French May '68, "China," and the dialectics of refusals in film and intellectual cultures since 1960s

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French May ’68, “China,” and the Dialectics of Refusals
in Film and Intellectual Cultures since 1960s

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of PhD at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation submitted to this or other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

Signature: __________________

Date: August 2014
ABSTRACT

One of the most fashionable impressions about the legacies of French May ’68 lurking in our capitalist society nowadays is perhaps the view that this historic episode has greatly inspired a chain of sexual liberations and anti-authoritarian lifestyle revolts within the realm of modern Western cultures. However, without actually questioning the ideological implications behind this liberal-libertarian ethos, the above convenient historical verdict may still help perpetuate the predominant logic of late capitalism and the concurrent status quo. Historically speaking, during the heyday of the worldwide leftist insurrections of the 1960s, the events of ’68 were never simply an isolated First-World phenomenon. Deeply entangled with the empirical lessons of the Maoist Cultural Revolution, May 68 in France has radically invoked and manifested many profound social queries and contestations against both the capitalist universality and the emerging Soviet revisionist thinking for two decades. In this dissertation, my primary research focus is precisely to call into question, through the optics of their inherent “Chinese connections,” the dominant narratives about the movements of May ’68 as merely a smoothening agent of massive “cultural reforms” in the capitalist West, instead of a continuous response toward the Maoist egalitarian principles that keeps incessantly catalyzing genuine political transformations in the sphere of global communitarian and quotidian practices. By analyzing and rehistoricizing a variety of cultural texts that include travel writings, memoirs, novels and films in relation to the subversive spirits of ’68, this study aims to reopen their heavily forsaken sociopolitical significances in order to recast some of the truly alternative historical imaginations of this epoch. Unlike the predominant methodologies of historiography and intellectual histories which usually marginalize cinematic texts as largely “illegitimate” data for the serious investigations of the sixties, this thesis particularly emphasizes the extensive study and critical reexamination of many insufficiently discussed or widely misinterpreted filmic representations of “China” that were produced by a large group of Western filmmakers such as Bertolucci, Godard, Antonioni, Casabianca, Viénet, and Yanne, under the adoptions of different art forms and genres between the 1960s and the 2000s. While the overreliance on European cinematic representations of China may potentially risk becoming a blind repetition of many contemporary capitalist stereotypes about the Maoist influences in May ’68 at the expense of those greatly innovative and dialectical Sino-Western encounters during the same period, this thesis also seeks to cautiously retain and reinscribe the latent heterogeneous, antagonistic, and historical Chinese characters long pertaining to the ensemble of the so-called “French Theory” advanced by Barthes, Kristeva, Lacan, and others since 1968, so as to retrieve certain unrealized revolutionary potentialities of the latter beyond the reigning ideological confines of neoliberalism today. I argue that this seemingly “redundant” or “generic” gesture of constantly delinking the multiple creative novelties adhering to the aforementioned Western cultural representations of “China” from the unique intellectual innovations of ’68 is highly crucial here, insofar as such excessiveness of negativity and refusal may nonetheless offer us a chance to persistently (re)search for some even better forms of emancipatory possibilities to come. [500 words]
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Zhongkuo gongchandang (Chinese Communist Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDT</td>
<td>Confédération française démocratique du travail (French Democratic Confederation of Work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGT</td>
<td>Confédération générale du travail (General Confederation of Work)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinois, encore un effort</td>
<td>Chinois, encore un effort - Chinois, encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires! (One More Effort Chinamen, If You Want to be Revolutionaries! aka Peking Duck Soup)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIP</td>
<td>Groupe d’information sur les prisons (Group for Information on Prisons)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GP</td>
<td>Gauche prolétarienne (Proletarian Left)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVG</td>
<td>Groupe Dziga Vertov (Dziga Vertov Group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Dialectique</td>
<td>La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques? (Can Dialectics Break Bricks?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les amants</td>
<td>Les amants réguliers (Regular Lovers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Les Chinois</td>
<td>Les Chinois à Paris (The Chinese in Paris)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LCR</td>
<td>Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le pharmacie</td>
<td>Le pharmacie N°3 (The Shanghai Pharmacy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLF</td>
<td>Mouvement de Libération des femmes (Movement of Liberation of Women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPR</td>
<td>Nouvelle résistance populaire (New Popular Resistance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCF</td>
<td>Parti communiste française (French Communist Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCMLF</td>
<td>Parti communiste marxiste-léniniste de France (French Marxist-Leninist Communist Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCI</td>
<td>Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun (People’s Liberation Army)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCFML</td>
<td>L’Union des communistes de France marxiste-léniniste (The Union of Communists of France Marxist-Leninist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UJCML</td>
<td>Union de la Jeunesse Communiste Marxiste-léniniste (Union of Young Marxist-Leninist Communist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Une histoire</td>
<td>Une histoire de ballon (The Football Incident)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLON</td>
<td>Société pour la Lancement des Œuvres Nouvelles (Society for Launching New Works)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VLR</td>
<td>Vive la révolution (Live the Revolution)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yukong</td>
<td>Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes? (How Yukong Moved the Mountains?)</td>
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INTRODUCTION
MAY ’68, CULTURAL REVOLUTION, AND TODAY

Whither the Sixties?

Ever since the end of the Cold War in 1989, there has been a popular neoliberalist consensus and ideological revision among the predominant powers that constantly dismisses and trivializes the term “revolution” as a gigantic historical failure pertaining to the tragic fates of many former Red countries and other Third-World developments throughout the twentieth century. After Francis Fukuyama’s thesis on “the end of history,” it has generally been agreed that capitalism has triumphed over all kinds of communist experiments and many decolonial options that were associated with civil violence. Compared to the political “tyrannies” and revolutionary “terrors” of Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and others, the logic and operation of capitalism seem to be both much “less evil” in the realm of public administration and much “less dangerous” during the course of world democratic development.

