

NEGOTIATING THE NATION AFTER MAY '68: NARRATIVES OF AMERICA  
AND FRANCE IN FRENCH FILM, 1968 - 1972

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## ABSTRACT

JUNE ELIZABETH MAULDIN: Negotiating the Nation after May '68:  
Narratives of America and France in French Film, 1968 - 1972  
(Under the direction of Martine Antle)

This dissertation focuses on May '68 as a turning point in French politics, culture, and national identity. For many French intellectuals, the lessons of the ambiguous uprising were expressed in radically new expressions, and for filmmakers Agnes Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, and Jean Pierre Gorin, those expressions took the form of new structure, content, and technique. They were radicalized by the fleeting glimpse of a Marxist vision come true, of workers and students uniting against an increasingly globalized, Americanized capitalism, and against their own nation's lingering imperialist failures. Varda, Godard, and Gorin used film to explore, among other things, the possibilities inherent—surprisingly, to some—in American culture, politics, and history. They scrutinized the counterculture, the antiwar movement, and black power; they were influenced by a new, distinctively American, subversive ethos of deconstructing American mythology and identity. And their films reflected their fascination with a vivifying home grown radicalism that could breathe life into their own nation's foundering leftist tradition.

In my interrogation of the cross-cultural construction of national identity, I examine five films that articulate the tensions surrounding Franco-American relations in the late sixties and early seventies and demonstrate the simultaneous resentment of and admiration for American culture. In chapter one, I examine the ways in which directors

Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, in their film *Letter to Jane* (1972), address Jane Fonda's trip to Hanoi during the Vietnam War as a way of critiquing American military and cultural imperialism. In chapter two, I discuss Agnès Varda's film *Lions Love* (1969), and the director's articulation of the revolutionary potential of American popular culture and pop art as a site of contention in the "culture wars" between the U.S. and Europe. And in chapter three, I study Varda's documentary *The Black Panthers* (1968) and Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968) and *One A.M.* (1968) to explore the interrogation of Black Power as an oppositional discourse that challenged American hegemony from within.

To my dad

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The revolution of the twentieth century will take place in the United States.

Jean-François Revel, 1971

In 1960, the social scientist Jean-Marie Domenach noted the encroachment of American-style capitalism on French society:

Ten years ago we could still look down on the snack bars, the supermarkets, the striptease houses, and the entire acquisitive society. Now all that has more or less taken hold in Europe. This society is not yet ours, but it—or one that resembles it—could be our children's. The United States is a laboratory exhibiting life forms into which we have entered whether we like it or not. (Kuisel 109)

Domenach's quote encapsulates French debates over modernity in 1960s France that revolve around a cross-cultural construction of national identity. As Jean-Phillippe Mathy has claimed, post-World War II discourses about the meaning of America are actually arguments about the meaning of modernity itself and the American way of life (4). In terms of culture, the discourse has revolved around issues like egalitarianism, hierarchies of taste, and the superiority of the European modernist tradition over American mass culture. French critics worried about the usurpation of spiritual values by

crass materialism and the manipulation of consciousness by the mass media. On a political and economic level, French critics on the right and left argued that postwar modernization would radically alter the character of life in France and lead to a technocratic society characterized by unbridled consumerism, alienation, and conformity.

These struggles over national identity and modernity are tied in with debates about the shape of France's future—an Americanized future that held the country's suspicions, fears, and expectations. As sociologist Daniel Singer wrote in 1970, a French person traveling in the United States is “less struck by contrasts than by resemblances. He has the strange impression of making a journey through his own country's more or less distant future” (328). Indeed, writers like Georges Duhamel and Céline, who went to the U.S. in the 1930s and returned with horrific tales of Chicago slaughterhouses, Hollywood artifice, and homogeneity, contributed to post-World War II French fears of an Americanized France that was being ushered in by the Marshall Plan and the seemingly unfettered access of American corporations to the war-torn French markets.

Beginning in the 1950s, the French had a vested interest in such debates because they considered America a harbinger of what was to come in their own country, or, as French sociologist Michel Crozier described the U.S.: “terre promise ou enfer climatisé, mais toujours notre principal modèle de référence concrétisant nos craintes, nos espoirs et nos attentes...” (6). Anticipation of this future stirred up considerable anxiety in French society and prompted the creation of various studies and committees to prepare for its inevitable arrival. One report that emerged from this effort, *Réflexions pour 1985*, concluded that the France of 1985 would be analogous to the United States in 1965. During the intervening

twenty-year period, it would be necessary to weed out the undesirable elements of American society considered incompatible with French traditions and values. In fact, the writers boasted, the richness of these very values would “garantir que les structures de consommation y continueront de refléter des échelles de valeurs différentes de celles qui ont cours Outre Atlantique” (*Réflexions* 23). In this dissertation I examine some of the conflicting French discourses about American mass culture and the counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, and what they say about France’s struggle over the definition of modernity and national identity. I am particularly interested in French views of America in the late sixties and early seventies, when the concept of modernity was widely contested in the wake of May ’68.

This time marks a transitional period in French national identity. In the wake of the Algerian war, France faced the realities of a post-colonial existence with formerly occupied peoples in the Third World. Moreover, it was the last time that opposition to American intervention around the world was widely termed “American imperialism” (that is, until the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq) (Ross, “French Declaration” 146). By focusing on the late 1960s and early 1970s, I will shed light on the social conflicts and shifting power relations occurring in the U.S. and France that both challenged and created particular constructions of the nation. During this period, France was still reeling from the aftershocks of May ’68, when the myth of a unified France, created by the Gaullist administration, exploded, revealing the social tensions and political and economic discontent that had been simmering underneath. This was also a time when a radical re-ordering of space—geographical, social, and political—changed the way the French lived

and experienced the world. Figuratively, the world was shrinking as telecommunications and transportation made information from remote parts of the world more accessible to a French audience. This access made possible the psychological transcendence of national boundaries to create alliances between radical groups in the “First World” and revolutionaries in the “Third World.” Socially and politically, the fracturing of traditional fixed identities—through coalitions between students, workers, and the colonial other—opened up new ways of understanding a French national identity and political activism. At the same time, it also created a new way of conceiving the rapid acceleration of global capital that was blurring national boundaries, eroding centuries-old class differences, and transforming the Third World, particularly Vietnam, into a battleground against America’s continuation of European imperialism.

May ’68 was a watershed not only in French society, but in Franco-American relations as well. In my dissertation, I concentrate on the bitter division that emerged among the French left about the American counterculture. Amid the finger pointing about the failed revolution, some members of the French intelligentsia looked across the Atlantic for alternative models for France’s future. Even before the social ramifications of the events had time to unfold fully, many leftist intellectuals felt utterly defeated. Sociologists like Jean-François Revel argued that traditional ideas of revolution—i.e., that the proletariat would overthrow the capitalist system—were no longer valid in a post-industrial society. Leftists like Revel were also discouraged by the infighting between competing political groups, like the Communists and the Maoists, who were busy arguing about their respective visions of revolution.

Some French cultural critics, like sociologist Edgar Morin, traveled extensively throughout the U.S. and returned to France with a positive view of American culture in opposition to the long tradition of French anti-Americanism. In 1970, Morin praised the American counterculture's rejection of bourgeois society: "Aujourd'hui, au cœur de la civilisation bourgeoise la plus avancée, et née de l'expérience vécue de notre carence, c'est la première amorce de civilisation post-bourgeoise. Quelle spontanéité quelle violence, quelle candeur dans ce rejet, dans cette quête !" ("La mutation occidentale" 548). Morin and other French critics were attracted to the anti-authoritarian liberation politics of the American counterculture, which established itself against American consumer society while acknowledging that such a society had created the very conditions that allowed the counterculture to emerge in the first place. The new generation of French critics contrasted the individual freedom and social mobility in the U.S. to the social inertia in France, and praised the cultural revolution as a more effective means of political change than France's ideological gridlock.

In my interrogation of the cross-cultural construction of national identity, I examine five films that articulate the tensions surrounding Franco-American relations in the late sixties and early seventies and demonstrate the simultaneous resentment of and admiration for American culture. In chapter one, I examine the ways in which directors Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, in their film *Letter to Jane* (1972), address Jane Fonda's trip to Hanoi during the Vietnam War as a way of critiquing American military and cultural imperialism. In chapter two, I discuss Agnès Varda's film *Lions Love* (1969), and the director's articulation of the revolutionary potential of American popular culture and pop art as a site of contention in the "culture wars" between the U.S. and Europe.

And in chapter three, I study Varda's documentary *The Black Panthers* (1968) and Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968) and *One A.M.* (1968) to explore the interrogation of Black Power as an oppositional discourse that challenged American hegemony from within.

The films under examination here are the most important examples of French cultural engagement with America after the events of May '68—America as an idea, as a cultural and political hegemonic force, and as a wellspring of new forms of radicalism. Other French directors were influenced by May '68, but few used it as a lens through which to examine America. In *French Cinema in the 1970s: The Echoes of May*, Alison Smith examines a wide range of filmmakers who were affected by the 1968 uprising and identifies three general areas of transformation in film: the abolition of hierarchical structures, the redistribution of power in terms of representation (i.e. increased visibility of women and minorities), and the politicization of everyday life (Smith 11-12). The work of Marin Karmitz and Chris Marker in the decade following May '68 illustrates these trends as both filmmakers took their cameras into the factories. In a collaboration with workers who filmed their own working conditions, Karmitz and Marker broke down the subject/object divide as they helped make visible this formerly hidden world of the French factory. The Situationists also addressed these issues in films like René Vientet's *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (1973) and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973), but the directors never explicitly took on the United States as a subject, as did Varda and Godard.

It is my contention that the brief window of time, the first few years after May '68, represents the most significant break with the past and the most significant

engagement with the United States as a simultaneous embodiment of imperialistic capitalism and unique models for revolution in the wake of a failed Marxist revolt in France. The films made by Godard and Varda during the late 1960s and early 1970s illuminate this search for a new national identity by looking to the United States during a time when that country was seemingly being torn apart by battles over race, war, gender, morality, and civil liberties.

The films discussed here take on further significance in light of the later work of Godard and Varda. *Letter to Jane* marked the end of Godard's collaboration with Gorin, as well as the end of his Marxist-Leninist phase of filmmaking. But the effects of May '68 can be seen in Godard's body of work even in the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, when the director turned his attention away from revolutionary politics to the breakdown of traditional narratives and the foregrounding of the process of translating stories to film. In films like *Prénom Carmen* (1983), *Je vous salue, Marie* (1985), and *King Lear* (1987), Godard's subject matter paralleled the wider culture's increasing attention to sexual politics as well as the theoretical turn toward deconstructionism. His later films, like *Forever Mozart* (1996), which deals with the Bosnian conflict, focused on the breakdown of collective identity and the triumph of liberal democracy in the aftermath of the Cold War. Varda's career in the mid-1970s and 1980s marked a return to the question of female subjectivity first broached in her film *Cléo de 5 à 7*. In films like *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* (1977) and *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), Varda explores the construction of female sexuality in her experimentation with feminist forms of cinematic storytelling that disrupt traditional phallogocentric ways of viewing. By the mid-1970s, both directors had begun to move away from a direct engagement with the United States as America's defeat in

Vietnam became imminent, the rise of identity politics grew to replace the collectivism of sixties radical politics, and the American-dominated world economy of the immediate postwar period morphed into a more diffuse, interconnected global system.

#### A. HISTORICIZING THE PERIOD

It is crucial to understand the historical conditions in which Godard, Gorin, Varda, and other French directors made films from 1968 until 1972, since these conditions limited and shaped the nature of the narratives of the United States in the 1960s. May '68 was a critical turning point in French history when the whole process of American-style modernization in France, along with the authoritarian Gaullist policies that governed the country, was radically contested.

In the Gaullist sixties, debates about national identity became intertwined with the meaning of modernity and France's past. As president of the Republic, Charles De Gaulle stirred up a nationalism that harked back to a time when France was a great international player and a leader in world affairs. He drew on the idea of a communal past that became the basis for his idea of the French nation—a fiercely independent country in the middle of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Gaullism was a thoroughly modern project in its attempts to construct a definite, stable identity for the nation-state. The president relied on French cultural memories, values, and myths in order to create his idea of a unified France. The opening lines of his war memoir famously attest to his sentimental construction of the nation:

All my life I have formed a particular idea of France...Whatever feeling I have sees naturally in France the story princess or the madonna of frescoes, dedicated to an eminent and exceptional destiny...In short, to my way of thinking, France cannot be France without *grandeur*. (1)

This identity was a part of De Gaulle's romantic (and gendered) narrative of the country that glossed over France's dark colonial past, ignored bloody, prolonged military struggles to maintain control of Vietnam and Algeria, and omitted the country's collaboration with Nazi Germany in World War II. Critics like Jean-François Revel criticized De Gaulle's reinforcement of (as opposed to a reassessment of the need for) French *grandeur*, arguing that the president was "willing to jeopardize the future of the nation in order to attempt to reconquer for France a place in the diplomatic and military sun" (50).

On the cultural front, author André Malraux, De Gaulle's Minister of Cultural Affairs, worked with the president to shore up a national cultural and political sense of self, of Frenchness. The Cultural Ministry was established in 1959 expressly for this purpose, and Malraux outlined his goals in a governmental decree: "To make accessible to the largest number of French people possible the major artistic works of humanity, and above all those of France; to ensure the widest possible audience for our national heritage, and provide favorable conditions for the creation of artistic and intellectual works which will enrich this heritage" (Rigby 31). The government employed culture as a means of strengthening national unity and the nation-state at a time when France was

moving toward supranationality under the European Union, and at a time when France was undergoing an identity crisis in the aftermath of decolonization and crushing defeats in Vietnam and Algeria.

The specter of America dominated Gaullist policy and served as a necessary element in de Gaulle's definition of France. On a political and economic level, De Gaulle discouraged American investment in France, pulled the country out of NATO, and ejected American troops from French soil. During national elections, De Gaulle often warned voters that a defeat of the Fifth Republic would mean a loss of French independence vis-à-vis "the American hegemony." Malraux also attempted to contain the importation of American cultural goods and called for a deepening of spiritual values through the contemplation of French high art. These political and cultural stands directed against the United States played on fears of the Other in an attempt to solidify nationalistic fervor.

Many Gaullist policies were designed to ward off the complacency that American affluence would surely usher in. Such complaints about the staidness of French life spilled over into the political arena. A March 15, 1968, article in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, entitled "Quand la France s'ennuie," lamented the absence of political turmoil and rebellion in the Gallic nation (1). The author, Pierre Viansson-Ponté, blamed the comforts of modernization and affluence for the lack of interest, especially among French youth, in the revolutionary conflicts occurring in Vietnam, Cuba, and Latin America. However, this complacency would be shattered just days after Viansson-Ponté's article

appeared, and one of the primary targets of the revolutionary action would be the very “Americanisme” that had ostensibly fostered such apolitical tendencies in the first place.

That month, five student members of the Comité Viêt-nam national (CVN)—a group of Vietnam War protesters based at the University of Nanterre—detonated a series of small explosives that shattered the windows of the Chase Manhattan Bank, Bank of America, Trans World Airlines, and the American Express office in Paris. After their arrest, the students called the attacks demonstrations against America’s imperialist war against the Vietnamese people, a war they considered “a scandalous sign of the genocidal aggression of a society that claims to be the creator of prosperity and equality” (Flanner 299).

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a sociology student at Nanterre, organized a protest against the arrest of the student-militants, dubbing it the “Mouvement du 22 mars.” Students occupied the administration building and organized commissions on subjects like imperialism, the class structure of the university, and the workers’ struggle. Less than two months later, in May 1968, the unrest on the periphery of Paris had traveled to the heart of the Latin Quarter, the Sorbonne, in the form of student calls for general university reforms. Within days, the protests spread from Paris to the rest of the country, causing a general strike that shut down the country for weeks and almost toppled De Gaulle’s administration.

The events of May rocked the foundations of French society, prompting a reevaluation of the modernization process that had radically altered the traditional French way of life. As Daniel Singer points out, May was a total rebellion against France’s capitalist structure and the consumer society it had spawned, as well as a rejection of the

centralism and authority of the Gaullist state (21). Unprecedented alliances formed between students, blue-collar workers, artists, intellectuals, and numerous other groups and individuals who felt exploited by the bourgeois capitalist system. These separate but comparable struggles worked to bring the normal functioning of France to a standstill. Students built barricades on the streets of the Left Bank, hurling pavement stones and Molotov cocktails at invading CRS troops.<sup>1</sup> Factory workers held managers captive for weeks, confining them to their offices until worker demands were met. Farmers dropped tons of imported produce into the Mediterranean Sea to protest the Gaullist administration's lowering of tariffs on foreign agricultural products. Gravediggers occupied cemeteries, prompting morticians to call on the military for help in burying the dead.

At the Cannes Film Festival, filmmakers like Godard, François Truffaut, and Louis Malle succeeded in closing down the festival as a show of solidarity with the student and worker protesters across France. When festival organizers tried to continue without disruption a screening of Carlos Saura's *Peppermint Frappe* (1967), Saura, Godard, Truffaut, and actress Geraldine Chaplin (the star of the film) held the theater curtain shut—a sight that *New York Times* film critic Renata Adler described as reminiscent of the planting of the flag at Iwo Jima (D1). Later, in the Salle Jean Cocteau at the Palais du Festival, Godard, Truffaut, and Roman Polanski faced a hostile crowd. Newsreel footage of the event shows Godard before a mass of cameras and microphones, lamenting the apolitical nature of the films submitted for the festival jury's consideration:

Il n'y a pas un seul film qui montre les problèmes ouvriers ou étudiants tels qu'ils se passent aujourd'hui. Il n'y en a pas un seul qu'il soit fait par [Milos] Forman,

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<sup>1</sup> Compagnies républicaines de sécurité (French national riot police).

par moi, par [Roman] Polanski, par Francois [Truffaut]; il n'y en a pas. Nous sommes en retard. Nos camarades étudiants nous ont donnés d'exemple en se faisant casser la figure il y a une semaine. Il ne s'agit pas ici de continuer ou de ne pas continuer... Il s'agit de manifester, avec un retard d'une semaine et demi, la solidarité du cinéma sur les mouvements étudiants et ouvriers qui se passent en France. La seule manière pratique de le faire est d'arrêter immédiatement toute projection. ("Cannes: Mai '68")

As part of a common desire to reform the French film industry, more than 1,500 workers united to form the Estates General of French Cinema. The editors at *Cahiers du cinéma* applauded the new group for its efforts to "transform the 'system,' the state of affairs in which the cinema in France has been so self-enclosed, so cut off from any social or political reality" ("Editorial" 309). Filmmakers like Marin Karmitz and Chris Marker and other members of his film co-operative SLON (Société pour le lancement des oeuvres nouvelles) took their cameras into the factories, encouraging workers to become documentarians of their own lives and working conditions. Employing cinema in the subversion of the status quo, Godard and Marker, independent of one other, both filmed the violent beating and gassing of students in the streets of Paris. These *ciné-tractes* served as a counter-testimony to the mainstream news coverage shown every evening on French state-run television.

In *May '68 and Its Afterlives* Kristen Ross examines the events and the legacy of French students and workers coming together in the largest strike in France's history. For two months, nearly nine million people, drawn from the ranks of white-collar professions, manual laborers, and university students, refused to work and shut down

universities in their protest of American imperialism abroad and Gaullism at home. Although they failed to set, and thus to meet, any tangible goals in the mass movement, participants did manage to at least temporarily throw a wrench into the daily functioning of an entire nation and to draw worldwide attention to their critiques of the status quo. It was not insignificant. But, as Ross demonstrates, three decades later a popular misconception persists that May '68 was little more than a harmless, if petulant, collective student tantrum. Ross also demonstrates how the truth has been rewritten or erased—the truth about injuries and deaths as a result of brutal police violence, the pivotal role of the working classes, rampant anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism, and the invocation of Algeria and Vietnam.

Despite the widespread upheavals in French society and unprecedented political alliances forged between students and workers, many participants and observers of May '68 felt the revolution had been a failure, little more than a momentary explosion of jubilant anarchy. A governmental overthrow never materialized. De Gaulle was still in power, albeit shakily, and in the general elections of 1969, an overwhelming majority of right-wing candidates were elected to the National Assembly. In addition, capitalism had survived, and the revolutionary ideas that fueled the events were co-opted by larger capitalist forces. In the end, the barricades in the Latin Quarter were eventually cleaned up, erasing any trace of the incendiary confrontations.

But where the events of May '68 left many radicals and intellectuals disillusioned, some looked across the Atlantic to an unlikely source of inspiration: the United States. The late sixties and early seventies saw a change in French attitudes toward the U.S. Many intellectuals turned away from the modernist, humanist critiques of intellectuals

like André Malraux—the damning of the evils of American culture—to celebratory predictions of the U.S. as the site of the coming revolution. For some, America was still the center of capitalism, but it also contained the seeds of its own demise, exporting an anti-American sentiment around the world like any other cultural product. As Jean-François Revel writes:

Never before has the “sacred ego” of a nation become a subject of political controversy; and especially not in a nation that stands at the apex of its power. The consequences of this development are incalculable, for the criticism of imperialism and nationalism is taking place, for the first time, at the very source of imperialism and nationalism, and it is being spoken by those who are in a position to do something about it. (167)

This reversal of traditional anti-American rhetoric helped bring about an important change in French attitudes toward American culture. Agnès Varda was part of a contingent of French intellectuals, like sociologists Edgar Morin and Jean-François Revel, who were attracted to the ways in which cultural revolt, social criticism, and political contestation were intertwined in the U.S. They were critical of France’s rigid ideological groups and their backward-looking ways. For them, France was confined by this relationship to the past.

According to these intellectuals, American youth were actually creating revolution as opposed to trying to conceptualize and plan it under the precepts of any specific ideology, or what Revel calls the “theoretical dustbins of Europe” (235). He writes:

Why should unorganized activity be a virtue in Europe, and a vice in America—especially when this new type of revolt was not born in Europe, but in America, where it has not been smothered under the weight of pseudo-Maoist rhetoric and where it is continuing to get results? The movement of dissent in America has disconcerted the powers-that-be in politics, in economics, and in culture. Nonetheless, it is not precisely an economic upheaval by an oppressed class, or a political movement by an opposing party, or a cultural rebellion by a subversive school of thought.

(128)

These French thinkers were attracted to the expansiveness and creativity of the American counterculture as opposed to the political deadlock that many believed was the undoing of the May '68 events. A revolt against American hegemony was taking place within the U.S. itself, and many leftist French thinkers were enthralled. However, French enthusiasts for the American counterculture were well aware of the precariousness of such counterhegemonic politics. As Mathy writes, French observers of the scene “took pains to underline the equivocal character of the new cultural revolution: its basic vulnerability in the face of repression, its lack of cohesiveness and long-term perspective, the possibility of being short-lived. No matter, suddenly Berkeley and Venice Beach replaced Beijing and Havana as symbolic sites of revolutionary change” (197).

Jean-François Bizot, publisher of the French underground magazine *Actuel*, spent time in the U.S. during the sixties and was one of the principal proponents of the American counterculture upon his return to France. He describes the fascination with America as more than a romantic fancy—it was an urgent need: “Entre 1965 et 1970, on

avait besoin de l'Amérique" (7). Bizot points out that his generation had grown up in a Europe caught in a "post-Holocaust stupor" and reeling from the loss of its colonies. This is not to say that France was culturally and intellectually dead during this period. Rather, he argues, America was like a mirage for "cette Europe des petits costumes et des bleus d'ouvriers " that would appropriate "the best in French aspirations " for its own purposes: the theory of Simone De Beauvoir changed the consciousness of feminists in the women's liberation movement; the Black Panthers drew revolutionary inspiration from the postcolonial critiques of Frantz Fanon and Cheikh Anta Diop; the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud flowed underneath the lyrics of Jim Morrison and the Doors; and for their outlandish public spectacles, the Diggers (the early prototypes of hippies) in San Francisco borrowed from the absurdist elements of Alfred Jarry's plays. Bizot claims that while France slept during the postwar period, America was picking his country's pockets. He writes: "Son underground, nourri d'Europe mais futurisé post-Disneyland, devenait impressionnant pour une Europe qui n'avait toujours pas la télé en couleurs, le congélateur, la banquette arrière et la pilule qui va avec " (7).

#### B. SCHOLARSHIP ON VARDA, GODARD, AND GORIN

The films discussed in my dissertation have largely gone unexamined in recent years. Aside from critical reviews published in the late sixties and early seventies, there are relatively few academic articles published about these films. Current scholars focus on Godard and Varda's better-known work: *A bout de souffle* (1960), *Vivre sa vie* (1962), *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), etc. I speculate that this is partially due to the relative obscurity of *Lions Love*, *Letter to Jane*, and *The Black Panthers*, and their availability only on 16 mm. (*The Black Panthers* was released on video by

International Historic Films in 1995.) The films are briefly mentioned in broad overviews of the filmmakers' careers. For example, Wheeler Winston Dixon, in his book *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard*, devotes only one paragraph on *Letter to Jane*—basically summarizing the film and concluding: "It's brilliant, if difficult, filmmaking" (125). And in Alison Smith's *French Cinema in the 1970s: The Echoes of May*, the author briefly mentions Godard's *One A.M.* by way of comparison with filmmaker William Klein's examination of the black nationalist movement (231).

Most of the articles about the films discussed in this dissertation were written between 1968 and 1973, at the time of their release. Much of this literature, especially the literature on Godard, is dominated by a formalist analysis of the works as a response to Hollywood convention. These articles focus solely on Godardian aesthetics, instead of looking at how the form and content functioned in tandem to challenge the U.S. both culturally and politically. For example, Peter Wollen wrote several articles on Godard in the early seventies, such as "The Two Avant-Gardes" (published in *Studio International* in 1975) and "Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent d'Est" (published in *Afterimage* in 1972) in which he gives an excellent analysis of the director's radical aesthetics. But Wollen disregards the actual content of Godard's films—thus dividing the two elements that the director himself considered inseparable.

In addition, Jennifer Smith, in her 1999 book *An International History of the Black Panther Party*, points out the absence of literature about the Panthers' connections to larger international movements. She claims that Robert Sandarg's article, "Jean Genet and the Black Panther Party," is the only article devoted entirely to the party's international activities (51). By researching how Godard, Gorin, and Varda joined Genet

in his support of the Panthers, I will fill in some of the gaps in the current literature, which focuses mainly on the domestic activities of the group. By looking at the Black Panthers' critiques of America as an internal colonizer of blacks and an international colonizer in Southeast Asia, I will shed light on the transnational component of the movement's agenda for worldwide, revolutionary change.

The filmmakers themselves represent the bitter division among the French left in their opinions of American cultural politics—with Godard and Gorin, who were deeply entrenched in the ideological conflicts of May '68, and Varda, who was living in the U.S. in the late sixties and heavily influenced by the American countercultural and underground scene. Varda is a somewhat slippery figure in French cinema. As a contemporary of Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and Claude Chabrol, Varda is often grouped with these directors under the New Wave label, though she was never associated as a critic with *Cahiers du cinéma*. Unlike the films like Godard and Truffaut, Varda's formal and aesthetic interests came from the fine arts, as opposed to the Hollywood tradition (Williams 357). She is often linked with the Left Bank group, a loose affiliation of filmmakers—including Alain Resnais and Chris Marker—who saw cinema in relation to other arts, like literature and music. As Richard Roud states, this Left Bank group had “a fondness for a kind of Bohemian life and an impatience with the conformity of the Right Bank, a high degree of involvement in literature and the plastic arts, and a consequent interest in experimental filmmaking” (143).

Much of the literature on Varda's work ignores her most overtly political film, *Lions Love*. Scholars largely focus on her films that lend themselves more readily to a

feminist reading. For example, in her overview of Varda's career, Alison Smith concentrates on the director's "feminine cinema," looking at women's images and self-images in *Cléo de 5 à 7*, *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* (1977), *Sans toit ni loi*, and *Jane B. par Agnès V* (1987). By contrast, she devotes only eight sentences to *Lions Love* (47-48). In terms of filmmaking after May '68, much of the literature investigates the aesthetics of post-May '68 film as a response to traditional Hollywood cinema. For example, in her book *May '68 and Film Culture*, Sylvia Harvey gives a thorough historical account of the impact of the events of 1968 on French film production. In an excellent, comprehensive overview of the period, Harvey focuses on the evolution of film theory toward political engagement and places this change within the context of earlier debates about modernism and notions of cultural production. The author remains in the theoretical realm, however, without discussing any specific film in detail.

Film historians have also tended to pay inadequate attention to the actual activities of Varda, Godard, and Gorin in the U.S. There is no extensive written documentation of their trips to the United States or their involvement in various political struggles. But it is important to piece together these experiences as much as possible, because they deeply affected the filmmakers and shaped their work and their thinking during this crucial period. In 1970, Godard and Gorin traveled to the U.S. on a college promotional tour with their movie *British Sounds*. The tour was partially funded by the film's distributor, the alternative Grove Press, and included stops at UC-Berkeley, Yale, and New York University. In addition to exhibiting their film, Godard and Gorin raised money for a movie they were working on about the Palestinian struggle. College audiences did not react favorably to *British Sounds*. After the screening at Berkeley, a handful of

disgruntled viewers threw tomatoes at Godard and Gorin as they walk onstage for a question and answer session. The audience then pelted the directors with criticism, accusing them among other things of profiting from the countercultural movement (Goodwin et al 24).

Varda was living in Los Angeles during the events of May '68. Her husband, director Jacques D  my, had signed a contract to make a film in Hollywood, and they moved to California in 1967 and quickly became caught up in the wave of dissent sweeping the country. In a pre-May '68 interview, D  my claimed that the couple was happy to leave France, describing the political and cultural climate there as dreary and dull. In contrast, he was quickly taken with the American counterculture. He writes: "En venant ici, j'allais    la rencontre de choses, de probl  mes, qui me paraissaient int  ressants, importants. Ce ph  nom  ne de la jeunesse, les hippies, les r  actions    la guerre du Vietnam, les Noirs...enfin tout ce m  lange de l'Am  rique avec tous ses probl  mes" (Delahaye 52).

Since the role of the filmmaker as a cultural agent is essential to any discussion of post-May '68 film practice, I will explore the activities of these directors in the United States and their association with the Black Panthers, antiwar activists, and other countercultural groups. The dissertation is also informed by, and contributes to, our understanding of the complex, varied, ambivalent, and ever-changing attitudes of the French about America. Jean-Philippe Mathy's book, *Extr  me-Occident: French Intellectuals and America*, focuses on the ways in which French intellectuals' writings on America are shaped by stereotypes accepted by those on both the left and right. Richard Kuisel's *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* is an extensive look at

the complex fluctuations in French opinions about the U.S. in the twentieth century, and the influence of economics, politics, and culture on these opinions. Kristin Ross, in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, examines the years between the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the late 1960s, when France witnessed a startlingly rapid transformation from an agrarian, inward-looking nation with colonial ties to a decolonized, modernized, and Americanized country. Ross ends her study in 1968, when discontent with the processes of American-style modernization erupted in the revolts of May '68. In Mathy's and Kuisel's work, discussion of "culture" is confined largely to the work of French novelists, poets, and essayists, giving little if any attention to filmmakers. By classifying Varda, Godard, and Gorin as artists, intellectuals, and radicals, however, this dissertation complicates the narrative of French postwar attitudes about America. Though France had a long tradition of anti-Americanism<sup>2</sup>, and most thinkers, writers, and artists in the 1960s and 1970s found the U.S. repellent on a number of fronts, Varda and Godard found something redeemable in its unique brand of counterculture politics and bourgeois radicalism. The U.S., or at least some of the dissenting groups within it, offered a new model for personal, political, and cultural transformation that profoundly affected not only their own work but also their conception of French identity, and the possibilities of French identity.

