

# **Le Gai Savoir**

Le Gai Savoir [1968] (AKA: *Merry Wisdom, Happy Knowledge, Joyful Wisdom, The Gay Science, The Joy of Wisdom*) 96 Minutes.

"..did you ever consider that lsd and color TV arrived for our consumption about the same time? Here comes all this explorative color pounding, and what do we do? We outlaw one and fuck up the other."

--Charles Bukowski -'A Bad Trip' from "Tales of Ordinary Madness'

"If this is to be the cinema of the future, God help us."

--Richard Roud of *Le Gai Savoir*<sup>1</sup>

Taking its title from the work of both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Le Gai Savoir* [1968] introduces the viewer to a new formalist style in Godard's work. The techniques and the application of many of the ideas used throughout the film had far reaching consequences for projects Godard continued with throughout 1968 until the early 1970's. These revolutionary changes were due to the social movement of the events in Paris during May 1968, and a continuation of the formalist, politically avant-garde movement Vertov and Eisenstein had introduced in cinema. From Godard's perspective, *Le Gai Savoir* is an experimental film, and although it "is not the film that should be made,"<sup>2</sup> *Le Gai Savoir* does provide a precedent for ideas and the exploration of ideology that he would pursue with the Dziga-Vertov collaborations.

The departure from Godard's pre-'68 style is marked by his rethinking of the way images are ideologically codified, and the way these images are manipulated by new technology and mass media. In many respects *Le Gai Savoir* represents the antecedent of the "Fin de Cinema" he proclaimed at the end of *Weekend* [1967]; and is representative of many of the ideas emerging from new media and communications literature in the 1960's.

Concepts of Globalisation and the emerging mass medium of television are reflected throughout, while critically reapplying earlier cultural works such as Brecht<sup>3</sup> and Walter Benjamin to the 'new' medium. Godard is self-critically investigating the way in which

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Roud, 'Le Gai Savoir', *Sight and Sound*, 38, (1969), 211.

<sup>2</sup> *Masculin Féminin* [1966] had contained a similar authorial statement "This wasn't the film we'd dreamed of. This wasn't the total film that each of us had carried within himself..the film that we wanted to make, or, more secretly, no doubt...that we wanted to live." Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in Jean-Luc Godard, *Masculin-Féminin* (New York: Grove Press Inc, 1969), p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Godard had already applied Brechtian techniques in his pre-'68 cinema and explicitly used Brecht's name in *Deux ou trois choses que sais d'elle (Two or Three things I know about her)* [1966]. James Naremore mentions Godard's interest in Brecht can be traced to his early criticism for *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1959. James Naremore, 'Authorship and the Cultural Politics of Film Criticism', *Film Quarterly*, 44 (1990), 16-17.

his own cinematic practice works, and in perhaps general terms, investigating the way film as a medium functions, and the inherent problems of communication and miscommunication. As Godard investigates the new functionality of the filmic medium in the contemporary world, he develops a self-consciousness and reflection on ideology in *Le Gai Savoir*, investigating its uses and applications within his own cinematic practice.

Representative of Godard's "great leap forward,"<sup>4</sup> *Le Gai Savoir* underwent an extended period of shooting and editing throughout 1967/8 before finally being released in 1969. In an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma* in October of 1967, Godard reveals that the original plot of *Le Gai Savoir* was supposed to be based more directly on a modernisation of Rousseau's text, and to be released under the name 'Emile'.

"A modern film, the story of a boy who refuses to go to his high school because the classes are always overcrowded; he begins to learn outside of school, by looking at people, going to the movies, listening to the radio, or watching television...What the film eventually became was *Le Gai savoir* (sic.), in which, as Richard Roud puts it, "there is, at last, no plot at all."<sup>5</sup>

Initially the project had been produced by the O.R.T.F.<sup>6</sup> and began shooting in December of 1967. However, whether or not Godard was genuinely interested in making such a film, or was merely capitalising on creating a treatment that would receive funding is open to question.<sup>7</sup> Certainly in the past, his adaptations from literary sources were frequently used in order to secure production funding.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard* (London: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> Royal S. Brown, 'Introduction: One Plus One Equals'. In Royal S. Brown, ed., *Focus on Godard*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1972), p. 9. The original plot of the film sounds uncannily like Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups/The 400 Blows* (1959), but also Godard's own life. Godard frequently alludes to himself as being a child raised in the cinema.

<sup>6</sup> O.R.T.F. is an acronym for Office de la Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française: The government controlled monopoly of France's radio and television networks.

<sup>7</sup> The O.R.T.F. controls on programming were rigid to say the least. They also held adaptations of French 'Classics' in high esteem during the late 1960's. Jill Forbes, 'The Rise of Audio-visual Culture'. In Jill Forbes and Michael Kelly, eds., *French Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1995, pp. 232-233.

<sup>8</sup> Speaking of using Maupassant to begin the *Masculin-Féminin* project, and to entice production funding, Godard says "And in the end things went off course as they always do when I use a "wall" to hoist myself up on. Then I discover something else and I forget the wall I used...I always need a canvas, a trampoline. Then you look and see where you're heading, but you forget, you take off from the trampoline..." Jean-Luc Godard in Godard, *Masculin-Féminin*. pp. 237-238.

On February 14, 1968 in a discussion of his work during a speaking tour of the United States, Godard mentioned the completion of the film's script in passing.

I have just finished a script which started out as Rousseau's *Emile*, but no longer resembles that novel at all. It's about education.<sup>9</sup>

However, upon seeing the material Godard had shot, the O.R.T.F. rejected the film whereupon the rights to the film were finally returned to Godard after a lengthy battle. Completion of the film was left to be produced by Anouchka Films, the Bavaria Atelier, and Sddeutschen Rundfunk after the events of May until its final editing in 1969.<sup>10</sup>

Richard Roud writes about the difficulty in trying to ascertain the completion date of the project.

Furthermore, there was a long gap between the shooting of the film and its final editing, so that it is impossible to say just how much of the film preceded the events of May 1968 and how much came after.<sup>11</sup>

There are a number of direct references to the events of May throughout the film, including the use of speeches and footage that indicate the film was still being worked on well after the January date that is mentioned in many of the publications on Godard's work. Godard was working on the *Ciné-Tracts* [1968] project during May and June, but according to Royal S. Brown, the final editing of the film was completed throughout May,<sup>12</sup> which would in all likelihood place the completion of the film's shooting before Godard's departure to begin production on *One Plus One* [1968] on May 30.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gene Youngblood, 'Jean-Luc Godard: No Difference between Life and Cinema'. In David Sterritt, ed., *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, ed., *Focus On Godard*, p. 179. In his review of the film, Roud includes 'Kestrel' films as a part of the production. Richard Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard* (London: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 79. Julia Lesage includes 'Gambit' as one of the producers of the film. See Julia Lesage, *Jean-Luc Godard: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1979), p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 139.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, ed., *Focus On Godard*, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> It is quite likely that Godard had four projects at various stages of production throughout the May and June period. *Le Gai Savoir*, *Cinétracts*, *Un Film Comme les Autres* and *One Plus One* are frequently recognised as being in production in May and June. Godard made at least two trips back to Paris during the shooting of *One Plus One* in June. See Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 151.

The completed film seems to have been left after its completion until finally premiering at the Berlin Festival<sup>14</sup> and then on to festival screenings in London and New York in 1969. At the time of Roud's writing in 1970, *Le Gai Savoir* had still not publicly screened in France.

