup>52</sup> This notion follows along the lines of Marx's infamous proclamation from *Capital* (chapter 31) that "force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one."

There is an obvious contrast between the idea of re-contextualizing (or de-contextualizing as it may prove to be) work created before a 'revolutionary' moment, and the Stalinist project to re-instate bourgeois auras, such as Tchaikovsky. For more on this, see Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*.

that preceded him. As the name implies, the effect endeavors to establish a critical distance between the spectator and the action unfolding before them. Or:

“...the audience must be discouraged from losing their critical detachment by identification with one or more of the characters. The opposite of identification is the maintenance of a separate existence by being kept apart, alien, strange—therefore the director must strive to produce by all the means at his disposal effects that will keep the audience separate, estranged, alienated from the action” (Esslin 132).<sup>53</sup>

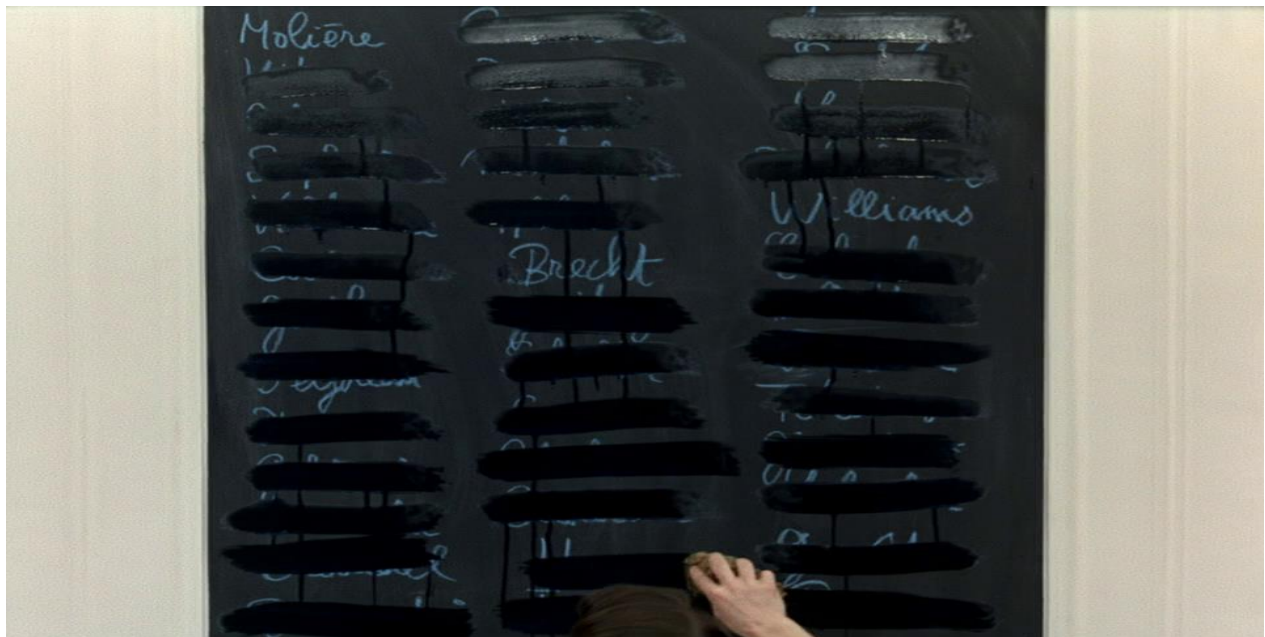


Figure 21 -- Brecht is the last name standing.

In Godard’s attempt to unite content and form, *La Chinoise*, ostensibly a Marxist film, endeavors in its own way to create a sense of alienation in the viewer, in which their enjoyment of the film becomes estranged to themselves. It is precisely in the Marxist understanding of the term—of feeling external to one’s own life—that Godard, like Brecht, aims to alienate the film’s audience from the film’s fiction.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> On the effect’s name, the same author says: “A term that has never been successfully rendered in English because terms like alienation or estrangement have entirely different, and unfortunate, overtones. In French *distantiation* is a happier term” (132).

