

# Un Film Comme les Autres

Un Film Comme les Autres [1968] (AKA: Une Film Comme les Autres, A Movie Like the Others/ A Film Like All The Others/ A Movie Like Any Other/ A Film Like the Others] 120 Minutes.

"The machine has ground up human language and dispenses it in clean slices, to which no flesh clings. Those "binary digits," perfect segments, have only to be assembled (programmed) in the requisite order. The code triumphs and attains its perfection in the transmission of the *message*. It is a great feast for the syntagmatic mentality."

-Christian Metz 'The Cinema: Language or Language System?'  
in 'Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema' 1968.

*A Film Like the Others* [1968] ostensibly represents the final film Godard completed as an individual director before beginning the collaborative projects with the Dziga-Vertov group in 1969. Entirely self-produced by Godard using his Anouchka Films company, the film is indicative of Godard's increased politicisation, an unwillingness to compromise the political message of his work, and representative of the independent filmmaking means which Godard would pursue in his work throughout the early 1970's. Many of the published sources of information on Godard's career throughout 1968 posit *Un Film Comme Les Autres* as being Godard's first project to be shot and completed by the Dziga-Vertov group. However, James Roy MacBean counters this idea by stating that although the film does significantly illustrate a direction the group would move in, it predates the formation of the Dziga-Vertov group by several months.<sup>1</sup>

Whether due to problems the film had with distribution, or possibly because of the public reaction it received, the existence *of* the film is frequently mentioned in the published criticism on Godard's career, but it has rarely been discussed at any length during its period of release or since. Perhaps because of this, a great deal of the information surrounding the production of the film is contradictory and open to speculation. Significantly, it is also somewhat prophetic of the marginal critical and commercial

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<sup>1</sup> James Roy MacBean, 'Godard and the Dziga-Vertov Group: Film and Dialectics', *Film Quarterly*, 26 (1972), 31.

reception Godard's films would receive during the period from 1968 until the demise of the Dziga-Vertov group in 1972-3.<sup>2</sup>

Information about *Un Film Comme Les Autres* including the extent of Gorin's influence (if any) upon the project, the film's running time, and the precise date when the colour material for the film was shot is contradictory. Even in what appears to have been an extremely limited distribution, the film had at least four English titles, and Richard Roud notes that there were rumours that Godard was barely involved in the filming of the project.<sup>3</sup> Something as simple as the date on which the film had its U.S. premiere at the Philharmonic Hall in New York is contradictory depending on the source.<sup>4</sup>

Given that at least two versions of the film were distributed, reported estimations of the film's running time are anywhere between 100 and 120 minutes. The English language VHS video that is being used as the source material is 120 minutes in duration, each half being approximately 60 minutes.<sup>5</sup>

The origin of the black and white footage is contested by many of Godard's published critics. It has been suggested that the material was shot by Godard himself, recycling material that was used as part of the *Cine-Tracts*<sup>6</sup> or, as noted by Royal S. Brown, it is equally possible that it was provided by the 'Etats Généraux du Cinéma.'<sup>7</sup> Loshitzky and

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<sup>2</sup> Journals such as *Sight and Sound* frequently covered Godard and his films until 1968 where they appear to lessen their coverage throughout the year-- virtually coming to a standstill after *One Plus One*. It is also interesting to note that some critics make no division between *Un film Comme les Autres* and *British Sounds/See you at Mao*. See Bruce F. Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-Person Film* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 212.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard* (London: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Roud says the film screened in "early 1969." Roud, p. 186.

The New York Times article (see Appendix Fig. 3.) reports the film screened on 29 December 1968. Any source of information about successive screenings of the film has been elusive. By winter of 1971-1972, it had still not screened in England. See Christopher Williams, 'Politics and Production', *Screen*, 12 (1971/2), 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Un Film Comme les Autres* was originally distributed by Leacock-Pennebaker Films upon its release. The video copy being used was purchased from Pennebaker's 'Living Archives'.

<sup>6</sup> Wheeler Winston Dixon says the black and white sections are from footage Godard recorded for the *Ciné-Tracts*. Wheeler Winston Dixon, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 104. There are a great many similarities to the *Ciné-Tracts* material, especially in the first half or reel of the film. However, there is a possibility that Godard has used both material from the *Ciné-Tracts* and the *Etats Généraux du Cinéma*.

<sup>7</sup> Royal S Brown, ed., *Focus On Godard*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1972), p. 179.

The *Etats Généraux du Cinéma* was enormously important immediately after the events of May. Constituted of French Film luminaries and enthusiasts alike, the *Etats Généraux du Cinéma* attempted to

MacCabe offer the most precise date for the film's production by stipulating the film was made throughout August 1968,<sup>8</sup> but other possibly contradictory evidence exists.<sup>9</sup>

What can be verified about the film are two 16mm reels of equal duration composed of two parts: A colour component (which makes up the bulk of the film), illustrating a group of five "students from Vincennes and workers from the Renault plant at Flins".<sup>10</sup> The group sit in a field outside a large tenement block on the outskirts of Paris and discuss politics, the objectives of the May revolt, and the potential steps involved in achieving revolution in France. The second component of the film is comprised of silent black and white 'documentary' footage from the events of May intercut with the colour 'live' action in the field. Each of the black and white sections illustrates the May events that the participants discuss, and acts as a complement to their conversation.

Richard Roud reports that breaking the film into two reels of equal length was not necessarily done for technical reasons, but to force the projectionist to make an arbitrary decision on which reel would screen first. Reportedly, Godard left specific details about the presentation of the picture for its premiere. Legend has it that this was a signed note left inside one of the reels for the projectionist to follow: "one is meant to toss a coin to decide which reel comes first." This would imply that Godard was highly aware of the project's political didacticism by using footage that is shared between each of the reels. However, the sequencing of the reels was not the only thing left to the discretion of those involved at the screening.