Using the O.R.T.F. studios in Joinville as a location for the shooting of the actors in *Le Gai Savoir*, the main character focus of the film is comprised of seven meetings between the two characters Patricia Lumumba (Juliet Berto) and Emile Rousseau (Jean-Pierre Léaud) over a four year period. The dialogue between the two concerns their quest to experiment with language and images on both a theoretical and practical level. The film illustrates their exploration of sound and image using a variety of forms including: live footage from the events of May, speeches, photographs, on-camera interviews, book covers and other 2-dimensional works of art taken from a number of sources.

Using daytime footage of daily life on the Paris streets, Godard intercuts material illustrating shops and pedestrians, commuters and traffic, all of which contrast with the night-time studio space where Emile and Patricia conduct their experiments. Godard's use of sound in the film takes us through several environments, and due to the duration of some of the audio material, the film is certainly more difficult to examine if the spectator does not speak French.

The casting of actors Jean-Pierre Léaud and Juliet Berto is also partially illustrative of the reflexivity of Godard's political intentions for the film. Both actors had appeared in *Weekend* [1967], however, Berto had also previously appeared opposite Jean-Pierre Léaud in the political *La Chinoise* [1967].

Winston-Dixon summarises the plot of *La Chinoise* as chronicling

the lives of five young revolutionaries who live in a bourgeois apartment in Paris during the summer of 1967[...] they attempt throughout the summer to put into practical application the teachings of Marx and Lenin, as interpreted by Mao Tse Tung [...]The five students are Véronique (Anne Wiazemsky),

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<sup>14</sup> Winston Dixon quotes Julia Lesage as saying the reception in Berlin of *Le Gai Savoir* was 'disastrous'. The screening in New York seems to have suffered a similar fate with an en masse walkout. Wheeler Winston Dixon, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 95.

Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud), Henri (Michel Sémeniako), Kirilov (Lex de Bruijn), and Yvonne (Juliet Berto).<sup>15</sup>

Léaud's character Guillaume is the jilted lover of Wiazemsky's Veronique, while Berto plays Yvonne, the 'housekeeper', who is "supposed to be grateful to the other members of the group for rescuing her from a life of prostitution."<sup>16</sup> Using this form of intertextuality affords Godard the opportunity to expand on the audience expectations of the characters, as well as utilising an economy with subject matter.

Just as the characters of *La Chinoise* attempt to practically apply the work of Marx, Lenin and Mao to their lives, Patricia (Berto) and Emile (Léaud) attempt to learn theoretical and practical applications of visual and aural communication to help them better understand the workings of ideology and to further their revolutionary goals.

Léaud's history within French cinema almost needs no introduction. Beginning his career at the age of thirteen, Léaud embodies many of the publicly recognised facets that made up the New Wave in French cinema. In her article concentrating on Léaud's career, Maureen Turim suggests Léaud embodied many of the characteristics and attractions for French audiences that James Dean did for US youth<sup>17</sup>. It isn't difficult to teleologically follow this analogy, from Léaud's youthful rebellion in *The 400 Blows (Les Quatre Cents Coups* [1959]) to the adult character of Guillaume in *La Chinoise* and Emile in *Le Gai Savoir*, each of these cinematic incarnations plot a growing adult political consciousness.

This use of persona is not unusual in Godard's films. His selection of actors has frequently attempted to lend some form of authenticity to the characters his actors play. For example, the use of 'Ye-Ye' pop star Chantal Goya, who makes a relatively convincing pop star in *Masculin Feminin* [1966].

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<sup>15</sup> Winston Dixon, pp. 80-81.

<sup>16</sup> Winston Dixon, p. 83. Winston Dixon notes that *La Chinoise* was Godard's most successful film at the U.S. box office aside from 1959's *A bout de Souffle*.

<sup>17</sup> Maureen Turim, 'Jean-Pierre Léaud: Child of the French Cinema', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 7, (1972/3), p. 41.

By using actors playing themselves within films, or directors such as Fritz Lang and Samuel Fuller<sup>18</sup>, Godard, at minimum, blurs the line between life and the cinema. Godard himself states

I see no difference between the movies and life. They are the same.<sup>19</sup>

However, Godard further problematises the actor/character relationship in *Le Gai Savoir* by Léaud's announcement at the end of the film that he is going to shoot a film with Skolimowski, which in fact he did, appearing in Skolimowski's *Le Depart* in 1967.<sup>20</sup>

Godard's use of Léaud is given an added complexity when examining the fusion of personal and professional relationships between the actor and Godard. Just as Léaud's relationship with Truffaut became paternalistic throughout Truffaut's 'Antoine Doinel' cycle of films, similar issues of cinematic 'paternity' are raised within *Le Gai Savoir*. Godard assumes Rousseau's role of father and teacher within the film. Reflexively, Léaud can be interpreted as Godard's own child, a child that has been raised within the cinema<sup>21</sup>, and simultaneously shared by other directors who were part of or influenced by the New Wave.

Considering the original plot for 'Emile,' there are a number of comparisons between the plot Godard was developing and events within Godard's own youth. It is not difficult to imagine the possibility that Léaud would be Godard's choice of actor to play himself given Léaud's own developing politicisation at this time.<sup>22</sup>

Written in 1762, Rousseau's novel *Emile* is both a treatise on public education, and didactically offers a guide for the modernisation of education for the children of France. The novel shares nothing with *Le Gai Savoir* in its content, and periodically, the novel comes under satiric attack from Godard. However, the novel does share similar thematic

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<sup>18</sup> Lang had appeared in *Le Mepris* (1963) and Fuller in *Pierrot le fou* (1965)

<sup>19</sup> 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. 13.

<sup>20</sup> See: Christian Braad Thomsen, 'Skolimowski', *Sight and Sound*, 37 (1968), 142-144.

<sup>21</sup> Godard has frequently referred to himself as a child raised in the cinema.

<sup>22</sup> See Godard in Youngblood, p. 37. Godard says that in 1967, during the shooting of *La Chinoise*, none of the cast knew anything about Marxist-Leninism. However, Léaud was regularly seen marching throughout the May events.

concerns with *Le Gai Savoir*, such as the modernising of education that Godard wishes to extend to the spectator, and the use of the narrator as teacher.

Just as Rousseau's novel helped contribute to the modernising of the French educational system in his time, Godard is attempting to modernise the system within his own time, a time in which the use of images is perceived to be at its greatest in human communications.

Godard plays with Rousseau's characterisation of Emile in original and sometimes humorous ways. If Rousseau's Emile is supposed to "spend most of his time out of doors, running about...leading the vigorous, natural and free life of a young animal,"<sup>23</sup> Godard's Emile is depicted contrarily: by being kept within the confines of the studio, without an on-screen representation of him interacting with an outside world. However, the intent for Emile's role within *Le Gai Savoir* becomes transparent when examining Godard's growing concern with the student movement in Paris of May 1968.

Just as Rousseau rejected the notions of education in his day, the students in Paris during the events of May were rejecting the bourgeois education system of their time. In this respect, Emile is the student who represents both Rousseau and Godard's ideal product of education; he is both an intellectual and a worker. By using this construct, *Le Gai Savoir* parallels ideas and provides a historical context in which the film can communicate.