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<sup>2</sup> French animosity toward America has waxed and waned since mid- 1700s. It takes on many forms—from the natural historian Buffon's belittling of the the New World's flora and fauna as stunted and atrophied, to Frédéric Gaillardet's mockery of American cowboys as a poor man's version of chivalry and knighthood, to the Far Right Charles Maurras's condemnation of Woodrow Wilson as the leader of a meglomaniacal country bent on world domination. For an overview of these and other instances in the long history of anti-americanism, see Philippe Roger's *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*.)

### C. THEORIZING NATIONAL IDENTITY

This dissertation also examines the ways that national identity, both American and French, become negotiated through various forms of visual culture. In light of Benedict Anderson's ideas about the formation of the nation-state, I will discuss how individuals come to identify with an "imagined community," as well as how nations are defined against and distinguished from other nations through visual culture.

In a 1977 issue of *Tel Quel*—a journal that expressed a pro-American sentiment that grew out of the turn in the late sixties—theorist Julia Kristeva discusses how her travels to the U.S. affected her views of the country as a model for social change. She explains that during her first visit, in 1966, she was leaving behind a France that from a cultural point of view was "tout à fait fermée, bloquée" (3). Upon Kristeva's arrival in the United States, she discovered that "ce qui se passait là répondait à une expérience de la modernité que l'Europe ne soupçonnait pas du tout à l'époque" (11). Her trip marked a turning point:

J'avais de plus en plus l'impression que ce qui se passait en France, grâce aux développements divers du gaullisme finissant d'une part, et de la montée des forces dites de masses ou de masses petite-bourgeoises de l'autre, faisait du continent européen une histoire prévisible et que, par contre, si on s'intéressait à des ruptures de l'histoire, de la culture et du temps, il fallait changer de continent.  
(3)

Kristeva's comments illustrate cultural theorist Henry Giroux's argument that "national identity is always a shifting, unsettled complex of historical struggles and experiences that are cross-fertilized, produced, and translated through a variety of cultures" (42). It is

this cross-cultural construction of identity that I examine in my dissertation, and the work of Henry Giroux, Benedict Anderson, Caren Kaplan, and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White inform my understanding of the complex dynamics of national identity formation.

National identity is always predicated on a series of inclusions and exclusions. As social historian Benedict Anderson argues, the nation is an “imagined political community” in which the nation becomes a cultural artifact narrated by other cultural artifacts (17). Whereas Anderson’s study examines the role of print culture in the creation of the nation-state, my dissertation focuses on how cinema actively participates in the actual defining and conceptualizing of a nation. This is not to suggest that the nation does not exist independently of its cultural representations. Certainly there are multiple factors in defining and maintaining the idea of nationhood—symbols, myths, values, memories—and film is more than a simple reflection or expression of a unified and complete national culture or identity. In my dissertation, I explore cinema as the means through which such symbols, myths, and values are transmitted to a nation’s citizens.

In addition to discussing the mechanisms underlying the construction of the nation-state and national identity, I look at travel as a theoretical construct that also works to build national identities. As Caren Kaplan points out: “The paradigm of displacement ... has a long-standing tradition in modern French discourse on the United States” (79). Indeed, ever since its inception, French views of America have been shaped by writers’ actual voyages across the Atlantic—from Alexis de Toqueville to Chateaubriand, from Duhamel and Céline to Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Here, I examine Varda, Godard, and Gorin’s travels between the U.S. and France—their literal, physical displacement between the two countries as well as the figurative travel that takes place in

the films—and how they serve to construct particular narratives about both America and France. This enables me to study national identity formation as a process, or as Simon Frith describes identity construction in general, “not the positioning of the subject as such, but [the] experience of the movement between positions” (110).

In my discussion of *Lions Love*, I draw from cultural theorists Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s reading of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque—with its symbolic inversions of high and low culture, the transcendent and the profane, the grotesque and the classical, the pure and the soiled—as an analytic category.<sup>3</sup> The theorists argue that within a society, the human body, geographical space, and the social order are constructed within interrelated hierarchies of high and low. This binary opposition is fundamental to the “mechanisms of ordering and sense-making in European culture” (3). Whereas Stallybrass and White show how bourgeois culture emerged from a rejection of the carnivalesque, I will demonstrate how the strict maintenance of this opposition also works to delineate the boundaries of the European nation-state. I will discuss how France attempted to construct its identity as a nation-state by demarcating itself from American popular culture (and how some French intellectuals worked against such strict boundaries.)

These theories help to answer the following questions that I pose in the dissertation: How does the construction of an imagined America conversely construct a particular notion of the French nation? How do these films shed light on France’s struggle over the definition of modernity and national identity? How are notions of

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<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque as the “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.”

citizenship fashioned by processes of remembering and forgetting certain histories and cultural differences? How do individuals come to identify with an “imagined community,” and how are nations defined against and distinguished from other nations? I have chosen to answer these questions through the medium of film, in particular the works of French directors who, between 1968 and 1973, made radically new kinds of films in terms of style and content that were ultimately seen by relatively few viewers. The relative obscurity of the films does not diminish their significance, for they can be seen as valuable texts for the cultural historian attempting to measure the immediate impact of the events of May ’68 on French leftist intellectuals and their ideas about national identity. Moreover, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have argued, “Beliefs about the origins and evolution of nations often crystallize in the form of stories. . . . The cinema, as the world’s storyteller *par excellence*, was ideally suited to relay the projected narratives of nations and empires” (367). In the case of French reactions to May ’68 and to America during the decades following World War II, cinema, and its critique of Hollywood’s role in exporting certain images and meanings of the U.S. around the world, is a crucial lens through which to view the interplay between French and American national identities.

In an interview about his epic work *Histoires du Cinéma* (1997-98), Godard argues that cinema was one of the primary factors in fostering the ascendancy of America in the world. Film was one of the many historical forces that paved the way for American global hegemony by its transmission of the utopian promise of the “American dream” to people around the world. Discussing American director Frank Capra’s films, Godard claims the popular filmmaker’s work was designed to “give America an all-

conquering image” because “America needed to dominate the world bit by bit,” and cinema, in its propagation of American foundation mythologies, played a key role in that accomplishing (Ishaghpour 95). Each in his or her own way, Varda, Godard, and Gorin during this period were using cinema, in part, to subvert what amounted to the mass production of dreams and mythologies embodied by Hollywood. In the process of this subversion, they also revealed their own biases and interpretations of the meanings of “America,” at times woefully off the mark or condescending, and other times perceptive, trenchant, and reverential.

#### D. DESCRIPTION OF CHAPTERS

##### *Letter to Jane*

In chapter one, I discuss Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin’s 1972 film *Letter to Jane*. In July 1972, Jane Fonda went to Vietnam to protest the atrocities committed against the North Vietnamese by U.S. forces. Earlier that year, she had starred in the Godard and Gorin film *Tout Va Bien* (1972) as an American journalist questioning her profession in the wake of the May ’68 events. After Fonda’s trip to Vietnam, Godard and Gorin made *Letter to Jane* to show at the New York Film Festival to accompany a screening of *Tout Va Bien*.

In the film, Godard and Gorin seek to uncover the complex social and political structures hidden in a photograph of Fonda with several North Vietnamese soldiers. This type of analysis was part of a larger trend in film theory in the late sixties that attempted a “scientific” analysis of film, and drew from fields like semiotics to understand how images communicate meaning. In the experience of the film, the viewer sees this simple

black and white photograph on the screen while listening to Godard and Gorin conduct a formal analysis of the image. The filmmakers later move from a close reading of the photo to a comparative study as they juxtapose the image with other still images of John Wayne, Henry Fonda, Golda Maier, Richard Nixon, and dead Vietnamese civilians. The film begins with Godard and Gorin explaining the goal of their investigation:

[VOICEOVER] Everyone is his own journalist or editor, depending on how he changes his own day-to-day concrete activities into a film, making himself the star of this film. And it is precisely this kind of star system that we want to talk about. To talk about with the audience. But in order to do so, we must make a detour because just as a film is a kind of detour that leads us back to ourselves, in order to get back to the film we must first make this detour into ourselves. And here, in the USA today, ourselves still and always means Vietnam.

As the film progresses, Godard and Gorin draw parallels between their struggle to combine art and politics to combat American cultural and political imperialism and the North Vietnamese struggle against the American neo-imperialist project.

In chapter one, I also look at Godard and Gorin's choice of Jane Fonda as the subject of their film. This chapter includes a discussion of how the directors' critique of the Hollywood star system revealed the ways in which star images mask and/or expose ideological contradictions. Godard and Gorin's critique of the Hollywood star system has much in common with Christine Gledhill's theory of the function of the film star. Gledhill writes:

The star challenges analysis in the way it crosses disciplinary boundaries: a product of mass culture, but retaining theatrical concerns with acting, performance and art; an industrial marketing device, but a signifying element in films; a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which expresses the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style; a product of capitalism and the ideology of individualism, yet a site of contest by marginalised groups; a figure consumed for his or her personal life, who competes for allegiance with statesmen and politicians. (xiii)

*Letter to Jane* addresses several of the questions raised by Gledhill's analysis.

For example, as an American film star, how does Jane Fonda function as a social sign for Godard and Gorin? As a "signifying element," how does Fonda become a site of contestation between different groups/individuals (the North Vietnamese, the French filmmakers, conservative Americans) with a vested interest in controlling and disseminating her image? Also, I incorporate Edgar Morin's study of the Hollywood star system, *Les Stars*, which had a strong influence on Godard and Gorin. Written in 1960, Morin studies the development of the system into a major capitalist institution in which the star serves as a commodity destined for mass consumption. This chapter discusses how the filmmakers' critique of Fonda stands in for a critique of American capitalism.

In addition to a semiological analysis of Fonda's photo, Godard and Gorin incorporate modernist techniques of artists from the early part of the century, like Bertolt Brecht and Dziga Vertov, in their critique of the ideology of American

mass culture. Cultural historian Andreas Huyssen argues that, as the “hidden subtext” of the modernist project, mass culture was gendered feminine by the political and aesthetic discourse surrounding it in the early twentieth century: “The autonomy of the modernist art work, after all, is always the result of a resistance, an abstention, and a suppression—resistance to the seductive lure of mass culture, abstention from trying to please a larger audience, suppression of everything that might be threatening to the rigorous demands of being modern and at the edge of time” (55). By incorporating Huyssen’s observation, I demonstrate that in their reading of Fonda as a product of the American capitalist system and carrier of the capitalist ideologies that Godard and Gorin deemed inherent in mass culture, the filmmakers replicate the patriarchal biases of the modernist aesthetic. I show how Fonda serves as a receptacle for the anxieties and fears brought by Americanization and modernity in general on both the right and the left.

Godard and Gorin set up the film as a visual letter written in the second person singular to Jane Fonda. The directors hope that Fonda will “be able to come and answer our letter by talking with us as we go reading it in two or three places in the U.S.” The use of the epistolary form to critique society is a common trope in French literature. Ostensibly, authors like Montequieu crafted fictional characters from foreign countries who traveled to France. These characters when wrote letters back to their home country describing the French culture, but the descriptions were critiques of French society. For example, in *Les lettres persanes*, Montesquieu, through the letters of Usbek and Rica, criticizes French politics, culture and religion. In chapter one, I conclude that Godard and Gorin’s concern with American mass culture, especially as seen through the body of Jane

Fonda, reveals an anxiety about the French male intellectual after May '68. After May, emerging minority groups challenged the very definition of intellectuals, as well as the intellectual's ability to speak in the name of others. I show how this anxiety is projected onto the female body, and how the directors reify the paternalistic qualities of the imperialist practices that they ostensibly repudiate.

### *Lions Love*

The next chapter considers Agnès Varda's 1969 film *Lions Love* as a cross-cultural construction of national identity. The film takes place in June 1968, when Robert Kennedy was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, two months after Martin Luther King Jr. had been murdered in Memphis, and only a day after Andy Warhol was shot in New York by Valerie Solanas. In *Lions Love* Varda depicts the lives of three hippies—Viva, Jim Rado, and Jerry Ragni—living in Los Angeles. Her choice of actors is important: Viva, a star from Warhol's Factory; Rado and Ragni, well-known actors and writers in the New York theater who also wrote and starred in the *American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (later and better known as *Hair*). Varda also cast New York underground filmmaker Shirley Clarke as herself, in a role that brings her to California to discuss a contract for a Hollywood film, and where she ends up staying with the threesome in their Hollywood Hills home. Within this framework Varda unveils her critique of both American consumer culture, but more importantly also of French fears of U.S. capitalism and mass culture, and their decaying effects on French national identity. Her characters live in an exaggerated world that fulfills the worst nightmares of the French humanist intellectuals: in a house filled with plastic objects, in a city built to

perpetuate illusion and false dreams, in a state where American westward expansion resulted in the evaporation of European culture at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

In 1968, film historian Carlos Clarens (who appears in *Lions Love*) introduced Varda to Andy Warhol at the Factory in New York. According to Varda, it was Warhol who convinced one of his Superstars, Viva, to appear in *Lions Love*. The following year, after the movie was completed, Viva appeared nude along with her co-stars, Jim Rado and Jerry Ragni, on the cover of the first issue of Warhol's celebrity gossip magazine, *Interview*. In her autobiography Varda acknowledges the artist's influence on her own films : "Son travail m'a certainement aidée à visualiser le temps au cinéma, à inventer des images inscrites dans le temps réel qui passe pendant qu'on regarde un film" (*Varda par Agnès* 35). In *Lions Love* Varda weaves Warhol's Pop sensibility through her film as a means of exploring—and critiquing—the French need to establish distinct cultural and national boundaries between France and the United States.

I argue that Varda is offering up the carnival imagination prevalent among American radicals in the late 1960s as an alternative to the cultural codes, values, and norms of Gaullist France. After examining the efforts of André Malraux to define French cultural life, and the government's use of culture as a means of strengthening national unity, I will look at Varda's construction of the U.S. as a nation imbued with the excesses of the Warhol sixties—mass consumption, artifice, and bad taste. This world, as portrayed in *Lions Love*, intersected with French anxieties about American modernity and signified everything that French critics (both left and right) feared about Americanization. I also demonstrate how

Varda constructs a “Pop” America of celebrity and superficiality that undermines French notions of authenticity and taste. Finally, I show how Varda draws from the American counterculture, where sexual liberation served as a tool of social and cultural revolt. Through *Lions Love*, I explore some of the conflicting French discourses about American mass culture and the counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, and how they in turn illuminate France’s internal struggles over the country’s sense of self. Varda’s construction of an imagined America can be read as the antithesis of an equally imagined France.

### *Black Panthers*

The Black Panthers drew support not only from countries participating in anti-imperialist struggles but also from groups in the First World nations who considered the organization a significant force for change in the U.S. In France, Jean Genet was arguably the most vocal supporter of the Black Panther Party. He was actively involved in protesting the trial of Bobby Seale and other Panthers in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1970, and he spoke on behalf of the group at universities across the country. Two years earlier, in 1968, while living in California, Agnes Varda created a thirty-minute documentary on the Black Panther Party. Titled simply *Black Panthers* (1968), it consists almost entirely of footage from a “Free Huey” rally and birthday celebration for the imprisoned Panther co-founder and leader. The rally took place in at the Oakland Auditorium in Oakland, California, on February 17, 1968, and Varda chooses to film the event and edit the footage without a narrator or any exposition. Unlike her counterparts Godard and Genet, who also used the Black Panthers as subject matter in their cultural

and political productions, Varda's approach attempts to let the Panthers speak for themselves—though her choice of images and speeches to include and exclude makes clear the impossibility of unmediated communication and offers clues to Varda's sense of national identity and the meaning of America at that crucial historical moment.

The Panthers were not the first to criticize U.S. foreign policy or to make connections between racism at home and racism abroad. From Marcus Garvey to Malcolm X, W. E. B. Du Bois to Martin Luther King, African Americans have long articulated anti-imperialist critiques in the same breath as demands for full legal equality within the United States. By 1967 King had become one of the most prominent opponents of the Vietnam War. In a speech delivered at New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967 — a year to the day before he was murdered — King called the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" ("Beyond Vietnam" par. 11). From Vietnam to South Africa to Latin America, he declared, the U.S. was "on the wrong side of a world revolution" (par. 44). King questioned "our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America" (par. 47), and asked why the U.S. was suppressing revolutions "of the shirtless and barefoot people" (par. 50) in the Third World, instead of supporting them. He also offered an economic critique, complaining about "capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries" (par. 47).

By the 1960s, many Third World nations had gained their independence from colonial European powers, and many other subjugated people were fighting wars to gain their freedom and the right to self-determination. Several groups sought to cross national boundaries and connect these struggles. The Black Panthers were an integral part of the

effort. By appropriating and recontextualizing the colonial history of these countries, they identified black people in the U.S. as part of the Third World, requiring political and economic independence to end their oppression and status as colonized peoples.

Godard was attracted to the Panthers' revolutionary rhetoric, and in 1968 he joined with filmmakers D.A. Pennebaker and Richard Leacock to make a film about resistance and revolution in America, entitled *One A.M. or One American Movie*. Due to differences with his colleagues, Godard abandoned the project. Later, Pennebaker took the footage that he shot of Godard's trip to the U.S. and assembled his own film entitled *One P.M.* This version shows the French director visiting an inner-city high school with actor Rip Torn, watching the police arrest the Jefferson Airplane as they perform on a rooftop in downtown New York, and discussing revolution with Eldridge Cleaver.

In *Sympathy for the Devil* (aka *One + One*), Godard also looks at the role of violence in bringing about change. The film consists of ten sequences roughly ten minutes in duration. Each sequence is one continuous shot—sometimes the camera remains fixed, sometimes it moves freely about. The film revolves around the Rolling Stones in a recording studio rehearsing their song "Sympathy for the Devil." Godard intercuts scenes of black radicals reciting militant texts by LeRoi Jones and Eldridge Cleaver.

The press often distorted the basic platform of many radical groups in America, particularly the Black Panthers, as did the FBI in a vicious smear campaign. Conscious of this problem, filmmakers saw the need to distribute as well as produce films. A company known as American Documentary Films was founded to produce and distribute antiwar films and films from Cuba, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Agnès Varda, who was actively

involved in the Panther movement, produced and exhibited films that publicized their plight, and raised money for the group, made *Black Panthers* for American Documentary Films. The film features a who's who of Panthers, including Eldridge Cleaver, H. Rap Brown, Bobby Seale, and Stokely Carmichael. The documentary is fairly conventional in form and tone, adhering to a traditional *cinema verité* approach to the subject. Through editing, however, Varda critiques the American mythology of the frontier by highlighting those speeches from the rally that invoked the genocide of indigenous peoples in America; that called upon the arming of African Americans to defend their communities from the imperialist power of the police—a literal and quintessentially American call to arms and a legacy of the gun-saturated frontier tradition; and that compared America's overseas expansion and “colonization” in Vietnam to the “colonization” of blacks inside the United States.

In this chapter, I look at the connection between domestic constructions of race and these transnational alliances that transformed the space of the “internal colonized” in America, enabling African Americans to redefine themselves as compatriots with other people of color oppressed by American political and military might. At a time when radicals were eschewing national identities in favor of connections with Third World struggles, Varda, Genet, and Godard were also working to break down these boundaries. The Black Panthers also read the experiences of the Vietnamese through the filter of their own collective memory, appropriating these experiences to arrive at a new understanding of their own identity. In this chapter, I show how the Panthers constructed meaning out of foreign discourses, appropriating and recontextualizing them in order to reexamine their

own "national" identities. Through their rewriting of American history and its foundation myths, I examine how the Panthers reveal the fragmented nature of national identity. Myths, at their base, are narratives of origins and creation that construct values and meanings and are passed down through generations, enabling a society to define itself. The mythic tradition of the United States, as Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies have argued, "has been forged from its history, consciously constructed, persistently employed, widely disseminated and subject to subtle shifts over time" (30 -31). In the pages that follow I will explore how these French films embrace, explode, or simply interpret various American myths. I will also examine what their readings of those myths, especially those that had significant political impact in the late 1960s and early 1970s, reveal about changing concepts of French identity at the time.

CHAPTER ONE: *LETTER TO JANE*: JANE FONDA AND THE AMERICAN  
IMPERIALIST PROJECT

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new forms of the subject. - Walter Benjamin

A. Introduction

In March 1968, the destruction of the plate glass windows of the Chase Manhattan Bank, Bank of America, Trans World Airlines, and American Express offices in Paris caused an unexpected aftershock across France. Though the damage inflicted was minimal, the nature of these attacks was multi-layered. Not only did they represent a protest by the Comité Viêt-nam national against U.S. interference in a sovereign nation's internal affairs, they also challenged the notion of America as a universal model of economic development and prosperity. The choice of venues for the explosions—two banks, an airline, and a communications center for American tourists--symbolizes not simply the presence of American industry in France, but, more importantly, the circulation of American goods and an accompanying capitalist ideology around the globe. The actions and subsequent arrests of the Nanterre students proved to be the catalyst for

the May '68 events in which the very process of American-style modernization in France was radically contested.

The events of May had a profound effect on director Jean-Luc Godard. Along with a new generation of radical theorists at *Cahiers*, the director came to view Hollywood as a social and economic institution with political implications. *Cahiers* critics like Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni argued that cinematic realism was an expression of a society's dominant ideology: Cinema "is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself with itself...the film is ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself" (46). Like the Comité Viet-nam national's bombings of the American Express and TWA offices in Paris, Godard's post-May '68 films attempted to call attention to the circulation of ideological artifacts across national boundaries without respect for borders. Classic Hollywood cinema was now considered a propaganda tool used to spread American capitalist ideology around the world, and it was ideological not only in content--promoting the American way of life with the encouragement of the U.S. government--but in form as well. In order to expose the underlying mechanisms of mainstream cinema, a revolutionary film practice was needed, a *cinéma militant*, that would link content with aesthetics. Godard joined with filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin to form the Dziga Vertov group, whose goal was to disrupt the traditional ways of viewing aligned with Hollywood cinema.

In a 1972 interview about their post-May '68 filmmaking practices, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin referenced media theorist Marshall McLuhan and his ideas on the impact of mediated images on traditional ways of seeing: "...McLuhan was right. We think that today the people, and even us, don't know at all what 'to see' means

anymore. We have lost completely our sense of seeing...When we see a picture of Vietnam we are not seeing Vietnam, we are just reading, whether 'peace in Vietnam,' if you are for that, or 'let's go into the war in Vietnam,' if you are for that" (Kernan 12). For Godard and Gorin, the image is imbued with power, and revolutionary cinema involved a restructuring of how Hollywood film had taught viewers to see. Vision became a crucial site of contestation in their struggle against not only mainstream cinema, but the attending ideology circulated by Hollywood around the globe.

In their film *Letter to Jane*, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin compose a cinematic "letter" to Jane Fonda as they attempt to show how images make meaning within the framework of particular ideological and political struggles. In 1972, Fonda traveled to North Vietnam to express her support for the Vietnamese people in their fight against U.S. aggression. A grainy photograph, taken by Joseph Kraft, of Fonda meeting with the Viet-Minh in Hanoi was circulated in magazines and newspapers around the world by a North Vietnamese government-operated news agency. In France, the image appeared in the August 1972 issue of the magazine, *L'Express*, accompanied by the caption "Jane Fonda questioning the citizens of Hanoi about American bombings." In the foreground, Fonda stares intently at a North Vietnamese soldier whose back is turned to the camera. The viewer cannot see his face—only the pith helmet on his head. In the background, other Vietnamese villagers watch Fonda, their faces somewhat blurry.

In *Letter to Jane*, Godard and Gorin project this photograph on the screen and, in a direct address to both the audience and to Fonda, meticulously deconstruct the image in an off-screen voice-over in English. The viewer sees only the still image while listening to the filmmakers exhaustively analyze the photograph and caption—in terms of camera

angle, depth of focus, composition, word choice, and so on. Instead of considering Fonda an ally in their fight against U.S. imperialism, they accuse her of complicity with the U.S. imperialist project. For the filmmakers, Jane Fonda provides the perfect vehicle for interrogating and critiquing not only American cultural imperialism, but U.S. political and economic domination as well. As a dissenter and activist, Fonda traveled to North Vietnam to express her political opposition to her own government's war. As the daughter of actor Henry Fonda—who starred in a number of populist movies that had stirred up support for Roosevelt's New Deal some four decades earlier—Jane Fonda provides a link to Hollywood's past and the ideological imperatives of a cinema in the service of American capitalism. Godard and Gorin consider the Hollywood actress a commodity created for consumption, diffusing the American myth as she travels around the globe.

The directors made the film for the New York Film Festival as a companion piece for *Tout Va Bien*, their movie starring Jane Fonda as an American radio journalist in France who reports on strike at a meat-packing plant. After making *Tout Va Bien* with well known stars in order to attract a larger, mainstream audience, Godard and Gorin immediately made a film to subvert the very star system they had participated in. Critics who have written about the film generally mention it as an aside in their reviews of *Tout Va Bien*. Colin MacCabe derides the filmmakers for directing their critique of the Hollywood star system personally at Jane Fonda instead of examining their own participation in the system. He writes: "It's greatest problem...is that it is a criticism by two men of the way that a woman has chosen to use her image politically" (73). *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby called *Letter to Jane* "breathtakingly mean-

spirited” and wrote that he felt “harangued” by the voice-over narration. According to Canby, the audience at Lincoln Center (at the New York Film Festival) booed and hissed, then walked out in anger and boredom (H1).

While it would be easy to dismiss Godard and Gorin’s film as self-indulgent and misdirected, *Letter to Jane* illustrates anxieties of the post-May ’68 period, a period that witnessed the transnational reconfiguration of economies and cultures, power and identity. At the beginning of the movie (in a direct address to Jane Fonda), the directors emphasize the act of looking as they trace the trajectory of their project across national boundaries—from the making of their film, *Tout Va Bien* (starring Jane Fonda and Yves Montand) in Paris to Fonda’s trip to Vietnam to Godard and Gorin’s trip to New York to the actual theater at the New York Film Festival where *Letter to Jane* was shown:

[VOICEOVER] We are, as you, submerged in some pretty troubled waters, through which this photograph can help us to see clearly. This is where we have to start from – from you in the U.S. – from us in Paris – from you and us in Paris – from you in Vietnam – from us in Paris looking at you in Vietnam – from us going to the U.S. – and from everyone here in the theater listening to us and looking at you.

Following an interconnected pathway between France, the United States, and Vietnam via Hollywood, the filmmakers identify their project with the idea of movement and “looking relations” along transnational circulation patterns established during the height of French colonialism and American neo-imperialism.

In this chapter, I will examine how these different forms of movement—circulation and travel—are linked to visual perception and the construction of identity,

both individual and national. Such movement disrupts and alters our sense of self and national identity as we encounter and look at other people and cultural objects. My study is informed by the work of feminist theorist E. Ann Kaplan, who argues that metaphors of travel and displacement function to obscure power differentials between categories of identity like nationality, race, and gender. Kaplan argues that looking relations are never innocent because they are shaped “by the cultural systems people travelling [sic] bring with them” and “determined by the visual systems a particular stage or type of technology makes possible” (6).

The “Jane Fonda” of *Letter to Jane* can only be understood within Godard and Gorin’s post-May ’68 ideological framework—the economy in which this particular icon was produced and circulated—when critiques of American imperialism were intertwined with anti-capitalist discourse. In the first section of this chapter, I will examine how May ’68 informed Godard and Gorin’s understanding of traditional ways of viewing Hollywood film and how this is related to the idea of American cultural imperialism. In the second section, I conduct a textual analysis of *Letter to Jane*, focusing on Godard and Gorin’s recreation of Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov’s famous experiment in film montage and the influence of cinema on visual perception. In the third section, I describe the impact of May ’68 on Jane Fonda’s politics, and how her trip to Vietnam protesting her country’s imperialist aggression also involved a subversion of traditional ways of seeing the “Other” through the lens of American exceptionalism—the “Other” being both the demonized enemy of the American military (the Viet-Cong and Viet-Minh) and the beneficiaries of American *largesse* (the Vietnamese people in general). In the final section, I discuss the consequences of Godard and Gorin’s use of modernist techniques to

challenge ways of seeing, which ironically created blindspots to new subject positions emerging during the period (in particular, feminism). I conclude that Godard and Gorin's concern with the politics of movement and vision reveal an anxiety on the part of the French male intellectual after May '68.

### B. May '68 and Visual Culture

In the late 1950s, a handful of critics from the French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* began making films. These critics—including Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, and Claude Chabrol—broke with the commercial filmmaking techniques of mainstream French cinema and emerged as the New Wave. Their films are characterized by improvisational acting, location shooting, hand-held camera work, and the intimate nature of the subject matter (which often drew from the personal experiences of the directors). These critics/filmmakers praised Hollywood movies as examples of auteur cinema which strongly marked a film with the director's imprint and lauded American directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks and Nicolas Ray as models of excellent filmmaking.

Just as the aftershocks of May '68 rippled across French society, however, cultural practices also underwent a radical rethinking. Many French filmmakers began to question the function of culture and cultural production, as well as their previous attitudes about American cinema. As the decade wore on, these *cinéphiles* questioned their admiration for Hollywood film in the face of increasing U.S. economic, military, and cultural dominance. Jean-Luc Godard expressed this ambivalence: “Mystery and fascination of this American cinema. How can I hate Robert McNamara and adore *Take*

*the High Ground* (1953), hate John Wayne who supports Goldwater and tenderly love him when he abruptly takes Natalie Wood into his arms in the next to the last reel of *The Searchers* (1956)?” (qtd. in Rosenbaum 5).

His remarks reflect a disdain for American politics yet still-fervent enthusiasm for classical film. However, after May '68, Godard made a definitive break with American cinema. Along with a new generation of radical theorists at *Cahiers*, the director came to view Hollywood as a social and economic institution with sinister political implications. Classic Hollywood cinema was now considered a propaganda tool used to spread American capitalist ideology, and it was ideological not only in content--promoting the American way of life with the encouragement of the U.S. government--but in form as well. These theorists condemned the realist mode of representation--logically ordered events, seamless dramatic performances, continuity editing—that worked to create a false sense of identification in the viewer. In order to expose the underlying mechanisms of mainstream cinema, a revolutionary film practice was needed, a *cinéma militant*, that would link content with aesthetics.

According to the theorists at *Cahiers*, it was not enough for a film to express politically leftist content in a realist manner. A revolutionary film had to go beyond content to a radical questioning of aesthetics to expose the illusory nature of social reality. In their 1969 manifesto, “Cinéma/Idéologie/Politique,” *Cahiers* theorists Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni proclaimed that:

bourgeois ideology...can adopt different forms, in particular, in the area of cinema and politics, that of progressivism, at least a progressivism of ‘content’ that does not get at what is essential, which is the modification of

the relation between spectators and the conditions in which they see a film. (46)

A politically effective film critiqued the illusionism upon which the classical, Hollywood narrative was based. The *Cahiers* editors called for radically new aesthetic forms that would disrupt traditional ways of seeing to allow the spectator to develop a critical attitude toward the action on the screen.

