

Introduction

'The depiction of late 1960's counterculture in the 1968 films of Jean-Luc Godard'

Robin Wood: "...I dropped out on [Jean-Luc] Godard a long time ago."

David Walsh: "Godard dropped out on Godard a long time ago."¹

Recent historical criticism seems to have divided the 1960's into two possible paradigms. One maintains that the 1960's was entirely populated by two politically opposed factions, the 'Hippies' and the 'Straights,' which, over time, has come to represent something of a status quo. The other appears to be a revisionist exercise, maintaining that the 1960's were a period of apolitical cultural upheaval with no political principles or involvement.² One of the features of Godard's filmmaking practice that this thesis will attempt to illustrate, is Godard's far from apolitical motivations, his acknowledgement and understanding of past revolutionary movements, and his obvious celebration of contemporary 'left-wing' political events illustrated throughout his work in 1968.

The five films under discussion are:

Le Gai Savoir

Ciné-Tracts

One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil

One AM/One PM

Un Film Comme Les Autres

Examining the five films Godard made in 1968 reveals a greater number of similarities in technique with the cinema of the past than the majority of filmmaking in 1968. The use of intertitles, textual inscriptions on still images, bare sets, and a minimisation of camera movement harkens back to early silent cinema. These kinds of techniques must have appeared like some form of primitivist 'kick' in 1968 to those who understood the origins of their form, especially when compared to films such as Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, also released that year.

¹ David Walsh, *A Conversation with film critic Robin Wood*. Internet WWW page, at URL: <
http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/oct2000/tff7-o16_prn.shtml> (version current at 29 October 2000).

² Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 9.

However, this is not to say that Godard's films from this time offer the spectator anything like a normal narrative film that quaintly utilises some past techniques from the history of cinema. Instead, the spectator is served up a war of images and text that arrests the viewer, presents an idea, and just as quickly makes an association with another. The films are unashamedly intellectual, anti-spectacle, and challenging to any passivity the viewer may bring to the screen. The films revel in contesting the spectator's assumption of films being made for entertainment, and encourage the viewer to explore ideas which, on initial contact, may or may not be within the spectator's knowledge.

This contesting of the spectator's knowledge is representative of what Roland Barthes identifies as the 'Rhetoric of the image.' Godard explores the potential effects of creating a proliferation of alternative readings within individual images. Barthes explains

The variation in readings is not, however anarchic; it depends on the different kinds of knowledge – practical, national, cultural, aesthetic – invested in the image and these can be classified, brought into a typology. It is as though the image presented itself to the reading of several different people who can perfectly well co-exist in a single individual: *the one lexia mobilizes different lexicons...* This is the case for the different readings of the image: each sign corresponds to a body of 'attitudes' – tourism, housekeeping, knowledge of art – certain of which may obviously be lacking in this or that individual. There is a plurality and a co-existence of lexicons in one and the same person, the number and identity of these lexicons forming in some sort a person's *idiolect*.³

Generally, what makes Godard's films from 1968 counter cultural is their contemporary ideological critique of these pluralities from different media made available to the public. With the exception of the collaborative *One AM* project, each film can be interpreted as a critique of an individual mass medium that signifies and reinscribes the culture and ideology of bourgeois hegemony.

Le Gai Savoir: Television

Ciné-Tracts: Print

One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil: Music

³ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (Oxford: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984), pp. 46-47.

Un Film Comme Les Autres: Radio

In the preface to his book *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Theodore Roszak examines the difficulty in studying the intricacies of counter culture and the attendant stress of trying to pin-point something that, almost by definition, should be elusive.

It would surely be convenient if these perversely ectoplasmic *Zeitgeists* were card-carrying movements, with a headquarters, an executive board, and a file of official manifestoes. But of course they aren't. One is therefore forced to take hold of them with a certain trepidation, allowing exceptions to slip through the sieve of one's generalizations in great numbers, but hoping always that more that is solid and valuable will finally remain behind than filters away.⁴

Information or statistics about individuals involved in any particular counter cultural group throughout the 1960's is extremely difficult to obtain. In the case of the highly organised groups during the 1960's, depending on what the goals of the group were, it was best not to release the number of 'subscribed' members if you wanted to avoid persecution or achieve the greatest publicity.⁵ It is also unlikely that official censuses would include such questions as 'Are you, or have you ever been an Anarcho-Syndicalist?' or 'Have you ever been a member of the Situationist International or the Enragés?' And which subversive in their right mind would want to say 'Yes' for Government statistical purposes if those questions were included?

Roszak's image of the representatives of American counter culture is distinctively youthful, positioning the counter cultural movements of the 1960's within a "youth culture" which adopted the appearance of "exotic sources" from East and West alike.

...from depth psychiatry, from the mellowed remnants of left-wing ideology, from the oriental religions, from the Romantic *Weltschmerz*, from anarchist social

⁴ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. xi.

