

Displacing the House of Being: The Politics of Parody in
the Cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, 1960-1968

by

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Introduction

Culture in the Carceral:

The Politics of Aesthetics in Disciplinary Societies

In Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, a child asks his mother, "What is language?" The mother replies, "It's the house in which a person lives."¹ The concept of language as a "house" appears in Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* (1959),² as well as his "Letter on Humanism," a text with great significance in French intellectual history. Heidegger wrote this letter to Jean Beaufret in 1946, and it was published in 1947. It directly responded to Jean-Paul Sartre's appropriation of existential phenomenology to the Cartesian humanist tradition, effectually challenging the possibility of applying his philosophy to Sartre's existential Marxist political program in *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946).³

Although Beaufret used Heidegger's letter to develop a second reading of Heidegger's philosophy in France which sought to return to Heidegger's original text of *Being and Time* (1927), it marked the first importation of what is known as Heidegger's "turn" from an ontological investigation into being to a historical investigation of being. For the later Heidegger, because being is constructed by

¹ *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1967; New York: Criterion, 2009).

² Mauri Ylä-Kotola, "Philosophical Foundations of the Work of Film Director Jean-Luc Godard," *Mediapolis: Aspects of Texts, Hypertexts, and Multimedial Communication*, ed. Sam Inkinen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1999), 148.

³ Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 157, 153-155.

culture and language, being is necessarily historical, varying across space and time.⁴ Although *Being and Time*, through its critique of Descartes, had argued that the subject lacked a prediscursive ontological status and was created by French rationalism,⁵ the later Heidegger, which was deeply influential to Merleau-Ponty and the structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, put the emphasis on the discursive construction of identity. If this were only a philosophical move, it would be radical enough in itself, a revision of the way of understanding human beings that dated to Plato. However, formulating it as a historical problem implied political implications as well. For Heidegger, the self-interpretation of being in modernity, what he calls the “technological age,” is that human beings are not only managers of resources through a subjectivity assumed to have ontological status, but understand themselves as resources. It is this self-interpretation which lies at the root of the division between subject and object.⁶

For Heidegger, this self-interpretation is at the source of the “leveling” diagnosed by Søren Kierkegaard as characteristic of modernity, in which the absence of any basis on which to make distinctions leads to nihilism.⁷ Thus, Heidegger

⁴ For an account of the reception of the “Letter on Humanism” in France, and the ensuing “Heidegger Affair,” see Kleinberg, 157-206.

⁵ “With the ‘*cogito sum*’ Descartes had claimed that he was putting philosophy on a new and firm footing. But what he left undetermined when he began in this ‘radical’ way was the kind of being which belongs to the *res cogitans*, or—more precisely—the *sense of the being of the ‘sum.’*” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 46.

⁶ Hubert L. Dreyfus, “On the Ordering of Things: Being and Power in Heidegger and Foucault,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28, Supplement (1990): 84.

⁷ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Jane Rubin, “Appendix: Kierkegaard, Division II, and Later Heidegger,” *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), 283, 299-240. See Søren

argued, the only way to recreate meaning in the world is to create a new culture which advances a different kind of self-interpretation.⁸

This critique of modernity as totalizing in its interpretation lies at the source of the structuralist and post-structuralist critiques of modernity in France. Lévi-Strauss's cultural relativism, Derrida's critique of metaphysics, and Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge can be traced back to Heideggerian questions.⁹ However, the structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers were deeply conscious of the dangers which Heidegger's scaffold might lead to. Heidegger, believing that Hitler and National Socialism might bring about a new self-interpretation of being in Germany, committed to the Nazi party in 1933.¹⁰

These French thinkers have therefore addressed the problem: how to resist a totalizing understanding of being-in-the-world, one which banalizes life and is enforced by disciplinary institutions, without risking repeating the error of Heidegger? Claude Lévi-Strauss responds that the only reasonable response, given the terrible consequences of politics in the twentieth century, is a withdrawal from political action and a turn to self-consciousness through scientific research.¹¹ However, such a response is relatively easy for a privileged intellectual with leisure to

Kierkegaard, "The Present Age," *Two Ages: the Age of Revolution and the Present Age: A Literary Review*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁸ Dreyfus, "On the Ordering of Things," 93-95.

⁹ Kleinberg, 283. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), 8-9.

¹⁰ Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Heidegger on the connection between nihilism, art, technology, and politics," *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 2nd edition, ed. Charles B. Guignon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 367.

¹¹ François Dosse, *History of Structuralism: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 11.

engage in scientific research. What if that imposed self-understanding is too oppressive to live under? Michel Foucault's work engages with the political consequences of this self-interpretation most explicitly. Although the correspondence between Foucault's analysis of power and Heidegger's analysis of being is not one-to-one, they bridge a similar fundamental question: what is the contemporary understanding of being, how does it limit us, and how might we resist?¹²

Foucault relativizes the contemporary understanding of the self through his critical genealogies of the social sciences and of psychiatry in *Surveiller et punir* (1975) and the first volume of *L'histoire de la sexualité* (1976). For Foucault, one way to resist is to perform this relativization and to explore what other possibilities are excluded by contemporary understandings of the self. Gary Gutting describes this role as the "critical intellectual."¹³ However, Foucault is careful not to prescribe solutions. He indicates at times that the project is local resistance of power at vulnerable points, and his books constitutes instances of that resistance. However, he never prescribes a solution—he does not see that as his role. While some call Foucault an anarchist, he claims that he does not wish to overturn welfare capitalism. Rather, he sees his work as contributing to a loosening of its most oppressive tendencies by exposing the social construction of its norms through an investigation into the workings of bio-power.¹⁴ Foucault writes,

¹² Dreyfus, "On the Ordering of Things," 83.

¹³ Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 263.

¹⁴ Dreyfus, "On the Ordering of Things," 92-93.

What the apparatuses and institutions operate is, in a sense, a micro-physics of power, whose field of validity is situated in a sense between these great functioning and the bodies themselves with their materiality and their forces.¹⁵

For Foucault, the task is to map these “micro-physics,” this “network of relations,” to analyze its effects on the constitution of knowledge and the range of possibilities for thinking and being.¹⁶ In the case of *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault argues that a “technology of the ‘soul’—that of the educationalists, psychologists and psychiatrists” attempts to conceal a “whole technology of power over the body. “This “modern soul,” which the medical and psychiatric discourse constructs as having ontological status but which is actually an invention of modernity, is a technology of power, a way of implementing panopticism and self-surveillance.¹⁷ This is not in itself a problem—Foucault certainly does not advocate a return to public torture and executions. But the norms which it enforces, against homosexuality, for example, incur guilt and feelings of social exclusion, are “uninhabitable,” to use Butler’s phrase.¹⁸ Thus, Foucault writes a history of the prison and the knowledge which is constituent and constitutive of it as a “history of the present” which will loosen the grip of modern disciplinary structures.¹⁹

Besides writing critical genealogies, however, it is unclear how to resist. For Heidegger, resistance meant reviving marginalized practices, such as hiking in the

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 26.

¹⁶ Foucault, 26.

¹⁷ Foucault, 30.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 187.

¹⁹ Foucault, 31.

woods or meditation.²⁰ However, capitalism has succeeded in appropriating these once-marginal practices, accommodating it to its logic of increased efficiency: one who practices yoga to work more efficiently for a software company is not resisting.

Michel de Certeau, in *L'invention du quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de faire* (1980) offers the possibility of a productive consumption. De Certeau focuses on the everyday consumer, but he argues that by consuming the products of the culture industry in creative and individual ways, a person can allay the banalization and nihilism that characterizes modernity. The slang of marginal groups, by reformulating an imposed language in a new way, constructs a potentially empowering identity.²¹ However, on level of conscious practice, de Certeau's model does not seem terribly practicable: while the idea of *la perruque*, or “the wig”—of the worker who does their own work, presumably something creative, while making the boss think they are working for the company²² —is intriguing, it is difficult to see it creating broader social change—and is quickly becoming impracticable with increasingly intrusive modes of surveillance in the workplace.

How to cope with a modernity that instills nihilism? How to resist discipline? Heidegger denies the possibility of simply inventing a novel understanding of being. Thus, the attempt by Marxist-Leninists to create a new understanding of being through establishing socialist governments is, for Heidegger, doomed to failure. However, in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” he argues that poets may offer human

²⁰ Dreyfus, “On the Ordering of Things,” 91.

²¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 104.

²² de Certeau, 260.

beings in Western culture a new sense of community. By condensing and holding the shared practices of a community in a “work of art,”²³ poets put truth to work. Heidegger’s central example is the Greek temple. Hubert Dreyfus, the leading interpreter of Heidegger in the English-speaking world, calls these works of art “cultural paradigms:”

A cultural paradigm focuses and collects the scattered practices of a culture, unifies them into coherent possibilities for action, and holds them up to the people who can then act and relate to each other in terms of the exemplar.²⁴

If a cultural paradigm must engage with the practices of a culture, then it must be intelligible to the culture that produces it. What Heidegger envisions is a shift in which marginal practices become central practices become marginal.²⁵

If a shift in a culture’s self-understanding occurs through art, then art, which seems politically marginal, if not neutral, becomes central to understanding a society’s social and political structure. D.A. Miller’s early work applies Foucault’s investigation of disciplinary societies to the Victorian novel, showing how the Victorian novel, as the hegemonic cultural practice of the period, instituted a certain model of subjectivity, with political effects. In “Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and *Bleak House*” (1983), writing of *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) and other early novels, Miller argues that Dickens represented social discipline through depicting “places of confinement” which at once “referred to a disciplinary society committed to the manufacture of such enclosures” and “carried an even more emphatic allusion to the space between them: a space of freedom or

²³ See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 17-87.

²⁴ Dreyfus, “On the Ordering of Things,” 94.

²⁵ Dreyfus, “On the Ordering of Things,” 94-95.

domestic tranquility that was their ‘other.’”²⁶ Dickens’ representations of the carceral as “a confined, instructional space in which power is violently exercised on collectivized subjects” operate always already in opposition to “a space of ‘liberal society,’ generally determined as a free, private, and individual domain and practically specified as the family.”²⁷ That is not to say that this opposition posed regulation of behavior in opposition to liberty. On the contrary, Dickens framed the family as a preferred means of social discipline, the absence of which necessitated the harsher measures of the carceral, and which constituted freedom’s precondition. Thus, Oliver escapes from the carceral by submitting “to the norms, protocols, and regulations of the middle-class family, in which he receives tuition not just from Brownlow but from the Maylies as well.”²⁸ However, Dickens certainly represents the family as more attractive than the carceral, implying that it is a preferred mode of social discipline.

Dickens conceives of the family, and of the mores of liberal society of which it is the transmitting institution, as the primary mechanism of social discipline, implying that the carceral should intervene only when the family fails. Thus, Dickens teaches the reader to be grateful for regulation by the family rather than the carceral, while he warns the reader to vigilantly uphold family values by showing how easily the lines could be crossed. Indeed, if *Oliver Twist*’s hero works in a workhouse, then inefficiencies in the system can transform liberal subjects into the objects of these

²⁶ D.A. Miller, “Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and *Bleak House*,” *Representations* 1, no. 1 (1983): 59.

²⁷ Miller, “Discipline in Different Voices,” 59.

²⁸ Miller, “Discipline in Different Voices,” 60.

institutions,²⁹ and mismanagement of the family could result in oneself or one's kin becoming dependent on a foundling hospital or debtor's prison.³⁰ Representations of the opposition between family and carceral functioned to make the reader, assumed to be a liberal subject, feel grateful for the insulation of middle-class life from state violence and warned them to continue to ascribe to bourgeois values if they wish to preserve their status.³¹ Consequently, Dickens enacts a "policing of the family,"³² by which he reminds his audience that "the family's freedom is founded in the possibility of its discipline, and thus to enjoy the former means to have consented to the latter".³³ In order to be free, one must be a member of a self-regulating family. His novels portray the family not only as the way of life which occurs in the absence of the carceral—as the natural expression of liberal society—or as a cherished virtue, but as a regulating mechanism which keeps one free of the carceral. He defends this system with a utilitarian argument: the family is less expensive, more effective in regulating its members, and more pleasant to live in than places of confinement.³⁴

Miller, therefore, argues that Dickens' novels constitute a means of constituting liberal subjects, of teaching them why it was important to follow the norms of the Victorian middle-class family by contrasting life in liberal society with

²⁹ Miller, "Discipline in Different Voices," 59.

³⁰ Miller, "Discipline in Different Voices," 59.

³¹ Miller, "Discipline in Different Voices," 60.

³² Miller, "Discipline in Different Voices," 84.

³³ Miller, "Discipline in Different Voices," 84.

³⁴ Miller, "Discipline in Different Voices," 83.

life in the carceral institutions. Dickens novels and others like it, the hegemonic cultural form of the Victorian era,³⁵ functioned,

[...] to confirm the novel reader in his identity as “liberal subject,” a term with which I allude not just to the subject whose private life, mental or domestic, is felt to provide constant inarguable evidence of his constitutive ‘freedom,’ but also to, broadly speaking, the political regime that sets store by this subject.³⁶

For Miller, therefore, the Victorian novel constitutes part of the disciplinary system which creates the liberal subjects that define their relationship to the political body in terms of their freedom to participate in it.

Miller owes an obvious debt to Michel Foucault’s work on surveillance. Analysis of literature did not form a central part of Foucault’s mature work,³⁷ but Miller’s argument coheres with the “genealogy of the present scientifico-legal complex”³⁸ which Foucault offers in *Surveiller et punir*. Foucault argues that “the soul is the prison of the body”³⁹—a creation of the disciplinary matrix of the “micro-physics of power”⁴⁰ which instills, through conditioning in the family, school, hospital, and family, a self-regulating mechanism which creates a phenomenon of “panopticism”⁴¹ which “assures the automatic functioning of power.”⁴² Subjection to institutions of social discipline from birth creates a “state of conscious and permanent

³⁵ Miller, *The Novel and The Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), x.

³⁶ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, x.

³⁷ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, viii.

³⁸ Foucault, 23.

³⁹ Foucault, 30.

⁴⁰ Foucault, 29.

⁴¹ Foucault, 195

⁴² Foucault, 201.

visibility”⁴³ whereby the liberal subject feels “a permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance” in the environment: “a faceless gaze” renders “the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert.”⁴⁴ If the Victorian novel forms part of the matrix which instills this sense of omnipresent surveillance, the novel constitutes part of the process which creates the liberal subject that allows the modern state to exist. The experience of the binary opposition between family and carceral in the novel’s world confirms the liberal subject’s imagined identity, which they see as the only alternative to madness or criminality.⁴⁵

If liberal subjects, for Miller, exist only insofar as they accept the binary opposition between liberal society and the carceral as natural rather than the product of a system of social discipline, then novels which promote this binary through emphasizing the desirability of the family⁴⁶ form a central part of the system of social discipline which creates liberal subjects and which is thus the condition of possibility for the liberal state to exist. But how, one might ask, does the analysis of Victorian novels fit into an analysis of the politics of French cinema in the 1960s? Indeed, the novel is no longer widely read, which seems to undermine Miller’s argument about the centrality of the novel in creating liberal subjects. But Miller argues that while the novel itself no longer enjoys cultural hegemony, its function continues:⁴⁷

The “death of the novel” (of that novel, at any rate) has really meant the explosion everywhere of the novelistic, no longer bound in three-deckers, but

⁴³ Foucault, 201.

⁴⁴ Foucault, 214.

⁴⁵ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, x.

⁴⁶ Miller, “Discipline in Different Voices,” 82.

⁴⁷ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, x.

freely scattered across a far greater range of cultural experience. To speak of the relation of the Victorian novel to the age of which it was, *faute de mieux*, the mass culture, is thus to recognize a central episode in the genealogy of our present.⁴⁸

If we accept this proposition, one area where the novelistic reigns is surely the cinema. Prior to the mass distribution of television, film was the medium which, opposed to the novel, people defined their modernity by watching.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue in “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1947) that the Hollywood film, like the Victorian novel, functions to create the individual units, the liberal subjects, which constitute capitalist societies. This individuality, Adorno argues, is false because it is defined in terms of choice in the marketplace, and thus in terms of a “class determined form of self-preservation.”⁴⁹ This individuality exists only in order to reify the universal:

The individual trait is reduced to the ability of the universal so completely to mold the accidental that it can be recognized as accidental. The sulky taciturnity or the elegant walk of the individual who happens to be on show is serially produced like the Yale locks which differ by fractions of a millimeter. The peculiarity of the self is a socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural.⁵⁰

These peculiarities of individuals under a capitalist society, because the range of choices is so limited by the monopoly of the culture industry, are mere

⁴⁸ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, x.

⁴⁹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin S. Noert, trans. Edmund Jephcon (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 125.

⁵⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, 125.

...fingerprint[s] on the otherwise uniform identity cards to which the lives and faces of all individuals [...] have been reduced by the power of the universal.⁵¹

Adorno calls the individuality based on the meaningless possibilities for idiosyncrasy offered by the marketplace “pseudoindividuality”⁵²—a form of false consciousness.

If the market reduces individuality to “mere intersections of universal tendencies,”⁵³ the particular cannot oppose the universal, implying that tragedy is impossible.⁵⁴ If the particular qualities of pseudoindividuals simply manifest the universal tendencies of *homo economicus*,⁵⁵ the social order can accommodate anyone who has the qualities of a human, which are equivocated with the qualities of a consumer. Those who cannot reconcile themselves to this arrangement are mad or criminals, because sanity is defined by one’s accommodation to the market.⁵⁶

In capitalist democracies, where carefully controlled monopolies over production are possible in ways unheard of under feudalism,⁵⁷ art is tolerated only insofar as it reifies the ideology of liberal society, which posits the family as the primary means of social discipline, with employment as a close second. If Miller’s reading of Dickens can be generalized to capitalist societies overall, the family will be

⁵¹ Adorno and Horkheimer, 125.

⁵² Adorno and Horkheimer, 125.

⁵³ Adorno and Horkheimer, 125.

⁵⁴ “Pseudoindividuality is a precondition for apprehending and detoxifying tragedy: only because individuals are none but mere intersections of universal tendencies is it possible to reabsorb them smoothly into the universal.” Adorno and Horkheimer, 125.

⁵⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, 125.

⁵⁶ “...anyone who goes hungry and suffers from cold, especially if he once had good prospects, is a marked man.” Adorno and Horkheimer, 121.

⁵⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, 105.

deployed in opposition to the carceral in the films which constitute the “culture industry” of which Adorno writes.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as for Heidegger, art offers the possibility of resisting, but this avenue has been all but cut off by the appropriation of art by capitalism and the creation of an art market. If the ability to make art is largely monopolized by the culture industry, how, then, to bring about a shift in Western culture so as to resolve the problem of nihilism? How might one deploy art to resist discipline? But what if the cinema’s ideological effects could not only offer moments of toxic escape, but be subverted via a productive consumption of Hollywood norms?

Such a film would constitute an instance of what Butler calls “parody.”⁵⁸ For Butler, parody is the exaggerated repetition of a norm in order to expose its constructedness. Butler gives the example of drag, a performance of femininity that is so exaggerated in its artifice it is not one-to-one imitation, but parody.⁵⁹ Indeed, even a seemingly “natural woman”⁶⁰ fails to live up to the norm of femininity, but in doing so in such an exaggerated and obviously artificial fashion, the drag queen exposes the artificiality of the norm itself.⁶¹

Godard’s films perform this parodic repetition of Hollywood norms. Their allegiance to Hollywood conventions and deployment of conventional social norms make them intelligible, or at least recognizable, to a broad audience. But, as this thesis will demonstrate, they constantly assert the presence of the cinematic narration

⁵⁸ Butler, 186.

⁵⁹ Butler, 174-175, 186-187.

⁶⁰ Butler, 29-30.

⁶¹ Butler, 186-187.

which is constituent and constitutive of these norms, thus exposing the artificiality of the most fundamental category of identity in 1960s France, the subject. Thus, they constitute part of a broader interrogation among French intellectuals, via structuralism and existential Marxism, of the fundamental unit of republican citizenship.