However, during the heyday of the sixties, the worldwide leftist movements and insurrections of this epoch saw this capitalist universality widely challenged and problematized, not only in the Third World but also among the dominant First-World nations. Arthur Marwick wrote: “What characterized 1968 was the wide geographical spread of student activism, affecting Japan and the Iron Curtain countries as well as the West, not the imminence at any point of revolution.”¹ This dissertation mainly seeks to critically revisit and reexamine the various emancipatory legacies of the sixties, especially the two significant and entangled historical events of French May ’68 and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, within the realm of Western cultures and intellectual scenes against the lure and legitimacy of both capitalist machinery and neoliberalist ethos so prominent today.

As Fredric Jameson argued in the late 1980s, the world sixties precisely marked a rare short-circuit and synchronicity between revolutionary opportunities and failures in response to capitalist imperialism after a few decades of postwar overexpansion in the West. Following the same vein, Christopher Connery recently said that the 1960s “were in that sense an immense and inflationary issuing of superstructural credit: a universal abandonment of the referential gold standard, an extraordinary printing up of ever more devalued signifiers.”

Elsewhere, Connery added:

The global sixties—cutting across the temporality of the cold war—was an irruption of the political, in the first, second, and third worlds. Sixties movements affected the course and character of great power rivalry, and complicated binary logic of U.S. cold war strategy, and the relationship of these movements to the cold war—temporally, historiographically, ideologically, politically—is antagonistic and disjunctive.

In the eyes of many leftists in the West, it was precisely French May ’68 that epitomized the center stage of Western Europe, creating an unlikely concurrence and ambivalence between the revolutionary opportunities and limits toward the capitalist governance. In the view of sociologist Alain Touraine, May ’68 advanced the birth of a “new social movement” by both replacing the traditional dichotomy between the bourgeoisie and the workers and reinventing new class struggles and alliances between the working class and bourgeois students against capitalist technocracy. The May revolt in France, according to Touraine, was at once a leaning motion toward and a resistance against the emerging technocratic, post-industrial Western society. Heralded as the largest mass movement in French history and the biggest strike in the history of the French workers’ movement, the barricades of May ’68 were a highly spontaneous outburst, whereas Gilles Deleuze called it “a demonstration, an irruption, of a becoming in its pure state.”

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Based on these profound observations, Kristin Ross elaborated that “France [during ’68], for some five to six weeks, was brought to a complete paralysis.”\textsuperscript{7} The events of May ’68 called into question the predominant trio on the French political scene—the paternal de Gaulle government, the revisionist Parti communiste français (French Communist Party – PCF), and the imperialist capitalist order during the 1960s. In the final phase of ’68, the insurrections were on the brink of a complete overthrow of the Gaullist regime. Ross added: “Among the insurrections that were occurring across the globe in the 1960s—notably in Mexico, the United States, Germany, Japan, and elsewhere—only in France, and to a certain extent in Italy, did a synchronicity or ‘meeting’ between intellectual refusal of the reigning ideology and worker insurrection occur.”\textsuperscript{8} Likewise, Daniel Singer argued that “[i]t was only in France that the revolt of the students got a response from the workers—ambiguous, complicated, but nevertheless a response—that precipitated the biggest general strike in French history, paralyzing the economy and raising, for a brief spell, the question of power in the country.”\textsuperscript{9}

At the same time, the geographical, historical, and chronological framework of ’68 cannot be solely limited to Republican France because it also encompassed social influences from Italy, Vietnam, Algeria, and Mao’s China, to name just a few. While many critics have observed that French ’68 may have ended in political failure and state restoration, it was also believed that the same event triumphed “culturally” and “transhistorically,” which should have had an even broader if not far more enduring effect on the subversive tactics and countercultural resistance against the global capitalist hegemony that is still practiced today. Yet, one of the most popular and fashionable impressions about the legacies of May ’68 in our advanced capitalist society nowadays is perhaps the view that this historic episode has greatly inspired a chain of sexual liberations and anti-authoritarian lifestyle revolts within the realm of modern Western cultures.

\textsuperscript{7} Kristin Ross, \textit{May ’68 and Its Afterlives} (Chicago, University of Chicago, 2002), 4.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
However, without actually questioning the ideological implications behind this liberal-libertarian ethos, I argue that the above convenient, oversimplified historical verdict may still help perpetuate the predominant cultural logic as well as the concurrent status quo. As Peter Starr succinctly pointed out, the chief revolutionary virtue of May ’68 did not mainly concern with the liberations of sexual identities. Rather, this social movement has altogether liberated the long-standing Western notion of “revolutionary desires” from the narcissistic illusion of “total revolt,” which is always doomed to be a tragedy under the classic Freudian Oedipal struggles between father and son. The true profundity of ’68, despite its apparent “failure” to change all facets of social life, was that it succeeded in its attempt “to move politics outside the notion of political desire as desire for an impossible, total revolution—and hence, outside that oscillation between despair and hope.”