Royal S. Brown extends the comparisons between Godard and Rousseau by suggesting that Godard himself is 'Rousseau-like' by identifying Godard's work as juxtaposing "a varied layer of idealism". Brown writes,

Generally, Godard seems to have a Rousseau-like vision of a civilization that has lost contact with an idea through the progressive modernization, mechanization, "capitalization," and, ultimately, socialization of human life. Certainly, the dehumanization of man represents an important theme in many of his films...<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> P.D. Jimack, in the 'Introduction' to Rousseau's *Emile*. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1986), p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Royal S. Brown, 'Introduction: One Plus One Equals'. In Brown, ed., *Focus on Godard*. p. 11.

However, what Brown does not mention is the relationship between Rousseau's own time and Godard's. Just as Rousseau lived through the French Revolution of 1789, Godard is living through what he believes to be his own revolutionary time in France.<sup>25</sup>

In Robin Bates' discussion of 1968 and history, he contends that the opening lines of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* certainly have a resonance with the events of May 1968 "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains...[From birth to death] he is enslaved by institutions."<sup>26</sup>

Assuming Rousseau's role within the film, Godard undertakes the dual role of both teacher and narrator. Like his role in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle (2 or 3 things I know about her)* [1966], Godard's half-whispered voice rises as a punctuation of scenes; and as a somewhat reluctant teacher and guide for Patricia and Emile, Godard facilitates their investigation into the ideology of images.

The narrator's voice that Godard engages the audience with at the beginning of the film somewhat conventionally introduces the spectator to the characters. By the use of the character names, Godard's narrator directs the viewer to outside sources for clues of information. In this case politics and literature.

Emile is the eponymous son of the novelist Rousseau, while Patricia is the daughter of Patrice Lamumba. Patrice Lamumba was the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the Congo (now Zaire<sup>27</sup>). As the daughter of Lamumba, Patricia is representative of, and a symbol of disenfranchised revolutionary political power and the third world.

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<sup>25</sup> Given Godard's formalist experimentations and the obvious influence of Dziga-Vertov's films throughout this period, it could equally be said that Godard is aligning his filmmaking with many of the ideas from *LEF* and the successful Russian revolution of 1917. See Translations from *Lef* and *Novy Lef* in *Screen*, 12 (1971/2), 25-103.

<sup>26</sup> Robin Bates, 'Holes in the Sausage of History: May '68 as Absent Center in Three European Films', *Cinema Journal*, 24 (1985), 26. Interestingly, Rousseau's '*Social Contract*' was retranslated and republished by Penguin in 1968. G.D.H. Cole who translated Rousseau's text in 1947, translated the opening line as "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (London: J.M Dent and Sons Ltd, 1947), p. 3. The Penguin version from 1968, translated by Maurice Cranston, reads "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains." See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> Lamumba was kidnapped and executed in January 1961, a victim of cold war ideology for his pro-soviet political stance. If not killed at the instigation of the CIA, it appears they were complicit with his murder. See: Elaine Woo, *CIA's Gottlieb Ran LSD Mind Control Testing*. Internet WWW page, at URL: <[http://mojo.calyx.net/~refuse/resist\\_this/041099lsdcia.html](http://mojo.calyx.net/~refuse/resist_this/041099lsdcia.html)> (version current at 7 October 2000).

Godard also makes significant contributions to the content of *Le Gai Savoir* by engaging the viewer in a dialogue with the process of filmmaking itself. Godard accomplishes this in several moments throughout the film by directly addressing the audience with his voice-over narration using classic Brechtian 'alienation' methods.

In particular, Godard's highlighting of the technicalities of the cinematic image and its use of sound contributes to this distancing. By displacing either the sound or the image from conventional narrative cinema, the effect is of a discordant break. This is often confusing to the viewer due to what MacCabe attributes to the mixing or blurring of conventional forms, and the prioritising of sound and image.

...whether priority is given to the image, as in fiction films (we see the truth and the soundtrack must come into line with it) or to the soundtrack, as in documentary (we are told the truth and the image merely confirms it).<sup>28</sup>

By mixing sound and image on such a scale, Godard is able to attribute as much power and validity to the sounds as the image. In many respects, this represents a larger agenda that Godard was forthcoming about in discussions preceding the release of *Le Gai Savoir*.

Maintaining that he was searching for a new visual alphabet within cinema, Godard appears to be searching for a new methodology in reaction to what he perceives to be a lack of innovation in Hollywood cinema.<sup>29</sup> Attacking the U.S. as the world's largest producer of films, Godard believed the film industry had negatively under-utilised sound since its birth from silent cinema. Extending this criticism, Godard also maintains that there was much more to be explored using silent cinema than had previously been done. The U.S. hegemony of cinema had prematurely dismissed and neglected silent cinema and had created a cult of cinema without difference. Godard states that he wished to broaden cinema's growth by more experimentation with these tools.

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Charlayne Hunter-Gault, *Second Look: Origins of a Crisis*. Internet WWW page, at URL: <[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/africa/february97/crisis\\_2-17.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/africa/february97/crisis_2-17.html)> (version current at 7 October 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in Gene Youngblood, 'Jean-Luc Godard: No Difference between Life and Cinema'. In *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*. p. 14.

Since the invention of talking pictures we are doing only 10 or 15 percent of what could be done in cinema. We are not using cinema fully. Every time I see a silent film I'm amazed at the diversity among filmmakers of those days. Murnau was so different from Griffith, for example. But talking pictures look and sound pretty much alike.<sup>30</sup>

It is in this mixing of a new sound and image methodology that Godard creates a hybrid of form in *Le Gai Savoir*. By treating sound with the same validity as the image,<sup>31</sup> Godard creates parallels between film and the recording of sound as an image. For example, throughout *Le Gai Savoir*, the spectator frequently hears the sound of recorded speech being rewound or fast-forwarded, but is never shown what it is that Patricia and Emile are watching, or the visual context of what they are listening to. Godard purposely creates ambiguities as to whether his characters are watching or listening to a sound image.

In an attempt to create a sound film that does not look and sound like all the others, Godard raises a concept from *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* [1966] and *Made in U.S.A.* [1966] that informs the spectator of the progression Godard wants to achieve. Godard directs the viewer to the concept of "back to zero," a concept that encompasses multiple levels within *Le Gai Savoir*.

Back to zero is both a call to re-engage cinema with its earlier revolutionary uses as envisaged by directors such as Vertov and Eisenstein; but also to re-engage the fundamental basis of the image and the means with which it expresses ideas and ideology<sup>32</sup>. This becomes particularly expressive within the film as Godard examines the still image and explores the possibilities of achieving multiple meanings using differing sounds, or textual inscription with the repetition of images. In some respects, the film

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<sup>30</sup> Godard, in Youngblood, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> When asked in February of 1968 what Godard's opinion was of the relationship between sound and image, Godard replied " There is a technical difference. But other than that I see no difference. Both are the same, more or less." In Youngblood, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> The definition of ideology here is used in the Marxist sense, of a dominant or popular system of beliefs that passes itself off as natural. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. eds., Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. (New York: International Publishers, 1997), pp. 375-377.

attempts to educate the viewer in matters of ideology using a formalist experimental process, similar to the Kuleshov experiment<sup>33</sup>.

'Back to zero' in *Le Gai Savoir* also represents Godard's intentions to break down both written and oral language. Berto's character says

I want to learn, teach them and myself, everyone, to turn against the enemy the weapon which at bottom he uses to attacks us: Language.