⁵ One excellent example is probably Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin's YIPPIE movement, where they spoke for themselves and gave the impression of having hundreds, if not thousands of members by selling Yippie badges to fund their activities. See Jerry Rubin, *DO IT! Scenarios of the Revolution* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1970).

theory, from Dada and American Indian lore, and, I suppose, the perennial wisdom.⁶

Aside from the observations of couture, Roszak reveals the disparate elements that comprise any counter cultural movement, but more significantly reveals the history that is represented in the identities that the individuals adopt or identify themselves with. If Roszak's implication takes a 'clothes make the man/woman' perspective, it also sheds light on the powerful alienation a society can feel if its youth start adopting styles and cultural sensibilities alien to the one in which they were raised.

In 1968, Godard maintained that he was attempting to escape his own bourgeois background. Although Godard is of an older generation than the youth culture Roszak describes, it is worth noting the discrepancy between Godard's and his father's generation. Godard's father, Paul, revealed in a television interview, emotions of pride and alienated bewilderment at his son's accomplishments.

Paul: "He obviously had a very literary, even verbal, heredity. That can be seen in all he does."

Veronique (Godard's Sister, smiling): "Verbose."

Paul: "No, not verbose, verbal. Verbal! Certain of his quotations are his own. They aren't all from Lenin."⁷

Although the quote humorously illustrates a judgement on Godard's father's part, Paul Godard's assessment "they aren't all from Lenin" also reveals the origins of Godard's bourgeois past, and a political difference between the two. Daniel Cohn-Bendit analyses this question of differences between the generations in 1968 as not being about

...the impatience of the young to step into the shoes of the old. [But] In the current revolt of youth, however, very much more is being questioned. The distaste

⁶ Roszak, p. xiii.

⁷ From the *Cinéma Cinémas* video series *Cinéma Cinémas: Jean-Luc Godard*. CEDFI/MAE, 1984-1989. Ed. Claude Ventura.

is for the system itself. Modern youth is not so much envious of, as disgusted with, the dead, empty lives of their parents.⁸

This is echoed by Jean-François Revel's perception of the youth of the United States.

American Revolutionaries do not want merely to cut the cake into equal pieces; they want a whole new cake.⁹

Godard foreshadows the beginnings of this departure from his bourgeois past in the films he made in 1967. The end of Godard's 'old' narrative driven cinema is almost entirely epitomised in an image from *Weekend* [1967]. The image depicts the bourgeois Corinne (Mireille Darc) with a rifle held against her head by one of the revolutionaries who has captured her, played by Juliet Berto.¹⁰ The image is potently symbolic of Godard's past, as well as his anticipation of the future when considering Berto's role as the revolutionary Patricia Lumumba in *Le Gai Savoir* the following year.

In an interview with Andrew Sarris in 1994, Sarris directly asks Godard if he was ever a Marxist. Godard replies that his only desire in talking about Marx was to be provocative "...mixing Mao and Coca-Cola and so forth."

Sarris: ...are you still on the barricades?

Godard: One can still be a good critic and a moral observer, but one remains professionally detached as a writer and a film-maker. I didn't have to pick up a rifle to make *Les Carabiniers*.¹¹

However it can be argued that Godard's work has always been political. Some of his initial film criticism for *Gazette du Cinema* in 1950 displays a political consciousness already at work. In his 1950 article entitled *Towards a Political Cinema*, Godard

⁸ Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (London: André Deutsch, 1968), p. 44.

⁹ Jean-François Revel, *Without Marx Or Jesus* (London: Paladin, 1972), p. 126.

¹⁰ Wheeler Winston Dixon, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 98. See Fig. 1. in the Appendix.

¹¹ Andrew Sarris, 'Jean-Luc Godard Now', *Interview*, 24.7 (1994), p. 84.

commands the attention of the “..unhappy film-makers of France who lack scenarios..”¹² and questions why contemporary French cinema does not examine modern French political concepts, including political individuals in French society.

Highlighting the Russian cinema for his article, Godard perceives the “major currents” of Soviet cinema as “..the cinema of exhortation and the cinema of revolution, the static and the dynamic.”¹³ Although his commentary provides a critical examination of Soviet cinema, his purpose is to reveal exactly what is missing within contemporary French film, something he and his fellow *Cahiers du Cinema* critics were to redress constantly throughout the 1950’s.

If Godard perceived there to be insufficient political filmmaking, several of Godard’s critics have certainly accused him of leading the wave in creating too much. Critic Nicholas Garnham believes it is Godard’s efforts to be more directly political that have obscured his film-making.