Jean-Luc Godard was the leading proponent of the new filmmaking practices. This is not to say that his work as a New Wave director was apolitical. He often tackled controversial issues in his films—for example, *Le Petit Soldat* (1963) makes reference to the atrocities committed by the French military during the Algerian War, and *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) broaches the subject of Vietnam in the mid-sixties, before the war became a lightning rod of controversy. In terms of form, Godard's New Wave films played with the idea of fiction versus truth in their use of elliptical plots, self-reflexive narratives, and disorienting jump-cuts. However, the aesthetics of his films after May '68 took on a more political tone. Peter Wollen suggests that in Godard's post-1968 work, there is “a kind of flattening out, so that fiction = acting = lying = deception = representation = illusion = mystification = ideology” (90).

In a 1973 interview, Godard discussed the radical break with his previous filmmaking practices. By 1967, he felt that he had exhausted all cinematic innovation, that everything had been invented, yet he still searched for a way to make movies differently. He explained: “the answer came to me through the '68 events in France, but brought to me by someone who knocked on my door and on my head at the same time – Jean-Pierre” (Mate 32). Jean-Pierre Gorin, a student of Louis Althusser at the *Ecole*

*supérieure* in Paris and a member of the UJCML (*Union de Jeunesses communistes — Marxistes-léninistes*), brought Althusser's ideas of subjectivity and Maoist precepts of cultural intervention to his new partnership with Godard.

Mao's Cultural Revolution, as a model for both political and social theory and practice, had a deep impact on Godard and Gorin. They were particularly influenced by Mao's belief that one acquires knowledge through the practice of changing the world:

The struggle of the proletariat and the revolutionary people to change the world comprises the fulfillment of the following tasks: to change the objective world and, at the same time, their own subjective world—to change their cognitive ability and change the relations between the subjective and objective world.” (“On Practice” par. 26)

As Colin MacCabe points out, it was the “linking of the importance of personal struggle, particularly in the ideological field, with a commitment to the Third World that made Maoism an appropriate form for the expression of hatred of consumer society and its basis in underdevelopment elsewhere” (57).

Althusser's ideas on subjectivity also heavily influenced the filmmakers. According to Althusser, the subject is positioned in a manner that presents representations (films, television, literature, etc.) as reflections of reality. Repeated exposure to “realist” texts reinforces traditional ways of seeing; seduced by the pleasure of the text, the viewer willingly succumbs to the ideology at work in the text, thus securing and constructing a sense of self. Film theorist Bill Nichols explains this process in the context of viewing a film: “When we say ‘I see (what the image means),’ this act

simultaneously installs us in a place of knowledge and slips us into place as subject to this meaning... All the viewer need do is fall into place as subject” (38).

Gorin coupled Althusser’s theories of subjectivity with the tenets of Maoism in order to challenge American cultural hegemony and the concomitant ideology of consumer capitalism. According to Maoist doctrine, revolution meant “attempting to build political movements that would combat oppression at every point that it was experienced instead of simply challenging this oppression on the given terrain of political debate and struggle” (MacCabe 52). By relating their personal fight against Hollywood’s dominance of the world market with Mao’s philosophy on cultural production, Godard and Gorin aligned themselves with “Third World” peoples in the struggle against imperial expansion.

Godard and Gorin also revisited some of the debates about the avant-garde and the revolutionary potential of art conducted in the 1930s, and especially borrowed from the ideas of Bertolt Brecht. Heeding Brecht’s call to reveal the machinations of bourgeois ideology, Godard and Gorin adapted the playwright’s theories of avant-garde theater to the cinema. They were particularly influenced by Brecht’s ideas about vision and reality. For example, Brecht once noted that “A photograph of the Krupp factories doesn’t tell you very much about those factories” (qtd. in Benjamin 51). In order to reveal the layers of social and political implications that exist outside the photographic representation of the factory, the photographer or filmmaker had to concern him- or herself with the relationship between art and reality, which entailed shifts in the relationship between art and audience. By attacking the illusionist tradition, Brecht’s

dramaturgy invited participation by the audience; instead of passive consumers of art, viewers became an integral part of the production of the work.

Fueled by these various theories on cultural production, Gorin joined with Godard to form the Dziga Vertov group, named after the early modernist Russian filmmaker. Like Vertov, the group insisted on the interaction between art and politics, adopting the slogan: “The problem is not to make political films but to make films politically” (qtd. in MacCabe 19). In 1929, Vertov developed his concept of “Kino-eye” in his essay, “From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye:”

Kino-eye = kino-seeing (I see through the camera) + kino-writing (I write on film with the camera) + kino-organization (I edit)... Kino-Eye means the conquest of space, the visual linkage of people throughout the entire world based on the continuous exchange of visible fact... Kino-Eye is the possibility of seeing life processes in any temporal order or at any speed...Kino-Eye uses every possible means in montage, comparing and linking all points of the universe in any temporal order, breaking, when necessary, all the laws and conventions of film construction.

(xxv)

The goal of the Dziga Vertov group was to disrupt of the traditional ways of viewing aligned with Hollywood cinema to show how images make meaning within the framework of particular ideological and political struggles. Their films were designed to lead the viewer to a more complex understanding of these struggles and, eventually, to transform them.<sup>4</sup> In order to circumvent the virtual monopoly that the Hollywood film industry held over local operations in France, Godard and Gorin exhibited the films

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<sup>4</sup> Godard and Gorin’s collaboration includes *Vladimir and Rosa* (1970), *Le Vent d’est* (1970), *Lotte in Italia* (1971), *Tout Va Bien* (1972), and *Ici et ailleurs* (1976).

themselves in America, with financial assistance from the radical American publishing company Grove Press. In the late sixties and early seventies, they traveled around the U.S., showing their films at festivals and universities like Michigan, Berkeley, and UCLA. In 1972, they arrived at the New York Film Festival to present their film, *Letter to Jane*.

### C. American Imperialism and Ways of Seeing

To understand Godard and Gorin's reaction to the photograph of Jane Fonda, it is necessary to understand the ideological lens through which they were viewing the image. Their criticism of the actress diverges from Tom Wolfe's critique of left-wing celebrities' enthusiasm for revolutionary causes--the "radical chic" exuded by Leonard Bernstein and his upper-crust friends mingling with black militants on the Upper West Side. (In his essay "Radical Chic," Wolfe documented this world of affluence and comfort that dabbled in the radical politics of the day by tossing the stray dollar or two to the *cause du jour*). In the United States, the photograph, which appeared in newspapers across the country, provoked apoplexy tinged with sexism. For conservatives, Fonda's act was considered the ultimate form of treason, an undermining of the patriotic ideal of "supporting the troops" that became a political weapon in the decades to come. Since American national identity has, as with many nations, been so closely tied in with warrior culture, speaking with the enemy was equated with denouncing one's rights to American citizenship.

In a convergence of American military intervention in Vietnam and the dominance of Hollywood film on the world market, Godard and Gorin's criticism of

Fonda involves an understanding of the actress as nothing more than a product of American capitalism, just another tool of American imperialism. Their sentiments are nothing new; the belief that American movies were a propaganda tool of the U.S. government dates from the days of silent film. In 1928, several representatives of the French film industry visited the U.S. to meet with Will Hays, President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors. With the devastation of World War I still fresh in people's minds, Hays told the visiting delegation that cinema was the best means for securing world peace. The trade talks became a war of imperial rhetoric. In response to the perceived American demand for free access to French markets, French film critic Rene Jeanne, in his article "The American Cinematic Invasion," wrote of Hays: "I wondered if 'the Czar of the Cinema' does not believe that, to insure peace, the only method is to Americanize the thoughts, language, and souls of the inhabitants of little old Europe." An American journalist for the *New York Times* mocked his French counterpart for "picturing Mr. Hays as a celluloid Napoleon, bent on world conquest with the aid of his marshals, Zukor, Laemmle, and Fox [...]" The American journalist also claimed that movies do not contain hidden ideologies, countering: "M. Jeanne sees strategy and offense where none can be intended. Movies planned with an eye to the box office he sees as slurs on French prestige" ("Our 'Imperialistic' Movies" 20).

While accusations of American imperialism were nothing new, this notion took on a new meaning a few decades later. In her article, "Americanism for Export," historian Victoria De Grazia contends that this idea of a specifically cultural form of imperialism became popular in the 1960s. While cultural imperialism had long been a part of Marxist-Leninist thought, the term became

widely used by critics of American empire in the 1960s to refute claims of U.S. exceptionalism—the belief that America was a unique, and uniquely successful, experiment in democracy. According to De Grazia, these critics sought to draw attention to the ideological roots of America’s interference in other nations’ affairs, and rejected the notion that the U.S. provided a model for economic development around the world. The particular critique of America as a cultural empire grew out of the combination of the U.S. picking up the mantle of European colonialism--particularly in Vietnam when the United States continued the French modernist project of imperialism after France’s crushing defeat at Dienbienphu in 1954--coinciding with the unprecedented circulation of American mass culture around the globe.

The Vietnam War represents a turning point in the history of late capitalism as it proved to be the first serious challenge to the idea of America as a universal model of development and progress since World War II (de Grazia 74). Leftist revolutionaries considered Vietnamese resistance the symbolic center of a combination of global struggles that had up until the late sixties remained separate from one another. The radical politics of the 1960s were forged through powerful transnational alliances--Third World movements had a profound effect on First World politics, and radical leaders in the West often sought to cross national boundaries to connect their personal struggles with former colonies. For example, one of the student leaders of the May ’68 events, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, described the mix of international and national concerns: “the struggle of the Third World has to be supported by concrete action which tries to

destroy...the centers of exploitation themselves which are within our reach—in France itself” (25).

For Godard and Gorin, the center of exploitation was the United States, and Hollywood in particular. The directors expanded the notion of “Third World” beyond strict geographical borders to include their cultural production and situation vis-à-vis Hollywood and mainstream cinema. The directors linked their own struggle against American cultural imperialism with the anti-imperialist movements in the Third World, especially in Vietnam. As French filmmakers “colonized” by the exploitative economic and cultural domination of Hollywood in the post-World War II era, Godard and Gorin likened the armed struggles of the North Vietnamese to an artistic uprising against American cultural imperialism, wielding film as a weapon in the struggle against the oppressor. In the press release for his film *La Chinoise* (1967), Godard proclaimed, “we too should provoke two or three Vietnams in the bosom of the vast Hollywood-Cinecitta-Mosfilm-Pinewood-etc. empire, and, both economically and aesthetically, struggling on two fronts as it were, create cinemas which are national, free, brotherly, comradely and bonded in friendship” (*Godard on Godard* 243). Film theorist Robert Kolker, also drawing from the rhetoric of imperialism, noted that one reaction against the “colonization” of the world by mainstream American film came from Godard, who “started a guerrilla war in the sixties, a war on the colonizer that took on special meaning as the decade wore on and the struggle of the new filmmakers could be seen in very rough parallel to the struggles of the Vietnamese against another form of American colonialism” (*Alternating Eye* 167).

While the U.S. government and many Americans considered American trade practices as simply a matter of free enterprise, Godard and Gorin formulated their protests against cultural imperialism in the language of domination and oppression, employing the rhetoric of colonialism and the idea of forced cultural imposition. In *Letter to Jane*, Godard and Gorin seek to expose this mythology as a construction that cloaks the ideological interests of those in power who benefit from its maintenance and circulation.

#### D. Looking Relations, Movement, and Visual Culture

In *Letter to Jane*, the filmmakers, in a voice-over directed at the audience, emphasize the importance of the visual aspects of the photo:

[VOICEOVER] We ask, and we are asking ourselves: Did we really look at this photograph? What did we see in it?' And beneath this question, we discover another question. For example, how did we look at this photograph? How did our eyes function in regard to this photograph? And what makes them glance that way instead of another? And still another question: What makes our voice interpret this glance in a certain way instead of another?... These questions can be summarized in the question about the intellectual's role in revolution.

Godard and Gorin engage in a semiological analysis of the photo of Jane Fonda akin to Roland Barthes' project in *Mythologies*. Like Brecht, Barthes considers a photograph not an unmediated simulacrum of reality, but instead a representation consciously created by a photographer and interpreted by a viewer through particular cultural resonances.

In an illustration of his argument, Barthes analyzes a photograph of a young African colonial soldier on the cover of *Paris-Match*. The soldier, dressed in a French

military uniform and saluting the tricolore, “hails [him] in the name of French imperialism” (125). French imperialism condemns the young man to the status of “instrumental signifier,” but at the same time “the Negro’s salute thickens, becomes vitrified, freezes into an eternal reference meant to establish French imperialism” (125). For Barthes, the photograph of the young man intimately links French imperialism with ways of seeing, as the young man in the photo establishes the concept of French military might and the grandeur of French imperialism. The visual message reinforces French universalist ideals of citizenship established during the Napoleonic empire, extending a French identity to all new colonial subjects. In order to understand and accept the ideology imbued in the photograph of the colonial soldier, the viewer must share a particular subject position in relation to other members of what Barthes calls an interpretive community. Thus, the photo not only constructs and positions the colonized as a loyal servant for the empire, it also constructs the identity of the colonizer in a position of power. As Michael Harkin writes, Barthes “disrupts the seamless link between French national identity and imperialism as established by the imperial gaze of the viewer seeing the photograph from a particular subject position” (8).

Godard and Gorin undertake an analysis of the photo of Jane Fonda similar to Barthes’ analysis of the photo of the young colonial soldier. However, Jane Fonda functions as a sign of American imperialism as perpetrated through the Hollywood star system, and this ideology was now circulating within the borders of Vietnam. Like Barthes, Godard and Gorin look at the way that activities express certain ideological positions, and seek to uncover these complex social and political structures hidden in the

photograph--in this case photographer Joseph Kraft's representation of Fonda's meeting with the North Vietnamese.

Just as Barthes demonstrated that visual media are not simply reflections of an objective social reality, Godard and Gorin sought to show that visual experience is embedded in the cultural. Following the basic principle of semiotics, that a sign only has meaning in relation to other signs within a system, Godard and Gorin recreate Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov's experiment with contemporary political images to illustrate how film shapes our experience of viewing. Like the modernist Kuleshov, they concentrated on the role of vision in understanding how viewers make meaning.

In the early 1920s, Kuleshov proved that two shots projected in succession are not interpreted separately by the spectator—the audience integrates the shots into a larger, contextual whole by establishing a causal relationship between them. In his original experiments, Kuleshov juxtaposed an isolated shot of the actor Ivan Mozhukin with shots of other isolated images—a bowl of soup, a woman in a coffin, and a girl playing with a teddy bear. The spectator's interpretation of the actor's expression changed according to the subject of the second image. Kuleshov's experiment demonstrated how editing creates illusionary narrative meaning, and how the viewer participates in this illusion of the real world.

In *Letter to Jane*, Godard and Gorin interrupt this flow of signification by juxtaposing Fonda's image with other photos of Hollywood stars like her father, Henry, and John Wayne. Like Kuleshov's experiments, which demonstrated how cinema alters perception since images contradict not only themselves but each other, the filmmakers study the relationships between photos. As a means of relating the photo to Hollywood

film, they compare Fonda's expression to similar expressions she made in *Klute* (1971); or those of her father, Henry, in the film version of the "fascist Steinbeck's" *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) as well as *Young Mister Lincoln* (1939). The voice-over elaborates: "The facial expression of the militant in this photograph is, in fact, that of a tragic actress. A tragic actress with a particular social and technical background. Formed and deformed by the Hollywood school of Stanislavskian show-biz...And even further back in the actress' paternal history, within the history of cinema, we find the same expression that Henry Fonda used to cast the profound and tragic look on the black people in *Young Mister Lincoln* made by the future Honorable Admiral of the Navy, John Ford."

Godard and Gorin make a tenuous link through Fonda's "paternal history" to the populist films of the 1930s. Henry Fonda's appearance in such movies was shorthand for the triumph of "good" (that is, American values) over "evil" (any forces that would threaten the mythical American way of life), and emphasized a common humanity that worked to conceal any class conflict that could be read into the film. Fonda's films displayed a certain simplistic good-versus-evil moral clarity. The New Deal resurrected the American system of capitalism after it had collapsed in the 1929 stock market crash. Three decades later, in 1965, Henry Fonda embarked on a three-week USO-sponsored "Handshake Tour" to boost the morale of troops stationed in Southeast Asia. Touring with other stars of classic Hollywood cinema like Jimmy Stewart, Charlton Heston, and Bob Hope, Henry Fonda returned home to the U.S. convinced that the American action in Vietnam was just: "Well my eyes were opened...Every time there's a parade or peace rally in this country it will make the war that much longer, because this doesn't escape the attention of Ho Chi Minh" (Anderson 147).

They also compare her expression to John Wayne in *The Green Berets* (1968), claiming that “one can also find this expression on the opposite side as John Wayne expresses his deep regret about the devastation of the war in Vietnam in *The Green Berets*.” Godard and Gorin could have criticized John Wayne and his film, which is basically the Vietnam War equivalent of the Pentagon’s *Why We Fight* propaganda film series commissioned during World War II to garner support for the war effort. Wayne’s film invokes the American ideals of patriotism, heroism, and freedom, and the actor’s hawkish persona embodies the mythic American west and the ideology of expansionism.

So why did the filmmakers choose Jane Fonda instead of Henry Fonda and John Wayne, whose Hollywood films presented American values as universal values, and inculcated viewers with the idea that America had a mission to defend and spread these values around the globe? In a 1973 interview in *Sight and Sound*, the filmmakers were asked if they could have replaced the photo of Jane Fonda with an unknown person. They replied: “Not at all. The North Vietnamese don’t need unknown Americans to say ‘peace in Vietnam.’ They need very well known people because Nixon is not an unknown American. The star system is very important” (Kolker “Angle” 132). In the film’s voiceover, Godard and Gorin address their choice of subjects in the film. They explain that Fonda could ask them: “Why this picture of me and not one of Ramsey Clark? He was in Vietnam, too, and saw the bombing of the dikes.” Clark was the U.S. Attorney General under President Lyndon Johnson, and an outspoken critic of the war in Vietnam. Godard and Gorin answer this hypothetical question by claiming they chose Fonda because she is a well-known Hollywood actress and it is imperative to challenge the workings of the star system in the spreading of American propaganda. Godard and

Gorin then pose a second question that Fonda could ask: “Then why not a photo of Yves Montand in Chile?” Montand, who was Fonda’s co-star in *Tout Va Bien*, was an actor and political activist who protested the American-backed coup of Salvador Allende in Chile. They respond by saying that the Chilean revolutionaries did not circulate a photo of Montand in newspapers and magazines around the world, therefore the idea of the “star-as-advertisement” was not an issue.

The Hollywood studio system incorporated mass production techniques like the assembly line, a highly specialized division of labor, the regimentation of different stages of production, and large-scale manufacturing (Strinati 11). For Godard and Gorin, Jane Fonda is a product of this system, and a study of the star becomes an issue in the social production and circulation of meaning linking industry and texts, films and society. The filmmakers were influenced by French sociologist Edgar Morin’s study of the star system, published in 1960 as Les Stars. Morin discusses the impact of stars on everyday life and how they fulfill the needs of twentieth-century capitalist society, arguing that the star system is a “specific institution of capitalism on a major scale” (135). The system produces stars like manufactured goods that then become merchandise destined for mass consumption, with a price subject to the fluctuations of supply and demand. He adds that the star is not only a subject but an object of advertising, drawing examples from Classical Hollywood, such as Lauren Bacall advertising Lux soap and Grace Kelly hawking Avon products in the 1950s.

For Morin, the star system is a distinct product of American capitalism, and the star a product of Fordist production. His rhetoric is shaped by the postwar influx of American goods into France:

The star is a total item of merchandise: there is not an inch of her body, not a shred of her soul, not a memory of her life that cannot be thrown on the market. This total merchandise has other virtues: she is the typical merchandise of capitalism on a major scale. The enormous investments, the system's industrial techniques of rationalization and standardization effectively convert the star into merchandise destined for mass consumption. The star has all the virtues of a standard product adapted to the world market, like chewing gum, refrigerators, soap, razor blades, etc. Mass distribution is assured by the greatest diffusers in the modern world: the press, radio, and, of course, the movies. (*Stars* 137)

For Godard and Gorin, Jane Fonda, as a product of the Hollywood star system, is little more than a commodity with use value. But for the North Vietnamese, this meant an international advertisement for their struggle against the United States. In *Letter to Jane*, one of Godard and Gorin's biggest objections to Fonda in Vietnam was the fact that, as a product of Fordist mass production of the studio system, she was trying to fight this same system of which she is a product and an advertisement:

[VOICEOVER] What interests the Vietnamese is to have [gotten] an American star to make the journey to Vietnam. It is in the displacement of this star that they show the strength and justice of their cause.

In their view, then, this "new" Fonda was not new at all; it was just another reinvention, a reincarnation of an old familiar product—the Hollywood starlet—this time repackaged in combat fatigues and surrounded by grateful North Vietnamese. Given what we know about the extent of Fonda's antiwar activism, this is a startlingly cynical construction. Nevertheless, it clearly illuminates Godard and Gorin's Marxist interpretation of the vast

(and insidious) potential of capitalism to intervene even in an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist revolution.

#### E. Jane Fonda and the Politics of Looking

In what is ostensibly a “scientific” study of the photograph, Godard and Gorin end up ridiculing Jane Fonda and questioning the motives for her visit to North Vietnam, as well as her ability to express any meaningful commitment to the anti-imperialist cause. To them, Fonda was a symbol of the ineptitude of the well-meaning yet obtuse bourgeoisie, and proof that it was impossible to fight the system using the very tools of that system. Since the person in the photograph was merely an illusory fabrication of the Hollywood machine, she was powerless to bring about changes that would threaten not only the myth-making system of Hollywood movies, but the capitalist economy that thrived on both selling consumer goods and bombing Third World countries. With a sneer, Godard and Gorin dismissed Fonda’s activism out of hand.

They were not alone. Amid the frenzied uproar that Fonda’s visit elicited in the U.S., there was a palpable undercurrent of dismissiveness. For example, a 1971 article in *Life* magazine on Fonda’s political involvement was entitled “Nag! Nag! Nag! Jane Fonda has become a nonstop activist”—essentially reducing her to America’s ball-and-chain housewife.<sup>5</sup> Tessa Perkins has pointed out how the media’s negative criticism worked to belittle her political activities and at the same time denigrate feminism. Perkins cites several articles that invoke gender stereotypes to attack Fonda’s newfound political consciousness, like a 1971 *Guardian* article that compared the new “political”

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<sup>5</sup> John Froom, “Nag! Nag! Nag! Jane Fonda has become a nonstop activist.” *Life* 23 April 1971: 54.

Fonda to the pre-1968 “sex kitten”: “The new Jane Fonda is many things, but one thing she is not is ‘lovable’” (243).

As it had for Godard, May ’68 marked a turning point in Jane Fonda’s political consciousness. While living in France in the late 1960s with husband, French director Roger Vadim (the director of her 1968 film, *Barbarella*), Fonda witnessed firsthand the political struggles occurring in the streets. She states: “What was important about being in France was that for the first time I realized that it really could all come down...Who would have thought that students and maybe workers were going to bring France to a halt?” (Georgakas 118). On television, she also saw the student protests and urban riots in the U.S., and news clips of American fighter planes bombing Vietnamese villages, schools, and hospitals. She decided to return to the U.S. after viewing the brutality of police against demonstrators at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968. “Paris was in a state of siege. Most everyone I knew was in the streets, but my eyes were on my own country: the occupation of Columbia University, the ’68 convention riots in Chicago” (Kiernan 88).

Jane Fonda’s political trajectory was not unlike that of millions of Americans in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the fighting and the death toll continued to escalate and as people grew disillusioned with the prevarications of the president and the Army when it came to whether the U.S. was winning or losing. Not everyone who came to oppose the war became as active or as publicly scrutinized as Fonda trying to end it, but clearly she was operating from a position of instant visibility through her celebrity; therefore her transformation into a

political activist was also more highly public and visible. Fonda's understanding of herself as a product of the Hollywood system is similar to Godard and Gorin:

For a long time, I didn't see how the women's movement related to me. I didn't even comprehend the concept of women's oppression. We get so used to certain things being the way they are that we consider them normal, inevitable. Three or four years ago, I would be asked periodically by groups of women to discuss my exploitation as a movie actress; I never knew what to say. It seemed to me that if you were an actress, you were a property that was packaged and sold and I saw that as normal. (Kiernan 90)

Perhaps Godard and Gorin were unaware of Fonda's introspection about being "packaged and sold," or perhaps they dismissed it as another crass marketing move. Either way, the filmmakers never venture beyond the confines of their ideological mission to grant Jane Fonda even the possibility of integrity or intelligence. After 1968, Fonda began using her star status to bring national and international attention to particular social causes—most significantly to help bring an end to the war in Vietnam.

The expatriate returned to America in 1969 to participate in what felt to many like truly radical activism, embarking on a trip across the United States that was extremely controversial. She attended rallies and meetings with Native Americans who were occupying Alcatraz in an effort to reclaim the island. Fonda met with activist Angela Davis and French playwright Jean Genet to help raise bail for Huey Newton and other Black Panthers imprisoned for a shootout with Oakland police. She gave speeches for

groups like California migrant workers, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and the Young Lords (a radical Puerto Rican organization similar to the Black Panthers).

Like Godard, 1968 also marked a turning point in the type of films that Fonda made. She opted for stronger characters in films that were more explicitly political. The following year, she chopped off her long blond hair for the part of Gloria in *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* (1969). Portraying a woman desperate to win prize money at a grueling dance marathon during the Depression, Fonda felt the metaphor of the marathon dance captured the spirit of American capitalism: the wealthy profit from the labor and exploitation of the poor. In 1971, she won an Academy Award for her portrayal of prostitute Bree Daniels in *Klute*. Again, Fonda describes her character by criticizing the American system for its role in women's oppression: "Prostitutes are the inevitable product of a society that places ultimate importance on money, possessions and competition" (Kiernan 232).

Fonda collaborated with director Haskell Wexler on a film about Vietnam—an hour-long documentary entitled *Introduction to the Enemy* which documented the devastation caused by U.S. bombing in Vietnam. She wanted to show the Vietnamese people as human beings, or, in her words, "to tear away the mask that the Pentagon had given the Vietnamese people" (116). As Godard and Gorin did with *Letter to Jane*, she screened her film at schools and universities across the U.S.

Like other leftists, Fonda was drawn to the antiwar movement, which also included men and women who were active members of the armed forces. In fact, an entire oppositional subculture emerged on and around military bases across the country by the early 1970s. A vibrant underground press came out of this subculture, and it

helped unite people ideologically despite physical separation. Some have estimated the number of antiwar newspapers and publications at around 300. The GI press also inspired many outside the military, among them Jane Fonda, who in 2005 remembered believing in American foreign policy as a positive force in the world: “I grew up believing that if our flag was flying over a battlefield, that we were on the side of the angels. My father fought in the Second World War and won awards and medals and I grew up during the ‘good war’” (*Sir! No Sir!*).

In 1970, Howard Levy, an antiwar activist described by Fonda as a “celebrity within the GI movement,” suggested to her and to Donald Sutherland that they “put together an antiwar show that’s the opposite side of the coin from the Bob Hope [USO] show” (*Sir! No Sir!*). The result was the FTA (Fuck the Army) acting group, whose name originated from the popular GI translation of an army slogan, “Fun, Travel, and Adventure,” into “Fuck the Army.” The troupe staged variety shows and plays for GI audiences criticizing the American government and its actions in Vietnam. The 2005 documentary chronicling the GI antiwar movement, *Sir! No Sir!*, includes footage from some of these performances. In one scene we see actor Michael Alaimo and Jane Fonda playing the roles of Richard and Patricia Nixon, respectively:

FONDA (agitated): Mr. President, there’s a terrible demonstration going on outside.

ALAIMO: Aw, there’s always a demonstration going on outside, Pat.

FONDA: But Richard, this one is completely out of control.

ALAIMO: What are they asking for this time?

FONDA: Free Angela Davis and all political prisoners, out of Vietnam now, and draft all government officials.

ALAIMO: Well, we have people to take care of that.

FONDA (frantic): But Richard, you don’t understand, they’re storming the White House!

ALAIMO: Oh, in that case, I’d better call out the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines.

FONDA: You can’t, Richard!

ALAIMO: Why not?  
FONDA: It *is* the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines!

The audience responds with enthusiastic laughter and applause, and doubtless also with a certain amount of appreciation or relief that someone—and in this case someone well known—understood, respected, and agreed with their position on Vietnam. Fonda and Alaimo were tapping into evolving definitions of patriotism, in which the unblinking faith in government and unquestioning military service exhibited by Henry Fonda's generation were no longer the only meanings; although all American wars had seen their share of dissenters, the GI movement during the Vietnam era marked a departure in reframing dissent as patriotism.

As she recalled years later, “Here was a way that I could combine my profession, my acting, with my desire to end the war. It just seemed like a perfect fit” (*Sir! No Sir!*). At a press conference in 1970, Fonda told reporters:

The show that we bring to these bases is not trying to tell the people on the bases anything that they don't know. We are coming in response to what is probably the most powerful movement going on in this country. The movement of the men inside the military, and the women, who are beginning to understand how they're being used, and what the nature of American foreign policy is. And we come there because they have asked us to. We come there because for the last year we have read in the newspapers from Vietnam, from West Germany, from Okinawa, from the Philippines, from Japan, “What we want is entertainment, we want people who speak to how we feel, and the majority of us don't know why we're going over there, we don't know why we're being shot up, we don't know why

our buddies are being killed, we don't know why we're killing those people.”

*(Sir! No Sir!)*

Fonda remembers this style of activism decades afterward as a way of using her vocation, acting, and her fame to publicize an important segment of the antiwar movement. Unlike World War II, when the government enlisted Hollywood stars like Henry Fonda, Clark Gable, and James Stewart to garner support for the war effort, Fonda used her celebrity during the Vietnam era to rally opposition to the war. Yet it was her very celebrity that brought such scorn from Godard and Gorin in *Letter to Jane*, in which they view her as an empty-headed, superficial pawn of a cynical Hollywood machine. But as the events were unfolding, she noted that what the GIs wanted was “entertainment,” entertainment from people who understood them, not from someone like Bob Hope, an aging Hollywood showman who played golf and told corny jokes—and supported the war in Vietnam. They understood, appreciated, and were empowered by Fonda’s and FTA’s subversive brand of humor.

FTA toured the country, playing in coffeehouses in and around military bases. In the spring of 1971, the group toured several Asian countries, including Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines, and performed in front of an estimated 60,000 troops. At every show, GIs appeared onstage to speak about the war and their reasons for opposing it. *Sir! No Sir!* contains footage of these soldiers; in one, a young man reads from a prepared statement: “We can no longer remain silent about the atrocities and injustices being perpetrated by the United States’ military on peoples of other nations, nor the petty harassment that servicemen and women are made to endure day after day” (*Sir! No Sir!*). It is important to understand FTA in the context of Jane Fonda’s later controversial visit

to Hanoi. Although critics from the left, like Godard, and the right, like Richard Nixon, mocked Fonda as a Hollywood activist, she clearly had devoted considerable effort to the antiwar movement, had won the hearts and minds of thousands of active duty soldiers in the U.S. military, and had also nurtured ties to GIs that likely led her to believe she could communicate with them from atop a tank in North Vietnam. The significance given to the act of “speaking out” in the GI movement also likely emboldened her to make that life- and career-altering journey.

The underground GI press covered FTA performances, and captured this growing disenchantment with Hope’s brand of humor. *Camp News* described one FTA show: “2000 GIs jammed the Okinawan auditorium, and at least another 1000 crowded around windows, jammed in the back stage area, and sat on a wall, across the street. The positive response was tremendous. At least 250 GIs rapped until late in the night in a lot across the street from the auditorium” (“Bob Hope” par. 2). Two days later, Hope’s entourage appeared, and according to *Camp News*, “Many troops were given direct orders to attend the show,” where Hope faced jeering and a smattering of boos. “The only applause he evoked was when he said, ‘I’ll make it short.’ There was no laughter at any of his political jokes. Jim Nabors [television’s bumbling Marine, Gomer Pyle] put on an officer’s hat and was booed until he took it off” (“Bob Hope” par. 5).