More specifically, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, what was truly novel and creative about May ’68 was its sheer absence of a “pledge” or an “oath” that was supposed to mediate the corresponding interests between the protesting students and the working class during their brief alliance in those two insurrectionary months. For Sartre, there appeared to be no such thing as an intermediary apparatus that would help stiffen or glue the two sets of class concerns and revolutionary demands. Because of this absence of representational agency among the French leftists, there was simultaneously no actual terror or violence that emerged from their meeting. This radically “non-violent” experience of ’68 ultimately led Sartre to revise his initial thesis on the “group-in-fusion” and the “pledged group” in his groundbreaking Critique de la raison dialectique (Critique of Dialectical Reason) published in the early 1960s. His original hypothesis on the “group-in-fusion” was that the emergence of the fused group virtually presented a reorganization of the existing connections between the people involved in the very moment that the interiority of freedom had suddenly become the exterior basis of common action. This creative logic of “group-in-fusion” that had been profoundly

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11 As Keith Reader suggested, “if 68 needed a philosophy, Sartre’s was the only appropriate one: collectivist yet against apparatuses, individualist yet against bourgeois individualism.” See Keith A. Reader, The May 1968 Events in France: Reproductions and Interpretations (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 63.
reworked during May ’68 will radiate throughout the core presentation of the arguments in my thesis.

For example, Sartre often presented the following scenario: People at a bus stop, who are initially unrelated, suddenly realize that the bus company is terrible and thereby march off together to protest at the local office. However, this new and unpredictable group formation is, at the same time, hardly a recognizable social form. The group is highly unstable, as it must develop a minimal level of organization, a “pledged group,” to solidify their novel alliance and unexpected common action. The establishment of the “pledged group” is therefore premised on an “oath,” a “third-party” element, yet quite distinctive of the traditional notion of Rousseau’s “social contract.” An oath is in fact an inherent “practical device” to mediate reciprocity among the various members of the group. Unlike the rather “independent” position of the social contract, the pledge is always relational and immanent within the social field. Sartre wrote: “[The oath] cannot be presented as a possibility for the individual, unless it is assumed that the possibility is social and that it appears only on the basis of groups which are already bound by a pledge.”12 The internal mediation of the pledge thus gives rise to a sense of fraternity since every member is obliged to supply mutual help to one another. But because of the relational dimension of this oath, it immediately marks Sartre’s pessimism of the pledged group.

Suffice it to say that the core foundation of this organizational process is fear—fear of revolutionary betrayal or treason. The pledge will therefore necessarily be sustained and perpetuated by an ambience of terror. Since each member of the group does not fully know if the other is afraid enough of such betrayal, the group must establish in its midst a terroristic reciprocity in order to equalize this fear in everyone, thus ultimately subordinating everyone linked to that fear. Such reactionary “fear of fear” in relation to the pledge is what Sartre called the “fraternity-terror.” This atmospheric terror pressures each individual to constantly find the “class traitor” within the group in order to balance the fear of treason among them. Paradoxically, the more the members attempt to purge the

“class enemy,” the more they find themselves becoming submissive to this fear, insofar as the “class traitor” is a highly imaginary construct to begin with. Surprisingly, this secondary “fear of fear” did not enter the revolutionary alliances in May ’68. As Sartre wonderfully discovered:

For me, the movement in May was the first large scale social movement which temporarily brought about something akin to freedom and which then tried to conceive of what freedom in action is. And this movement produced people—including me—who decided that now they have to try to describe positively what freedom is when it is conceived as a political end. What were the people really demanding from the barricades in May 1968? Nothing, or at least nothing specific that power could have given them. In other words, they were asking for everything: freedom.13

However, while the absence of the “oath” may have helped preserve many of the creative praxes of the “group-in-fusion” in May ’68, the eternal ambivalence between “demand for nothing” and “demand for everything” linked to the notion of “freedom” was also highly problematic. Many Western commentators were unimpressed by the continuous political oscillations that were suggested by the episodes of ’68. Shortly after the anti-authoritarian uprisings of ’68, Raymond Aron, a prominent left-leaning critic in postwar France, (in)famously branded the events of French May as demonstrating a peculiar “Parisian’ aspect” of “psychodrama,” a narcissistic, self-revoltig “caricature of the revolutionary comedy” without a clear political aim.14 This kind of dismissive observation implied that the anti-authoritarian movement of French ’68 entertained no historical singularity but solely exemplified a farcical repetition of the previous epic episodes. The democratic demands of ’68 were often skeptically portrayed as a ridiculous imitation of the former guillotine of 1789’s French Revolution.

13 Ibid., Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken, trans. Paul Auster and Lydia Davis (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 52. That is why Sartre also commented that the failure to capture power does not necessarily imply that the idea of “cultural revolution” in French May ’68 was simply an echo of other revolutionary sequences such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution. He argued that “on the contrary, it expressed a radical contestation of every established value of the university and society, a way of looking at them as if they had already perished. It is very important that this contestation be maintained.” See Ibid., “Itinerary of a Thought.” New Left Review 58 (November–December 1969): 59.

14 Raymond Aron, The Elusive Revolution: Anatomy of a Student Revolt, trans. Gordon Clough (London: Pall Mall Press), 3; 37. Aron added: “The May crisis developed in a way similar to the crisis of 1848, but more absurdly, and I claim the right to be as severe in my criticism of the events of May 1968 as the socialist Proudhon, the liberal Tocqueville and Karl Marx were in theirs of the imitators of the Great Revolution, the comedians of 1848.” See Ibid., 123.
Influential revisionist historian François Furet took this type of analysis even further ten years after May ’68. He argued that the French revolutionary tradition, including the 1789 insurrections, was never serious at its core. It was similar to a sham carnival. Indeed, Furet reread the epic tradition of the French Revolution as simply an event where “nothing happens.” According to him, the French Revolution did not contain any heroic element in itself. In fact, it was even more prone to a farcical result of the former revolutionary sequence. Contrary to the popular interpretation of the French Revolution as the birth of Republican France, Furet considered it a highly contingent episode in the sense that the revolutionaries of 1789 effortlessly took over the space long annihilated by their historical predecessors. He repeatedly argued that the French Revolution was neither comprised by a collective exercise nor genuine democratic demands but, rather, enjoyed the opportunistic success of the very “vacancy of power” already in place. France in the late eighteenth century, according to Furet, was already a “society without a state.”¹⁵ That is to say, the Revolution defeated and occupied something that did not really exist in the first place, namely, the Ancien Régime (old order).¹⁶ This old order had ceased to function long before the outburst of 1789. In this respect, it was a grand illusion that there was something crucial to capture and overthrow in 1789 when there actually was not. It was, after all, a romantic misrecognition of revolutionary changes. Revolutionary violence, especially the Jacobin terror, in Furet’s view, was fundamentally useless and counterproductive.¹⁷