<sup>54</sup> Marx says of Alienation in his *Notes on James Mill* (1844): “Let us review the various factors as seen in our supposition: My work would be a *free manifestation of life*, hence an *enjoyment of life*. Presupposing

Godard goes about this very early in the film, in which he presents to us an intertitle that declares: *un film en train de se faire*, which translates to 'a film being made,' or more directly 'a film in the process' (see: Fig. 22). While the temporary breaking of the fictional mold is nothing new for Godard, here he is directly declaring the material intent of the project, i.e. the labor of manufacturing a film. Godard has firmly broken the 'narrative spell' to alert the viewer to the fact that everything that follows is part of the larger effort to construct the movie.



Figure 22 -- 'A film being made,' or perhaps more directly 'a film in process.'

This 'discouragement' of losing one's 'critical detachment' is further advanced in the following scene, which features a long, extended shot (in the form of an interview) of Guillaume/Léaud, in which he initially admits "Yes, yes, I'm an actor." This disclosure is reiterated later in the film when Henri, being questioned about Véronique, tells the camera that "she was confusing Marx and theatre and politics, and that's romanticism," and that "she behaved in life like an actress."<sup>55</sup> As always, Godard is playfully conflating the form and its constraints (the audience knows that she is an actress), but the effect is decidedly more alienating when the film has gone through structural pains to stress its own material

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private property, my work is an *alienation of life*, for I work in *order to live*, in order to obtain for myself the *means* of life. My work is *not* my life."

<sup>55</sup> Henri is the film's archetypical revisionist, saying at one point that "Marxism is first of all a science."

condition. A condition which is further affirmed through the inclusion of subsequent shots of the camera, clapboards, and the actors/characters rehearsing.<sup>56</sup>

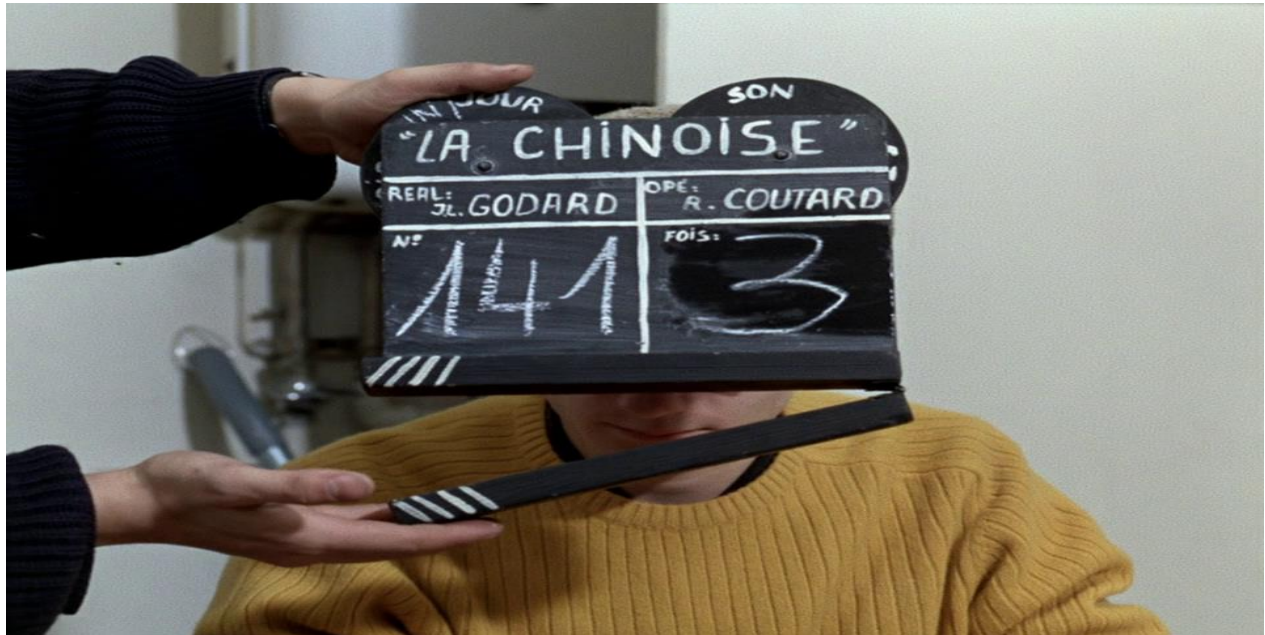


Figure 23 -- The clapboard in the shot.

Like Brecht's technique for the theater, effects like these make it clear that there can be no doubt that what the viewer is watching is indeed a film, and, more importantly, a film that is actively deconstructing itself in front the viewer's own eyes. But this isn't to imply that Godard has then abandoned theatrics. Henri's false assumption, that there is a clear delineation between Marx/theater/politics, is challenged by the previously mentioned scene involving Guillaume, who, after openly confessing to being an 'actor,' then proceeds to tell the camera "an idea of what theater is."