In a New York Times article published the day after the film's New York premiere, reporter Donal Henahan writes:

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reform the entire National Film industry through a series of 'Projects'. Many sources have investigated the group and given excellent accounts of their activities. See Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1978). In addition, see Simon Hartog, 'The Estates General of the French Cinema, May 1968', *Screen*, 13 (1972), 58-88.

<sup>8</sup> It seems conceivable that Loshitzky is quoting MacCabe. Yosefa Loshitzky, *The Radical Faces of Godard and Bertolucci*. (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 28. And: Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> In an interview with Godard and Gorin in 1970, Godard says the film was shot "just after the 1968 May-June events in France." Whether this means before August or beyond is unknown. Kent E. Carroll, 'Film and Revolution: Interview with the Dziga-Vertov Group'. In Brown, ed., *Focus On Godard*. p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Winston Dixon, p. 230.

In line with Mr. Godard's wishes, the second half of the 100-minute film was to be shown only if the audience voted to see it.<sup>11</sup>

Coming just one month after the controversial premiere of *One Plus One* in London, the premiere of *Un Film Comme Les Autres* in New York was perhaps the most controversial of Godard's films in its reception by the public in 1968. The English audio translation of the dialogue for the film was synchronised with the French dialogue, creating a confusing melange of audio that rendered both languages indecipherable. At several stages during the premiere, the audience reacted with outbursts including demands for their money back. The representative for the film's U.S. distributors (Leacock-Pennebaker) was David McMillan, who defended the version of the screened film, and apparently attempted to soothe the audience.

Possibly sensing a near riot, the Philharmonic Hall house manager attempted to tell the audience that refunds would in all likelihood be given, but McMillan countered by threatening the house manager with legal action if admission charges were refunded. McMillan's compromise was to promise the patrons admittance to a subsequent screening that would include subtitling if they kept their ticket stubs.<sup>12</sup> What began as an audience of one thousand expectant patrons at the beginning of the screening, barely totalled one hundred after an exodus en masse at the end of the first reel.

Partially due to the publicity surrounding the New York premiere, stories began to develop about the content of the film. Richard Roud provides a comprehensive list of the rumours precipitated by the premiere.

Legend has it that there is only one shot in the whole two-hour film, but this is not true. Nor is it true that the camera never moves; there are a few lateral pans now and then.... Legend again has it that the whole film consists of views of tall grass, while on the soundtrack one can hear the discussion of the people hidden by the grass; again, this is not quite true, for we often see the bodies of the group, the man's polka-dot shirt, a girl's hair, her red and green peppermint-striped blouse,

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<sup>11</sup> Donal Henahan, 'Boos Greet Film By Godard Here', *New York Times*, December 30 (1968). See Appendix: Figure 3.

<sup>12</sup> I can find no information verifying that this subtitling was ever done. However, the suggestion is quite fantastic given the volume of dialogue in the film; and it would be a disservice to the intentions of the audio techniques, such as overlaps in speech, to ameliorate their effect by the use of subtitles.

and once in a while we even see a face or two. This, reportedly, was pure accident. Legend again has it that Godard was not there during much of the shooting and so was unable to assure that none of the faces would be seen. The truth of this I have not been able to establish.<sup>13</sup>

Roud's description appears to reveal the closeness of the rumours to the reality; yet the description Roud provides is also "not quite true." Roud very cautiously insinuates that the basis for these legends are truthful representations of the film. However, he omits a number of significant details about *Un Film Comme Les Autres*, confining his description to the colour sections, and completely neglecting the black and white footage that is of great significance.

Although each reel of the colour component does contain a great deal of repeated footage that is also shared between the two reels, it is a disservice to the film to ignore the complementary black and white footage of the May events.

It is also a disservice to merely examine the aesthetics of the film and not discuss the content in a more meaningful way. Roud does not reflect on any of the spoken dialogue, which is the main focus of the film's political message; and Roud also neglects to mention that the film's visual techniques are of immense political importance as they break with conventional cinematic techniques by being purposely 'anti-spectacle.'

By positing that the ending is signalled by the politically laden "Italian Communist song," "Bandiera Rossa," the music "[welling] up on the soundtrack to signal the climax of the movie," Roud suggests something far more sentimental than the anti-spectacle provided within the film. Roud immediately follows this description of the ending with what is an obvious oversight-- "Ultimately, it is a very boring film..."<sup>14</sup> A form of conclusion to the film is suggested by an individual voice near the end of the second part or reel of the film that precedes the music Roud mentions. Using silence as a parenthesis for the lone voice on the soundtrack, Godard provides a heavy contrast with the discussion and layering of voices that occupies the majority of the film's content. It also provides a strongly defiant message entreating the viewer to break the traditional hierarchical model of society in

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<sup>13</sup> Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard*, p. 147.

favour of a new form of social practice. Roud skips this part of the film, and fails to grasp the anti-climactic purpose of the film's ending by turning it into a spectacle.

The colour footage of the group in the field is dominated by two types of shot. One is of the group in long shot, revealing the group in the grass with the tenement building behind them. The other is a close-up from behind individuals backs, with arms, legs and torso of others in the background. By providing at least one or two blades of grass in the extreme foreground of these shots, Godard steadfastly prohibits any easy access to seeing the individuals faces in either the fore or middle ground of the frame. By using the two types of shot, there is a slight, potentially fallacious implication, that the close up material of the group may in fact be shot from a distance with a telephoto lens, reinforcing the idea that the camera is an unobtrusive presence.