Language to be used as a weapon is above all the active subject of *Le Gai Savoir*. Godard explores ideas suggesting that film language and the visual image has lost its educational or instructive purpose, especially in the commercial cinema. *Le Gai Savoir* diagnoses these problems of visual and verbal language, the culture that produces it, and its inherent fallibility.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps what is just as important is what comes after the investigation when he attempts to redefine the visual image into a politically instructive force. To accomplish this, Godard's aims are created from the destruction of conventional film language, and the fragmenting of them from a politicised viewpoint. Royal S. Brown writes that the effect of this technique is representative of a constant throughout *all* of Godard's anti-narrative work.

The fragmented illogicality of Godard's anti-narratives thus paradoxically represents a documentary technique for looking at a state of the world and civilization.<sup>35</sup>

In a more simplistic way, if Godard's pronouncement of the death of cinema in 1967 is contrasted with *Le Gai Savoir*, 'Year Zero' is 1968. This demarcation point is evidenced in

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<sup>33</sup> A number of comparisons between Godard and Kuleshov's montage can be found in contrast with Eisenstein. For example, Ronald Lavaco notes that Kuleshov's experiments with montage "clearly finds its richest layers of signification in metonymic not metaphoric function." Ronald Levaco, 'Kuleshov and Semiology: Selections from Lev Kuleshov's *Art of the Cinema*', *Screen*, 12 (1971/2), 107. In an interview, Jean-Pierre Gorin explains the extended use of Kuleshov's techniques in the Dziga Vertov Group's *Letter to Jane* [1972]. Robert Phillip Kolker, 'Angle and Reality: Godard and Gorin in America'. In *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*. p. 62.

<sup>34</sup> If *Le Gai Savoir* diagnoses the problems with Language, Godard's *One Plus One* amply demonstrates his desire to destroy it.

<sup>35</sup> Royal S. Brown, 'Introduction: One Plus One Equals'. p. 11.

the new work produced after 1968, and the beginning of Godard's experimentation with the new "alphabet in the language of cinema"<sup>36</sup> he wishes to accomplish.<sup>37</sup>

In his writing about *Le Mepris* [1966] and Godard, Richard Roud believes one of the reasons for Godard's changing attitudes to cinema during the late 1960's was "...a growing realisation on Godard's part that the personal and the social are inextricably intertwined."<sup>38</sup> The second was a more "total abandonment" of fictional forms and romanticism from his previous works, and lastly his marriage to Anne Wiazemsky<sup>39</sup>.

Roud also notes the influence of Walter Benjamin's work on *Le Gai Savoir* by quoting from Benjamin's unfinished work '*Paris, Capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*'.

The most worn out, communist platitude means more than the most profound bourgeois thought, because the latter has only one true sense, that of apology.<sup>40</sup>

Although Roud doesn't mention it, a more useful sphere of influence upon Godard's filmmaking at this time surely lies with Benjamin's contemporaries, Dziga-Vertov and the early Futurist work of Mayakovsky's '*Lef*' group. The use of 'trans-sense' language, and the groups' extended ideas on defamiliarising images are readily apparent in *Le Gai Savoir*.

This technique the Lef group called 'ostranenie' or 'making-it-strange' was developed by the artist and critic Shklovsky. Ben Brewster writes,

Ordinary language and everyday perception rapidly become routinised with the result that real understanding and vision cease. It is the function of art, by linking

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<sup>36</sup> Godard, in *Youngblood*, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Witt suggests something similar in his discussion of Godard's use of the term 'the death of cinema' in Michael Witt, 'The death(s) of cinema according to Godard', *Screen*, 40 (1999), 335.

<sup>38</sup> Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 131.

<sup>39</sup> Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 131. Interestingly, James Naremore believes Godard was aware of "the personal being political" as far back as his time as a critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1959. See James Naremore, 'Authorship and the Cultural Politics of Film Criticism', *Film Quarterly*, 44 (1990), 21. It should be noted that Wiazemsky refutes any political influence upon Godard whatsoever, and categorically states that if any suggestion were true, she somewhat begrudgingly supported Godard's politics during the course of their relationship. "Reading Mao, Marx and Engels was a horrible bore, but once in a while I had to [...] Certainly not for my work. For love, yes." See *Jean-Luc Godard* in the *Cinéma Cinémas* series produced by *Ministrie Des Affaires Etrangères*.

<sup>40</sup> Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 142.

together dissimilar things in tropes, and disappointing routine expectations in all its devices, to make us see and understand afresh, correctly. Thus the more formalised, the more 'true,' the closer to 'reality.' This idea is found in Vertov's *Lef* articles, too, for what characterises the cinema-eye is the *differences* between it and the human eye – hence the emphasis on close-up, unnatural perspective and slow and fast motion.<sup>41</sup>

*Le Gai Savoir* defies any conventional categorising into documentary, dramatic fiction, or even a political essay such as Marker's work. The closest example of other films which reflect similarities with *Le Gai Savoir* are other Godard films, and in particular, Godard's recent work on the *Histoire du Cinéma* [1989-1997] series. However, the focus of *Le Gai Savoir* is perhaps even more ambitious as it attempts to renounce conventional narrative to reveal the relationship between *all* images.

*Le Gai Savoir* opens with black space, and uses electronic sound to introduce the beginning of the film. Significantly, there are no credits or visual cues that the film has begun until the sound of the electronic noise starts. The noise is used throughout the film as a precursor to both Godard's narrator voice addressing the spectator, and as an intervening, often chaotically, inhuman form of communication.

The first words spoken in the film are by Godard as the narrator. He lists numbers, which represent the number of frames that have been used since the beginning of the film, and by doing so, illustrates the materiality of the film medium<sup>42</sup>. By contrasting the electronic sound with the numbers, Godard appears to direct the viewer to a binary use of language such as a computer and its use of numerical language.<sup>43</sup> By using this sound, Godard literally foregrounds the raw source of the televisual broadcast medium and highlights the technological apparatus that presents the image to the screen. By using this technique, Godard strips conventional 'human' language to a raw state, a binary language that is translated into images and sound on the screen.

Without opening credits it is not until Léaud's presence that the viewer is aware of a live space for the actors to inhabit. By Léaud walking on from off-camera, the viewer is

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<sup>41</sup> Ben Brewster, 'Documents from *Novy Lef*', *Screen*, 12 (1971/2), 64.

<sup>42</sup> It also somewhat humorously illustrates Samuel Goldwyn's utilitarian adage that a film isn't made up of actors or stories, but 'so many feet of action, so many feet of romance..'

<sup>43</sup> *One Plus One* certainly reinforces the concept and use of a binary language system of images.

shown that what had previously appeared to be a plain black screen where the expectation would be to see the film's credits is in fact the set. Godard also thwarts this expectation at the end of the film, where once again no credits are given, providing a peculiar circularity. It is as if the film literally comes from a black 'nowhere' of the airwaves and ends itself as abruptly as the blackness from which it came. Because the beginning gives no indication that the black space is in fact an extremely skeletal set, the absence of props or other visual clues defies the spectator's ability to discern what the situation or story might be. By the camera remaining static, Godard avoids giving the viewer any clues as to Berto's location. The intent of this technique appears to be Godard's desire for the spectator to be off-balance, to destroy expectation, and to engage the spectator with a different mode of cinematic expression.