Chapter 1

The Filmic Flesh:

Godard's Phenomenological Roots

In *La Chinoise* (1967), Véronique dismisses structuralism as an excuse for political quietism,¹ seemingly allying Godard with an existential Marxist critique of structuralism as ideology in favor of a progressive movement for social change based on the subject as an agent of history. Indeed, the student radicals whom Godard films here would oppose structuralism. As Marxists, they commit themselves to the realization of man through history. As we shall see, the French existential Marxists of the 1960s held that by changing social conditions, they could free the human subject from conditions that dehumanize it. Structuralism undercut this project, because structuralism claimed that social systems changed independently from human agency.² As a result of their negation of agency, structuralists, especially Claude Lévi-Strauss, were largely indifferent to organized politics, even if sympathetic to Marxist historical analysis, and, for the most part, did not involve themselves with the student protests that culminated in May 1968.³

Indeed, many student radicals saw May 1968 as a refutation of structuralism. That is to say, for the students, structuralism seemingly denied the possibility of social change through organized and intentional political action, and their organized

¹ *La Chinoise*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1967; New York: Koch Lorber Films, 2008).

² François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, vol. 1, *The Rising Sign, 1945-1966* trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 362.

³ Dosse, *The Rising Sign*, 11.

protest seemed to disprove structuralist claims.⁴ Lévi-Strauss argued that organized politics was beside the point because it assumes history, which is a mythological construction of the bourgeoisie, and that the only hope for Westerners was to become very self-conscious of their own historical myths and attempt to revert to the ahistorical “savage” mind.⁵ However, this is not to say that structuralists saw organized political action as impossible. They were simply skeptical about its possibilities for success. In a famous 1970 debate with Noam Chomsky on Dutch television entitled “Human Nature: Justice versus Power,” Michel Foucault, considered at that time to be the spokesperson for structuralist philosophy, argued that this was because any ideal that a movement proffered had been formulated within a social order based on power and class division, and thus would reconstitute those class divisions and systems of domination in the future.⁶

For students who hoped that organized political action could change their condition, it seemed that May 1968 refuted the philosophy of structuralism because, at that moment, it seemed like organized political action had changed history.⁷ Their graffiti invoked the French revolution and proclaimed things like “Althusser is useless.”⁸ Épistemon described May 1968 as “not only a student strike in Paris, [...]

⁴ François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, vol. 2, *The Sign Sets, 1967-present* trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 113-114.

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 254-255.

⁶ “The Chomsky-Foucault Debate,”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WveI_vgmPz8. For a discussion, see Paul Rabinow, “Introduction,” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

⁷ Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 113-114.

⁸ Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 111.

but the death warrant of structuralism as well.”⁹ In November, Mikel Dufrenne, a philosopher who gained notoriety writing for *For Man*, wrote in *Le Monde* that, “May was the violence of history in a period that wanted to avoid all histories.”¹⁰

This perspective on structuralism as the ideology of advanced capitalism, held by Godard’s Véronique and at least some of the 1968 student radicals, echoed that of the existential Marxists,¹¹ whose logic many of the students, in graffiti and in writing, used to justify the uprising. Existential Marxism developed as an attempt to revamp Marxism in order to provide a revolutionary theory that was consistent with the new social world that Marxists saw developing in the 1950s and 1960s in France. This new world was characterized by the concentration of wealth in transnational corporations; increased state intervention into the economy; the organization of consumption through planned obsolescence, advertising, and fashion; increased urbanization; the decline of puritanical sexual mores; and the increase in leisure among broad swathes of the population, including increased cinema attendance, sports spectatorship, and automobile use, which shifted the structure of everyday life.¹²

Although the existential Marxists maintained, like the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party, that capitalism was an oppressive and dehumanizing system, they recognized that the “theory of absolute impoverishment” could no longer form the

⁹ Épistemon (Didier Anzieu), *Ces idées qui ont ébranlé la France* (Paris: Fayard, 1968), 83, quoted in Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 114.

¹⁰ Mikel Dufrenne, *Le Monde*, November 30, 1968, quoted in Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 114.

¹¹ Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), 361.

¹² Poster, 361.

basis of a Marxist political praxis.¹³ This doctrine, which the French Communist Party continued to uphold, maintained the validity of Marx's prediction that capitalism's internal contradictions would lead to the proletarianization of an increasingly high percentage of the population: that is, they would become wage-earners rather than owners of capital. Although ownership of the means of production became increasingly concentrated in the 1950s and 1960s, proletarianization did not imply material misery, as it did in Marx's day. That is, capitalism, in part through the intervention of the state, had succeeded in providing a decent standard of living for workers.¹⁴

Observing the increased affluence of the working classes, liberals and technocrats, in texts such as Michel Crozier's *Le Phénomène bureaucratique* (1964), proclaimed the victory of capitalism. Through state intervention, capitalism succeeded in curtailing capitalism's worst excesses. Looking with cautious admiration at the United States economy, they proclaimed an era of mass affluence in which a middle-class standard of living would spread to the majority of the population, ending radical working-class movements.¹⁵

But for the existential Marxists, buying off the lower classes did not eliminate capitalism's alienating effects: lack of ownership of one's own means of production still had debilitating effects on day-to-day life. Although the workers' material wealth

¹³ André Gorz, *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal*, trans. Martin A. Nicolaus and Victoria Ortiz (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 21.

¹⁴ Gorz, 30.

¹⁵ Poster, 363,

increased, “the workers were being dispossessed of their conscience.”¹⁶ Increased affluence was achieved only “[b]y subordinating human ends to technical exigencies,” and thus continued the fundamental contradiction of capitalism: the subordination of human needs to those of capital.¹⁷ However, alienation no longer produced the material misery necessary to provoke a revolution among the working classes. The existential Marxists, therefore, felt trapped, and looked for a reason to keep up their hopes despite the fact that “the revolt against society has lost its *natural* base.”¹⁸ This is not to say that the existential Marxists did not recognize that many people in France in the 1960s lived in poverty. But the percentage of people living in “misery” had decreased to one-fifth of the population, and this misery, which no longer characterized the condition of the entire working class, was too dispersed to foster revolutionary consciousness.¹⁹

However, for André Gorz, a leading existential Marxist who was close with Sartre and co-founded *Le nouvel observateur* in 1964, the decline of misery did not negate the truth of Marx’s assertion that all history is the history of class struggle, or even the theory of absolute impoverishment in a sense. Gorz maintains “the fundamental antagonism of the classes.”²⁰ Indeed, Gorz argues that the impoverishment of the mass of people in France has “never been greater,” because in a society in which “possibilities (notably cultural, sanitary, medical)” and wealth is held up “as the norm potentially valid to all,” society denies those possibilities and

¹⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sasha Rabinovitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 40.

¹⁷ Gorz, 19.

¹⁸ Gorz, 3.

¹⁹ Gorz, 3.

²⁰ Gorz, 20.

wealth to the vast majority of people.²¹ However, “to this greater poverty there is no corresponding misery.”²² Thus, although the needs created by the consumer ideology which, for Gorz, allows the system to function without the mass of people existing in misery are not met, these needs “do not have the same absolutely imperative urgency” as the “elementary needs” left unsatisfied by earlier forms of capitalism.²³

For Gorz, therefore, those who maintained the necessity of socialism could no longer wait for the logic of history to produce a working-class revolution. In order to update Marxist social analysis and political praxis to account for France in the 1960s, Gorz constructed a theory of a “new working class,” comprised of educated mental workers, such as technicians and teachers, whose education and social awareness would lead them to demand greater autonomy and creativity in their work, while recognizing the injustice of the system.²⁴ This new working class would reject “capitalist relations of production” based on hierarchies, and form a revolutionary class based on qualitative needs, because although “the development of capitalism” increased the worker’s level of consumption, the relations of production had become more hierarchical and dehumanizing.²⁵ For Gorz,

It is this intolerable alienation that needs to be brought more profoundly into consciousness, because it implies the negation of the worker not only as a consumer and as “generic man” but also as producer, as citizen, as a human being; and because it calls for the refusal of capitalism not only as a system of exploitation, but also as an authoritarian society with deeply rooted anti-

²¹ Gorz, 22.

²² Gorz, 22.

²³ Gorz, 22.

²⁴ Gorz, 25.

²⁵ Gorz, 30.

democratic social relations, as a civilization with inverted priorities, as a system of waste and destruction.²⁶

That is to say, if the alienation of workers from the material fruits of their production no longer produced sufficient misery to create revolutionary consciousness, then a new theory of alienation which addresses the “dehumanization” the worker under advanced capitalism was necessary. For Gorz, increased affluence produced “new needs” which capitalism could not meet, because the condition of possibility of mass affluence was the organization of people in large, impersonal cities and large, impersonal corporations.²⁷ Thus, a new political praxis based not on capitalism’s exploitation, but its alienation of the worker’s possibility to engage in creative and meaningful work, would provide the impetus for a revolutionary movement. Thus, the central issue for Gorz was *autogestion* or workers’ self-management.²⁸ The goal, as Lefebvre put it, was “permanent cultural revolution.”²⁹ By reorganizing industrial society around the creativity of workers, rather than maximum possible levels of consumption for the owners of capital, this new socialist movement could move towards a society which meets the need for creative autonomy, not just material comfort.

Existential Marxism, therefore, primarily addressed the hierarchical nature of industrial enterprises, rather than their material exploitation of workers. Gorz wrote, “It is the hierarchical nature of industry that is placed in question by each partial

²⁶ Gorz, 30-31.

²⁷ Gorz, 30.

²⁸ Poster, 363-364.

²⁹ Lefebvre, 194.

demand on the control question.”³⁰ Thus, for students frustrated with what they saw as overly rigid and arbitrary hierarchies at the university, existential Marxism proved attractive³¹—especially to students of sociology who studied directly under Lefebvre and Alain Touraine, two key existential Marxist figures, at Nanterre.³² Analyzing the May 1968 movement, Touraine argued that existential Marxist issues were at its source:

The May Movement was a thunderbolt announcing the social struggles of the future. It dispelled the illusion that improvement in production and consumption result in a society in which tensions replace conflicts, quarrels replace disruptions, and negotiations replace revolutions.³³

That is to say, for Touraine, advanced capitalism could provide material comfort to a great mass of people in France, but only through controlling previously private areas of daily life such as the family and leisure. Thus, May 1968 revolted against the new types of alienation that bureaucratic capitalism produced.³⁴

Although Touraine was predisposed to interpret the events so as to legitimate his theoretical positions, it is difficult to dispute that existential Marxism largely provided the student movement’s discursive framework.³⁵ Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a leader of the student movement at Nanterre, dismissed the suggestion that Herbert Marcuse held special importance to the movement, and invoked instead the

³⁰ Gorz, 367.

³¹ Poster, 371.

³² Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 108.

³³ Alain Touraine, *Le communisme utopique: Le mouvement de Mai 68* (Seuil: Paris, 1972), 54, quoted in Poster, 371.

³⁴ Poster, 371.

³⁵ Poster, 383.

situationists and especially Jean-Paul Sartre.³⁶ Sartre, the existential Marxist *par excellence* who had been the great public intellectual of the postwar era, was the only philosopher the students invited to speak at the Sorbonne.³⁷ Épistemon understood May 1968 in Sartre's terms, writing, "the student revolt of May tried out its own version of Sartre's formula, 'The group is the beginning of humanity.'"³⁸

Due to their appropriation of existential Marxist discourse, the more philosophically inclined students were bound to see structuralism as an enemy. During the 1960s, as structuralism gained media attention, existential Marxism defined itself in opposition to what Lefebvre called the "religion of technocrats."³⁹ In part this resulted from personal rivalries and a desire to maintain relevance and cultural power: Levi-Strauss' attack on Sartre constituted an attempt to displace the latter figure as the predominant French intellectual.⁴⁰ However, for someone like Lefebvre, structuralism constituted a reactionary intellectual movement because it constructed the subject as myth and thus made Marxist politics seem pointless.⁴¹

If the tension between structuralism and existential Marxism can be seen in part as a power struggle between intellectuals, the existential Marxist critique of structuralism carries some intellectual weight. Structuralism offered an epistemological account of the present, but that epistemology was divorced from

³⁶ Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *The French Student Revolt*, trans B. R. Brewster (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 58, quoted in Poster, 383-384.

³⁷ Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 112.

³⁸ Épistemon, 83, quoted in Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 112.

³⁹ Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 101.

⁴⁰ Dosse, *The Rising Sign*, 232-233.

⁴¹ Jean-François Revel, "La religion des technocrates," *L'Express*, July 10-16, 1967.

practice.⁴² Although it implied a relativization of the present, it was difficult to justify political action in its terms—this problem motivated Foucault to eventually abandon the archeological project.⁴³ Thus, if the result of embracing structuralism was a retreat from politics—a throwing up of the hands—then it is easy to see why existential Marxists saw it as contrary to their aims. Poster, taking the existential Marxists side, summarizes the view of existential Marxists, expressed in texts like Lefebvre “Claude Lévi-Strauss ou le nouvel éleatisme” (1966) and Lucien Goldmann’s “Structuralisme, marxisme, existentialisme,” published in *L’Homme et la société* in 1966, as this: “With the unchecked growth of bureaucratic structures in advanced industrial society (structures that were ruled by non one), with the dissolution of historical consciousness (the sense that the future was not in the hands of the people), it should not be too surprising that a theory developed in which society was composed of agentless structures.”⁴⁴ However, the existential Marxists argued, “Generalizing from the distinction between the subject and his language to posit a fixed disjuncture between social beings and institutions that effectively excluded liberating action, was not only unproved but worked into the hands of the ruling class.”⁴⁵ For the existential Marxists, and for Poster, therefore, structuralism constituted a reactionary ideology.

Indeed, for Lefebvre, structuralism not only played into the hands of the ruling class, but was the ideology of a technocracy that sought to affirm its power as

⁴² Poster, 329-330.

⁴³ Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 278.

⁴⁴ Poster, 317-318.

⁴⁵ Poster, 318.

unchangeable as well.⁴⁶ However, Herman Lebovics argues in *Mona Lisa's Escort* (1999) that the existential Marxists were the real conservatives. For Lebovics, 1968 was the replacement of an old, humanist episteme with its last intellectual defenders, the existential Marxist writers, being replaced by the structuralist and post-structuralist literary critics of the anti-humanist postmodern era.⁴⁷ By using the word episteme, Lebovics borrows an analytical category that Michel Foucault develops in *Les mots et les choses*. The episteme constitutes the rules governing discourse in a given historical period.⁴⁸ It is,

[...] the epistemological field, the episteme in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility; in this account, what should appear are those configurations within the space of knowledge which have given rise to the diverse forms of empirical science.⁴⁹

Truth, therefore, results from how the rules of discourse in a given historical period construct truth. It follows, therefore, that the truth about the human subject which Sartre attempts to describe results from the historical period from which he lived and the discourse in which he participated. Foucault follows Lévi-Strauss in refiguring Sartre's historical subject as myth as well.

Within a Foucauldian scaffold, any intellectual shift is a power-struggle, and thus it is no surprise that the existential Marxists met structuralism with vigorous

⁴⁶ Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 108.

⁴⁷ Herman Lebovics, *Mona Lisa's Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), x, 204.

⁴⁸ Gutting, 268.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), xxii.

argumentation, given that the structuralists attacked their central analytic category, the transcendental subject. Henri Lefebvre, who taught many of the movement's leaders at Nanterre, argued that structuralism constituted the ideology of the technical classes who had taken power in France since the Liberation in 1945.⁵⁰ In *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne* (1968), he claimed that structuralism constituted an ideology pretending to be “non-ideology” by posturing as science.⁵¹ In *Position: La religion des technocrates* (1967), he called Althusser's interpretation of Marx reactionary because it removed the subject as the agent of historical change.⁵² His *Everyday Life in the Modern World* argues that while the social changes between 1950 and 1960 had changed the subject beyond recognition, this was a class strategy of the bourgeoisie to hide in everyday life man's real condition from himself and prevent revolution through distracting people with consumer goods. But the eternal truths about the human subject had not become invalidated. They had simply become more deeply hidden by the replacement of the misery of the working classes with new forms of alienation, such as loss of control over working conditions, and by the “decay of symbols” through the subject's constant bombardment with signifiers in urban life.⁵³

⁵⁰ Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 101.

⁵¹ “[...] today ideologies have changed and they bear names such as functionalism, formalism, structuralism, operationalism or scientism; they parade as ‘non-ideologies’ in order to merge more readily with the imagination; they disguise the basic fact—or factual basis—that everything stems from everyday life which in turn reveals everything, or, in other words, that the critical analysis of everyday life reveals ‘everything’ because it takes ‘everything’ into account.” Lefebvre, 72.

⁵² Revel.

⁵³ Lefebvre, 78, 94-97, 88.

From Lefebvre's perspective, the structuralist argument that the notion of "man" or the "subject" would become erased with the end of the humanist, historical episteme was ideology. That is, it was convenient for the technocrats to believe that the society they designed to control people, which to Lefebvre dehumanized the subject such that it no longer recognized its own subjectivity, did not erase anything basic and essential about human nature, but instead constituted a new way of being which would replace "man." That way, Lefebvre argued, they could blind themselves to what they were actually doing: acting as reactionary forces in history by reconstituting people as consumers.⁵⁴ In Sartre's vocabulary, this structuralist framework keeps people in being-in-itself rather than being-for-itself, because they conceive of themselves as arbitrary historical constructs rather than subjects in history.⁵⁵ For the existential Marxists, subjects in history are what people really are, so structuralism keeps people in inauthenticity or bad faith, blinding people to their own freedom.

Consequently, *La Chinoise's* commentary on structuralism, as well as the student radicals' graffiti and revolt, occurs in the context of a decade-long debate about how to study human beings and how those human beings should conceive of themselves as political actors. Humanism, especially existential Marxism, had been on the defensive against structuralism. Liberal humanists at the Sorbonne made every effort to keep structuralism marginal. The social sciences did not have a central place

⁵⁴ Revel.

⁵⁵ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 34.

in the French curriculum, and the department of literature at the Sorbonne focused on biographical criticism of the great French authors.⁵⁶

When Seuil published three articles by Roland Barthes applying structuralist literary analysis to Racine as *On Racine* in 1963, it inspired a public debate about the merits of structuralist literary analysis with Raymond Picard, the Sorbonne's foremost Racine scholar.⁵⁷ However, the French academic establishment generally ignored structuralism until it had gained such status in French culture that it had to be incorporated. It was the existential Marxists, especially those fighting for space with structuralists in the nascent French departments of social science, which defined themselves in opposition to structuralism.

Marxism and existentialism both promised to reveal the truth about man and history. Structuralism challenged the premises of that project by claiming that man and history were both social constructions created by "arrangements of knowledge."⁵⁸ Thus Marxists, existentialists, and especially existential Marxists sought to defend themselves. Since the 1950s, the structuralists had pushed what they saw as the "Marx and Freud's combined lesson"⁵⁹ even farther than the Marxists. If the Marxists argued that much of perception was distorted by ideology, they still assumed there was a stable subject that perceived.⁶⁰ The structuralists went even farther, arguing that this subject was a social construction as well, as was the historical framework in which the subject existed. Thus, Lévi-Strauss frames Sartre's *Critique de la raison*

⁵⁶ Dosse, *The Rising Sign*, 191-192.

⁵⁷ Dosse, *The Rising Sign*, 223-234.

⁵⁸ Foucault, 387.

⁵⁹ Lévi-Strauss, 253.

⁶⁰ Poster, 333.

dialectique (1957), which was supposed to tear away the ideology which kept people in bad faith and expose the subject for what it really is in relation to the collective, as myth as well, a “first-class ethnographic document.”⁶¹ In the conclusion to *Les mots et les choses* (1966), Michel Foucault argues that the “figure of man” central to existential phenomenology is a recent historical construction resulting from “a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge.” If those arrangements shifted, as Foucault hints they might, the figure of man might be “erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”⁶² In an interview, he mocked Sartre’s *Critique* as “The magnificent and pathetic effort of a man of the nineteenth century to think the twentieth century.”⁶³

Indeed, Foucault frames the “solution” of Marx to “the relation of History to anthropological finitude” as simply an inversion of the bourgeois economic thought of Ricardo. “At the deepest level of Western knowledge, Marxism introduced no real discontinuity,” claims Foucault. The distinction between Marx and Ricardo is “of little importance.”⁶⁴ Foucault writes:

Marxism exists in nineteenth century thought like a fish in water: that is, it is unable to breathe anywhere else. Though it is in opposition to the ‘bourgeois’ theories of economics, and though this opposition leads it to use the project of a radical reversal of History as weapon against them, that conflict and that project nevertheless have as their condition of possibility, not the reworking of all History, but an event than any archaeology can situate with precision, and that prescribed simultaneously, and according to the same mode, both nineteenth-century bourgeois economics and nineteenth-century revolutionary economics. *Their controversies may have stirred up a few waves and caused a*

⁶¹ Lévi-Strauss, 249.