As Godard has tried to make his films more relevant in a direct political sense, they have, paradoxically, become increasingly indecipherable.¹⁴

Garnham blames this upon the “European tradition” of the “art-movie” and the “personal statement.” Garnham believes the result of this is the making of films that are the equivalent of “highly convoluted, cryptic, almost encoded articles in fringe left-wing magazines.”¹⁵

Garnham’s opinion appears to have been shared by both fans and critics alike. In a speaking engagement Godard attended in 1968, a member of the audience stood to proclaim his disappointment in Godard’s departure from his former style and technique of filmmaking. Criticising what he perceived to be an anti-emotional and highly political framework in *La Chinoise* [1967], the fan explained his resentment at the didacticism of Godard’s politics. Godard’s rebuttal articulates the target of his filmmaking throughout 1968 and an illumination of both *La Chinoise* and *Le Gai Savoir*.

¹² Jean-Luc Godard, 'Towards a Political Cinema'. In *Godard on Godard*. Ed. Tom Milne and Jean Narboni. (New York and London: Da Capo Press, 1986), p. 17.

¹³ Godard, p. 16.

¹⁴ Nicholas Garnham, *Samuel Fuller* (New York: Secker & Warburg, 1971), p. 160

¹⁵ Garnham, p. 160.

We make a mistake in looking at any work of art as something that exists wholly in itself for all time. About *La Chinoise*, it's clear that I don't want to talk about human emotions, because since the beginning of cinema we have dealt only with human emotions. We must try to show something else—that is, why people are human and how they became that way. We should abandon drama and psychology and go in more for politics...There's no interest in relating a story of two young Marxist-Leninists in terms of a love story. What's important is to try to know what Marxist-Leninism is and how it helps them in their love.¹⁶

Certainly after the events of May, any notions of conventional romanticism are removed from Godard's films. Discussing Godard's work, Colin L. Westerbeck asserts that the events of May not only enabled a different perspective in Godard's filmmaking practice, but that filmmaking became a part of the historical present as it never had before.¹⁷ By creating films within the present, Godard's films are firmly placed within the context of the modern, technological world in order to examine the complications involved in the lives of his characters.

Creating a 'present' context in the film's narrative enables Godard to provide a more transparent focus of political and social intent in his work. In part, the creation of a 'present' environment is constructed around the use of contemporary sounds, and the use of contemporary images that may be familiar to spectators through exposure to other media. By utilising familiar images, the spectator is also more readily able to examine the social and political commentary in the contemporary context Godard provides.

Godard's interest in the past is confined to what can be related to the documentation of the present. This is due to Godard's perception that very little of the past can be recreated truthfully.

The cloche hat is less interesting today than it was in 1925, and it is quite right that *Quai des Brumes* should appear dated. I would be incapable of making a film

¹⁶ Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in Gene Youngblood, 'Jean-Luc Godard: No Difference between Life and Cinema'. In *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*. Ed. David Sterritt. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 48.

¹⁷ Colin L. Westerbeck Jr, 'A Terrible Duty is Born', *Sight and Sound*, 40 (1971), 81.

about the Resistance. People then had a way of talking and feeling which bears no relation to the way we behave today.¹⁸ (Italics mine)

However this antipathy concerning recreating the truth of the past is extended to encompassing the problems in recreating the present in Godard's 1968 films. Due to the perceived misrepresentation and distorting influence of the media, Godard's attacks on the conventional sources of media became increasingly vehement and highly publicised throughout 1968. From the beginning of the year, at a conference in the United States, Godard's sentiments seemed to be directed towards three observations about contemporary filmmaking: a lack of awareness about the history of cinematic images, a resentment at the under-utilisation of sound in film, and an over-emphasis on visual technologies for superficial purposes. Godard emphasised that this had resulted in the loss of cinema's educational or instructive power.

In contrast to the rejection of the commercial sources of media and filmmaking, Godard began relationships with alternative filmmakers. Godard's increasingly global revolutionary outlook on filmmaking included 'Third World' Argentine filmmakers such as Solanas and Getino, and underground organizations such as 'Newsreel'¹⁹ from the United States.

The increased presence of 'Alternative Media' organizations such as 'Newsreel' in the United States during 1968 had begun to pose an alternative to the 'official channels' of media sources, however Godard began to grow increasingly suspicious of their effectiveness in challenging the status quo of the commercial media. By 1970, there had been a form of dissolution in their relationship whereby the two would only work together, from Godard's perspective, for pragmatic purposes.²⁰ Part of this shift in perspective can be attributed to Godard's own shifting ideology throughout this time.

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Godard, *Le Petit Soldat* (London: Lorrimer Publishing Limited, 1967), p. 12. *Quai des Brumes*. Dir. Marcel Carné. France, 1938. AKA *Port of Shadows*. USA.

¹⁹ Bill Nichols writes "...News reel itself is the single most important film-making and distributing collective to emerge in the United states since the Worker's Film and Photo Leagues in the 1930's. Other individuals have made politically powerful films since 1968, when Newsreel began, and other groups have succeeded in distributing political films widely, but only Newsreel has been able to merge these two functions on a consistently collective basis." In Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods: Volume One* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 202.