¹⁶ Furet wrote: “For the revolutionary situation was not only characterized by the power vacuum that was filled by a rush of new forces and by the ‘free’ activity of society. It was bound up with a kind of hypertrophy of historical consciousness and with a system of symbolic representations shared by the social actors. The revolutionary consciousness, from 1789 on, was informed by the illusion of defeating a State that had already ceased to exist, in the name of a coalition of good intentions and of forces that foreshadowed the future.” Ibid., 25.
¹⁷ Ibid., 17. But Jacques Rancière held an opposite attitude to this historical revisionism. He argued that: “History, having become historiography, becomes a division of political science, a teratology or demonology devoted to the study of the aberration that causes the event of speech to proliferate through the cracks in political legitimacy. The end of the scholarly belief or historical study is the abolition of history, where it becomes sociology or political science. The completion of the scholarly revision of the Revolution perhaps signals the closure of the age of history.” See Jacques Rancière, The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 41.
Obviously, there are still some sympathetic commentaries within neoliberalist circles about the revolutionary happenings of May ’68. Some Western scholars, while acknowledging certain democratic traits of the events, are still highly pessimistic about the historical significance of French May ’68, which displayed an unavoidable tragic outcome. What May ’68 demonstrated, according to this view, was characterized by an eventual regression back to the “triumph” of a founding failure—of the etymology of “revolution” itself. The most literal meaning of “revolution,” as in to revolve around again and again, follows the repetitive structure of perpetual returning and endless looping-back. This is ultimately what sociologist Jean-Pierre Le Goff called the legacy of 1968 representing an impasse or an impossible heritage. In his view, the democratic insurrections of ’68 proved to be too fragile in that they could not really overcome the intrinsic deadlock long inhered in the idea of revolution as such—that is, the mundane morning that is painfully realized shortly after the intense excitement of yesterday’s barricades. The revolutionary follow-up was always the most difficult thing to come to grips with.

Le Goff argued that the radicalism of French May ’68 undeniably liberated an immense level of “democratic passions” and, to a certain extent, also upset both the Eurocentric myth of revolution and the rational and ethical foundations of politics. At the same time, he also recognized that the democratic passions liberated from ’68 were embodied and rechanneled by some institutional formats to catalyze certain structural changes. In this respect, the democratic demands could not be fully self-sustaining. Le Goff asked: “[H]ow can one continue to invest the passion that [was] once inspired by the 68ers, only in moderation, circumscribed within democratic institutions? Is passion without utopia possible? Is it able to take root in a democratic organ?” Le Goff summarized that the heirs of ’68 unfortunately promoted a blackened vision of the past, present and future that obstructs the horizon; [they] advance a Great Refusal that would rather not confront possibilities and make choices…. The ‘no’ [of the Refusal] is not supported by an initial ‘yes,’ by a positive affirmation, be it implicit or explicit; it retires unto itself. The primary

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relation of confidence that unites us to the world is fractured, involving a pessimistic paralysis of thought and action, a logic of self-destruction.¹⁹

Having co-written a book called *La Brèche (The Breach)* with Cornelius Castoriadis and Edgar Morin shortly after ’68, Claude Lefort argued that the movements of May ’68 precisely opened up a “breach” that drew an intrusive rupture, however elusive it was, within both capitalist structure and state bureaucracy. In its simplest sense, “to breach” means to break through fortifications, such as the social barriers inherent in the repressive order of knowledge production. During ’68, there was a sudden realization that the fences of capitalist machinery had an opening. The breach was not merely destructive but also contained the potential for creative recompositions and uncustomary concatenations. It created the possibility of a new beginning, “non-static” machines of what Lefort celebrated as “the new disorder.” As the breach *perforates* the state rather than simply captures or takes it over, it simultaneously actualizes itself as a distinctively new form of social organization: a line of escape that is drawn out of the striated spaces of the capitalist realm—that of the university, factories, and the street to finally transform the “non-place” into a new egalitarian field.²⁰ However, the three authors soon conceded that the unexpected outbreak of May ’68 as a social breach was more or less over, due to the overt reemergence of a new and mature capitalist order starting in the 1970s and onward.²¹

However, I argue that the above sympathetic positions on the French social movements are just the opposite side of the same coin to the apparent dismissals of the legacies of ’68 characterized by Aron and Furet’s accounts. Undeniably, Le Goff’s analysis, which was indeed shared by many neoliberalist commentators on the contemporary scene, was somehow modified from Aron’s

¹⁹ Ibid., 474.
²¹ In the same book, Edgar Morin argued that, contrary to Lefort, May ’68 was a typical logic of revolutionary failure that justified this extension of the political to encompass the full range of everyday activities. More precisely, the recourse to an explicitly cultural politic followed from a logic of structural repetition that branded “all the substitute political powers, including the Federation of the Left and the Communist Party” as simple variants of a bureaucratic capitalist theme. See Ibid., 65.
conservative account of May ’68. Yet this overtly pragmatic emphasis on the traumatic “morning after,” like the aforementioned caricature by Aron, may still fail to truly perceive the historical novelties of ’68 as such. If the democratic demands of French May ’68 were always organized based on a “structural impasse,” according to Le Goff, this kind of woeful historical interpretation may also be structured around the same form of “internal deadlock” that kept justifying a revolutionary impossibility, since its analysis also revolved and looped around a predetermined dismissal of the “impossible legacies” of the ’68 events. That is to say, this sort of commentary offers nothing new about the specificity of the historical happenings.