By using the simplicity of the black background, the studio set of *Le Gai Savoir* illustrates a new form of theatricality, that exemplifies modernist minimalism such as Pinter's or Beckett's, whose play 'Happy Days' Godard considered filming in 1967.<sup>44</sup>

It is difficult not to think of this blackboard type space as metaphoric of political symbolism. The colour black is usually symbolic for anarchism, and the black space can be interpreted as both a "clean slate" and the inverse of a projection screen.

Godard's Dziga-Vertov collaborative partner Jean-Pierre Gorin goes some way in confirming this idea in an interview that was conducted in a trip to the U.S. in 1972.

For four years we decided to cool down, slow down, to make only stationary shots, make flat films and try to work out the white screen as a blackboard, a whiteboard.<sup>45</sup>

This quote is also partly representational of Gorin's extended critical influence over Godard's films later in 1968, and perhaps unintentionally, he has attributed a great deal

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<sup>44</sup> "At one time I'd wanted to film *Oh! Les Beaux Jours*. I never did - they wanted to use Madeleine Renaud; I wanted to use young actors. I'd have liked to -- I had a text, so all I'd have had to do is film it. I'd have done it all in one continuous travelling. We'd have started it as far back as we had to to get the last line, at the end of an hour and a half, in a close-up. It would have meant just some grade-school arithmetic." Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in J. Bontemps, Jean-Louis Comolli, Michel Delahaye, and Jean Narboni, 'Struggle on Two Fronts: A Conversation with Jean-Luc Godard', *Film Quarterly*, 22 (1968-9), 32. See also Royal S. Brown, 'Jean-Luc Godard: Nihilism versus Aesthetic Distantiation'. In *Focus on Godard*. pp. 116-117.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Pierre Gorin, quoted in Robert Phillip Kolker, 'Angle and Reality: Godard and Gorin in America'. In *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*. p. 67.

of credit to himself. However, due to the extended period of *Le Gai Savoir*'s production before release, it is not inconceivable that Gorin had some effect on the final editing of the film.<sup>46</sup>

Nonetheless, the raw footage that is set in the O.R.T.F. studios for *Le Gai Savoir* indicates that Godard was already working towards using this technique for his cinema. By using static camera work for most of the studio footage, Godard creates a contrast with the live action shots taken outside, which are frequently shot from what appears to be a moving car. The use of static camera placement in the studio provides a visual compatibility with the photographic images used throughout the film. These techniques encourage the viewer to concentrate on Godard's use of montage and mise-en-scene, which contribute to a dialogue between the images and the meanings they create. In this way, *Le Gai Savoir* hearkens back to a very early form of silent cinema. In its utilisation of small sets, and the static camera, Godard directs the spectator to the foundations of silent cinema where meaning and content are found in the relationship between images as opposed to a sound source.

For example, instead of utilising conventional romantic narrative structures, Godard utilises a more skeletal mechanism of signs to reveal romance or intimacy. Proximity, a gesture, the placement of an arm or hand often reveals intimacy, as well as conventional narrative techniques such as an embrace or a kiss. Using a semiological model for communicating ideas, Godard's methodology creates a different kind of cinematic economy than his pre-1968 films by enabling a greater communication through images than relying upon speech.

When Berto enters the area of the sound stage, she extends her arms in a gesture that both illustrates her feeling her way in the dark, and also illustrates a kind of anguished or claustrophobic pushing against the framing of the camera. Before she stumbles into Léaud, Godard's narrator tells us "440,000 frames tell about them on about 7,500 feet. 127,000 sounds, ditto."

As the narrator, Godard breaks the action of the film using the objectivity of mathematical statistics to reveal one component of the film medium. The statistics he gives also provide one form of reference to try to describe the relationship Patricia and

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<sup>46</sup> Winston Dixon claims Godard and Gorin befriended each other during the production of *La Chinoise* in 1967. Winston Dixon, p. 81.

Emile have. This suggests that Godard finds it an impossible task, and does not believe there to be any way to describe in full the objective reality of their relationship. Berto's costuming is kept simple and contemporary, but of note is the use of colour in her costuming which is confined to red and black. The symbolism of these colours is usually of political significance: communism and anarchism. The only time the background of the studio set changes colour is when the other characters within the film are being interviewed by Berto and Léaud. Significantly, the colour of the background is red. Godard frequently uses colours as representations of political ideas. In *Le Gai Savoir* the colours adopt political significance, but are also a contrast with the national Tri-Colours of red, white, and blue. The use of black and red in *Le Gai Savoir* set the precedent for what would become the dominant colours Godard would use throughout the majority of his film projects in 1968.

After Emile and Patricia meet, the one prop of the film is introduced--a transparent plastic umbrella. Emile identifies it as an anti-nuclear umbrella, but Patricia replies that it is a consciousness reflector. When they pass the umbrella between them, they ask introductory, quasi-Socratic questions, of both themselves and each other. However, the questions they ask are also ambiguous in their meaning. The audience is unaware whether the questions verbalised are coming from the characters for the purpose of introducing themselves to each other; or are the influence of the 'consciousness umbrella' speaking through them, directing the questions back at themselves rhetorically.

Either way, Godard almost instantly allays any thought of communication being simple – either between his characters or with his audience. After each of the characters introduces the other, in turn, they address the audience with "He said" and "She said." This motif continues throughout the film and is a contrast to the objective notions of film that have been introduced by Godard's use of statistics at the beginning of the film. It also highlights the character's mistrust of language and a disbelief in an objective, all-encompassing 'truth' in their statements.<sup>47</sup> Godard utilises this technique to compel the spectator to question the elements that comprise the film's content, but also in a more didactic sense to question the content of all images and language. The spectator is included in Godard's educational instruction as much as Patricia and Emile are.

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<sup>47</sup> The phrase "We refuse to accept any self-evident truths" is a repeated motif throughout the film.

Although the closed set of the studio appears to be a private space, it is in fact utilised as a shared window or prism between the audience, Emile, Patricia and Godard as narrator. Emile and Patricia both appear to self-censor themselves when they are aware of their exposure to the reaction of the audience and Godard the narrator. It is this kind of development and the use of modernist space which illustrates the programmatic way Godard would use the cinema in his post 1968 films.

For example, in his discussion of *Vent d'Est* [1969], critic James Roy MacBean notes the political use of direct address in the cinema

In short, the bourgeois cinema pretends to ignore the presence of the spectator, pretends that what is being said and done on the movie screen is not aimed at the spectator, pretends that the cinema is a 'reflection of reality'; yet all the time it plays on his emotions and capitalises on his identification-projection mechanisms in order to induce him, subtly, insidiously, unconsciously, to participate in the dreams and fantasies that are marketed by bourgeois capitalist society.<sup>48</sup>

It is also illustrative of Godard's belief that there is no division between the cinema and real life, and in a more abstract sense "What is alive is not what's on the screen but *what is between you and the screen.*"<sup>49</sup>

When Emile tells Patricia that they are alone as usual, Patricia responds that France is still in the Middle Ages and the Communist Party is still nowhere near taking over. Emile counters that they may not be alone as she thinks, directly addressing the audience.

Patricia: You're right. We're on TV aren't we?

Emile: Yes. So what?

Patricia: TV enters every bedroom, so why shouldn't we?