⁶² Foucault, 387.

⁶³ “L’homme est-il mort?,” interview in *Arts* 30 (1966), quoted in Gutting, 276.

⁶⁴ Foucault, 260-261.

*few surface ripples; but they are no more than storms in a children's paddling pool.*⁶⁵ [emphasis mine]

If structuralism attacked the transcendental subject as a historical construction and dismissed Marxism as a mere inversion of bourgeois economics incapable of creating meaningful social change, both structuralism and existential Marxism defined their positions firmly in opposition to the other. For the structuralists, the existential Marxists operated in a humanist episteme that was mythological, and thus antithetical to science. The existential Marxists, for their part, framed the structuralists as reactionaries.⁶⁶

This debate occurred publicly in the French press. Godard, who studied philosophy and sociology at the Sorbonne and who operated in a social circle of French artists and intellectuals,⁶⁷ would have been very aware of this debate. Sartre had been a figure in Parisian popular culture since the late 1940s, and Foucault gained celebrity with the publication of *Les mots et les choses* in 1966.⁶⁸ Thus, Godard's films assume an audience familiar with the debate and with these texts. Even *Breathless* makes reference to Nietzsche: "live dangerously until the end," which the protagonist Michel Poiccard sees on a poster, is a direct reference to *The Gay*

⁶⁵ Foucault,, 262

⁶⁶ Revel.

⁶⁷ Mauri Ylä-Kotola, "Philosophical Foundations of the Work of Filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard," *Mediapolis: Aspects of Texts, Hypertexts, and Multimedial Communication*, ed. Sam Inkinen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1999), 146.

⁶⁸ Dosse, *The Rising Sign*, 3, 330.

Science,⁶⁹ and films later in the sixties feature photographs of structuralist and Marxist texts, when they are not explicitly invoked in conversation.⁷⁰

If Godard was certainly familiar with this debate and was a politically engaged French intellectual and artist, it is tempting to attempt to categorize his films on one side of the debate, given the divide between the two positions in the public discourse of the time. Reading Godard as an existential Marxist in opposition to structuralism would seem to make sense, given Godard's interest in the student radicals as a participant in 1968 and as filmmaker: *La Chinoise*; *Masculin, féminin* (1966); *Le gai savoir* (1969); and *Tout va bien* (1972) all engage with student radicals and questions surrounding 1968. Godard himself participated in 1968.⁷¹ The leaders of the student radicals defined themselves in opposition to the structuralists, and many commentators on 1968 claimed that the student uprising meant the death of structuralism. A forum in *Le Monde* in November 1968 bore the title: "Has Structuralism Been Killed by May '68?"⁷²

Thus, it might seem that Godard falls on the existential Marxist side of the debate with the student radicals, due to his interest in them and participation in 1968. David Bordwell, the foremost neo-formalist film critic in the United States, makes that conclusion in his chapter on Godard in *Narration and the Fiction Film* (1985). In contrast to the analysis of the film's effects, analysis of its themes and their

⁶⁹ Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Discussion of Film – *Breathless*," Lecture 25, Philosophy 7, Existentialism in Literature and Film, UC Berkeley Webcasts, Spring 2007, MP3 audio file, <http://webcast.berkeley.edu/courses.php?semesterid=27>.

⁷⁰ See *Le gai savoir*; *2 ou 3 choses*; *Masculin, féminin*; and *La Chinoise*, but that is by no means a complete list.

⁷¹ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 332.

⁷² Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 116.

relationship to history is facile, he argues. Even Godard's early films engage with the politics of everyday life. The politics of everyday life is the central focus of the existential Marxists, who sought to reinstate revolutionary fervor through dissatisfaction with working conditions and a society organized around consumption, thus Godard is an existential Marxist.⁷³

Bordwell cites the final chapter Mark Poster's *Existential Marxism in Postwar France* (1975) as the basis for his claim that the 1968 student movement was an existential Marxist phenomenon.⁷⁴ However, Bordwell accepts uncritically some of Poster's unwarranted assumptions. Poster argues that because much of the rhetoric of the student revolutionaries is existential Marxist, then the student revolts, as well as the radical films such as those of Godard, can best be explained in terms of existential Marxism.⁷⁵ However, while the student radicals certainly adopted the rhetoric of existential Marxism, it does not follow from this that existential Marxism's explanation of the student revolt in terms of the dehumanization of the subject by the transition to consumer culture is correct: it was simply the explanation accepted by the students. A structuralist might read students rioting against humanist institutions in terms of humanist values as humanist discourse collapsing in its own contradictions. Lacan implies such a reading in his statement that in 1968 "structures

⁷³ Bordwell, 311-313, 332-333.

⁷⁴ Bordwell, 331-332.

⁷⁵ Poster, 361-398.

had taken to the streets,”⁷⁶ and Lebovics account in *Mona Lisa's Escort* roughly corresponds to this as well.

But neither the views of characters nor Godard's subject matter necessarily implies that Godard's films should be seen as existential Marxist artifacts that have the effect of instilling or reflecting existential Marxist tenets. Godard could, like Barthes and especially Foucault,⁷⁷ be interested in the students as a social movement without agreeing with them philosophically. And while Godard acted in the student revolts, whereas most structuralist figures did not participate, the actions of an artist do not necessarily close the reading of his films.

Indeed, while Godard's films engage with the politics of everyday life in a manner that suggests the critique of everyday life characteristic of existential Marxism, that does not necessarily imply that Godard accepts the existential Marxist analysis of everyday life. An interest in the politics of daily life is by no means solely an existential Marxist concern. Barthes' *Mythologies* (1959), which in its construction of myth as a “metalanguage,” a “second language, *in which* one speaks about the first,” or “second-order semiological system,”⁷⁸ is undoubtedly a structuralist work, addresses the way in which bourgeois mythologies limit the range of possibilities available to think with in daily life and obscure history, which is to say social and economic conditions. Barthes writes,

⁷⁶ Jacques Lacan at the Foucault lecture on February 22, 1969, on the topic “Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?”; reprinted in *Littoral*, no. 9 (1983): 31, quoted in Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 122.

⁷⁷ Dosse argues that Foucault's move from archeology to genealogy resulted from an attempt to make sense of the perceived failure of the May 1968 student uprisings. Dosse, *The Sign Sets*, 247.

⁷⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 115, 114.

The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the ‘naturalness’ with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which in my view, is hidden there.⁷⁹

Barthes’ work, therefore, seeks to expose how bourgeois myths make what is the consequence of social and economic interests appears as the natural state of things. Barthes writes that mythologies operates like a semiological system of the second order, where a preconceived concept determines the form of a text. The form produces a signification that reinforces the concept: the effect erases much of the initial significance of the form.

In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional patten which I have just described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first image, becomes a mere signifier in the second.⁸⁰

The picture of a black soldier giving a salute offers an example of this “theft of language:”

I am at the barber’s, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Barthes, 11.

⁸⁰ Barthes, 113.

⁸¹ Barthes, 116.

The history of the black soldier is lost viewer receives only the signification of the myth: the concept that it is natural for blacks to make military salutes to the flag of the French Empire.⁸² For Barthes, history is “absorbed by the concept”⁸³ and the implied audience, which is part of the mythological system, forgets the historical circumstances which produced the situation.⁸⁴ the history of colonial conquest, the ideology taught in French and French colonial schools, the lack of other options for a young black man born in the French empire during the 1950s.

However, these mythologies do not hide an essence of the human subject in history. That is to say, for Sartre, these mythologies would function to obscure the essential brotherhood of mankind and basic human rights which they share, the essential truth that to desire freedom for oneself is to desire freedom for all men.⁸⁵ Barthes makes no such claims about human nature. Consequently, for Barthes, mythologies simply obscure the scientific truth about the arbitrariness of the social order by making it appear natural, or the only way the world could go.

Thus, an interest in the politics of everyday life is insufficient to brand Godard as an existential Marxist, because it is interest shared, albeit from a very different perspective, by the structuralists. And while this interest in the politics of everyday life suggests a possible affinity with existential Marxism, Godard’s ironical approach towards the student radicals suggests that he does not take their existential Marxist discourse entirely seriously. *La Chinoise* figures the student radicals as somewhat

⁸² Barthes, 116.

⁸³ Barthes, 118.

⁸⁴ Barthes, 116-117.

⁸⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Brooklyn: Haskell House, 1977), 50-52.

ridiculous. Véronique compares her condition to that of the workers suffering because they live in Nanterre, a worker's suburb. However, her education and relative physical comfort from doing something as benign as philosophy lessons distinguishes her radically from the one working-class girl in the collective, who has been a prostitute.⁸⁶ Godard mocks the posturing of students as workers in *Masculin, féminin* as well. Paul works as a union organizer, but sits around in cafés all day while seducing a pop star. His social position comically undercuts his complaints about the condition of the worker who lacks the time or leisure to organize. In *Masculin, féminin*, student radicalism seems to be an excuse to bully girls the radicals secretly want to sleep with. Paul attempts a sociological interview with a magazine contest winner in "Interview with a consumer product," but he is in fact the boyfriend of a consumer product, a pop singer. Godard describes this generation of student radicals as coming from "the generation of Marx and Coca-Cola,"⁸⁷ implying that he does not take their revolutionary discourse very seriously—that revolution might be a superficial consumer product that they *want now*—like their Coca-Cola.

Indeed, if Godard undercuts the existential Marxist rhetoric of the student radicals in his films with irony, suggesting their commitment is not entirely serious, the films' interest in language and the local rules of cinema is never undercut, and suggests as much in common with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology or even structuralist sociolinguistics than with existential Marxism. Godard's approach to philosophical problems shares more in common with structuralism and post-

⁸⁶ *La Chinoise*.

⁸⁷ *Masculin, féminin*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1966; New York: Criterion, 2005).

structuralism than existential Marxism. In *Vivre sa vie* (1962), Nana, the protagonist forced into prostitution, asks Brice Parain, Godard's former philosophy professor at the Sorbonne,⁸⁸ to buy her a drink. Nana expresses frustration at the need to talk. She tells him, "Words should express just what one wants to say. But they betray us."⁸⁹

Parain attempts to allay Nana's frustration at words' apparent failure to express. Although it would be pleasant to live in silence and avoid committing errors, "we can't live without talking." Talking is necessary because "we must think, and for thought we need words."⁹⁰ For Parain, therefore, thought cannot exist without language, which implies that truth cannot exist without words.⁹¹

This seemingly suggests that Parain advocates a postmodern approach to truth in which it is constructed by a language game. But he cites Plato as his philosophical reference point and advocates a Platonic conception of truth as outside of the world. Indeed, he notes that the idea that "one cannot distinguish the thought from the words that express it" goes back at least to Plato.⁹²

However, that thought cannot be separated from words does not necessarily imply that truth only exists within words. On the contrary, Plato's conception of the relationship between truth and language posits that language can only point humans towards the truth of the forms, which philosophers must contemplate directly.⁹³ Parain's statements support this Platonic conception of truth. Defending the

⁸⁸ Ylä-Kotola, 149.

⁸⁹ *Vivre sa vie*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1962; New York: Criterion, 2010).

⁹⁰ *Vivre sa vie*.

⁹¹ Ylä-Kotola, 147.

⁹² *Vivre sa vie*.

⁹³ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Melissa S. Lane (New York: Penguin, 2007), VIII, 533d, 265.

possibility of effective use of language, he cites Plato as an example. People continue to understand him even though “he wrote in Greek, 2500 years ago,” even though no one knows Plato’s ancient Greek, “at least not exactly.” This suggests that, for Parain, the function of language is to express truth, or at least point towards it. Consequently, humans have an obligation to attempt to “express themselves” well: the vocabulary of expression implies that the truth exists outside of language, as something inside.⁹⁴

Thus, if for Parain “one cannot have thoughts without words,”⁹⁵ then humans cannot construct the intersubjective truths of science without words, even if they can only point towards the truth. But because these truths are transcendent, and because the words will not always be the right words, the fact that humans are enmeshed in language implies that they will inevitably make errors and tell lies. But, Parain argues, the only way to arrive at the right words—to arrive at the truth—is by making errors. Thus, humans arrive at the truth only by making errors.

For Parain, therefore, the dream of French philosophy of the seventeenth century, to “[a]void error” and “live directly in the truth” is not possible: the structure of human thought through language prevents it. He cites German philosophy, particularly Kant and Hegel, as a means of bringing “us”—French philosophers—“back to life and make us see that we must pass through error to arrive at the truth.” For Parain, therefore, dialectics offer a way out of the apparent trap of human thought structured by language, which seemingly leads human beings inevitably to error because it is representational and socially constructed, and a Platonic conception of absolute truth outside of language. That is to say, dialectics allow Parain to agree with

⁹⁴ *Vivre sa vie.*

⁹⁵ *Vivre sa vie.*

Nana that “there is truth in everything, even in lies”: untruths constitute part of the “searching” for the truth. In order to get at the truth, one must make errors, and one must deploy the “contingent truths” of “everyday life” which are not identical with absolute truths.⁹⁶

Parain’s appropriation of dialectics to make everyday life a search for truth seemingly offers a stoically optimistic view of the relationship between truth and falsehood through life. A person experiments with possible truths based on the “bits and pieces” of knowledge that one has, making almost “arbitrary choices.” This process constitutes the path to “maturity,” which is the capacity to recognize truth.⁹⁷

Although Parain denies the possibility of language ever capturing absolute truth, he offers a way of progressively arriving at the truth through experience. Thus, his use of dialectics seemingly corresponds with the progressive vision of history towards the truth of German idealism.⁹⁸ However, Parain, in the film at least, restricts his discussion to the individual person: it is not clear whether civilizations make the same progress towards truth through experience that individuals do.

Without the teleological narrative of German idealism, dialectics offer a tragic vision of history overall. Dialectics themselves become “one damn thing after another,” but in a formalized, schematic fashion. That is, for Parain, truths always become the basis for making untrue claims—unless one stops talking altogether, but

⁹⁶ *Vivre sa vie.*

⁹⁷ *Vivre sa vie.*

⁹⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), 33.

for Parain this is impossible.⁹⁹ And unless there is historical progress—something it was difficult to argue given the legacy of the twentieth century, in which as Gorz points out it became obvious that technology did not necessarily serve human happiness¹⁰⁰-- then an arbitrary sequence of oppositions, in which a contingent truth produces a consequent falsehood, constitutes a random sequence of oppositions.

Thus, if we adopt Parain's view of human beings as wrapped up in language, but do not adopt a teleological outlook in which humans' language games progress towards an absolute truth while maintaining that such an absolute truth exists, then dialectics become tragic rather than progressive, because oppositions, such as that between subject and object, never resolve themselves.¹⁰¹ This opposition between subject and object constitutes the central epistemological problem of the West: how can a subject know the truth about an object which is outside of them? After the recognition, by Marcel Mauss and others, that many non-Western cultures do not recognize the subject as a universal category—a debate which was embedded in the problem of how to study non-Western societies as an attempt to move beyond the limits of French sociology, but was generalized to philosophy--it became a central preoccupation for existential phenomenology. Sartre attempted to resolve it by arguing that the subject was universal, but that “scarcity” blocks people in “primitive societies” from developing an articulated understanding of it.¹⁰² Sartre denies the possibility of integrating subject with object, claiming that this “integration [...] is

⁹⁹ Ylä-Kotola, 148.

¹⁰⁰ Gorz, 30.

¹⁰¹ Ylä-Kotola, 148.

¹⁰² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, *Theory of Practical Ensembles*, ed. Jonathan Rée, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976), 83.

always indicated and always impossible.”¹⁰³ However, by recognizing the universality of being-for-itself as the subject living in good faith, and making subjectivity an intensely impersonal position, Sartre constructs a unity of being in which human beings are responsible for the realization of the good faith of others, because being-for-itself entails a recognition of the possibility of being-for-itself in others.¹⁰⁴

For Merleau-Ponty, however, Sartre reconciled the division between subject and object by arbitrarily universalizing the subject. Rather than universalize the subject, Merleau-Ponty argued that the subject was an arbitrary cultural category that blinds Westerners to “the flesh,” the common property of all being. In “The Intertwining—the Chiasm,” from his unfinished book *Le visible et l’invisible* (1964). Merleau-Ponty argues that the flesh inherently intertwines subject and object, or the seer and the visible. That is, he fundamentally rejects the architecture of the relationship between subject and object or seer and seen as it is constructed by science, as Merleau-Ponty conceives of it.¹⁰⁵ For Merleau-Ponty, science assumes that it must bridge a caesura between subject and object. There exist “age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as the box.”¹⁰⁶ As an alternative, Merleau-Ponty offers the “chiasm” as a trope, in which the world lends its body to the viewer, and

¹⁰³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 623.

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Brooklyn: Haskell House, 1977), 50-52.

¹⁰⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” trans. Alphonso Lingis, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 393.

¹⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 399.

the viewer lends its body to the world, and they inflect each other, creating a common space of “the flesh.”¹⁰⁷

If Merleau-Ponty shifts the architecture of perception from the subject contemplating an object to an anonymous flesh, then Merleau-Ponty completely reconceives the process of perception. Instead of a subject striving for an immediate—which is to say, without the mediation of cultural assumptions or circumstance—contemplation, Merleau-Ponty insists that one can only have ideas through the flesh.¹⁰⁸ If the scientists’ dream of erasing their position is impossible, then the problem of how the subject can contemplate the object is a red herring. Rather, “There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other” that must be made sense of.¹⁰⁹

Rather than attempting to bridge the subject-object relationship, Merleau-Ponty offers a different mode of making sense of a thing which already assumes that

¹⁰⁷ Merleau-Ponty, 393, 395.

¹⁰⁸ “We touch here the most difficult point, that is, the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests in which it conceals. No one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible, in describing an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth. For what he says of musical ideas he says of all cultural beings, [...]. literature, music, the passions, but also the experience of the visible world are—no less than is the science of Lavoisier and Ampère—the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas. The difference is simply that this invisible, these ideas, unlike those of that science, cannot be detached from the sensible appearance and be erected into a second positivity.” Unlike under the assumptions of empirical science, “For these truths are not only hidden like a physical reality which we have not been able to discover, invisible in fact but which we will one day be able to see facing us, which others, better situated, could already see, provided that the screen that masks it is lifted. Here, on the contrary, there is no vision without the screen: the ideas we are speaking of would not be better known to us if we had no body and no sensibility; it is then that they would be inaccessible to us.” Merleau-Ponty, 408.

¹⁰⁹ Merleau-Ponty, 399.

there is no background. Rejecting the subject-object framework implies that there are not “things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer.”¹¹⁰ Rather, looking and being looked-at are co-determinant of each other. When someone perceives a red dress, that color is not an example of red. Instead, it occurs in relation to other aspects of the flesh:

[...] This red is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it, with which it forms a constellation, or with other colors it dominates or that dominate it, that it attracts or that attract it, that it repels or that repel it. In short, it is a certain node in the woof of the simultaneous and the successive. *It is a concretion of visibility, it is not an atom.* [emphasis mine]¹¹¹

If a color is not a coloration of a visible without color, but a “concretion of the visible”—if blue is not an example of blue, but a network with other visible things, such as red—then Merleau-Ponty rejects Platonism, which construes the visible as an example of the invisible, of abstract forms.

Thus, like Parain who argued that humans could only reach at truth through language, Merleau-Ponty argues that the visible and the invisible are intertwined. However, for Merleau-Ponty, there is no Platonic form towards which to strive. There is no use of a word outside of its own use, thus it is impossible for words to fail us. The red dress is not an example of red, but “a punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution, certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar [...]”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 393.

¹¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, 394.

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty, 394.