As a mostly factual description premised on a vain conclusion, such a diagnosis is indeed a universally “safe” verdict, which normally involves no true groundbreaking or debatable arguments but instead a recuperation of existing observations. Even so, by constantly referring back to a preestablished impossibility of revolution, this seemingly “realistic” interpretation of ’68 is simply a repeated justification for its own laziness and passivity in persistently rethinking the new in spite of the sheer difficulty of truly arriving at the new. This historical logic without genuine engagement with history ultimately reaffirms nothing but perhaps the capitalist status quo. Indeed, I argue that such a quasi-objective approach to ’68 was an admirably convenient way of overturning and ruling out a further and perhaps more innovative historical reinterpretation to come.

What is really at stake here is that the various neoliberalist social commentaries, which constantly dismissed the revolutionary potentials of ’68, are paradoxically part of the “legacies of May ’68” as a whole. Unfortunately, the spontaneous uprising in ’68 also proved to be, unfortunately, quite elusive and ambiguous. The various legitimacy crises posed by the rare alliances between students and workers were quickly addressed by the French state, which received massive support from the general public and eventually advanced a new campaign of moral restoration. As the most symptomatic consequence of the episode, many ex-68ers retreated to the Right Bank and compromised with the state ideology shortly after the failure to overthrow capitalist ideology and its allying
technocratic governance. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the most famous spokesperson of ’68 and now the co-president of the Green Party in the European Parliament, recently argued that May 1968 “won culturally but lost politically.” According to Cohn-Bendit, it would be better to “forget” the legacies of May ’68 in order to focus on the truly important issues today concerning the new multilateral and radically diffused global setting.

I argue that the neoliberalist dismissals of 1968 should not be simply trivialized as empty rhetoric. With important epistemological and ideological support, the dismissive commentary above has helped galvanize and strengthen the right-wing populist strategy so prominent today. Approaching the 40th anniversary of May ’68 in 2007, Nicholas Sarkozy, who at the time was a French presidential candidate receiving public support from ex-Maoist leaders such as André Glucksmann, infamously called for a “liquidation of May ’68.” He argued that 1968 bred nothing but moral weakening, intellectual relativism, and a persistent decline of national identification within Western societies. Sarkozy henceforth urged a rehabilitation of the work ethic and national respect and pledged that he would tighten the rules of the immigration policy and the social welfare system in Republican France.


23 Ibid., 118.

24 According to Daniel Gordon, the strategic use of the “anti-68” sentiment appropriated by Sarkozy, who belongs to the generation just after ’68, was indeed very appealing as a convincing rightist populist rhetoric, especially for those people who belonged to the pre-68 generation and who are now still very influential in the business and political sectors. See Daniel A. Gordon, “Liquidating May ’68? Generational Trajectories of the 2007 Presidential Candidates.” Modern & Contemporary France 16, no. 2 (May 2008): 156.

25 Sarkozy stated: “May ’68 had imposed intellectual and moral relativism on us all. The heirs of ’68 have imposed the idea that everything has the same worth, that there is no difference between the true and the false, between the beautiful and the ugly and that the victim counts for less than the delinquent…. The inheritance of May ’68 has introduced cynicism in society and politics…. Remember the slogan of May ’68, painted on the walls of the Sorbonne: ‘Live without obligations and enjoy without commitments’. This is how the inheritance of May ’68 has wiped out the school of thought of Jules Ferry in the French Left, which was a school that praised excellence, merit, respect, and civic duty…. These [the immigrant youth living in the banlieue areas] are the heirs of May ’68, who denigrate the national identity, who encourage hatred of the family, of society, of the state, of the nation, of the Republic…. I propose to the French people that we restore morality, authority, and love of country to politics.” See Nicholas Sarkozy, “Discours à Bercy,” [Speech in Bercy]. Union pour un mouvement populaire, April 29, 2007: http://www.u-m-p.org/site/index.php/s_informer/discours/nicholas_sarkozy_a_bercy (accessed May 8, 2008).
But can the legacies of May ’68 simply be forgotten and liquidated? Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, in their book Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme (The New Spirit of Capitalism), argued that the seeming contrast between the high communist years of 1968–1978 and the sharp capitalist turn of 1985–1995 in French political culture indeed shared a curious homology. The book aimed to investigate how this new and infectious form of capitalism, with an even more disastrous impact on the fabric of social life than its predecessors, managed to present itself so smoothly and insidiously in France without drawing either critical attention or organized resistance, which were so vigorous just a decade previously. Boltanski and Chiapello suggested that the radical social critique on the Gaullist state machinery in 1968 paradoxically helped clear up the latent obstacles to capitalist development and expansion, thus eventually facilitating its continual ruling and dominance.

In fact, one major difficulty of this research is that the theoretical challenges and novelties posed by these profound critiques and self-critiques that emerged after 1968 may have already been hijacked and even precontained by the capitalist machinery to help advance a certain “liberal” and “radical” image of its own as early as the 1980s. To a certain extent, the philosophical insights and novel ideas yielded in May ’68 unfortunately helped breed a new form of cynical wisdom that exactly fit the bill of continuous capitalist self-refashioning. Slavoj Žižek gave an example on numerous occasions about seeing a French yuppie on the Paris underground reading Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s Qu’est-ce que la philosophie? (What Is Philosophy?). What is really sarcastic about this scene is that this theoretical work was written precisely in opposition to yuppies’ eclectic reading of radical ideas in the post-1968 French intellectual climate. Žižek further argued that this incident was not just a simple irony. Instead, it pertained to a wider cultural symptom of the so-called “libidinal triumph” and “liberation of desires” that emerged in the capitalist West after 1968.

