The Dialectics of Text and Image in the Revolutionary Filmmaking of Godard, Farocki, and Marker

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments........................................................................................................1

Introduction: Towards a Language of Images.........................................................2

Chapter 1: Text/Image/Politics
  A Revolutionary Lesson.........................................................................................9
  Metz’s Method.......................................................................................................10
  Godard’s Weaponized Montage...........................................................................12
  Marker’s Dialectical Disruption..........................................................................21
  Marker, Godard, and the Ideology of the Real...................................................24
  Farocki’s Building Blocks...................................................................................27
  Return to Zero......................................................................................................35

Chapter 2: Content of Revolution
  A Third Voice......................................................................................................36
  “You Never Know What You are Filming”: Revisitation and Constellation........38
  Performance and the Revolutionary Image.......................................................42
  The Grin Without a Cat.......................................................................................51

Chapter 3: Revolution of Form
  Shot/Countershot: The Theory and Practice of Interface...............................55
  Secondary Revision and Simultaneity.................................................................58
  The Articulation of Images..................................................................................63
  Content Mirrors Form in the Statue of Critios...................................................68
  Coding/Decoding................................................................................................70
  Godard’s Language, À Côté de la Plaque.............................................................72
  From the Human Race We Pass to Metaphor...................................................79
  Farewell to Language..........................................................................................85

Works Cited.............................................................................................................90
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Introduction: Towards a Language of Images

In his short film *Catch Phrases—Catch Images*, Harun Farocki sits in a Berlin café with philosopher Vilém Flusser, discussing the front page of the notorious *Bild-Zeitung* tabloid. They talk with a casual yet lucid intellectualism about the words, and the pictures, and the interactions between them. Farocki and Flusser are theorists of images and their relations to power, and their dialogue moves from the surface material of the tabloid to its underlying, mystified political ideology of demagoguery and violence. Even when their conversation reaches sweeping political summits, they remain rooted in the formal details of the *Bild*, from the layout of the images to the size and color of the font. At the center of their focus is the interplay between the paper’s two modes of communication, text and image. Early on, Flusser says: “People usually still say that either the image is there to illustrate a text or that, conversely, a text is there to clarify the image. But on this page one clearly sees how these two types of communication start to penetrate into each other. Text is there as a function of the image and the image as a function of the text, and they both put each other in ‘check’.”¹ His seemingly simple statement animates a broad range of questions about the politics of the relation between text and image. The deceptively complex relationship between text, image, and politics is the subject of this thesis. Looking closely at key works by three politically active filmmakers, I will parse out the mechanics of their montage in an attempt to elucidate the latent political content at the nexus of text and image.

The origins of this project were in the class Criticism and Marxism, for which I

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wrote a research paper relating Farocki’s films to Roland Barthes’ theory of myth. Seeing Farocki and Barthes doing similar work in different mediums, I began with the question: How does a film’s construction of ideas differ from a written text’s? Even beyond the comparison with Barthes, Farocki’s films display a sophisticated use of written and verbal text. With Barthes as the foundation, the paper combined the formal analysis of Farocki’s images with the critical analysis of his texts; it quickly became clear that it was impossible to consider one without the other. The interactions between text and image in Farocki led to questions about meaning-making in political filmmaking, which grew more elaborate as my work continued. I began that project with a long list of films and critical texts, and the process of writing narrowed it down to only a few—my work seemed incomplete, just beginning to formulate questions that I was nowhere near answering. I knew I wanted to continue exploring the intersection of film and theory, and a thesis seemed like the next step.

Though books could be written on Farocki’s work alone, for me it seemed necessary to expand the scope beyond his essayistic documentaries to get multiple approaches to the text/image problem. Jean-Luc Godard was the next logical choice; his work formally extends Farocki’s concern with the intersections among text, image, sound, and politics, but from the perspective of narrative feature films. Chris Marker rounded out the group, his intelligent, personal, and playful essay films sitting between the narrative provocations of Godard and the diligent documentaries of Farocki.

Outside of the films themselves, these filmmakers share crucial biographical reference points. In the late 1960s, all three sought to make their filmmaking practice an inseparable part of their revolutionary political action. Godard’s efforts led to his co-founding of the Dziga Vertov group with Jean-Pierre Gorin in 1969, where he made
collective radical films until the early 1970s. Chris Marker started the SLON (Society for Launching New Works) in 1967 to produce the anthology film *Far From Vietnam*, and the labor-oriented Medvekin group, which involved workers directly in the filmmaking process. Floating in similar French leftist circles, their paths overlapped, with Godard directing a segment for SLON’s *Far From Vietnam* and each contributing to the agitprop *Cinétracts* around the same time. The Berlin-based Farocki was slightly outside of the social sphere of Godard and Marker, but was nonetheless politically active in the late 1960s—expelled in 1968 from film school for his activism, he opted to make guerilla-style films himself instead. The magazine *Filmkritik* also had a leftist slant, and provided his primary outlet for politically-charged media theorizing when he served as editor from 1974-78. Just as all three filmmakers were swept up in the radical climate that culminated in ’68, each found ways to maintain a revolutionary spirit as the hopes for revolution faded in its aftermath.

The three also share a similar willingness to advance their formal technique through experimentation with cutting-edge image technologies. All were early adopters of video in the 1970s, and digital and other new-media technologies in the 1990s and 2000s. My third chapter brings in two examples of new-media experimentation, in Farocki’s *Interface* and Godard’s *Adieu au langage*. All these points of contact between the careers of the three filmmakers inform the overall shape of the thesis, which roughly follows their parallel political and formal

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5 Chris Marker’s CD-ROM *Immemory* was planned to be included as well, but had to be cut for reasons of space.
evolutions. As the earlier years of their careers were charged with a more materially fertile revolutionary situation that dwindled as time went on, the first two chapters have a heavier Marxist inflection, while the third chapter leans harder towards psychoanalytic concepts to match the shift in values towards a more individualized revolution of consciousness. That said, strains of Marxist and psychoanalytic thought are present and commingled throughout the thesis. To maintain a consistent formal vocabulary, I turned to Christian Metz’s book *The Imaginary Signifier*, the urtext of psychoanalytic film theory. In it, I found a method bridging the gap between literary and film theory, offering both the precise structure of semiotics, and the multivalent openness of psychoanalysis.

Chapter 1 focuses on early, militant political works from each filmmaker. Using Metz’s metaphor and metonymy as the formal terms guiding my analysis of montage, I pinpoint the moments when form and content meaningfully collide to produce political friction. I chose Godard’s *Le gai savoir* (1969) as the chapter’s central film because its rigorous, self-reflexive formal analysis works through many of the oppositions that the rest of the thesis will untangle, between text and image, narrative and documentary, entertainment and politics. Though it is Godard’s eighth feature film, *Le gai savoir* marks an important new beginning in his trajectory as a filmmaker. Coming after *Week End*’s proclamation of the “end of cinema,” and made in the midst of the turbulent political events of May 1968, *Le gai savoir* was one of his first films to deal with the aftermath of each, an attempt to formulate a method of political filmmaking that could be relevant to the contemporary moment and serve as a productive instigator of revolutionary consciousness. *Le gai savoir* is a calculated, methodological introduction to the ideas and preoccupations that would be crystalized in the following years through the Dziga Vertov Group films, and revisited throughout the rest of his career. Its montage is some
of the most sophisticated of his career, exploring the relationships between text and image through calculated permutations. I compare Le gai savoir’s deconstruction of narrative, sound, and image with Chris Marker’s essayistic documentary Letter from Siberia (1958), which takes a different approach to dialectical editing, laying the groundwork for Chapter 2’s focus on Marker’s A Grin Without a Cat. The chapter ends with Harun Farocki’s The Inextinguishable Fire (1969), a Brechtian polemic on the production of napalm that treads a middle ground between Godard’s carefully-staged fiction and Marker’s documentary. The three films engage in formal experiments with montage within narrative, documentary, and pseudo-documentary traditions. They serve as entry-points into the directors’ overlapping preoccupations, their early grasps at a revolutionary synthesis of form and content, which they later refine.

Rather than another broad survey of works by each filmmaker, Chapter 2 zeroes in on Marker’s 1979 film A Grin Without a Cat. It is both a tribute to, and elegy for, the leftist revolutionary activity that all three filmmakers were involved in throughout the 60s and 70s, and reaches the apex of the dialectical editing that Chapter 1 introduced. If Letter from Siberia used montage to establish the duplicitous relationship between narration and film image with a single scene and a single voice, A Grin Without a Cat complicates that relationship by multiplying the types of footage and narration. Through polyvocality, materiality, and theatricality, Marker draws together footage from across space and time to create a vision of history both personal and impersonal, guided and unmoored. The film demands participatory viewing for the audience to reckon with the formal clashes of text and image, and to make sense of its content of history (both the history of representation of the left, and the representation of the history of the left). The ultimate effect of Marker’s rigorous montage is an embodied understanding of the
revolutionary spirit which is activated by the audience’s intellectual engagement, understood in relation to Walter Benjamin’s dialectically-charged constellations. As the centerpiece of the thesis, it bridges the gap between the early attempts at formulating a political cinema during the moment of revolution, and the later experiments which attempt a revolution of consciousness through technological means rather than mass collective action. Standing between these two periods, *A Grin Without a Cat* speaks the language of the past, in order to point towards a more hopeful future.

Chapter 3 holds a forward and backward glance synchronously, juxtaposing two works which use additional technology (two-channel video and 3D) to problematize, and potentially revolutionize, the standard procedures of image-making. It begins with a summary of Farocki’s theorization of and against the common shot/countershot technique, before launching into a close reading of his installation *Interface*, whose soft montage offers an alternative to the established cinematic language. Returning to the Freudian roots in Metz, I situate Farocki’s concept of soft montage against the psychoanalytic concept of simultaneity and tease out its dialectical potential. I argue that through simultaneity and secondary revision, the soft montage of *Interface* creates new modes of viewer engagement and dialectically reconsiders the entire apparatus of image-making. The thesis then returns to Godard, with an analysis of *Adieu au langage 3D* (2014). Framing it in the context of Godard’s filmmaking lecture on shot/countershot in *Notre musique* (2001), I suggest that Godard’s innovative use of 3D in the “separation shot” provides a formal solution to the problem of shot/countershot articulated by Farocki and Godard alike. This is followed by a close analysis of a scene directly following the second separation shot, which achieves a similar effect without the use of 3D. Concluding the chapter, and the thesis, I trace a spoken quotation back to its origins
to reveal how Adieu au langage’s formal strategies resolve a career-long working-through of text and image. The ending is also a return to the beginning, circling back to the relationship between text and image as the simple, and fundamental, locus of revolutionary filmmaking.

At the end of Catch Phrases—Catch Images, Flusser gives an important reminder of the illusion of authority that is given by their conversation being shown on television:

You have to be aware of the fact that we are not talking normally in a bar, but for television, and consequently, everything we are talking about, is itself immersed into image, and again changed magically by the receiver, so that we find ourselves on a very slippery slope. We are contemplating here, in an apparently transcendent way, this “kitschification,” brutalization and reduction of human dignity, by such a demagogy, and thereby serve ourselves as factors in a new “magicalization” by the television. I think, honestly, when somebody is watching us at the television, that this should be said; we should now make an appeal to the spectators and say: Use this critical skill because we are speaking this word against ourselves!”

Similarly, this thesis is doomed to be written in the sort of metalanguage it seeks to transcend. I have embedded images from the films to familiarize the reader with the scenes I write about, and also in the hopes that, stripped from their original context and thrust into a different one, they may reveal some new, unforeseen facets.

I approached this thesis as a gradual traversal into uncharted territory: I began without many preconceived ideas, and instead aspired to discover something new about text and image through filmmakers whom I assumed could teach me something useful. Inevitably, my approach was limited by the medium I used to explore these questions, but I hope that in its own mélange of text and image this thesis can provoke a fresh set of questions for the reader to take with them to the movies.

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Chapter 1: Text/Image/Politics

A Revolutionary Lesson

Though Godard’s entire career probes the political dimensions of form and content, *Le gai savoir* occupies a unique position in his oeuvre. First, because it serves as an intermediary between the character-driven (or at least character-populated) narratives of his earlier films and the (sometimes character-free) documentaries he would go on to make. The presence of Jean-Pierre Léaud and Juliet Berto as Émile and Patricia, the film’s fictional guides, are carryovers of the former style; the documentary footage of Paris streets, stripped-down narrative structure, and pedagogical slant looks ahead to his future experiments. Second, it uses on-screen writing (of Godard’s own hand) more frequently and more pointedly than any of his other films. Third, it is Godard at his most transparently instructive, at least until his lecture on text and image in *Notre musique*, which will be addressed later. Afforded by *Le gai savoir*’s form as a lesson, Émile and Patricia frequently self-reflexively discuss the film’s aims, explicating its overall structure in broad strokes through their three year plan:

Patricia: [In the first year] We’ll pick up images, we’ll record sounds. It will create unorderly experiences.
Emile: Actions, hypothesis.
Patricia: Yes, and the second year, we’ll criticize it all. We’ll decompose, we’ll reduce, we’ll substitute, and we’ll recompose.
Emile: Okay. And afterwards, the third year. We’ll create a few samples of sounds and images. My practice will not be blind since you will have enlightened it with your revolutionary theory.
Patricia: My theory will not be without object, because it will be linked to your revolutionary practice. 

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The film largely adheres to this trajectory, as Émile and Patricia progress from presenting fragments of culture, to destabilizing relationships between images and sound, to creating new miniature films of their own which enact the lessons learned by the previous parts. Decompose, reduce, substitute, and recompose; the same could be said of Godard’s montage techniques. This accumulative trajectory is built into the film’s pedagogical structure, and in its approach to knowledge of the past more generally. The constant refrain to “return to zero,” in all its revolutionary implications, implies a look backwards at the history of representation, arming the characters with the tools and weapons to bring this knowledge forwards towards a future-oriented revolutionary praxis. And, insofar as Émile and Patricia are surrogates for the viewer, the film’s intentions extend beyond its diegesis. It aspires to create the same insight, and subsequently action, in the viewer; it provides the theory which precedes and provokes the practice. That the film was made originally for the mass-audience of television bolsters the credibility of Godard’s aspirations for affecting the world.

With the basic aims of the film established, I will analyze select scenes to parse out the mechanics of Godard’s montage style, extrapolating from these isolated instances the significance of Le gai savoir’s montage in relation to works by Marker and Farocki.

First, an explanation of my model of formal analysis, adopted from Christian Metz.

**Metz’s Method**

In *The Imaginary Signifier*, the French film theorist Christian Metz attempts to synthesize findings from psychoanalysis, rhetoric, and linguistics into a comprehensive theory of film. Metz acknowledges that, as opposed to a literary theorist or linguist, the
greatest challenge faced by the film theorist is “the problem of the word.”

Metz states that “natural language is made up of words (and lexemes); whereas film language has no semiotic level that would correspond to these: it is a language without a lexicon (without a vocabulary), insofar as this implies a finite list of fixed elements.” Instead, film consists of “units… [which are] patterns of construction rather than pre-existing elements of the sort provided by the dictionary.”

Rather than the linguistic model which has both grammar and vocabulary, film has “a grammar, up to point, but no vocabulary.” Metz in his book, and Godard in his film, attempt to expose the taken-for-granted grammar of film. Metz sticks to linguist Roman Jakobsen’s distillation of a variety of rhetorical tropes into two related pairs: metaphor and paradigm, which “share the basic feature of ‘similarity,’” and metonymy and syntagm, which share “that of ‘contiguity.’”