In contrast to the colour sections, the black and white footage utilises hand-held camera work, and appears to unfetter the footage of the May events. The black and white material uses a number of fast moving pans, different points of view, and also includes the use of a number of close-ups of individuals speaking, but does not include the sound of their speech. Most of this material is shot on the streets of Paris illustrating the public demonstrations. However, a great deal of the black and white footage illustrates the strikes within the car factories and many of the protest activities happening within the universities. The use of post-synchronised sound seems to indicate Godard's desire to magnify or explode the purpose of illustrating the group in the field, not merely as a solitary collection of individuals, but as a microcosmic representation that signifies the breadth of similar discussions, amongst similar groups within France at the time.

Apart from the short *Operation Beton* [1954] and the abandoned *One AM* [1968] project, which was not screened until 1972, *Un Film Comme Les Autres* is Godard's first film that is exclusively a work of documentary. Although the non-fictional content of the *Cine-Tracts* [1968] project revealed Godard's attempt to create direct revolutionary cinema, it certainly falls outside the scope of a full-length project such as *Un Film Comme Les Autres*.

The techniques Godard employs throughout the film defy 'normal' documentary methodology, and in fact strive to alienate the audience by accentuating the differences within the film. It is therefore worth considering that besides the effect of the alienation

techniques used, the audience reaction at the premiere possibly came about from their expectation of believing they were about to be watching a fiction film.<sup>15</sup>

Godard's interest in the documentary form, its various modes of communication and forms of addressing an audience, increases throughout the films of 1968. In particular, Dziga-Vertov's formulation of the newsreel has parallels with both the *Ciné-Tracts* and *Un Film Comme les Autres*. In an article written for *Lef*, Dziga-Vertov states:

Please let's get into life.

This is where we work – we, the masters of vision – organisers of visible life, armed with the ever-present cinema-eye.

This is where the masters of words and sounds work, the most skilful montage-makers of audible life. And I venture to slip in with them the ubiquitous mechanical ear and mouthpiece – the radio-telephone.

It means THE NEWSREEL FILM

and THE RADIO NEWSREEL

I intend to stage a parade of film-makers in Red Square on the occasion of the Futurists' issuing of the first edition of the montaged radio-newsreel. Not the 'Pathé' newsreel-films or Gaumont (a newspaper-type 'newsreel') and not even 'Kino-Pravda' (a political 'newsreel'), but a genuine cinema newsreel – *a swift review of VISUAL events deciphered by the film-camera, pieces of REAL energy* (I distinguish this from theatrical energy), *brought together at intervals to form an accumulatory whole by means of highly skilled montage.*<sup>16</sup>

By using multiple audio sources, and the two types of visual footage, *Un Film Comme les Autres* can be perceived as a critical radio newsreel in contrast with the *Ciné-Tracts'* emphasised critique on the print medium.

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<sup>15</sup> Henahan's article makes it clear that the audience for the film's premiere were "predominantly young" and "booed and hissed" throughout the screening. See Appendix, Figure 3. In Craig Fischer's examination of Godard's commercial film releases in the U.S., Fischer examines the "hissing and snickers" that seemed to be a normal part of the New York Film Festival. Although *Un Film Comme les Autres* didn't appear as part of the festival that year (*One Plus One* was supposed to, but there were problems with getting the print) Fischer's article goes some way in explaining 'normal' audience reactions for the time. Craig Fischer, 'Films Lost in the Cosmos: Godard and New York Distribution and Exhibition (1961-1973)', *Spectator*, 18 (1998), 47-66. And: Donal Henahan, 'Boos Greet Film By Godard Here', *New York Times*, December 30 (1968). See Appendix. Fig. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Dziga Vertov, 'Film Directors, A Revolution', *Screen*, 12 (1971/2), 57-58.

Just as Rosenbaum credits Godard's films with being 'global newspapers,'<sup>17</sup> *Un Film Comme les Autres* presents the spectator with a radio newsreel that presents events of the past and a discussion of the possible future of the revolution in France. The film is also illustrative of the contrasting switch in visual emphasis that Godard would attempt to move to later in the year.

If it is to be accepted that the film was shot in August, it predates the *One AM* cinema verité project he would attempt with Leacock and Pennebaker in November of 1968. However, the contrasts between the two projects illustrate lessons Godard learned from *Un Film Comme Les Autres*, and would attempt to apply within *One AM*.

In many respects *Un Film Comme les Autres* is the antithesis of the experimental form of Godard's intentions for the *One AM* project. The *One AM* project was supposed to invert the traditional forms of fiction and non-fiction, by using black and white film stock for the fictional parts, and colour for the documentary. In contrast, *Un Film* uses conventional documentary chromatic forms by organising the colour sections to represent the present moment, while the black and white images are used to provide a context of the past for discussion.

The use of these more conventional documentary modes, especially the effects of the seemingly static placement of the camera, is intended to achieve two goals. Superficially, the first goal of the colour footage is to contrast the reportage style of the black and white images. However, what is more important, is that the colour footage is also representative of something akin to a 'pure' form of cinema verité. There are none of the usual 'self-conscious' signals of hand held camera movement that can be identified as hallmarks of the Leacock-Pennebaker cinema verité style: zoom, motion, out of focus images or follow focusing.

The camera remains predominantly static, with the occasional slight pan.<sup>18</sup> However, for the most part, the camera work is frequently supposed to give the impression of having

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'My Filmgoing in 1968: An Exploration', *That Magic Moment: 1968 and the Cinema* (1998). Internet WWW page, at URL: <<http://www.viennale.or.at/1998/magic/rosenbe.htm>> (version no longer available). Publication (in German) available from Internet WWW Page, at URL: <<http://www.viennale.or.at/english/shop/index.html>> (version current at 7 October 2000).