Calling Deleuzian ideas “the ideologist of late capitalism,” Žižek believed that the post-1968 radical writings, which persistently glorified creativity and affective emotions, first and foremost exemplified yuppies’ mentality and consumerist logic.\textsuperscript{28} He claimed that Deleuzian thought and other Western ideas that constantly valorized imaginative faculties epitomized a “false subversive radicalization that fits the existing power constellation perfectly” in the climate of post-1968 Paris.\textsuperscript{29} By awakening one’s innermost desires to “demand the impossible” (a famous slogan in ’68 was “Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible”), the Deleuzian insights romanticized and even mythicized an “alternative” mode of life attitudes and revolutionary sensibilities under the umbrella of the so-called sixties’ “spirit of Refusal” (with a capital R). Without truly problematizing this radical “spirit of Refusal” at its heart, the creative novelties of the 1960s paradoxically served as a silent companion to various capitalist self-transformations in global lifestyles and the everyday cultures (as evidenced in recent Adidas’s slogan “Impossible is nothing” and in Nike’s jingle “Just do it”).

**Research Significance**

However, if we simply follow and embrace the above Žižek’s analysis on ’68 in its entirety, one can easily fall into the trap of those rightist responses that are exactly prescribed by the various neoliberalists mentioned before, thus ultimately reinforcing the historical stereotypes about the movements of French May as a revolutionary “failure.” In this respect, in order to analyze the legacies of May ’68 more deeply and critically, I argue that one must also include the potentially dismissive, if not counterproductive, neoliberalist accounts within the creative praxes and novelties of ’68. Unlike the previous rather optimistic analysis by Sartre, the symptomatic popularity of revolutionary “betrayal” among many May ’68 protagonists since the late 1970s may have simultaneously revealed that the “pledge” as such could have already been established during many revolutionary alliances in ’68 in order to spread the “fear of treason” among the social participants. However, for structural reasons, one cannot easily detect the presence of this pledge due to the constant confusion and mixing between the

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London & New York: Verso, 1999), 250–251.
notions of “enemy” and “comrade” within the allied groups in French May ’68. In those days, one found it very difficult to truly discern whether the trade unions, the PCF, or even the student leaders were fighting “for” or standing “against” the people. Because there was a multiplicity of voices and social inquiries, it was difficult for the participants at this epoch to distinguish “noises” from true revolutionary “demands.” In this respect, Sylvain Lazarus argued that May ’68 was still bound up with a kind of “historicism” in which the “caesura” or the radical opening of the episode “does not support a reading of the event” but “serves only as a marker between anterior and posterior.”

According to Alain Badiou, who borrowed from Lazarus’s idea of “obscure eventualty,” May ’68 was “an event-ality still suspended from its name.” The historical novelty of ’68 is still quite ambiguous today because it has yet to truly find and arrest its nominal singularity. Unlike the well-known revolutionary dates of October 1917 and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Badiou argued that May ’68 was incapable of being an entirely independent sequence that possessed an intellectual and conceptual self-evidence. Historically speaking, unlike other European insurrections of the 1960s, May ’68 undeniably had the most profound and enduring historical ties with the political lessons from Maoist China. Although the events of ’68 were determined by a number of transnational characters and parameters that included, for example, anti-American imperialism in the Vietnam War, Algerian decolonializations, and the armed struggles in Latin American, only in France was it so intimately connected to the onset of the Maoist Cultural Revolution from the very beginning.

32 Badiou elaborated “There are such eventualties—that is, eventualties such that the statements that can be detached from them, or the names used to refer to them, never manage to justify the practice of the sequence, never manage to stabilize it…. As for May 1968, we’ve drifted this way and that, perhaps because it is an event belonging to precisely that time when we were passing from the old conception of politics to something else, so that, as a result, the name ‘revolution’ wasn’t the right name.” Ibid., 126–127.
As Badiou has suggested, French Maoism between 1967 and 1975 was precisely the “only innovative political tendency in France in the aftermath of May ’68.”\(^{33}\) It was quite evident that various prominent left-leaning French intellectuals of that era, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Philippe Sollers, Jean-Luc Godard, Louis Althusser, and Althusser’s young students at Rue d’Ulm, were particularly stirred up, inspired, and encouraged by Maoist revolutionary doctrine to uncompromisingly wage a war against both the bourgeois and revisionist ideologies, especially in the wake of the Sino-Soviet Split. Peter Starr wrote that “in the absence of concrete details, Mao’s Cultural Revolution came to serve as a screen for the projection of French cultural-political fantasies, especially among proponents of a new, revolutionary *écriture.*”\(^{34}\) Compared to other First-World left-leaning movements, May ’68 was among the few that took on such an explicit “Chinese theme” in making many of the political claims and demands for self-agency, spanning from the concerns for prisoners’ conditions and the fight for civil rights to women’s liberation and the queer movement, at least between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. Hence, the true historical significance of May ’68, as Badiou argued, could not actually be conceived without the gigantic insurrections of the Chinese Cultural Revolution during the same revolutionary course and continuum of the 1960s. The lessons of the Cultural Revolution, despite all their traumatic associations, provided a crucial epistemological backdrop that allowed the revolutionary potentialities of May ’68 to take shape.