Metz’s method ends up being diagrammatic, establishing a several sets of vertical and horizontal axes that any fragment of film can be situated upon. Metaphor and metonymy occupy the referential axes. Here, metaphor operates vertically, with multiple meanings accumulating onto a single signifier, corresponding roughly to condensation from psychoanalytic theory. On the horizontal axis is metonymy, which substitutes a part for a whole (or another part), corresponding approximately to displacement from psychoanalytic theory. The other, parallel set of axes is the discursive, which deals more fundamentally with the construct of the form rather than the content. On the discursive level, paradigm operates on the vertical axis, “set[ting] up several units in competition for

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid. 213
12 Ibid. 174
13 Ibid.
a particular place in the syntagmatic chain.”\textsuperscript{14} Paradigm operates on a principle of similarity, a sliding vertical scale in which certain units will be chosen, creating the structure which allows metaphors to occur. The horizontal axis is syntagmatic, which operates on positional contiguity. Metz explains that film editing is “wholly syntagmatic… since it consists in juxtaposing and combining elements \textit{in discourse}—in the filmic chain—without these motifs necessarily having any metonymic connections as referents.”\textsuperscript{15} Hence, the discursive syntagmatic chain is the structure in which metonymy may possibly, but is not guaranteed to, occur.

Metz goes into more detail on each of these elements, but at the most essential level, his model can be visualized as three parallel sets of perpendicular axes, all of which correspond to each other in numerous ways but which are nonetheless distinct: metaphor/metonymy, paradigm/syntagm, condensation/displacement. These formulations provide a dynamic theoretical model with which to scrutinize Godard’s systematic approach to images, sounds, and text in \textit{Le gai savoir}.

**Godard’s Weaponized Montage**

In an early sequence of \textit{Le gai savoir}, Patricia says, “It’s up to me to turn the weapon against the enemy with which they attack our language,”\textsuperscript{16} which is precisely what Godard does for the remainder of the film. The enemy here being the false images and sounds which proliferate through the channels of the news media, advertisements, and mainstream entertainment. Godard uses his film as an opportunity to turn the language of images and sounds against themselves. And importantly, he conceives of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 181
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 183
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Le gai savoir}, Godard, 3:40.
\end{flushright}
images, sounds, and texts as interconnected facets of enunciations, speech acts, which can be traced to an originary source; this is demonstrated when Patricia says, “in every image, we must know who speaks.” Figuring out who speaks, or developing the tools to do so, is one of the film’s principal tasks.

The concept of returning to zero manifests itself early in the film, when Émile says: “the first image,” and the screen fills with the historical first photographic image, View from the Window at Le Gras by Niépce. In showing the first photograph, Godard returns to the origins of filmic representation, in a sense the original act of naming in images. This visual return to zero demonstrates two of Metz’s points. First, that “there is a link between the product and the place where it is manufactured. A disturbing resemblance.” The photograph, as a trace of the view from Niepce’s window, is metonymic for the view itself on the imaginary or referential level. On the discursive level, it is also the first link in the syntagmatic chain of all subsequent photographic and filmic images; the origin of all future images. Godard’s gesture to the first, ostensibly documentary photograph highlights the authored and constructed point of view in all images; all images have behind them someone “who speaks”. Though Niépce’s photograph may appear to be a purely documentary reproduction, “One way or another, the precise, referential, purely denotative term must have also been invented.” The photograph is presented as a speech act, materially and historically situated, the original metaphor which has not yet become

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17 Ibid. 15:05
18 Ibid. 11:55
19 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, 160.
20 Ibid.
“worn”. With the point of origin established, the rest of the film is poised to explore what relations of power lie hidden behind images of advertising and television, and potentially “discover images and sounds that are free.”

In the third year, Émile and Patricia begin to make their own films and start to discover these free images and sounds. Their “Guerilla film,” for example, demonstrates viscerally the potential of images and sounds as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle.

The scene consists of a close up of Patricia’s face in profile with Émile’s voice-over:

This face is a bottle, the eyes are a cap. The hair, a wick that descends into a bottle until the nose. the mouth and the chin being the bottom of the bottle. – [Soundtrack: loud annoying beep plays while Patricia smiles]—you throw this face smashing into a CRS in france, a Kapo in Germany, a Carabinieri in Italy. In short, against any other face of the repression.

This segment offers an example of metaphor presented syntagmatically. The image, Juliet Berto’s face, is metaphorically compared to a Molotov cocktail, equating revolutionary (or guerilla) image-making with a real revolutionary weapon. The face, and the bottle, are also metonymic for revolutionary struggle more generally.

Additionally, the use of a disruptive, annoyingly loud beeping sound “attacks” the viewer on a physical, bodily level. Sound is shown to have a literal power to cause pain, form as a vehicle for its ideological content.

The effect of this brief segment is like a synecdoche of the movie as a whole: using metaphor and metonymy, it demonstrates the viability of a method which can be mobilized to more radical means by the viewer later on. Through its open-ended, transposable method, the film positions itself as a starting point (zero) for the future

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21 Le gai savoir, Godard, 13:30.
22 Ibid. 1:27:04.
films that will be made using its techniques. The film’s ending confirms this position, both when the characters claim that Bertolucci, Straub, and Glauber Rocha will film the scenes they didn’t get a chance to, and when Godard concludes that this film is not trying to explain cinema, but “give an efficient method of achieving it. This film is not the film that needs to be made. But how, if we have a film to make, we necessarily have to go through the well-known paths of films.”

Godard would go on to make further educative and didactic films in the leftist Dziga Vertov Group.

One of Godard’s most striking visual techniques in Le gai savoir is a form of detournement. Borrowed from the Situationist International movement, which defines it as “detournement: short for: detournement of preexisting aesthetic elements. The integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu,” Godard’s detournement comes from his appropriation of, and writing on, magazine images to create new meanings. An early montage establishes the interplay between text, image, and speech as a foundational technique for the rest of the film.

Preceding the montage, Émile and Patricia commit themselves to learning from images, before they do anything else. “First, to learn. That’s not bad. Ok. To learn,” says Émile, holding up his hand as the camera to pans left into darkness. After a few seconds of pure black (the absence of image, a recurring motif), a montage begins. Alternating between footage of Paris streets and magazine images with writing on them, the montage is also accompanied by a piano piece on the soundtrack and a fragmented voice-over track spoken by multiple voices.

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23 Ibid. 1:31:40
25 Le gai savoir, Godard, 5:07.
The detourned images in the montage consist of a crowd of people pushing a giant razorblade (with “Revolution” written over it), a woman’s face behind colorful puzzle pieces (with “Image” written over it), a photograph of Vietnamese POWs being led by American soldiers (with “Vietnam” written over it), a photograph of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara (with “Acub” written over it, or Cuba scrambled), a photograph of a man being carried through a foggy street (with “Son” written over it), and a photograph of Godard reading a book about Vietnam, (with “zerO” written over it). Over this montage, the voiceover track speaks, “A society, in church/Rousseau/Until the End of the earth/and I searched/at its simplest expression/So, his call/and finally, we... people have decided to.”26 The montage is followed by a shot of Patricia’s face. Émile, offscreen, says “we can’t really understand,”27 to which Patricia

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26 Ibid. 15:26.
27 Ibid. 5:56.
replies, “Of course, they’re speaking out of order,” the scrambled speech matching the images’ scrambled spelling of *savoir*.

They repeat this exchange three times, before another montage begins. The images of this montage consist of the word “Savoir” written (by Godard) over the cover of *Le Langage* by Edward Sapir, a photograph of a red flag, and the title page of *De La Grammatologie* by Jacques Derrida. The soundtrack is a repetition of the polyvocal voiceover from before, reorganized to be comprehensible: “I had gone/to the ends/of the earth/searching for/what Rousseau calls/progress almost unaffected/its/ beginnings/and I/looked for a society/reduced to its simplest/expression.” Following this montage, Émile and Patricia have an exchange in which they unscramble the word “Afranics,” going from “A-F-R-A-N-I-C-S” to “N-A-F-A-R-I-C-S,” and ultimately to “F-R-A-N-C-A-I-S”. Soon after, Émile says, “we study links, relations, differences.”

The previously described sequence is dense, packing a remarkable amount of content (visual, textual, sonic) into just a few minutes of screen time. Despite its brevity, this sequence is a key to understanding the project of the film as a whole, introducing many of the techniques that Godard revisits and expands upon.

First, it should be noted that Godard is already transgressing the boundaries of Metz’s model of filmic tropes by acting upon the signifiers themselves. Metz describes strong condensation and strong displacement as different ways in which the signifiers can be distorted beyond recognizability. On the one hand, “[Strong] condensation now attacks [the signifier’s] very substance, undertakes to redefine its familiar forms, to get

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28 Ibid. 5:59.
29 Ibid. 6:30.
30 Ibid. 7:55.
right inside it so as to bring about its disintegration.”

On the other, when strong displacement occurs

the relation between units of the signifier and units of the signified is modified beyond a certain point the change cannot be assimilated by the code, and its effect is no longer to make it evolve, but to subvert a fragment of its domination. Displacement is then no longer the driving force of language, or of discourse, but a potential cause of the disintegration of the signifier, even if this is not physically affected.

In his detourned images, which distort the actual substance of the original images, the original signifiers, Godard pushes the disruption of signifiers and signifieds towards the ends of “subverting a fragment of [the code’s] domination,” teaching Émile, Patricia, and the viewer new ways to consider images critically.

In this sequence, the strong condensation of Godard’s writing “bring[s] about an alteration in a previously constituted and stable unit of the signifier.” These previously stable units are the magazine images which Godard writes on. His detournement creates new paths of metonymic and metaphoric connections between the images and text in the sequence. For example, the photograph of Castro and Che, labeled Cuba (reordered as “A cub”) has a metonymic relationship to the written word, Cuba, as well as the actual country of Cuba. The photograph is metonymic for the country Cuba and specifically the Cuban revolution—it is showing a part of the whole (synecdoche, included in metonymy), and Castro and Che’s iconic faces are the locuses of metonymic displacement. The word Cuba reinforces that Castro and Che, on the referential axis, are metonymic for Cuba and the revolutionary struggle occurring there. It is also metaphorical in the sense that the written word Cuba, when paired with the image,

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31 Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 284.
32 Ibid. 286.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid. 284.
connotes more than itself, and is overdetermined; it does not simply represent Cuba, but specifically the country’s revolutionary struggle of the late 1950s.

This image is situated within a montage of other images—therefore, on the syntagmatic axis, it is metonymic for the sequence as a whole. Adding to this effect, the highlighted letters of the words written on the images form a scrambled anagram for the word *savoir,* which is then repeated, reassembled, in the second montage. As each image/word unit is metonymic for the word *savoir,* the montage’s metonymy happens on the level of both the images and the text (and on a third level, the text of the voice-over).

The overall effect of this montage, when paired with the voice-over which is similarly scrambled and then reassembled, is to establish the associative, metonymic relations between each of the images through the text which links them together. All the content of the images (Vietnam, Cuba, advertisements, Images, sounds, protests, etc.), heterogenous on the referential axis, is linked together through the discursive axis by the presence of the interdependent text. The structural reassemblage of the text and the voice-over speech implies the possibility of a similar redemption of the images. The images, seemingly heterogenous, must be significantly interrelated. As Émile says a bit later, “To understand is to discover the common ownership of a series of different facts.”35 As the written words and spoken voice-over are metonymically stitched together across the montage, so too must the images be linked by common ownership.

The montage of Émile, Patricia, and magazine images is punctuated with the intercutting of footage of the streets of Paris (already inundated with signs, writing, logos; an image-saturated society which needs to be decoded). Through this densely

35 *Le gai savoir,* Godard, 24:24.
packed montage, with several registers of content commingling, the task of the film is established: to decode these ostensibly heterogenous but syntagmatically related fragments of media, to reshape them into something comprehensible (savoir, knowledge), and to teach Émile and Patricia the method for doing so. By extension, guided by the example of the Émile and Patricia, the audience too can learn, and ultimately participate in its own deconstruction of the cultural signs they are faced with on a daily basis.

Crucially, *Le gai savoir* addresses its revolutionary audience from a formalist void, allowing Godard to control and position his film’s references to the real political situations which it exists adjacent to. Godard’s fictional conceit gives him full control over each variable on screen (and off), allowing him to perfect his montage style and create a flexible cipher for the audience to decode the false ideological images and representations of the real world political discourse. The film’s subject matter is the spectacular society and the political content of images under capitalism, and the importance of revolutionary theory and praxis in understanding and overturning these forms. But unlike the Dziga Vertov Group films he would make directly after, which largely approach these subjects from a documentary perspective, *Le gai savoir* references its real-world subject matter from an isolated vacuum of pure form, through the commentary provided by Emile, Patricia, and Godard himself. Metz describes discourse and reference as “the imaginary of the other: the other of the other.”36 Viewed this way, Godard’s film is the other of reality; it can reference the real world, but only from a good distance.

Marker’s Dialectical Disruption

Over ten years earlier, Chris Marker used many of the same montage techniques as Godard, without the added distance of Godard’s formalist conceit. In 1958’s *Letter from Siberia*, Marker similarly interrogates the complex relationship between text and image through montage, but does so in a situation where the film’s subject matter and commentary are in direct, rather than indirect, dialogue.

*Letter from Siberia* is considered one of the earliest and most famous examples of the “essay film,” due to Andre Bazin’s review published in a 1958 issue of *France-Observateur*.37 The film is structured in the epistolary form, with narration of Marker’s travels read like letters to some unnamed recipient, an unspecified “you” that stands in as a surrogate for the audience. The words correspond with, and sometimes contradict, the images onscreen. Andre Bazin describes the relationship between words and images in Marker’s editing style as “horizontal montage,” in which “a given image doesn’t refer to the one that preceded it or the one that will follow, but rather, it refers laterally, in some way, to what is said.”38 Bazin emphasizes the role of Marker’s “intelligence,” and goes on to say that “that intelligence flows from the audio element to the visual. The montage has been forged from ear to eye.”39 Bazin’s descriptions create a three-dimensional visual model of Marker’s film; his horizontal montage refers not to the sequential temporal procession of the images but to the horizontal plane between the viewer and the screen, mediated by the ear and the eye. This model is in operation throughout the film, but openly reveals its functioning in the film’s most famous sequence, highlighted by Bazin.

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39 Ibid.
Marker leads into the sequence with a self-reflexive questioning of his own intentions and the reception of his film. The narrator ponders, “While recording these images of the Yakutsk capital as objectively as possible, I frankly wondered whom they would satisfy.” Unlike Godard, Marker does not seem to have designed his film with a specific audience in mind. He acknowledges the burden of preconceived biases and expectations shaping audience responses to the Soviet Union, and the challenge this poses to depicting it: “you can’t describe the Soviet Union as anything but the worker’s paradise, or, as hell on earth.”

The film then launches into the repeated montage with different narrations that illustrates this problem. The repeated sequence consists of four shots: a red-painted bus driving by a ZIM on a sparsely-populated intersection; five laborers pulling a heavy beam to prepare a concrete sidewalk; a man with an eye disorder walking by the workers; another shot of the workers dragging the beam from the opposite angle.

In this sequence, Marker disrupts the positional contiguity and positional similarity, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. Rather than linearly cycling through his cards, Marker’s horizontal montage shows the audience his hand, a gesture revealing simultaneously the arbitrariness and meaningfulness of the textual choice he made among an infinite number of possibilities, and in turn, the artifice of the game itself. In *Letter from Siberia*, the political question is also a formal one: how to represent the Soviet Union on film. Marker’s formal tactics throughout the film, from the subjectivizing epistolary travelogue format, to interludes of animation and “imaginary newsreels,” to the previously discussed dialectical sequence, emphasize the impossibility

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41 Ibid. 27:28.
of a film ever achieving objectivity. Marker described his film as being in opposition to “the documentary style of Soviet social realism in which ‘the rule was that all images, like the wife of Stalin, had to be above suspicion.’” Marker intentionally makes his images suspicious, to complicate any straightforward reading of the film or its subject matter. This open-endedness interpellates the viewer into an unstable position, forcing them to reconsider their own relationship to the film, and by extension, the Soviet Union itself.