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted however, whether intentional or not, the camera can be seen almost imperceptibly moving throughout all of the 'static' shots. Whether this is due to a zoom lens being used, or an inexperienced camera operator is unknown.

been set up and abandoned by the operator, leaving the subjects to talk uninhibitedly. The majority of the film's action is manipulated through editing and crosscutting between the two types of footage, or through different perspectives of the group. By doing this, and thwarting the spectator's expectation of seeing the identity of the participants in the field, Godard allows the viewer a deceptively objective or unmediated image.

The colour sections achieve the effect of live action by relying, in part, on the use of environmental sounds.<sup>19</sup> Frequently the sound of aeroplanes all but drowns out the conversation of the group. Godard also employs other environmental sounds such as children playing in the tenement building behind the group, and the sound of birds and insects in the grass. Alan Williams suggests that this technique is used to contrast the natural with the mechanised, and to illustrate acculturation of mechanised objects in the human landscape.

The sounds that interest him are, almost without exception, mechanical in origin...Two noteworthy aspects of this preference are:

the sounds are recorded at remarkably high levels; and  
the characters seem peculiarly unresponsive to them—it's as if they are unaware of their sonic environment except to the extent that it assumes culturally rationalised forms. Where as is typical in Godard's "location" recordings, the spectator strains to decipher dialogue (subtitling tends to make this seem easier than it actually is), the characters seem better adapted to urban noise than the film audience is made to feel.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, environmental sounds are conspicuously absent from the black and white footage. In place of the environmental sounds, classical and orchestral music (with and without vocals) ebbs and flows throughout the black and white scenes until the spectator is returned to the group in the field. The discussion the group engage in within the colour sections continues to run through the black and white fragments, leaving the black and white footage to act as a visual construct, illustrating an event the group are discussing.

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<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in *One Plus One*, Godard uses three environmental sounds repeatedly.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Williams, 'Godard's Use of Sound', *Camera Obscura*, Autumn 1982, p. 197.

This leads us to the second more obvious goal of the colour material. It is utilised to contrast and heighten the effects of the other devices Godard wishes to emphasise. Most notably, the effects accomplished with unsynchronised sound.

Sound is not only language. Sound is everything. A picture can go without any images on the screen for some time—just sound. Or only with silent images. It depends on what you want to tell. It's only a matter of technique.<sup>21</sup>

By purposely providing a 'simplified' image, the film draws the spectator's attention to the use of sound and the discussion in which the participants are involved. The functionality of the sound is a type of aural palimpsest, whereby, the audio track frequently uses multiple voices talking simultaneously.

Significantly, as the film progresses, the spectator becomes increasingly aware that the voices Godard uses for the dialogue of the film are not necessarily those of the figures the spectator sees. By using multiple overlapping voices on the soundtrack, it is made apparent that many of the voices have been recorded in other locations, and not the outside environment of the field where we see the group.

A great deal of the film's material appears to use an incremental method of timing the cutting of the black and white footage with the colour material. For example, within the first ten minutes of *Un Film Comme les Autres*, Godard contrasts the long takes of the colour material with increasingly faster cutting in of the black and white material as action involved with the protests increases.

(Colour) The film opens with a mid shot of a woman sitting in the field. The spectator sees her back, with her hair obscuring her face. There is a blade of grass which sits conspicuously in the foreground, and the leg and forearm of a man who sits in front of her in the background of the shot. The shot lasts for approximately two minutes.

(Black and White) Shot of protestors marching in a demonstration with a banner that reads: 'Enterrement Non Revolution Qui' 7 seconds.

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<sup>21</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in, 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. 37.

(Black and White) Long shot of protestors. 16 seconds. Music begins.

(Black and White) Long shot of Champs Elysees and protestors. 8 seconds.

(Colour) Back to medium shot of woman in field revealing more of man in front of her, revealing both of his forearms and the spectator can tell he is wearing a black shirt. The sound of an aeroplane passing overhead is heard. 40 seconds.

(Black and White) Close up of protestors. Camera pans right to extreme close up of the back of someone's head with raised fists of the protestors in the background.

(Colour) Woman in field. Camera slowly pans right revealing the back of a man in a white shirt smoking a cigarette. Significantly, the pan enables the viewer to recognise there are at least 4 participants in the discussion. A figure on the right then moves into the frame revealing the fifth member of the group. A book lies in the centre of the shot. The camera then slowly pans left, stops, then back to its original position with focus on the woman's back. 2 minutes 15 seconds.

(Black and White) Long shot of fire and smoke in the distance. 2 seconds.

(Black and White) Long shot from building rooftop of ambulance and people putting an individual in the back of the ambulance on a stretcher. 14 seconds

(Black and White) Out of focus long shot of trees and fire in distance. 2 seconds.

(Colour) Woman in field, with sound of aeroplane passing overhead. 43 seconds. Camera pans right passing grass onto the back of one of the men until Camera stops. 50 seconds. Camera slowly pans back to the left, stopping when reaching the woman. 2 minutes.

(Black and White) Chaos of silhouetted figures and fire in background. 4 seconds.

(Black and White) Same scene as before, however the spectator is taken closer to the action seen in the previous shot. 1 second.

(Black and White) Even closer to the source of light, but out of focus. 4 seconds.

(Black and White) Long shot of burning car and protestors throwing objects. 12 seconds.

(Black and White) Protestors push the burning car forward. The sound of a car horn is heard. 4 seconds.

(Colour) Man with white shirt in the field. 1 second.

(Black and White) Burning wreckage of the car. 4 seconds

(Colour) Man with white shirt in the field. 1 second.

(Black and White) Long shot of burning in distance and silhouetted figures. 2 seconds.

(Colour) Woman in field. 1 second.

(Black and White) Protestors. 2 seconds.

(Colour) Woman in field. 1 second.