If the visible is not an example of a form, then the way to achieve knowledge is not by escaping the fray, like the chemist who arrives at truth in a sterile laboratory, but entering the fray. It is not clear whether the seer and the seen produce the knowledge: they make it together. “What is this prepossession of the visible, this art of interrogating it according to its own wishes, this inspired exegesis?”¹¹³ What is seen dictates what is said in an “inspired exegesis. However, the seer is not a blank canvas, because they come to the image of the red dress with the other reds they have seen, which does something to the image as well. Merleau-Ponty offers the example of two hands of the same person touching at the same time:

Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporates into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange.¹¹⁴

The example seems not to correspond with vision, because in vision the seer and seen do not “belong ‘to the same sense.’”¹¹⁵ However, the point is that seeing occurs in the world and that by seeing an image, one does something to the image and oneself at the same time.

Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh abolishes the epistemological problem of how one can know something outside of oneself. In Merleau-Ponty’s construction of vision, “he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at.”¹¹⁶ That is to say, worldliness does not obstruct knowledge, but is its precondition. In

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty, 395.

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, 395.

¹¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, 395.

¹¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 396.

seeing something, one sees another element of being: he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he “*is of it*”¹¹⁷—unless they share the flesh.

The flesh, therefore, allows Merleau-Ponty to offer a way in which local and contingent truths are produced by going with the world, rather than through a subject erasing their position to arrive at universal truths. With this essay, therefore, Merleau-Ponty attempts to resolve what he sees as a tragic situation that thinkers like Parain trap themselves into, in which universal agreement on a universal truth permanently eludes humans due to their conception of truth as outside the world and unchanging. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, truth occurs always already going with the world. Perception, and thus knowledge, occurs through this common element of the flesh which fills the world. Merleau-Ponty claims that subject and object are constructions of discourse, derived from Plato and maintained by the pervasive influence of Christian theology on Western thought, that make the problem of knowledge more difficult than it has to be. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty explicitly attacks the notion that words could fail to represent the truth, because there is no truth to be represented. For Merleau-Ponty, truths are invisible, but they are bound to the flesh.¹¹⁸ While Parain argued that humans could not access truths without language as a tool in the struggle, Merleau-Ponty argues that language cannot possibly fail to represent because it does not represent: it is constitutive of ideas, as ideas have their being only by relation to the flesh.

Although Merleau-Ponty never explicitly applied his notion of “the flesh” to the theory of cinema, it obviously contradicts the principle of cinematic realism. If all

¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, 396.

¹¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 407.

being is of the flesh, then an image does not represent a world outside of itself—the real. Rather, the image constitutes part of the world. This is exactly the position Godard took in his film theory. Even when working for André Bazin at the *Cahiers du cinéma*, Godard rejected Bazin’s theory that film functions essentially to give the viewer the impression of seeing reality. For Godard, Bazin’s realism stemmed from a fundamental disrespect for the image as representation, a tool outside of the truth of life. In contrast to Bazin’s view, Godard insisted that film constitutes part of life. Thus, the filmmaker should not strive to imitate the real, but discover the laws which govern film, which is part of the real—insofar as the real exists.¹¹⁹

Godard’s films, as well as his criticism, substantiate the correspondence of his theory of cinema with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception. In *JLG/JLG. Autoportrait de décembre* (1994), the voiceover uses the concept of “*la chair*,” or “the flesh,” and directly references Merleau-Ponty’s example of one hand touching the other.¹²⁰ A conception of knowledge as produced by the interaction between the seer and seen corresponds with Godard’s insistence that his films constitute forms of “research.”¹²¹ But the best evidence of Godard’s use of Merleau-Ponty’s

¹¹⁹ Ylä-Kotola, 153-155.

¹²⁰ “[...] d’épouser les choses que j’ai touchées dans le mienne or, le domaine on s’en aperçoit vite est illimité si nous pouvons montrer que la chair est une notion dernière qu’elle n’es pas union ou composée de deux substances mais pensable par elle-même s’il ya un rapport à lui-même du visible qui me traverse et me constitue en voyant ce cercle que je ne fait pas mais qui me fait cet enroulement du visible sur le visible peut traverser animer d’autres corps aussi bien que le mien et si j’ai pu comprendre comment en moi naît cette vague comment le visible qui est là-bas est simultanément mon paysage.” *J.L.G./J.L.G. Autoportrait de décembre*, VHS, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1994; Paris: Gaumont, 1994). Published as Jean-Luc Godard, *JLG/JLG. Phrases* (Paris: P.O.L., 1996), 70-71, quoted in Ylä-Kotola, 158.

¹²¹ Jean-Luc Godard, “One Should Put Everything Into Film,” trans. Tom Milne, *Godard on Godard*, ed. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 238.

epistemology can be seen in his use of technique. As genre critics have noted, his films reference and exaggerate other films,¹²² giving the impression that they are about cinema itself rather than about characters. In *À bout de souffle*, Michel's reverent utterance of "Bogey" before a poster of Humphrey Bogart makes the fact that he imitates Bogart obvious, with the parodic inversion that he is a criminal instead of a detective.¹²³ In *Une femme est une femme* (1961), Godard's take on the musical, the musical sections often lack motivation in the script.¹²⁴ Hollywood musicals painstakingly construct a form of motivation,¹²⁵ but for Godard, that the film is a musical is enough, because the genre is already established.

Indeed, the music in these scenes starts and stops at random, calling attention to the process of narration. That is to say, it breaks the possibility of imagining that the film offers a window onto the world, because it is obviously artifice. Although a Hollywood musical could be seen as fantastical rather than realistic, it follows the principle of realism insofar that it motivates the soundtrack in the script, through a musical theater production within the film, or as an expression of the characters' subjective states. But in Godard, music functions as the narration proclaiming its presence.

¹²² David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 315.

¹²³ *Breathless*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1960; New York: Criterion, 2007).

¹²⁴ *A Woman is a Woman*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1961; New York: Criterion, 2004).

¹²⁵ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 71.

Thus, Godard's "arbitrary use of technique"¹²⁶ breaks the socially conditioned process of constructing a narrative about characters outside the film and forces the audience to recognize that they interact with images and sounds. Godard uses the soundtrack to achieve this effect in *Masculin, féminin*, where it is impossible to hear the two protagonists speak to each other, and in *Le week-end* (1968), where the musical soundtrack makes it difficult to hear Corinne tell the man she is cheating on her husband with about an erotic adventure, in highly explicit and profane detail.¹²⁷ In *Le mépris* (1963), Godard uses color filters in the opening scenes that change from blue to red to yellow, calling attention to the presence of a camera.¹²⁸ Beginning with *A bout de souffle* (1960), jump cuts disorient the viewer. Many of his films use intertitles, which not only comment on the cinematic narration, but call attention to its presence as well.

This arbitrary use of technique directly violates classical cinematic conventions, which function to subordinate technique to the fabula and make the narration as invisible as possible. The fabula is an invisible construct which exists in the audience's mind. It equates roughly to story, and constitutes the pattern of causal relationships between characters.¹²⁹ For Bordwell, the classical cinema renders the syuzhet, the arrangement of story events, and style, defined as the deployment of film techniques, into a series of cues towards the construction of the fabula.¹³⁰ By violating these conventions and often denying the audience enough information to

¹²⁶ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 312.

¹²⁷ *Weekend*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1968; New York: New Yorker Video, 2005).

¹²⁸ *Contempt*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1963; New York: Criterion, 2002).

¹²⁹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 49.

¹³⁰ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 49-50.

construct a clear fabula without abandoning narrative, Godard calls attention to film's status as a cultural artifact rather than a window on the world or representation of the real.

If Godard's deviation from classical conventions only called attention to the materials of cinematic narration, that in itself would constitute a significant aesthetic move. However, Godard insisted in one of his first articles, "Towards a Political Cinema" (1950), written when he was nineteen years old, that a political cinema was possible.¹³¹ After 1968, he claimed to make a revolutionary cinema. Godard's self-presentation as revolutionary due to complete independence from Hollywood is faulty; Godard's films function politically only in relation to the classical cinema which serves as its background, but they achieve their political effects through that relationship.¹³²

That is to say, while Godard's films operate always in relation to the classical cinema, they have subversive political effects within that limit by calling attention to norms of cinema-watching, what Bordwell's wife Kristin Thompson calls "backgrounds."¹³³ In "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods" (1988), Thompson argues that audiences view films in relation to a background, comprised of movie-watching conventions. The process of narration classical cinema deploys assumes that the audience has seen hundreds of films before. Through repeatedly watching classical cinema, audiences learn to construct a fabula from the

¹³¹ Jean-Luc Godard, "Towards a Political Cinema," trans. Tom Milne, *Godard on Godard*, ed. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 16-17.

¹³² Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est* (1972)," *European Cinema Reader*, ed. Catherine Fowler (New York: Routledge, 2002), 82.

¹³³ Kristin Thompson, "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods," *Breaking the Glass Armor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 21.

narration's cues, constructing "norms of prior experience" or backgrounds.¹³⁴ Bordwell claims that this learned process of narration, which depends on a canonic story format Bordwell claims to be embedded in Western culture, occurs mostly in the preconscious mind.¹³⁵

As Bordwell notes, Godard's deviations from these conventions obstruct fabula construction. Although there is a fabula, characters' motivations and causal relations often do not appear fully formed. Their motivations are often ambiguous, while the arbitrary use of technique often obstructs the reception of key info. Scenes that do not advance the script complicate the plot and often occur at the expense of scenes that would clarify motivations.¹³⁶ As Bordwell notes, this causes Godard's films to place much greater demands on the viewer's attention and memory to even allow the narration to come together.¹³⁷

Therefore, Godard, by rejecting the conventional subordination of technique to the fabula, makes the audience aware that film is a medium which, through repeated exposure, has created expectations about how films should go. This seems technical, but has political effects. Narration in classical cinema is insidious because it attempts to erase its own presence and become a transparent vehicle for ideology. This is not a place for a discussion of what that ideology consists of. However, any narrative is constituent and constitutive of the culture which produced it and which it produces, and most cultures assume that their myths are universal.¹³⁸ By showing

¹³⁴ Thompson, "Neoformalist Film Analysis," 21.

¹³⁵ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 112.

¹³⁶ Bordwell, 322.

¹³⁷ Bordwell, 320.

¹³⁸ Lévi-Strauss, 249.

classical cinematic conventions to be a set of conventions for making film appear to be a window on the world rather than the natural way to produce a film, Godard reminds audiences that the image is part of the world rather than a representation of it, and, as we shall argue later, performs a relativization of the values of the civilization which is constituent and constitutive of classical cinema.

Chapter 2

Seeing Cinema:

Subverting Hollywood's Newtonian Architecture

If Godard's work undermines representation, then Godard incorporates many of the same influences as structuralism into his work. Godard formed part of a general artistic and critical critique of the notion of representation in art, which was linked to the structuralists' rejection of the notion that language should seek to transparently represent reality.¹ This critique stemmed in part from Merleau-Ponty's work, but had its deepest roots in Merleau-Ponty's antecedents, Nietzsche and Heidegger—the principle influences on structuralism.²

In “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” Nietzsche frames truth as a social construction. He writes, “Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing.”³ By claiming that humans invented truth at a specific time in a specific place, Nietzsche historicizes truth. If the distinction between truth and lies was established at a specific historical moment through the creation of rules—if “a uniformly valid and binding designation is

¹ Mauri Ylä-Kotola, “Philosophical Foundations of the Work of Film Director Jean-Luc Godard,” *Mediapolis: Aspects of Texts, Hypertexts, and Multimedial Communication*, ed. Sam Inkinen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1999), 155.

² Dosse describes structuralism as a banner for the importation of Nietzsche and Heidegger into French intellectual life. François Dosse, *History of Structuralism: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 364-379.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” trans. Daniel Breazeale, *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith A. Pearson and Duncan Large (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2006), 114.

invented for things, and this language likewise establishes the first laws of truth”⁴—then Nietzsche inverts the architecture of knowledge. Rather than the model of humans coming to discover truth through science, truth is invented by the rules which constitute science. Consequently, for Nietzsche there is no basis to privilege scientific truth over other kinds of truth, because both are myth.⁵

If there is no fundamental truth which humans struggle to represent in language, but instead all truths are constructed by language, or “metaphor,”⁶ then language does not fail to represent truth—the tragedy of Platonism—but is the material through which humans create truth. However, language is not transparent, and different languages create different kinds of truth in different ways, because truths, which are metaphors or myths, constitute “weapons” in a struggle for power between the weak and the strong,⁷ rather than knowledge to be accumulated. If the circumstances of the struggle change constantly, then so will the metaphors deployed, implying that truth is local and historical.

For Nietzsche, therefore, language does not fail to represent a truth outside of life, but constitutes truth. However, truth is not the central problem, because Nietzsche de-privileges truth as just another myth. What becomes central, therefore, is language. Language is arbitrary, because it is not derived from representations of truth in external reality, but metaphor: “we possess nothing but metaphors for

⁴ Nietzsche, 115.

⁵ Nietzsche, 117.

⁶ Nietzsche, 117.

⁷ Nietzsche, 122.

things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities.”⁸ The appropriate metaphor is circumstantial and perspectival, but it is all we have.

Godard’s rejection of representation in art, therefore, was rooted in Nietzsche, as well as, perhaps via Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger’s turn to language, which Godard references in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (1967). Godard’s critique of representation, therefore, shared the same genealogy as structuralism’s rejection of representation in language. Indeed, Dosse argues that structuralism constituted a Trojan horse by which Nietzsche and Heidegger entered French intellectual life.⁹ This is not to say that the names Nietzsche and Heidegger had not already been introduced to France by the existentialists. However, Sartre and the other existentialists had not engaged with the critique of representation in language developed in Nietzsche and the later Heidegger. For Sartre, language functioned as a tool of representation. If there were no fundamental truths to represent, there was a condition to describe and represent: the goal of language for Sartre was the transparent representation of reality.¹⁰

That Godard engaged in a critique of representation does not necessarily imply that he engaged with a critique of metaphysics, although I will argue that he did. That is to say, modernist works questioned the possibility of accurately representing reality without questioning the existence of a common reality. *Citizen Kane* (1941), for example, presents the audience with several contradictory portraits

⁸ Nietzsche, 116.

⁹ Dosse, *The Rising Sign*, 364-379.

¹⁰ Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 309.

of Charles Kane.¹¹ However, *Citizen Kane*, however, does not question that there is a fundamental reality which the characters in the film share: it simply questions whether narrative can capture the truth of what happened. *Citizen Kane* is about how words fail to represent a complex underlying reality, the integrity of which it does not question.¹² Indeed, *Citizen Kane* explores the impossibility of capturing the life of a man in a single narrative by offering several narratives that do not cohere. That they cannot be made to fit together is emphasized by the failure of “Rosebud” to explain Kane’s life: the editor wants there to be a single key or gimmick, but lost childhood as an explanation is so banal that the audience rejects it. The failure of the gimmick emphasizes that reality resists closure by a single narrative.¹³

But although *Citizen Kane* critiques overly simplistic narrativizations of reality and suggests that reality escapes closure, it does not undermine the audience’s sense that there is one single reality into which the film offers a window. Godard, by contrast, used technique to undermine the audience’s sense that there was a coherent story-world. Like *Citizen Kane*, Godard’s films are fabulas: there is a story-world. However, unlike *Citizen Kane*, there is no assurance that there is a real, coherent story world, because *Bande à part* (1964), as we shall see, refers constantly to its own contrivance through deploying film techniques that are not motivated by the conveyance of story-information. Similarly, *A bout de souffle* (1960) undermines the viewer’s sense of a single reality by calling attention to the presence of narration

¹¹ *Citizen Kane*, DVD, directed by Orson Welles (1941; Atlanta: Turner Home Entertainment, 2001).

¹² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1989), 37.

¹³ Robert L. Carringer, “Rosebud, Dead or Alive: Narrative and Symbolic Structure in *Citizen Kane*,” *PMLA* 91, 2 (1976): 190-191.

through jump cuts that lack motivation in the script. Moreover, although the characters share the space of Paris, they live in different moral worlds, and those worlds are primary: the deviation of these world from the seemingly objective perspective of the viewer is not about the tragic impossibility of communication between characters or the misunderstanding of Michel about the way things are in the world which leads to his punishment and the return of order—a tempting explanation, taking its cues from the Victorian novel, because the police do shoot him to death—but the condition of life: difference and conflicts follow from different perspectives. Godard constantly calls attention to the narrational process, emphasizing the artificiality of any such world as a function of cinematic conventions. That is to say, Godard's interruption of fabula-construction implies that any such world exists in the mind of the viewer as a result of socially-constructed narrative conventions.

If viewers arbitrarily construct a story-world as a result of cinematic tricks, then the situation is the same for their cultural world. That is to say, those cinematic cues work to create a fabula because humans in cultures where cinema exists operate under the fundamental self-interpretation that they exist in an intersubjective reality. Thus, when presented with images and sounds of humans in motion, they create a chain of causal relationships like they would in their everyday lives. However, it is a narrative trick, it is all illusion: those characters are words and images. Of course, there is no reason why everyday life is any different: the personalities of other people are constructed by words and image, which are not origins, but the result of an intercession of personal and cultural influences and power relations—as Barthes

writes, the self is a “ready-formed dictionary.”¹⁴ However, the ideology of late capitalism, or the fundamental self-interpretation of the technological age, posits that each person is a subject solving problems in order to make more money. Godard, by making it explicit that his characters are constructions of cinema, through the obstruction of narration and through their obvious imitation of Hollywood genre characters, calls attention to the construction of identity.

If Godard shared many antecedents with the structuralists, this is not to say that Godard was a structuralist. However, by engaging with the critique of representation and the critique of metaphysics, Godard forms part of a crisis of confidence about “grand narratives,” questioning the myth of emancipation and the myth of ideal truth. Looking back on the period between 1968 and 1972, Jean-François Lyotard argues that these years marked the beginning of the rejection of “grand narratives.”¹⁵ Following Nietzsche, Lyotard frames sciences as language-games with discursive rules, rather than the positivist accumulation of truths. In order to justify themselves, they must legitimate themselves in terms of what Lyotard calls “narrative.”¹⁶ These narratives “determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do.”¹⁷ Knowledge, therefore, must justify its existence in terms of self-legitimizing narratives through

¹⁴ Barthes, 146.

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), xxiii.

¹⁶ Lyotard, 10, 7.

¹⁷ Lyotard, 23.

philosophy.¹⁸ However, these narratives are not fundamental, but are historical because they are “part of the culture.”¹⁹ Thus, if the culture changes, then the narratives in terms of which knowledge must justify itself will change. Lyotard argues that a reorganization of society occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s. Lyotard writes, “the old poles represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction.”²⁰

Later sociologists argued that this was the result of the transition from international capitalism, in which commerce was organized in terms of the nation-state and its colonies, to global capitalism, in which commerce was organized in terms of transnational corporations,²¹ but this is not a place for the discussion of the causes. However, Lyotard insists that different forms of social organization produce different forms of the “sociopolitical subject” which does science:²² Lyotard writes that the “new scientific attitude” of the science of the modern period which developed in the Enlightenment is legitimated by “the people’s consensus,” and thus justifies itself in terms of the “progress” of “the people” in their apparent political manifestation, the nation-state. Consequently, the state and subject which perform modern science were interdependent:

[...] this necessarily abstract subject [...] depends on the institutions within which that subject is supposed to deliberate and decide, and which comprise

¹⁸ Lyotard, xxiii.

¹⁹ Lyotard, 23.

²⁰ Lyotard, 14.

²¹ See Leslie Sklair, *Sociology of the Global System*, 2nd edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

²² Lyotard, 30.

all or part of the State. The question of the State becomes intimately entwined with that of scientific knowledge.²³

If the subject of science was created in terms of a State which legitimated its practice, the decline of the centrality of the state changes the way knowledge legitimates itself.

During the period in which the nation-state was central, the narratives through which knowledge legitimated itself in terms of those poles were the narrative of “humanity as the hero of liberty,” which dominated in France, and the narrative of “the speculative spirit,” or German idealism, which dominated in Germany.²⁴ The first of these narratives construes “humanity as the hero of liberty.” The natural state of man is to be the subject that performs science, and humanity must overthrow the tyrants that prevent man’s access to that epistemological position. Thus, Lyotard relates science in this narrative in terms of a political right to act for the people in order to liberate them.²⁵ Under this grand narrative, the entire structure of institutions of knowledge legitimized themselves in terms of the state, which legitimized itself in terms of the people.