The show was well received by the American soldiers who denounced American involvement in Vietnam. With the FTA tour, Jane Fonda was essentially staging her own anti-Hollywood show. According to a *New York Times* article, Fonda criticized Bob Hope’s USO tours with their Hollywood celebrities and beauty queens, noting that Hope’s form of entertainment consisted of “traditional jibes at military foibles” without

“criticism of this country’s involvement in Indochina” (Wooten 9). Fonda released a documentary, *F.T.A.* (1972), featuring footage from the troupe’s shows as well as conversations with soldiers who criticized the military for what was happening in Vietnam.

In 1972 Jane Fonda made what has now become an infamous and iconic trip to North Vietnam to witness for herself the wasteland the American government had created after years of unrelenting bombing and use of chemical weapons. In doing so, she challenged some of the dominant myths of American culture. While in North Vietnam, she made several radio broadcasts addressing American pilots and soldiers in South Vietnam, describing the horror she had seen inflicted on the Vietnamese people. She declared:

One thing that I have learned beyond a shadow of a doubt since I've been in this country is that Nixon will never be able to break the spirit of these people; he'll never be able to turn Vietnam, north and south, into a neo-colony of the United States by bombing, by invading, by attacking in any way. One has only to go into the countryside and listen to the peasants describe the lives they led before the revolution to understand why every bomb that is dropped only strengthens their determination to resist. (“Jane Fonda Broadcast” par. 7)

She recounted stories of children with their hands and feet blown off by American bombs, read excerpts from the Pentagon Papers which documented the deceptions of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and supplied historical background about the U.S. role in propping up dictators in South Vietnam.

As E. Ann Kaplan has argued, “Looking relations are never innocent. They are always determined by the cultural systems people travelling bring with them. They are also determined by the visual systems a particular stage or type of technology makes possible. Films dealing with people travelling...reveal how American culture mobilizes inter-racial and inter-cultural looking relations” (6). In her travels to Vietnam, Fonda was able to imagine other identities to understand the plight of the “Other” at the hands of her fellow citizens and her government. In the process, she constructed new identities for herself and produced new knowledge for American soldiers and Americans back home. She challenged the American imperialist gaze by turning that gaze on American atrocities committed in the name of freedom and democracy.

When asked in a 1974 *Playboy* interview about charges that her broadcasts in Hanoi undermined troop morale, Fonda replied: “The GIs didn’t need me to undermine their morale. I was simply giving an eyewitness account of what I, as an American woman, was seeing. Now, I assumed that most people in the Air Force—pilots who dropped bombs and didn’t see their destruction close up—weren’t going to desert or mutiny” (Bauer 78). Like Godard and Gorin, she wanted the military, whose vision was filtered through the technological screens of their bombers to render their human targets as mere abstract blips, to actually *see* what they were doing.

Describing how she made the tapes, Fonda explains that she simply wanted to speak out, to make facts available, to offer information to soldiers who were being deceived by the Pentagon. She explains:

Yesterday I saw children with their hands and feet blown off, and this is the kind of weapon that did it. Perhaps you’re not aware of what’s in the bombs you’re

dropping. I would talk about what it felt like to be an American seeing what our Government was doing to these people. I read some excerpts from the Pentagon papers over the radio. I talked about how the United States had prevented the reunification of Vietnam in 1956 and how we had installed a series of dictatorships in South Vietnam. In fact, I said essentially what I say when I speak in the United States. I said that we'd been lied to, and that I didn't think it was possible to continue, either as civilians having the war waged in our names or as pilots pushing buttons and pulling levers, without its destroying us as human beings. I said we really had to think about what we were doing, that we couldn't allow ourselves to be turned into robots. (Bauer 78)

Godard and Gorin were either unwilling or unable to grant Fonda authority to spread a message similar to their own against the machinery of capitalism, war, and death. Just as Fonda invoked images of heartless, unthinking robots as a symbol both of the men and the technology that carried out the war and of unthinking Americans who simply accepted the war, so too do Godard and Gorin position Fonda herself as a robot, of sorts. She is nothing more than a fabrication and a product of the Hollywood machine, and whatever relevance her words may have had to them, the filmmakers cannot view her outside of that narrow definition. But of course, as Fonda herself explained in subsequent interviews, she chose to circulate herself as that type of commodity. She knew that her celebrity would bring media attention to her participation in the antiwar movement. And so it did, perhaps more glaring and critical than she could ever have anticipated after her Hanoi trip, but her initial choice to become an activist was shaped by her knowledge of attracting the spotlight. In the late 1960s, before Fonda joined the GI movement or

traveled to North Vietnam, she lived in Paris and saw the events of May '68 unfold. This was what originally inspired her to change the way she interpreted the role of her own country around the world—whether spreading consumer capitalist culture (as in France) or intervening in a long-running European imperialist war in Southeast Asia—which later led her to join the antiwar movement. The act that changed Fonda's life and deeply affected her professional career, the trip to Vietnam, also involved a subversion of traditional ways of seeing the "Other" through the lens of American exceptionalism.

#### F. Conclusion

When placing this film in its cultural and historical context, it is important to remember Jean-Pierre Mathy's observation about French commentaries on America: "Judgements passed on the United States from France must be read as discourses about France; they tell us more about an author's position in French intellectual and ideological fields than about social and cultural processes within American society" (7). *Letter to Jane* displaces the French intellectuals' anxiety in the wake of May '68 and the emergence of minorities who speak for themselves. The same events of May that prompted Godard and Gorin's intense scrutiny of how visual perception constructs identity were the same forces that opened up new spaces to marginalized groups who had been silenced and rendered invisible, for the most part, until that point. The filmmakers seem to be transferring their own anxiety over the role of the intellectual in the revolution as these groups (eg. racial and ethnic minorities, women, gays, etc.) began to "[speak] out against those authorities and institutions which had refused to acknowledge them and treat them as human equals" (Rigby 149).

Godard and Gorin's desire to turn their political commitments into public action were by and large rejected by American audiences. Many film critics have speculated on the failure of the Dziga Vertov Group's films in the United States. In a 1973 article, film historian Robert Kolker describes how Godard and Gorin tried to produce films that were simple and straightforward while simultaneously questioning every aspect of the films' production. The directors could explain every element of the film: why certain images were used, why they were framed in particular ways, why one form was chosen over another and for what purpose, etc. Unfortunately, as Kolker writes: "The final paradox, however, as they found of their 1972 tour of the United States to promote *Tout Va Bien*, is that there is no one outside their own tiny group who is really interested in posing the questions" ("Angle" 99). Another critic, Jonathan Rosenbaum, points out that Godard's post-1968 the elimination of pleasure in the Dziga Vertov films alienated his American fans, even the most politically active, who were unaccustomed to such forms (33).

The question of audience plagued Godard and Gorin. In the 1967 film *Loin du Vietnam*,<sup>6</sup> Godard appears on screen and addresses the spectator, lamenting his inability to combat the "aesthetic imperialism" of the Hollywood dream factory while simultaneously producing films that the working class come to see: "I am cut off from the working class, but my struggle against Hollywood is related. Yet workers don't come to see my films." In the end, Godard and Gorin hoped that their films would have a sort of "trickle down" effect from the small group of people who did manage to see them. However, their insistence on questions rather than answers was seen as the same problem plaguing French radical politics in general. As doctrinaire Maoists who saw the world in

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<sup>6</sup> *Loin du Vietnam* was a collaborative project made with the filmmakers William Klein, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Claude Lelouch, Agnès Varda, and Joris Ivens.

terms of global class struggles, the filmmakers could not see Jane Fonda other than a tool of American culture and capitalism. And even though most Americans deplored Fonda's travels to Vietnam, their loathing had little to do with theory and everything to do with patriotism.

I would argue that other social factors were at work in the audience's rejection of Godard and Gorin's film. Though Godard and Gorin's textual analysis of the *L'Express* photograph serves to critique the Hollywood star system and to show how star images mask and/or expose ideological contradictions, it does not entirely succeed. The filmmakers move from a critique of the photo to a critique of Fonda herself. Godard and Gorin criticize Fonda for not examining her own life and learning lessons from the Vietnamese revolution. At one point in the film, the directors fault Fonda for not questioning her role in the revolution. "As a militant, she does not ask herself a single, newly phrased question on the subject of her function—social and technical as well—as an actress." As her F.T.A. tour and subsequent interviews demonstrated, however, that was simply not true. In this sense, Godard and Gorin got it wrong.

While the directors considered her a product of mass culture as a Hollywood actress, as a social sign she spills over these boundaries, carrying cultural meaning as a national celebrity for American audiences that far outweighs the reductionist view of Fonda as a consumer good. Viewers were not the simple passive recipients that Godard and Gorin imagined them to be; the meaning they bring to the photograph is also determined by a certain cultural system. Although the filmmakers thoroughly analyze the photograph of Jane Fonda within a semiological framework to see how meaning is circulated by the signs in the image, they do not incorporate an understanding of how

these signs function in society. “Jane Fonda” as a sign intervenes in their reading of the text; her meanings are highly contested, functioning in many different capacities: traitor, radical feminist, sex object, political activist, a symbol of the feminist “awakening” through the women’s liberation movement.

The emergence of the marginalized people in the 1960s was often framed in terms of returning the gaze. For example, in his introduction to *Black Orpheus*, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about problematizing the imperial gaze by the colonized in the wake of decolonization:

I want you to feel, as I, the sensation of being seen. For the white man has enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen...Today, these black men have fixed their gaze upon us and our gaze is thrown back into our eyes... By this steady and corrosive gaze, we are picked to the bone. (7-11)

The emergence of decolonization brought about a renegotiation of traditional looking relations and a critique of the power held by the individual or group who looks and the individual or group who gets looked at.

In the late sixties, the new cultural pluralism, including ethnic minorities, women, homosexuals, challenged intellectuals to rethink their positions in relation to the marginalized groups. As “the ‘objects’ of history were coming forward as political and human ‘subjects’”, they began to voice their opposition to the myths that had been constructed about them in their absence (Rigby 152).

Intellectuals and artists found themselves facing new questions about their role in society, as well as changing ideas about the notion of representation. For them to carry

out their political commitment to helping the cause of these groups, they had to grapple with the contentious issue of speaking for the “other.” Almost two decades after the events of May, discussing the role of the intellectual in society, Jean Baudrillard explained the dilemma:

...after '68 people were saying that nobody could speak for anybody else; expression was not something that could be monopolized. We were asked to leave behind our role of subjects of knowledge, our role of teachers, etc. Speech, it was said, had been sold out. All this was doubtless utopian. It was the utopia of '68, which blurred all the contours. It's extremely difficult, after this, to take up, once again, the position of the intellectual who is conscious of himself. What is an intellectual? How can he claim to speak in anyone else's name? Here we have a really radical question... (79).

In the 1960s, given the problematization of the speaking subject and changing attitudes toward American culture, the French intelligentsia found themselves in an unusual—and uncomfortable--situation.

Godard and Gorin project the anxiety of the intellectual onto the female body, reifying the paternalistic qualities of the imperialist practices that they ostensibly repudiate. Through their materialist analysis of class and capitalism, they ignore the power relations which characterize gender; the filmmakers' critique of the hidden mechanisms of bourgeois society as manifested in Hollywood cinema does not entail a critique of that society's sexist foundations and the gaze that fixes women in place. As Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, in

the 1960s artists began to erode the division between modern art and mass culture.

Huyssen believes it is no coincidence that this occurred simultaneously with the emergence of feminism and women as major participants in the arts. At a time when cultural production in every field was becoming increasingly aware of, if not actively countering, the inherent oppression of traditional role distinctions based on the construction of sexual difference, Godard and Gorin reinforced these biases with their return to modernist techniques of like Brecht and Vertov to explain and challenge a new situation. This helps explain why they were incapable of seeing Fonda's actions in Hanoi as a legitimate form of political protest.

Godard and Gorin rigorously analyze every element of the photograph of Jane Fonda. But their focus on seeing paradoxically reveals their own blind spot: the exclusion of gender that is crucial to an understanding of their own critique. While articulating the recently emergent circulations of capital on an unprecedented scale, they rely on modernist notions of vision, and thus replicate the gender biases of the modernist aesthetic.

As Laura Mulvey writes in her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema:" "Woman... stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (362). While Mulvey has been criticized for her reductionist account of the male gaze as heterosexist and reductionist, her analysis perfectly encapsulates Godard and Gorin's project. Instead of perceiving Fonda as an ally

in the anti-war movement, Godard and Gorin render her silent, speak for her under the guise of speaking to her, and construct her as part of the problem. In their attempt to change how images are produced, Godard and Gorin end up stuck within the parameters of Hollywood or western structures and reinforcing the imperial gaze by demonizing Fonda. In fact, the filmmakers make Fonda speak at the end of the film by inserting a sentence in the first person singular: “I am keeping my mouth shut because I admit I have nothing to say.”

Feminism provided Fonda with new discourses to make sense of her situation. Leftist struggles in France, the war in Vietnam, and the antiwar movement in the U.S. also changed her consciousness. She, like so many others during this period, experienced a break with the old self. After 1968, the “new” Fonda, attacked from the right and belittled (and misread) by Godard and Gorin, began speaking out—on Radio Hanoi, on the F.T.A. tour, in coffeehouses on military bases. But in contrast to the crisis of male French intellectuals, Fonda’s new awareness did not elicit anxiety—it sparked a radical break with her past that led to a real commitment to ending the war and struggling for justice in the United States.

## CHAPTER II: AMERICAN CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE THREAT TO FRENCH NATIONAL IDENTITY

The new style was violence—hippie love was already old-fashioned. In '68 Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy both got assassinated, the students at Columbia took over the whole campus and fought with the police, kids jammed Chicago for the Democratic National Convention, and I got shot. Altogether, it was a pretty violent year.— Andy Warhol

### A. INTRODUCTION

Postwar fears of American modernity are central to Agnès Varda's 1969 film, *Lions Love*. The film follows the lives of three hippies who live together in the Hollywood Hills overlooking Los Angeles. The actors play themselves in the mainly improvised film—Viva, one of Andy Warhol's superstars from the Factory, and Jim Rado and Jerry Ragni, creators of the *American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (which opened on Broadway as *Hair*). A calendar appears between scenes marking the passage of time, from June 1 through June 9, 1968—a ten-day period that witnessed the assassination of Robert Kennedy at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles and the near-fatal shooting of Andy Warhol in New York by Valerie Solanas.

According to Varda, *Lions Love* elicited a strong, yet mixed, reaction from French audiences:

...d'abord il est complètement exotique et ensuite il est un peu incompréhensible aux Français qui sont très intolérants... pour tout ce qui a une forme pittoresque ou étrangère: ils comprennent, si vous voulez, mais ils sont méfiants et très hostiles dès qu'il y a cet espèce d'appareil hippie, de baroque hollywoodien, de mauvais goût américain; ce sont ces choses-là qui sont typiquement et presque officiellement refusés par les Français. (*Varda par Agnès* 248)

French hostility to these singular products of American capitalist society—hippies, Hollywood baroque, and lowbrow taste—signals an aversion to objects that threatened to transverse national and personal boundaries. It was important for the Gaullist administration, in its desire to shore up a distinct national identity in the face of massive postwar Americanization, to stave off a future that the arrival of such American products represented, for these products encoded all that France rejected in order to construct a sense of nation that represented everything America was not. One French film critic noted that Varda was actually providing French audiences with a glimpse of the country's own future: “Au cœur d'une société française qui se calfeutre encore dans les poisons et charmes du passé, elle ne fait qu'entrouvrir une porte, avec cinq ans d'avance” (Chapier n.p.).

America, and its shiny 1960s representation of mobility, affluence, and suburban utopia, Southern California, as constructed in *Lions Love*, played on French anxieties about American modernity and encoded everything that French critics on the left and right feared about Americanization in the postwar period. In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss the official effort by the French government, in particular through the policies of André Malraux, to define French cultural life, and how the state employed

culture in their attempt to create national cultural cohesion in the face of American economic and cultural encroachment. I will show how Malraux sought to return France to its former position of prominence in the art world, a position that had been usurped by the rise of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art in the postwar period. In the second section, I examine Varda's construction of the U.S. in the late 1960s as a nation characterized by Warholian excess—consumerism, artifice, “bad taste,” and the fetishization of the commodity object at the expense of spiritual values. Like Warhol's work itself, in which the everyday object becomes so magnified and exaggerated that it forces viewers to question their relationship with the object, Varda's exaggerated construction of American capitalist society demands a reinterpretation of inherited French discourse surrounding the anxieties about American hegemony. I will also demonstrate how Varda constructs a “Pop” America of surface and celebrity that works to undermine French conceptions of authenticity and taste. In the third section, I will show how Varda, drawing from the American underground and counterculture where pornography served as a tool of social and cultural revolt, offers the carnival imagination popular among American revolutionaries in the late 1960s as an alternative to the values of Gaullist France. Throughout this chapter, I examine some of the conflicting French discourses about American mass culture and the counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, and how they in turn illuminate France's internal struggles over the definition of modernity and national identity. For, as French sociologist Edgar Morin argues: “Nous interrogeons désormais l'Amérique pour nous interroger nous-mêmes” (“La mutation” 12).

## B. André Malraux and French National Culture

After World War II, the United States implemented the Marshall Plan to rebuild the economies of war-torn European nations. The United States benefited both financially and politically from the plan. By devising American-style business programs, productivity would increase, in turn increasing wages and profits and decreasing work hours and consumer prices. This higher standard of living would create a market for American exports, which would help fuel the post-war boom in the U.S. economy. And the influx of American consumer goods into Europe produced certain desirable cultural/political effects that the U.S. government believed would entice the Europeans into the American sphere of influence and help win the war against Communism—namely, by introducing the continent, as Kristin Ross describes it, to “the joys and rewards of American capitalism (*Fast Cars* 4).

In France, the Marshall Plan prompted fierce debates about the pros and cons of taking America as an economic and social model. While critics never doubted the economic benefits of American-style production methods in the business sector, they were gravely concerned about the social and cultural changes that Americanization would bring to the country. Higher productivity would result in a higher standard of living, but at what cost? Many critics argued that such a plan would lead to a conformism that entailed an acceptance of mass-produced goods promoted by slick, manipulative advertising. Affluence demanded acquiescence to “collective norms,” considered the antithesis to French individuality. One critic of the Marshall Plan argued that the American way of life could only be achieved in France by “profoundly modifying the tastes and habits of our people” (qtd. in Kuisel 102). Actor Louis Jouvet seconded this

notion, claiming that American films allowed into the country under the Blum-Byrnes accords<sup>7</sup> jeopardized the French dramatic arts: “L’altération du goût de notre public serait irrémédiable et mortelle. Faits aux vins de Bourgogne et de Bordeaux, nos estomacs devront s’accoutumer au coca-cola. Cela revient en somme à proprement abdiquer sa qualité de Français” (3).

As the decade wore on, debates about the suitability of America as a social, economic, and cultural model for France turned to realizations that such an Americanized future was inevitable. The raising of the French standard of living required sacrificing a French way of life and tradition that would yield uncertain results. It was now necessary to prepare for this future and attempt to weed out the undesirable elements of American society considered incompatible with French traditions and values.

The need was especially urgent in the late 1950s, when President Charles De Gaulle began a determined effort to make France economically competitive in an increasingly global market, presiding over an accelerated modernization campaign that brought about a burgeoning consumer society and unprecedented economic prosperity to France. This American-style modernization was bringing not only American consumer goods and mass culture to France but also, the cultural elite feared, new social values that celebrated consumption and materialistic ideas.

In 1958, when De Gaulle returned to the office of the President for the second time since the end of World War II, France was also facing something of an identity crisis. With the humiliating defeat in Indochina, the loss of its colonies (Algeria would be the last to gain its independence in 1962), and the

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<sup>7</sup> The Blum-Byrnes Accords was a trade agreement that opened up the French film market to American productions. Thirteen weeks out of the year, only French films could be shown in the country. After that time, American films were allowed free access to French screens.

haunting memories of Nazi occupation and collaboration, the Gaullist government was determined to return France, or at least the idea of France, to its former grandeur. This challenge involved a concerted effort to create a distinct national identity that would in turn foster a sense of national unity and pride.

Culture played a key role in the Gaullist project, for the French conception of the nation rested on a shared cultural legacy. Cultural assimilation was required for inclusion in the political state. The Gaullists had inherited a political and geographical concept of the French nation formulated in the *ancien régime*. As Victoria De Grazia points out, since the time of Louis the XIV, when political and cultural life became intertwined, citizenship was extended to those who “upheld French high culture’s universalizing values and rationalist precepts—or, at least, who shared the language in which they were couched” (De Grazia “Americanism” 54).

In the postwar period, American culture, both “high” and “low,” threatened to penetrate French borders and erode the cultural status of France and the political establishment with which it was tied. Reviving a sense of national heritage among the French would help thwart perceived American values that would potentially subvert the French idea of national community. For the Gaullists, this meant constructing an identity in which the United States stood in opposition as the Other. On the cultural front, André Malraux worked to counter these ill effects. Beginning in 1959, Malraux, as head of the newly established Ministry of Cultural Affairs, worked alongside President Charles De Gaulle to shore up a national cultural and political sense of self, of Frenchness. This mission entailed exposing the French citizens, or more specifically, citizens of middle and lower class origins, to the masterworks of Western civilization and especially French

works of art. A decade earlier, in response to the flood of products entering France under the auspices of the Marshall Plan, Malraux had contended that “European values [were] threatened from within by techniques developed to appeal to collective passions: press, movies, radio, advertising—in a word, propaganda” (*Conquerors* 189). Through his humanist project at the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Malraux hoped to bring about a communion in the human spirit and a transcendence of the debasing low culture being funneled into France through television and cinema. He resorted to a cultivation of high culture among the citizens to combat this invasion of mass culture and the decline of European morals and values that these products of American capitalist society portended.

At the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Malraux assumed the responsibility of cultural guardian of France, countering the threat from America with an idealized version of French culture that was based on the classical values of purity, harmony, balance, and the cultivation of aesthetic and spiritual values. He sought to elevate the French, particularly the lower classes, into the world of high art—imbuing them with a sense of Frenchness that French art was perceived to possess. Believing in the therapeutic and transformative power of art to lift people above the dehumanization of the technological nightmare emanating from the United States, he sought to bring about a spiritual rejuvenation in opposition to the material values of consumer society and mass culture. Malraux insisted that a work of art express human ideals and emotions.

He believed that each great work of art possessed a profound essence that was revealed to individuals who contemplate them. These individuals, in turn, discover that they contain this same essence and are transcended above the world. Great artists confront of the tragedy of life in their works and lead the viewer to a transcendence of

this life to a higher realm of awareness, bringing out all that is noble and good in humanity. Malraux proclaimed that these works contain “la signification que prend la présence d’une éternelle réponse à l’interrogation que pose à l’homme sa part d’éternité” (Bernard 431). Communion with the masterworks of civilization would lead French citizens not only to a richer appreciation of a classical work of art, but also nurture in them a resistance to the allure of American pop culture.

One way to ward off undesired elements of lowbrow culture was in the preparation of the French masses, those who were ostensibly most susceptible to the influence of mass culture, to combat the American menace. Malraux called for the construction of *Maisons de la culture* throughout France in an attempt to engender a sense of Frenchness in citizens through an exposure to high art. These establishments would give every citizen access to the art, theater, and classical concerts that were readily available in Paris. In his speech at the opening of the *Maison de la culture* in Bourges, Malraux expressed his desire to bring about individual spiritual transcendence through the communal contemplation of high culture—all in the name of *la patrimoine artistique*:

Si nous voulons que la France reprenne sa mission, si nous voulons qu'en face du cinéma et de la télévision les plus détestables, il y ait quelque chose qui compte et qui ne soit pas simplement les réprouvés (ce qui n'a aucun intérêt), il faut qu'à tous les jeunes hommes de cette ville, soit apporté un contact avec ce qui compte au moins autant que le sexe et le sang. Car, après tout, il y a peut-être une immortalité de la nuit, mais il y a sûrement une immortalité des hommes.

(“Discours” par. 29)

He also believed in cultural democratization as a means to combat the threat to Western values posed by mass culture, advocating the idea that in the battle for the human imagination, “il faut que nous puissions rassembler le plus grand nombre d'œuvres pour le plus grand nombre d'hommes” (“Discours” par. 34).

Regaining France’s place as the rightful center of the art world was also a crucial element in reinvigorating the country’s sense of self, worth, and purpose. After the war, the vibrant cultural scene that characterized Paris in the interwar period faded, along with France’s status as a political and economic world leader. With the rise of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s, New York ascended to the center of the art world. Critic Clement Greenberg described this new artistic movement, specifically the work of Jackson Pollock, as containing a particular American brutality and virility. This observation prompted art historian Serge Guilbaut to argue that “French ‘taste’ and ‘finish’ had given way to American ‘force’ and ‘violence’ as universal cultural values” (177).

This competition between two conflicting universal projects that, in the eyes of America’s detractors, promoted vastly different value systems, came to a head at the 1964 Venice Biennale. Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg stirred up controversy by winning the Grand Prize, and his win was perceived as heralding the triumph of American values. Europeans criticized the new Pop art because it did not defend spiritual values, and considered it an assault on moral order on the continent. These critics scoffed at the vulgar objects which Pop artists took as their subject matter—the very objects that Malraux claimed were threatening to

destroy Western civilization, like comic books, advertisements, and Hollywood film. Reporting on the exhibition for *The New Republic*, Tullia Zevi claimed one anonymous French lamented: “The Rauchenbergs will proliferate and invade us; they will murder the pictorial idiom with their childish gadgets” (34).

The French press were especially enraged by the American catalogue, which announced that the U.S. had superseded France as the new art capital. With the success of Abstract Expressionism and the advent of Pop art, the catalogue explains, “everyone acknowledges that the center of world art has moved from Paris to New York.” Zevi points to another critic in the French journal, *Arts*, who wrote that the American “invasion” of Venice was symptomatic of the decline of Western civilization. Invoking the rhetoric of imperialism, he claimed, “we Europeans are now in the eyes of the Americans nothing but poor backward Negroes, good only for being colonized” (34). The critic was upset not simply because the U.S. postwar triumph now extended to the art world, usurping France of its place of prestige, but also because Pop promoted U.S. imperial interests. Pop was not only an outgrowth of capitalist society, it was a weapon in the American imperialist project, working in collusion with capitalism to promote an American way of life. The Pop artists were seen not as subversive of consumer society, but complicit in their refusal to make any statements about it.

Malraux worked to reestablish France as the world’s cultural leader and purveyor of refined, artistic taste. This was particularly important because since the Enlightenment, as Victoria De Grazia points out, “the power of the French nation abroad had often been measured in terms of the cosmopolitanism of French high culture” (“Mass Culture” 63). He attempted to carve out a niche for the nation as the guardians of a Western civilization

under fire from the ravages of capitalism. Malraux came from the French humanist school of thought in the twenties and thirties that viewed the rise of American civilization as evidence for the collapse of Western values. As Jean-Philippe Mathy points out, these accounts tended to demonize American culture as the absolute Other of Europe and stress its difference with classical and Renaissance civilization (11). As the Minister of Culture, Malraux was in a position to promote a government sanctioned corrective to the American mission of spreading capitalism around the globe. He was not as anti-American as his humanist colleagues like Georges Duhamel, but he did believe that there were stark differences between France and the United States that needed to be addressed: “Nous avons avec la civilisation des États-Unis des profondes différences mais nous sommes embarqués dans le même destin” (qtd. in Mossuz-Lavau 23). Despite their differences, France and the U.S. were headed in the same direction, and it was up to the minister to steer a different course for France.

On an international scale, Malraux’s mission for French art was to elevate all of humanity above the technological nightmare of modern society and to uphold the dignity and value of every person. Although he denied that he was advocating an intellectual form of nationalism, he proclaimed that “il est parfaitement vrai aussi que c’est un très grand honneur pour un pays que de porter la charge du destin des hommes et surtout la charge de ce qui peut les sauver. Dans la mesure où nous le pouvons, notre devoir est de le faire au nom de la France.”<sup>8</sup> Saving mankind was a grave responsibility and, as Malraux points out, the French were bound to save civilization in the name of their beloved nation. In his book, *Mona Lisa’s Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of*

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<sup>8</sup> Excerpted from a speech given at the National Assembly on November 9, 1963. Reprinted in *Les Affaires culturelles au temps d’André Malraux: 1959-1969* (Paris : La Documentation française, 1996) 23.

*French Culture*, Herman Lebovics shows how the country's loan of the *Mona Lisa* serves as an illustration of Malraux's aspirations for French culture to function as a sort of *mission civilatrice*—a cultural chauvinism aimed at the U.S. intended to counter the mass, consumer culture that America was exporting to the continent.

On January 8, 1963, Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* was unveiled at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. At the behest of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, the French government had granted unprecedented permission for the painting to leave the Louvre and travel to the United States. André Malraux, France's Minister of Cultural Affairs, saw a kindred spirit in the Kennedys, especially Jackie, who, having been schooled in the fine arts, embodied the refinement and elegance of European culture. Under extremely tight security, Malraux accompanied the *Mona Lisa* on the transatlantic voyage.

Malraux had faced heavy criticism in France when the idea of the exhibit was first proposed. Officials at the Louvre argued adamantly against the removal of the painting from the museum, not only because of the risks posed by such a journey, but also because of their belief that America was a danger to the very values of Western civilization that the *Mona Lisa* symbolized. How could they consent to lending Leonardo's masterpiece to a country that had exported to them only a vulgar mass consumer culture that threatened the French way of life?<sup>9</sup> French officials feared that the removal of Leonardo's masterwork from its place

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<sup>9</sup> In the post-World War II period, the U.S. Marshall Plan--designed to bolster European democracies against the threat of communist dictatorship--opened the floodgates for an unprecedented number of American consumer goods into France. From Hollywood films to chewing gum to refrigerators and automobiles, these exports not only helped fuel the post-war boom in the U.S. economy, but also exposed Europeans to the "benefits" of the American way of life. Jean-Paul Sartre expressed French anxieties about this expanding consumer society: "American ideology and culture will necessarily come to us with screws, manufactured goods, and canned fruit juices." (Quoted in Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 137).

of enshrinement at the Louvre would lead to defilement, especially in a country as shallow as the United States.

Malraux himself had expressed similar anxiety about an all-consuming mass culture that threatened to contaminate France. In fact, on a trip to the U.S. a year earlier, he condemned the “imperious demons” and “cheap heroes” fabricated by the mass media—especially the popular press, film, and television--that competed with “the greatest of human dreams” (“Rise of Mass Culture” 56). So why would he make such a controversial arrangement with the U.S. government? For Malraux, exposing Americans, accustomed only to the vagaries of banal middlebrow culture, to a famed European masterwork would illuminate for them the meaning of “real” culture. This was crucial in guarding against the proliferation of mass culture that threatened to subvert the values of civilization and, closer to home, French culture. These values were manifested in art such as the *Mona Lisa*, which embodied, to use the minister’s lofty humanist rhetoric, “the invincible permanence of what has triumphed over death” (“Rise of Mass Culture” 56). In addition, the *Mona Lisa* exhibit served to shore up a particular idea of French national identity. If America was the world’s leading military power and exporter of mass culture, then France would cultivate an image of itself as the world’s *cultural* superpower, the guardians of Western civilization.