**Marker, Godard, and the Ideology of the Real**

Godard makes a comparable disruption of the circuit between the truth value of text and the image it describes halfway through *Le gai savoir*. In this scene, Émile narrates over black and white photographs of Patricia: “I added that we had to be careful not to fall into the ideology of the real. A trap that isn’t always avoided by great filmmakers such as Dreyer, Bresson, Antonioni, Bergman.” Patricia responds, “Yes, but then what is a false image? Where are the true images and sounds?” beginning a sequence where Patricia, onscreen, repeats alternatingly false and true facts about herself: “I am 84 years old. I am 30 ft. tall. I’m wearing a yellow sweater. I’m 20 years old. I’m 5’4. My blue sweater. I am 84 years old. I am 30 feet tall. Yellow.” Émile protests from

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43 *Le gai savoir*, Godard, 43:20.
44 Ibid. 43:31.
45 Ibid. 43:46.
offscreen that “it’s clear,” to which Patricia responds: “because you know me. Imagine de Gaulle talking to the students, Johnson talking to Vietnamese, Franco to the workers, it would immediately be less clear.” Coming so soon after the list of film directors, this list of political figures forges a link between the performative deception of each industry. Patricia and Émile then have the following exchange:

Patricia: ‘Yes and no. No, because within an image and sound, nothing is stable.’
Émile: ‘So it’s about grasping a movement.’
Patricia: ‘Yes, of contradiction, and the solution to these contradictions within the people.’

Godard’s “ideology of the real” is synonymous with Metz’s “referential illusion.” Like Metz, Godard approaches this ideology as an adversary, a false mode of images which must be combated with “true images.” And yet, like Marker’s, Godard’s sequence demonstrates the inherently duplicitous relationship between text and image. His presentation of the concept not only disrupts the positional contiguity and similarity, but also makes his example a metaphor for the false ideology espoused by politicians.

Unlike Marker’s film, which consists (mostly) of documentary footage he shot in Siberia, Godard’s fictional conceit creates a gulf between the diegetic film world and the real, everyday world it gestures to. So if the unstable “movement” between image and sound that Emile refers to is, as Patricia explains, a dialectical movement, Godard must also take an extra step to suggest that the contradictions of form raised within his own form point out into the real world. The scene (and film as a whole) disrupts the path of the movement between sounds and images, from the inside, to expose the contradictions within the movement, and gesture towards the same contradictions in the real world.

\[46\] Ibid. 44:10.
\[47\] Ibid. 44:40.
In this scene, the extra step between his film and the reality it references comes in the form of metaphor presented paradigmatically. The words Patricia speaks about herself clearly don’t describe the image of her on the screen. The disjunction is obvious, as Émile points out, and her continuous insistence on repeating the false facts seems gratuitous. But Patricia explains that this obviousness is intentional, in order to attune the audience to the more general phenomenon of the untrustworthiness of words in relation to images. The false “ideology of the real” perpetuated in film by Dreyer, Bresson, Antonioni, and Bergman is challenged by Patricia’s straightforward example. Godard exposes the filmic ideological illusion, then, through the movement of metaphor, suggests its transposability onto the political ideology in the speeches of de Gaulle, Johnson, and Franco. The simplified, purely formal framework of the filmic is condensed and folded over onto the political outside.

Marker and Godard each disrupt the referential illusion, but the differing genres of their films means they fall on different points on the spectrum between documentary to reality. Marker works within and against the documentary tradition. His techniques of destabilizing his own authority undo audience’s assumptions of any documentary’s ability to capture objective reality. Godard’s film is not as easily categorizable; it can be said that, like most of his previous work, it falls within the tradition of the fiction film, being a scripted scenario involving actors playing fictional characters. But from within this fictional space, Godard also insists there are things to be taught and learned about the real world. Godard reduces the toolset of the fiction film into its barest formal elements (text, image, sound, speech), in order to make metonymic and metaphorical connections between his film and the real world of revolutionary politics through montage.
Farocki’s Building Blocks

In his 1969 short *The Inextinguishable Fire*, Harun Farocki splits the difference between Marker and Godard by staging a fictional scenario that is ostensibly a documentary one, set in a real company and based on facts about napalm manufacturing.

*The Inextinguishable Fire* begins with Farocki sitting at a desk, reciting a statement given at the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm: “My name is Thai Binh Danh. I am Vietnamese, born in 1949. I want to report crimes that the United States imperialists committed against me and my village…”

48 going on to describe the horrors inflicted by napalm strikes. After the monologue, Farocki looks at the camera, and asks:

And how can we show you the injuries caused by napalm? If we show you pictures of napalm burns, you’ll close your eyes. First you’ll close your eyes to the picture. Then you’ll close your eyes to the memory. Then you’ll close your eyes to the facts. Then you’ll close your eyes to the entire context. If we show you a person with napalm burns, we will hurt your feelings. If we hurt your feelings, you’ll feel as if we’d tried napalm out on you, at your expense. We can give you only a hint of an idea of how napalm works.49

The camera dollies forward to a close-up as Farocki puts out a cigarette on his arm. “A cigarette burns at 400 degrees Celsius. Napalm burns at 3,000 degrees Celsius. If viewers want nothing to do with the effects of napalm, then it is important to determine what they already have to do with the reasons for its use.”

50 The film then cuts to a rat being lit on fire, as further facts about the effects of napalm are read in voice-over.

Farocki’s first-person reading of the testament could, on a basic level, be compared with Patricia’s insistence that she is 84 years old and her sweater is yellow: what is being said clearly doesn’t match up with the image onscreen. In Godard’s film, this disjunction of sound and image is used in comparison to real-world examples.

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49 Ibid. 1:22.
50 Ibid. 2:15.
Similarly for Farocki, the desk scene points to images and events outside of itself. The true images of the effects of napalm would be too confrontational. As Farocki explains, to show the actual effects of napalm would make the viewer close their eyes to the picture, memory, facts, and entire context. Instead, the effects of napalm must be evoked indirectly, through the metonymic image of Farocki putting out the cigarette on his arm. Of course, this is a violent image in and of itself, made exponentially more painful when the narration explains that napalm burns more than 7x hotter than the cigarette. The image causes some pain, and suggests a far greater pain. The formal effect of the painful image is similar to *Le gai savoir’s* Guerilla Film, which intentionally uses metonymy, metaphor, and a violent sound to hurt the viewer. But while Farocki’s image is pointing to a specific external phenomenon, Godard’s provocation (in this case) is purely formal.

Like Marker’s film, there is no distance between the subject matter and the image; the content is built into the form—*The Inextinguishable Fire*’s subject matter is the Dow chemical factories and the workers who manufacture napalm, and that is where it takes place. However, like Godard, Farocki has created as fictional, scripted scenario to play out in this world. This in-between space allows Farocki to make direct commentary on the Dow Chemical factory and napalm, while also retaining the formal control of Godard’s fiction. Because Godard’s film takes place in a formalist void and has no particular subject matter, its methods are endlessly applicable to any sort of content. Although the films were released in the same month of the same year, *The Inextinguishable Fire* almost reads as the sort of ideal film a revolutionary filmmaker would make after
watching *Le gai savoir*. It achieves the goal of that strongly condensed word Émile comes up with at the film’s end, “Misotodiment: the merging of ‘method’ with ‘sentiment’.”

*The Inextinguishable Fire* replicates *Le gai savoir’s* deconstructive method of filmmaking as a series of combinations, but grounds the method within the specific subject matter of the division of labor. Specifically, how the division of labor allows Dow chemical scientists to unknowingly work on components which contribute to napalm and other instigators of death and destruction in Vietnam. Early in the film, a scientist speaks a key line: “A large chemical corporation is like a set of building blocks,” while scientists are looking for a napalm which sticks to the skin, making it more difficult to wipe off. A scientist working on polystyrene for shoe heels offers to help reach a solution through collaboration between departments. Later, the head of Dow repeats the line about the corporation, and expands on it: “A chemical corporation is like a set of building blocks. We let each worker have one block to work on. Then we put the blocks together to make whatever our clients request. Each employee will be given a discreet task. Primarily for reasons of secrecy.” Farocki’s montage operates in much the same way. Decompose, reduce, substitute, and recompose.

This is followed by a sequence that begins with messages coming in through pneumatic tubes, bookending three shots of scientists writing on blackboards. The narrator announces newly developed technologies, such as “A new foam rubber granule, Palaspan 500, which will have many uses,” and then the scientists write their department titles on the blackboards, such as “Plastics department test series:

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51 *Le gai savoir*, Godard, 1:30:40.
52 *The Inextinguishable Fire*, Farocki, 6:32.
53 Ibid. 10:45.
54 Ibid. 12:20.
Polysterene types.\textsuperscript{55} The different departments and areas of research indicated by the blackboards are linked within the montage by the repetition of the shots, including the shots of the pneumatic tubes. Formally, it produces the same effect of Godard’s scrambled montages in \textit{Le gai savoir}—the separate elements which are heterogenous on the referential axis are linked on the discursive axis. By linking together the images, the montage suggests that these separate departments of Dow chemicals are linked as well. The alienating illusion of the division of labor is unmasked by the unifying power of the montage. Like Dow, and like Godard, Farocki’s montage is made up of “a set of building blocks” which are reconstituted to form new meanings.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. 12:30.
Another example of Farocki’s complex montage linkage through repetition occurs through his use of televisions and newsreel footage. This first appears in a cut between a shot of two scientists standing on either side of rotating industrial mixer and a shot of a scientist and man sitting down to watch a TV. The shots are linked by the metaphorical resemblance of the rotating mixer to a rotating dish on the TV, an example of metaphor presented paradigmatically: “One [filmic element] replaces the other, while simultaneously evoking it.” The effect of this metaphor is to link an element of the industrial process (the rotating mixer) to the images of the media (the television image of the satellite dish), and also to the specific content of the media shown—the camera zooms in as the TV shows newsreel footage of the American army causing destruction in the Vietnam War, as a voiceover reads out statistics: “The US command announces that nearly 5000 communists have been killed in guerilla strikes in Saigon…” Following a shot on the TV of tweezers reaching for burnt skin, the scientist watching the TV takes off his mask and puts his head in his hands despairingly. This is followed by an intertitle: “In view of the crimes committed in Hiroshima and Vietnam, many scientists and technicians realized that their contribution to the destruction was criminal: TOO LATE.” The sequence is repeated, with variations, a few minutes later. This time, the industrial mixer cuts to two TVs (showing the same footage). Again, the camera zooms in, and the TV narrator reads off more statistics on deaths. This time, the footage of the

56 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, 189.
57 The Inextinguishable Fire, Farocki, 8:35.
58 Ibid. 9:15.
tweezers prying apart the dead flesh is held for longer. Next we see several scientists watching the TV, complaining about the images, “Nothing but blood, hunger, misery, violence,” and a man saying “I'm asking you, do we have to look at this?” appearing to play out the hypothetical scenario that Farocki expressly didn't want at the beginning of the film: a group of spectators turning away from violent images. This is followed by another intertitle: “Because of the intensified division of labor, many technicians and scientists can no longer recognize the contribution they have made to weapons of destruction. Regarding the crimes in Vietnam, they feel like observers.” This intertitle escalates the stakes of the first: whereas the first scientist showed remorse, this larger group, when shown the same images, can no longer recognize their role in the violence on screen. This sequence proves Farocki's point: sensational images in and of themselves will do nothing but provoke disgust. They serve a similar role to the referential illusion or ideology of the real—to maintain a feeling of distance from the images on screen.

At times, Farocki’s editing also approximates Marker’s dialectical approach, where the exact same images are repeated but with different emphases. Towards the end of the film, a woman finds a note on her car, a letter from Harvard students telling her to quit her job as a chemist at Dow. She says she is conflicted, because she simply makes substances which could be good or bad for humanity: “The insecticide that we manufacture help mankind. The herbicides that we manufacture scorch his harvest and cause him harm.” After the intertitle “Who benefits, who is harmed,” begins a sequence of shots consisting of a forklift driving away from the camera, a plane talking

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59 Ibid. 15:33.  
60 Ibid. 15:49.  
61 Ibid. 16:44.
off, and a POV shot from the plane flying over and spraying crops, repeated twice.\textsuperscript{62} The first time the sequence of shots plays through, it ends on a plant in a glass case with crickets in it. The narrator says, “Dow’s insecticides destroy pests, and harvest crop yields across the USA and Europe.”\textsuperscript{63} The second time the sequence plays through, a different plant is shown at the end, its leaves withering, as the narration states, “Dow’s herbicides destroy the harvest in the Third World.”\textsuperscript{64} This sequence is followed by the intertitle: “The loss for the oppressed is the gain for the oppressors,” which seems to answer the earlier one, and illustrates Farocki’s dialectical stance on the inseparability of Dow’s harmful and beneficial products.\textsuperscript{65}

Another intertitle, “How To Change It,” leads into another sequence of iterative repetition.\textsuperscript{66} A man in a bathroom talks to the camera and runs through three scenarios as three different characters. First, he is a worker in a vacuum factory who brings home parts every day to make a vacuum. When he assembles it, it becomes a submachine gun. Then, he is a student in the vacuum factory who suspects the factory is making submachine guns for the Portuguese. He brings parts home, but whenever he tries to assemble it, it turns into a vacuum cleaner. In his third appearance, the man is wearing a slightly nicer outfit, indicating his higher status. He is an engineer at the factory, and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid. 16:53.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Ibid. 17:57.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Ibid. 19:02.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Ibid. 19:15.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid. 19:20.
\end{itemize}
explains that the workers think they’re making vacuum cleaners, the students think they’re making submachine guns. He then picks up a vacuum cleaner and a submachine gun and says, “this vacuum cleaner can become a useful weapon. This submachine gun can become a useful household gadget. What we manufacture depends on the workers, students, and engineers.” Stating that the manufacturing depends on the workers, students, and engineers suggests the ability to change the conditions, and gives agency to those groups, and by extension the audience. Along the same lines, the metaphorical possibilities of the vacuum cleaner and submachine gun are a testament to the mutability of meaning and function. It all comes down to the possibility of choice.

As the conclusion to the film, this sequence nicely recapitulates all that came before it in a dialectical sweep. The man is a doubly condensed figure. First, in each role he metonymically represents all workers, all students, all engineers. Second, because the same actor plays each role, all three types (workers, students, engineers) are associated and linked on both the referential and discursive axis. The repetition of the montage, the repetition of the man; like Farocki’s previous instances of dialectical editing, this sequence performs the film’s conceit that Dow’s helpful, innocuous products are inseparable from its production of instruments of war, and that every employee at every level of the system contributes to it. And, the film suggests it is not just the employees of Dow, but the politically active students, and the members of society in general that are implicated. Dow is itself part of a larger system, a synecdoche; it is the cigarette burn to the napalm of the entire military industrial complex, or even the totality of capitalist society. From the smallest scale to the largest, Farocki shows the building blocks of a

67 Ibid. 20:36.
chemical corporation through his intricate deconstruction of the building blocks of montage. And by revealing of the underlying connections mystified by the division of labor, he opens up a space for the possibility of changing the system from within.