Given that *Le Gai Savoir* was supposed to be broadcast nationally by the O.R.T.F., it seems plausible that Godard thought the project had the potential to reach a greater proportion of the nation than his previous cinematic works. His use of this form of direct address is partly motivational and very obviously didactic. He wishes to promote the kind

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<sup>48</sup> James Roy MacBean, 'Vent D'Est: or Godard and Rocha at the crossroads', *Sight and Sound*, 40 (1971), 147.

<sup>49</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in Claire Clouzot, 'Godard and the US', *Sight & Sound*, 37 (1968), 114.

of intellectual thinking about language, images, and politics that *Le Gai Savoir* affords, but he also wishes to be polemic in his education of the audience without developing pedagogy.

As *Le Gai Savoir* progresses, the spectator watches Patricia and Emile's own relationship develop. Instead of the conventional sequencing of romantic involvement, when we do see Emile and Patricia embrace, it is a part of the dialogue that seems to acknowledge the end of their relationship rather than a beginning. Instead of normative narrative techniques, the viewer is given static placements of gesture to reveal the growing intimacy between the two characters without the usual verbal communication about their changing relationship. Any private communication is kept private. In this respect, the narrative structure is stripped of usual episodic or scenic development in favour of utilising the space between the actors, a style that is almost that of a documentary.

The moment of Emile and Patricia's embrace, and the dialogue that ensues, is ambiguous and open to questioning. Firstly, there is the desiccation of its delivery. Its structure appears to be a monologue, but the responsibility of its delivery is shared between Emile, Patricia, and Godard the narrator. Secondly, the relationship Emile and Patricia have formed is open to spectator interpretation as to whether it is romantic or platonic. As has been mentioned, the viewer is given none of the usual normative indications of either action or language to indicate a sexual relationship.

Perhaps even more important is the underlying critical depiction of Godard's monologue, which seems to break with any of the previous scenes between Emile and Patricia. In this scene the viewer is unsure whether they are watching a dialogue between Emile and Patricia as they have previously appeared throughout the film, or a self-conscious monologue/dialogue that is specifically directed and authored by Godard the narrator, or Godard the director of the film. This Brechtian style of communication can also be interpreted as a monologue not between the characters, but between the actors Jean-Pierre Léaud and Juliet Berto. When Godard's own narrator voice intercedes in the conversation, it further renders the monologue into one that some criticism has suggested could be between Godard and his then ex-wife Anna Karina. The polysemy of the monologue also acts as an example of Godard's mistrust of spoken language and, in hindsight, reveals the end of romance within Godard's films until the early 1970's.

By denying an overt emotional basis to his filmmaking, Godard conceives a cinema that dispenses with traditional compartmentalisation in favour of a highly mediated space that the characters use to strip the veneer of their socially created lives. *Le Gai Savoir* is illustrative of this as the spectator watches Emile and Patricia come to a better understanding of the tools that have created ideologically 'natural' viewpoints. With a renewed understanding of their environment, they propose to reshape it into a different set of relationships, and in turn change their relationship with their perception of themselves in the world, both inwardly and outwardly.

Godard made a point of dropping the original narrative scenario he had chosen for *One Plus One*; and in *Le Gai Savoir* it is no accident that the film reveals so little information concerning the character personalities or private lives.

In Royal S. Brown's article entitled 'One Plus One Equals,' Brown discusses the broadening definition of the word 'bourgeois' in connection with Godard's work at this time.

[...] the word "bourgeois" has come to represent, both philosophically and aesthetically, a much broader concept than that of a simple social class. Today the word implies an entire mentality, a middle-of-the-road way of life involving a halfway materialism justified by a religious confidence in the inexorable operation of a cause-and-effect absolute, and a halfway absolutism whose whole *raison d'être* is bound up in totally materialistic goals.<sup>50</sup>

If the bourgeois consciousness can be defined by the above, it is this type of thinking that Godard's films are trying to counter.

[...] one of the prime ways Godard has broken most strongly with traditional filmmaking is through his avoidance of just about anything resembling a conventional storyline, narrative or plot. It is the presence of a narrative in a work of art that can provide the internal event or events with an overall cause-and-effect justification so that, basically, there is eventually a reason for everything that happens.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Brown, 'Introduction: One Plus One Equals'. p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Brown, 'Introduction: One Plus One Equals'. p. 7.

Godard seems to indict television as one of the largest proponents of bourgeois ideology, and is critical of television's state control as represented by the O.R.T.F. and the strict guidelines in its programming.<sup>52</sup>

The power that the O.R.T.F. had within French national life was unquestionable, and its moral imperatives were myopically drawn directly from state control.

Moral and political censorship was a direct constraint on broadcasting: control of programmes was from 1953 vested directly in the government Ministry of Information, which paid careful attention to the composition and presentation of news, and exercised the right to schedule official announcements. Advertising was not permitted before 1968, though public information broadcasts on matters like health and safety used similar techniques of persuasion on behalf of the public good, as the Ministry understood it...It's most lavish productions tended to be historical documentaries and adaptations of classical theatre, generally conveying a sense of the depth and continuity of French national identity.<sup>53</sup>

In his book on Charles De Gaulle, Regis Debray alludes to the increasingly prevalent role played by television and mass media in directly changing politics within France in the 1960's. Television in France grew at such an exponential rate that when De Gaulle came to power "...there were a million television sets in France: people still had TV at home. When he left it there were ten million, and people were at home on TV."<sup>54</sup> Due to the growth in television consumption, the international cinema-going public had been in decline since the beginning of the 1960's.<sup>55</sup>

With the nascent growth of television and mass communication, repercussions and debates took place across the entire spectrum of the arts. Within the field of literature, people such as Marshall McLuhan arose to investigate and diagnose emerging new forms

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<sup>52</sup> Forbes, 'The Rise of Audio-visual Culture'. pp. 232-233.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Kelly, Tony Jones and Jill Forbes, 'Modernization and Popular Culture'. In *French Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. pp. 146-147.

<sup>54</sup> Regis Debray, *Charles De Gaulle* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 34.

<sup>55</sup> Falling from 1,082 million patrons a year in 1955 to 600 million by 1960. Subsequent assessments reached figures of 326 million by 1965 and falling to 20 million by 1970. See Winston Dixon, p. 100.

of media and their effects upon the old. While many celebrated the advent of television, an equal number were left hot under the collar by the 'cool' medium.<sup>56</sup> Writing of television's increased influence in 1969, Rudolf Arnheim criticises the banality of the televised image.

Television proves daily how revealing a small gesture, caught from life, can be for the eye of the beholder and how tediously absurd is, on the other hand, the endless exposure of talking human bodies. Speech, wisely subordinated, supplements, explains, and deepens the image. But the image continues to rule the screen; and to explore its properties remains a topical task.<sup>57</sup>

Godard is no less critical of the medium, but reserved judgement in the hope that control of it could be exercised for greater breadth of viewpoints and political ideas, such as those expressed with *Le Gai Savoir*. An example of this type of expression can be found in one sequence in *Le Gai Savoir* where the spectator is shown a series of images that depict everything from advertising copy from magazines to images taken from television. One television image prominently shows a CRS<sup>58</sup> policeman with a television. The sequence also illustrates the demands Godard places upon the spectator's attention to image and word. By fracturing the sentences using individual words or short phrases with a series of static images, Godard obfuscates the meaning of the message by forcing the spectator to maintain concentration for an extended time.