### C. Pop Art and the Politics of Surface

In the U.S., Andy Warhol was inspired by the *Mona Lisa* exhibits in Washington and New York, and by the busloads of Americans who lined up to see them. He created his own tributes to the masterpiece, entitled *Thirty Are*

*Better Than One* and *Mona Lisa (Colored)*. In the first work, *Mona Lisa* is silk-screened six times across the canvas in a symmetrical repetition of five rows. The thirty resulting images are identical except for variations in the ink used in the silk-screen process. In the second piece, *Mona Lisa* is repeated vertically, horizontally, upside-down, and right-side up over the canvas in various shades of red, blue, yellow, and black. Some images retain Leonardo's original composition; others present a fragmented focus on the face or the crossed hands.

Warhol's silk-screens can be read on several levels as the symbolic fulfillment of Malraux's fears about the decline of civilization. His mechanically reproduced *Mona Lisa* degraded the seriousness of the French cultural minister's ideas of high culture, erasing the uniqueness of the work of art through an American-style mass production. By painting the *Mona Lisa* as he would any Campbell's Soup can, Coca-Cola bottle, or Hollywood celebrity, Warhol effaced any transcendental values or mystical aura that the minister perceived in the portrait and, in effect, reduced Leonardo's venerated subject to an object destined for mass consumption. He drew on popular culture for his subjects, from the very films, advertising, and television that cheapened Malraux's "heroes." And his work breaks down the barriers to cultural consumption to the extent that a work of art was an object to be consumed like any other manufactured good. In sum, Warhol's work, which emerged from a particular stage of American capitalism, directly challenged Malraux's beliefs about the function of art in society.

In *Lions Love*, Agnès Varda sets up a cross-cultural dialogue between Malraux's (and De Gaulle's) humanist vision for France with a Warholian concept of America that engages the mass, consumer culture of the sixties. At the

beginning of the film, New York independent filmmaker Shirley Clarke flies to Los Angeles to discuss a contract with a Hollywood studio to make a mainstream film.<sup>10</sup> Film historian Carlos Clarens, dressed in his fringe leather jacket and bell-bottom jeans, greets Shirley at the airport, surprising her with a *Newsweek* magazine featuring President Charles de Gaulle on the cover. He opens the magazine, revealing a photo of Henry Langlois on the front of *Cahiers du cinéma*. Smiling, Clarke says: “You know, the New York filmmakers thing, Langlois started the revolution.” Carlos replies: “He certainly did. I was there in Cannes only two weeks ago. I can’t believe it. It was like another world!”

Carlos is referring to the infamous Cannes of May ’68, when directors like Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and Louis Malle protested André Malraux’s firing of Henri Langlois. Langlois was the famed director and cinephile who headed the Cinémathèque française and supported the New York underground filmmakers like Shirley Clarke and Andy Warhol. Godard called for a revolution in sympathy with the students in the streets who were waging battle against Malraux’s archaic cultural policies, rallying behind the slogan: “Power to the imagination!” The directors at Cannes succeeded in closing down the festival with fist-fights and shouting matches, and forced Malraux to rehire Langlois. Varda references the turmoil of May ’68 with the inclusion of the issues of

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<sup>10</sup> Shirley Clarke began making films in the late 1950s when many alternative directors were experimenting with an American style of *cinéma vérité*, known as direct cinema. This style of filmmaking encouraged interaction between the subject and director, and permitted the director to initiate action instead of passively awaiting privileged moments. Clarke’s film, *The Connection* (1961), was both applauded and criticized for its mixing of both documentary and dramatic techniques—blurring the lines between fact and fiction. She also helped establish the Film Distribution Center—an offshoot of the Filmmaker’s Cooperative in New York designed to distribute underground and avant-garde films to mainstream venues. Andy Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls* (1966) was their most successful effort.

*Newsweek* and *Cahiers du cinéma*: hidden within the narrative of purity, refinement, and glory that De Gaulle and Malraux were actively constructing for France lies a cultural revolution that threatens to infiltrate the pages of this narrative of the nation, deconstructing the concept of, and disrupting the actual workings of, the Gaullist state.

Immediately after introducing the cultural rebellion against Malraux's policies in France itself, Varda sets up the Pop world of Southern California that serves as the antithesis of Malraux's regressive notion of culture. Shirley and Carlos drive toward L.A. where Viva, Jerry, and Jim live in the Hollywood Hills, overlooking a city that Warhol admired for its artifice, glamour, and surface: "I love Los Angeles. I love Hollywood. They're beautiful. Everybody's plastic...I want to be plastic" (*Andy Warhol* n.p.). The camera pans across the surfaces of the city as Carlos and Shirley ride through the hills, past oil derricks and eventually down streets lined with palm trees and store fronts under a bright sunny sky. Shirley asks: "Are we in Hollywood?" Carlos responds: "Yeah, I guess this is Hollywood already. It doesn't look like a city. It looks like you're coming into a city, but the city's never there."

This idea of Hollywood as surface, devoid of any distinct geographical boundaries, is related to the absence of nature. At one point in the film, Viva, Jerry, and Jim discover and praise a "real" patch of grass that had grown among the concrete sidewalks of L.A.—a last vestige of "nature" in a city founded on the elimination of the natural environment. Later, as the film historian Carlos explains the history of Hollywood to Shirley, we see a montage of shots from around the city, including a sign for Lemon Grove Avenue. Carlos explains that acres of lemon groves had to be pulled down to

make way for the film studios. At this point, Varda cuts from a shot of a lemon grove to a montage of all the film studios in Hollywood during the sixties: Columbia, MGM, Paramount, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. She evokes nature that disappears in advanced capitalism, paved over by the Hollywood studios that tamed the unpredictability of nature into perfection, churning out standardized factory products.

For Varda, Los Angeles is one big unabashed celebration of the artificiality of nature—as even the street names demonstrate. The director focuses on the Hollywood star system that has worked its way into the fabric of the city, indeed, becoming physically embedded in the city itself. In one montage sequence, the camera pans along the Hollywood Walk of Fame, over the surface of the stars of actors like Elizabeth Taylor, Victor Mature, Dorothy Lamour, Fred Astaire, and Kim Novak. On the Avenue of Stars, we pass signs for: Tracy Street, Bancroft Avenue, Crosby Place, De Haviland Avenue, Fairbanks Place, Temple Street, Peck Drive, Gregory Way, and Monroe Street. These commodities had infiltrated the fabric of city life.

The actress Viva epitomizes the manufactured and mediated self. As Carlos and Shirley drive through Hollywood past palm tree-lined sidewalks, Carlos tells Shirley that she might get a “bit of a shock treatment” upon meeting Viva for the first time. Shirley replies: “Like her movies? I mean, she’s real.” Carlos says: “Viva’s life is nothing but a movie.” Shirley responds that she herself has felt that way, asking the question: “Which comes first: the movie or reality?” This play of surfaces extends to the plasticity of Viva, Jim, and Jerry’s home. Their apartment is practically a shrine to the artificial matter, which, as Barthes points out, modifies the traditional function of nature (98). An operatic

chorus on the soundtrack accompanies a montage of the decorative furnishings: a bowl of plastic fruit, a stuffed bird, a plastic pineapple lamp, a plastic, potted weeping willow, and an imitation fireplace. The trio's Hollywood apartment, its plasticity and gaudiness, epitomized a quintessentially American aesthetic, and was what French critics fears about compromising French taste for modernization.

This idea of Hollywood as a play between surface and depth, the real and artificial, is nothing new. In fact, it has been a trope in French writings about the city since Hollywood emerged as the entertainment capital of the world in the 1910s. For example, in 1936, Francis de Croisset relayed to French readers in *Revue des deux mondes* his dismay at the artificial beauty of L.A.: "Strange manufactured paradise! Inviting and deceptive nights! Nature seems as deceiving as the people!" (304). During his 1931 trip to California, Georges Duhamel remarked on the illusions and false hopes promised by Hollywood film: "The cinema is a pastime for slaves, an amusement for the illiterate, for creatures stupefied by work and anxiety...It is spectacle that demands no effort, that does not imply any sequence of ideas, that raises no questions, that evokes no deep feeling, that lights no light in the depths of any heart, that excites no hope, if not the ridiculous one of some day becoming a 'star' in Los Angeles" (34). For these critics, the illusory nature of both Hollywood films and the city itself signaled a dehumanization that resulted from the technology of the machine age.

But, by the late 1960s, this American aesthetic pointed to wider social implications for subjectivity in an advanced capitalist society. In 1972, Michael Davie wrote that southern Californians had become so affluent and prosperous--surrounding

themselves with fake materials, replicas, and reproductions—that “it is as if some basic change has taken place in the attitude of the citizens to external reality” (31).

Warhol’s Pop art encapsulates these characteristics of American consumer society. His work erased the nature that the European tradition held up as the ideal, taking instead culture as its subject matter. Mass production has reduced the significance of originality and authenticity. Identity becomes constructed by the consumption of mass-produced objects and images. Instead of the search for an authentic self, identity here disintegrates into fragments and becomes a play of surfaces. And just as Pop Art was a break with the tradition of European art, Los Angeles was a break with European urbanity as the embodiment of the new Pop aesthetic with its absence of the political, social, and religious arrangements that the rest of America inherited from Europe. Warhol himself admired L.A. for this very reason: “New York is like Paris and Los Angeles is so American, so new and different and everything is bigger and prettier and simpler and flat” (Berg 42).

Later in the film, Carlos, who is doing research for a book on Hollywood, comments on the city’s lack of a history. Unlike its European counterparts which, as Jean-Paul Sartre wrote after a 1946 trip to the United States, “reflected the customs and ways of past centuries” while concurrently “filter[ing] the present,” Los Angeles had no past (118). Carlos comments on the absence of history: “You know there’s no film museum in Hollywood unless you call a museum the Waxworks on Hollywood Boulevard. And there’s no cinemathèque either. It’s as if Hollywood were ashamed of its past.” Clarens continues, calling Hollywood nostalgic and a “state of mind”: “The real museum of Hollywood may very well be Larry Edmunds’ bookshop, where all the

memories of Hollywood are sold in little parcels of nostalgia to fans all over the world.” His voice-over continues as the camera pans along the interior of the shop crammed full of movie memorabilia – fan magazines, posters, lobby cards, books, postcards--plastered side by side, covering the wall in a complete saturation of history and memory.

Carlos provides background on the rise of talkies in Hollywood, which coincided with the rise of the star system: “Between 1925 and 1935, more was written about Hollywood than about any other part of the nation. Eventually, the intellectuals began to arrive: Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, Scott Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Somerset Maugham and also André Malraux – then a leading Communist writer.” These novelists resided in Paris during the interwar period when the city enjoyed the status of the world capital of culture. However, while the modernist writers were sitting in the literary circles of the Parisian salons, penning the modernist masterpieces that railed against a technological, capitalist future—*Brave New World*, *The Great Gatsby*—across the Atlantic, Hollywood (which was becoming a metonym for American culture), was emerging as the world capital of mass culture.

The lure of Hollywood brought these novelists to Southern California like so many other writers, directors, and artists whose talents were put to the service of the capitalist machine. As Mike Davis points out, the convergence of eminent European writers and intellectuals in California in the 1930s proved a seminal moment in the cultural histories of Southern California and Europe, for this group created a mythology of Los Angeles and America that helped shape critical reaction to the postwar Americanization of Europe. Living in L.A. at the time of its ascendance as the heart of the Culture Industry reinforced Europeans’ disdain for the vapidness of American culture,

and the idea of “Los Angeles” became central to debates about the fate of Modernism and the future of a postwar Europe ruled by the principles of Fordist production (21-22).

They could point to the fate of their American counterparts, writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner who relocated to Hollywood late in their careers and cranked out booze-soaked, hackneyed screenplays for the studio assembly lines, fabricating the Utopian dreams of American cinema that contrasted so starkly not only with their great literary achievements that demythologized the American dream, but also with the depression and alcoholism of their personal lives that was seen as a result of working in the service of the assembly line. The fall of these writers only served to confirm the European intellectuals belief that the Culture Industry dehumanized the individual, and it also reinforced the French anxiety of a Fordist future for France expressed by humanist critics like André Malraux.

As Varda continues panning the interior of the Hollywood book store, we hear a telephone conversation over shots of black and white posters of stars: Greta Garbo, Shirley Temple, Rita Hayworth, Theda Barrow, Katharine Hepburn, Douglas Fairbanks, Rock Hudson, Sean Connery, Gary Cooper, Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich – “Yes, it’s true that André Malraux was here. He was here in 1936 speaking for the Spanish Republic. The movie colony and the movie stars raised enough money for two ambulances and then before he left, the ambulances were signed by all the stars that contributed. He was here at the same time with Ernest Hemingway.”

For his part, Malraux never actually resided in Los Angeles for any length of time. In the 1930s, the novelist was fighting for the Communists in the Spanish Civil War. The Stalinists, who were supplying Soviet aid to their Spanish counterparts,

appointed Malraux the official Minister of Propaganda and Foreign Relations for the Spanish Republican government. The Stalinists, who were running out of funds to support their losing cause, sent him to the United States to raise funds for the Spanish “Aide Médicale.” After stops in New York, Washington, Philadelphia, and Cambridge, Malraux headed to the West Coast for engagements in Los Angeles, Hollywood, San Francisco, and Berkeley. Jean-François Lyotard points to the irony of Malraux’s situation of raising money in America to pay the revolutionaries, calling his actions the “final antifascist platforms in Capital’s great cities” (110). The capitalist system to the rescue of the Communist project in Spain. The artifice and superficiality negated his ideas of communion and transcendence through life-affirming adventure.

By mentioning Malraux’s presence in Hollywood, Varda contrasts his high humanist ideals with the surface of the celebrities in shop. Malraux’s memoirs contain all the heroic adventurous places he traveled – but Los Angeles is conspicuously absent. Trekking through the jungles of Cambodia in search of the temple ruins of Bantál Frey, aiding Ho Chi Minh, supporting anti-colonial forces in Shanghai, flying over the Arabian deserts in hopes of discovering the remains of the Queen of Sheba’s mythical capital, volunteering as a Republican fighter in the Spanish Civil War, and fighting with the French Resistance in World War II--these were, in a humanist sense, authentic, life-affirming, and noble journeys that were incompatible with the illusory nature of L.A., which was unworthy of inclusion.

Some three decades later, Andy Warhol had his own ambivalent experience in Malraux’s country. In 1964, Andy Warhol was invited to have a

one-man show at the Sonnabend gallery in Paris, in a rare display of adventurousness.<sup>11</sup> While planning the exhibit, Warhol's friends discouraged him from showing any works that the French could perceive as promoting consumer culture or the "American way of life" (Bourdon 148). As a result, instead of showing his soup cans and Coke bottles, he decided to center the exhibit around the theme "Death in America," drawing on works from his "Death and Disaster" series. In these silk-screens, Warhol depicts graphic images of mangled car crashes, impaled corpses, and crumpled suicide victims in vivid colors. Warhol states: "There was no profound reason for doing a death series, no 'victims of their time'; there was no reason for doing it at all, just a surface reason" (Berg 186).

President John Kennedy's 1963 assassination figures prominently as a subject in Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series. The president's death was seen as a unique event that, as Fredric Jameson points out, was a "collective (and media, communicational) experience, which trained people to read such events in a new way" (355). The ability of television to alter perception fascinated Warhol, and he took what have now become iconic images of the event and flattened and serialized them. These silk screens, entitled *Jackies*, *Sixteen Jackies*, and *Nine Jackies*, are comprised of individual canvases (which were later joined together) painted with images of the First Lady in shades of blue, white, and beige—Jackie in Dallas wearing her pillbox hat, smiling; Jackie wearing her black veil, stoically

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<sup>11</sup> Art critic Pierre Cabanne relates the reluctance of French art galleries and museums to exhibit cutting-edge works of art to the elitism of State cultural policies, stating that the Sonnabend "effectua un travail d'information et de diffusion considérable, celui que le musée d'Art moderne se refusait à faire par chauvinisme ou indifférence.» (37).

overseeing her husband's funeral procession; Jackie on the plane ride back to Washington as Lyndon Johnson takes the oath of office. Again, Warhol claims only a superficial reason for doing these portraits: "It was just to show her face and the passage of time from the time the bullet struck John Kennedy to the time she buried him" (Berg 192).

In *Lions Love*, another Kennedy assassination is replayed, doubled, like a Warhol portrait. Varda replays Senator Robert Kennedy's 1968 assassination on a different medium--television. When *Lost Horizon* ends, Shirley turns the channel to the news where they watch footage of Kennedy's last-minute campaigning before the primary. The candidate shakes hands in L.A.'s Chinatown, where celebratory fireworks sound ominously like gunfire and foreshadow things to come; he playfully admonishes a crowd for reelecting Ronald Reagan as governor of California (a reference to the repressive forces that exist alongside carnival); he takes his kids to Disneyland in Anaheim--the ultimate utopian theme park that epitomized the idea of surface and the control of nature in the production of standardized goods.

Viva, as the embodiment of Pop art, calls attention to the surface of Kennedy politics. For example, she is attracted to his physical appearance: "I mean in a sea of ugliness, a good-looking politician is not to be sneezed at." Calling him a "plastic actor," she proclaims, "Even if he is corrupt, at least he does it with style. All politics is the same thing. They're just better actors. If you were as good an actor as Bobby Kennedy, you'd be where Bobby Kennedy is up on the podium influencing the masses." This American attitude about politics presented by

Varda is the antithesis of Malraux's views of political engagement. For humanists like Malraux, a fraternal model of politics was vital to defeating fascism and totalitarianism. The author-revolutionary brought together art, literature, and politics in novels like *La Condition humaine* (1933) and *L'Espoir* (1938), which both illustrate Malraux's philosophy that politics was something that was lived; it involved being actively engaged in the world. By emphasizing the cosmetic appeal of Bobby Kennedy and, by implication his link to John Kennedy, America's first television president, Varda shows us that Malraux's heroic vision of revolutionary politics was no longer possible in the age of television. His grandiose truth-claims about man's redemption through political commitment collapse in the mediated world of American politics where the authority of the public intellectual's word is eroded by the society of the spectacle.

After a voice-over states that Kennedy hopes to renew Franklin Delano Roosevelt's coalition of minorities, footage shows Kennedy delivering a speech: "I present my candidacy. And I say to you that you have a clear choice in the question of what direction you want this country to go in." His speech captured a particular notion of the American dream that historian Tom Moylan argues was a seminal question in the 1960s—"the shape of the American dream that was emerging, or being denied, in the period of postwar affluence" (47). The 1950s and 60s had brought affluence and comfort to millions, and the rise of the suburbs, the preeminence of the automobile, and home and television ownership had created consumer-based brand nationalism that marked a clear departure from

previous eras. Kennedy constructed his run for the presidency around stopping the war in Vietnam and opening the doors to this version of the “good life” to more Americans, especially the poor and minority groups.

Television was a popular source of material for Pop artists like Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Rauschenberg, and Varda shared their fascination with the televised image, especially American television. As opposed to the two state-run channels in France that served as an arm of propaganda for the Gaullist administration, Varda relished the stream of images from the more plentiful and varied options on U.S. television. At the beginning of the film, Varda has already established the importance of the television by actually giving it a credit as a character in the movie—placing the word “television” in the credit bed along side the main protagonists, Viva, Rado, and Ragni. In fact, the television is so important in their house that they keep an American flag on top of the set—unfurling it at night when the networks play “The Star-Spangled Banner” to signal the end of broadcasting hours.

At one point in *Lions Love*, Viva, Jerry, and Jim come home from a party having heard the news that Kennedy had been shot after winning the California primary. Jim turns on the television and exclaims: “We’ve seen this already.” Not only have they seen the footage before (presumably at the party), but the entire world has seen it before. The image is doubled like Warholian Pop. The threesome watch the news coverage together on television, and disturbingly violent images, *à l’américain*, flood the screen—Kennedy supporters in shock and confusion at the Ambassador Hotel, the iconic image of the senator sprawled on the hotel’s kitchen floor, his head cradled by the busboy, lying in

a pool of blood. An off-screen voice narrates the events: “He had gone off to the kitchen area when some shots rang out. News cameraman James Wilson filmed this picture of Senator Kennedy lying on the floor. The crowd around him was panicked, screaming in disbelief. Some of them tried to talk to him as they supported his bleeding head. The senator was conscious at that time...” Whereas the television was earlier transmitting the idea of utopia in a Frank Capra movie, it is now transmitting images of abject dystopia.

Eventually, they go to bed. Jerry says: “Leave the picture. Kill the sound.” While they sleep, images flicker silently across the T.V. screen in an interrupted chronology – Senator Kennedy is now suddenly alive, standing at a podium at the Ambassador Hotel with his wife, Ethel, flashing a peace sign at his supporters. Suddenly, the phone rings. Jerry answers and gives phone to Viva. On the other end of the line, someone tells her that Andy Warhol has been shot. Again, Varda juxtaposes fantasy and reality, for in “real life,” Viva was actually on the phone with Warhol when Valerie Solanas—author of the S.C.U.M. manifesto (which outlined her own ideas of a feminist utopia)—walked into the Factory and began shooting. Viva actually heard gunshots and Warhol’s cries for help on the other end of the line.

In the film, ubiquitous scenes of mediated death, detached from the audio, float up from the screen—serialized death, like a Warhol painting, repetition of death. Critical distance comes in the form of Viva commenting, prompted by an image of Robert Kennedy dining with some Japanese dignitaries, “Look, he’s using chopsticks. He can do everything!” Death is no longer an object to be contemplated, mulled over; as Viva says, “What else can you do? We’re having fun. The national pastime is televised death. You have to make fun or you’ll go crazy.”

On the television, a spokesman grimly announces that Kennedy is dead. Viva, Jim, and Jerry lie in bed staring solemnly at the screen. This is the only moment in the film that their laughter turns to grief. The next shot shows the cover of the morning edition of the *L.A. Times* with the headline in bold, capital letters: KENNEDY DIES. Then camera concentrates on the word “dies,” then the film jumps to Coretta Scott King on television reading her condolences to the Kennedy family. Then we see the funeral cortege arriving at the airport where a plane waits to transport Kennedy’s body back to New York. Jacquelyn Kennedy is there, invoking memories of a Kennedy assassination five years earlier.

Warhol’s own reaction to the death of Robert Kennedy intertwines this idea of reality blurring into fiction:

As I was coming down from my operation, I heard a television going somewhere and the words “Kennedy” and “assassin” and “shot” over and over again. Robert Kennedy had been shot, but what was so weird was that I had no understanding that this was a *second* Kennedy assassination—I just thought that maybe after you die, they rerun things for you, like President Kennedy’s assassination. Some of the nurses were crying, and after a while, I heard things like “the mourners in St. Patrick’s.” It was all so strange to me, this background of another shooting and a funeral—I couldn’t distinguish between life and death yet, anyway, and here was a person being buried on the television right in front of me. (Warhol and Hackett 274-275).

For Warhol, the sound was detached from the ubiquitous images of Kennedy’s televised death, free-floating from any particular time and space, like one of his own works of art.

Death, mediated death, life, sound, image, John, Robert, Andy—all became interchangeable in this sixties spectacle of reality.

Here, Varda is also acknowledging the violence and aggression that marked 1968. The assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the attempt on Andy Warhol's life, and their depiction in the media signal a sort of community of death and destruction. Warhol himself had explored the dark underbelly of American culture in his 1963 "Death and Disaster" series, and Varda, not coincidentally, echoes his technique of repetition in this instance—one of her many readings of Pop art that both shape her film and articulate her oppositional vision to that of Malraux.

Once again, Varda entertains French anxiety about the contaminating effect of American-style politics and culture by illuminating Pop art's questioning of the power of art to transcend the vagaries of life and death. "All art has been a revolt against man's fate," wrote Malraux in *The Voices of Silence* in 1951 (64). Humanity affirms and enshrines its existence through artistic creation; the immortality of the work of art defies nihilistic existentialism and defeats the finality of death. Varda's Warholian televised death undermines Malraux's lofty claims about the heroic efforts of the artist to overcome "man's fate"; in Pop art, death is emptied of any meaning in its metamorphosis into a simulacrum of repetition and surface. As Roland Barthes has argued, "The Pop artist does not stand behind his work, and he himself has no depth: he is merely the surface of his pictures, no signified, no intention, anywhere" ("That Old Thing" 372).

#### D. Hippies and the "Erotics of Politics"

After Varda builds up an exaggerated America wallowing in the excesses of capitalism, she plays with the consequences of that excess. The world encoded

in Warhol's Pop art—consumerism accompanied by materialistic values—signaled inevitable moral decline. Varda then plays off these French fears that Americanization would lead to the decline of morality, by presenting a cultural and social sphere in which the transgression of moral codes was perceived as a revolutionary action.

Varda begins her foray into the carnivalesque from the outset with her choice of actors. Viva sprang from the ranks of the Factory—Warhol's underground New York version of a Hollywood studio. Like Candy Darling and Ultra Violet, she claimed the exclusive label of a Warhol Superstar—culled from an assortment of transvestites, addicts, and socialites whom Warhol had arbitrarily elevated to a status of glamour celebrity. She was known at the Factory for her sharp wit and fondness for nude scenes. Viva starred in numerous Warhol films, like *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), *Bike Boy* (1967), and *The Nude Restaurant* (1967), all of which featured the ultimate taboo in American film—male frontal nudity. In *Blue Movie* (1969), Warhol filmed Viva having sex with co-star Louis Waldon. During a showing in New York City, the film, originally entitled *Fuck*, was confiscated by the police; the theater manager, projectionist, and ticket seller were arrested for possession of obscene materials. A three-judge panel later ruled that the film met the current definition of obscenity: “it aroused prurient interest in sex, offended contemporary community standards, and was totally without redeeming social value, making it ‘hard-core pornography’” (Bourdon 301). In an Atlanta theater, police seized the film *Lonesome Cowboys*, and photographed audience members to put in their file of “undesirables” (301).

Viva's counterparts in *Lions Love*, Jim Rado and Jerry Ragni, shared her penchant for sex and nudity in their own theatrical productions. As two of the most important figures in experimental theater of the 1960s, they performed for the New York-based theater group Café La Mama that was known for its scathing criticisms of the U.S. government and America's increasing involvement in Vietnam. When their production of *Hair* opened on Broadway, a scandal erupted over the display of rampant drug use, profanity, and nudity.

In *Lions Love*, Viva, Rado, and Ragni play hippies living together in the Hollywood Hills. We never see the threesome engaged in any type of paid labor. Varda shows the actors in leisurely, quintessentially “hippie” activities: watching television while smoking pot, floating nude in their pool, lying in bed together nude, eating nude in front of a picture window overlooking Los Angeles. Viva describes their relationship with one another as an “experiment” in which they have reached a “fabulous stage of love.”

In both the U.S. and France, criticisms of this lifestyle revolved around questions of morality. Religious leaders and politicians in the U.S. decried the immorality of free love and drug use as detrimental to the American family and way of life. In France, criticisms of hippies also revolved around questions of morality, but they were also considered products of an affluent U.S. society, confirming many critics' belief that the American system fostered this particular brand of self-indulgent immorality. For example, when Rado and Ragni's play *Hair* opened in Paris (with singer Julien Clerc playing Claude Bukowski), the Salvation Army criticized the American play's decadence and attempted to have it

shut down. General Commissioner Gilbert Abadie, who led the effort, defended his actions: “It is not censorship to forbid a show that abandons 40,000 years of civilization to return to the cave” (Hess 14).

In Suzanne Labin’s 1972 book, *Hippies, Drugs, and Promiscuity*, the French author echoes the postwar critics of the Marshall Plan when she writes: “French hippies have not yet reached the point of sitting down *en masse* on the sidewalk, making love in public, or taking drugs under the noses of the police as in the United States or England. But that will come. For everything—from automatic Laundromats to long hair, from exotic drugstores to exotic drugs—comes to France, some five to ten years after the Anglo-Saxon countries” (142). Labin’s prediction confirmed postwar anxieties about American capitalism and America as a social model for France. Such base behavior would, inevitably, like so many other American exports flooding the country, corrupt and disrupt French society. It was imperative to contain this lifestyle, that, like consumer culture in the postwar period, France saw coming as part of its future.

In Labin’s argument, discourse surrounding the United States, capitalism, and morality all intersect in the body of the hippie. Here, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s theories of subjectivity are useful in understanding this French desire to delineate strict boundaries between the civilized and the profane. The theorists argue that within a society, the human body, geographical space, and the social order are constructed within interrelated hierarchies of high and low. These hierarchical relationships are fundamental to the maintenance of order in Western cultures. Stallybrass and White focus primarily on the emergence of the bourgeoisie as a powerful economic force, and the bourgeoisie’s strategy for delineating itself from the proletariat in such a way as to make their

dominance over the proletariat appear natural. The theorists argue that bourgeois culture emerged from a rejection of the base elements of popular culture:

The division of the social into high and low, the polite and the vulgar, simultaneously maps out divisions between the civilized and the grotesque body, between author and hack, between social purity and social hybridization. These divisions...cut across the social formation...and the body, in such a way that subject identity cannot be considered independently of these domains. The bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as “low”—as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust. (191)

Just as the construction of a class-based identity is rooted in the individual body, French leaders sought to protect the national body of France from the contamination of American popular culture. This same “demarcating imperative” regarding the formation of the bourgeoisie works similarly in the formation of French national identity in the 1960s.

In her appraisal of the reading of *Lions Love* by French audiences, Varda asserted that the hippie lifestyle was typically and, on a certain level, officially rejected by the French. As Stallybrass and White argue, class anxieties about social relations are often expressed through the exclusion or containment of actual bodies. In the late 1960s, this exclusion was replicated on a national level as the French press constructed hippies, a quintessentially American product, as a contagion that threatened to pollute European values and social structures. Hippies were abject “others” against which the French press defined their cultural superiority, and newspaper headlines announced the infiltration of

the contaminant in the country, for example, this one from *Aurore*: “Des hippies bien léchés à l’assaut de l’hexagone.” If the rhetoric of dirt and contagion involves fears about the ordering of society, then such headlines express an anxiety over French national identity and the blurring of boundaries as hippies penetrate the borders of the hexagon.

The French also pointed to the hippies’ defilement of the body through drug use as a way to demarcate European from American culture. Describing her initial research into the history of drug use, Labin discovered that throughout history, people employed a wide range of drugs except for Europeans, who only used them on a minor scale. She speculates “perhaps Europe owes her prodigious history to this abstinence” (249). Europe’s superior culture and values had presumably warded off any drug use in France, but the encroachment of the American counterculture might now sway young French minds.

Similarly, conservative critics often blamed the American counterculture for celebrating pornography and obscenity, which they believed would also have a contaminating effect on France. In this instance, they may have been on to something; among hippies who advocated free love and expression of sexuality, they showed “self-liberation from all hang-ups, to scandalize the established order” (Labin 183). Many in the counterculture believed that graphic representations of sex worked to subvert repressive, hypocritical notions of sex in mainstream culture.

In France, critics on the left and right criticized hippies for what was perceived as their non-involvement in politics. Relying on traditional notions of political engagement, Labin argues the superiority of European politics over countercultural politics. She claims that hippies chose to focus on the liberation of the senses because it was easier

than the liberation of the proletariat. In contrasting the politics of European youth with the American counterculture, Labin argues:

In France or Italy, a young rebel will join the Communist Party. In America, an obscene ad in the Berkeley Barb<sup>12</sup> is their act of revolution. It is a form of social protest. They raise no red flags over the American universities, they ‘make the scene’ with no clothes on. In the New World, drugs and sex have replaced the Hammer and Sickle...and the American revolutionaries are content. (184)

Flouting moral dictates, according to French critics, not only wasn’t politically radical, but would actually be damaging to any progressive movement foolish enough to believe that sex equaled revolution. In their view, true revolutionary acts involved a commitment to a political ideology, not a hedonistic indulgence in immoral behavior, no matter how subversive it was perceived to be.