Return to Zero

These early works demonstrate some of the interactions that montage can facilitate between text, image, and speech. Each film, as a fluctuating hybrid of fiction and documentary, stands at a different distance to reality and the claims they make about it, but they share common interests and goals driven by Marxist politics. The first commonality is an interest in disrupting the referential illusion, as seen in *Le gai savoir’s* yellow sweater scene, or *Letter from Siberia’s* crossroads sequence. The second, creating linkages through metonymic and metaphoric connections, can be seen in *Le gai savoir’s* detourned metonymic montages, or *The Inextinguishable Fire’s* metaphorical connection between the mixers and the radars on TV. The third is the attempt to use film as an instigator of real social and political change. *Le gai savoir* does this through its pedagogical, instructional style; it is a formal manual for revolutionary filmmaking. *Letter from Siberia*’s agenda is more subtle: a complication of the representational politics of documentary, and subsequently, a reframing of the Soviet Union. *The Inextinguishable Fire* implicates its viewer in the struggle against the production of Napalm, and serves as a call to action for its audience to reconsider their own position in relation to the Vietnam war. Together, these three films establish a formal paradigm which each filmmaker would use and evolve in future works, increasingly revolutionary in content and form.
Chapter 2: Content of Revolution

A Third Voice

In *Letter from Siberia*, Marker created a dialectical montage from the barest possible means; four repeated shots and one narrating voice were enough to destabilize the relationship between text and image. Though instructive, that film’s political thrust was limited to raising questions about representation in documentary filmmaking. *A Grin Without a Cat* expands the scope of this lesson, demanding more of the viewer but also offering them more agency in their engagement with the film’s montage. Retaining a typical sense of modesty, Marker describes his attempt to give the viewer agency in the film’s escalation of horizontal montage. Positing the film as an imaginary dialogue, he explains how a “third voice” emerges from the clash of the first two:

Each step of this imaginary dialogue aims to create a third voice out of the meeting of the first two, which is distinct from them. I don’t claim to have succeeded in making a dialectical film. But for once I’ve tried (having abused the power of voice-over narration a fair bit in my time), to give the spectator, by means of montage, their own commentary, that’s to say their own power.\(^68\)

While Marker’s earlier films were based around the mostly straightforward formula of image plus commentary, *A Grin Without a Cat* utilizes the technology Marker picked up while making 1967’s *Cuba Si*, synchronized sound, to create new combinations.\(^69\) The addition of on-screen synchronized sound enhances the possibilities for interaction and contradiction between voiceover narration and onscreen speakers. *Grin* also contains numerous different narrators, including the voice of Marker himself. This polyvocality,

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\(^{69}\) Alter, *Chris Marker*, 68.
enabled by the sync sound and multiple narrators, undercuts the authority of the narrating voice and complicates the 1-to-1 relationship between text and image. The horizontal montage as seen in *Letter from Siberia* proliferates, taking on the shape of a plane of possibility rather than a prescriptive line. Like the evolution from mono to stereo, the new aural possibilities allowed by sync sound technology open up the potential for a viewer’s own commentary to emerge.

Also contributing to this openness is the relative infrequency of the voice-over. In many of Marker’s earlier films, the constant narration serves as a guide for the viewer. This guide is not always unproblematic—see the aforementioned scene in *Letter from Siberia*—but it is nonetheless the primary entry-point for the viewer to engage with the ideological content of the film. Unlike these earlier films, *Grin*’s voice-over commentary is not constant—Marker allows for periods of silence, and uninterrupted speeches of onscreen voices. These techniques contribute to the nurturing of the viewer’s own commentary, as Marker says, “their own power.”

This principle of diversity and polyvocality in sound is complimented by the film’s visuals; the images of *A Grin Without a Cat* are drawn from a variety of contexts, ranging from *Battleship Potemkin*, to documentaries of Vietnam, Japan, and Bolivia, to Marker’s own documentaries, to unused footage from militant films. The sources number in the dozens. The visual equivalent of the polyvocal narration, Marker’s colored tinting of the films provides an organizing metaphorical device to distinguish between the film’s frequent jumps among countries and time periods. The tinting not only makes the film easier to follow, it also stylizes, almost fictionalizes, the documentary

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footage and draws attention to the film as a material representation. The look harkens back to silent movies, and by association, the intellectual montage of Eisenstein and Vertov. Significantly, the excerpts from Battleship Potemkin at the film’s beginning are tinted orange, setting the precedent for the film’s organizing stylistic principle. Potemkin is itself a fictional re-enactment of a historical event, which “abstracted that event out of its historical actuality and raised it to iconic status,” and Marker’s tinting serves a similar purpose for the revolutionary activity of the 60s and 70s. Framing the diverse images he draws from as images, as representations, Marker prepares the viewer to see the revolution itself as an image, an unstable and incomplete image that needs the film’s commentary and viewer’s commentary to be whole. The fluctuating positionality of the sound and the color-coded materiality of the images are deployed in a rigorous montage that provides no easy point of view for the spectator to latch onto, in either an identificatory or conflictual sense. From this position of uncertainty, which necessitates critical thinking for orientation, the viewer’s “third voice” develops.

“You Never Know What You are Filming:” Revisitation and Constellation

An essential feature of A Grin Without a Cat is the open image, the image whose form is stable, but content is mercurial and subject to change over time. In a film so concerned with the connection between visual and political representation, the ambiguity of the open image contains something frustrating in it, a demand to be closed. Among the flow of its diversely-sourced stream of images, Grin is not only a revisitation of historical events themselves, but also Marker’s own place in those events, a

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71 Langford, B. (2005). 'So Intensely Historical': Spectres of Theatre, Phantoms of Revolution in Marx and Marker. Film Studies, 64-VII.
recontextualization of his own filmography. Aside from his double-take of *The Sixth Face of the Pentagon*, the film’s most notable reconsideration is of the figure of Fidel Castro. More specifically, Castro as he appears in Marker’s filmography.

Prior to *A Grin Without a Cat*, Marker made two films about Cuba, 1961’s *Cuba Si!* and 1970’s *The Battle of Ten Million*. The first is Marker’s sympathetic portrait of Castro and the Cuban revolution; as Norah Alter puts it, *Cuba Si!* “tells the story of successes: the revolution combats malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, and assures the population housing, schools, and equality.”72 And, taking advantage of the new technology of sync sound, Marker allows Castro himself to speak at length, coming across as a charismatic, charming, and effective political leader and thinker. In 1970, Marker revisited the subject of Castro in *The Battle of The Ten Million*, which focuses more on Cuba in the context of international politics. Though *Battle* was a more dialectical and critical film, in it Marker reveals his “continued allegiance to Cuba,” and “admiration for Castro.”73

The optimism of these earlier films was soured by the time Marker made *A Grin Without a Cat*, which repurposes their footage, and adds new material, to reckon with Castro’s increasing corruption and deteriorating ideals in the intervening time. By returning to his own footage, Marker re-evaluates his position as a maker of politically-charged images, demonstrating by example how images reveal new resonances and connotations over time. The film’s late section on Allende and Castro works through this issue in detail, but it is introduced early in the second part, in a meditation on footage shot at various Olympic games. The sequence begins with footage of the congress of the Czech communist party which was later declared null and void; the

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72 Alter, *Chris Marker*, 68.
73 Ibid. 69.
narrator muses: “have a good look at these images, they show something that apparently never happened.”\textsuperscript{74} This idea of image as unreliable testament continues as the film transitions between footage of the Helsinki, Mexico, Berlin, and Munich Olympics. The narrator announces, “there was a team from South Korea in Helsinki, and its cook was the man Leni Riefenstahl had shot—I mean, filmed—as winner of the marathon in the Berlin Olympics of 1936. Just that, by then, he was Japanese. You can never tell what you might be filming.”\textsuperscript{75} Drawn from Reifenstal’s documentary and elsewhere, the footage of the man is tinted lime green, yellow, and orange, shifting between shots to emphasize the image’s duplicity. This is followed by Marker’s own footage, as the narrator continues: “Leni Riefenstahl thought that she was filming a Japanese, and it was a Korean. In ’52, I thought I was filming the winning rider of the Chilean team. Turns out it was Lieutenant Mendoza, later General Mendoza, member of Pinochet’s junta. You can never tell what you might be filming.”\textsuperscript{76} The coloring again shifts, from yellow-tinted Olympic horse jumping footage to cold, blue-tinted footage of Mendoza in the junta.

Together, these two isolated moments are metonymic for Marker’s approach to images in the entire film. The backdrop of the Olympics metonymically suggests the film’s larger political context, as a point of convergence of world politics, competition, and spectacle. And the layering of temporality mirrors the film’s larger reconsiderations of the effects of the past on the present. Marker’s repeated assertion that “you can never

\textsuperscript{74} A Grin without a Cat. Directed by Chris Marker. France: Icarus. 2008. DVD, 10:01.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. 13:44.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. 14:00.
tell what you might be filming," can be extracted from these isolated instances and used as a motto for his revisitation and recontextualization of images.

Marker’s process is a critical weaving of images from the past into a complex tapestry that resonates with the present. His technique embodies the insights of Walter Benjamin’s *On the Concept of History*, particularly when Marker explicitly reckons with his own cinematic past. In these moments, “where thinking suddenly halts in a constellation overflowing with tensions,” Marker “records the constellation in which his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one. He thereby establishes a concept of the present as that of the here-and-now, in which splinters of messianic time are shot through.” In language appropriately echoing Benjamin’s, Marker speaks to his use of images in their original form as much as possible “(television screens, lines of kinescopes, newsreel quotes...),” to present images as material objects:

…other principles were: relating documents to the concrete circumstances of their formulation and proceeding in such a way that the information would not appear as a cosa mentale—a mental object—but as a material object, with its grain, its spots of irregular surface, sometimes even its splinters.

Through his rethinking and reworking of a vast amount of old material, Marker’s constellation carries the tensions between the various times, places, and mediums on display, as well as the entire project’s tension with the shifting demands of the present. Compounding this effect, Marker’s multiple re-edits of the film, decades apart, further destabilize the images and lay bare their contingency. Any closure he provides to the open images seems only temporary, and they retain their capacity to form new constellations with the fluctuations of the everchanging here-and-now.

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77 Ibid.
Performance and the Revolutionary Image

In his essay *So Intensely Historical*, Barry Langford claims that “Marker insists... upon the impossibility of an experience of the world outside of representation, and of acts in the world outside of acting; yet in the same breath he asserts the vitality and the urgent necessity of these 'fictions of the real' as the basis for any political struggle and any prospect of future transformation.” Indeed, Marker’s consideration of image, representation, and performance in revolution is one of the film’s primary conceptual through lines. Marker synthesizes his insistence on politics as representation, the reconstellation of old footage, and the emergence of a viewer’s commentary in the sequence that jumps from Chile’s socialist president Salvadore Allende, to Fidel Castro, and back. Marker’s sharp deployment of these techniques in a single, relatively brief sequence, traces a philosophy of the image that passes into pessimism before being dialectically resurrected in the form of the revolutionary image.

The sequence begins on a yellow-tinted interview with Allende, in which the Chilean president discusses first meeting with Fidel Castro in a room full of machine guns and guerillas playing chess. Allende says: “he took me to meet Raul Castro, and I saw Fidel right away.” at which moment Marker cuts to a red-tinted clip of Castro saying “Institutionalizará,” which translates to “will be institutionalized.” This brief cut, a metaphor presented paradigmatically, is also a foreshadowing of a speech given by Castro

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80 Langford, *So Intensely Historical*
81 *A Grin without a Cat*, Marker, 1:30:07.
82 Ibid. 1:03:17.
only minutes later. Allende continues, “He impressed me at once with his exuberant intelligence and force,” as the camera moves to a photograph of their meeting, “which surges forward like a human waterfall.” Then, a cut to a green-tinted scene of Castro giving a speech to some unidentified men. The effect of this brief montage first metaphorically connects Allende’s word, Fidel, with the filmed image of Castro, followed by the montage’s focus on the static image of Castro in the photograph. In a short period of time, Marker’s montage makes several complex associations which are untangled in the following sequence, held together by the central idea of Fidel Castro as an image.

The green-tinted scene of Castro begins with a close focus on his hands and exaggerated gestures, which will continue to play a pivotal role in the scenes to come. Because the text is untranslated for the first few moments, the topic of his exuberant monologue remains a mystery until the voice-over narrator announces, “Here, Fidel Castro is passing on the secrets of Italian cooking to the Italian publisher Feltrinelli,” after which Castro’s words are translated in subtitles, talking about cheese and sauce. The scene humorously establishes Castro’s affable performativity, and the integral role of gestures in his locution. Additionally, delaying the audience’s knowledge of the topic that Castro is discussing forces the viewer to consider him as an entirely performative figure—his gestures take precedent over his words. Following this scene, a brief shot of a guerrilla in the mountains carrying a bazooka leads into the much-discussed sequence of

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83 Ibid. 1:03:41.
84 Ibid. 1:04:00.
Castro fiddling with microphones. Sandwiched between the two humorous (yet substantial) scenes of Castro, the guerilla’s bazooka acquires a performative dimension through association, by way of a metaphor presented paradigmatically: bazooka and microphone as two spectacular instruments of revolution.

The microphone sequence cycles through footage from four of Castro’s speeches, demonstrating the consistency of his self-conscious tie of adjusting microphones, until he is thwarted by the immovable mic holders at a speech in Moscow. Here, the voice-over is in guide-mode, describing how Castro had “the knack of great performers, in turning the accidental into the legendary.”85 Though the voiceover provides an amusing observation (and explicitly refers to his performativity), it also leaves room for Castro’s gestures to speak for themselves.

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85 Ibid. 1:04:24.
The voice-over then goes quiet when the film cuts to another, earlier speech of Castro’s. The transition has several changes—moving from blue-tinted to red tinted film, Castro’s dress goes from formal Soviet wear to his signature fatigues, and to an earlier time, as a different narrator announces simply, “1961.”

This speech, taken from *Cuba, Sí!* serves as an ironic foil to the latter, an time-acquired perspective on the idealism of that earlier film. Closing the link set up by the earlier insertion of the “institucionalizará” clip, Castro speaks here of the institutionalization of the dynamic process of revolution, saying, “The time in which the revolution lives is not eternal. A day will come when all that the revolution has created will become institutional. When this profound and true democracy will also create profound new forms.”

With these final words, Castro points upward with his finger, and the film cuts to a shot of a curtain being raised. The resemblance between his gesture and the direction of the curtain makes the sequence a metaphor presented paradigmatically on the visual level, which carries it simultaneously on an ideological level. The institutionalization he speaks of is literalized by the footage the curtain leads into, of the “1975-first congress of the Cuban communist party,” an overtly theatrical event where Castro’s fatigues have given way to formal wear and his thoughtful oration to

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86 Ibid. 1:05:30.
87 Ibid. 1:05:40.
88 Ibid. 1:07:09.
platitudes. This disjunction, enhanced by the difference in film tint and costume, charts Castro’s trajectory from charismatic revolutionary to bureaucratic figurehead.89

This scene leads to a series of talking head interviews, beginning with a Venezuelan member of the communist party misquoting Marx’s aphorism from The Eighteenth Brumaire90: “The example of Cuba will not be repeated. Marx has already said: history does not repeat itself, and when it does, it takes the form of a tragi-comedy.”91 This misconceptualization of Marx, with built-in irony, sets the stage for the film’s recounting of the disastrous outcome of Chile’s revolutionary moment. The following sequence of shots alternatingly confirms and challenges the Venezuelan’s misquote.