As Guillaume begins to detail a demonstration in Moscow by Chinese students, he starts to wrap a bandage around his head, until his entire face is covered. "And of course the Russian police beat them up," he says, before explaining that the following day the Chinese met in front of their embassy in front of

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<sup>56</sup> For Wollen it is *Loin du Vietnam* (1967) which first 'shows' the camera, despite *La Chinoise* being released two months earlier. He says: "It was not until his contribution to *Loin du Vietnam* that the decisive step was taken, when he simply showed the camera on screen" (421). Regardless of which film accomplished the task first, the point stands that at this moment in his career, Godard had entered a new stage of de-fictionalization in his cinema in which the *physical act of filmmaking* would form a crucial part of the films themselves.

the Western media. “And a student came up, his face covered with bandages,” Guillaume says, his face now completely covered as well, “and [he] started yelling: look what they did to me! Look what the dirty revisionists did!” He tells us that the reporters flock to the figure, to take pictures as he removes the bandages: “when they were all off, they realized his face was alright.” Of course, by this point Guillaume has removed his own bandages to reveal his own similar ‘alright’ face. He tells us a reporter yells “the Chinaman’s a fake!” But they had failed to understand, he says, that this was theater.



Figure 24 -- An act of 'real theater.'

Guillaume terms this “real theater,” and elsewhere the film uses the term ‘socialist theater’ interchangeably. “Like Brecht or Shakespeare” he tells us. But whatever definition and motivation we can ascribe to ‘socialist theater,’ we must carefully examine what it is Godard has done here, particularly as concerns the cinematic. Guillaume, after admitting that he/Léaud is an actor, has re-staged a scene (whether it is a true story or not), for the camera, that was itself first a dramatic staging for the reporter’s cameras. This recorded act of ‘real theater’ complicates more orthodox notions of the cinematic scene, perhaps even that of Bazin and his ‘objective reality.’ Marxism is theoretical, while the act of theater is intrinsically political.

But this theatrical element—which at its core challenges the heterodoxy of socialist realism, and which, within the confines of the film’s content and aesthetics, seems strictly revisionist—also raises the question within the film of the precise role that the spectacle plays. The spectacle, as detailed by Guy Debord in his *Society of the Spectacle*, is, for him, as totalizing and all-encompassing as the culture industry is for Adorno and Horkheimer. Like Brecht’s concept of alienation, we can keep Marx in mind as Debord defines his term: “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (2). Simply put, the spectacle, this ‘collection of images’ becomes the only filter through which the people of a late-capitalist society can view the world. “It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society” (3).

Godard’s film, with its constantly shifting series of sporadic scenes, which are loosely configured into ‘movements,’ resembles the aphoristic structure of the book, and forms a *détournement* of sorts.<sup>57</sup> But the key is, again, the concept of mediated devices, with the devices here being precisely the *images* themselves. The film, and the characters, use these images to form a coherent (or otherwise) conception of the revolution, and Godard’s constant cycle through them paints an absolute reliance on their mediating functionality that is potentially greater than that of the electronic vessels of communication presented in *Masculin féminin*. When Véronique first assassinates the (wrong) minister, the shot is shown via a Lichtenstein-esq comic image of a man being shot (see: Fig. 25).

Returning once again to the question of cultural negation, it seems even more improbable to break entirely—or perhaps even at all—from this overreliance on images. From the spectacle. And it isn’t only Godard’s use of American comics/popular culture to consider; the proliferation of Maoist/communist iconography is not separate from the spectacle, despite its radical origins. In fact, as hinted earlier, the use of the *Little Red Book*, including its frequent humorous application as prop, makes it clear that it might be the ultimate object of spectacle presented in the film. Godard fragments its words, so it makes sense that he would fragment its image as well. As Debord tells us “this is why the spectacle feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere” (11).

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<sup>57</sup> Which, of course, is a method for disrupting the spectacle that Debord (and the broader Situationist movement) advocated.





Figure 25 -- Image as mediating device.