Image 1. A magazine image of a naked woman with guns.

Textual inscription: 'Henceforth'

Image 2. A photograph of Fidel Castro in a field.

Textual inscription: 'we refuse to accept'

Image 3. A photograph of a riot scene in a field.

Textual inscription: 'any kind of'

Image 4. CRS guards and a TV.

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<sup>56</sup> One of the inventors of television, Vladimir Zworykin, was so disappointed in the use of the technology that he expressed his disappointment to the President of the United States. "Wiesner introduced his visitor to the president as "the man who got you elected." Startled, JFK asked, "How is that?" Wiesner explained, "This is the man who invented television." JFK replied how that was a terrific and important thing to have done. Zworykin wryly commented, "Have you seen television recently?" Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 82.

<sup>57</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Film As Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité: National riot police. Many of the posters produced throughout May criticised the media for being the puppets of the CRS.

Textual inscription: 'self-evident truths'

Image 5. Photographic image of a band of guerrillas.

Textual inscription: 'we'

Image 6. Photograph of a relay runner passing a baton.

Textual inscription: 'do not believe'

Image 7. CU of text from a book.

Textual inscription: 'that there exist any'

Image 8. split-screen photographic image of an older figure on left and Cohn-Bendit on the right.

Textual inscription: 'self-evident truths'

Image 9. CU bikini clad woman on magazine cover.

Textual inscription: 'self-evident truths'

Image 10. CU from advertisement of a hand holding a can.

Textual inscription: 'belong'

Image 11. Sexualised cartoon image of a semi-clad woman in a hammock, and sewing.

Textual inscription: 'to'

Image 12. Photograph of siblings washing family car.

Textual inscription: 'Bourgeois Philosophy'

When Godard starts to introduce two-dimensional images and scenes shot outside of the studio where Patricia and Emile converse, he creates new ideas and fragmented concepts and equations that defy the viewer on a denotative level. Instead, they are asked to piece together ideas through association. The criticism Godard attaches to televisual and print images found in advertising are of great significance within *Le Gai Savoir*. By reinscribing the image with a textual signifier, or associating two images to create a new equation, Godard is able to capitalise on the original image and subvert it with a new meaning.

In his role as a teacher, Godard tries to not only educate the audience on the role images play, but also attempts to 'unmask' the ideological coding behind them. Through the repetition of these images with new textual signifiers, the images adopt a palimpsestual quality that eviscerates any constancy in meaning.

David Bordwell writing in *Narration In Fiction Film* describes these methods in Godard's films as 'generators of confusion,' and the results obfuscate meaning through technique,

until they become “..elusive on a simple denotative level..[they]..invite interpretations but discourage, even defy analysis.”<sup>59</sup> Much of this interpretation stems from what Bordwell believes is the psychological use of the ‘cocktail effect’ in Godard’s films. The multiplicity of image and sound leads to “perceptual and cognitive overload” in the viewer.

Peter Wollen rebuts Bordwell’s argument that Godard’s films “discourage, even defy analysis,” by pointing out that *Le Gai Savoir* doesn’t provide the open ended multiplicity of interpretation that Bordwell seems to imply.

Nor, of course, is it indifferent to Godard what types of new meaning are produced. Although his work is open-ended, it does not offer itself simply for a delirium of interpretation, as though meaning could be read in at will by the spectator.<sup>60</sup>

Much of Godard’s filmmaking uses fragmented images, but as Godard points out, this is literally what the mechanics of cinema are. The meanings we derive from a film are nothing more than the composition of an ensemble of fragmented images. “For me to make a film is to seize in one gesture a whole through fragments. Each shot is not organised with respect to the dramatic function. A film is not a series of shots but an ensemble of shots.”<sup>61</sup>

Bordwell writes that the films from this period are typified by an almost gratuitous inclusiveness of material that breaks the unification of the fabula.

It is as if Godard has extended the principle “replete” parametric cinema to so many parameters that we grasp each stylistic event only as a discrete burst of technique, immediately arresting our attention and disrupting the construction of a unified fabula. The narration shifts violently and without warning between principles of organisation.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 311.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', *Edinburgh '76 Magazine*, 1 (1976), 82.

<sup>61</sup> Wollen, p. 317.

<sup>62</sup> Bordwell, p. 320.

Bordwell's representation of Godard's filmmaking denies any other significant formalist tactic. All of the films from 1968 can arguably fit into being anti-narrative. Colin Westerbeck, in his discussion of *Pravda* [1969] and *See You at Mao (British Sounds)* [1969] suggests that *Le Gai Savoir* is the demarcation point for the beginning of Godard's anti-narrative filmmaking.

They also have continuity with earlier work because they go beyond *Le Gai Savoir* in eliminating traditional narrative elements. Whereas *Le Gai Savoir* does away with everything except a couple of central characters, these films do without the characters as well.<sup>63</sup>

However, it might be fairer to look further back at the development of cinema from the 1920's to get a clearer picture of what Godard is trying to accomplish with narrative in *Le Gai Savoir*. Writing in *New Lef* in 1928, Arvatov denies the use of the term 'anti-narrative' in favour of the word 'deformation'.

Firstly, a few words on the misunderstanding of the concept of narrative structure. The term is used to describe the succession of events which makes up the theme (*syuzhet*) of an art product. Bourgeois art tradition has taught us to consider that narrative structure belongs to the realm of imagination (the tale, the story etc) but any fact out of reality developed in time obviously has a narrative structure....This problem is tightly bound up with the problem of 'deformation' and the problem of so-called agit-art.<sup>64</sup>

Godard's 'abandonment' of fictional forms should not be confused with an abandonment of narrative forms. 1968 is frequently alluded to by many critics as the year Godard's films either dropped narrative structures or became anti-narrative in their content. The real departure in Godard's filmmaking is in reality attributable to his changing attitude to what constitutes narrative.

In his tour of the United States in February of 1968, Godard spoke to student filmmakers about his career and changing perspectives on filmmaking. One of the participants, Eli Hollander asked,

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<sup>63</sup> Colin L. Westerbeck Jr, 'A Terrible Duty is Born', *Sight and Sound*, 40 (1971), 82.

<sup>64</sup> Arvatov, 'Film Platform' in *Lef*, No. 3, 1928. In *Screen*, 12 (1971/2), 80-81.

EH : *When looking at your films, one sees two directions you take. On one hand there's the group of films with a strong fictional narrative line, while on the other hand certain films have a strong intellectual, essay approach. For example, Contempt and Band of Outsiders are much more fictional than Masculine/Feminine or La Chinoise. When you introduced La Chinoise you talked about a new film language you are searching for. Does that mean you are going in the direction of the more intellectual films?*

JLG : No—I disagree with you. There is always a narrative line. In *La Chinoise* I am narrative about ideas, and in *Contempt* I am narrative about people. That's the only difference. In both, I was very much narrative. And if I was not, I couldn't go on shooting. It's only because I have a narrative line in mind that I'm able to improvise and to go on shooting every day...I'm just moving away from something I call drama. Most movies use drama, but I think it's good for stage but not movies. I'm trying to avoid drama. But drama has nothing to do with narrative. French literature, for example, has avoided drama for some time now...<sup>65</sup>

For example, the first piece of footage shot outside of the studio that the viewer is shown in *Le Gai Savoir* demands concentration and the ability to juggle and suspend ideas from the sounds, images and words they are shown. In this way, the viewer is forced into producing a new lexicon of ideas. In no way are these ideas, sounds, and images random. However, the spaces between the ideas are frequently confounded or obfuscated to challenge the viewer. Godard wants the spectator to relearn their understanding of images by teaching the viewer that 'the eye must listen before it looks.'