In the next shot, a member of the Chilean communist party explains that American Imperialists put in place anti-guerilla forces, answered by the following shot of Mr. Wallander from the CIA: “the same type of miracle that happened in Cuba, those miracles won’t happen again because now the countries are prepared.”92 The Chilean communist then extolls the strengths of Chile’s revolution by the people. In Chile’s revolution, he claims, the “results are more effective than the heroism of a few young people fighting on the mountains or in the town.”93 The sequence is capped off by an extended speech from 1970 by Georges Marchais, General Secretary of the French Communist Party, proclaiming the party’s full support of the Chilean revolution. Viewed

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89 As Katharine Lupton puts it—“extracts from the Cuba Si’ interviews and Castro’s mass rallies dammingly underscore the distance that Cuba’s president has travelled from the style of open populist oratory that Marker had showcased and admired in these earlier films.” Lupton, Chris Marker: Memories of the Future, 145.
90 “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historic facts and personages appear, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” —Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. The Marx-Engels Reader. Edited by Robert C. Tucker. New York, NY: Norton, 1978, 594.
91 A Grin without a Cat, Marker, 1:08:33.
92 Ibid. 1:09:03.
93 Ibid. 1:09:27.
in the context of the ultimate outcome, as the film reveals minutes later, these interviews fulfill the Venezuelan’s accidental prophecy that “history does not repeat itself,” and the optimism of the Chilean communist and Marchais provide some of the comic irony to go along with the tragic history. Marker lingers in this tension between the tragic and the comic in the final section on Allende, which laments the inevitability of Chile’s revolution’s downfall, while retaining the hope of its revolutionary spirit.

During the end of Marchais’ speech, more footage from Chile is intercut, including a shot of Allende’s inauguration, announced by overriding voice-over narration as “the first recorded image of Allende as president.”\textsuperscript{94} When Marchais’ speech concludes, the film cuts back to Allende. The voiceover announces simply: “Santiago, 1972. President Allende meets factory workers.”\textsuperscript{95} But the footage doesn’t simply show Allende’s speech to the workers, it also strongly emphasizes the media presence in the factory, lingering on shots of the television cameras and monitors recording Allende.

The previously discussed sequence (with the exception of the microphone segment) contains hardly any voice-over; what little narration there is merely provides factual information like names, dates, and basic scene-setting. Rather, it is the montage which shapes the meaning. Montage both in an editing sense, with juxtaposition of scenes from different times and places, but also with the montage within the shot, the choices to linger on mediated images like photographs and television cameras. The effect of this montage is to emphasize the performative, mediated aspect of politics, and to retain Marker’s insistence on the materiality of images. As Katharine Lupton points out, “a core premise of \textit{A Grin Without a Cat} is that the ‘real’ political history of the 1960s

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid. 1:11:00.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid. 1:12:27
and ‘70s cannot be somehow abstracted from the welter of recorded images that documented it, debated it, offered it visual models of action and communication, and ultimately gave form to its memories.”96 Through montage, both Allende and Castro are depicted as performative figures, inseparable from the images they project—and because this happens largely through montage rather than voiceover, it gives the opportunity for the connections to be made by the “third voice” of the viewer.

This idea of politicians as theatrical images comes to a head in the section beginning with “the first recorded image of Allende as president.”97 The sequence consists of Allende’s speech to the factory workers, about the necessity of continuing to work hard, to maintain progress towards socialism despite the difficulty and adversity being faced on a daily basis, intercut with footage of workers on city streets, protesters, and police, as well as the faces of the crowd listening to the speech. Allende ends the speech with the following remark:

In fact, we’ve all the disadvantages of a capitalist regime, and none of the advantages of socialism. We’re stuck in the middle… like sandwiches. I was saying yesterday to my friends. Isn’t it a dramatic life, to move around only between two cars, for security measures. It seems there are some who are disturbed by my good health.”98

The last line gets a laugh and applause from the crowd, and the film then cuts to color footage of Allende walking into a building. The narrator states: “Last recorded image of Allende as President.”99 Here, the form reflects the content. Sandwiching Allende’s speech between the first and last recorded images of him as president mirrors

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96 Lupton, Chris Marker: Memories of the Future, 144.
97 A Grin without a Cat, Marker, 1:11:00.
98 Ibid. 1:18:00.
his speech about being stuck between capitalism and socialism, and being between two cars for security measures. This multilevel “sandwiching” happens in the images (the first and last image of his presidency) the voiceover (which names the first and last images), and the speech’s content (his reference to “sandwiching”). These three layers are inextricably bound by the image of Allende, the common metonymic link between image, speech, and speech image. This layering of meaning, especially in the context of all that came before it, provides multiple overlapping elements of text and image for the viewer’s “third voice” to engage with.

One potential reading is that Allende’s image shares the same fate as Chile’s political revolution, and Allende’s body. Sandwiched between the worst aspects of capitalism and socialism, his political career was ended by a military coup. Sandwiched between the two cars for protection, those who were “disturbed by [his] good health” got the best of him, and he took his own life during said coup. Finally, as an image, Allende is sandwiched between the first and last filmed images of his presidency. This sequence, by enacting three types of “sandwiching” simultaneously, shows that Allende’s image and politics were inseparable, and each was doomed. The next sequence dialectically transforms this conclusion into a more hopeful theory of the image.

The following scene is Beatriz Allende’s 1973 Havana speech about her father’s death. Set to ominous atonal music, the speech is given a melancholic register when the narrator announces that “on October the 12th, 1977, Tati Allende committed suicide in
Havana, as her father had done in Santiago four years earlier.” The camera lingers on Beatriz Allende’s face, the disjunction between image and text highlighting the apogee of the referential illusion of film: Beatriz is dead, yet her image lives. After the next cut, the atonal music is muffled to the point that its repetitive clicking resembles the spinning of a film projector. Over a green-tinted scene of Allende, circularly framed by strong vignetting, Allende reads in voice-over: “Two people impressed me greatly, among many other things, by their eyes: Chou En Lai. And Che Guevara. Both had an inner force. They had great resolution, as well as great irony.” At the end of his speech, the black vignette edges iris in towards his face before the screen cuts to black. Allende’s speech is about the powerful impression made on him by two revolutionary’s eyes, about the powerful effect of their image—and Che is a particularly resonant example of the enduring effect of a revolutionary’s image, as a revolutionary image. The evocation of Che also connects a similar, earlier moment in the film when Castro reads Che Guevara’s farewell letter to him over footage of Guevara working, giving a speech, and of Guevara’s face as a gigantic mask carried in a street protest. His iconic visage lives on as an emblem for the revolution, an effect Marker’s sequence attempts to replicate with Allende.

That the Allende sequence concludes in this reflexively filmic manner highlights the potency of the image, and film’s power to maintain the presence of a person and

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100 Ibid. 1:20:52
101 Ibid. 1:21:07
their revolutionary ideas even after their bodies die.¹⁰² Like the two revolutionaries that Allende mentions, Marker depicts Allende as a figure of “great resolution, as well as great irony.” In the prior scene, Marker set up Allende’s image pessimistically, as a closed image sandwiched between two dead-ends. But here Allende is redeemed, through film’s power to resurrect the dead, through montage, in the form of images which have the potential to keep the revolution alive. Not just a revolutionary’s image, but a revolutionary image, which remains open, and inspirational. Though Godard, Farocki, and Marker himself have all disrupted and condemned the referential illusion at various times, here Marker emphasizes its redemptive, revolutionary potential. Appropriately, the film’s ending follows not soon after, making a similar affirmation that despite the victory of capitalism and the decline of the new left, the spirit of the revolution persists.

The Grin Without a Cat

In a metonymic parallel with the revisitation of footage within the film, Marker re-edited *A Grin Without a Cat* several times, making at least three distinct cuts of varying lengths, and with two separately recorded voice-over narration tracks in English and French. The most substantial difference between these cuts is the addition of a final monologue in the 1992 edit, in which the narrator openly reflects on the process of revisiting the film’s images:

> The editing of these last three hours of reminiscences has offered the opportunity of looking at them again after a gap of… a few years… he could mull over times past and note what changes had taken place by means of a very

¹⁰² Sarah Cooper notes that “*Le Fond* depicts [Allende] as still alive… rather than dwelling on the intertitle announces his death,” which raises the point that in the original French version, the Allendes’ suicides are announced on intertitles rather than in the narration.

simple device. By simply looking for words that had absolutely no meaning for people in the 60s. Words like boat people, AIDS, Reaganism, occupied territories, ayatollah, glasnost, and the most unexpected of them all, commonwealth of independent states.\(^{103}\)

This method of measuring through a juxtaposition of temporally specific signifiers is congruent with the film’s archival approach, again recalling Benjamin:

It is not so, that the past throws its light onto the present, or the present its light onto the past, but the image is that, in which the past coincides with the now and in a flash becomes a constellation. In other words: the image is dialectics at a standstill. The relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.

The film’s internal revisitation of the past through images is dialectically sent one notch higher by Marker’s return to the film over the years, made explicit by the self-reflexive final monologue. When considering the film as a film, the other most significant difference between versions is the title. The original French version is titled *L’fond de l’air est rouge* and the English version *A Grin Without a Cat*. The former, a difficult-to-translate revolutionary slogan, is never spoken in the film, but the latter is named in reference to the guerilla foco:

…The question is who’s leading? The party, or the guerilla command? The answer of the Cubans, of Douglas, later of Che, is unequivocal: political and military unity embodied by the guerilla. Some call it “foquismo,” which means that a small group of fighters can decide for a national uprising. It accounts largely for what will happen years later, in Bolivia. But it is there, in Venezuela, that the split occurred, within the Latin American revolutionary movement, and made the guerilla appear as a spearhead without a spear, a grin without a cat”\(^{104}\)

The guerilla fighters are vanguards, bringing about a revolution through the actions of a small group rather than an organized party. As the “grin without a cat,” they are metonymic for the entirety of the revolutionary activities in the film; with their performative iconography and unconventional fighting tactics, they are the visible front

\(^{103}\) *A Grin without a Cat*, Marker, 1:22:44

\(^{104}\) Ibid. 34:48.
which appears in place of an invisible, ungraspable body. They are, like the revolutionary image, an image without a body. The film’s own “textual instability,” through its changing versions over time, makes it similarly difficult to pin down. Because of this instability, its emphasis on the openness and materiality of its images, and the performativity of revolution, the collection of text and image that forms *A Grin Without a Cat* becomes, like the guerillas, Che, and Allende, the grin without a cat—a revolutionary image with no body. The movie formally becomes the material enactment of own thesis, fulfilling its potential as a visual testament to the revolutionary actions of the 1960s and ‘70s, as simultaneously a lamentation of the revolution’s defeat and a harbinger of its eventual resurrection.

This message of hope is presented through the finale of the wolf culling, which serves as a metaphor presented syntagmatically in relation to the entire film. The wolves, like Che, Allende, and the other countless casualties of the revolution, are struck down one by one by the relentless firepower of the existing order. The film’s final, bitterly optimistic words, are spoken over images of wolves being shot to death from a helicopter: “A comforting thought, however. Fifteen years later, some wolves still survive.” Paired with the very last shot, of a felled wolf, the disjunction between text and image echoes the filmic afterlife provided by the footage of Beatrice and Salvador Allende. The wolf, an embodiment of the revolution, stands for a hope that the spirit of revolution will persist even despite its apparent defeat by the forces of capitalism. Marker imbues the substance of the film with the philosophy of the guerilla foco, the grin without a cat, as a bodiless vanguard of a revolution yet to come. And his dialectical

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105 Langford, *So Intensely Historical*
106 Ibid. 1:25:52
dialogue, staged through the polyvocality of text and image and enhanced by the use of open and revolutionary images, allows for the activation of the viewer's own commentary, and consequently their own power. Through the viewer's encounter with the material images in Marker's advanced horizontal montage, the viewer becomes the film's body, the cat, and opens up the possibility for “a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past.”

107 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History."
Chapter 3: Revolution of Form

Shot/Countershot: The Theory and Practice of Interface

The sprawling epic *A Grin Without a Cat* took dialectical montage to its apex—there is perhaps no bigger or better example of metaphorical and metonymic editing weaving a film together through sequentially sutured images. To go further necessitates a formal innovation that transcends the traditional grammar of film, an elaboration of the standard elements to discover new forms. Harun Farocki long sought a solution to the limits of linear editing, approaching the problem by way of the shot/countershot in his 1981 article from *Filmkritik*, “Shot/Countershot: The Most Important Expression in Filmic Law of Value.” This essay lays the conceptual foundations that Farocki would later refine into his theory of soft montage, and put to action in *Interface*. Farocki writes about the shot/countershot as “the first rule, the law of value,” because it “has an advance effect on the shooting, and thus also upon the intention, choice, and way of dealing with types of filmic image and prototypes.”

Farocki goes through numerous examples of variations on, or violations of, the shot/countershot, beginning with Godard’s invention of the jump cut in the driving scene of *Breathless*. Farocki maintains that Godard’s use of the jump cut creates shots lacking countershots, and puts it in Christian Metz’s category of “sequence by episodes”: “Although the notion of a single temporal succession becomes combined with the notion of discontinuity, each shot within an episodic sequence appears clearly as being a symbolic summarization of one

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stage in a long evolution, globally condensed in the sequence.” Though the “sequence by episodes” itself is nothing new, Farocki claims that the unique quality of Godard’s jump cut derives from its opposition to the shot/countershot—“it is a norm even when absent”—according to Farocki, Godard is unique because his form actually comments on the forms of the past: “Although attempting something different, he allows the non-difference of that which is different to appear. This is what gives strength to his filmic narrative; it does not just invent, but actually says something.” This form which comments on form is a feature of both Godard’s and Farocki’s films. Towards the end of the article, Farocki claims, “I am trying to discuss this shot/countershot by shooting both sides. Put together they should produce a different image and that which is between the images should become visible.” His ambitions are lofty, but limited by the medium. Though the article certainly provokes critical thought about shot/countershot, aside from a crude drawing the lack of visuals makes it a purely theoretical exercise.

Nearly 15 years after the Filmkritik article, Farocki put his theorizing of shot/countershot into practice with Interface, expanding the possibilities of dialectical editing through the addition of a second screen. Not a film in the traditional sense, Interface is a two-channel video installation originally displayed at the The World of Photography exhibition in the Musée d’Art Moderne in 1995, titled “Section”. The installation was later released on television as Interface, with the two images occupying the top left and bottom right corners of the frame. In the TV version, the images overlap

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109 Ibid. 92.
110 Ibid. 94.
111 Ibid. 108.
113 This is the context in which the film was viewed for this thesis.
at the corners, a liminal space which vacillates between opacity and solidity. The images also shift in size and emphasis, the left image growing larger and smaller as the content dictates. *Interface* consists of contemporary footage of Farocki at his editing station and archival footage from across his oeuvre, as he voice-over narrates, speaks on screen, and reflects on the process of meaning-making in footage from his past. Volker Pantenburg describes *Interface* as a series of dichotomies, “of image versus text, of film versus video, of visual versus tactile, of coding versus decoding,” and this dichotomous structure is built into the form. The presence of the two separate adjacent images is the technical basis for an effect Farocki terms “soft montage.” In his article “Cross Influence/Soft Montage,” Farocki writes that the technique emerges from the technical character of video editing: “My point of departure was the fact that only one image is seen when editing film, rather than two images when editing video: the one already mounted and the preview of the next one,” which Farocki first saw in Godard’s *Numéro Deux.*

The precise definition of soft montage is appropriately amorphous, and its specific formal mechanisms and complexities will be untangled over the course of this chapter. Owing to his frequent use of soft montage after *Interface*, Farocki has explained the technique in a number of ways, the most straightforward being that in soft montage, “one image doesn’t take the place of the previous one, but supplements it, re-evaluates it, balances it.” At its core, soft montage is a technique that creates meaning from the

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114 Pantenburg, Volker. *Farocki/Godard Film as Theory.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 159.