The second grand narrative, mostly of German origin, bears less of a relation to our analysis here. The importance lies not in the details or history of the two narratives, but in their effects. For Lyotard they provided the framework in which science legitimated itself in the modern period of intellectual history. For Lyotard,

²³ Lyotard, 31.

²⁴ Lyotard, 31, 33.

²⁵ Lyotard, 31.

“modern” knowledge is “any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse [the narrative of philosophy],”²⁶ which is to say a grand narrative.

During the period 1968 to 1972, Lyotard argues, an appeal to these grand narratives no longer structure knowledge. He designates these years as the beginning of the “postmodern” period in science.²⁷ Lyotard defines postmodernity as characterized by “incredulity towards metanarratives.”²⁸ Lyotard speculates that this resulted from the undermining of Newtonian physics and the recognition in high-level theoretical hard sciences that truths are always already perspectival, but this was constituent and constitutive of social changes as well. Equally important was the impossibility of any one person being able to understand scientific research in all the different discipline, which is an effect of scientific progress as well.²⁹ During this period from 1968 to 1972, Lyotard argues, many researchers stopped making the pretense of appealing to a grand narrative. Therefore, a “local determinism” replaced unifying grand narratives.³⁰

The post-structuralist turn in literary criticism and philosophy after 1968 supports Lyotard’s assertion of a turn to “local determinism.” In *S/Z* (1970), Barthes mocks structuralism’s attempt to create a science of narrative and create a closed reading. This was “a task as exhausting (ninety-nine percent perspiration, as the saying goes) as it is ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference.”³¹ Instead of continuing this pseudo-scientific project, Barthes uses structuralist

²⁶ Lyotard, xxiii.

²⁷ Lyotard, xxiv.

²⁸ Lyotard, xxiv.

²⁹ Lyotard, xxiv.

³⁰ Lyotard, xxiv.

³¹ Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 3.

techniques to explode the text and show how texts sustain multiple readings.³² Barthes writes that there are five codes operating in Balzac's *Sarrasine*, but there is no scientific basis for claiming there are five codes as opposed to ten codes seventy-five codes. Indeed, that is the whole point: rather than frame the text as manifesting an internal structure, Barthes aims to produce a "structuration" by deploying technical categories: that is, to read the text in a creative way.³³ In *Surveiller et punir* (1975), Foucault abandons the scientific pretensions of his previous efforts to create scientific histories of discourse, and writes instead a "history of the present" which makes no claim to tell the past as it really happened.³⁴

If these former structuralists abandoned their claims to science after 1968, Lyotard claims that this is no coincidence. The way in which science legitimates itself is always already tied to "the social bond."³⁵ Particularly in the French educational system of the 1960s designed by the Third Republic, knowledge was justified in terms of the benefits it provided to the people. In 1968, the revolt against the educational system seems to have liberated some of the most famous French intellectuals from feeling a responsibility to appeal to the grand narratives of the classical humanist culture which developed out of the Third Republic's educational policies, while rousing some of them to political action. Rather than appeal to the progress of the people via the state, Foucault appeals to the possibility of resisting disciplinary society—although what this freedom benefits is not made clear. Barthes

³² Barthes, *S/Z*, 10.

³³ Barthes, *S/Z*, 19, 20.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 31.

³⁵ Lyotard, xxiii-xxiv.

appeals to the pleasure of the reader.³⁶ Indeed, the “death of the author,”³⁷ taken more broadly, is not simply a liberation of the literary critic from the need to do biographically-based readings, but a liberation from the assumption that there is an original text, the natural in which truth is discovered, which must be uncovered—the death of the Newtonian scientific paradigm in which science is the discovery of God’s natural laws,³⁸ in favor of Nietzsche’s myth-making.

Herman Lebovics correlates the postmodern turn in the humanities and social sciences with a crisis of legitimacy of a French state that had taken direct responsibility for its culture.³⁹ That is to say, French culture after the Second World War failed to maintain its symbolic capital. Although Lebovics uses the term *episteme* and, like Lyotard, points to 1968 as the point of shift, he claims that the shift resulted from a broader decline in French high culture’s authority over the broader popular since before 1945.⁴⁰ If Lyotard restricted his inquiry into the state of science and only made suggestions as to what a historical characterization of this shift might be, Lebovics attempts to construct it as part of a broader process in the cultural and intellectual history of France. Consistent with Lyotard’s claims about the intersection of science with the legitimacy of the state, Lebovics claims that the scientific shift is part and parcel of the disintegration of the myth of the “True France,” supported by

³⁶ See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).

³⁷ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

³⁸ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 143, 146.

³⁹ Herman Lebovics, *Mona Lisa’s Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 198.

⁴⁰ Lebovics, 4-6.

the culture of *la civilisation française*, which had held the French nation together since the 1880s.⁴¹

In the postwar years, the classical humanist culture of republican France no longer fostered unity as it had before.⁴² Although Lyotard argues that the rejection of grand narratives occurred in the years between 1968 and 1972 in France, those grand narratives, as a result of structural and political changes, had been weak and self-critical since the 1940s: structuralism and existential Marxism can be seen as the culture of grand narratives attacking itself from within. Lebovics writes that the popularity of existentialism in the Fourth Republic was a symptom of the decline of this humanist culture, characterized as it was by the grand narrative of progress.

Already in the brief years of the Fourth Republic, literary intellectuals were filling the reviews and book racks with gloomy essays on contemporary intellectual life and the culture. What was existentialism, if not a stricken literary humanism's confrontation with death?⁴³

Although French existentialism developed in the 1930s as French intellectuals sought to accommodate the French philosophy they had been taught at university with the tragic view of life that predominated after World War I, it gained unprecedented popularity after World War II. With the publication of *L'Être et le néant* (1943), *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), and high profile arguments about the

⁴¹ Lebovics, x-xi. Lebovics narrative coheres with that offered by Eugene Weber in *Peasants into Frenchmen*, where Weber argues that the French nation was constructed by the French educational system as a homogenous print culture. Although Weber's narrative can be criticized as an instance of modernization theory run rampant in an oversimplification of the construction of identity, this does not necessarily undermine Lebovics' hypothesis about the disintegration of French national culture.

⁴² Lebovics, x.

⁴³ Lebovics, 198.

validity of existentialism with Marxists and cultural conservatives, Jean-Paul Sartre became France's foremost literary celebrity.⁴⁴

In that lecture, Sartre emphasized that existentialism was the bearing out of the consequences of atheism, and showed how it constituted part of the progressive narrative that had legitimized French knowledge since the 1880s. However, the expansion of human freedom, which had been central to French philosophy since the 1880s, was used to justify opposition to the nation-state and French nationalism. That is, Sartre remained committed to the cause of freedom inculcated by his French education, but did not see the French state as the vessel for the expansion of freedom. Rather than the French state, from 1952 forward he saw the Communist Party or the working classes—an explicitly transnational category—as the vessel of freedom. Sartre's turn to Marxism, therefore, and the popularity of his brand of existential Marxism among French intellectuals and students, can be seen as part of a crisis of confidence about the French state's ability to uphold the values of the grand narrative of progressive liberty which legitimated it.

If Sartre emphasized the inability of the French state to uphold the value of freedom, Lefebvre showed how scientific progress did not serve the cause of freedom either. Observing the increased economic wealth through increased technical and economic development from the period 1950 to 1960, Lefebvre concluded that science did not in itself bring about the emancipation of the people.⁴⁵ Thus, the grand

⁴⁴ Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 153-154.

⁴⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sasha Rabinovitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 51.

narrative of progress was attacked from another angle, that of the necessary correlation between scientific progress and human progress.

Although Lefebvre, as a Marxist, was committed to progress through reason, he argued that progress through reason functioned as ideology in postwar France, because increased material comfort robbed the working classes of their revolutionary fervor, without resolving the problem of alienation. This was because the resolution of material needs produced new needs, namely autonomy and creativity in work, which French civilization did not meet in the 1960s. Thus, for Lefebvre, alienation did not just result from material deprivation, but resulted from any form of labor organization in which a person does not have autonomy.⁴⁶

In *Stratégie Ouvrière et Néocapitalisme* (1964),⁴⁷ André Gorz attempted to think his way out of a situation in which there was no longer a revolutionary class but alienation continued, and strove to show how educated technicians and teachers might, due to their concern for liberty over economic gain, might constitute a new revolutionary class. This new strategy for labor could offer existential Marxists a way of conserving the grand narrative of a progressive vision of history. Although Henri Lefebvre seems to have embraced this theory to some degree, he was not overly optimistic. Recognizing the failure of the Soviet Union to live up to expectations, Lefebvre became pessimistic even about socialism's liberatory potential, because a socialist state, while distributing material comfort to the masses, might still fail to

⁴⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 56.

⁴⁷ André Gorz, *Strategy for labor; a radical proposal*, trans. Martin A. Nicolaus and Victoria Ortiz (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

give the workers autonomy,⁴⁸ and would thus be no better than the postwar French capitalist system.

If the existential Marxists attempted to cling to the grand narrative of emancipation by using it to criticize the deployment of science under capitalism, the structuralists attacked the emancipatory and progressive side of the grand narrative in terms of one of its constituent elements, scientific truth. Lévi-Strauss, claiming to speak with scientific authority, declared that Sartre's historical subject, which was central to his vision of historical progress through its emancipation in history, was a mythological construct.⁴⁹ In *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault argued that the problem of "man," and hence the problem of how to maximize man's freedom and potential, was a recent historical invention resulting from the arrangements of discourse under market capitalism.⁵⁰ Thus, Foucault argued, the existential Marxists sought to liberate something from its constituent conditions—a pointless undertaking.

However, the structuralists' truth-claims were as inflated as the existential Marxists' claims to know man's true nature. Structuralism fashioned itself as a scientific discourse. Even if we make the pre-1968 assumption that scientific truths are ahistorical, structuralist claims were not empirically verifiable, and thus were not science.⁵¹ But, as the post-structuralist critique of structuralism made clear after 1968, it was senseless for the structuralists to claim to make claims about the world that

⁴⁸ Lefebvre, 46.

⁴⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 249.

⁵⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 344-387.

⁵¹ Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 249-250.

were objective when their presupposition was that rules of discourse, which are produced as a result of power-relations through institutions, serve the interests of certain privileged groups. Thus, although structuralism offered a vessel through which Nietzsche and Heidegger could critique French humanism, it did not constitute an epistemic shift away from “modern” thought—it continued to be self-critique.

As Lyotard and Lebovics argue, it was only after 1968 that thinkers influenced by structuralism became postmodern. Lyotard characterizes structuralism as a “Newtonian anthropology”⁵²—it assumes that truth exists independent of perspective. After 1968, there was no longer the assumption of a single language-game. Instead, the assumption was that there “are many different language games,” dispersed among different communities, with different interests and priorities.⁵³ This shift in the organization of knowledge coincided with a shift from the universalizing tendencies of class-based politics to the identity politics of the New Social Movements of the 1970s.⁵⁴

The shift in Michel Foucault’s historiography from before and after 1968 is instructive. In the 1966 book *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault’s method was archeological and had scientific pretensions. The goal was to construct a scientific theory of discourse. Although Foucault recognized discourse shifted in relation to shifts in social institutions, Foucault did not investigate those relationships, but sought to map the rules of discourse, or epistemes, in a set of distinct historical

⁵² Lyotard, xxiv.

⁵³ Lyotard, xxiv.

⁵⁴ See Arthur Hirsh, *The French New Left: An Intellectual History from Sartre to Gorz* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 208-235.

periods.⁵⁵ Although this project is of interest as intellectual history, its separation of discourse from institutions for the sake of scientific accuracy—it is easier to make scientific-seeming claims about structures of discourse than scientific-seeming claims about the relationship between discourse and social institutions—does not imply any sort of project for agency.⁵⁶

Although *Les mots et les choses* relativized the human sciences of the 1960s, it does this in terms of science and for science's sake. That is to say, it made the human sciences' assumption seem arbitrary as compared to, say, chemistry, and the goal is to construct a scientific theory of discourse. Thus, Foucault continued to operate in the scientific framework of the progressive grand narrative, intrinsically linked to a national project, in this work.

However, by the mid-1970s, when Foucault gave the lectures that were later published as *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault experimented with a historico-political discourse—he did not even claim its scientific validity, but saw it as an exploration—which framed “truth” as something which serves interests, “as a weapon to be used for a partisan victory.”⁵⁷ Foucault framed this historico-political discourse in direct opposition to the vision of the nation-state proffered by the Third Republic of the “True France.” Under this vision of the “True France,” conflicts among social classes and regions were superficial and the nation-state constituted a sacred and

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), xxii.

⁵⁶ Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 278.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), 270.

metaphysical union.⁵⁸ This vision of the “True France” equates roughly with de Gaulle’s “certain idea of France” as a country with an “exceptional destiny” which transcends internal divisions.⁵⁹

Foucault argues that the historiography which occurred in terms of this philosophico-juridical discourse functioned to legitimize the nation-state by arguing how “beneath the apparent or superficial confusion, beneath the visible brutality of bodies and passions a basic rationality” existed “which is both permanent and related, by its very essence, to the just and the good.”⁶⁰ This historiography was based on the assumptions of Thomas Hobbes. For Foucault, Hobbes seemingly argued that man’s natural state was war, but this was not actually what Hobbes argued. Hobbes offered a vision in which the natural state of man was not-war based on a calculation.⁶¹ Within this framework, Hobbes justified the replacement of a martial society within what became the state’s borders with military institutions.⁶² But this was in turn justified by war between states. However,

The important point is that the principle of historical analysis was sought in racial duality and the war between races. On this basis, and through the intermediary of the works of Augustin and Amédée Thierry, two types of historical interpretation developed in the nineteenth century: one will be articulated with the class struggle, and the other with a biological confrontation.⁶³

The apparently essential truth of the rational good of nation-state legitimated by the analysis of Hobbes, but then supported by a discourse of war between the nation-state

⁵⁸ See Herman Lebovics, *The Wars Over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁵⁹ Charles de Gaulle, quoted in Julian Jackson, *Charles de Gaulle* (London: Haus, 2003), 60.

⁶⁰ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 269.

⁶¹ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 270.

⁶² Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 267.

⁶³ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 271-272.

and others not protected by the nation-state. Foucault, therefore, argues that these claims to truth were used by the nation-state as a means of dominating their subjects. Consequently, the apparent peace is actually war; “the civil order is basically an order of battle.”⁶⁴

Thus, Foucault inverts the ideology of nationalism. For de Gaulle, the conflicts on the surface in France were superficial and deviations from a basic unity. For Foucault, unity was superficial and belied chaos and conflict beneath. Moreover, the claims to unity served the interests of power. The technique of such a history is completely different. Where “traditional analyses” would “try to find beneath the apparent or superficial confusion [...] a basic rationality which is both permanent and related, by its very essence to, to the just and good”—it would seek to find beneath class warfare the rationality of the progress of the people via the state—, Foucault’s analysis would attempt to show the conflict underlying the peace.⁶⁵

If the conflicts do not submit to a higher order of narrative coherence about progress, then there is no claim in this form of analysis to an objective truth. That is to say, because Foucault does not seek to speak as a “universal subject,” then there is no reason to appeal to the logic of non-contradiction, the goal of which is to permit everyone to agree despite differences. That was the goal of Kant—the dream of being a universal arbiter. For Foucault, by contrast, truth is another mode of argument, and agreement serves one side of a war. If the philosophico-juridical discourse used truth to aim at universality, in the historico-political discourse when the participant “speaks about the truth” he “is speaking about the perspectival and strategic truth that will

⁶⁴ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 266.

⁶⁵ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 269.

allow him to be victorious.”⁶⁶ “For a subject speaking such a disclosure, the universal truth and general right are illusions or traps” that serve certain interests—usually those of the bourgeois nation-state, in the case of France—and preserve its hegemony.⁶⁷

Foucault’s rejection of universalist political analysis, and of contribution to a scientific project which appeals to universal reason, in favor of examining the local effects of discourse while assuming that any appeal to universal reason is just a form of argument or a power-claim, marks a shift in Foucault’s assumptions about how knowledge works. Rather than knowledge being centralized, it is dispersed. It does not pretend to appeal to the public good of everyone in the nation-state, because that assumes there is a generalizable public good and that the nation-state represents it, when Foucault assumes that the nation-state is an institution which serves certain social classes. That is to say, if history under the nationalist model always related itself in terms of the progress of the nation-state and justified itself in those terms as well, Foucault’s analyses served the interests of the position he was in, rather than the nation-state, and cast itself in terms of his perspective at the moment. Thus, when he was involved in prison reform, he wrote *Surveiller et punir*, a historico-political analysis of the function of prison in society—without making any claim to tell the past as it really happened, because the assumption was that history as it had been written had been written from the perspective of progress in the nation-state, which was not something Foucault was interested in. Rather, he was interested in the local.

⁶⁶ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 268.

⁶⁷ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 269.

That this shift in the organization of knowledge from the universal to the particular corresponded with a revolt against an overtly nationalist Gaullist regime was not coincidental. The shift in knowledge was a shift from conceiving of it as part of a national language-game of science with universalist pretensions for the nation-state's—and ostensibly the people's—sake to a multiplicity of local language-games serving local interests, and thus was inherently political.

However, as we have seen, if the shift from appeals to science to appeals to the politics of the particular did not occur until after 1968, existential Marxism and structuralism had been attacking the French nation-state's universalist pretensions for over a decade prior to the student revolt. On a popular level, the social changes accompanying industrialization and increased affluence that occurred from 1950 forward, often labeled “Americanization,” created a perception among intellectual that economic development threatened traditional French culture.⁶⁸ If de Gaulle's establishment of a new institution in French society, a Ministry of Culture, in 1959, which reframed culture as a state responsibility, implies that he saw this perceived cultural crisis as inherently political and of potentially grave consequences for the future of France, he had some precedent and some reason. The great historian Marc Bloch's book *Etrange défaite* (1940), which attempted to explain France's quick defeat at German hands in World War II, blamed French professors and French culture generally. The guardians of French culture, “capable neither of preserving the aesthetic and moral values of classic culture nor of creating fresh ones to take their

⁶⁸ See Richard F. Kuisel *Seducing the French: the Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

place,”⁶⁹ compromised France’s ability to mount a unified military response.⁷⁰ For Bloch, military and political strength depended on cultural unity and vigor.

De Gaulle, therefore, acted in a tradition of French cultural exceptionalism which saw French culture as uniquely important in maintaining a unified nation-state. For de Gaulle, there was a “certain idea of France” that is unified and capable of greatness which exists in spite of France’s regional and class divisions. It was the state’s responsibility, and his responsibility as his leader, to maintain national unity around that idea of France so as to resist divisions’ pull towards mediocrity and achieve national greatness in spite of itself.⁷¹ The creation of the Ministry of Culture, therefore, stemmed from de Gaulle’s recognition that the task of the French state as he saw it, to unify the people of the hexagon through a common culture despite their regional and class differences, had become increasingly difficult in the postwar era.

Regardless of whether one accepts Eugene Weber’s argument that the Third Republic deliberately constructed French identity through a process of internal colonization,⁷² it is certainly true that, since even before Vichy, French national unity had become increasingly precarious, with differences of class, region, ethnicity, and intellectual sympathies coming to the fore during the interwar years, with far-right and far-left groups gaining substantial ground by exploiting ethnic, class, and regional prejudices.⁷³ Asked if he intended to become a dictator, de Gaulle responded, perhaps

⁶⁹ Marc Bloch, *Etrange défaite* (Paris: Franc-Tireur, 1946), quoted in Lebovics, 3.

⁷⁰ Lebovics, 4.

⁷¹ De Gaulle, quoted in Jackson, 53.

⁷² See Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

⁷³ Charles Sowerwine, *France Since 1870: Culture, Politics, and Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 142, 146.

with some frustration, “How can one be expected to govern country with two hundred and forty-six varieties of cheese?”⁷⁴ Republican national culture—the French language, literature, and art instituted by the state education system—was perceived by many observers of French society to be the only thing holding the nation together. Thus, he perceived “Americanization” that accompanied increased affluence sparked anxiety among French intellectuals, including Lebovics, who spoke disparagingly of Hollywood “dream factories,” that cultural pluralism threatened the only thing holding the French nation together.⁷⁵

Moreover, the economic development of the *Trois Glorieux* decades not only increased the French standard of living, but also changed the organization of life in France so dramatically that many intellectuals perceived French identity to be threatened.⁷⁶ Economic development between 1950 and 1960, wrote Lefebvre, increased the gap between “quotidian and non-quotidian,” between commerce and “art, religion, philosophy,” the separation of man from nature, “the dispersal of communities and the rise of individualism (not to be confused with self-realization),” “the division of labor stressed to the point of specialization,” and “anguish arising from a general sense of meaninglessness.”⁷⁷ Most importantly, “the subject,” the fundamental unity of social analysis in French philosophy and political theory, “has

⁷⁴ Charles de Gaulle, *Les mots du Général de Gaulle*, ed. Ernest Mignon (Paris, 1962).