It is not too coy, then, to say that Godard is trying to show us the revolution with the only images he has, which is to say the cinematic image generally. Similar to the manner in which he quotes the text, Godard is taking the image at its word, so that, as mentioned prior, these same images must speak for themselves. But what they have to say is no less complicated. For, despite what the film's Aden Arabie Cell paints on their wall, "we should replace vague ideas with clear images" (il faut confronter les idées vagues avec des images claires) (see: Fig. 26), it is increasingly difficult to conceive of what a 'clear image' would consist of. "The cinema," Wollen reminds us, "cannot show the truth, or reveal it, because the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to be photographed" (426). A line from the film echoes this sentiment: "Art doesn't reproduce the visible. It makes visible."<sup>58</sup> The truth, so to speak, is in the image itself.

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<sup>58</sup> Originally from Paul Klee, in his *Creative Credo* (*Schöpferische Konfession* 1920). As they say in the film, "It's the reality of the reflection!"



Figure 26 -- 'We must confront vague ideas with clear images.'

#### IV. Bleating Like Sheep

In a scene preceding—but not necessarily separate from—that of Kirilov’s intrusion on Véronique and Guillaume at the table, he is speaking on the question of art before the group. He tells them:

“We are not the ones using obscure language. It’s our society which is hermetic and closed off in the poorest of languages possible. Three: Maiakovsky in poetry. Eisenstein in movies. All those fighting for a definition of socialist art were knifed in the back by Trotsky and others. Those who two months after taking the Winter Palace, accepted Imperialist language to sign the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk.”<sup>59</sup>

This emphasis on ‘socialist art’ as something distinct from the ambiguities of the ruling ideology, with its ‘vague ideas’ and ‘obscure language,’ finds its counter in Debord’s claim that the spectacle is “the opposite of dialogue” (6). A sealed society inevitable produces an incestuous and stunted language, and, as the quote suggests, the radical impetus in the infant Soviet Union to overcome this (bourgeois)

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<sup>59</sup> As far as I’m aware, this quote is Godard’s own.



limitation was effectively snuffed out when the fledgling revolution adopted, from necessity or otherwise, the Imperialist terms and conditions. If you sign their contract, then you've essentially agreed to their terminology. The emphasis, then, is on this idea of the 'fight for a definition.'

As we've seen, Godard is actively probing the barriers of language for just this kind of *definition*. But 'Imperialist language' is not so easily skirted, and we can see the film's continual quotation of Mao as just one attempt to vitiate this influence. But even Mao's words must be disrupted and deconstructed, for even they carry with them a certain weight of distrust. Wollen tells us that Godard is "looking for a way of expressing negation" (421), and this linguistic negation is being practiced on words as well as on images, remembering that with his cinema Godard is consciously practicing a process of 'writing in images.' If the 'Imperialist language' is not to be trusted in its words, why should it be any less suspect with the images it produces?

But the negation of bourgeois language, or at the very least the attempt at such a negation, carries with it the same complication that it does for bourgeois art. An active deconstruction, as Godard is attempting with *La Chinoise* (and *Bande à part* and *Masculin féminin*), risks, even beyond the ever-present limitations—and fear of assimilation—presented by both the culture industry and the spectacle, the same obscurity which it deigns to combat. To this end, Wollen reminds us that:

"The whole project of writing in images must involve a high degree of foregrounding, because the construction of an adequate code can only take place if it is glossed and commented upon in the process of construction. Otherwise, it would remain a purely private language" (421).

In other words, a 'new language' must establish itself as a language actively establishing itself, lest its pieces become unintelligible. Godard's endless quotations serve this purpose, to show their reliance on, and then break with, previous forms, such as the more orthodox cinema of Hollywood. But, as we've seen with his use of the older, more traditional arts such as David's *Oath*, such an employment rests on the concept of radical negation as a teleological absolute—these works penetrate forward as well as back. Godard is re-framing the *Oath*, but he is not reconstituting it. All that can be done when one attempts to build a language in images is the active task of building a language in images, with the emphasis, again, on building. Like the intertitle announces: "en train de se faire..." (in the process).