(Black and White) Protestors. Camera pans left and right rapidly. 6 seconds.

By repeating the shot of the woman in the field, the film anchors the black and white material to the ongoing discussion. The group as a whole are never identifiably revealed in their totality, with the exception of the long shot which situates them in front of the tenement building approximately 11 minutes into the film. However, the shot does not reveal any of their faces, and is used to reveal the location of the group, rather than to identify them. The sound of the conversation in the field continues over the top of the black and white images, tying the spectator to the discussion of the events of May. The use of the discussion also keeps the spectator's attention firmly focused on the film's use of sound.

In interviews and public discussions he attended in 1968, Godard frequently espoused the opinion that sound had been under-utilised since its inception in cinema, and positively attempted to expand the boundaries of both silent and sound cinema throughout the year. In Christian Metz' discussion of 'The Cinema: Language or Language System,' Metz questions the underdeveloped nature of verbal language within cinema.

The verbal element is never entirely integrated into the film. It sticks out, necessarily. Speech is always something of a spokesman. It is never altogether *in* the film, but always a little *ahead* of it.<sup>22</sup>

*Un Film Comme les Autres* challenges Metz' notions of speech within cinema and provides another channel of communication that challenges other forms of media. A great deal of the reportage available of the May events illustrates the importance of radio communication as an organisational tool and a means of gathering information, in particular, information about actions led by the state.<sup>23</sup>

Many of the images from May illustrate the antipathy the participants felt for the state controlled Office de la Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (O.R.T.F.), which controlled the flow of information over radio and television.<sup>24</sup> Like many of Godard's film projects throughout 1968, *Un Film Comme les Autres* attempts to provide an alternative to the conventional media sources. Unlike conventional media sources, Godard emphasises the soundscape and limits the pictorial depiction of the discussion in the field. In part, Godard achieves this emphasis on sound by disembodiment of the voices from the image.

Perhaps what is at stake is that language is thus shown to be *separable* from the people who speak it. It does not merely "express" them but also works through them. "One's own" voice is shown to be simply a particular variety of language use.<sup>25</sup>

Like the visual contrasts between *Un Film Comme les Autres* and *One AM*, the use of sound in *Un Film Comme les Autres* is the antithesis of its conventional use in the collaborative *One AM*. Unlike *One AM*, *Un Film Comme les Autres* does

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<sup>22</sup> Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> See William Klein's documentary *Grands soirs et petits matins: Mai 68 au Quartier Latin* [1978] to see the significance of communication and the instruments which enabled students and workers to organise demonstrations and protests.

<sup>24</sup> For many of the posters created by students and the Atelier Populaire throughout the May events, see: Burn Collective. *Paris 1968 - Table of Contents*. Internet WWW page at URL: <<http://burn.ucsd.edu/paristab.htm>> (version current at 7 October 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Alan Williams, 'Godard's Use of Sound,' *Camera Obscura* (1982), 194.

not use synchronised sound, but attempts to use visual techniques to confirm the veracity of what the spectator sees.

Particularly within the first reel, the spectator sees the characters gesticulate during parts of the debate to reinforce their points of view. The attendant sound goes some way to confirming what the spectator sees. However, in the second reel the sound heavily contradicts the images and undermines the spectator's belief that the voices heard on the soundtrack belong to any of the individuals seen speaking in the first reel. It is as if Godard were attempting to present a cautionary message telling the audience to question both what it sees and what it hears. Another possible interpretation is that this simple technique of unsynchronising the image from the sound is employed to alienate the spectator even further from the image.

In a 1970 interview, Godard made clear his desire to reduce filmmaking to a more simplified process. Part of his desire was to make films independently of the commercial methods of production. Within this process of reducing cinema to its raw basics was a desire to strip the technicalities of the sound process.

We made a step forward when we tried to reduce all those so-called technical problems to their utmost simplicity. [...] So we are trying to make only a few images, work with no more than two tracks, so the mixing is simple. For the moment, most movie makers, except some underground movie makers, work with ten to twelve sound tracks and mixing lasts one week. The mixing is only three or four hours for us. We just work with two tracks and possibly later with one track, because with one track, we can really have simple sound again.<sup>26</sup>

Godard believed that the use of sound is itself political.

But for the moment, we have not the political capacity of working with one track. This is the political stage, not simply a problem of techniques.<sup>27</sup>

Godard's seemingly simple use of both black and white, and colour film stock, heightens the contrast when the sound meets the image. Although the recording of the sound may

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<sup>26</sup> Godard, in Carroll, p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> Godard, in Carroll, p. 52.

be simple, the application of unsynchronised sound within *Un Film Comme les Autres* is complex and an effective tool in alienating the spectator.

By using these techniques, the black and white footage examines the May revolt as an event, or as a precisely fixed point that has passed. In contrast, the colour section depicts a 'present time'. The sound techniques attempt to alienate the spectator and create a sense of uncertainty that is shared by the subjects of the film, as they explore the question of what happens next.

Many of the texts written in the aftermath of the May revolt have attempted to confine its participants to two possible political extremes. The first is a representation of a unified front between students and workers as a homogeneous mass. The other is a sociological representation, a mass movement that had its basis amongst a far greater section of the French population than it really had. Perhaps more controversial than these two arguments, are the apolitical posturings that have arisen recently, eviscerating any political ideas the May revolt had.

In Arthur Marwick's large and extensive tome 'The Sixties,' he opines

It will be a major theme of this book that it is a mistake to concentrate on politics and changes of government: the social and cultural movements I am concerned with continued largely irrespective of the political complexions of governments.<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to Marwick's position is Charles Posner's compilation of works about the events of May 'Reflections on the Revolution in France: 1968'. Posner illustrates the basis for the May events being a struggle for power, and the investigation of new forms of democracy.