116 Farocki writes: “When Godard presented *Numéro Deux* in 1975, a 35-mm film that (mainly) shows two video monitors, I was sure that here the new experience of video editing, the comparison of two images, was evident,” Ibid.

spatial, rather than temporal, adjacency of two images. It is an entirely formal conceit that is nonetheless intimately tied to the content, especially in the self-reflexive *Interface*.

**Secondary Revision and Simultaneity**

*Le gai savoir*, *Letter from Siberia*, *The Inextinguishable Fire*, and *A Grin Without a Cat* are all film-based motion pictures, and their editing style can be understood partially through Christian Metz’s concepts of metaphor and metonymy. Metz’s model, based on Freud’s theories of condensation and displacement in the dream work, deal with the relation between two filmic elements as they occur in a linear chronological succession. On a basic level, one celluloid image frame is succeeded by another through a cut, and the relation between these two separate images can be described in certain circumstances as metaphoric or metonymic. This paradigm is applicable to the majority of traditional, narrative-based or documentary films, to more or less dialectical ends. But it falls short of being able to describe the montage in a two-channel video installation like *Interface*. Though *Interface* shares attributes with the previous films, including the use of metaphor and metonymy, its two-screen setup fundamentally changes the way that the viewer interacts with the work. Rather than a horizontal montage, in which a viewer’s eyes and ears are engaged in a linear relationship to a single source of image and sound, *Interface* produces the spatial orientation of a triangle, with the viewer positioned between two screens and their attention decentered, empowered to drift between the screens at will.\(^{118}\)

One way of seeking a new critical vocabulary to describe *Interface* is to return to Metz, and his original source, Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, from which he drew the

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\(^{118}\) Volker Pantenberg writes that “The exhibition space, unlike the cinema screen, can arrange two images in such a way that the viewer is brought into different relationships with what is shown, and the triangle between the two images and the viewer configures itself variably.” Pantenburg, Volker. *Farocki/Godard Film as Theory*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 159.
concepts of metaphor and metonymy by way of condensation and displacement, and made them applicable to filmic montage. The same might be done for the concepts secondary revision and simultaneity to flesh out the mechanics of Interface’s soft montage.

Metz writes about secondary revision in *The Imaginary Signifier*, acknowledging that Freud’s original definition of the exact process is inconsistent. Freud claims that secondary revision functions “in the manner which the poet maliciously ascribes to philosophers: it fills up the gaps in the dream-structure with shreds and patches. As a result of its efforts, the dream loses its appearance of absurdity and disconnectedness and approximates to the model of an intelligible experience.”\(^{119}\) But the exact point at which secondary revision intervenes is indeterminate. Metz elaborates on the multiple ways that Freud describes the chronology of secondary revision in dreams:

Sometimes he considers that it comes into play towards the end, following the condensations, displacements, and various “figurations,” and that its function is to put a hasty, last-moment logical façade over the illogical productions of the primary process. Sometimes he situates it considerably further back at the level of the dream-thoughts themselves or of a choice subsequently made among them. Finally (and this is the most probable hypothesis), he sometimes refuses to assign it a segmental position within a quasi-chronology and considers that the different processes resulting in the manifest dream occur in a tangle, that is to say, in a manner at once alternating, successive and simultaneous.\(^{120}\)

The slippery temporality of secondary revision gives it an uncertain position in dreams, made even more uncertain when Metz attempts to map the process on to films. Metz writes that in dramas, secondary revision is often less important than condensation or displacement, but in films, it takes on a more prominent role:

From the point of view of the cinema analyst, then, everything happens as if the secondary revision (which in the production-perception of the dream is only one force among others, and not the principal one) became in the production and reception of the film the dominant, omnipresent force, the architect of the mental


\(^{120}\) Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 121.
milieu itself, the milieu and the place where the film is delivered and received… When we trace the obscure kinship relations (interwoven as they are by differences) of the film and the dream, we come upon that unique and methodologically attractive object, that theoretical monster, namely, a dream in which the secondary revision does nearly everything by itself, a dream where the primary process plays only a furtive and intermittent role, a role of gap-maker, a role of escape: a dream, in short, like life. That is to say (we always come back to this), the dream of a man awake, a man who knows that he is dreaming, who knows that he is at the cinema, who knows that he is not sleeping: since if a man who is sleeping is a man who does not know that he is sleeping, a man who knows that he is not sleeping is a man who is not sleeping.121

Like Freud, Metz never specifies precisely when secondary revision occurs in the production timeline of film. But one place it is certain to occur in is editing. Just as the secondary process retroactively imposes order on the unconscious dream-thoughts, the editor imposes order on the raw footage that emerges from a film shoot (or archive). Secondary revision in film, as in dreams, occurs “in a manner at once alternating, successive and simultaneous,” and Interface’s fragmented staging of the editor at his workstation could be seen as a depiction and example of secondary revision in action.122

For the concept of simultaneity, unaddressed by Metz, we will need to return directly to The Interpretation of Dreams. In the chapter on the means of representation of dreams, Freud explains that dreams “reproduce logical connection by simultaneity in time,” giving the example of the painting of the School of Athens in which all of the philosophers and poets of Athens are depicted in the same place and time, despite such a situation never actually occurring.123 Freud continues, “Whenever [dreams] show us two elements close together, this guarantees that there is some specially intimate connection between what correspond to them among the dream thoughts.”124 The precise nature of

121 Ibid. 123.
122 Ibid. 121.
123 Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams. 330.
124 Ibid.
this “specially intimate connection” is initially unclear, and requires the interpretation of an analyst to tease out the underlying similarities between the elements.

Freud’s means of representation are purely formal descriptions based on his observations of the dream’s techniques for creating pictorial images. The idea of simultaneity seems to only support his larger theory of dreams as coded pictorial representation—a single aspect of his dreams-as-rebus example, in which a seemingly non-sensical picture puzzle is decoded to “form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance.”

Like condensation and displacement, for Freud simultaneity is simply a formal mechanism of dreams. But just as Metz merged condensation and displacement with metaphor and metonymy as a starting point for thinking about linear editing, which politically-minded filmmakers used for dialectical ends, the dialectical potential of simultaneity might also emerge when viewed in relation to *Interface*.

There are two levels of connection between images in *Interface*. As Farocki describes it, “there is succession as well as simultaneity in a double projection, the relationship of an image to the one that follows as well as the one beside it; a relationship to the preceding as well as the concurrent one.”

The first is the traditional, linear cycling through of film images, joined through cuts, that happens on each individual screen. The second, more novel connection, is the soft montage created when the two images are placed next to each other, adding to the first montage rather than replacing it. This soft montage is where the simultaneity arises: rather than one image being connected to the next in temporal succession, two images are presented simultaneously in time, juxtaposed spatially. As in a dream, some sort of analyst is needed to decode the

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125 Ibid. 296.
underlying “specially intimate connection” between the two images of soft montage. In Interface, the role of analyst is played by both Farocki, sitting at his editing table and reviewing the images on the two monitors in front of him, and the viewer, observing a similar setup of two simultaneous images on the screens. This marriage of simultaneity and secondary revision adds something unique to the language of film, decentering meaning from the cut and introducing a new method of articulation with images.

In the “Shot/Countershot” Filmkritik article, Farocki unintentionally formulated the radical potential he would realize through soft montage, writing that “put together, [images from both sides] should produce a different image and that which is between the images should become visible.” Farocki’s language is distinctly dialectical—one can hear echoes of Chris Marker’s idea of the “third voice” emerging in A Grin without a Cat. But in Interface, this idea of that which exists between the images, a third image, has a more literal, spatial dimension to it because of the physical distance between the screens. When viewing Interface, a viewer’s attention is divided between the two screens, and must alternate between them. One cannot experience it in the way a traditional film is received—uniformly, passively—Interface demands participatory viewing because of this necessary drift of attention. Christina Bluminger describes it as “textual mobility,” and highlights the impossibility of having the same experience with Interface twice: “this is not a closed text, but an open form, which already premeditates variations and textual deviations, each one a possible film,” an internal associative logic matched by the viewer’s participation. Farocki and Kaja Silverman first identified simultaneity and soft


montage in Godard’s *Numéro Deux*, writing: “*Numéro Deux* does not predetermine how the two images are going to be connected; we must build up the associations ourselves in an ongoing way.” Furthering the idea in his own film, Farocki says: “The simultaneous words and images are suggestive rather than descriptive. Apart from this I try to be spontaneous, like the sudden ideas one gets during good conversations.”

The conversing of words and images is built into the form of *Interface*. The installation, played on a loop and experienced differently by each viewer, is an endlessly generative formal machine, an open form which invites the associative interactivity, improvisation, and development typical of conversation rather than any linear, hermetic meaning.

**The Articulation of Images**

From the start, *Interface* operates in the space between text and image. The installation begins with a close-up of Farocki’s hand writing on a notepad on his editing table on the left screen, and footage of a TV from *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) on the right screen. Farocki narrates: “I can hardly write a word these days if there isn’t an image on the screen at the same time. Actually, on both screens.” *Interface* uses writing as a point of comparison for the process of editing, as two ways of making meaning that are not as distant as is often

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131 Christa Blümlinger describes it as follows: “even if the visitor is not required to engage in any physical ‘interactivity’, as a reader s/he develops a textual mobility when confronted with two audiovisual tracks whose arrangement is independent, as if they are conversing with each other…” –Blümlinger, “Incisive Divides and Revolving Images,” 63.

thought—Farocki proposes that editing allows for a sort of writing with images: Does this image offer itself to that one? Does this image close itself off from that one? We can grasp this duality by suggesting that one image comments on the other. To date only words, or sometimes music comment on images. Here images comment on images.”

The meaning of the images is not reducible to written language, and through the simultaneity of soft montage, they derive meaning not only from their relations to texts, but to each other. Taking clips from his own filmography, Farocki reanimates his old images in new combinations to allow them to have new conversations, with themselves, with him, with the viewer.

Around halfway through the film, Farocki revisits *The Inextinguishable Fire*. Playing back the opening monologue on one screen, he repeats the words at his editing station, in a reflection of the past made tangible when the onscreen Farocki puts out a cigarette on his arm, and the Farocki at the editing table caresses the faded scar. The image of Farocki burning himself with the cigarette is repeated on the left screen, while the right screen shows the shot of the rat burning. In the original film, the rat shot follows the cigarette shot, but Farocki here dissects the montage, pulls it apart, turns it into a soft montage. Farocki narrates: “The author compares himself to an animal in a research laboratory. He equates his workplace with a laboratory.”

The images appear simultaneously, briefly, before cutting to the film’s sole surreal image: Farocki’s

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133 Ibid. 5:30.
134 Ibid. 8:40.
editing station filled up with smoke. On the left screen, he sits hunched over the console nonchalantly, writing on his notepad. The right screen is taken up by a close-up of his hand on the editing console. The smoke is mysterious, sourceless, illogical—operating on the associative and fluid principles of the film’s montage, it seems to emerge from the smoke of The Inextinguishable Fire. The smoke is a moment of rupture, a dream image, and perhaps meant to be the intrusion of the unconscious in Farocki’s self-analysis. Unfazed, Farocki narrates: “work at an editing station: can it be equated with a scientific study? Are scientific experiments conducted at the editing station?”135 The next answer he gives, while the left screen cuts to a close-up shot of his hands on his legs, complicates a straightforward analogy: “According to the concept of the modern scientific age, the scientist’s hand is not allowed to interfere in a procedure. During the course of the experiment, the scientist is purely intellect.”136 The motif of hands, mediated by machines, stakes the claim on the side against the ostensible neutrality of science. Here and elsewhere, Farocki’s hands are all over Interface, all the way to the final shot.

This is followed by footage of an artificial wave machine from Images of the World and the Inscription of War: “Here is a laboratory experiment, the experimental pool in an institute for the exploration of ocean waves.”137 The image of the wave machine fills the left screen. On the right screen, Farocki sits in front of the wave image on his monitor, and again speaks over the narration of his past film: “The sea unfurling

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135 Ibid. 8:50.
136 Ibid. 9:04.
137 Ibid. 9:21.
on the shore, irregular but not haphazard, binds one’s view with its movement, without capturing it, thus setting thoughts free.”

This 30-second sequence is loaded with a complex fluid movement of thought, difficult to pin down but rich in associative density. First, the wave machine has a metaphorical resemblance to the filmic apparatus. The waves are compelled by the machine to come forward in sequential intervals, like scenes being edited together, or even the individual frames of celluloid film. Farocki’s monologue plays on this resemblance, distortedly. Second, he talks about “the sea unfurling on the shore”—despite the wave machine clearly not being the sea, but an artificial imitation of it. “Irregular but not haphazard” could again refer to the progression of images in a film—not of uniform length, but still designed and considered. The final part of the narration, “binds one’s view with its movement, without capturing it, thus setting thoughts free,” evokes an image of cathexis. The concept of cathexis in psychoanalysis designates the investment of free energy in the unconscious so that it can be bound and discharged by the psychical apparatus in the secondary process in a more stable form. In dreams, this cathexis happens distortedly through processes like condensation and displacement. The image of the wave machine, metaphorically standing in for film in general, is overdetermined and highly cathected. The image carries on through the next scene, switching between the left and right screen, always remaining in adjacent relation to further shots from *The Inextinguishable Fire*. The wave machine binds the viewer’s attention, pointing the way towards a stable form while simultaneously revealing its

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138 Ibid. 9:34.
impossibility. This is a concentrated instance of the dialectic of seeing at work throughout Interface.

Farocki continues, over the staged shot of the Dow chemical company, to add to the associative dialogue: “This is a portrayal of the Dow chemical company. The images say: a laboratory looks nothing like this, chemists don’t speak like this, the people who work for this company don’t speak like this. These are not portrayals, these are models.”139 Subsequently, the actor on the screen, dressed in a lab coat, says: “A large chemical corporation is like a set of building blocks. You can build up the entire world with it.”140 The scene adds ripples to the complex sets of dichotomies at play, of science versus art, reality versus representation, and resonates with a quote Farocki would write much later describing soft montage: “Imagine three double bonds jumping back and forth between the six carbon atoms of a benzene ring; I envisage the same ambiguity in the relationship of an element in an image track to the one succeeding or accompanying it.”141 The recurring comparison to chemistry is no accident—the images in Interface, and Farocki’s work in general, have the chemical quality of combination and association, of properties acquired through contact and motion, of experimentation. The chemical language recalls that earlier formal machine, *Le gai savoir*, in which Émile and Patricia sought to “dissolve image and sound.” In Interface, images acquire meaning through their temporal distance, their relationship to adjacent images, and their fluid permutations. Farocki straddles the line between scientist and artist, archivist and creator, treating the images clinically but always reminding the viewer of the human hand behind them.