Despite the fact that Viva, Jim, and Jerry are never shown participating in any formal outlets of political activism, they represent what Stuart Hall calls the “erotics of politics”—that is, the practice of free love, communal living, and self-sufficiency that involved a utopian idea combining American individualism—“do your own thing”—with the social collectivism of the commune (196). Hippies embodied this idea of the new revolt. In 1969, Hall wrote that though hippies withdrew from the conventional arena of political struggle, they prefigured a new kind of subjectivity outside the confines of the traditional bourgeois family structure, representing a new kind of “politics of

The fact that this type of revolt could emerge from the heart of capitalist society attracted Varda and other French intellectuals like Edgar Morin. Morin, writing in 1969,

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<sup>12</sup> The Berkeley Barb was an underground newspaper published in Berkeley, California. The paper often ran personal ads of a very explicit nature.

described the shifts in subjectivity in postindustrial America: “C’est un néo-tribalisme, quelque chose de très archaïque qui surgit de la pointe avancée de la modernité » (« La mutation occidentale » 528). Varda was attracted to the cultural forms that this social revolution took, for example Rado and Ragni’s play *Hair*.

*Hair* advocated the power of drugs, free love, and peace to make a better world. In addition to its antiwar message, the play was reviled by some for its rejection of antiquated ideas about sexuality and nudity. In the opening stage directions of *Hair*, the playwrights emphasize the communal nature of the show in a sort of manifesto of sixties youth culture:

The Kids should be approached, directorially, as a “tribe.” Marshall McLuhan describes today’s world as a “global village.” And today’s youth is involved in group-tribal activity. An extension of what’s happening. A coming-together for a common reason: a search for a way of life that makes sense to the young, that allows the growth of their new vision, however defined or undefined that may be; to find an alternative to the unacceptable standards, goals, and morals of the older generation, the establishment. (viii-ix)

This was perhaps the most personal revolution—the unabashed rejection of their parents’ generation, the men who had triumphed over Nazism and fascism and who had presided over the United States’ ascendance as a world superpower. The counterculture saw no glory there, only repression, hypocrisy, superficiality, and violence.

In *Lions Love*, Varda plays on this idea that sex was more than simply freedom—it was a weapon to be used against the social order. In one scene,

Shirley and Carlos sit at an outdoor café, discussing various options for an afternoon activity. Carlos suggests they see an exhibit by the California artist Rick Herold, explaining: “He’s an artist from out here... He does blow-ups of what you could call pornographic scenes – scenes of love-making. But you really don’t realize what it is until you really have looked at them for quite some time.”

Instead of raising the *objet d’art* up on a pedestal for the spectator to gaze at from below, in wonderment of its transcendental qualities (*à la* Malraux), Herold enlarges the subject in a way that alters traditional ways of seeing, transforms the viewer into an unwitting voyeur, and presents the body as a grotesque, unrecognizable spectacle. While that is one effect of Herold’s paintings, he is also part of the school of thought that believed that forcing people to confront their sexual desires would lead to the betterment of society.

Varda’s incorporation of Michael McClure’s 1965 play *The Beard* into *Lions Love* continues her interrogation of counterculture politics and sexual freedom.<sup>13</sup> The film begins with Viva, Jim, and Jerry attending a performance of the play in L.A. The play brings together Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow in paradise in a confrontation between two American pop culture icons--the cowboy and the movie goddess. On stage, we see the Kid as he takes off Harlow’s shoe and bites her foot. In dialogue laden with obscenities, the actress screams: “Oh, you dirty fucker! You dirty God damn son of a bitch...I think it’s bleeding.” Harlow examines her foot and yells: “You tore my stocking! You tore my stocking with your teeth! You tore my stocking with your rotten teeth!” The Kid replies:

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<sup>13</sup> In the mid-sixties, Andy Warhol actually did his own film version of McClure’s play entitled *Harlot*. McClure went to court to prevent the film’s release, eventually winning an injunction against the artist.

“Yeah, that’s divine!” Viva, Jim, and Jerry later return home and re-enact their own version of the play. When *The Beard* played fourteen nights in L.A. in 1965, invoking the wrath of California’s First Lady Nancy Reagan, the actors were slapped with fourteen counts of obscenity.

McClure’s own thoughts about the play reveal a carnivalesque subversion of sexual norms through excess: “I feel that the people who do not like the play are not so much frightened by the sexuality, but that gives them a handle. What threatens them is the statement that we are all divine—and how can we be divine and have a divine war in South Vietnam? How can we be divine and do the things that we’re doing? I think that’s frightening to some people” (qtd. in Smith 340). McClure proposed to eliminate the concept of pornography by helping his audiences confront the conventional sexual mores and replace them with another that found pleasure in actualization rather than deferral of sexual contact. McClure believed that social reform could only come about through a release of pent-up sexual energies. In his view, sexual repression in American society was more than symbolically linked to the government’s foreign policy of “containment” in Southeast Asia. According to McClure, Americans needed to confront the construction of sexual pleasure and identity in order to end the war in Vietnam and the Cold War mentality that had spawned it: “It’s the same area of sexual repression that keeps a person from using a ‘dirty’ word to describe an act of love that eventually causes a powerful, beautiful nation to coil up its hatred and deliver it in the form of bombs and napalm on an innocent, technologically incapable, small Oriental nation” (qtd. in Smith 340).

With its endless stream of obscenities and ritual defilement of the classical body, *The Beard* stood in direct opposition to Malraux's exalted ideas about theater. In sharp contrast to the minister's utopian ideals about the perfection of humanity through high culture, McClure believed that social reform could only come about by forcing Americans to confront their own sexual repression. By making *The Beard* a running subtext in her film, Varda advocates a cultural revolution aimed at the social and political establishment, an explicit and self-conscious rejection of Malraux's project of transcending capitalism through an exaltation of high art.

#### E. CONCLUSION

In *Lions Love*, Varda investigates the sexual politics of the hippie subculture, the superficiality and artificiality celebrated and perpetuated by Hollywood, and American low brow bad taste (through the lens of Warholian Pop art) as a means of exploring national identity and the French need to establish clear cultural and national boundaries between France and the United States, to distinguish itself from the low, popular forms of American culture. In each instance, the cultural products of American capitalism—the counterculture, Hollywood film, and Pop art--threatened to upset the borders that separated France from the U.S. She offers up the American countercultural scene as an alternative to the codes and norms of Gaullist France. As opposed to Malraux's cultural project that served as a universal corrective to American capitalism, she sheds light on how the Gaullist concept of French identity was dependent on the exclusion of base and degrading elements of American low culture, which were incompatible with the idea of France, and French citizens, as the guardians of the classical ideal.

Malraux, as the Minister of Cultural Affairs, was *the* center of cultural power in France, endowed with the authority to determine what defines “high” and “low” in French society. His ideas of art forms involved a belief that art must deal with the tragedy of existence and reveal the timeless truths of ages past. The artist bears responsibility of morally instructing his fellow man, increasing his spiritual and aesthetic awareness through the revelation of essential truths. Malraux’s cultural project meant cultivating an aesthetic of “pure taste” that, as Pierre Bourdieu argues, involves a rejection of the vulgar, the popular, the coarse, and the corporal.

The high discourses of French cultural critics, whether it be Malraux or Labin, are structured by the beliefs that Europeans inherited the classical tradition not only in the cultural realm, but that the classical ideals and values are manifest in certain European bodies. While Labin and the French press seemed to simply reject this symbolic foreign matter (e.g. hippies), they are in fact producing a sort of liminal space of hybridization where the self and other become intertwined. This is like Malraux who, in his attempts to unify and purify the social collectivity through the delineation of boundaries and the expulsion of low culture, in fact produced a new hybrid identity for France. As Stallybrass and White argue: “The classical body splits precisely along the rigid edge which is its defence against heterogeneity: its closure and purity are quite illusory and it will perpetually rediscover itself, often with a sense of shock or inner revulsion, the grotesque, the protean and the motley, the ‘neither/nor,’ the double negation of high and low which was the very precondition for its social identity” (113). Malraux’s idea of France was thoroughly constituted by the very objects to which he claimed French

culture was universally superior. His construction of French identity was absolutely dependent on the very objects he tried to dispel.

Clearly, Malraux was attempting to ward off a cultural shift in which more was at stake than artistic styles or movements. As Stallybrass and White assert, cultural identity is inseparable from its limits, and order is always organized around the figures of its territorial borders (200). Identities that traditionally defined the social and cultural world of modern societies—like gender, sexuality, and nationality—are in decline, giving rise to new forms of identification and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. De Gaulle needed to maintain the cohesion of French society (or the nationalistic idea of it) that was being pulled apart by the forces from which Pop art emerged. Malraux proposed a universalizing aesthetic humanism as a remedy to counter changes brought about by the rapidly emerging forces of globalization. Malraux's attempts to hold the country together, by appealing to the past and the classical ideal, were unsuccessful in a time when traditional centers of authority were collapsing along with the idea of the nation-state.

It is in this context that I read *Lions Love* as a rejection of hierarchy and domination. This rejection in turn enables the emergence of emancipatory ways of being and the very possibility of utopian expressions, underlying the carnivalesque spirit that the oppositional culture created and fostered. In *Lions Love*, Varda explored culture as a powerful weapon and sought to disarm the Gaullist administration that wielded it so forcefully in the name of French national identity.

Near the end of the film, Viva, dressed as a mermaid wearing only tights and a pink feather boa, and Jerry, clad in a cowboy outfit, reenact the scene from McClure's

play *The Beard* that began the film. However, instead of performing the scene in a theater before an adult audience, they perform in an empty swimming pool behind their house. The audience consists of a dozen prepubescent kids sitting at the pool's edge, passing around a joint as they watch the play.

VIVA: What's divine.

JERRY: Divine is free. Divinity is where you least expect to find it.

VIVA: But there's nobody here! And we're bags of meat.

JERRY: And you're a bag of fish.

Viva spits at him: Fish is health food. And fish is non-violent.

Jerry bites her toe and she screams.

VIVA: You tore my tail with your teeth. Your rotten buffalo teeth.

JERRY: That's divine! That's divine!

VIVA: My god! My god! There's going to be blood. My poor tail!

Jerry shoots Viva, and the play ends with Viva collapsing in his arms.

With this last shooting in the film, Varda references the other violent shootings that marked 1968: Robert Kennedy, Andy Warhol, Martin Luther King. In the play, however, Viva bounces back to life, and bows for the audience. The camera pans across the faces of the small children in the audience as they pass around a joint. Jim announces: "Kids! This was an aquatic remake of *The Beard* and a salute to Michael McClure who wrote the original one... We were honored to perform in front of you, the up and coming generation, the new audience, the future, the space-future, the space-children-future. You. You."

Engaging in the societal vices that Varda has appropriated in the film, like smoking pot and watching obscenity, these children represent the body in the process of transformation, of becoming. Varda transports her utopian ideals outside the boundaries of the proscenium, erasing the divide between actors and audience, as in carnival, "which is neither contemplated nor, strictly, performed; it is lived" (Bakhtin 78). Culture is

removed from the sacred cathedrals of Malraux's *Maisons de la Culture*, and becomes part of everyday life. Whether it be the works of Andy Warhol or the hippie life-style, Varda saw an active cultural engagement with consumer society that was more effective than the Gaullist attempts to ward off this culture by a retreat into the world of high art.

By incorporating the violence of 1968 into her film, she reveals the imperfections and equivocal nature of utopian society, including American state suppression of counterculture politics. Her celebration of the carnivalesque elements of American society is in no way idealistic or an idealization of the transgressive potential of these elements. Varda works to sustain the utopian imagination in the face of numerous setbacks and acts of violent aggression and repression—challenging the viewer to play with alternatives in order to break from the ideological framework that attempts to limit this very act of playing and imagining. Even in the face of a consumer capitalism that recuperates countercultural excess into commodities, the cultural battles continue in American pluralist society, juxtaposing a more participatory culture with Malraux's decrees from on high of what is important and progressive for the people.

Varda's America is a challenge to Malraux's modernist project and constructions of nationality and subjectivity. As Lawrence Grossberg points out, "a counter-modern politics has to contest the particular relations of identity and difference that have been constructed by, offered, and taken up in the modern" (93). While questioning these established values, she forces a reexamination of the function and purpose of art in industrial society and celebrates the possibilities of radical social change stemming from American counter- and underground cultural practices. *Lions Love* contests Malraux's desire to impose his moral authority upon the French populace and counters his efforts to

construct consensus through high art. But it also tweaks the longstanding French antipathy toward American culture in general, particularly as the film celebrates the counterculture and the deconstructionist impulses behind pop art. Throughout the post-World War II period and accelerating as the decades passed, there existed a palpable anxiety among the French about the potential contaminating effects of the exporting of Americanism. Varda asks French audiences to set aside that anxiety and to see beyond Malraux's dire warnings about how mass culture, rampant consumerism, and the trash culture of Hollywood would drag France down to the level of the United States. What is important about the counterculture ethos embodied in the threesome in *Lions Love* is not that their celebration of bad taste and free love could somehow be spread like a disease from American shores to Europe. Instead, Varda seeks to show how their rejection of American bourgeois values was truly radical and must not be dismissed out of hand.

## CHAPTER THREE: BLACK NATIONALISM AND AMERICAN MYTHOLOGIES

### A. INTRODUCTION

On May Day 1970, French playwright and novelist Jean Genet was part of a massive Black Panther rally on the New Haven Green. Genet had been in the U.S. for two months, crisscrossing the country speaking to college students in Los Angeles, Berkeley, New York, and Boston on behalf of the imprisoned Bobby Seale who had been arrested for his role in the kidnapping and murder of a fellow Black Panther, Alex Rackley, in New Haven. The local Panthers believed that Rackley was a police informant who had infiltrated the party, and the government accused Seale of ordering his murder. In his article, “I Must Begin with an Explanation of My Presence in the United States,” for *The Black Panther* newspaper, Genet explained why he had traveled from France to campaign on behalf of the Panthers: “You will say that I am mixing into America's affairs: the thing is that I am following America's own example of mixing into everybody else's business all over the world. After meddling with Korea she started in Vietnam, then Laos, and now Cambodia, and so I do so with America” (6, 19). Not only did his identification with the Panthers exceed national borders, it also transcended racial boundaries; as he confided to the German novelist Hubert Fichte, “Perhaps I’m a Black whose color is white or pink, but a Black” (126).

His tour of the U.S. was a call to action aimed at white American leftists: first, to become closer allies with the Black Panther Party, but also to learn to see blacks in a new

way; as Genet put it, white Americans would have to “provide a new dimension to politics—delicacy of heart...a delicacy in our relations with men who do not have the same rights as ourselves” (“ I Must Begin” 6). Whites must also, he urged, see, comprehend, and ultimately abandon their own privilege based on skin color. Only then could they be on equal footing with revolutionary blacks, as epitomized by the Black Panther Party. And only then could true revolution, the overthrow of the bourgeois order and the creation of a socialist state, occur.

Genet, who himself had spent time in prison, also took up the cause of George Jackson, an African American who had been in California’s maximum security prisons for a decade for allegedly stealing \$70 from a gas station. In the fall of 1970, Jackson published a collection of his prison letters and Genet wrote the introduction, a passionate homage to Jackson’s resiliency and anger, and a critique of the “extravagant adventure of white America, which is the victorious expansion of Victorian England.” He predicted, “it will dissolve and fade, revealing at last what is cheerfully devouring it: the black nation which was caught within it” (Jackson 335). Jackson’s letters are filled with analyses of white European capitalism and the exploitation and genocide of people of color around the world; the futility of Martin Luther King’s theory of nonviolence in an inherently violent country (“Just a cursory reading of history and just a glance about me now would show—that I could expect more mercy from a pack of Bengal tigers”); and the need for “true internationalism with other anticolonial peoples” (Jackson 223, 264).

In fact, Genet had argued many of the same points as he toured the U.S., devoting special attention to the hypocritical stance of white Americans to Black Panthers’ carrying guns. “It is fashionable to accuse the Black Panther Party of violence,” he told a

reporter for the underground *Los Angeles Free Press*, “but white Americans have been violent to blacks for over two hundred years. How do you expect the Panthers to react?” (Marshall 1). In a 1970 interview for the *New York Times*, he referred to the U.S. as a “brutal, violent country which has the gall, the nerve, to preach nonviolence to blacks” (Darnton 40). Genet’s 1970 speaking tour represents his efforts to tell the story of American history that diverged from the standard narrative through talking about the Panthers as claiming their American birthright of arming themselves. In other words, he was turning on its head America’s long tradition of gun culture by defending the Panthers’ defiant public display of machine guns and rifles—an act that made them quintessentially American in a nation where the first African Americans, slaves, were forbidden by law from owning guns. By pointing this out to white America, already sufficiently unnerved by images of Black Panther Party demonstrations, Genet was clouding the waters of what it meant to be a citizen and what the United States stood for.

In his 1970 May Day speech at the New Haven rally for Bobby Seale, Genet continued his questioning of American ideals and exclusionary notions of citizenship and urging white radicals to work toward freeing Seale. In an article for the *Black Panther* newspaper, Genet compared Seale’s situation to France’s Dreyfus Affair of the 1890s:

I have said that the American left, if it wants to be revolutionary has the possibility of performing real actions, with regard to Bobby Seale, in collaboration with the Black Panther Party. To refuse this, would be to accept here in the United States the outbreak of a kind of Dreyfus Affair. Perhaps still more damaging than the Dreyfus Affair in France and in Europe. It is time to decide whether the intellectuals are keeping quiet because Bobby Seale is guilty

or because he is Black and Chairman of the Black Panther Party, and if the intellectuals are afraid of the threats made by Agnew against those who help or encourage the Party. And everything, here, seems to indicate that we are turning away from Bobby Seale because he is Black, and in the same way that Dreyfus was guilty because he was a Jew. (16-17)

In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French Army, was arrested and imprisoned for allegedly providing military secrets to the Germans. He proclaimed his innocence, but nonetheless spent five years in jail. Foreign governments and many French intellectuals, most notably Emile Zola, urged his release from the notorious prison at Devil's Island. Dreyfus languished until 1899, however, and was not exonerated until 1906, by which time his case had become an international political cause on the left.

Although Genet saw similarities between Dreyfus and Seale, he was careful to note the limitations of comparing the two: "Naturally, this parallel with the Dreyfus Affair cannot be pursued point by point. And I must admit that up till now, in America, there has been no Clemenceau. no Jaures, and especially, among the intellectuals, no Zola to write "J'Accuse". A "J'Accuse" which would bear witness against the courts of your country and against the majority of Whites, who have remained racists" (17). His mission in the U.S. in 1970, as he saw it, was to raise the consciousness of white leftists, in particular college students, about their own role in a racist culture and the harm done by that culture to Bobby Seale and the Black Panthers. Just as the Dreyfus Affair called into question one of the fundamental mythologies of French nationhood—the republican principle of citizenship originating from universal “natural rights”—the Black Panthers

also forced white America to reconsider its own hypocritical and capricious definitions of citizenship and equality.

This chapter investigates myth and national identity, through Agnès Varda's documentary, *Black Panthers*, and Jean-Luc Godard's cinematic representations of the Panthers in *Sympathy for the Devil* (a more commercialized version, which Godard detested, of his original film, *One + One*) and *One A.M.* The Panthers' struggles against their own government's racism at home and abroad captured the imagination of white student radicals in the U.S. and in France. But they also captured the imagination of French artists and intellectuals who, in their work with the Panthers and their cultural representations of them, revealed as much about French leftists and their revolutionary aspirations as they did about American foreign and domestic policies.

In this chapter I draw from Homi Bhabha's idea of the nation as narrative, not simply a geographically bounded territory composed of people whose citizenship is conferred by birth or naturalization. For Bhabha, the nation-space is "a process of the articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial because they are *in medias res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of 'composing' its powerful image" ("Introduction" 3). The nation is not simply a space to which citizens belong; the people actually constitute and perform the nation. By focusing on performativity, Bhabha opens up the fissures within the national narrative, in which dominant stories and myths of the nation can be disrupted. Within the all-encompassing borders of the national mythology, minority discourses reveal "heterogenous histories of

contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations” (“DissemiNation” 299).

In the late 1960s, the liberation movements coupled with American intervention in Vietnam caught the United States in the act of composing its image. The U.S. had entered the fray in Indochina after the French retreat in 1954, in the name of containing Communism and defending the West against a global enemy. Americans stayed for years even after it became clear that victory would be impossible. The guiding principles that led the country to war and occupation in the first place and explained its stubborn refusal to admit failure were based on self-delusion: the narrative of American exceptionalism, the frontier ethos of expansion and benevolent enlightenment to inferior “others,” and the myth of American innocence. By the late 1960s, however, the U.S. was caught in its self-deception for the rest of the world to see. At the same time, a rising chorus of black power at home exposed the lie of American “freedom” and “democracy” by connecting the colonization of blacks inside the United States to the colonization of the Vietnamese people by the same government.

In this chapter I argue that by the 1960s we can see a growing tendency at least among industrial nations to appropriate and recontextualize the histories of foreign countries like Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba, appropriating these experiences to arrive at a new understanding of themselves and America in the world. By borrowing from and transforming the characteristics and “stories” of other national histories as well as challenging mythologies of America, the Black Panthers crafted a counterstrategy to the exclusionary boundaries of American citizenship. Since film contributes significantly to the shaping of public perceptions of the past, which are crucial to the formations of

national identity, I examine how the filmmakers challenge the dominant ideologies of the nation that create and sustain America, in particular sites of conflict. As film historians Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie argue, “Films...do not simply represent or express the stable features of a national culture, but are themselves one of the loci of debates about a nation’s governing principles, goals, heritage and history” (4). I will also answer the following questions: How are national images used and understood by different populations? Can national images be contestatory? How do they change over time and as a result of their remobilization and reworking in other cultures?

#### B. Varda, the Black Panthers, and Frontier Mythology

In Varda’s documentary *Black Panthers*, the director documents how the Black Panthers understand their national identity and differentiate themselves from white America. She also shows how this minority group disengages from the national collective, reject traditional American mythologies, and offer alternative versions of what it means to be an American. According to cultural historian Anatol Lieven, the frontier left an indelible imprint on the American character: “A history of exceptionally ferocious warfare, often amounting to genocide, in which both sides committed appalling atrocities,” became part of the American tradition—both “a capacity for ruthlessness and a taste for absolute and unqualified victory of the kind which was in the end won over all the indigenous adversaries of White America” (100). The nation was built upon an ethos of expansionism, an ongoing and urgent desire to acquire land and natural resources. The destruction of native peoples and animals as well as the physical environment has been well documented, as have the accompanying tenacious self-told narratives of “progress,”

“civilization,” and “manifest destiny.” For most Americans, and throughout much of the nation’s history, fantasy has won out over reality; it has proven more palatable for Americans to tell themselves that their conquest of a 3,000-mile-long swath of North America was a noble and worthy accomplishment. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, critics such as Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers exploded these myths as part of their global critique of white, European imperialism in general and the particularly brutal nature of race-based genocide and oppression in the United States.

Varda’s documentary *Black Panthers* captures this historical moment through the lens of a 1968 rally on behalf of Panthers co-founder Huey P. Newton. The director, through editing and through her choices of certain segments of speeches to include in her film, challenges frontier mythology by allowing the Panthers to articulate their critiques in their own words. The film begins with several Black Panthers standing motionless on the steps of the Alameda County Courthouse, holding “Free Huey” flags. One Panther explains that that they are there to protest the incarceration of Huey Newton, who had been jailed for allegedly shooting a police officer. Next Varda moves to the funeral of Bobby Hutton, a seventeen-year-old member of the Black Panthers who was killed in the same shootout with Oakland police. His pallbearers are all Panthers; Varda shows their procession out of the church, where a large crowd had gathered in grief and in anger at yet another black victim of police violence. Then follows a cut to a modest middle-class house, which from all outward appearances looks like a typical postwar suburban dwelling—including a white fence and flowers growing on a trellis by the front porch. Inside, however, it becomes clear that the house has been the site of a gun battle. The

camera pans the bullet-riddled interior walls of the house where Hutton was shot, and then zooms in on graffiti on the wall asking: "Is Vietnam like this?"

With this seemingly simple series of shots, Varda represents a central theme in the Panthers' critique of American imperialism and violence. Newton, Seale, Carmichael, and others regularly compared the position of African Americans as colonized subjects in their own country to the people of Vietnam, who for centuries fought off colonizers, from the Chinese to the French to the Americans. The Panthers identified with the Vietnamese struggle for independence, and the parallels they drew showed an astute grasp of the functions of political and economic power. In Varda's documentary, Newton says that "the Vietnamese people realize that they must handle first things first. First they must drive the oppressor out and then they can institute institutions that will be for the benefit of the people." Later, Newton compares the Oakland police department to a foreign invader: "One of the chief goals of the Black Panthers is to drive this foreign troop out so that we will have the right to determine our own destiny." Anne McClintock defines colonialism as "direct territorial appropriation of another geo-political entity, combined with forthright exploitation of its resources and labor, and systematic interference in the capacity of the appropriated culture to organize its dispensations of power" (88). Internal colonization, according to McClintock, "occurs where the dominant part of a country treats a group or region as it might a foreign colony" (88). As early as 1967, Stokely Carmichael (who later adopted an African name, Kwame Touré) and Charles V. Hamilton articulated a theory of power relations that clearly qualifies the history of people of African descent in the United States as a colonial one. Even after the end of slavery, many African Americans lived in geographically segregated areas, economically

and politically controlled by white local and state power structures. As a group, they had neither emerged as an independent nation-state nor become fully politically and economically integrated within the government that colonized them—either of which might qualify as "post independence." As such, the Panthers saw themselves in the process of liberation, defending themselves against a much more powerful government that was bent on their destruction.

The film then moves to Bobby Seale speaking at the Free Huey rally, explaining to the audience the Panthers' founding ideals in their struggle against what McClintock calls "internal colonization." Huey, he reminded them, demanded basic rights and participation in some of the most basic civic pursuits. He wanted to teach black people to read. He wanted them to be safe from state-sanctioned violence. As Seale put it, Huey chose a simple message; he didn't want to go "all elaborate" with "dissertations and essays," because it would not appeal to the average black person. Seale then outlines the Black Panther Party's ten-point platform: blacks should have the power to control the destiny of their community; full legal equality; decent housing; they should be exempt from all military service; they should receive a quality education that teaches them the truth about the racist history of the U.S.; an end to white control of businesses in black neighborhoods; the immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people; the release of all black prisoners, none of whom had received a fair trial because they'd been tried by all-white juries; the right for black suspects to be tried by all-black juries; and finally, justice and peace.

Varda then moves from the Panthers' local concerns to international ones. Her camera lingers on Stokely Carmichael: "And so in talking about Brother Huey Newton

tonight we have to talk about the struggle of black people not only in the United States but in the world today and how he becomes part and parcel of that struggle and how we move on so that our people will survive America.” As Benedict Anderson argues, communities are by necessity limited by geographical restrictions, “because even the largest of them . . . has finite, if elastic, boundaries. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind” (7). Just as national identity involves the inclusion of certain peoples within a marked geographical terrain, it also entails the exclusion of people outside of particular national parameters. The frontier is a crucial element of America’s understanding of itself, for the frontier was part of the American mission; it allowed for the constant regeneration of American ideals without regard to boundaries. And it was dependent upon the removal and isolation of indigenous peoples as well as an economic system of African slavery. As Anatole Lieven points out, a messianic view of the nation, that the country has a responsibility to save the world by perpetuating its ideals around the globe, prevents most Americans from viewing their own nation as “a country among others or an ‘international community’ that includes America as a member rather than a hegemon” (63).

An editorial published in *Nhan Dan*, the official Communist Party newspaper of North Vietnam, linked the Vietnamese struggle with that of American blacks: “The Vietnamese people, who are now opposing the American imperialist aggressors with arms, consider the black people of the United States in the struggle for their emancipation as their natural companions in arms and allies. The more the Nixon group develops its aggression in Indochina, the more it develops its repression and terror against the black people and the forces of peace and progress in America. It sheds the blood of young

blacks in Indochina while their compatriots have need of their arms and their brains to engage the struggle in the U.S.A.” (“Cleaver and Black Panther Group” 13).

Acknowledging the plight of African Americans as part of the world revolutionary movement, the North Vietnamese government even organized a special event—“an international day of solidarity with the black people of the United States”—attended in Hanoi by Eldridge Cleaver, Elaine Brown, and other members of the Black Panther Party.

The conquering and virtual eradication of Native Americans is one of the cultural fictions that have been crucial to the founding myth of the United States. Stokely Carmichael understood that, and at the rally for Huey Newton, captured in Varda’s *Black Panthers*, he claimed, “Many people think they’re about to commit genocide against us. It’s a horrible thing to say, but as Malcolm X says, we must examine history. The birth of this nation was conceived in the genocide of the red man. In order for this country to come about, the honky had to completely exterminate the red man and he did it! And he did it where he does not even feel sorry but he romanticizes it by putting it on television with cowboys and Indians! If you do not think he is not capable of committing genocide against us, check out what he’s doing to our brothers in Vietnam!” Carmichael was challenging the beliefs and values that constitute the American creed, employing Fanon’s strategy of “us[ing] the past with the intention of opening up the future” (232).

Carmichael deconstructs Bhabha’s “Janus-faced discourse of the nation”—disputing the writing of an American identity rooted in a past that it has also paradoxically erased. He not only reaches across international boundaries to create a new identity, but also back into America’s past to identify with other subjects of American aggression and violence, whose history was also erased in the creation of an idealistically

mythological national identity. By selecting this particular footage and these particular words from an event that featured numerous speakers and went on for several hours, Varda highlights the Panthers' internationalist consciousness and agenda.

Tied up in the frontier mythology is the idea of American innocence, a founding mythology rooted in the early settlers' view of the original American colony as a "City on a Hill" and a "New Jerusalem," consecrated by God as a beacon of light for the rest of the world. This idea originated from the early French observer, Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, who saw America as Rousseau's primitive wilderness that would craft a "New Man" purged of his European self (40-44). Such a break with Europe, therefore, ostensibly absolved and dissociated the new Americans with the crimes of the father. Conquering Indians wasn't European imperialism; it was a purging of the obstacles that stood in the way of America's manifest destiny to spread its ideals across an entire continent.

These mythologies also were frequently invoked to justify American military incursions into other countries. The Black Panthers challenged the moral supremacy of America at a time of heightened nationalism during the Vietnam war, criticizing the imperialist impulse behind U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. But they did more than that; they also refused to go to war. Service in the military, especially during wartime, has long been a hallmark of citizenship, as it has in many cultures. But during the Vietnam era, dissent was tantamount to anti-Americanism. The Panthers were not alone in resisting military service, but their refusal rankled, in part because they were so outspoken in their explanation (patriotic white Americans did not want to hear them

asking why they should fight for a racist government killing people of color), but also because the Black Panthers took up arms for their own self-defense.

As Lieven points out, the frontier also gave rise to the “cult of personal weaponry”—the “belief that every man had the right to defend his personal and familial honor” (101). Hollywood’s western genre played out this theme, endlessly replaying it for generations of American audiences. But when Newton, Seale, and the Panthers openly encouraged blacks to carry guns and patrol their own communities, to neutralize the power of police to intimidate and harass, they hit a raw nerve in white America: what was more terrifying than a group of black men wielding machine guns in public? But they adopted a quintessentially American position on the much-beloved constitutional right to bear arms and used it to demand an end to what they saw as police occupation of their communities—and likened it to a foreign army occupying a territory.