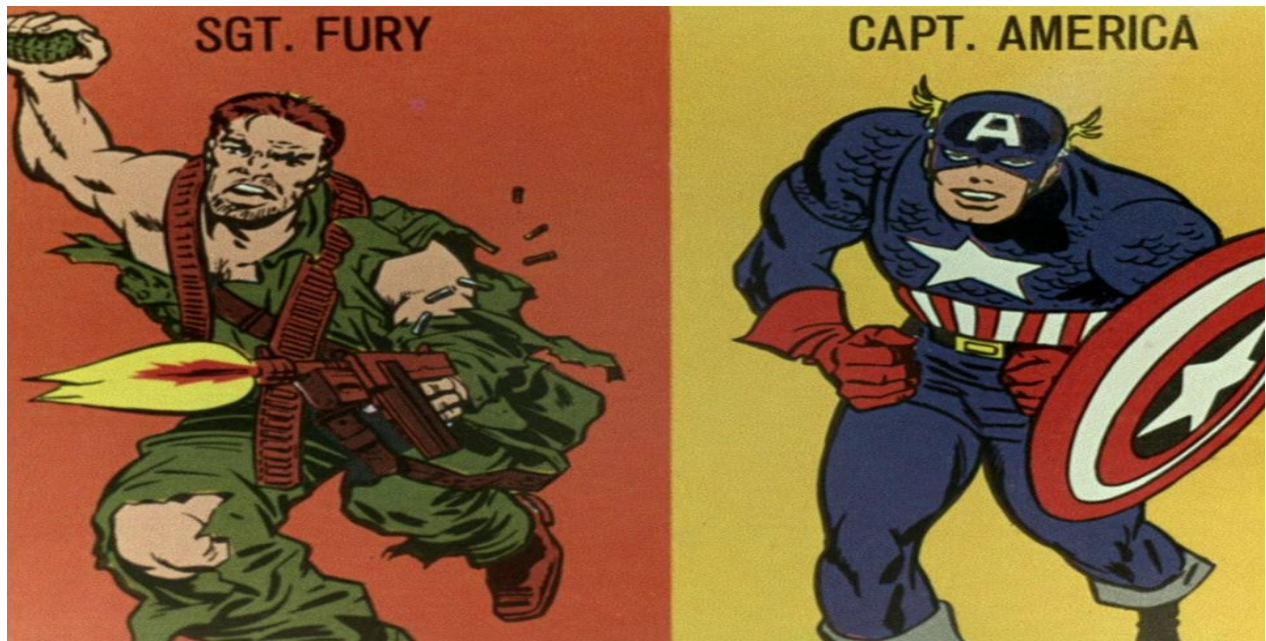


Figure 27 -- Pop culture as language.

*La Chinoise* as a film recognizes this limitation. To distance himself from the group after his expulsion, Henri, in an attempt to reiterate their insular mindset, tells the story of the 'Egyptian children.' The Egyptians, who believed their language "that of the gods," attempted to prove this by leaving infants in a hut removed from the rest of society, assuming they would naturally learn how to speak. "They came back fifteen years later," Henri tells us, "and what did they find? The kids talking together, but bleating like sheep." The Egyptians had failed to notice a sheep-pen next door. Henri says that for the characters in the flat, Marxism-Leninism was "a bit like the sheep."

Of course, with the utilization of any language and any system of images there remains just such a threat that one may be found "bleating like sheep."<sup>60</sup> Godard may subvert pop culture icons by juxtaposing them alongside radical images, or by manipulating their presentation to imply a more radical critique, as he does with 'Sgt. Fury/Capt. America,' two comic symbols of American patriotism, whose image is edited to the rhythm and sound of a machine gun (see: Fig. 27) —but this approach overlooks both the tendency for the radical images themselves to eventually become subsumed within the pop

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<sup>60</sup> As they reiterate in the film: "Perhaps reality hasn't appeared yet to anyone."

culture lexicon (consider the proliferation of 'Che shirts' today), and the inherent subversion (as we've seen with David's painting) already present in such works to begin with.

Wollen says that "as long as there are images at all, it is impossible to eliminate fantasy" (424). Godard is most likely aware of such a restriction, and as we've seen with his cinema, he is at the very least having fun with the constraints. But this is cinema attempting to become revolutionary, and it can be framed as a continual effort to this end. Throughout these films, Godard is highlighting the totalizing force that is the culture industry/spectacle society, and is actively positioning the cinema, at least the consciously revolutionary cinema (which is, among other things, an attempt at merging form and content), as a potential agent of disruption to these forces. For disruption, in the sense of disturbing a process, is one of the primary radical virtues against the hegemonizing tendencies of the status quo, and its place—and possible effectiveness—is perhaps more important to us now than ever, especially in the post-68 arena. Godard's films under discussion here may ultimately raise more questions than answers on the nature of revolutionary cinema, but they are the right questions. And it is cinema's job to ask them.

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