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139 Ibid. 9:54.
140 Ibid. 10:13.
Content Mirrors Form in the Statue of Critios

The image of the wave machine is one of several old images that Farocki uses as metaphors for the film apparatus. Around halfway through the film, Farocki takes a detour away from his own films and looks at the Greek statue of Critios, the first known to exhibit the contrapposto posture. Farocki describes it in the following monologue:

Think about the view of the historian, the art historian. His eye roams over thousands of statues and discovers something new in this figure, in this boy Critios. For the first time, the legs and feet are not equally weighted: the body weight rests on the left leg, consequently, the right hip is a bit sunken, the right shoulder too; the head turns slightly to the side. Calmness, capable of tension at the same time. the human being is seen differently. He is different.142

As Farocki speaks, the images cycle between shots of the statue of Critios, shots of Farocki’s knees, Farocki at his editing table, and shots of workers walking outside of factories from *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995). His monologue continues:

Perhaps we could say that the boy represents the isonomic citizen, although it’s not so much equality but rather freedom and the mobility it provides that he expresses. Greek sculpture is normally concerned with the formation of similarities; of types. But in a new and different way. The peculiarity of the isonomic citizen is not at issue here, but rather the human being as he has now emerged: embedded in a field of opposing forces, like the isonomic Polis.143

Here, the content serves as a metaphor for the form. The narration’s comparison to Critios with a citizen can’t help but evoke questions about labor and class when juxtaposed against *Workers Leaving the Factory*, but it is also operating in a more direct formal register. Critios resembles the form of *Interface*, down to specific details, like the way *Interface’s* soft montage is designed with the same sort of asymmetrical tensions as the revolutionary contrapposto posture. The weight on Critios’s left leg is matched by the left screen being the primary screen which grows larger, and the “right leg sunken”

142 *Interface*, Farocki, 12:29.
143 Ibid. 12:58.
like the lower right screen, makes the Critios’s contrapposto just as much a point of comparison as the more obvious metaphor of the editing table. The focus on posture, and the shots of Farocki’s legs in particular, also follows through on a metaphor from the earlier *Filmkritik* article, when writing about his growing awareness of the shot/countershot: “Perhaps you can compare shot/countershot with running. Always one foot in front of the other. First right, then left. For so long that you don’t know which one was first. Looking at or thinking about either action or viewing can make you despair. If you don’t look and don’t think, there is a rhythm capable of sustaining something.” (98) The inability to differentiate between right and left, action or viewing, that Farocki identifies with shot/countershot is resolved by the simultaneity of soft montage, as action and viewing are merged. Just as Critios is “embedded in a field of opposing forces,” so is the form of the film, and the viewer. In a proper edit, there is no simultaneity. A series of shots, 1-2-3-4-5, progress through a sequence and meaning is created by their order, determined by the cuts. In soft montage, the time-bound cut is no longer the fulcrum of meaning, and new combinations of images (1-4, 5-2, 3-1, for example) coalesce and speak to each other in the language of simultaneity. Critios reflects the sculptural quality of soft montage, its suspension in time, its ability to hold opposing forces synchronously. Farocki places these evocative images alongside each other—an ancient statue, turn-of-the-century factory workers, an editor at his table—and lets the associations between them create meaning dynamically. It is both a potent metaphor for, and example of, soft-montage.
Coding/Decoding

Near the end of Interface, Farocki repeats a variation of his opening lines: “Today I can barely think through a new film if I’m not at the editing station. I write into the images and then read something out of them.”\(^{144}\) While he speaks, the left screen shows his hands writing in a notepad, in front of a monitor showing hands typing on an enigma machine. The right screen shows the same image from the monitor, of the typing hands. The left screen cuts to a close-up of Farocki opening a book on Alan Turing, the famous breaker of the enigma code. Farocki continues: “At the moment I’m toying with the idea of a film about coding and decoding messages.”\(^{145}\)

Images from the book, of Turing, the enigma machine, and the colossus decoding machines, cycle through the two screens, as Farocki narrates: “Turing delighted in perceiving human intellect as a machine. He wanted to think like a machine himself.”\(^{146}\) The following shot is a permutation of the shot which began the sequence. Here, the left screen with Farocki writing in front of the monitor displaying the enigma remains, although he is now writing (and narrating) the letters being typed on the enigma machine in the monitor. The right screen image has been replaced with a close-up of Farocki’s hands at the video editing station, scrolling through timecodes and pressing buttons to make cuts.

\(^{144}\) Ibid. 20:05.  
\(^{145}\) Ibid. 20:20.  
\(^{146}\) Ibid. 21:22.
The comparison Farocki draws between editing and codemaking marks another instance of content as metaphor for form, in the final and perhaps most literal way.

Returning to the concept of secondary revision, this machine-like arranging of shots like a secret code shows the dominance of secondary revision in the editing process, and figures the editing table, the interface, the screens, as the apparatus where the messages of images are both coded and decoded. *Interface*, as an interface for Farocki and the audience, actively showcases how secondary revision is the “dominant, omnipresent force, the architect of the *mental milieu* itself, the milieu and the place where the film is delivered and received.”

In working and reworking through past images, filling the gaps “with shreds and patches,” Farocki shows the endless possibilities of meaning-making in the secondary revision of editing. Through the simultaneous presence of the images—the soft montage—the coding and decoding happens in a dialectical dialogue between the screens, the audience, and the author.

*Interface*’s last spoken line suggests a deceptive ambiguity, undermined by the argument made by the concurrent montage. The ending sequence begins with shots of Farocki’s hand casting a shadow over a book’s photograph of Alan Turing. The shot of his hand casting the shadows, similar to an earlier shot where he “reframes” shots of Armenian women by covering part of their faces with his hands, evokes the inescapable presence of the human hand behind the production of images, no matter how mediated by machines they may be.

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147 Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, 123.
“Alan Turing’s biography isn’t the issue,” Farocki narrates, and, mirroring the language of shot/countershot, continues: “Nor a film about espionage or counter-espionage.”

The final shot, an unambiguous countershot shown concurrently on both screens, is a different angle of the same content, a medium shot of Farocki holding his hand above the book. Like Godard’s use of the jump cut, Farocki’s choice to end the film on its one true instance of the countershot comments on the rest of the film’s subversion of that technique, and sets up the formal terms to read the last spoken line. Looking down, he asks: “Might this editing station be an encoder or a decoder? Is it about decoding a secret, or keeping it? The answer, found in the uniquely simultaneous properties of soft montage, seems to be: both. Like a dream, Interface refuses the logic of either—or for an endless, accumulative and.

**Godard’s Language, À Côté de la Plaque**

The soft montage of Interface uses a technological innovation to alter the possibilities of audience interaction, and the same could be said of Jean-Luc Godard’s 2014 film Adieu au langage 3D. Never content to retread the same territory, Adieu au langage is a radical late-career experiment for Godard, both a departure from and natural culmination of his work thus far. His second 3D work after his short contribution to the anthology film 3x3D, Adieu au langage uses 3D differently than the Hollywood spectacles usually associated with the technology, sidestepping the pseudo-realism and pop-out effects for something rougher and more confrontational. Alternatingly disorienting,
aggressive, and beautiful, Godard uses 3D as a tool of defamiliarization, undermining any sense of visual or narrative convention and opting instead for a sensory overload.

Like *Le gai savoir*, *Adieu au langage* is founded on the building blocks of a narrative film—in each, a fictional couple experiences a series of events. *Le gai savoir* takes this most basic unit of the film, the couple, as a locus from which to deconstruct every aspect of the cinematic apparatus and its connection to politics of representation, and politics in general. It is explicitly methodical, pedagogical, and systematized. *Adieu au langage* emerges from a similar origin point but explodes in the opposite direction, fragmenting and defamiliarizing its couple(s) and the language of cinema at every possible level. If *Le gai savoir* deconstructs the cinema by speaking its own language, *Adieu au langage* attempts to transcend language altogether and (re)discover possibilities of meaning beyond words.

For the film’s release, Godard hand-wrote an appropriately enigmatic synopsis in verse:

The idea is simple:
A married woman and a single man meet.
They love, they argue, fists fly.
A dog strays between town and country.
The seasons pass.
The man and woman meet again.
The dog finds itself between them.
The other is in one,
the one is in the other
and they are three.
The former husband shatters everything.
A second film begins:
the same as the first,
and yet not.
From the human race we pass to metaphor.
This ends in barking
and a baby's cries.
In the meantime, we will have seen
people talking of the demise of the dollar,
of truth in mathematics
and of the death of a robin.\(^{151}\)

His non-traditional synopsis appears abstract on first read, but it accurately captures both the broad strokes of the plot and the stuttering cadence of its form. The key phrase might be “the idea is simple,” because for all of its experimentation and innovation, *Adieu au langage* aims at simplicity. As Godard describes, the film is about a series of couples, beginning with the story designated by the intertitle “1/Nature.” At a used bookstand in Nyon, a young woman named Josette browses books and converses with a professor, Davidson. Abruptly, a man drives up, gets out of the car, and violently threatens Josette in German, implying that he is her husband and she needs to come home. He walks offscreen and a gunshot is heard. Gédéon, who was watching from the sidelines, approaches Josette while she is washing her hands in a fountain, and says, “I am at your command.” The section ends abruptly, and “2/Metaphor” begins. After a transitory montage of footage from old films and Roxy the dog, the section plays out similar events as the first. Davison is sitting on a bench looking at an art book, and is approached by a young woman, Ivitch. They have a brief conversation, before a German-speaking man approaches, accosts Ivitch, and fires a gun. Ivitch stands behind metal bars in front of the water, and is approached by a man, Marcus, who puts his hand on the bars and says “I am at your command.” This off-rhyming structure continues for the rest of the film, switching between the two parallel stories of the couples in affairs, “1/Nature” (Josette and Gédéon) and “2/Metaphor” (Ivitch and Marcus), as they enact similar scenes of conversation, conflict, and defecation. Roxy the dog appears in both stories, mostly wandering alone through nature but also engaging with each couple. After a historical interlude with period-dressed Mary and Percy Shelley, the film

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153 Ibid. 15:56.
ends on the image of a flower, with the sound of a dog barking and baby crying. To describe the film’s narrative in such linear terms does not nearly capture the vitality and experimentation of Godard’s form, nor the inimitable experience of watching it.

The relative coherence of the two storylines is constantly eroded by the film’s impressionistic montage style, which intercuts seemingly at random to footage of the tour de France, helicopter crashes, Hollywood films old and new, black screens, fauvistic nature scenes, grainy home-video of road trips and dog walks, cloudy skies, sunsets, and countless other diversions from various sources and cameras that break any sense of traditional continuity or realism. The soundtrack is equally fragmented, an onslaught of voiceover narrated quotations, windy location sound, and recurring snippets of classical music, all pushed far deep into the left and right channels. And then there is the 3D, which disorients and dazzles in equal measure, providing depth and realism to the images as often as it distorts and separates them. The mechanics and affective value of the 3D effect compounds the difficulty in translating an impression of the film into words.

In typically elliptical fashion, Godard explained his motivations for the film in a lengthy interview for Canon shortly after its release, giving some clues into his process of making the film while still leaving plenty of room for interpretation. Godard states that his interest in 3D technology “lies in that it is not interesting,”[154] because the depth of 3D is an illusion which doesn’t offer anything beyond what we can already see: “Quite simply if you close one eye, you still see. I can still see you in 3 dimensions, more or less well depending on the quality of the eye. Therefore, to put two cameras like that, it has no… it’s a trick.”[155] He elaborates, through a comparison with painting, that 3D simply

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adds the feeling that the image is getting close to touching the audience, but because it
does not actually touch them, they will not believe it. Therefore, the 3D technicians
“would have you believe what you wouldn’t naturally believe. Well, I said to myself,
there must be something, they’re off the mark, which is a French expression, how do
you say ‘à côté de la plaque’ in English? To miss the point.”156 The French expression “à
côté de la plaque,” which Godard repeats and attempts to translate accurately, perfectly
encapsulates the inadequacy of language, itself always missing whatever point it attempts
to make in the act of articulation. Godard embraces this “à côté de la plaque” in Adieu au
langage, its unconventional use of 3D an attempt to escape the constraints of meaning.

For Godard, the actual appeal of 3D, rather than any sort of enhanced realistic
effect it can offer, comes with the newness of the technology: “When technique is at its
very beginnings, just like a child, it knows no rules. Then right away, we teach the child
to speak, go to school, pay taxes and all that, just like… with 3d I said to myself, ‘Hey,
there’s no rules.’”157 His choice of metaphor is potent—comparing the development of
filmic technology to a child’s acquisition of language evokes the psychoanalytic concept
of the development of the secondary system and internalization of the codes of
language. In the infantile medium of 3D, Godard sees the opportunity to contribute to a
new and developing language. Crucially, he is approaching a language beyond meaning,
or towards a new kind of meaning. He emphasizes the loss of meaning in words:

There are lots of languages but there is no longer any proper words. Words have
been lost in the forest or in Africa, or with the animals or with the poor, or with
the mentally impaired, or the homeless. But it no longer exists, so there is
something else, “à côté de la plaque,” it conjures up other images if we say next
to the point.158

156 Ibid. 8:30.
157 Ibid. 6:43
158 Ibid. 10:31
From this position of linguistic uncertainty, Godard cobbles together his unconventional take on 3D, breaking the traditionally-accepted rules and codes to invent his own. Giving an example of the inadequacy of the codes through the ubiquitous shot/reverse shot.

Godard revisits his lecture from *Notre Musique* to explain the opportunities of 3D:

> The famous shot/reverse shot that came from America has no distance. In the past in Russia, in cinema, there was no shot/reverse shot... I believe I did it in a film, in *Notre Musique*, in which I speak about a shot in which you see Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell talking on the phone and you switch from one to the other. And what I was showing, in fact, there is no difference between the woman and the man. Cary Grant is a man... for the audience, you think he’s a man. Rosalind Russell also. There is no difference. One is not more than the other. We don’t know. That’s exactly it. And you think in fact, they are unaware of each other. Well, because the director has talent, we do believe the relationship exists... but it’s completely false. We film the executioner. We film the victim. And we think that we’re establishing a relationship. No! on the contrary, we are removing that relationship. So, if you like, for me, 3D allowed me to be in that area, on that landscape, in this, there you have it. So, you get what you get.

Godard’s formulation of the shot/reverse shot, with the cut removing rather than establishing a relationship, suggests that the ostensible connection between the content of the two shots is an illusion, “completely false.” It is worth returning here to the original scene from *Notre Musique*, where he articulates this persistent formal problem. In the scene, Godard is giving a lecture to young film students in Sarajevo, and shows them two stills of Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell from *His Girl Friday*, saying, “The shot and reverse shot are basics of film grammar. But look closely at these shots from the Hawks movie... you’ll see that it’s the

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159 An identical and interchangeable term with shot/countershoot
160 Ibid. 20:18
same thing twice. That’s because the director is incapable of seeing the difference between a man and a woman. They are alike.” Godard argues, shows both people as identical—the shot/reverse shot is repetitive rather than illuminating. It effaces difference rather than maintaining or emphasizing it.

Later in the lecture sequence, Godard tells an anecdote that sheds light on the relationship between images and meaning, spoken over book images of Elsinore castle followed by a hanging lamp swinging left and right:

In 1938, Heisenberg and Borg were walking in the Danish countryside talking about physics. They came to Elsinore castle. The German scientist said: “Oh! There’s nothing special about this castle!” the Danish physicist said: “Yes, but if you say ‘Hamlet’s castle’ then it becomes special.” Elsinore the real, Hamlet the imaginary. Shot and reverse shot. Imaginary: certainty. Reality: uncertainty. The principle of cinema, go towards the light and shine it on our night. Our music. This anecdote reimagines the dynamic of shot/reverse shot as a critical relationship between image and language, as real and imaginary. Language, in the realm of the imaginary, imposes significance on the undifferentiated real. Godard suggests that the task of cinema is to discover the equivalencies and differences between distant images and mobilize them with montage. At the beginning of the lecture, Godard emphasizes: “All the power of an image can only be expressed through it. They say our language arbitrarily divides things up in reality,” followed by a long tracking shot of the students in the audience, panning from left to right, then back again. This deployment of the cut-free tracking shot maintains difference in the audience, in time and place, and offers an alternative to the shot/reverse shot. It fills in the spatial and temporal gaps erased by the cut of the shot/reverse shot, and prefigures the “separation shots” of Adieu au langage. In

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162 Ibid. 49:30.
163 Ibid. 44:50.
this lecture, Godard articulates the problem that he would continue to reckon with in *Adieu au langage*, that of the gap between images. Farocki’s solution was to counter the shot/reverse shot with soft montage, separating two shots apart and replacing their temporal succession with spatial simultaneity. Godard’s approach is more abstract, at times veering close to soft montage but never formulating an explicit code like Farocki. In *Adieu au langage*, Godard is driven by the desire to “be in that area, on that landscape,” to enter into the gap between images, narrative, and language, and play around in it.