In this context, Varda chooses to show in her documentary, after Seale is shown talking about the importance of armed self-defense, a group of white people (including a young boy) firing guns at a shooting range and talking about their own need to arm themselves against the “savages” of California. As it turns out, some of these white shooters are members of the John Birch Society, the right-wing anticommunist group founded in the late 1950s and increasingly popular at the grassroots level during the 1960s. While Varda shows this all-American group of middle-class whites taking target practice, we hear one of the Birchers in a voiceover: “I think the people should be prepared. I think every person today, under our Constitution, has the right to bear arms for his own protection. And he should be prepared and should have a gun and know how to shoot and be able to shoot straight and shoot to kill if necessary.” In the American

frontier myth, these golden faces represent the pioneers, who come bearing the accoutrements of civilization to a hinterland filled with untold dangers, not the least of which are the inferior people of color who were there first or who are now sharing the new land. In this instance, Varda plays on the trope of violence—particularly gun violence—as a means of protecting and defending the very foundations of civilization in order to “bring the settled moral order of law and democratic government” to a wild and savage place (Sardar and Davies 47). Her juxtaposition of this scene with the one before, in which the Black Panthers employ almost identical language to justify their own use of guns, exposes the hypocrisy not only of the frontier myth itself but also of whites’ vilification of the Black Panther Party for taking up arms.

It is Varda’s editing that reveals her interpretation and understanding of the Black Panther Party, its place in American culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and its defiant challenge to the national mythology. Of all the footage she shot—the Huey Newton demonstration, white Californians at a shooting range and a political meeting, a prison interview with Newton—she selected a half an hour of words and images that lingered on notions of violence, genocide, and the ethos of the frontier, forcing the viewer to remember an American past that is intertwined with the devastating intrusions of the U.S. in Southeast Asia. As Homi Bhabha has argued, national identity is partly founded on forgetting. For people to figuratively unite around some shared past and common set of values, the narrative that binds them together must by necessity be selective, adaptive, and incomplete, and the people themselves “obliged to forget” (*Location* 161). The nation is not simply a space to which citizens belong; the people actually constitute and perform the nation. By focusing on performativity, Bhabha opens up the fissures within the

national narrative, in which dominant stories and myths of the nation can be disrupted. Within the all-encompassing borders of the national mythology, minority discourses reveal “heterogenous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations” (148).

In Varda’s *Black Panthers*, the minority discourse of the black power group shatters any feel-good illusions of manifest destiny and tells a different story of the nation’s history. The Black Panther Party did as much as any other radical group of the day to point out, repeatedly, that America was an imperialist power, despite its protestations to the contrary. As Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease argue, “the diplomatic history of U.S. imperialism from academic study of the national culture” has allowed “imperialism to go unrecognized as an American way of life” (19). This national myth of American innocence is engrained in the American psyche, the idea that the U.S. is a benevolent country that has been thrust into a position of superpower/police without seeking it, that it is the reluctant nation dragged into conflicts started by others.

The Black Panthers, and other black nationalists and pan-Africanists, dragged this idea of innocence out of the collective (white) American subconscious and laid out the hypocrisy and deceit inherent in the myth, forcing people to acknowledge the long history and current reality of their own nation’s imperialism abroad and colonization of black Americans at home. Similarly, activists opposing the U.S. war in Southeast Asia framed it as yet another example of the United States imposing its will on people of color in third world countries. Varda’s *Black Panthers* highlights the group’s ideological and activist focus on exposing the truth about American expansionism.

### C. Nation and Myth in Jean-Luc Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil*

At the 1968 London Film Festival, Jean-Luc Godard debuted his film *Sympathy for the Devil* after a screening of Agnès Varda's documentary on the Black Panthers. Taking the stage, the director explained the structure of the film: "This is a film about language about the language of blacks and whites, because they don't use the same dictionaries" (Merrill 134). Here, Godard's description of the "foreignness" of languages is similar to Homi Bhabha's theories about colonial discourse, about the *vox populi* of the "colonial, postcolonial, migrant, minorities: wandering peoples who will not be contained within the *Heim* of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation" ("DissemiNation" 315). In *Sympathy for the Devil*, Godard creates a world in which black militants, as the "inner colonized," from the margins of society disrupt the dominant discourse of the nation and thus defamiliarize the inherited narratives of America.

For the movie, Godard filmed the revolutionary musings and activities of a fictionalized group of Black Panthers, set in a junkyard in England, and interspersed it with footage of the Rolling Stones recording what would become one of their best-known songs, "Sympathy for the Devil," a dark, sprawling homage to violence and mayhem. The film is a jumble of images and sounds, with no fixed narrative structure, precisely because Godard seeks to fracture the seamless techniques by which national mythologies

are produced, capturing them in the process of creation and composition. In particular, Godard focuses on two pervasive myths in American culture: the captivity narrative and the fantasy of the hypersexual black male. As cultural theorists have argued, mythology and memory, stories and histories convey meaning and identity to nations; they are the means by which individuals understand themselves and their nation. It matters little that the narratives and stories bear any resemblance to truth or to what “really” happened, because it is the stories themselves that constitute identity. In *Sympathy for the Devil* Godard brings these two narratives together in order to challenge the mythology of American innocence and to throw light on the hypocrisy and deception of various American narratives—most importantly manifest destiny and benevolent, paternalistic slavery—by turning these benign delusions on their head, showing modern-day black radicals wielding their violent sexual anger against white women.

Captivity narratives traveled with the British to the New World in the seventeenth century, and remained a popular literary genre for centuries. Though individual stories differed over time and place, some common themes existed in virtually all of them. In general, the story entailed civilized white Europeans being kidnapped by Indians and taken away from their own people and into an utterly foreign and primitive world. The Puritans, for example, commonly described the encounter in terms of lost innocence and confrontation with the devil. Here the protagonist suffered emotional and physical pain and deprivation; struggled to maintain his or her cultural identity and resist assimilation; reached a new understanding of suffering and oppression and experienced a concomitant burst of spiritual growth; and in most cases was returned after a time to “civilization,” although escape and adoption into the tribe also occurred. For women captives, taken in

far greater numbers than men, the narrative always included an undercurrent of anxiety about rape or “forced marriage.” Scholars have tended to view these narratives as both propaganda in support of westward expansion and as conflicted and contested elements of American identity—a sort of ambivalence about the dichotomy between savagery and civilization.

Another founding American myth employed by Godard in *Sympathy for the Devil* is that of black sexuality. Like the captivity narrative, this myth came to America from England, transported to the American colonies with the first African slaves in 1619. For more than two centuries, one of the most frequently invoked justifications for enslaving blacks was their inherent inferiority, often expressed in animalistic, sexualized terms (Jordan 37 – 40). When applied to women, it was used to justify white slaveholders’ sexual abuse; when applied to men, it was almost uniformly (and, over time, increasingly) told and retold to engender fear. After emancipation, a “new language of sexualized politics” took shape, in which the political rights of black men were equated with sexual access to white women; now, even more so than during the antebellum period, the “political and sexual perils of racial equality” became central to white supremacist thought (Hodes 172-73). Beginning in the late nineteenth century and persisting into the twentieth, whites maintained political and economic power in part by claiming that black men’s predatory sexuality and desire for white women threatened the purity of the white race and the integrity of the nation. During the post-World War II civil rights movement, opposition to the integration of schools and public accommodations frequently took the form of strident condemnations of race mixing. The specter of the black rapist loomed as large as it had a century earlier. But by the late 1960s, as sexuality

became politicized through feminism, gay liberation, and other social movements, some black radicals began reclaiming and redefining the myth (and in the process imbued it with a new empowering meaning—one that was in turn criticized by both black and white feminists as misogynistic).

In *Sympathy for the Devil* Godard uses both the captivity narrative and the myth of black sexuality, sometimes simultaneously, again, for the purposes of exploding the myth of American innocence. After opening with the Rolling Stones' recording session, Godard cuts to the junkyard. A black militant opens a metal gate and a red Mini Cooper enters. Three white women get out, all clad in white sleeping gowns. A black man angrily motions to them with his rifle. Heads lowered, they slowly walk across the paved brickyard as the man follows, his gun aimed at them the entire time. In the junkyard, a man is leaning out of a car reading a script while another man holding a tape recorder repeats what he says: "There is no love left between a black man and a black woman. Take me, for instance. I love white women and hate black women. It's just in me, so deep that I don't even try to get it out of me any more. I'd jump over ten nigger bitches just to get to one white woman."

He interrupts his reading to tell one of the women to get down on the ground. The first man forces the other two women along at gunpoint, then orders one to lie facedown in the back of a broken down car. The second woman is forced into the back of yet another rundown car, while the third lies prostrate on the ground. As the militant continues reading from the book, another man caresses the woman's body. The camera returns to the reader: "It's not just the fact that she's a woman that I love; I love her skin, her soft, smooth, white skin. I like to just lick her white skin as if sweet, fresh honey

flows from her pores, and just to touch her long, soft, silky hair. There's a softness about a white woman, something delicate and soft inside her. But a nigger bitch seems to be full of steel, granite-hard and resisting, not soft and submissive like a white woman. Ain't nothing more beautiful than a white woman's hair being blown by the wind."

The passages are taken from *Soul on Ice*, the 1968 collection of essays by the Black Panthers' minister of communication, Eldridge Cleaver. The book was received warmly by *The Nation*--whose reviewer called it "beautifully written" (Mayfield 638)--and sent shockwaves among white radicals (though it was excoriated by James Baldwin, who criticized Cleaver's vicious homophobia). In addition to critiquing imperialist white American culture, Cleaver argued that rape—and in particular the rape of white women by black men—was "an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values" (*Soul* 14). Growing up black in the U.S., Cleaver well knew the social proscriptions against interracial sex, specifically between black men and white women. He was familiar with the longstanding admonitions against "contamination," "mongrelization," and "race mixing." Through anti-miscegenation laws as well as de facto prohibitions (often enforced by lynching and other forms of violence), white America attempted to maintain the so-called purity of its population.

In *Sympathy for the Devil*, Godard carries this theme one step further by equating white America's racist desires to maintain the purity of the race and the nation with the Nazis' Final Solution. In an interview with film critic Guy Flatley in the *New York Times*, Godard likened the American government's treatment of the Black Panthers to the Holocaust: "I respect the people in America who are dedicating their lives to changing

things. I feel a comradeship for all the people who are jailed and shot by the FBI, whether white or black. What the United States is doing to the Black Panthers is what the Nazis were doing to the Jews and what the Israeli government is doing to the Palestinian people” (103). Although this is a spurious and overwrought analogy, it is worth noting because it speaks to the ways in which nations create and maintain a sense of national belonging through the exclusion of the Other.

In *Sympathy for the Devil*, Godard couples the black militant/white woman captivity narratives with Nazi calls for racial and national purity. In one scene, the camera pans across the shelves of a newsstand brimming with girlie magazines (*Playboy* knockoffs such as *Ace*), pulp novels, men’s adventure magazines featuring scenes of sexualized violence on their covers, and the viewer hears a voiceover of Hitler’s words from *Mein Kampf*: “The stronger must dominate and not mate with the weaker, which would signify the sacrifice of its own higher nature. . . . All the great civilizations of the past became decadent because the originally creative race died out, as a result of contamination of the blood.” Cutting between the newsstand and the junkyard where the black militants are committing violence against white women, Godard asks the audience to ponder the similarities between Nazi and white American constructions of racial purity. Thus, at the same time Godard is commenting on America’s split personality (its popular culture infused with sexualized violence coexisting with a Victorian primness and shame condemning it), he is also linking Hitler’s ideas about manhood and the nation back to white fears of race mixing that led to a full-scale assault by police and the FBI against the Black Panthers in the late 1960s.

After Godard finished making the film, he ran into trouble with the producer, Ian Quarrier, who wanted to replace Godard's incomplete and ambiguous ending with a more commercially accessible one. In particular, Quarrier demanded that the film end with a complete performance of the Rolling Stones' song from which the movie's title came. Godard protested unsuccessfully. He had intended to keep the song incomplete, unfinished, and open-ended—like the revolution itself, like the American narrative, not yet resolved. But now, the polished and complete version as opposed to what the viewer has seen earlier (nearly fifty minutes of writing, fits and starts, and rehearsing different variations) seems to negate the very essence of the film, which was to leave all of the themes unresolved. This decision by Quarrier also must have irritated Godard because it represented a calculated, almost crass attempt to reach out to an audience that would consume anything bearing the product's familiar and beloved name, in this instance the consumer product called the Rolling Stones and the commercialization of revolution in one of their most popular songs. Godard was so upset, in fact, that at the 1968 London Film Festival, he stood up after Varda's *Black Panthers* and just before *Sympathy for the Devil* was to be shown and encouraged the audience to demand their money back for his film and instead donate it to the Black Panther Party. Taken aback, some asked why they could not do both—see his film and give money to the Panthers. In a fit of pique and frustration, the director stormed out of the theater, but not before shouting, “You're all fascists!” and punching Quarrier in his face (Merrill 138).

The ending that Godard hated gave his film a closure that the director found patently false, and his feeling of betrayal speaks to Bhabha's ideas about narratives and national identity. Bhabha sees the use of narrative through culture in the formation of

national identity as a process that can be used to unify an imagined nation (as in the case of founding myths of America) but that can also be used for the opposite purpose, which is to illuminate those groups, histories, and cultures on the margins. As he writes, “the nation, as a form of cultural elaboration, is an agency of ambivalent narration that holds culture at its most productive position, as a force of subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing, guiding” (“Introduction” 7). Godard’s film was intentionally fragmented, intentionally unfinished. He wanted to subvert narrative forms in order to challenge American narratives of benevolent imperialism at home and, by extension, abroad.

#### D. Revolution and Identity in Godard’s *One A.M.* (or Pennebaker’s *One P.M.*)

D. A. Pennebaker, the American documentary filmmaker who had made two acclaimed films in the late 1960s, *Don’t Look Back* (1967) and *Monterey Pop* (1968) accepted Godard’s invitation in late 1968 to collaborate on something he was calling *One A.M.* (*One American Movie*). According to Pennebaker, Godard was “convinced that America was about to burst into revolution like the student uprisings in France in 1968. He kept saying we have to hurry and get to California because this is where it is going to begin. I asked, ‘What was going to begin?’ ‘The revolution you fool,’ he told me” (Phillips par. 21). Although Pennebaker didn’t take much stock in his friend’s prediction, he said yes to the project. They interviewed Tom Hayden and Eldridge Cleaver, among others. (Cleaver had just published *Soul on Ice* and received a hefty payment from the filmmakers for the interview.) But, in Pennebaker’s words, “towards the end, when [Godard] realized that he misjudged everything, he lost interest in the film and abandoned

it,” while he was left to finish it on his own (Phillips par. 22). He changed the title to *One P.M.* or *One Parallel Movie* (which Godard wryly referred to as *One Pennebaker Movie*). Although Godard disavowed his own aborted attempt at capturing the revolution as it unfolded, Pennebaker noted that the film succeeded in offering “a sense of the strange mood in America at that time. It was very peculiar because it wasn't just Jean-Luc, there were numbers of people who did think something was going to erupt in America. Nixon was right to be paranoid” (Phillips par. 24).

In a 1970 interview with Kent E. Carroll for the *Evergreen Review*, Godard explained his decision to abandon the film. After viewing the rushes, he recalled, “I had thought we could do two or three days’ editing and finish it, but not at all. It is two years old and completely of a different period. When we shot that I was thinking like a bourgeois artist, that I could just go and do interviews with people like Eldridge Cleaver and Tom Hayden. But I was wrong. And Tom Hayden was wrong to allow me to do that because it was just moviemaking, not political action. When we were in Berkeley I talked to Tom and apologized and told him I thought he was wrong. But Cleaver was correct. We paid him a thousand dollars and for him to take that money was correct. His was a political decision—he needed the money to escape America” (62). And so he did, fleeing to Mexico and then Algeria, the former French colony, where he later claimed to have received a regular stipend from the government of North Vietnam.

Pennebaker’s completed version consisted mostly of footage from three interviews—with Tom Hayden, Eldridge Cleaver, and corporate attorney Paula Madder—as well as images detailing the making of the film. In the opening scene we see

two African American schoolgirls singing along with a tape recorder and skipping through a gritty railroad yard. This is followed by a cut to a Native American (played by actor Rip Torn) clad in an elaborate headdress of colorful feathers, also holding a tape recorder. He walks near a rushing waterfall in the woods; the contrast between the decaying industrial city and pristine, bucolic nature is stark. The Indian begins playing the tape recorder and we hear Tom Hayden speaking about American imperialism and the genocidal nature of white resistance to black struggles for justice. After a few sentences, the Indian stops and repeats verbatim what he has just heard on the tape: “Counter-revolution. It’s important to fight back. That’s why the victory of Vietnam over the United States is so important.” The Indian speaks the same words, only much louder. “The lesson to teach is that he cannot win, he cannot suppress blacks, no matter how hard he tries. He cannot destroy the Vietnamese, the Chinese, because it will mean his own destruction.” As Colin MacCabe writes in *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy*, “This determination to ‘decompose and recompose,’ to take both himself and the audience back to zero where everything is constructed and nothing is available for direct inspection, is a constant of the period” (215). Moreover, the figure of the Native American would have been instantly recognizable to audiences in 1968, a symbol of the extreme ends of American capitalism, expansionism, and violence: genocide.

After a lengthy soliloquy from Tom Hayden in the backyard of his upper-middle-class Chicago home, the film shifts to Eldridge Cleaver. He strikes a match, lights a cigarette, and begins discussing the Black Panthers’ general mistrust of people pointing cameras in their faces: “We’ve begun to hate filmmakers around here because we’ve had bad experiences with them you see.” Godard asks why the group doesn’t make its own

films, and Cleaver replies, “Because we don’t have time. The situation is so immediate we’d rather shoot it with guns.” He claims that they no longer want to talk with news media, and he even acts wary about Godard’s intentions, warning him, “We’ll see how we come out on this film” and referring to the director as part of a “film mafia” that has been one of many sources of misinformation and intentional distortion of the Black Panther Party—in his view, yet another expression of “ethnic imperialism over black communities.”

In *Framing the Black Panthers*, cultural historian Jane Rhodes explores the relationship between the Panthers and the media. Despite Cleaver’s protests to the contrary, Rhodes sees the group as adept at exploiting media coverage, through what were often provocative public appearances, press conferences, and photo ops. She also makes the case that the mass media actually assisted the police and the government in their crackdown against the Black Panthers while at the same time turning them into celebrities, and even into folk heroes whose iconic images have long outlived the organization itself. As she writes, the Panthers “consciously relied on the press for salience and visibility, and they carefully crafted visual and rhetorical material to be disseminated for public consumption. The press shaped stories about the Black Panthers to fit the organization, practices, and constraints of media institutions and the ideologies of government and law enforcement” (97). For the purposes of this study, however, it is also important to note the role of the media (including Godard’s and Varda’s films) in forging a new American myth—the myth of the Black Panther. While there are numerous interpretations of that myth, it is an enduring one, and it speaks to the mythmaking power of television, film, and images.

One way that Godard explores these myths in *One A.M.* is by showing an extensive interview with Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther leader and author of the bestselling and controversial book *Soul On Ice*. The room in which Cleaver gives the interview is decorated with posters of Huey Newton and Malcolm X. He discusses Huey Newton's likening the oppression of African Americans to an occupying army in a colonized land: "When Huey Newton studied Frantz Fanon and the Algerian situation, after studying Marx, Lenin, Mao, and other revolutionaries, he was able to clearly identify the local police department as the counterpart to the occupying army of the French. From studying the Algerian situation, it was clear that the colonial regime/administration was without any power, without any force, to compel the Algerian people to submit to its dictates. But because the administrators were backed up by organized guns and the force of the French army, the administrators were able to get away with what they were doing." Cleaver takes the analogy further, arguing that the black community has also turned into a market and a source for cheap labor. But, he cautions, "We can't use the same terminology used to describe the situation in Algeria, we have to talk about community imperialism, ethnic imperialism, how those in the white community exercise a form of imperialism over the black community. Businessmen, politicians, and Gestapo, they work hand in hand with the black bourgeoisie—lawyers, doctors, teachers, professional people who belong to the political parties of the mother country and carry out their political programs in the colony."

Cleaver's reference to Fanon influence upon the Black Panthers is important. In *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon accurately predicted the ascendancy of the United States as an immensely powerful nation with a vast global reach. And, despite the

country's appearance of spurning colonialism *per se*, Fanon viewed the U.S. as a monstrous offspring of European colonialism "in which the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions" (313). For many leftists, Fanon's work offered more than a theoretical framework for revolution; it also provided practical insights into radical political confrontation with the oppressive tools of the state. Perhaps most appealing to black radicals in the U.S., Fanon paid special attention (particularly in his 1959 book, *A Dying Colonialism*) to the role of Algerians in resisting French occupation and thereby transforming and claiming a new national identity.

*One A.M.* was intended to examine various forms of resistance and revolution in America, but when Pennebaker finished it, it also became about how Godard approached and framed his subjects, which is most apparent in the scene near the end of the film in which Torn, dressed as a Confederate officer, speaks to a group of junior high or high school students in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn, which was now two years into an increasingly volatile battle between black advocates of community control and the largely white teachers' union. Before cutting to the school, Godard shows an office building overlooking the bustling avenues of New York's financial district; inside, a woman sits behind her desk, answering Godard's questions. "You can't separate the economic from the social factors in the development of a country. Business is too easily dismissed as an evil, when business could play a key role in the development of social progress," she intones.

Next we see the classroom scene. The students, all African-American, giggle as Torn takes his place in front of the blackboard. Godard sits in the back of the room, and two cameramen capture the action. Torn begins his performance, repeating the words of

the Wall Street businesswoman from the previous scene. “I am a woman. I work on Wall Street lending money. You know, where people lend money to make money?” From the back of the room, Godard instructs Torn to walk around the room. The actor ambles past a row of bemused students: “I have this very strong idea that business is going to be the most important thing to develop the underdeveloped countries, and I think that we’re underdeveloped right here in our country. So I’m going to take my business techniques that I learned on Wall Street and I’m going to develop you.” The camera pans around the room, capturing the students’ amused yet bewildered faces.

Again Godard intervenes, instructing Torn to remind the students that they should not take his words to heart because he might be lying. Torn challenges the students to interrogate and debate him. The actor draws attention to his uniform as a symbol of slavery, proclaiming: “People are still wearing this uniform today, aren’t they?” One girl yells out, “They don’t have to!,” implying that racism takes on new, more insidious forms in contemporary society. Torn then admonishes the students for not throwing something at him when he came into the room.

This prompts a young girl to criticize his assumption about black violence as well as the media’s representation of black youth in the city: “What the papers are trying to do is trying to make the other people in the community think we are militant so that they’ll then oppose decentralization...But we’re not militants.” Indeed, the city’s newspapers had been detailing the racially tinged battles over decentralization, and there had recently been several major flare-ups at Junior High School 271. The day after Martin Luther King’s assassination, for instance, black students had vandalized classrooms and attacked white teachers. Coverage of such incidents inevitably played

into white fears of chaos and violence within the black community, and clearly this in turn was not lost on black students themselves. Next, the camera pans across the classroom to show Godard pacing silently down an aisle. He points to the American flag on the front wall, and the cameraman tilts his camera up flag's red and white stripes. When Torn asks why the girl isn't militant, she replies, "Because we're just fighting for what we think is right, but that doesn't make us militants."

At this point, Godard has made his way to the front of the room. As he consults with Torn, the students talk amongst themselves. A girl raises her hand, addressing Torn: "Do you want to know what they're doing? They're trying say that people in this community are trying to have black power. They say they can take over our schools, take over our communities. Like they have kept us enslaved for hundreds of years and they think they're going to still keep us enslaved. But the black people are waking up to these white men's tricks and we're not going to let them do it no more." The classroom erupts with applause.

Torn does not respond, but seems to return to his script. He reaches into a large bag, pulls out several toy guns, and distributes them to a few of the students. He instructs the class to challenge anyone who "comes in with a funny-looking, stiff, suit...trying to put you back on the plantation..." He then steps out of the room for a few seconds and returns in a military uniform. With the cap pulled ominously low over his eyes, he bellows, "We're gonna' talk about some business here. I want to develop you." Pointing at a young boy in the back of the room, he declares, "I need you, young man. I'm going to give you some good money." The boy takes his toy machine gun and pretends to shoot

Torn, who falls on the floor, then runs around the room as the other students (and one of the cameramen) laugh.

Though it made for strange theater, Godard, as part of his post-May '68 project, was attempting to wake the students up to what he considered true revolution: the liberation of their consciousness and the students' awakening to their own ability to create revolution. He considered them the oppressed, and he wanted them to see the world in terms of proletarian revolution. His insistence on provoking them and on manipulating Torn's words and actions reveals the extent to which he wanted to actually orchestrate a microcosm of revolution. But his choice to ignore the actual revolution, of sorts, which had already been playing out in the public schools of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, is surprising. In the context of the battles over community control (eventually resulting in the firing of a dozen white teachers and a subsequent series of strikes), one historian has examined the radical underpinnings of decentralization activists like Leslie Campbell. A social studies teacher at JHS 271, Campbell "made his classroom a center for the study of Afro-American history from a Marxist and nationalist perspective. He used the lives of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X to illustrate the need for a 'revolution' in the modern-day black community, and did not shrink from discussing the possibility of violent forms of self-defense" (Podair 96). Here, then, was a living, breathing example of teaching a race-based, Marxist revolution, and yet Godard barrels into the black school with seemingly no awareness of this context.

In an interview in 1972 televised interview with Patrick Camus, Godard compares the political aims of his Dziga Vertov films with Marin Karmitz's *Coup pour coup*

(1972). For this film, Karmitz gave cameras to a group of textile workers in Elbeuf and they chose what to show and which stories to tell about their lives and work. In his interview, Godard claimed that while Karmitz's film fights for the exploited and oppressed members of the working class, the director "miss[ed] a step": "He thinks that we can listen directly to what they have to say though they've been denied a voice for so long, and that we can be of use to them with no problem. We [Godard and Gorin] think there is a problem, which is that the very medium we use was, up until now, in the hands of those we're fighting against." Questioning his role as director who controls the action of a film (as, he points out, Pompidou and Marcellin were directing France in the early seventies), he claimed to value above all else allowing the people to speak: "When intellectuals have the means to make films, since the working class doesn't, we must approach them and listen to be able to transmit their words. We know they aren't allowed to speak, neither in films nor on French TV." Karmitz, he claimed, was making a film "in the name of" the working class. But in his view, "we"—the intellectual—"should first speak in our own name." So, although Godard disparaged the power of the camera to mediate and thus distort the "truth" of the working class, he saw no similar problem with the intellectual class translating for them. This may explain why in *One A.M.* he allowed himself to be filmed in the New York City classroom, giving out orders to Rip Torn, instructing Pennebaker to turn his camera and linger on the American flag at the front of the classroom, and passing out toy guns to the students. Here was the intellectual orchestrating—directing—the revolution. It is impossible to know if Godard would have left those shots of himself in, had he maintained creative control and not handed the reins over to Pennebaker.

### E. Conclusion

In an interview for the *New York Times* just weeks after Robert Kennedy's assassination, Romain Gary, French novelist and husband of American actress Jean Seberg, commented on the similarities between the student-worker rebellion in France and the black uprisings in urban ghettos across the United States. As he and other intellectuals noted, French radicals were adopting and adapting the techniques and slogans of their American counterparts, but not necessarily their peers. Rather than emulating Students for a Democratic Society, many French student activists were enthralled by the Black Panther Party (BPP). "The average French student wants to identify with the Negro in the American ghetto. It was no accident that the radicals at the Sorbonne barricades adopted the slogan of 'student power' from the black nationalist cry of 'black power'" (Raymont 19).

Gary, in his capacity as an adviser on American affairs for the De Gaulle administration, was in the United States during the summer of 1968 conducting research on American violence in the wake of Robert Kennedy's assassination. He criticized both the French and American protesters for their lack of direction: "Neither the students in France nor the radicals in America seem to have any blueprint for change. They are convinced that they must destroy everything in order to build the same thing once more." Gary dismisses these transnational alliances as mere "romantic fascination and indulgence." In many ways, he was right. Cultural historian Robert Young warns about the cooptation of colonial discourse by individuals and groups located outside the sphere of historically and culturally specific forms of oppression. Using terms like "decolonized

sensibilities,” “the inner colonized,” and “the third world within” may serve to “erase the consequences of uneven development across the globe. It also may serve to efface and even trivialize the significant specificity of exceedingly different historical struggle” (4).

While it is of course crucial to acknowledge that conflating forms of oppression risks erasing particular histories, we cannot overlook or downplay the significance and the deep historical roots of the ties—symbolic, real, or otherwise—between the French and blacks in the U.S. Kobena Mercer argues that “whites in alliance with blacks entails a dis-identification with the positions ascribed to them [white subjects] in racist ideologies” (432-33). It is too easy to dismiss out of hand the colonizer’s attempt to identify with the colonized as delusional, romantic, or shallow. Instead we must examine those historical moments when members of privileged groups (whether racial, class, nation, etc.) made discursive or actual connections with the “other” and in the process helped dismantle exclusionary categories of difference and tools of oppression cloaked as national myths.

One such moment happened at a 1970 debate organized by the Black Panther Party at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Here Genet explained his presence in America in the context of the revolutionary spirit of May ’68 to the audience of 1500 people:

In May ’68, I realized that I was completely and effortlessly on the side of the protesting students and workers. In May, the France that I so hated no longer existed; rather, for one month, there was a world suddenly liberated from nationalism, a smiling world, an extremely elegant world, you could say. And

May was wrecked by the dramatic return of Gaullism and reaction. So I can tell you that in June 1968, my sadness and anger made me understand that from now on I would not rest until the spirit of that May in Paris returned, in France or elsewhere. But if I'm telling you about my own very subjective disposition, it's because I want you to understand just how close I find myself now to the Black Panthers. ("It Seems Indecent" 28).

In his speech, Genet drew parallels between the liberation ideology articulated in France in 1968 and that of the Panthers: "In terms of the United States, and perhaps on an even larger scale, it is this party, this revolutionary movement that is most capable, when it succeeds, of provoking an explosion of joy and liberation, an explosion already prefigured in some ways by the events of May in France. Therefore, wherever I am, I will always feel connected to any movement that will provoke the liberation of men. Here and now, it is the Black Panther Party, and I am here by their side because I am on their side. ("It Seems Indecent" 29). Just as the Panthers identified with people of color around the world colonized by Western imperialist powers, Genet identified with the Panthers because he believed that they embodied the spirit of May '68.

May '68 was a watershed not only in French society, but in Franco-American relations as well. In particular, it helped foster a bitter divisiveness among the French left about the American counterculture. For example, sociologist Jean-François Revel, in *Without Marx or Jesus*, admonished the French Communist Party for its inefficacy and ineptitude during the events of May. According to Revel, the power elite of the Communist Party frowned upon any revolt that did not conform to its preconceived notions of revolution, which were rooted in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Such

“intellectual dogmatism” encouraged people to take refuge in the past, and, for Revel, revolution demands innovation, mobility, and creativity because it “signifies an event such as has never taken place” (123). He argued that traditional Marxist ideas of revolution were no longer applicable within a postindustrial, globalizing economy and criticized French radicals for refusing to see that and to adjust accordingly. Leftists like Revel were also discouraged by the infighting between competing political groups, like the Communists and the Maoists, who were busy arguing about their respective visions of revolution.