In René Clair's 1953 book *Reflections on the Cinema*, Clair imagines a conversation with his former self from 1923 and endeavours to explain his own desire to educate the spectator anew.

R.C. 1923: If I could teach you to forget I would turn you into fine, simple savages. In front of the screen, at first entirely blank, you would marvel at elementary visions: a leaf, a hand, water, an ear; then a tree, a human body, a river, a face; after that, wind in the leaves, a man walking, a river flowing, simple

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<sup>65</sup> In Youngblood, pp. 39-40.

facial expressions. In the second year, you would solve visual puzzles. You would be taught the rudiments of a provisional syntax. You would learn to guess the meaning of various successions of images, as a child or a foreigner, little by little, finds out the meanings of the sounds he hears. And after several years, or, perhaps, several generations (I'm not a prophet), you would have learned to accept the rules of a visual convention as practical as the verbal one, and no more exacting.

R.C. 1950: And after that?

R.C. 1923: After that we'd invent something else. Perhaps a tactile, or an olfactory convention.<sup>66</sup>

When Emile parodies Dostoyevsky's "Knowing is not enough" with "Just knowing is pretty good," the camera pans left to the black of the set and cuts to live footage of cars and shops in the Paris streets. The scene then cuts to a close-up poster image of a giant razor blade being held aloft by what is obviously a group of workers. In the background of the image is a bridge which looks like many of the bridges that cross the Seine in Paris. Inscribed on the image, in Godard's own handwriting is 'Revolution.' A voice that is not Emile, Patricia or Godard's tells us "A...society...reduced," cutting to a live action shot of a car passing under a bridge similar to the one in the illustration; and then to a still image of a large pair of psychedelic eyes, inscribed underneath is the word 'Image'. There are a number of allusions in this sequence. Visually, the spectator is offered a set of relationships with the still image of the workers:

- [1] The razor blade can be interpreted as a metaphor of the workers cutting ties with the past through revolutionary ideas and their unity.
- [2] The bridge of the illustration can be tied to the reality of the live action bridge.
- [3] The revolution that has been depicted in images is becoming a revolution in reality.
- [4] Aurally Godard begs the question that if society is reduced to spectacle, then it is up to the workers in society to regain control of the image and use it to their own political ends.

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<sup>66</sup> René Clair, *Reflections On The Cinema* (London: William Kimber And Co., Limited, 1953), pp. 12-13.

He also touches upon a reference to Guy Debord's book (and later film) 'Society of the Spectacle'<sup>67</sup>. A part of this reference is the cutting from the image of the razor, and then to the image of an eye.

The live footage is obviously shot out of a car window, and hearkens back to Godard's earlier film work, such as 1959's *A bout de Souffle*. In many respects, the Godard of 1968 is recapitulating the earlier methods of the New Wave. Low budget, cheaper methods of making film--but still retaining the actors he believes can accomplish his aims. Significantly, Godard has dispensed with the concept of *Politique des Auteurs* in reaction to his belief of having a bourgeois past.<sup>68</sup>

The new alphabet of films can be interpreted as reworkings of older ideas and concepts in Godard's films--there is still romance, it is merely reworked into a system of signs without the romanticism of his previous work. Godard still uses techniques such as the use of interviews that became familiar to most spectators of his films in *Masculin Feminin [1966]*. Even the exploration and criticism of the two-dimensional images found in advertising that Godard utilises for the majority of the still images can be found in previous work. These still images reflexively illustrate past interests in the depiction of women and the prostitution of the self, as well as the concept of the cash nexus.

..the anecdote it tells (2 or 3 things I know about her) coincides with basically with one of my most deep-rooted theories. The idea that, in order to live in Parisian society today, at whatever level or on whatever plane, one is forced to prostitute oneself in one way or another, or else to live according to conditions resembling those of prostitution.<sup>69</sup>

Godard uses this kind of formulation with Patricia and Emile's professional lives in *Le Gai Savoir*. At the end of each of their meetings, they frequently describe what work they are going to do. Emile explains one of his occupations is as a journalist. "Michel and I are

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<sup>67</sup> 1967 and 1973 respectively.

<sup>68</sup> "I escaped from a bourgeois family into show business. And then I discovered that show business was a bigger bourgeois family than my own. Or came to feel it." Godard, quoted in Andrew Sarris, 'Godard and the Revolution'. In *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*. p. 53.

<sup>69</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in Jean-Luc Godard, 'One Should Put Everything into a Film'. In *Godard on Godard*. eds., Tom Milne and Jean Narboni. (New York and London: Da Capo Press, 1986), p. 239.

going to steal the dreams of two big pop stars, and sell them to the tabloids, and give the bread to North Vietnam.”

Both Emile and Patricia are acutely aware of the political ramifications of what they do occupationally. Both realise that there is something exploitative in what they do, and their reasons for pursuing their occupations frequently hinges on exploiting the exploiters, and making the conscious decision that this will help achieve their radical objectives. By using his characters to describe their roles like this, Godard appears to be revealing as much about his own professional life as he is about his characters motivations.

In many of Godard's pre-1968 films, his characters lives sometimes appear to be destroyed by the discrepancy between the lives they lead, and the lives they wish to live evidenced by the, frequently fictional, literature they read. Critic Robert Stam quotes Marianne from *Pierrot le Fou* [1965] saying

”What makes me sad,” she laments, ”is that we can't live in life the way we can in novels.” Life she goes on to explain, lacks the order, harmony, and logic encountered in works of fiction.”<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps beginning with *La Chinoise*, Godard's films shift from these literary roots into a different means of expression. In *La Chinoise*, the characters literary means of education is non-fiction, which, in turn, they abandon in order to learn to live in revolutionary ways. This proposal is cemented in *Le Gai Savoir*. If Roud's assertion that Godard abandoned fictional forms in his films is correct, Godard and his characters can be interpreted as having abandoned fiction also. For example, the distinction the film initiates between the interior of the minimalist night-time studio space, contrasted with the outside world of the Paris streets the actors occupy during the day.

Godard shows the spectator images of non-fiction book covers as clues, and as a means to illustrate what has been influencing his thinking, almost as a friend recommending a good book to the spectator. This technique can be seen in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* [1966], but Godard plays with these images much more than he has done previously. The books are treated with all the objectification that the camera can

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<sup>70</sup> Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 9.

summon. Mostly simple shots, vertically framing the cover. However, every now and again the book will be placed horizontally, making the spectator physically move in their seats to be able to read the book cover.

As a spectator, Godard wants any kinds of suspension of disbelief broken by making his audience mentally and physically interact with the film. Books are politically influential tools, and their power has to be critically examined. The only book we see Patricia and Emile studying is a children's book which reveals a political power struggle of representation.

The new interests explored within *Le Gai Savoir* are the proliferation of images within society, and Godard's sense of urgency in dispelling their cumulative effect. By asking his audience to use the images against the bourgeois establishment who created them, Godard hopes *Le Gai Savoir* will provide an education in resistance and application.