It also unveiled possible solutions to the problems of democracy, democratic control, and the purpose and meaning of work which plague all industrial societies. Hitherto these solutions have been discussed in the abstract; the May events put them to the test for the first time.

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<sup>28</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 9. One of the 'social and cultural movements' Marwick is interested in investigating, judging from the large photo of the Latin Quarter on the back cover, is France in May of 1968.

All of the contributors to this volume feel that if May was not a fully-fledged revolution, it was, at the very least, 'a dress rehearsal...The May events herald profound changes not only in who exerts power but how power is to be exerted and for what ends.<sup>29</sup>

From the Gaullists to the P.C.F.<sup>30</sup> (Communist party) leaders chastised students and young workers for their refusal to make the traditional demands of the consumer in the traditional way. When they discovered to their horror that their ideological presuppositions were not accepted and inadequate to the task, they resorted to less subtle means of persuasion.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of the Gaullists, the "less subtle means" were acts of violence perpetrated by the C.R.S.,<sup>32</sup> the national riot squad. The P.C.F. used political tools, albeit through less conventional channels: media sources such as 'L' Humanité', the communist newspaper, and through the CGT.<sup>33</sup>

The C.G.T., a Communist party controlled confederation, advocated conventional means of strike negotiation for the workers. They also attempted to keep students out of discussions surrounding workers' rights and worker objectives, making their disapproval of the greater goals of the May revolt well known. The predominant reason the C.G.T. was against the student revolt was for self-preservation.

The students threatened a total democratising of the workers, which of course would remove the power that the C.G.T. held. Of course, a consequence of successful student led revolution would of necessity be the loss of Communist Party power and influence.

On May 5, the C.G.T. issued the following statement:

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Posner, 'Introduction'. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France: 1968*. ed., Charles Posner. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1970), pp. 13-14.

<sup>30</sup> P.C.F.: Parti Communiste Français

<sup>31</sup> Posner, p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> C.R.S.: Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité

<sup>33</sup> C.G.T.: Confédération Générale du Travail

Wherever the essential claims have been satisfied it is in the workers' interest to pronounce themselves overwhelmingly in favour of a return to work.<sup>34</sup>

As Harvey points out, there were those on the left who believed this was 'orchestrated with an indecent haste.' Student activists accused the C.G.T. of not only behaving like American Liberals, but also of being 'reformist' by not supporting the revolution beyond their established role as negotiators.<sup>35</sup>

The C.G.T. also appeared to miss the point of the workers general strike. Particularly within the automotive factories, the strike action was about a number of issues, the least of these were workers' wages. Amongst the many reasons for the strikes was a call for foreign workers' rights.

Particularly within the Renault and Citroen factories, the workers from such diverse places as Portugal, Spain, Yugoslavia and North Africa lived under appalling conditions.

The Communist Party union (the C.G.T.) did not make special efforts to equalize the conditions of the foreigners with those of the French workers. This is largely because the work contracts of most of the foreigners were temporary, and the foreign workers could not vote, which means that the foreign workers did not represent a power base for the Communist Party. And some union spokesmen contributed to a further worsening of the foreign workers' situation by collaborating with the police repression of the foreigners, and even by publicly defining foreigners as the greatest threat to the French working class.<sup>36</sup>

The major cause of union between the students and workers, as Posner perceives it, was due to demography, coupled with the influence of a society that treated youth as an apprenticeship into adulthood. Society placed all the accoutrements and responsibilities of adult consumerism at the feet of youth, without any of the rights experienced by adults. The student and worker revolts are therefore, according to Posner, primarily a youth revolt that rejects consumerism.

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<sup>34</sup> Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> F. Perlman, 'Workers Occupy Their Factories'. In *Worker-Student Action Committees: France May '68*. eds., R. Gregoire and F. Perlman. (Detroit, Michigan: Black and Red, 1991), p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Perlman, p. 8.

...but for the consumer society youth was an apprenticeship in how to adjust to hierarchical control whether in the factory, the lycée, or the university... Youth's normal propensity to reject parental values grew into a rejection of parental society with its ideas of hierarchy masking as democracy.<sup>37</sup>

There is no doubt that Godard is attempting to unify the students and workers to advance the revolt that the events of May began. Far from being a roundtable discussion of both ideological sides of the argument, representatives of the pro-Gaullist, C.G.T. and P.C.F. factions are omitted from the discussion in the field. Godard had tried to unite students and workers with the *Ciné-Tracts*, but whereas the 'voice' of the *Ciné-Tracts* was undoubtedly authorial, *Un Film Comme les Autres* allows the participants in the revolt their chance to speak for themselves. It also allows them to speak outside of any organised media response from spokespersons and leaders such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit or René Riesel. The age demographic of the speakers is also highly significant. Using workers and students who appear to be in their twenties, Godard illustrates the politicised youth that Posner had detailed as being the basis of the revolution. By bringing the individuals together in a group, Godard emphasises the unification that must happen if the revolution is to advance.

In an interview with Kent E. Carroll in October of 1970, Carroll asked Godard if it was a necessity to work in a group to make films politically. Godard suggests that after independently moving away from bourgeois ideology and attaining a revolutionary consciousness, there is a natural progression towards working with groups.

That means you have to try to work as a group, as an organisation, to organize in order to unite. The movies are simply a way to help build unity. Making movies is just a little screw in building a new concept of politics.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, 'true' revolution requires the unity of groups in order to achieve revolutionary goals. *Un Film Comme les Autres* is Godard's first attempt at building unity by directly addressing the student and worker populations, and spreading the ideas from the discussion to increase unity along revolutionary lines. Moreover, many of the

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<sup>37</sup> Posner, p. 40.