²⁰ Kent E. Carroll, 'Film and Revolution: Interview with the Dziga-Vertov Group'. In Royal S. Brown, ed. *Focus On Godard.*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1972), p. 55.

However, the number of revolutionary groups attempting to undermine a largely state controlled media increased throughout the late 1960's.

In their article *Towards a Third Cinema*,²¹ Solanas and Getino examine the fallacy of believing that a revolutionary cinema cannot be made without a revolution already being in existence. On the contrary, Solanas and Getino list some of the guerrilla film movements already in existence, and working towards revolution in other countries.

Examples are Newsreel, a US New Left film group²², the *cinegiornali* of the Italian student movement, the films made by the *Etats Generaux du Cinéma Français*, and those of the British and Japanese student movements, all a continuation and deepening of the work of a Joris Ivens or a Chris Marker. Let it suffice to observe the films of a Santiago Alvarez in Cuba, or the cinema being developed by different filmmakers in "the homeland of all", as Bolivar would say, as they seek a revolutionary Latin American cinema.²³

Although there was a network of support amongst these filmmakers, the resistance to Godard's work from some of the participants on the political left was as galvanised as the right. Guy Debord, leader of the Situationist International, was perhaps best known for his 1967 literary work *The Society of the Spectacle*.

Providing a veritable manifesto of Situationist beliefs, Debord's work is packaged in a highly stylised aphoristic form. Detailing France's social structure and the seeming complicity of French society with the spectacle, Debord's work analysed the contemporary French socio-political structure and exploded its meaning to encompass bourgeois Western culture illustrating

²¹ Solanas and Getino. 'Towards A Third Cinema'. In Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods: Volume One*, pp. 44-64.

²² By the early 1970's, Godard doesn't appear to have any particular respect for the efforts of Newsreel, frequently accusing them of merely providing reportage. that had little to differentiate it from commercial media sources. See Kent E. Carroll, 'Film and Revolution: Interview with the Dziga-Vertov Group'. In Brown, ed., *Focus On Godard*, p. 55. Or even more bluntly in Andrew Sarris' interview: Andrew Sarris, 'Godard and the Revolution'. In *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*, pp. 55-56.

²³ Gene Youngblood, 'Jean-Luc Godard: No Difference between Life and Cinema'. In *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*, p. 45.

...the 'negation of life become visible,' by the 'loss of quality' associated with the commodity-form [and] the 'proletarianization of the world.'²⁴

Even in its most simplistic reading, Debord's 221 aphorisms provide ample description of the discrepancy between the life society lives, as depicted by media, and the actuality of people's existence. Debord transformed the text into a film by the same name in 1973, and followed the theme of his previous literary work with a book *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* in 1988. Like the work of Henri Lefebvre²⁵ (who was momentarily a member of the SI), Debord's later work examines, and attempts to verify his original thesis while expanding on his examination of the means and apparatuses by which the commodified society influences and controls the individual. Debord also directed some six 35mm black and white sound films between 1952 and 1978.

Although Debord's film work shares a great many similarities with Godard's, Debord frequently attacks Godard, accusing him of plagiarism and stealing from the 'dustbin of history.' Paradoxically, Debord's own cinematic work is derived from earlier work initiated by the Dadaists. However, the critical thinking of cinema that both employ in their work is the subtle awareness of cinematic history.

A great deal of the criticism directed against Godard's films from 1968 is inspired by a perception that Godard was a part of some 'fashionable' political wave, or, outlandishly, that his films were merely some form of agit-prop that was attempting to convert the 'youth' of his audiences into Communist believers. Unfortunately, the repercussions of this assault resulted in a near total disregard of the films from 1968, and in many respects, continues to the present.

Several critics have noted the fecundity of ideas and the multiplicity of different mediums Godard uses as sources of information or ideas within his films. Using the political and social events of 1968 as a focal point, the aim of this thesis is to clarify what Godard's aims were, and hopefully work towards answering the negative and often reactionary criticism targeted against them. Hopefully the analysis will provide a more positive, and more transparent, understanding of the content in the films from 1968.

²⁴ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 8.

²⁵ See: Kristen Ross, *Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview*. Internet WWW page, at URL: <<http://www.panix.com/~notbored/lefebvre-interview.html>> (version current at 29 October 2000).

As has been noted, Godard is acutely aware of the roots of his own cinema in the styles and traditions of the past. In the same way that Godard's pre-'68 cinema used 'homage' of the director's favourite filmmakers, the 1968 films include homage to the work of the first and second generation of European filmmakers who lived in revolutionary times. However, the culture that produced those filmmakers had changed, and as a consequence, the western world of the Twentieth Century provided a greater array of ideological targets.