And Godard’s language, if one is to take his word for it, is one without a message. When asked about the message of the film, Godard replied: “Rather, it would be the message of the absence of a message. It’s a message in everyday life… No there is no idea of message. No, it’s… like children, when they show their parents their first bicycle, they say ‘Look! No hands, mum!’”

Returning to the metaphor of the child, Godard renounces meaning and embraces a youthful spirit of experimentation, a sort of play not yet codified by a symbolic system. And yet, his example, “Look! No hands, mum!” is still a message—a message whose the meaning lies in the gesture of its delivery. This youthful audacity is on display throughout the film, as Godard invents new types of images through his play with 3D, a medium distinctly “à côté de la plaque.”

**From the Human Race We Pass to Metaphor**

In lieu of a message, *Adieu au langage* offers an associative structure of rhymes and resonances in the images, soundtrack, and narrative. In his essay on the film, David Bordwell calls this “associational form,” pointing out that it happens on a narrative level.

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164 Ibid. 27:33
as well as “textural or pictorial.” The plot’s parallel structure is divided between the two couples of the film’s sections, and Bordwell points out that “the parallel scenes of the long section ’2/Metaphor’ proceed in almost exactly the same order as in ’1/Nature’.” The two couples are united by the presence of Roxy, who as a non-linguistic animal, bridges the two worlds of nature and metaphor and blurs the distinctions between them. Of the structure, Godard said, “Here you could say that I applied Hitchcock’s theory: when you want to be understood, you say it at least twice. So the, rather than simply taking a couple and a dog, we kept the dog, but we took two couples. That’s it.” The notion that Godard wanted to be understood seems a little suspect, but the parallels between the two couples do at least provide the film with some of the textures that compensate for the void of plot. The loose structure also provides the opportunity for digressions and formal innovations.

The film’s greatest technical innovation is a shot that offers an entirely new kind of image, one which has been said to break the rules of 3D:

Godard starts with a stereo image—a two-shot of a couple. When one of the figures in the shot breaks off and moves away to screen right, one of the cameras in Godard’s stereo rig simply pans sideways to follow the action while the other camera remains in place, fixed on the first figure. The audience sees two different images simultaneously; if you’re in the mood for interaction, you can “edit” the shot as you watch. Simply close one eye at a time, so that you choose which of the two images you see. It’s a truly interactive film, and all you need is your eyes. Eventually, the second figure returns to the side of the first, and the camera pivots back into place, making the stereo image whole again.168

166 Ibid.
167 CanonEurope. “Jean-Luc Godard: An Exclusive Interview with the Legend,” 2014.
The film’s cinematographer, Fabrice Aragno, invented the technique while doing experiments in preparation for the film. Aragno has referred to this as a “separation shot,” and noted that it gives the audience a choice of how they want to watch it: “You are the editor… you can associate what you see or hear with your own feelings.”¹⁶⁹ The separation shot occurs twice in the film. The aforementioned scene shows Ivitch standing with Davison, on a bench and reading a book in a park. One camera follows as she is pulled to the right by her gun-wielding, German-speaking husband, before she returns to the original frame with Davison, shaken. The formula is repeated in a later shot, where Ivitch sits naked on a staircase, reflected in the glaze of a lamp, and the right camera follows Marcus walking right out of frame, then left back into it as he brings her flowers and the image again becomes whole. Each time, the shot isolates then reunites a couple, the sort of separation and reunification that occurs throughout the film.

This 3D separation shot is technically unprecedented in the language of film, but it is composed of familiar parts, combining aspects of superimposition and soft montage. Metz argues that superimposition is a powerful tool for creating metaphorical equivalences on an affective level:

The superimposition characteristically effects a sort of equivalence between two distinct objects: a partial equivalence, simply discursive and metaphorical (a ‘bringing together’, which the enunciation produces) as long as the spectator, in a process smacking of rationalization, secondarises it at the same moment that he reads it (that he binds it). A more profound equivalence, an authentic equivalence, total, in a way, insofar as the spectator also receives it in a more immediately affective fashion… somewhere within him the spectator takes the superimposition seriously; he sees in it something other than a familiar and neutralized artifice of filmic discourse; he believes in the real equivalence of the two objects superimposed on the screen (or at least in some magically transitive bond between them)...The fact of equivalence remains—equivalence that the film figures forth directly, without indicating “like”, “such as”, or “at the same

¹⁶⁹ Whitney, Oliver E. “Godard’s 3D Film ‘Goodbye To Language is Making Cinematic History” Huffington Post, October 7, 2014. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/07/godard-goodbye-to-language-3d_n_5941170.html
moment…” as language would—equivalence that thus appears a mixture of condensation and displacement.\textsuperscript{170}

What makes the separation shot unique is its overdetermined status, being both a superimposition (and thus including both condensation and displacement), and a sort of virtual soft montage in its aspect of simultaneity, by maintaining a single master frame even as it pulls apart into two virtual frames and recombines them. The properties of superimposition and simultaneity are modified by the panning motion, which serves the purpose of a tracking shot by replacing the cut with the dimension of contiguous time. Unlike a traditional superimposition, which draws an equivalency from two separate images through a soft cut, the equivalence in the “separation shot” is drawn from two angles of the same diegetic space and time by the panning motion. The effect is then not a metaphorical reconciliation between disparate worlds, but the asymmetrical doubling of the time and space of the same world. The separation of the two shots, and the ability to look at each independently, makes the technique similar in kind to soft montage, but the panning movement limits the simultaneity to a pre-inscribed time-frame—the image unfolds spatially \textit{and} temporally. Enabled by the technology of 3D and modified by the pan, the combination of superimposition and soft montage imbues the separation shot with condensation, displacement, and simultaneity all at once. It inverts the logic of the traditional shot/reverse shot, correcting it to better suit Godard’s dialectical aims—rather than effacing the difference between two people, it emphasizes it.

Directly following this second separation shot is a sequence which is less flashy but accomplishes a similar formal feat without relying on 3D. The sequence begins in the living room of the vacation home, with the camera facing Ivitch still sitting on the

\textsuperscript{170} Metz, \textit{The Imaginary Signifier}, 125.
staircase. It tracks from left to right as she stands up and walks into the living room towards their television. On its screen, a black and white film shows a man drowning in a churning ocean, and she sits down next to the TV, her head covering a lamp. After an abrupt cut to black, for a moment the screen is filled by the shot from the film on the TV, of the drowning man. After another cut to black, we return to the original shot of Ivitch by the TV, as she speaks to Marcus and looks at the TV before another abrupt cut to black. After a couple seconds of black, the shot returns, with the TV now frozen on a still of the old movie, as Marcus kneels down and grabs Ivitch’s knees. She reaches out, towards his head, but the shot is suspended in a brief freeze frame before cutting to a shot of the same TV, the room devoid of people, with a screen of crackling static.

This sequence’s formal radicality lies in its combination of the tracking shot with the variety of soft montage originally observed in Numéro Deux, of the mise en abyme sort, along with the unpredictable fragmentary cuts to black. Together, these techniques enact a complex dialectic of motion and stillness. In Godard’s old favorite, the tracking shot, meaning unfolds over time. In the soft montage created by the co-presence of the television image, meaning arises through simultaneity. And the cut-to-blacks and freeze-frames interrupt the flow of time. This sequence is loaded with conflicting temporalities, a few simple elements made immensely complex by the montage both in camera and in post-production. The effect is a microcosm of the film as a whole—a decentered perspective, a jagged sense of time, and a dialogue between images of the past and the present. Images become manipulable, painterly, divorced from narrative coherence or internal consistency.
The blank screens inserted in this sequence epitomize Godard’s open approach to secondary revision. Rather than Freud’s filling in of gaps with “shreds and patches,” Godard prefers to preserve and draw attention to the gaps; the filling is left to the viewer. This goes against the traditional logic of narrative films, the preference to maintain the referential illusion. Metz describes narrative film as “a dream in which the secondary revision does nearly everything by itself… where the primary process plays only a furtive and intermittent role, a role of gap-maker.” From the beginning, as far

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171 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, 121.
back as the jump cuts of Breathless, Godard has embraced the role of gap-maker, emphasizing the ruptures and discontinuities of the primary processes over the retroactive logic of the secondary. Because he is working with the new and unseconderarized realm of 3D, Adieu au langage invites Godard to push the primary aspect further than ever. As in Le gai savoir, images are broken down into discreet, recombinable units, but the recombination relies on a poetic principle rather than a strictly rational relationship between grammatical units. The division of the film into Nature and Metaphor is a deceptively simple binary, because Godard shows time and time again how the two are related, and complimentarily, the overall inseparability of form and content. The key move of the “separation shot” emphasizes this—the opening and closing of the gap, breath-like, in which time and space are bisected then reconstituted.

Farewell to Language

Like many of Godard’s later works, Adieu au langage’s soundtrack is suffused with quotes from philosophy, literature, science, and political theory, narrated by a panoply of voices, including Godard’s own. The breadth of sources and their rapid-fire pace makes comprehension intentionally difficult, and it is always a struggle to judge the intentions behind the choice of each quote. In the context of Adieu au langage, the quotes have an alienating, and possibly ironic effect; for a film supposedly meant to say farewell to language, why are there so many words? Philip Brophy describes the film’s approach to sound: “[Adieu au langage’s] sound editing conforms to pointillist and cubist aesthetics: points of emission are precisely directed to extreme vectors (left, right, center—each noticeably so), while fragments of atmospheres, voices, and events are edited to abut
either silence or oppositional tonalities.” Perhaps the voices are just another component of Godard’s sound collage, their meaning less relevant than their phonetic value. And certainly, as always with Godard, there is aural and phonetic play to match the play of images—form often seems to trump meaning. But a close look at the source of one quote does offer an important key to Godard’s larger motivations. It is a quote that comes originally from Godard himself.

In the midst of the film, following a montage of nature shots, there is an unusually still shot of an empty room with a window opening out onto a pastoral field of sunflowers. The corner of the room lights up with a beam from the window, revealing a sunflower in a vase, before the light dims and the flower fades from view. The 3D depth of the scene emphasizes a clear separation of depth, the sunny field outside extending deep into the positive parallax beyond the room. On the soundtrack, a female voice asks, “do you still take pictures?” which receives no response. This hanging question, about the continuing relevance of image-making, situates the following enunciation. A male voice says “Showing a forest, easy. But showing a room with a forest nearby…

difficult,” The quote is drawn from Godard’s Cabiers du cinema review of Alexandre Astruc’s 1958 film Un Vie. “For the difficulty was not to show the forest, but to show a drawing-room which one knew was only a few yards away from the forest.” The surface-level association of a room’s proximity to nature is immediately clear, but the connections with the rest of the review resonate in unexpected ways. Godard orient the

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173 Adieu au langage, Godard, 42:47; this quote is followed by another which retroactively alters its meaning: “When I was a kid, we played Indians. Apaches were my favorite. Their word for the world is: the forest.” Ibid. 43:28
review with spatial metaphors, calling *Un vie* “a superbly constructed film” then going on to “use terms borrowed from classical geometry” to illustrate his point.\(^{175}\)

A film may be compared to a *geometrical locus*, i.e. a group of points that possess the same property in relation to a fixed element. This group of points is, if you like, the *mise en scène*; and that single property common to every moment of the *mise en scène* is the scenario, or, if you prefer, the dramatic outline. All that’s left is the fixed element (which may possibly even be mobile): the subject. Well, what happens is this: with most film-makers, the geometrical locus of the subject they claim to treat never extends beyond the place of shooting. What I mean is that the action of their film may very well take place over an enormous area, but most filmmakers never conceive their *mise en scène* in terms which extend beyond the limits of the set.\(^{176}\)

This description resonates remarkably with *Adieu au langage*, both in terms of the structure of the geometrical locus and in its extension beyond the place of shooting.\(^{177}\) The model of the “group of points” may actually explain one of *Adieu au langage*’s more enigmatic recurring features, the shots of white circles in the middle of black screens that punctuate the film. The film itself, arranged around these points, is appropriately “a côté de la plaque.” In the review, Godard writes, “For Astruc, the *mise en scène* of *Une vie* lay quite simply in emphasizing one of these two movements, horizontal or vertical, in every scene or shot that had its own dramatic unity, and in doing so

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\(^{175}\) Ibid. 157.

\(^{176}\) Ibid. 157-158.

\(^{177}\) In the *Canon* interview, he speaks to the latter point, “With Lumiere or with Griffith, or with others later, good ones, big ones, smaller ones, as in painting. Sometimes painting is a frame, but sometimes you can see what’s beyond the frame”
in an abrupt way, so that all that did not form part of this abrupt movement sank into the background long before or after it.” The horizontal and vertical movements take on new meaning when considering Godard’s use of the Z axis. Godard calls Astruc’s technique “a carefully thought-out recourse to violence” drawn from a “discontinuity that is latent in continuity,” which could equally describe Adieu au langage’s disruptive editing style and clashing temporalities.

The locus of the Un Vie review is the quote that Godard revives in Adieu au langage: “for the difficulty was not to show the forest, but to show a drawing-room which one knew was only a few yards away from the forest.” The quotation opens up a nearly 60-year dialogue between Adieu au langage and Godard’s youthful Cahiers writing—the presence of the quote in Adieu pointing backwards to a moment in time when Godard was trying to work out in words the shape of another filmmaker’s images. Revealing new utility in its ability to describe the image on the screen, the quote works like a cut, linking Adieu au langage with Godard’s past theoretical writing by collapsing the temporal distance between them. The content of the quotation, signifying the problem of showing a drawing room near a forest, is spoken at the moment that the film’s images solve the specific problem of content it poses. But the quote also raises deep formal questions that resonate with the entirety of Godard’s career, questions of the extent to which difference can be conveyed through images, of images’ ability to extend beyond the limits of the set, and of the possibility of showing both the inside and the outside through the frame—broadly, the question of framing itself. And just as the images fulfill

178 Ibid. 158-160.  
179 Ibid. 160.  
180 Godard, “A Review of Alexandre Astruc’s Un Vie.” in The French New Wave, 158.
the quote’s surface-level problem of content, on a higher level, they resolve the broader formal problems that the quotation implies.

The shot shows a room, with a pastoral landscape in framed in a window, but there is also a second frame. The swath of sunlight from the window, which illuminates and hides the flower in the vase through the changing of the light, gives the mise en abyme effect of soft montage, mimicking the breathing motion of the “separation shots”. For all of Adieu au langage’s attempts to achieve simplicity through form, this unity between text and image might be the most deceptively successful. The quote is simultaneously redundant—describing exactly what the shot shows—and amplifying, metaphorically stacking the idea and the image so that both are reconstituted at a higher level, into a form that thinks. From within a film so aggressively embedded within the poetics of form, Adieu au langage elevates form to the level of meaning, as the telling of a message becomes inseparable from the message itself. In this scene, Godard truly says farewell to language, as text and image become one, simultaneously flattening and deepening, expanding and contracting, illuminating and darkening. The shot is the image, the reverse shot the words.
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