<sup>38</sup> Godard, in Carroll, p. 51.

techniques employed within the film, and Godard's changing focus from auteur filmmaker to collaborative partner, are a paradigmatic shift in methodology.

However, there is also the danger of collective discussion not achieving revolutionary aims due to passivity. Godard wants to achieve unity followed by revolutionary action.

A first step might be to simply gather people. At least then you can have a free discussion. But if you don't go on and organize on a political basis, you have nothing more than a free discussion. Then collective creation is really no more than collective eating in a restaurant.<sup>39</sup>

René Viénet, a member of the Situationist International [SI], believed what was missing from the May revolt was the type of active commitment Godard suggests.

What was lacking was consciousness of a real revolutionary perspective and its practical organisation. Never did an agitation by so few individuals lead in so short a time to such consequences.<sup>40</sup>

This is not to suggest that the Situationists were in agreement with Godard. Both Viénet and Guy Debord, the leader of the SI, were vehemently against Godard's films, frequently making attacks that were personal as well as professional. Yet, both share similar techniques in their films, and a similar ideology, raising the question of what could account for such wrath on Debord's part. In a review of *Le Gai Savoir*, the Situationists appear to target Godard as a filmmaker of unoriginal, even plagiarised, content and technique. Plagiarism being one of many techniques that the Situationists frequently encouraged in others.

Godard was in fact immediately outmoded by the May 1968 movement, which caused him to be recognized as a spectacular manufacturer of a superficial, pseudocritical, cooptive art rummaged out of the trashcans of the past (see *The Role of Godard in Internationale Situationniste #10*). At that point Godard's career

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<sup>39</sup> Godard, in Carroll, p. 51.

<sup>40</sup> René Viénet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 1992), p.19.

as a filmmaker was essentially over, and he was personally insulted and ridiculed on several occasions by revolutionaries who happened to cross his path.<sup>41</sup>

Like Godard, Debord is also influenced by avant garde film practice, and displays sensitivity to the lineage of commercial and experimental cinema. Beginning his cinematic career while with the Lettrists in the early 50's, Debord's films, like Godard's, are often characterised as "hard to watch."<sup>42</sup> The Lettrist cinema led by artists such as Isidore Isou and Gil J. Wolman were early influences on Debord's work.

This early '50's cinema found its roots in the avant-garde work of the dadaists and expanded into an avant-garde film practice imbued with the Lettrists own unique perspective. Elizabeth Sussman describes some of the techniques the Lettrists and Debord introduced in the 1950's.

These practices include, just to take a few examples, the use of flicker, radical sound-image discontinuity, negative sequences, multiple simultaneous acoustic inputs, direct manipulation of the celluloid surface through tearing, writing, and scratching, and an active engagement of the spectator a la "expanded cinema".<sup>43</sup>

The founder of the Lettrists, Isidore Isou, outlined the development of the cinema as an art form with the literary work *Esthétique du cinéma* in 1953. Illustrating two practices involved with the cinema's development, Isou created two formal divisions. The 'amplific phase' denoted the development of cinematic syntax and style. The 'chiseling phase' refers to the subsequent development of the form, whereby the form becomes exhausted "or of bloated, decadent excess."<sup>44</sup> When this occurs, Isou believes the form becomes reflexive, and a radical investigation of its basic formal and technical means takes place. Each of these examples can be found in Godard's 1968 cinema.

Several key techniques of the Lettrists mirror *Un Film Comme les Autres*, for example, their use of sound, its suspension from the image, and the inclusion of newsreel footage.

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<sup>41</sup> Ken Knabb, (Trans.) Situationist International. *Cinema and Revolution*. Internet WWW page, at URL: <<http://www.slip.net/~knabb/SI/12.cinema.htm>> (version current at 7 October 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Sussman, 'Dismantling the Spectacle: The Films of Guy Debord'. *On the passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: The Situationist International 1957-1972*. ed., Peter Wollen. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1989), p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> Sussman, p. 79.

<sup>44</sup> Sussman, p. 80.

Debord's *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* [1952] used these techniques; and many of the textual inscriptions used mirror those Godard would use in *Le Gai Savoir* [1968] and the *Cine-Tracts* project. The soundtrack for *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* consisted of

...dialogue spoken without expression...when one of the five voices is speaking, the screen is white....The dialogue consists primarily of phrases that have been detoured from journals, works by James Joyce, the French *code civil*, Isou's *Esthétique du cinéma*, and from John Ford's *Rio Grande* [1950], supplemented by quotidian banalities.<sup>45</sup>

Like *Un Film Comme les Autres*, Debord's *Hurlements* had a running time of 120 minutes. However, Debord's film inverts Godard's extreme use of speech by featuring only 20 minutes of spoken dialogue. The audience, like that of Godard's, was apparently provoked into, at first boredom and then violent outrage demanding admission refunds. It is also worthy of note that many of the Lettrist projects encouraged a radical foregrounding of sound rather than image.

Like *Un Film*, Debord's *Hurlements* is supposed to engage the viewer in a critical, more active participation. Sussman explains

....the lack of images in *Hurlements* – is employed as the essential ingredient in a recipe of provocation intended to "radically transform" the cinematic "situation" from a shrine of passive consumption into an arena of active discussion, a shift away from the spectacular and *toward* critical engagement.<sup>46</sup>

In *Made in USA* [1966], Godard began to develop and extend his interest in revolutionary cinema to envelop third world politics, actively encouraging and supporting 'Third World' political filmmakers and their initiatives. In 1968, and beginning with *Le Gai Savoir*, many of the ideas espoused by third world filmmakers became a regular touchstone of reference in Godard's films.

In Argentina, filmmakers such as Solanas and Getino were attempting to encourage new forms of filmmaking that would counteract the spread of imperialist Hollywood cinema.