⁷⁵ Lebovics, 4.

⁷⁶ Lebovics, 4.

⁷⁷ Lefebvre, 38-39.

become blurred; it has lost its outline, it doesn't well up or flow any longer, and with it the characters, roles, persons have slid into the background."⁷⁸

But as important as the exacerbation of preexisting internal divisions and the changes in French culture brought about by economic development was France's loss of great power status in a postwar order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ For de Gaulle, this loss of international standing was of great importance to French national unity because he claimed that *grandeur*, or French national pride, which necessarily implies high status in relation to other nation-states, was central to national stability.⁸⁰ De Gaulle claimed that the nation-state had almost metaphysical status, and that attempts by the USA and USSR to divide the world into ideological spheres of influence violated the natural order of things.⁸¹ De Gaulle had no illusions—he knew that West European security in the 1960s depended on a bloc organized around United States military power. However, he saw this as a temporary arrangement, but one that could do significant harm to French national unity if it compromised French *grandeur*.⁸² Consequently, establishing a Ministry of Culture to promote French culture at home through “marrying” the French people to what de Gaulle perceived as their cultural heritage, the elite culture of Paris, and abroad through aggressive national branding—exemplified by Malraux's accompaniment of the *Mona Lisa* to Washington in 1963—constituted an effort to reorganize French

⁷⁸ Lefebvre, 7.

⁷⁹ Lebovics, 5.

⁸⁰ Lebovics, 204.

⁸¹ Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Ruler, 1945-1970*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1992), 211

⁸² Philip G. Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur: Ideological aspects of de Gaulle's foreign policy* (Bristol, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 50.

national identity and pride around what Lebovics calls the “classical” culture of France: the culture of the French bourgeoisie from the 1880s forward.⁸³

Understanding de Gaulle and Malraux’s effort to “marry”⁸⁴ the French people to their culture requires sensitivity not only to French cultural exceptionalism, but the circumstances of de Gaulle’s rise to power. De Gaulle took office during a national crisis over Algeria that verged on civil war: disobedient generals attempted to assassinate him for allegedly betraying France by withdrawing from the former *département*.⁸⁵ De Gaulle’s concern over French national unity, therefore, stemmed not only from anxiety about cultural malaise which characterized postwar intellectuals, but immediate threats to national stability.

The Algerian war was a disaster for France’s international reputation as well as its self-image. In Godard’s *Le petit soldat* (1960), Michel, a conscientious objector who left France for Switzerland to avoid serving in Algeria, says that everyone hates the French, presumably as the result of the poor reputation that its military had earned for itself for torture during the war.⁸⁶ Godard’s film represented the French government’s willingness to use coercive and violent tactics explicitly, and was banned by censors until 1963. The film’s central message is the protagonist’s disgust with politics, which the film represents as legitimate in its unflattering portrayal of both sides. The FLN torture Michel in an effort to get information, and the French

⁸³ Lebovics, 5, xi. For a discussion of Malraux’s 1963 visit to Washington, see Lebovics, 9-26.

⁸⁴ Lebovics, 259.

⁸⁵ Sowerwine, 315.

⁸⁶ *Le petit soldat*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1960; New York: Fox Lorber, 2001).

secret service torture his girlfriend to death. At the end of the film, Michel shows little emotion, but expresses a desire to simply be left alone.

The Algerian War was especially disastrous because in prior encounters with foreigners, France had been able to frame its actions in terms of the grand narrative of emancipation, through which France defined a national project to civilize the globe.⁸⁷ The Algerian War seemed to show the violence at the basis of colonialism, making it clear that it was quite an uncivilized endeavor. In his preface to Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), Jean-Paul Sartre writes that France's behavior during the Algerian War, and the response by the Algerians, constituted "the striptease of our humanism," exposing it as "a dishonest ideology, an exquisite justification of plundering" the extra-European world.⁸⁸ That is to say, "the blinding glare of torture," which the French engaged in as much as the FLN, "is high in the sky flooding the entire country."⁸⁹ However, Sartre argued that the problem was not just hypocrisy of French humanism. The dehumanization of colonized people into "natives"⁹⁰ formed the basis of the justification for colonialism and of French identity.

As long as the status of 'native' existed, the imposture remained unmasked. We saw in the human species an abstract premise of universality that served as a pretext for concealing more concrete practices: there was a race of subhumans overseas who, thanks to us, might, in a thousand years perhaps, attain our status.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Lebovics, 4.

⁸⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), lvii-lviii.

⁸⁹ Sartre, lxii.

⁹⁰ Sartre, xliii.

⁹¹ Sartre, lviii-lix.

French humanism was based on the division of the world into “500 million ‘men’ and 1.5 million ‘natives,’” in a hierarchical system in which the European “men [...] possessed the Word, the others borrowed it.”⁹²

Consequently, colonial exploitation not only funded the culture of French *civilisation*, but was constituent and constitutive of its values. Decolonization, therefore, required the complete renovation of French culture—it is not just the Arabs who are “being decolonized.”⁹³ For Sartre, therefore, the French-Algerian war exposed that the values that had guided France since the Third Republic constituted false ideology. For Fanon, the only solution was a revolution of colonized peoples which destroyed Western civilization and the colonial system with it. Sartre, still committed to progress, constructs a dialectical system by which the revolt of colonized peoples through violence will create revolutionary consciousness among the French, who will see that they are colonized by the colonial system of the bourgeois nation-state as well.⁹⁴

But the key point is that for Sartre, as for Godard, the Algerian war destroyed France’s ability to conceive of itself as bringing civilization to the world. The structuralists critiqued this civilizing mission as well, but without the optimism of Sartre and Fanon. For Lévi-Strauss, there was no way out of the closed oppressive system except to become highly conscious of it and limit its worst effects.⁹⁵ Common, however, to both critiques was a repudiation of the notion that France had a special mission in the world.

⁹² Sartre, xliii.

⁹³ Sartre, lviii.

⁹⁴ Sartre, lxii.

⁹⁵ Lévi-Strauss,

If this national mission constituted key element of the *grandeur* which de Gaulle saw as central to French national identity, then the repudiation of this mission constituted a crisis of authority. Godard contributed to this attack on the grand narrative of emancipation by constructing French authority figures as not only brutal, but ridiculous. In *A bout de souffle* (1960),⁹⁶ Michel Poiccard, a small-time car thief, lives life intensely. “Never use the breaks,” he says, and Godard frames him next to a shot of a poster that says, “Live dangerously to the end.” But Michel marries this intensity with a cheerful openness that makes him very attractive.⁹⁷ Portraying a petty criminal as sympathetic may in itself constitute a subversion of authority, but the contrast between Michel and the apparently respectable figures of the film emphasizes its subversion of authority. That is to say, although Michel is intense, his free-spiritedness makes him attractive. Michel’s attitude towards Patricia in the hotel scene is condescending and abusive as he attempts to bully her into having sex with him.

Patricia: I’m writing a novel.

Michel: You?

Patricia: Why not me? What are you doing?

Michel: I’m taking off your shirt.

Patricia: Not now, Michel.

Michel: You’re such a drag. What good is that?

Patricia: Do you know William Faulkner?

Michel: No, who’s that? Some guy you slept with?

Patricia: No, my dear.

Michel: Then to hell with him, take off your shirt.

⁹⁶ *Breathless*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1960; New York: Criterion, 2007).

⁹⁷ Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Discussion of Film – Breathless.,” Lecture 25, Philosophy 7, Existentialism in Literature and Film, UC Berkeley Webcasts, Spring 2008, MP3 audio file, <http://webcast.berkeley.edu/courses.php?semesterid=27>.

That is, Michel's wit pushes the audience to overlook his flaws and his selfish pursuit of his own desires. This is because his egoism is unselfconscious, spontaneous. Although the audience might not approve of him picking up the skirt of a girl on the street in front of his lover, there is something enviable in his lack of self-consciousness.

The coolness with which Michel inhabits his intensity is contrasted with the pretentious intensity of the arrogant writer Parvulesco whom Patricia interviews, a parody of the French intellectual, the supposed guardian of France's cultural legacy. Parvulesco makes melodramatic generalizations about the state of French culture and society in a style that mocks the rhetoric of Sartre's popular writing. A journalist asks, "'Do you think that one can still believe in love in our age?'. He responds: 'Certainly. One can no longer believe in anything but love, especially in our era.'" When a female reporter asks, "Do you think that there's a difference in the way French and American women go about love?", Parvulesco responds, "There's no compassion between French and American women. The American woman dominates man. The French woman doesn't...yet." Parvulesco delivers these statements in a theatrical, pompous tone while wearing sunglasses. When Patricia asks whether he thinks women have a role to play in modern society, he takes off his sunglasses to lock eyes with her, and answers "Yes, if she is charming, if she has a striped dress, and smoked sunglasses," which describes her attire exactly—an exchange which refers to Sartre's notorious promiscuity. When Patricia asks, "What is your greatest ambition in life?", he responds, "To become immortal, and then die"—a direct reference and, in its deliverance by this ridiculous figure, jab, at the existentialists.

If Godard portrays the cultural elite as pompous and unattractive, the popular guardian of French society, the police officer, fares no better. Police Inspector Vital is sweaty, bald, fat, aging, and wears ill-fitting suits, in contrast to the young, fit, and sharply-dressed Michel. But more importantly, the way in which he plays the role of police officer is a forced exaggeration of the police in *film noir*. Indeed, he constitutes a foil to Michel. Although Michel plays a role as well by imitating Bogart, this role liberates him from the banality of his “real” life—the audience learns that his real name is Laszlo Kovacs and that he was an Air France flight attendant. For Vital, playing a role makes him strive in an unattractively earnest way, constantly hunched over and running after Michel, who even when running from the police maintains a spirit of play. In a taxi fleeing from the police, Michel remains attentive to his surroundings, complaining that a modern house has ruined the beauty of an intersection, touching Patricia’s face and exclaiming, “Yes, me, I’ve got a feeling for beauty...beauty!”. Even his abuse of the taxi driver has style: “I hate taxi drivers who are afraid to scratch their paint.” By contrast, the Vital lurks in the shadows and attempts to intimidate people. Like Michel, Vital bullies Patricia, but without any of Michel’s style, simply threatening her with deportation.

The irreverence towards authority of *A bout de souffle*, which constructs Michel as a sympathetic character despite his violation of every social norm, can be seen in *Bande à part*⁹⁸ (1964) as well. This film aligns the audience with Arthur and Franz, two aspiring criminals who persuade Odile, a young girl they meet in their English class, to help them steal a large sum of money from a safe hidden in the villa

⁹⁸ *Band of Outsiders*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, (1964; New York: Criterion, 2003).

outside Paris where she lives with her Aunt Victoria and a Mr. Stoltz. Although their relationship with Odile is predatory, Godard constructs joining their plot as the most exciting thing that has ever happened in her life, which he portrays as stiff and rigid. Her relations with her aunt, with whom she uses the formal “vous” form, are stiff and rigid, and she is subject to very strict rules despite being around twenty years old.

Thus, *Bande à part*, like *A bout de souffle*, constructs criminality as attractive by contrast with respectable French society. Indeed, the film’s title refers to the French expression *faire bande à part*, which translates roughly as “to go one’s own way” and separate oneself from the group, implying that the characters wish to remove themselves from the stuffy world of bourgeois social norms—something which their deliberate attempt to ape gangster movies and the pulp fiction they read seems to allow them—into an imagined world of criminality.⁹⁹ Indeed, they structure their plot around the conventions of genre films rather than practical concerns. The narrational voiceover tells the audience that “Arthur said they’d wait for night to do the job,” not because it offered the cover of darkness, but “out of respect for second-rate thrillers.” Like Michel in *A bout de souffle*, who wished to escape France with Patricia to Italy, Arthur, Frantz, and Odile wish to leave France once the job is complete—and Frantz and Odile do set sail for South America once Arthur dies.

Indeed, the film, even more than *A bout de souffle*, emphasizes the stuffiness of bourgeois culture, and offers play as a way to make it more bearable. The

⁹⁹ The notion that cinema allows an escape from the social norms of everyday life recurs in Godard. In *Masculin, féminin*, Paul refers to a certain film’s failure to live up to “the film we had dreamed, the film we all carried in our hearts, the film we wanted to make... and secretly wanted to live.” *Masculin, féminin*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1966; New York: Criterion, 2005).

atmosphere in the English class is unbearable. The teacher uses the course as free reign to discuss her personal literary preferences and force rote memorization of facts in English literary history, rather than teach practical English. She tells the class, “Today, no need to know how to ask for directions or a room with a bath; today”—presumably what people enrolled in an English-language adult education class are there for. Instead, “we must know how to spell ‘Thomas Hardy.’”

Dancing to American-style rhythm and blues offers one temporary escape from this culture dominated by family and teachers which continues to control the lives of characters into early adulthood, but the most striking example of the film’s irreverence towards elite French culture occurs when the characters run through the Louvre, beating the world record “set by Jimmy Johnson of San Francisco” by two seconds. That Frantz got the idea from an American suggests that the film constructs American culture as a way of rejuvenating France, in a similar way that Truffaut argued that imitating American directors might rejuvenate French cinema.¹⁰⁰

But simply the fact that the characters use the Louvre, which Malraux’s Ministry of Culture saw as the locus of France’s symbolic capital as the cultural center of the world, for recreation, rather than reverent worship of their cultural legacy, is the most significant aspect of this scene. For Malraux, the Louvre was the most sacred place in the classical French culture. During 1968, he told his ministry that he would defend it against the student mob personally should they decide to riot.¹⁰¹ Art was the central element which would unite the French people and provide

¹⁰⁰ François Truffaut, “Une Certaine Tendance du cinéma français,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, 31, January 1954.

¹⁰¹ Lebovics, 194.

them with symbolic capital internationally.¹⁰² But Godard, in the spirit of Duchamp and the surrealists, constructs this monument to European high culture, which Malraux thought would save France through its sanctity, as a place of play, useful insofar as it fosters expression and amusement—the use of history for life.

If Godard's repudiation of traditional authority and the narrative of emancipation, which de Gaulle attempted to arrive through an authoritarian French cultural state is overt, his critique of the science which functioned to legitimate that state, and which had legitimated itself in terms of its contribution to that state, was more subtle. By challenging the subject-object dichotomy set up by classical cinema, Godard attacked the assumption that truths could exist outside the fray, contributing to the Nietzschean insight, brought to French culture by the dissenting structuralist and Marxist discourses, and especially by Foucault, that truth constituted a mode of argument in a claim to power. By subordinating technique to narrative, classical cinema cues the viewer to construct a story world that is coherent and outside the text. Indeed, classical cinema subordinates the image to narrative: it is merely *syuzhet*, a cue for a narrative. This world, classical cinematic film practices assume, is coherent and will make sense: it will culminate in the resolution of narrative tension. Classical cinema, therefore, encourages a viewing-practice analogous to science: the problem is to find ways of accessing an objective reality.

Godard's films engage with the process of fabula-construction, but then subvert it and call attention to the fact that there is no coherent story-world, but just cinema. This is not to say that Godard's films are not *fabulas*. The viewer can

¹⁰² Lebovics, 158-177.

construct a story-world by watching *Pierrot le fou*: it is about a man who leaves his wife for his baby-sitter and goes on a crime spree. *A bout de souffle* cues the viewer to construct a story-world in which Michel flees from the police in Paris while attempting to persuade Patricia to leave for Italy with him.¹⁰³ However, Godard shows through the arbitrary use of technique how the sense of a single reality of the fabula is a construction of cinematic artifice that plays on cinematic conventions, rather than an actual story world.

Sometimes the arbitrary use of technique simply functions to call attention to the narration. The jump cuts in *A bout de souffle* do not interfere with the narration, but they wake the viewer from passive viewing and remind them that they watch a film. In *Bande à part*, when Arthur calls for a “minute of silence” in a noisy café and the soundtrack goes silent, the effect is similar, calling attention to the process of narration. The narrational voiceover functions in this playful self-reflexive manner as well. Rather than function to economically convey information, it directly addresses the audience. A few minutes into the film, it offers “A few clues for latecomers: Several weeks ago...A pile of money...An English class...A house by the river...A romantic young girl,” which calls attention to the contrivance of the cinematic event and undermines the classical principle of transparency, while referencing the advertising used in cinematic trailers with its melodramatic description of the plot’s elements. At the film’s end, the narrational voiceover tells the audience, “My story ends here like a dime novel. At a superb moment, when everything is going right.” This voiceover refers to the film’s intertextuality and the contrived efforts of the

¹⁰³ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 314.

filmmakers to achieve certain effects—the film’s ending is “superb”—while referring as well to franchising: “Our next episode, this time in Cinemascope and Technicolor: Odile and Franz in the tropics.”

These self-reflexive elements function primarily to create a spirit of play and intertextuality. But at other moments, Godard’s use of technique puts such strains on memory and attention that the process of fabula-construction becomes conscious, rather than pre-conscious: that is, by frustrating the pre-conscious process of the construction of fabula, Godard draws attention to the construction of that process, which results from standardized conventions. The narrational voice-over’s references to *Bande à part*’s homage to gangster films already called attention to the existence of genre format, but the subversion of classical cinematic form by obstructing the narrational process occurs more forcefully in later films. In *Made in U.S.A.* (1966), when Widmark and Paul speak to the camera simultaneously while giving important information about the plot, it becomes difficult to understand one of them, and impossible to understand both.¹⁰⁴ In *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* and *La Chinoise*, image and sound convey unrelated information to the viewer, similarly overloading the viewer with information: this is compounded when the letters move from side-to-side and the narrational voice’s phrases are ungrammatical.¹⁰⁵

If the film cues the audience to construct a fabula while obstructing the transmission of those cues, the result is to frustrate, annoy, and strain the audience. Godard defended this result, attacking “entertainment” cinema as form of valium to lull the masses into passive acceptance of the banality of life in “consumer

¹⁰⁴ Bordwell, 312.

¹⁰⁵ Bordwell, 312.

society.”¹⁰⁶ Rather than entertain, Godard sought to teach by constructing a “counter-cinema.” However, this counter-cinema taught viewers only in terms of its subversion of Hollywood cinematic norms, because a text is intelligible only in terms of its relationship to other texts.¹⁰⁷ Godard’s cinema of “*unpleasure*”¹⁰⁸ achieves this when the audience interrogates its own frustration. That is, if the film frustrates the audience, it is only because it fails to satisfy the conventions of classical cinema, which proscribe that technique should be subordinated to the transparent transmission of fabula information. Indeed, film bears relation to fabula only because cultural norms instituted by repetition of classical cinematic conventions teach audience that the cinema is about constructing the fabula from cues from the syuzhet—this is not the only possibility, non-narrative films exist. However, a non-narrative film would not cause this frustrated reflection. By pushing the audience’s capacity to construct fabulas to its limits, Godard shows how classical cinematic norms construct unconscious expectations in audiences.

That the norm which prescribes that image and sound in the cinema should be subordinate to fabula lacks metaphysical grounding seems like a mute point: of course artistic conventions are arbitrary. However, showing up modernity, including cinema, conditions people to view texts as evidence of things that exist outside of the text, rather than texts to be read—that views reality as something to be decoded and understood—has significant effects in terms of the politics of culture. That is to say, Godard shows how not only the educational system and religion, but cinematic

¹⁰⁶ Peter Wollen, “Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d’Est* (1972),” *European Cinema Reader*, ed. Catherine Fowler (New York: Routledge, 2002), 79.

¹⁰⁷ Wollen, 82.