Epistemologically speaking, the events of May ’68 were characterized by two kinds of “refusals.” First, it was distinguished by its refusal of the paternal Gaullist order. Second, there was an even more profound refusal of the presence of the revisionist PCF and its associated trade union organs, which immediately established themselves as the representative agent, or an “oath,” of students and workers in ’68. Yet these two refusals, especially the second one, were perhaps unable to claim a self-expressive character as a concrete lesson. In Badiou’s view, May ’68’s refusals of the revisionist tendencies within the fused groups could only be truly comprehended in relation to the historical happenings of the Cultural


\(^{34}\) See Starr, 90.
Revolution, which sought to overcome both the bourgeois counterrevolution and reactionary tendencies that resided in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Calling the Cultural Revolution a category of “political saturation,” Badiou defended the Maoist experiment as “the last significant political sequence that is still internal to the party-state” and that “without the saturation of the sixties and seventies, nothing would as yet be thinkable, outside the specter of the party-state, or the parties-state.”35 This represented both a refusal of Stalinism and an attempt to mobilize the masses to defend the revolution in China against the capitalist bureaucracy that was growing inside the Party. The Cultural Revolution unleashed a revolutionary storm whose creativity inspired revolutionary struggles beyond China. However, the “capitalist roaders” (i.e., Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping) inside the Party fought back and did not hesitate to use the elements of state power that they controlled to crush the insurgent masses—while at the same time organizing their own bands of conservative Red Guards to oppose the revolutionary Red Guards. Yet the true profundity of the Cultural Revolution was that, albeit all the violence involved, it constantly rejected and diminished the presupposed symbolic power of the immanent “class enemy” within the CCP. The notion of the internal “capitalist roader,” under the Maoist cultural revolutionary mindset, was just a paper tiger and nothing more. In this respect, Badiou summarized: “In the end, the Cultural Revolution, even in its very impasse, bears witness to the impossibility truly and globally to free politics from the framework of the party-State that imprisons it.”36

Undoubtedly, there has been a huge amount of historical studies, philosophical disseminations, testimonies, autobiographies, and literary and film representations that have attempted to recast the legacies of May ’68 as both opportunity and failure in relation to Western capitalist imperialism. However, its excessive and still-ongoing intellectual and cultural productions also testify to the

35 Badiou, “The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?,” trans. Bruno Bosteels. Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique 13, no. 3 (2005): 482–483. At this point, according to Badiou, Mao retreated from the threat of civil war. He was reluctant to accept the eventual destruction of the Communist Party that would be the next logical sequence after the Shanghai Commune. When Mao died in 1976, Deng Xiaoping, who was one of the main criticized targets in the Cultural Revolution, along with Liu Shaoqi, was able to seize control of the CCP and subsequently restore capitalism in China. See Ibid.

36 Ibid., 514.
traumatic fact that the genuinely novel political character of ’68 may have yet to be sufficiently addressed and actualized in those various accounts and reinterpretations, which are usually torn between a nostalgic mode and an apologetic frame of mind. Many contemporary literatures about this historical episode lack a genuinely dialectical interpretation between French May ’68 and the Cultural Revolution. Compared to the gigantic volume of literature on May ’68, there are just a handful of existing literature and in-depth studies that really address the Chinese political influences on the French leftist scene from the 1960s onward.37

There are basically no existing scholarly studies that rehistoricize how the Maoist influences of the 1960s in fact entertained the dimensions of both “revolution” and “reaction” among a chain of European leftist intellectuals and cultural activists before, during, and after ’68. In this thesis, I will argue that the predominant neoliberalist demonization of Maoist politics and social experiments starting from the late 1970s has altogether concealed many interesting, contestatory, and historical Chinese characters long embedded within the historical coordinates of May ’68 itself. The available literature on French Maoism is still somehow entrapped in a traditional Eurocentric mode of thought that ahistorically attributes the signifier of “China” to being eternally unchanging within French intellectual imaginations in the 1960s and 1970s. Recently, in the preface to his book *White Mythologies* republished in the 1990s, Robert Young wrote:

> It has become customary nowadays to dismiss Mao and Maoism. This is a mistake, if it leads to the underestimation of the historical importance of Maoism to theory from the time of the Cultural Revolution onwards, and its continuing effects in theory today. Accounts of post-structuralism consistently underemphasize the importance of Maoism in the Paris of the 1960s and 1970s, the breadth and depth of its influence, the extent to which French Sinophilia

contributed to the development of critical perspectives on Western culture and generated interest in forms of alterity.  

On the other hand, there are even less (or simply none) Chinese-written texts that have attempted to dialectically link the lessons of the Cultural Revolution with French May ’68. Despite the gigantic amount of historical studies on the Cultural Revolution today, there is simultaneously an intellectual tendency to self-confine the whole Maoist episode to a local phenomenon irrelevant to the social uprisings that happened around the globe, especially the bourgeois-led insurrections that emerged in the First World. The Chinese studies on the Cultural Revolution are mainly oriented toward a Sinocentric mindset that usually bypasses the necessity of reinscribing the Maoist lessons into the various parallel Western social phenomena advanced during the same revolutionary period for a new cross-cultural rereading of both contexts. But I will not simply adopt a “transnational” or “transhistorical” perspective to investigate this crucial Sino-French connection in my dissertation. I argue that the appropriation of a “comparative” methodology in analyzing the historical links between France and China is still largely confined to a Eurocentric perspective, if we fail to problematize the sheer epistemological setting behind this notion of “transnationality” from the very outset. How can one keep questioning the symbolic legitimacy of transhistorical knowledge while remaining one’s investigation cross-cultural? This thesis intends to take this challenge at face value by resurfacing a dialectical and revolutionary East-West nexus that has been partially opened up in the global sixties.