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<sup>45</sup> Sussman, p. 82.

<sup>46</sup> Sussman, p. 84.

Significantly, their goal, like that of Godard's throughout 1968, was to break free of the stranglehold that they felt had been imposed by neocolonialist cinema and the mass media wherein "Mass communications are more effective for neocolonialism than napalm".<sup>47</sup>

By countering the limitations of form in neocolonialist cinema that were being made contemporaneously, Solanas and Getino believed theirs were the first steps in raising or fomenting a national revolutionary consciousness. Promoting forms that were akin to the 'Direct Cinema' movement, and adopting many of the anti-spectacle techniques proposed by the Situationist International and Debord, Solanas and Getino's *La Hora De Los Hornos/The Hour Of The Furnaces* [Solanas and Getino, 1968] creates a number of ideological and metaphoric links. The cinema was being transformed into a weapon of guerrilla warfare by linking anti-spectacle ideological struggles with physical combat.<sup>48</sup>

Solanas and Getino emphasise the need for the intellectual to find their core competency to achieve "and perform the most efficient work," something Godard would espouse in his later work with Gorin in the Dziga-Vertov collaborations. Perhaps most important, is the work Solanas and Getino were conducting with the exhibition of their films.

The screenings of *La Hora De Los Hornos* were accompanied by open forum discussions. Using the film screening as a "detonator or pretext," the filmmakers organised events at the screening to precipitate discussion. At the beginning of the second part of *La Hora De Los Hornos* entitled *Acto para la liberacion*, the directors would introduce a dialogue with the audience as a means of dispelling any notions of spectacle.

Comrades, this is not just a film showing, nor is it a show; rather, it is, above all, A MEETING – an act of anti-imperialist unity; this is a place only for those who feel identified with this struggle, because here there is no room for spectators or for accomplices of the enemy; here there is room only for the authors and protagonists of the process to which the film attempts to bear witness and to deepen. The film is the pretext for dialogue, for the seeking and finding of wills. It

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<sup>47</sup> Solanas and Getino. 'Towards A Third Cinema'. In Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods: Volume One*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1976), p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> Solanas and Getino, p. 44.

is a report that we place before you for your consideration, to be debated after the showing.<sup>49</sup>

Although *Un Film Comme les Autres* is missing the explicit instruction of Solanas and Getino's film, it does implicitly ask the spectator to engage the film outside the parameters of the theatrical experience. Whether Godard credited his audience with too much intelligence, or lacked the foresight to provide explicit instruction is open to question.

Like Godard, Solanas and Getino's work is also attempting to escape the aesthetics of idealism, and the cult-like view that "Beauty in itself is revolutionary." Instead, Solanas and Getino provide a means of understanding the art of cinema outside of the 19th Century bourgeois form they wish to eliminate.

Man is accepted only as a passive and consuming object; *rather than having his ability to make history recognized, he is only permitted to read history, contemplate it, listen to it, and undergo it.* The cinema as a spectacle aimed at a digesting object is the highest point that can be reached by bourgeois filmmaking. The world, experience, and the historic process are enclosed within the frame of a painting, the same stage of a theater, and the movie screen; man is viewed as a *consumer of ideology*, and not as the creator of ideology.<sup>50</sup>

This statement is comparable to what appear to be Godard's own thoughts on history and ideology. Near the end of the second reel of *Un Film Comme les Autres*, an extended period of silence is heard on the soundtrack. Illustrating what Alan Williams describes as

...the ultimate sound effect: *silence*, which when it arrives—abruptly, as do most of Godard's sounds—is eerily soothing.<sup>51</sup>

The silence is followed by a solitary voice on the soundtrack, and informs the spectator that

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<sup>49</sup> Solanas and Getino, p. 62.

<sup>50</sup> Solanas and Getino, p. 51.

<sup>51</sup> Alan Williams, 'Godard's Use of Sound,' *Camera Obscura* (1982), 197.

According to Shakespeare, men are involved in history in three ways: Some create history and are its victims. Others think they create history, and are its victims also. Others yet do not create history, but they too are its victims. The first are the Kings, the second are their assistants who carry out their orders, the third are the simple citizens of the kingdom.

The speech that the individual gives provides a more potent ending for *Un Film Comme les Autres* than the one posited by Roud, and importantly signals the direction the Dziga Vertov group would take in directly addressing the political struggles of individuals and groups throughout 1969 to the early 1970's. The prevailing message from *Un Film Comme les Autres* is therefore one of attempting to escape the shackles of passively consuming ideology; but also of becoming actively involved in rejecting bourgeois culture in order to be an active participant in the making of history. For this to be accomplished through the film medium, Godard requires the audience to communicate with each other to achieve the ideological ideas he raises.

Although he later rejected the film as a "complete failure,"<sup>52</sup> he also affirms a belief that it marks the departure from quantity to quality. This departure marks a transition in the targeting of his audience as a potential collective cadre, as opposed to merely a collection of individuals and signified his desire to expand the role of cinema.

At a certain point you go from quantity to quality. Until *A Movie Like the Others* I was a moviemaker and an author. I was only progressing from a quantity point of view. Then I saw the job to be done, and that I had the possibility of doing this job only with the help of the masses. For me this was a major advancement. You can't do it as an individual. You can't do it alone, even if you are an advanced element of the good militant. Because being a good militant means being related, one way or another with the masses.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Godard, in Carroll, p. 53. In the Summer of 1972, Richard Roud states "Gorin admits that the possible public for *Un Film comme les Autres* was of the order of 5". Richard Roud, 'Godard is Dead, Long Live Godard/Gorin: Tout Va Bien!', *Sight and Sound*, 41 (1972), 123.

<sup>53</sup> Godard, in Carroll, p. 54.