¹⁰⁸ Wollen, 79.

viewing practices as well, construct a Platonic conception of knowledge which sees texts—and the world—as something to be decoded to arrive at a point of origin which allows one to close the text with a single interpretation. It is this desire to close a reading with a return to origin, rather than simply biographical literary criticism, which Barthes criticizes in “La mort de l’auteur” (1969). The “regime of the author” that legislates that the origin of a work should be found in the person that wrote it constitutes a symptom of a broader “capitalist ideology,”¹⁰⁹ in which not only does a text release “a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God)”¹¹⁰ but the “positivist” assumption, at the basis of “English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal faith of the Reformation”¹¹¹ that the world expresses a single, deep meaning to be deciphered.

Of course, despite the claims of *auteur* theory, the cinema is a corporate creation, combining the efforts of many people, and does not assign a personal author as the origin of the text. However, it does configure film as a representation of a story-world outside of film which functions as its origin, just as the regime of the author, as it asserts itself in the norms of confessional love poetry, for example, configures the poem as an expression of the emotions of an author which functions as the poem’s origin.

Consequently, if by subverting the norms by which classical cinema constructs film as a representation of a story-world, Godard shows how the image is

¹⁰⁹ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 143.

¹¹⁰ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 146.

¹¹¹ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142.

pure expression which is must be “disentangled” rather than “deciphered,”¹¹² Godard’s films function as liberatory texts which loosen the regime of not only authorship, but of representation, Platonism, and absolute truth which were constitutive of French Republican ideology. As Barthes put it,

In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.¹¹³

By subverting the classical model of the cinema in which the audience solves a problem in a fabula outside the text, Godard poses a critique of positivist science, which constitutes a critique of the ideology of French humanist culture.

¹¹² Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 147.

¹¹³ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 147.

Chapter 3

Curing a Neurosis:

Godard and the Subject

In “La mort de l’auteur,” Roland Barthes claims that the assumption that texts represent an origin—in literature, the experience and emotions of the author—forms part of a “regime” or broader modern episteme which includes English empiricism, French rationalism, individualism, and capitalism.¹ Therefore, under Barthes’ reading of literary and intellectual history, if Godard’s arbitrary use of technique critiques the notion of origin, it constitutes a critique of metaphysical science, and thus the relationship between science and the nation state under the “emancipation narrative.”²

However, if films are corporate productions, then the “origin” posited by classical cinema is not a literary author, except in auteur theory, but the characters which constitute the story-world. That is to say, it is difficult to argue that a film expresses something in a director’s biography, because so many people contribute to a film’s production. Although auteur theory, which argues that the director manipulates Hollywood conventions to convey their personality, had gained headway in France in the 1950s and 1960s among other members of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, academic film departments in France did not yet exist, so the experience of watching a film was not conditioned by education in literary philology which posits an author

¹ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 143.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), 48.

as “the past of his own book.”³ Godard, for his part, denied the existence of the author in interviews,⁴ and, through intertextuality, insistently decentered the narrator.⁵

Rather, it was conditioned by the architecture of film-viewing as constructed by classical cinema. Recall that the spectator, confronted with multiple narrative events, creates a relationship between them in terms of time, space, and causation, called the *fabula*.⁶ The viewer does not perceive a fabula materially in the film, but creates the fabula by making assumptions and posing hypotheses, mostly in the preconscious mind.⁷

Watching a film, therefore, is, for the classical mode of narration, somewhat akin to solving a problem in empirical science. One is confronted with exterior clues in the syuzhet to construct an interior truth, the fabula, constituted by the causal relationships between characters. The material of the film, therefore, represents in this model an internal truth which must be decoded through testing hypotheses against experience, just as, in Newtonian science, the material of the natural world represents natural laws which must be decoded through the scientific method.

³ Barthes, 145.

⁴ Jean-Luc Godard, interview by Jacques Bontemps, Jean-Louis Comolli, Michel Delahaye, and Jean Narboni, *Film Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1968-1969): 31. Godard argues in this interview, originally published in the *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1968, that the drive towards auteur theory in French film theory was primarily a strategy to get French people, educated in biographical literary criticism, to take film seriously. He said that he did not believe in the author himself, but that most people were not ready to understand or embrace the death of the author. This argument in defense of the strategic use of auteur theory suggests that the predominant way of watching films was not as an expression of a director-author’s intent, but about the world of the characters.

⁵ Bordwell, 324.

⁶ Bordwell, 49-50.

⁷ Bordwell, 49.

If the fabula is fundamentally the relationship between characters, then a subversion of the notion of film as representing fabula is a subversion of character, even the subject, as well. The classical cinema renders the character as a problem-solver. Bordwell writes,

The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals. The principal causal agency is thus the character, a discriminated individual endowed with a consistent batch of evident traits, qualities, and behaviors. The most “specified” character is usually the protagonist, who becomes the principal causal agent, the target of any narrational restriction, and the chief object of audience identification.⁸

Something goes awry in the social world, and the protagonist must resolve it. Thus, the classical cinema constructs subjectivity on two levels: on one level, through the problem-solving process by which the viewer searches for the origin of the film by developing the true relationship between the characters, and on another level by offering a model of the human being as problem-solver in the form of the protagonists.

If the viewer often identifies with the protagonist, this is because the predominant self-interpretation in not only France, but among the bourgeoisie of Western Europe and North America more generally, is that human beings are problem-solvers, or subjects.⁹ However, Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* that if

⁸ Bordwell, 157.

⁹ This self-interpretation, it is argued, arose with the establishment of the bourgeois nation-state. For a theoretical account of the process by which the state education

one were to look at most everyday activities, one does not find subjects contemplating objects to resolve problems—the model of the scientist that Heidegger claims Descartes universalized—but unselfconscious “ready-to-hand” coping, which “is not grasped theoretically at all.”¹⁰ Heidegger offers the example of a skilled carpenter using a hammer. When a skilled carpenter uses a hammer, the last thing that carpenter wants to do is evaluate their hammering technique.¹¹ To use a more bourgeois example, a student leaving a lecture hall is not at all conscious of the act of opening the doorknob. This is not to say that the carpenter does not go into the mode of being characteristic of the subject when the hammer becomes too heavy, but that the subject does not tell the whole story about human beings.¹²

Foucault argues that the Cartesian interpretation of human beings as essential subjects is a historical phenomenon as well. Offering historical substance to Barthes’ hypothesis that the subject of French rationalism and English empiricism was linked to the development of capitalism, Foucault argues that the subject is part of the disciplinary strategy of modernity, by which human beings become self-regulating.

system created national labor markets for industrial societies in which peoples from disparate regions within the same nation-state became almost interchangeable as workers, see Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983). For the role of print culture in this process of nation-building, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 2006). For an account of this process in France, see Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 99.

¹¹ Heidegger, 98-99.

¹² Heidegger, 196-200, 86-88.

“The soul,” he writes, “is the prison of the body,” the effect of a political strategy.¹³ Thus, “we have to look at how relations of subjugation can manufacture subjects.”¹⁴

If classical cinema’s construction of the self forms part of a socially-constructed way of being, then, if Godard subverts the subject by subverting fabula, then Godard subverts the predominant self-interpretation of people in France in the 1960s. Godard certainly subverts character. This is not to say that Godard’s films do not cue audiences to construct characters related in terms of cause and effect. They do, at least through *La Chinoise* (1967).¹⁵ However, that Godard appeals to the norm of character is the gesture which allows him to subvert character and expose the arbitrariness of its centrality to cinema. Thus, a Godard film will have characters, cuing the audience to construct the film in terms of the norms of narration characteristic of classical cinema.¹⁶ But,

[...] a Godard character is, to various degrees, presented as a sketchy construct, a precipitate out of the mixture of narrational modes. This means that instead of the narration’s asserting its ability to swell or contract its range of fabula information to “match” that of a character, the character’s range of knowledge at any moment works as a function of the goals of the narration.¹⁷

Instead of, as in the classical cinema, the narration deploying techniques in the service of giving more or less information so as to correspond with that of a character, information about the character is subordinated to “the goals of the narration”—to

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 30.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), 265.

¹⁵ Bordwell, 312-314.

¹⁶ “[...] Godard’s films, like other directors’, cohere and make sense only within particular narrative modes.” Bordwell, 313.

¹⁷ Bordwell, 322.

call attention to itself as a text “made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation.”¹⁸

We have already discussed the frustration wrought by Godard’s exploitation of the “cocktail-party effect,” whereby overstimulating the viewer with multiple monologues simultaneously, for instance, interferes with the process of fabula-construction that has been cued by Godard’s general adherence to classical cinematic norms. The frustration which results from struggling to grasp onto fabula information despite overstimulation is compounded by the deployment of technique that does not serve to convey narrative information or even punctuate scenes: the second-to-last scene of *Vivre sa vie* (1962) lacks a soundtrack, but there is no expressive or narrational reason why this should be the case; the camera moves wildly at certain moments in *Une femme mariée* (1964) without any motivation.¹⁹

Indeed, it seems at times that the fabula is not tied to syuzhet at all, so that the elements that Godard shares with classical cinema constitute a form of teasing.²⁰ This certainly describes a scene in *Masculin, féminin* (1966), where Paul and Madeline converse on the voice-over but images display action which bears no relationship to the voice-over. Thus, although there is a plot which drives the film, that plot does not unify Godard’s use of technique. Bordwell writes, “The eventual result is to tease the spectator with a spectral totality, triggering a search for an elusive pattern—the film behind the film—that will never be confirmed.”²¹ Play with

¹⁸ Barthes, 148.

¹⁹ Bordwell, 312. See *Une femme mariée*, DVD, (1965; New York: Kock Lorber, 2009).

²⁰ Bordwell, 320.

²¹ Bordwell, 320.

technique, therefore, rather than representation of character, characterize Godard's films. The narration of the story becomes a means by which technique is deployed, and the narration constantly asserts its presence, to an extent that far surpasses conventional art cinema.²²

If the deployment of technique is not motivated by the representation of character, creating the effect that the constant presence of narration is the central organizing principle of Godard's films, this is compounded by inconsistencies in the cues about characters. In *Le mépris* (1963),²³ when Camille tells Paul that she no longer loves him, Paul grabs a pistol, which contradicts the film's prior construction of him as an emotionally-withdrawn intellectual. However, he never uses the gun. Godard, therefore, undermines the audience's sense of Paul as a coherent character, because the classical cinema, which constitutes the viewer's background, defines characters' psychological profiles quite sharply as goal-oriented individuals who strive to solve problems.²⁴ In *A bout de souffle* (1960), Patricia's motivation for turning in Michel, and Michel's motivations to do anything, are always ambiguous. This tendency to efface the clear-cut definition of characters' psychological profiles characteristic of classical cinema functions, with the omnipresence of the self-conscious narration, obstructs the suspension of disbelief and emotional involvement necessary for the audience to identify with characters.²⁵ It reaches its apex in *Le Gai*

²² Bordwell, 322.

²³ *Contempt*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1963; New York: Criterion, 2002).

²⁴ Bordwell, 157.

²⁵ Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est* (1972)," *European Cinema Reader*, ed. Catherine Fowler (New York: Routledge, 2002), 75.

Savoir (1969),²⁶ a film in which voices do not match characters and characters break the fourth wall.²⁷

If the causal elements, the characters, which constitute the fabula are sketchy in their construction, then Godard does not express an author's intention, nor do his films represent a world, but, like Joyce or Pound, becomes a vessel through which meaning occurs.²⁸ Godard, therefore, becomes, like Mallarmé for Barthes, a figure who emphasizes that a text constitutes “that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away.”²⁹ A Godard film, therefore, does not primarily represent a character. Rather, character becomes a technique by which the film calls attention to itself. By framing cinematic characters as constructed, Godard subverts a fundamental means by which subjectivity is constructed.

It might seem that Godard's assertion of the presence of the narration at the expense of representing the character constitutes a form of auteurism, in which the organizing presence of the characters is replaced by the organizing presence of a single narrative center. Bordwell argues that this is the case, calling Godard's “an “egocentric cinema” which asserts the mastery of the director.”³⁰ However, not only did Godard dismiss auteur theory in an interview, but intertextuality constantly effaces Godard as origin of his films. Godard quotes other texts constantly. The music used to introduce Michel Poiccard in *A bout de souffle* is taken from *The Maltese*

²⁶ *Le gai savoir*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1969; New York: Kock Lorber, 2008).

²⁷ Wollen, 75-76.

²⁸ Wollen, 79.

²⁹ Barthes, 143.

³⁰ Bordwell, 324.

Falcon (1941).³¹ The narrational voiceover in *Bande à part* tells the audience, “My story ends here like a dime novel.” *Le Gai Savoir* shows images of texts by Derrida and Foucault while characters discuss class struggle. Godard told an interviewer in 1967,

Everything is a quotation. If I shoot a scene of the Arc de Triomphe it’s a quotation. If I’m in the street I thumb through a book. In a film I continue to do it—it carries more weight but it’s quite the same thing.³²

The notion that “[e]verything is a quotation” implies that there is no such thing as an original idea or an original shot. It is not only the overt references to other films and other texts that constitutes quotation, but even the shot selection—the Arc de Triomphe has been shot before, of course. Framing the creative act as quotation coheres with Barthes’ argument about writing, which is not the expression of an original self but the translation of a “ready-formed dictionary,” with the text produced constituting “a tissue of quotations.”³³

For Godard, therefore, the film does not express an auteur or represent a story-world, but constitutes instead a system of filmic references. Godard’s subversion of origin, be it an author or character, was already “revolutionary” for Barthes, but, more concretely, Godard loosens the grip of the subject as the prevailing self-understanding in France by using techniques to highlight the characters’ construction through filmic cues, interrupting the preconscious process of narration, and by showing how the

³¹ *The Maltese Falcon*, DVD, directed by John Huston (1941; Burbank, California: Warner Home Video, 2010).

³² Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in Bordwell, 312.

³³ Barthes, 146. Of this phenomenon in Godard’s films, Peter Wollen writes, “The text/film can only be understood as an arena, a meeting-place in which different discourses encounter each other and struggle for supremacy.” Wollen, 79.

characters are copies of copies. As we have argued, Godard's films make the viewer conscious of the narrational process, interrupting the suspension of disbelief through which viewers feel as if they watch real people by calling attention to the narration.

A bout de souffle offers an instructive test case. Michel, the film's protagonist, does everything with a light air of gayness and style which is very attractive. Godard emphasizes these attractive qualities by contrasting them with the gloominess of Patricia Francini and the comic seriousness of the Paris police. The film contrasts Michel with the other characters of the film to align the audience with a character who violates conventional morality: he steals cars, kills a police officer, and buys an ex-girlfriend breakfast with money he stole from her. Indeed, constructing Michel, who is in every conventional sense not a sympathetic character, as likable asserts the power of film to influence the viewer through affect rather than reason.

If the viewer is unlikely to imitate Michel's behavior, Michel's attractiveness might cause the viewer to imitate his gait and manner of speech. But Michel is not only a creation of cues in the *syuzhet*, as Godard's jump cuts and other techniques remind the viewer, but an amalgam of a parody of Humphrey Bogart's onscreen persona with other genre conventions: a blend of references to other films. When Michel sees a poster of Bogart on the streets of Paris, he offers perhaps the only display of reverence he gives in the entire film—he certainly takes it more seriously than his death. His goals, to escape with Patricia from the law, are contrived, taken from Bonnie and Clyde stories and imitation of *Romeo and Juliet*.

If Michel is a blend of cinematic references, then, if a viewer imitates him, they imitate a copy of a copy, *ad. infinitum*. This is not to fault Michel as an

unoriginal character, but to argue that *A bout de souffle* shows how identity is constructed through imitation of available possibilities in a culture. Indeed, for Barthes, “life can only imitate the book,” and originality is impossible.³⁴ Once the subject is seen as a historical construction, then there exists no essential self to liberate or express, because any such self would itself be a cultural construction. This is not to say that a text, or anything else produced by a culturally-situated person, cannot be unique or creative, but it will be creative always already as a cultural construction of culture.

If Mallarmé sought “to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs,’ and not ‘me,’”³⁵ Similarly, Godard sought to reach that point where only film performs, and not the character—but by using characters and exposing their contractedness. Thus, by making a film that narrates a fabula but emphasizes the construction of that fabula, Godard demonstrates the social construction of identity by imitation. The attentive viewer, who leaves the viewer knowing that they have watched a film about cinema rather than about characters, may, when they find themselves imitating Michel, but become aware, upon reflecting on Godard’s self-reflexive use of jump cuts and other techniques, that they imitate a cinematic creation, rather than a coherent person, and that the creation which they imitate copies another cinematic creation.

³⁴ Barthes, . “...the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely;” Barthes, 146.

³⁵ Barthes, 143.

A bout de souffle, therefore, by subverting the norms of cinema to show how they are artificial rather than natural, performs a parody of the subject. For Judith Butler, parody offers a way of undermining the disciplinary norms which construct identity through performing the repetition of those norms—which, as culturally-situated beings, is all humans can do. That is, for Butler, there is no way of escaping culturally-constructed gender norms. But Butler affirms the possibility of “proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identifying,” and contesting “naturalizing narratives.”³⁶ Parody does this through a subversive imitation of a norm. Butler gives the example of a drag queen: through a parodic repetition of femininity, the drag queen exposes the artificiality of femininity, because although the drag queen fails to meet the norm in an exaggerated way, no women ever meet it exactly, and shows that gender norms are not naturally legislated, but products of culture. Butler writes that although the exaggerated failure of marginal gender groups, such as transsexual men, to inhabit “the natural” or “the real” and live up to these norms can be seen as “a politics of despair,”

[...] this failure to become “real” and to embody “the natural” is, I would argue, a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable. Hence, there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects.³⁷

That is to say, in the failure of the marginal group to match the norm of the “real,” that very notion of the “real” is exposed as an effect of the socially-constructed norm.

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 186-187.

³⁷ Butler, 186-187.

For Butler, parody offers a political praxis in civilization which otherwise appears to have organized things such that any attempt to resist reifies the disciplinary apparatus. That is to say, it is a common complaint in the twentieth century that any seemingly revolutionary movement ends up reifying the oppressive structures of power which justified the rebellion.³⁸ For Lévi-Strauss, this risk was enough to renounce politics.³⁹ Foucault used this to justify his opposition to movements to establish, for example, an anarcho-syndicalist society.⁴⁰ This was not only a structuralist insight: the student movement of 1968 deliberately avoided creating new hierarchies in an attempt to avoid repeating the abuses of a French society they perceived to be totalitarian.⁴¹ That revolutionary politics tends to result in the reconstitution of oppression and entrenched interests was a point made dramatically by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and by the Communist Party's inaction during May 1968, and may have motivated the shift from class-based politics to identity politics in the 1970s.⁴²

However, Butler argues that identity politics are not immune either, because they continue to operate in terms of ontology of the subject, which is a form of

³⁸ This observation, however, dates at least to de Tocqueville, whose *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* can be seen in part as an investigation as to how the Jacobins recreated the authoritarian, statist society of the Old Regime, simply without a monarchy.

³⁹ François Dosse, vol. François Dosse, *History of Structuralism: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 11.

⁴⁰ "The Chomsky-Foucault Debate," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WveI_vgmPz8.

⁴¹ Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 375.

⁴² See Arthur Hirsh, *The French New Left: An Intellectual History from Sartre to Gorz* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 208-235.

discipline. Butler criticizes the feminist movement for constructing a “subject”-woman that exists behind the performed category of woman.⁴³ The problem with the “subject” model is that it assumes there is something with ontological status outside of culturally-constructed gender identities to be freed. That is, it assumes a binary opposition between free will and determinism. This is a false dichotomy, because culturally-constructed identities are the only sites where agency can be articulated and become “culturally available.”⁴⁴ This is because the subject is a culturally-constructed category as well. Consequently, feminist critique and political praxis should not seek to construct a point of view which espouses to exist “outside of constructed identities,” because such a model would be an epistemological model which claims universality rather than cultural specificity, and thus becomes part of the imperialist, universalizing discursive strategy that feminism seemingly opposes.⁴⁵

Constructing a transcendental female *cogito* not only repeats the effort of the imperialist West to construct a transcendental *cogito* outside of a culturally-specific site of meaning, a tactic which served to justify imperial conquest by constructing a hierarchy of civilization based on who had access to that *cogito*, but it is doomed to failure. One has no choice but to repeat the construction of these gender identities, because the “I” that would intervene through feminist critique exists always already inside the system of meaning which gives “I,” “man,” and “woman” the meanings

⁴³ Butler, 181

⁴⁴ Butler, 187

⁴⁵ Butler, 187-188.

they have: the “I” that has agency is unintelligible except within discursive practices which are constituent and constitutive of gender.⁴⁶

For Butler, therefore, feminist efforts to construct a critique from outside the fray are not only doomed to failure, but dangerous. A politics of liberation cannot be based on ontology because ontology is a normative injunction which limits possibilities for being, so that activist groups which use it end up reconstituting the disciplinary apparatus albeit in different forms.⁴⁷ The American Communist Party condemned homosexuality as *petit bourgeois* lifestylism.⁴⁸ Thus, in creating a subject—the proletarian—assumed to have basic ontological characteristics—a heterosexual male working with his hands—they repeated discipline.