Despite the hand wringing, finger-pointing, and glum admissions of a failed revolution, many leftists sought alternative models, and the late sixties and early seventies witnessed a change in French attitudes toward the U.S. with optimistic predictions of the U.S. as the site of the coming revolution. For them, America remained the epicenter of cultural imperialism and consumer capitalism, but at the same time these very forces were creating countervailing and insurrectionary movements like the Panthers, the hippies and the Yippies, and a whole host of radical groups battling the American government and the American idea itself. During his 1970 trip to California, sociologist Edgar Morin declared that “L’Amérique n’est pas seulement le pays de l’impérialisme, mais aussi celui de la croisade adolescente” (*Journal* 262). Revel added that the critique of imperialism was being articulated by Americans themselves—in particular, by opponents of the Vietnam war and black power advocates—and people outside of the United States were listening. Varda, Godard, and Genet were part of a contingent of French intellectuals in the late 1960s and early 1970s who, critical of

France's rigid ideological groups and their backward-looking ways, were attracted to the intertwining of cultural revolt, social criticism, and political contestation in the U.S.

According to these leftist thinkers, American youth were inventing and crafting real revolution. In *Without Marx or Jesus*, Revel harshly criticizes French radicals, arguing, "Revolution is not a settling of accounts with the past, but with the future. American revolutionaries sense this; and that is the reason for America's originality in comparison to Europe—as unpleasant as that fact may be for European students, who consider themselves to be more Left than Americans, and especially more intelligently Left. It is also the reason why American youth is actually creating a revolution in place of, or prior to, visualizing a revolution" (235). Like Revel and Morin, Varda and Godard were attracted to the expansiveness and creativity of American radicalism as opposed to the political deadlock that many believed was the undoing of the May '68 revolts. A revolt against American hegemony was taking place within the U.S. itself, and many leftist French thinkers were enthralled.

However, French enthusiasts for the American black power movement were well aware of the tenuousness of their politics. As Mathy writes, French observers of the scene noted "its basic vulnerability in the face of repression, its lack of cohesiveness and long-term perspective, the possibility of being short-lived." Still, it was significant that places like "Berkeley and Venice Beach"—and, as we see in these films, Oakland and Brooklyn—"replaced Beijing and Havana as symbolic sites of revolutionary change" (197). These sites are significant in the films discussed in this chapter, because they mark a departure for Godard and Varda in terms of setting them in inner cities of the United States, in locations where the hoped-for new revolution were presumed to be originating.

Scholar Tom Conley has written, “a film establishes a geography with which every spectator is asked to contend” (20). This cinematic mapping “propels the narrative but also, dividing our attention, prompts reverie and causes our eyes to look both inward, at our own geographies, and outward, to rove about the frame and to engage, however we wish, the space of the film” (1). Just as these filmmakers ask viewers to gaze inward and ponder the various myths and narratives of America, their films also reveal their creators’ own desires, ideologies, and political agendas.

Genet and filmmakers Agnès Varda and Jean-Luc Godard chose the Black Panther Party as the subject or point of reference in their films in part because they wanted to explore late sixties American radicalism as a positive example of a new brand of leftist revolutionary thought. They in turn presented the example to French audiences—one might speculate, at least in Godard’s case, as an effort to revive a Marxism that had become stale and moribund after the revolt of May ‘68 failed to achieve any meaningful change. In Genet’s writings and speeches about the Black Panther Party and black radical George Jackson, however, he is shining the spotlight on these revolutionaries for the sake of white America; he is telling them to wake up to the brutality of American racism at home and abroad, to abandon their own white privilege and to take up the cause of the Black Panthers to foment real revolution. And for her part, after having lived in the U.S. during the late 1960s, Varda came to see certain similarities between the black power movement and the emergent feminist movement, in the sense that both involved a new consciousness and a new way of claiming autonomy and power: “Il me semblait capter quand je les filmais une prise en charge d’eux-mêmes qui avait une belle équivalence en les Femmes découvrant qu’elles pouvaient elles-mêmes penser

la théorie et organiser l'action sans le secours des anciens penseurs" (*Varda par Agnès* 95).

While these intellectuals saw something in the Black Panthers that attracted them, it is also worth considering that for Varda, Godard, Gorin, and Genet the Black Panther Party was a *tabula rasa* upon which they could project their own frustrations with the failed French revolution of May 1968, allowing them to see the Panthers as a harbinger of a new form of revolution. For Genet that meant a liberationist politics of self-expression and a rejection of white privilege; for Godard and Gorin it was a break from stultifying Marxist strictures; and for Varda it represented a model that other oppressed groups, like women, could model themselves after in the pursuit of power. Black power in general and the Black Panther Party in particular appealed to these directors for many reasons, but perhaps one unifying factor was that, at its essence, black power was a vital counter-hegemonic discourse that exposed the ideal of America as incomplete and ultimately false. Another was the Black Panthers' (and other black nationalists and pan-Africanists') use of the language of anticolonialism to expose the repressive and thus disingenuous power of the state in its police force, prison system, schools, and other institutions. The Panthers were exposing their nation and their government in a way that threatened to rupture it from within, just as the events of May 1968 represented a rupture, albeit a brief one, in the Gaullist ideal of the nation-state.

## CONCLUSION

May '68 marked a turning point in French politics, culture, and national identity. For many French intellectuals, the lessons of the ambiguous uprising were expressed in radically new ways, and for filmmakers Agnes Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, and Jean Pierre Gorin, those expressions took the form of new structure, content, and technique. They were inspired by the fleeting glimpse of a Marxist vision come true, of workers and students uniting against an increasingly globalized, Americanized capitalism, and against their own nation's lingering imperialist failures. As Kristin Ross notes, the actual events of the uprising led to a momentary transformation of participants' identities: "What has come to be called 'the events of May' consisted mainly in students ceasing to function as students, workers as workers, and farmers as farmers." That disjuncture, she writes, "allowed students and intellectuals to break with the identity of a particular social group with particular self-interests and accede to something larger" (*May '68* 25). Varda, Godard, and Gorin used film to explore, among other things, the possibilities inherent—surprisingly, to some—in American culture, politics, and history. They scrutinized the counterculture, the antiwar movement, and black power; they were influenced by a new, distinctively American, subversive ethos of deconstructing American mythology and identity. And their films reflected their fascination with a vivifying home grown radicalism that could breathe life into their own nation's flagging leftist tradition. In this

dissertation, I have demonstrated that events of the late 1960s—most notably, May '68—jarred many French intellectuals and artists into a new examination of their individual identities and politics, but also those of France itself. And by looking at America in a new way, they came to see their own nation in a new light. Writing in 1993, scholar Richard Kuisel argued that America lost its oppositional power as the French “Other” in the late 1970s when Americanization became a more widespread, global process. He writes: “...once other cultural and economic dangers or alternatives arose—for example, Arab immigration, Japanese products, or the European community—the dialectic of forming identity by negating Americans no longer articulated French uniqueness” (6). Kuisel is correct in that other cultural “invasions” and social changes altered the way the American “Other” had to be faced. But despite these more recent transformations, in *Letter to Jane*, *Lions Love*, *The Black Panthers*, *Sympathy for the Devil*, and *One A.M.* we see the kernels of contemporary French anxieties about national identity in light of economic, cultural, and social changes brought about by Americanization and globalization.

In Chapter One, I discussed Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin’s *Letter to Jane* and the filmmakers’ attempts to reveal the workings of ideology in Hollywood film. I showed how the directors challenged seamless representations of reality by revealing the power relations inherent in images. Their experimental film was part of their struggle against not only mainstream cinema, but also the American way of life circulated by Hollywood around the globe. In his more recent films, Godard continues his perpetual critique of the symbolic violence of American cultural imperialism. But as he ages, his youthful concern with the way mainstream cinema colonized visual perception has shifted to the co-optation of cultural memory for commercial profit.

In his 2001 film *Éloge de l'amour*, an elderly couple who run a small bed and breakfast are on the brink of bankruptcy due to the encroachment of mega-hotel chains on their family business. In order to raise money, they decide to sell their story of fighting for the French resistance to a Hollywood production company—Steven Spielberg and Associates Incorporated. The message is a thinly veiled critique of Spielberg's Hollywood reenactment of the Holocaust in *Schindler's List* (1999). As one French producer in *Éloge* proclaims despondently: "Americans...have no memory of their own. So they buy the past of others. Especially those who resisted." Godard laments this Hollywood appropriation of history that shapes how collective memory is perceived and disseminated across cultural and temporal lines.

In Chapter Two, I examined Agnès Varda's *Lions Love* and the director's construction of an imagined America that represented everything French critics across the political spectrum feared about Americanization after World War II. I showed how André Malraux's attempts to identify the cultural needs of the nation and to elevate the people above the sea of America pop culture were designed to define and protect France from the very world Varda depicts in her film. *Lions Love*'s representation of the perceived contaminating effects of Americanism--the superficiality, the rampant consumerism, the Warholian fetish of the commodity, the artifice—illuminates France's struggles over modernity and national identity.

Malraux's fears of American low-brow culture's corrosive effect on French national identity reverberated in the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) talks of the 1990s. Of all the European countries involved in negotiations, France was the

most vocal opponent of U.S. demands. American officials sought an end to French subsidies of its national cinema and the abolishment of a quota system that limited the number of American films shown in the country. According to U.S. officials, such protectionist measures were an obstacle to free and fair trade. French officials countered that such government assistance had helped the French cinematic tradition survive the onslaught of the Hollywood monopoly, unlike their German and Italian counterparts. In addition, French representatives vehemently argued that film is not a trade commodity like any other consumer product, but rather a creative cultural production and art form.

This argument echoed French fears of American cultural imperialism in response to the Marshall Plan. Régis Debray, a French radical imprisoned in 1967 for his role in Che Guevara's Bolivian revolution, was an outspoken critic of the American challenge to France's protection of its film industry and cultural heritage. In the 1960s, Debray wrote manifestoes calling for revolution in Latin America; such violent insurrections would overthrow not only the puppet regimes installed by the United States in countries like Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, they would involve liberation from the neocolonial policies imposed by the United States itself (*Strategy* 176-177). In the 1990s, he was again leading the charge against U.S. imperialism, this time in the cultural arena: "What's good for Columbia and Warner Brothers is good for America, O.K.; the question now is whether it's good for the rest of the world. The American empire will pass, like the others. Let's at least make sure it does not leave irreparable damage to our creative abilities behind it" (Joscelyne par. 26).

Others involved in the film industry continued Malraux's protectionist rhetoric. Director Claude Berri envisioned an apocalyptic end of cultural identity: "If the Gatt deal

goes through as proposed, European culture is finished”; actor Gérard Depardieu testified in the European Parliament that “culture should be the exception in world trade” (Ridings 11). Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*, showing on French screens at the time of the negotiations, came to epitomize the invasion of France by American culture. Spielberg’s blockbuster had infiltrated the country—appearing in French movie theaters; promotional ads plastered in the subways, bus-stops, and kiosks; and tie-in products sold at McDonald’s across the country—and like the behemoths unleashed in his film, resistance to the invasion was all but impossible. The American director’s contribution to the erosion of a distinct national identity prompted Dominique Moisi, deputy director of the French Institute for International Relations, to proclaim: “There is less and less of France abroad, and more and more that is foreign in France. One minute it’s dinosaurs, the next North African immigrants, but it’s the same basic anxiety” (Cohen E2). Moisi’s comment brings together the economic, cultural, and social forces that were being reshaped by globalization as the migration of people and products challenged the boundaries of French identity.

In the late 1960s, the French fascination with the plight of the African-American attests to the absence of dialogue about immigration in France at the time. In my discussion of *The Black Panthers*, *Sympathy for the Devil*, and *One A.M.*, I have demonstrated how the black power movement provided a counternarrative to the prevailing mythologies of America that worked to expose the ideal of America as ultimately false. Like the events of May ’68 in France, the Panthers were a disruptive force that challenged the idea of the nation-state. For Genet, Godard, and Varda, the situation of African-Americans—America’s “inner colonized”—was more attractive and

more pressing than the situation of the former colonial subjects who were migrating to the metropole after decolonization. In fact, in a 1968 interview with critic Martha Merrill about his film *Sympathy for the Devil*, Godard speculated that black people in France encountered a certain level of intolerance unacknowledged by the white citizenry. When pressed by Merrill to describe his experience with black immigrants in France, the director admitted in three words: “None at all” (145). African-Americans represented a collective community, a highly visible force of resistance to American hegemony; immigrants to France in the 1960s had yet to coalesce as a community and were arguably still invisible within the nation in terms of their political potential. The immigrants who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s were actively recruited by the French government to fill the labor needs of the country; they were therefore considered a temporary presence in the country that would disappear as soon as they returned home. That attitude started to change in the 1970s when families began joining their relatives in France, a phenomenon that shifted the public dialogue about immigration to questions of citizenship and national belonging (Hein 72).

By the late 1970s, the black power movement in the U.S. had fallen apart due to internal conflicts, lack of funds, the marginalization of women in the party, and the incarceration or assassination of party leaders by the state. In a 1977 talk with Angela Davis, Jean Genet inquired about the status of Eldridge Cleaver, who had returned from exile two years earlier, renounced the Black Panther Party, and found salvation in Jesus and the Republican Party. Davis responded: “Cleaver? He’s selling out. He’s exploiting the visions of Christ he had in France, and it’s bringing in a lot of cash.” Genet adds: “He didn’t see Christ in France, he saw the Virgin in America! In France he was seeing

pants” (“Tenacity” 161). Genet is referring to Cleaver’s infamous design: a pair of pants with a special pouch on the outside to contain/display male genitalia. The militant of the 1960s whose incendiary, highly sexualized manifestoes infuriated millions of white Americans was now cashing in on his fame.

In the late 1970s, as immigrants became more visible and permanent within French society, Genet shifted his attention from the Black Panthers to the new, potentially explosive force in his own backyard. In an interview with writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, Genet declared that “the French still live with their superiority, except that it’s buried more deeply inside them lower down, probably in the depths of their intestines. This once haughty superiority, aware that its days are numbered, is growing vicious. And it’s all the more irritated now that France is full of blacks, Arabs, people of mixed race, who almost never lower their eyes anymore: their gaze is on a level with ours” (178). Genet’s prescient observation about the erosion of national *grandeur* and *gloire* anticipated French cinema’s role in providing a haven from the leveling gaze of the postcolonial immigrant.

The influx of immigrants created two separate but related trends in French film. In the 1980s and 1990s, France’s rapidly changing political, economic and social situation prompted a cinematic return to a mythological French past. Whether it was caused by computer-generated Jurassic dinosaurs or flesh-and-blood *maghrebains*, heritage films provided many French moviegoers with refuge from the foreign invasion of modernity, allowing them to retreat to the pastoral countryside of Provence in Claude Berri’s *Jean de Florette* (1985) and *Manon des sources* (1986), or to the glorious French past in films like Patrice Chéreau’s *Le Reine Margot* (1994) and Jean-Paul Rappeneau’s *Cyrano de*

*Bergerac* (1995). As European film historian Geoffrey Nowell-Smith declared: “More dangerous for the long-term future of European cinema is the temptation [heritage films] provide to retreat into a kind of upmarket Disneyfication of Europe as a celluloid theme park from which the discontents of modernity have been comfortably banished” (766).

Nowell-Smith’s worries about the trend in European cinema to exalt an imaginary past over confronting the realities of a changing economic and social landscape proved unfounded. In opposition to the bucolic *mise-en-scène* of the heritage films, a new movement, *le cinéma beur*, emerged. Harkening back to the more politically charged cinema of the 1960s, these films have greatly contributed to raising the visibility of immigrants in France over the past two decades. Instead of providing an escape from the anxieties of modern life, directors like Karim Dridi, Malik Chibane, and Abdel Krim Bahloul confront contemporary issues of violence, unemployment, and racism. And, like the 1960s, the films incorporate American countercultural forms that serve as a means of resistance to French notions of national identity and belonging--hip-hop culture. Appropriated by many disaffected youth within France’s immigrant community as an expression of their rage and alienation, hip-hop music, styles, and gestures appear throughout these movies as a sort of silent commentary on America—reminding the viewer of the power of American cultural forms, even the most commodified and commercialized ones, to provide alternatives to French values and norms.

Agnès Varda’s recent film, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2002), does not deal directly with the United States; rather she shifts her 1960s focus on Americanization to the more diffuse process of globalization. Varda documents the lives of those who exist

not only in the margins of the global market, but those who live off the excess of the capitalist system--the waste embodied in the literally tons of potatoes left in the fields by huge industrial harvesters. The gleaners gather potatoes that are too deformed, too large, too small, or too damaged for presentation in the produce section of the chain supermarkets that dot the French landscape. One woman stands beside an empty field, remembering her childhood days as a gleaner: "Gleaning, that's the old way. My mother would say, 'Pick everything up so nothing gets wasted.' But sadly we no longer do because machines are so efficient nowadays. But before, I used to glean together with my neighbors for wheat, and rice too." After filming several empty fields, Varda notices that no one seems to glean together anymore, that gleaning has become a solitary activity. The director shows how certain collective identities of the past have been eroded in the wake of industrialized corporate farming. Many of the people who appear in the film have slipped through the cracks of a system that caters to the demands of the market as opposed to the welfare of the people. Those who are excluded from the benefits of the free market must resort to a sort of bricolage where they piece together an identity and sense of belonging through the objects that they scavenge from the sites of consumer excess.

While filmmakers like Varda have moved from directly engaging with the United States to examining the processes of globalization, the question of French identity *vis-à-vis* American history, politics, culture, and mythology remains relevant today, though differently so. French critiques of America are now less about crass consumerism and lowbrow culture and more about the rise of neoliberalism, a doctrine of free-trade

capitalism, limited government, and deregulation. Pierre Bourdieu, writing in the late 1990s, observed this shift:

In a matter of a few years, in all the advanced societies, employers, international officials, high-ranking civil servants, media intellectuals and high-flying journalists have all started to speak a strange Newspeak. Its vocabulary, which seems to have sprung out of nowhere, is now on everyone's lips: 'globalization' and 'flexibility,' 'governance' and 'employability,' 'underclass' and 'exclusion,' 'new economy' and 'zero tolerance,' 'communitarianism' and 'multiculturalism.' . . . The diffusion of this new planetary vulgate . . . is the result of a new type of imperialism whose effects are all the more powerful and pernicious in that it is promoted . . . by the partisans of the neoliberal revolution. . . . By imposing on the rest of the world categories of perception homologous to its social structures, the U.S.A. is refashioning the entire world in its image. ("NewLiberalSpeak" par. 1, 6)

For Bourdieu, the latest form of American imperialism cloaks itself in the rhetoric of neoliberalism. In a certain sense, Jean-François Revel's prediction that America would be the site of the coming revolution was correct. It was not the version of revolution he had imagined, however. Instead, America was revolutionizing the free market by loosening longstanding constraints and regulations, unleashing an aggressive brand of neoliberal economic ideology to all corners of the globe.

In the films I have discussed in this dissertation, America loomed large in the eyes of the filmmakers, not only because the explosion of radical politics and cultural expressions had captured the attention of much of the world (including France), but also

because the United States had taken over the failed French imperialist project in Southeast Asia and had turned it into a bloodbath that affected international politics for years. These French filmmakers saw in America bracing new forms of potential revolution. At the same time, they watched as America blundered its way through an imperialist project that had already spelled their own nation's failures.

Some thirty years later, France and the U.S. are again grappling with one another. A reenergized nationalism emerged in the United States after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when patriotism soared, American flag lapel pins became all but mandatory, and "United We Stand" bumper stickers proliferated. At a time when many observers are proclaiming the arrival of post-nationalism, especially since September 11, we are seeing France play the role of the opposite and despised other in this new incarnation of American national identity. There has been a long history of antipathy toward the French, but after Chirac refused to sign on to the so-called "war on terror" in Iraq, there was a hysterical outbreak of anti-French sentiment in the U.S. that reached such absurd lengths as the infamous renaming of French fries as "Freedom Fries" (in the U.S. House of Representatives cafeteria, no less!) and patriotic wine dealers and restaurateurs emptying bottles of French wine into the gutter. Conservative pundits made endless jabs about France's surrender to Hitler and the French people's alleged ungratefulness to America for saving their country.

On September 13, 2001, the newspaper *Le Monde* published a headline proclaiming France's solidarity with America in the wake of horrific attacks of the preceding day: "Nous sommes tous Américains."<sup>14</sup> These sentiments echoed John F. Kennedy's remarks of June 26, 1963, when the president admonished the communist East

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Marie Colombani, "Nous sommes tous Américains." *Le Monde* 13 September 2001: 1.

Germany for erecting the Berlin Wall, a temporary obstacle in Kennedy's New Frontier that would be overcome by American might and right. The *Le Monde* article sympathized with the U.S. because, the author wrote, France owed its very freedom to that country, but also because France and America were similarly positioned as Western enemies of militant Islam: "La folie, même au prétexte du désespoir, n'est jamais une force qui peut régénérer le monde. Voilà pourquoi, aujourd'hui, nous sommes américains." *Le Monde's* headline evoked American Cold War rhetoric, and the shoe was on the other foot—America was now the victim, in need of sympathy, as the target of a new post-Cold War "other." The terrorist had replaced the communist.

As innumerable journalists have described, the window of opportunity for global sympathy toward the U.S. was small, and Bush's march to war soon slammed it shut. Compassion turned to scorn as the United States embarked on a unilateral mission as the world's sole superpower. But September 11 only gave America the moral authority, in the Bush administration's views, to proceed with its plan to remove Saddam Hussein and bring democracy to Iraq. The plan had been in the works since the 1990s. In garnering support for its mission in Iraq, America needed a foe to entrench in American minds the righteousness of the country's mission, and they found it in France. If France was against it, then it must be right.

While many countries objected to America's preemptive war against Iraq (among them Belgium, Germany, Russia, Greece, Austria, Finland, Sweden, and China, to name only a few), France was singled out as the main object of anger and derision. In line with the American penchant to crush things it dislikes, Las Vegas radio station KXNT-AM 840 hired an armored car driver to run over a pile of French products: a Paris travel

guide, French wine, a photograph of Jacques Chirac, and a baguette. Pennsylvania state representative Stephen Barrar, who proposed legislation to prohibit the sale of French wine in state-owned liquor stores, appealed to history to support his claims: “Since the mid-1960s, the French government has engaged in a persistent pattern of anti-American rhetoric and behavior.” This was a purely selective interpretation of history, but it worked, at least in the early days of the Iraq war. In addition, forty years after Varda showed America as the land of artifice and superficiality, the Paris hotel-casino in Las Vegas removed the French flag from its property for more than three months in a show of disapproval of their “real” counterpart’s recalcitrance. Blustery Fox News host Bill O’Reilly began a boycott of France, snarling, “Until we see the French government do something to help in the war on terror, we should consider that country hostile to our safety” (“Renewed Call” par. 8).

The intense mocking of France in Congress, political cartoons, and late night talk shows served to distract the country from real debate about France’s objections to the war. While the derision may seem like harmless fun, it served a serious purpose for the Bush administration: by constructing the French as “cheese-eating-surrender-monkeys,” it simultaneously constructed America as the warrior-savior of Western civilization. These barbs also allowed the U.S. to obfuscate its own economic interests in invading and occupying a country rich in oil and wide open to American corporate investment and privatization. According to Kristin Ross, “Imperialism was understood [in the 1960s] to be not only present in overt instances of actual military conquest but also heavily reliant on the mechanisms of trade, finance, and investment. What U.S. aggression in Iraq in part serves to make newly perceptible is the fact that the system of economic relations

covered under the rubric of imperialism had hardly changed at all in the past thirty years” (“French Declaration” 146). The idea of an effeminate France as the antithesis of the warrior America was constructed in political and cultural spheres alike. Neoconservative Robert Kagan, in his article “Power and Weakness: Why Europe and the U.S. See the World Differently,” defends American military might in the wake of Europe’s disagreement over Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Kagan dramatically begins his article by calling on Americans and Europeans to stop pretending that we share the same worldview. He claims that Europe, when it was powerful, exercised its strength through military invasions. Now, as a second tier power, the European Union views international problems through the eyes of the weak, producing “differing strategic judgments, differing assessments of threats and of the proper means of addressing threats, and even differing calculations of interest” (4). Kagan argues that in the aftermath of World War II, when European countries no longer had the power to sustain their colonial empires, the Cold War hid this “weakness.”

Denials from neoconservatives such as Kagan and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld aside, the U.S. occupation of Iraq has resuscitated talk of American imperialism, and specific comparisons to European countries. Régis Debray’s article “Americans, If You Only Knew,” written for *Le Figaro* on September 5, 2003, and reprinted in *Harper’s* for American audiences the following year, echoes Godard’s condemnation of the shaping of public memory through the lens of Hollywood in *Éloge de l’amour*. Debray fills in the gaps of America’s historical amnesia by equating America’s idea of spreading “democracy” to Iraq with Europe’s mission to bring “civilization” to the colonized: “With its proconsuls and its aircraft carriers, the

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Kagan, “Power and Weakness: Why Europe and the U.S. See the World Differently.” *Policy Review* 113 (2002): 3-28.

rapacious and generous America revisits the time of colonizers drunk on their superiority, convinced of their liberating mission, and counting on reimbursing themselves directly. We built roads; they build airports. We brought books and schools; they bring videotapes. We brought penniless Catholic missionaries; they bring wealthy evangelical sects” (15). And Debray predicts a precipitous decline for American empire similar to its European predecessors: “When, a century from now, our American friends come back to their senses and turn against this ‘capture of Baghdad’ (along with the oil wells), it will be, without a doubt, with the same perspective, incredulous and annoyed, from which we French now regard the capture of Tunis or of Hue (along with the good soil and coal mines)” (15).

Henri Brunschwig, preeminent historian of French colonialism, explored myths that had been invoked by the French to explain their own imperialist projects through the end of the nineteenth century. He argued that in fact French colonial expansion resulted from a traditional policy of *grandeur*, which was based on the principle of French exceptionalism and a responsibility to “civilize” other people and export the ideas and values of the Revolution. French imperialism was also deeply intertwined with a literal mission—to spread Catholicism to the peoples of the third world. During De Gaulle’s reign, critics such as Jean-François Revel attacked him for continuing to invoke and employ French *grandeur*, arguing that the president was “willing to jeopardize the future of the nation in order to attempt to reconquer for France a place in the diplomatic and military sun” (50). Although American intervention in the Middle East had little to do with Christianizing the people and more to do with opening new markets and securing natural resources, the neoconservative rhetoric of bringing democracy to a benighted

region bears a certain resemblance to earlier French imperialist ideas. Unlike the French during the nation's conquests in Southeast Asia and Africa, however, Americans generally have not thought of their country as an imperialist power, which is understandable given the apparent national preference for mythology over historical knowledge.

As Debray pointed out, Bush's war talk sounded remarkably like the French in earlier decades, who portrayed their imperialism as a benevolent power directed by God to help the natives. In a speech at the beginning of the Iraq war, for example, Bush declared: "To all the men and women of the United States Armed Forces now in the Middle East, the peace of a troubled world and the hopes of an oppressed people now depend on you. That trust is well placed. . . . We come to Iraq with respect for its citizens, for their great civilization and for the religious faiths they practice. We have no ambition in Iraq, except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people. . . . My fellow citizens, the dangers to our country and the world will be overcome. We will pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace. We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail. May God bless our country and all who defend her" ("President Bush Addresses the Nation" par. 3, 10).

The U.S. presence in Iraq has prompted comparisons with the Vietnam War, in which the United States continued the French imperialist project in the name of bolstering democracy against communism. But a more interesting and less noticed comparison is with another failed French imperial mission—the Algerian War. In particular, the war in Iraq has elicited a renewed interest in Gillo Pontecorvo's 1965 film *The Battle of Algiers*. The sudden attentiveness to a film about French imperialism, for

some Americans, reflects a desire to understand the perils of an overreaching empire; for others, to study the strategies of urban guerrilla warfare in order to perfect the American fighting machine against it; and for others still, to avoid the mistakes of a former imperial power desperately clinging to its glory or to understand the history of Western nations fighting Muslim rebels. In 1933, the French minister of Foreign Affairs, Gabriel Hanotaux, described the occupation of Algiers in terms that just as easily could have been used by Richard Perle and William Kristol to rhapsodize about America's presence in the Middle East in 2003: "En occupant Alger, la France remplissait la mission que la Providence et l'Histoire lui avaient confiée. . . . Et ce fut, de nouveau, une de ces belles aventures à la française: l'attraction de l'inconnu, la joie du risque, du sacrifice, le déploiement du courage individuel, le désintéressement dans le dévouement, l'élan de la création généreuse et éducatrice" (41).

In August 2003, just a few months after the invasion of Iraq, the Pentagon announced the screening of *The Battle of Algiers*, touting it as an admonitory lesson in military and political strategy: "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. . . . Children shoot soldiers at point blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film." Slate.com writer Charles Paul Freund mocks the Pentagon flier: "It's welcome news that the military is thinking creatively about the American role in Iraq, but the lessons and pleasures of *The Battle of Algiers* are a lot more ambiguous than this Pentagon blurb implies. To praise the film for its strategic insights is to buy into the 1960s revolutionary mystique that it celebrates." In spite of its loud self-congratulations

for taking the initiative to “study” the Algerian resistance, the Pentagon either chose to ignore the lessons altogether or simply learned the wrong lessons. For as the occupation stretched out over the next four years, the failed policies mounted and the inability to win hearts and minds became glaringly obvious—just as they had in Algeria.

In addressing questions of national identity, I have demonstrated how film functions as a site of contesting ideas and definitions. As David Morley and Kevin Robins have noted, film can selectively highlight values from the past and use them in the present to construct and help reshape both collective memory and national identity. It is a particularly powerful medium for conveying fictions, including fictions about nations, peoples, and histories. The Pentagon’s willful forgetting of history, or the selective retelling of history through Pontecorvo’s film (much like the selective use of intelligence that allowed the American government to fabricate a case for war in the first place), has fueled the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Particular exaggerations, fabrications, and distortions of the enemy, whether Saddam Hussein, al Qaeda, or France, have been used to generate support for the occupation at home and abroad. As Ernest Renan, writing at the height of French colonial power in the late nineteenth century, argued, “Forgetting, I would almost say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. . . . The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (45). National identity is, then, partially based on this intentional forgetting; one can only feel pride in and identify with one’s state if one ignores or forgets or invents a countervailing myth against the ugly truths of the nation’s past. This has been especially useful throughout American history, and especially during

the buildup to the invasion of Iraq, because since its inception the United States has created itself as a shining beacon of freedom; a unique and uniquely democratic republic in a world history filled with monarchs, dictators, and tyrants; and an innocent, benign power that seeks only to enlighten those it rules or holds power over.

But France too has relied heavily on discourses of distinctiveness and mission and good intentions in its own history. After May '68, some critics, intellectuals, and artists turned away from what they saw as the failure of French Marxism to bring about true revolution, looking instead to what may seem like an unlikely source, given their history of mutual disdain and distrust: the United States. The films discussed here show an ambiguous America; they show the forces within America that were challenging not only political structures but the ideas and myths behind those structures. The “revolutionary mystique” of the 1960s discussed by Freund has fallen prey to the ascendance of social conservatism, the rise of corporate dominance in the political process, and a widespread cultural consensus that most of the radical experiments of the 1960s failed. For French filmmakers like Varda, Godard, and Gorin, it was that very mystique that drew them to take on the United States as a subject for their films in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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