If a politics organized around the subject runs the risk of reconstituting discipline, then post-structuralist critiques of disciplinary societies seemingly leave politics at an impasse. Without a human to essence to be freed or realized, it is unclear why someone should resist the social norms of bio-power, because there is no reason to believe that any other system of power would be any better.⁴⁹ However, Butler insists that the acknowledgement that identity is constructed in discourse does not imply a rejection of politics, but instead politicizes the very terms in which identity is discussed.⁵⁰ Under the politics of the “deconstruction of identity,” there is no subject with ontological status to liberate from cultural constructions. That is to

⁴⁶ Butler, 189.

⁴⁷ Butler, 189.

⁴⁸ Harry Hay, “Mattachine, 1948-1953,” *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of its Founder*, ed. Will Roscoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 55.

⁴⁹ Hubert L. Dreyfus, “On the Ordering of Things: Being and Power in Heidegger and Foucault,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28, Supplement (1990): 93.

⁵⁰ Butler, 189.

say, the politics of the deconstruction of identity should not be conceived as a way of avoiding repetition of culturally constructed identities. Rather, Butler argues, the task instead should be to develop ways those constructions could be repeated in subversive way.⁵¹

This subversive repetition therefore constitutes what Butler calls parody. That is to say, rather than attempt to get outside of the socially-constructed identities that we inhabit, the task instead should be to develop ways those constructions can be repeated in a subversive way. Political intervention, therefore, becomes local, occurring by living “in those practices of repetition that constitute identity” but by doing so subversively: cultural conditioning in this frame does not trap a person in bad faith, but instead can offer space to be played with, subverted, and parodied.⁵²

If Godard’s films adopt the culturally-conditioned canonic story format but repeat it in a way that is subversive, they perform this subversive repetition. Indeed, their very ability to be subversive depends on their operating within a culturally intelligible paradigm of cinema.⁵³ Such a politics, therefore, operates not by leaving society—not by walking through the doorway away from the others, as in Sartre’s *Huis Clos* (1944),⁵⁴ or by making non-narrative revolutionary cinema--but by expanding the space within culturally intelligible modes of being. Drag, through parodic repetition of femininity, exposes the artificiality of femininity, and shows that

⁵¹ Butler, 189.

⁵² Butler, 188.

⁵³ Wollen, 82.

⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “No Exit,” *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 41.

gender norms are not naturally legislated.⁵⁵ Similarly, through a parodic repetition of a Hollywood cinema structured around the character, Godard exposes the artificiality of the character. If people structure their identity in part through imitation of cinema, and if Hollywood cinema contributes to people structuring their identity as problem-solving subjects, Godard exposes the social construction of subjectivity.

However, the task of such parody is not to dismiss socially-constructed identities, such as the subject, simply because they are cultural constructions. Butler writes,

The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.⁵⁶

That is to say, simply because an identity is a cultural construction does not necessarily imply that it is oppressive. However, problems occur when those identities develop ontological status in a culture, and become legislating norms, function as a “normative injunction.”⁵⁷ For Butler, gender is problematic not because it exists, but in its “construction [...] as a hierarchical binary.”⁵⁸ Like gender categories, the subject is not problematic simply because it is a socially-constructed identity that exists within culture, but it becomes problematic when the culture that produces it universalizes the subject and constructs a hierarchy of cultures based on access to that position.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Butler, 186-187.

⁵⁶ Butler, 189.

⁵⁷ Butler, 189.

⁵⁸ Butler, 188.

⁵⁹ Butler writes, “the epistemological paradigm that presumes the priority of the doer to the deed establishes a global and globalizing subject who disavows its own locality as well as the conditions for local intervention.” Butler, 188.

Thus, the project Butler sketches does not seek absolute freedom by destroying all social norms, but to loosen the grip of those norms that are unlivable.

Butler writes,

The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility *qua* possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that *already* exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible.⁶⁰

That is to say, rather than destroy all configurations of identity, in this case of sex and gender, Butler conceives of identity politics' task to be the radical proliferation of identity and the constitution of new "cultural configurations."⁶¹

If Butler argues that this radical proliferation of identity can be achieved by dispensing with "ready-made subjects,"⁶² that is not the dispensing of the subject as an epistemological construction when humans engage in science or problem-solving activities. Rather, it is achieved through dispensing with the subject's ontological status—the assumption that the subject occurs prior to cultural conditioning and is opposed to it, and with the "oppositional epistemological frame" which it implies.⁶³ This oppositional epistemological frame is based on a false equivocation between agency and a prediscursive ontological status, but on the false presumption "that to be *constituted* by discourse its to be *determined by discourse*, where determination forecloses the possibility of agency."⁶⁴

That is to say, Butler corrects the pessimistic misunderstandings of Foucault, Heidegger, and Nietzsche who pose theories of the self as socially-constructed. The

⁶⁰ Butler, 189.

⁶¹ Butler, 189-90.

⁶² Butler, 189.

⁶³ Butler, 182.

⁶⁴ Butler, 182.

assumption that guides the readings of these theorists as robbing agency, perhaps encouraged by rhetorical gestures such as Foucault's use of the prison as a metaphor for modernity, is that the social construction of identity precludes agency. That is, for theorists who retain the subject, or some equivalent with ontological status outside of discourse or culture, the social construction of identity in discourse makes language, and culture generally, appear as a "prison-house"⁶⁵ indeed.

Such theorists who maintain the ontological status of the subject cling to humanism, and thus condemn themselves pessimism because they oppose the self to the other in "an oppositional epistemological frame."⁶⁶ Such theorists, including the existential Marxists, construct a tragic view of human existence in which humans want to be free of cultural conditioning because they frame humans as essentially subjects, but argue that the self which contains the subject is culturally conditioned. This results in part from the French tradition of philosophies which seek liberty: the paradox of these theorists can be seen as a continuation of the drama of Rousseau, for whom "man is born free, and he is everywhere in chains."⁶⁷

But the tragic view of the existentialists and of those who read Foucault as a denier of agency results, at least in France, from an attempt to appropriate Heidegger's existential phenomenology while retaining a prediscursive subject.⁶⁸ This resulted in Sartre developing a version of "good faith" which amounted to a

⁶⁵ See Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-house of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

⁶⁶ Butler, 183.

⁶⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, or the Principles of Political Rights*, trans. Rose M. Harrington (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1893), 2.

⁶⁸ For an account of this appropriation, see Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005).

form of solipsism: facing towards one's own freedom and the lack of obligation to be culturally intelligible. That is, Sartre's "good faith," because it is based on the prediscursive status of the subject, differed radically from the "authenticity" of Heidegger. Although Heidegger quite famously does not elaborate any obligation to an ethics with ontological status, the authenticity which *Being and Time* describes is not an escape from culturally-intelligible categories, but a loosening of their grip in the understanding that they are culturally-constructed, allowing one to live a life of gaiety within cultural intelligibility.⁶⁹

Indeed, the function of Godard's parody of classical cinema is not a rejection of the identity categories which cinema contributes to the creation of. Rather, like Foucault's genealogies, it functions to loosen the grip of subjectivity. The subject, constructed as universal beginning in the 1880s, had outlived its usefulness as a fundamental category in the 1960s and become a constraint. That is to say, to continue to assume that the subject was a fundamental category after the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century, the apparent failure of socialism, the proliferation of transnational corporations, and cultural relativism seemed to condemn one to either hopelessly attempt to maintain imperial cultural hierarchies or to a tragic view of human existence due to the absence of evidence of historical progress. In his preface to Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), Sartre wrote that the recent history of France, especially the Algerian War, made French identity a "neurosis."⁷⁰ The local resistance to the prediscursive status of the subject in French public discourse

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 167, 344-347.

⁷⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), lxii.

through theoretical texts and Godard's parody of the classical cinema loosened its grip and contributed to making French identity livable again. Consequently, if Godard did not escape the Hollywood norms and ideology he held in contempt, his films subvert Hollywood to expose its cultural functions and loosen the grip of its norms, forming part of the broader undermining of the French republican subject which occurred in the 1960s.

Conclusion

Parodying Paradigms:

Godard's Subversive Cinema

In this thesis, I have argued that the prevailing interpretation in film history of Godard's films as existential Marxist artifacts relies on a naïve interpretation of the intellectual atmosphere in France in the 1960s. Bordwell and Poster, by claiming that 1968 was an existential Marxist event, oversimplify. They assume that the historical actors themselves can articulate an effective explanation of their actions. To do so is as naïve as to accept that the French Revolution was about expanding the rights of man and realizing liberty, equality, and fraternity, rather than being a complex event caused by the intersection of several groups with competing interests and ideologies.

Rather than attempt to close an interpretation of Godard's films in history by demonstrating the ties between Godard's films and any other ideology, I have attempted to situate Godard's films in terms of a cultural crisis characterized by the destabilization of French identity. In particular, this was characterized by a questioning or reconceptualization of the subject in history as the basic category of analysis in the study of human beings and of a questioning of the absolute truth of science. For the existential Marxists, this meant the recognition that the ways in which the subject was conditioned were changing due to the social changes affecting postwar France. By 1968, Henri Lefebvre regarded this first volume of his *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, published in 1946, as almost irrelevant, claiming that the subject of the 1960s was fundamentally different in its constitution from the subject

of the 1940s.¹ However, the subject for the existential Marxists retained its fundamental stature. For what else were they working towards liberating revolution?

The structuralists, by contrast, jettisoned the subject completely. Through the scientific study of human beings, they argued, they could show that the subject was a myth, a historical creation, and that the teleological edifice of the existential Marxists was a relic of the nineteenth century based on the deluded belief that human beings were essentially historical subjects. Through ethnographic field work, Claude Lévi-Strauss showed that human beings in other cultures did not conceive of themselves as historical, and claimed that history was an arbitrary myth of emancipation. However, they made these claims in terms of a positivist social science which the post-structuralist would later repudiate.

Godard's interest in Marxist student radicals seemingly suggests an affinity for existential Marxism. However, Godard's subversion of classical cinema continually undercuts subjectivity by demonstrating how classical narration constructs it. Consequently, although Godard the person made statements dismissive of structuralism, the author is, from our post-1968 perspective, dead—as he readily admitted. Thus, if the films can sustain a reading which undermines the subject, then Godard is a more complex figure than the reading of his films as existential Marxist artifacts would suggest.

Indeed, this interest in “the politics of everyday life,” which Bordwell uses to justify placing Godard in the existential Marxist camp,² was not the exclusive

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sasha Rabinovitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 59.

preserve of the existential Marxists. After 1968, Foucault jettisoned the structuralist approach to write genealogies of quite quotidian topics, showing how institutions and medico-legal discourse, rather than traditionally political institutions, control populations through sexuality and the self. Indeed, the reorientation of former structuralists after 1968 around explicitly political issues suggests that their work was motivated by everyday politics.

Consequently, Godard defies easy categorization. As a filmmaker, he did not need to ally himself with an intellectual camp or subject himself to academic conventions. That Godard supports readings from either side of the divide suggests, as Lebovics and Lyotard argue, that structuralism and existential Marxism were radicalized versions of the humanist episteme at the breaking point. As the structuralists argued, existential Marxists critiqued humanism from within, showing its hypocrisy, but without jettisoning its fundamental values. However, the structuralists mounted this critique in terms of the grand narrative of scientific positivism, and thus are part of the humanist tradition as well.

Under such an interpretation, existential Marxism, because it allowed space for deliberate political action, constituted the rhetoric of the actual revolution. But structuralism, which had been chipping away at the academic establishment by institutions outside of the mainstream teaching institutions, such as the *Ecole pratique des hautes études* and even the *Collège de France*, played a role as well in the delegitimization of French literary humanism, which had dominated the French educational establishment since 1880.

² David Bordwell, *Narration and the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 332.

The student revolt of 1968, therefore, constituted the failure of de Gaulle and Malraux's effort to reinvigorate this literary humanist culture by expanding participation beyond the elite, as the critiques from within the discourse became so radical as to justify attacking the institutions which were constituent and constitutive of that discourse. Rather than be replaced by a new grand narrative, the humanist grand narrative was replaced by a climate of suspicion towards all grand narratives. Former structuralists abandoned attempts to create a science of discourse, and instead focused on creating the most creative or subversive interpretations of data possible. For Barthes, this meant that the text became a way for the reader to develop their own virtuosity and explode the text. For Foucault, this meant writing critical histories of the present which construct the status of dominant institutions and discourse as relatively arbitrary, but which make no claim to tell the past as it really happened.

Ironically, however, the suspicion of grand narratives led to the abandonment of the claim that the subject was soon to be erased like a drawing in the sand. Indeed, without the structuralist edifice, there was no basis for making such a claim. Rather, post-structuralists such as Foucault acknowledge that the subject exists because we live it, and that it structures not only discourse, but the way in which people live their lives.

Although Foucault's suspicion of power seemingly suggests an anarchist position, his work does not necessarily advocate abandoning the subject or the institutions of knowledge-power. Rather, it seeks to relativize it in order to loosen its grip. Indeed, if there is no absolute subject to free, there is nothing to liberate, except

where, in cases like arbitrary prejudice against homosexual desire, it constitutes real oppression.³

However, although Foucault devotes his work to mapping out the “micro-physics of power”⁴ by which this discipline is incurred, he offers no explicit way out, leading some critics to argue that his work is an excuse for political quietism. He does, however, argue that he sees his role as an intellectual to be to map out ways in which the dominant discourses close off possibilities.⁵ Consequently, his histories of the present can be seen as guides for intellectuals and artists who wish to expand the range of possibilities for being.

Consequently, Foucault’s histories of discipline and knowledge-power, like Heidegger’s histories of being, imply a central role for the artist. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of Foucault’s relationship to the work of the later Heidegger. However, Heidegger argues that artists will play a role in showing how practices marginalized by the culture of the technological age can offer a way out of viewing oneself and others as resources to be managed, which Heidegger claims results in nihilism. Artists, Heidegger argues, offer “gods,” or “cultural paradigms” which offer ways of being to a culture.⁶ Heidegger cites the example of a Greek temple as such a paradigm in the ancient world. In the technological age, Heidegger claims that our god is an electric power plant. Hubert Dreyfus, the leading interpreter of Heidegger in the Anglo-American world, offers the example of Woodstock as a failed attempt at

³ Hubert L. Dreyfus, “On the Ordering of Things: Being and Power in Heidegger and Foucault.” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28, Supplement (1990): 87-89.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 26.

⁵ Dreyfus, “On the Ordering of Things,” 93.

⁶ Dreyfus, “On the Ordering of Things,” 94.

offering a new possibility for being, in which Dionysian values seemed to overtake capitalist values.⁷

However, as Dreyfus points out, Heidegger's enthusiasm for the possibility of new gods to save us is politically dangerous, because it can justify embracing demagogues. Heidegger's enthusiasm for the Nazi party resulted from his belief that Hitler might offer an alternative to the values of the technological age. Even though there was no way for Heidegger to know the full implications of his political choice in 1933, and although he seemingly lost enthusiasm for Nazism by 1938, his example still stands as a warning.⁸ Thus, rather than attempt to find new gods, critics such as Foucault devote themselves to dismantling the more oppressive gods in our technological age.

Even if many contemporary critics are skeptical of the possibility of a new god being offered through art, they are more sympathetic to the possibility of art critiquing the cultural paradigms that do exist and which limit the possibilities for being. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) shows how gender is constructed in discourse as something natural, rather than socially constructed. For Butler, parody of the cultural paradigm of femininity through drag, by exaggerating the norm in a spectacular failure to live up to it, exposes its artificiality.

Parody, therefore, constitutes a means of breaking out of the matrix, or at least expanding the possibilities for being within the matrix. If the drag queen exposes the

⁷ Hubert L. Dreyfus, "On the Ordering of Things: Being and Power in Heidegger and Foucault," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28, Supplement (1990): 95.

⁸ Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Heidegger on the connection between nihilism, art, technology, and politics," *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 2nd edition, ed. Charles B. Guignon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 367.

artificiality of gender by subverting and frustrating it, then the culture begins to recognize that women and men perform gender through imitation as well. That is to say, by imitating an oppressive cultural paradigm in an exaggerated way—femininity as embodied in the 1950s Hollywood—performance can subordinate that cultural paradigm.

Godard's films, by causing the audience to construct subjects but constantly reminding the audience that those subjects are filmic creations, demonstrates the artificiality of subjectivity as a construction of discourse. Indeed, they imitate the cinematic paradigms of subjectivity in an exaggerated way. If Godard's texts are films rather than knowledge-claims in academia, this absolved them of the need to appeal to a grand narrative, and exposed a crack in the episteme of humanism without appealing to science. Thus, Godard's films should be seen as anticipating the post-1968 rejection of grand narratives.

Of course, it goes without saying, but better with saying, that the categories of historical periodization are always already contingent. Although I have used terms like "episteme" which derive from a structuralist pseudo-science of discourse, they designate tendencies in discourse rather than absolute rules. Indeed, as Barthes demonstrates in *S/Z* (1970), such categories are more useful in developing creative interpretations which offer new possibilities for how one can conceive a text, or in this case the past (which, for the historian, is a body of texts, after all). Consequently, I think that the risks one runs at using technical jargon are counteracted by the gains. If we are to take anything away from this thesis, it is that cracks in the social structure can be seen in literature as well as official discourse, and that the distinction between

the aesthetic and the ethical may be arbitrary. Indeed, in some sense I envisioned this thesis as a way of jamming the circuit of academic discourse. In history, which envisions itself classically as reading documents to understand the motivations of historical actors, I choose to write about the effects of texts, with relatively little reference to the life of the person who created them. In discourse about political shifts and their relationship to shifts in cultural institutions, I made a claim about an aesthetic work: look how it performs an argument about the social construction of the self—what can we get out of it?

At this stage, it seems that the next stage of such a project would be an examination of gender performativity in Godard's films and its relation to his parody of the subject. Indeed, this project began as an inquiry into how Godard's formal innovations imply a critique of gender relations in 1960s France. I soon realized that showing how Godard performed a parody of the subject was enough of a task in itself. But Bordwell's claim that the classical cinema links the success of the protagonist in their primary goal⁹ intrinsically to their romantic success prompted me to reflect on the way in which Godard's deviation from the classical cinema might subvert it.

Indeed, repeated viewings of films in which success results in a protagonist having sexual success must have social effects. Instinct tells me that it constructs a model of sexual relations in which women are commodities, rewards for male success. Thus, Hollywood cinema would function similar to the nude in John

⁹ David Bordwell, *Narration and the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 49-50.

Berger's reading: constructing a naturalized feminine essence as an object-commodity for male pleasure.

Godard deviates from this model: in *Contempt*, Bardot leaves her writer-husband because of his concern for material success depletes his self-esteem; in *Breathless*, Michel Poiccard is attractive because of his style, not his success. Consequently, it would follow from such an argument that a critique of the subject is linked intrinsically to a critique of masculine and feminine as categories. Such a project would link Godard's subversion of the subject and, under this hypothesis, of gender, to the rise of the Third Wave of feminism in the 1960s after the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949). De Beauvoir argued that the subject was gendered male, and that the centrality of this male subject compromised woman's place in France. Although Beauvoir, as an existentialist, retained the subject as the fundamental category and sought to expand it to include women, her insight that women are formed by society rather than born was foundational to Third Wave feminism and the work of Butler, who framed the subject and all gender categories as arbitrary social constructions.

However, such a project is at this point but a sketch. It would require extensive research onto the construction of gender in Hollywood cinema to verify whether Bordwell's claim is valid. Indeed, I lacked sufficient time to conduct such research without constructing a straw man, which dissuaded me from making claims in this area in this thesis. However, it may provide the groundwork for future research.

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