**Research Methods, Hypotheses, and Objectives**

The 1960s was a moment where the notion of “culture” was beautifully pluralized and liberated outside the traditional Eurocentric confines in the sense that it began to equally acknowledge both “elitist” and “popular” ways of cultural

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39 Julian Jackson, while recently reviewing the a number of commemorative and dismissive literature on May ’68 at its forty anniversary in 2008, recognized that there was an urgent intellectual need to adopt a more “transnational” and “comparative” historical perspective, instead of confining back to the traditional self-contained mode of historical interpretations. See Julian Jackson, “Mystery of May 1968.” *French Historical Studies* 33, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 650.
representation on the same horizon. On the other hand, the same moment led to a constant innovation of ideas and techniques, not only in intellectual labors but also in cultural productions. In this sense, it is important to investigate how “culture” has been reworked and redefined in the West since 1968. I believe that this is precisely the area that traditional intellectual histories fail to encompass. This dissertation primarily seeks to reexamine how different versions of “China” have been reimagined by a wide set of Western literary and cultural representations including travel writings, novels, memoirs, and films, under the profound liberating influences of May ’68. In this study, I will use different forms of cultural representations, such as the travel writings on Mao’s China portrayed by the avant-garde Parisian Tel Quel writers, an understudied historical fiction about the ideological correlations between the Prague Spring and May ’68 by famous Czechoslovakian-French writer Milan Kundera, and, most of all, a wide range of cinematic texts produced between the 1960s and the 2000s, as my primary textual documents in an attempt to reconstruct some of the truly alternative historical imaginations of this epoch through mainly the theoretical optics of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Badiouan philosophy.

On the other hand, this study also aims to deviate from the predominant methodologies of cultural histories, which seldom regard cinematic texts as legitimate data for rigorous historiographical studies. I will use films as my primary texts in this research as I argue that the innovations in cinematic productions since the 1960s gave rise to a new set of interesting political questions of this era. Despite the fact that film studies and historiography are seldom studied as an organic unit in the dominant academic circles today, I will argue that the era of the sixties has also paved a rare opportunity to outline many innovative connections between history and cinema. Leftist film production collectives such as the Dziga Vertov Group established by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin were pronouncedly uncompromising to capitalism. The practice of filmmaking, according to the group’s philosophy, was an artistic extension to its beliefs in Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. They were “not to make political films,” but “to make films politically.” Many film movements happened around the globe as they bred numerous New Wave generations in the 1960s. There were revolutionary thinking and practices in both Western cinema (e.g.,
“countercinema” and women’s cinema) and films produced in the Third World (e.g., “third cinema” in Latin America).

But more importantly, it was the precisely the revolutionary potentials of cinema that was radicalized as an ideal apparatus to help rethink the intricate relationship between aesthetics and politics. During this era, cinematic productions were even heavily related to ongoing leftist social movements. Joris Ivens, as a socially committed documentarian, also advanced a new style of documentary filmmaking that sought to blend the innovative techniques of cinéma vérité (truth cinema) and direct cinema with the empirical realities of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Unlike today’s capitalist logic that has somewhat dichotomized aesthetics and politics into two separate realms, the boundaries between film and social movements were radically blurred in the 1960s. The creative blending of cinematic and political spheres was a unique social experience of the sixties. Jean-Pierre Jeancolas stated that “May ’68 had been one of the first historical events in which the cinema intervened in order to record scattered moments of that unlikely month, but also as an agent of militant action.”

The notion of “cinephilia,” according to Jacques Rancière, was not just about cinema-loving but also a continuous passion to transgress the traditional borders between art and life. This radical aspect of cinema has been now relegated to a minor option within our daily lives.

Interestingly, the demise of cinephilia in the 1970s can be considered another form of cultural liberation. Influenced by the spirit of the 1960s, the

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41 Rancière said: “Cinema is not only an art; cinema is a specific sensorium, cinema is a way of living the shadows … a film is never given as a whole … cinephilia, specifically French cinephilia of the fifties and the sixties, was not only a kind of love, it was also a kind of polemical intervention because what is specific to cinema is also the uncertainty of the border between high art and popular art, between art and entertainment.” See Rancière, “Re-visions: Remarks on the Love of Cinema: An Interview by Oliver Davis.” *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 3 (2011): 295. Elsewhere, Rancière also argued, cinema as such is always a “thwarted fable.” That is to say, film storytelling is neither a totally “false” narrative that is arbitrarily imposed by the storyteller nor a completely “true” expression that is entirely devoid of mediations. See Ibid., *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 1; 17-19.
42 Writing ten years after May ’68, another commentator noted that “there are no cinephiles any more, and we shouldn’t look too far for the reason: there is not … one cinema any more. To be more specific, there is no auteur cinema any more, there are no cinema auteurs any more … there are only films, and that’s fine.” See Bérénice Reynaud, “Introduction: *Cahiers du Cinéma* 1973–
traditional *auteur* mode of filmmaking had been somewhat challenged and deconstructed in the early 1970s, while the cultural values of popular features had become increasingly recognized in the West. Some even considered the demise of Western authorship after '68 a victory in disguise in terms of emancipatory politics. The traditional notion of cinematic representation has been expanded to encompass the different layers of social aspects such as institutional negotiations and the dynamics of readership in the late 1960s. Indeed, during the heyday of the sixties, films presented groundbreaking innovations and breakthroughs, not only in aesthetic and political terms but also in the self-agency of the audiences. This thesis therefore encompasses different film genres (e.g., *auteur* works, documentaries, popular features, and avant-garde films) and includes different types of Western filmmakers, ranging from auteur directors like Bernardo Bertolucci and Jean-Luc Godard, lesser known figures like René Viénét and Philippe Garrel, commercial producers like Jean Yanne, and female director Camille de Casabianca, to reactivate both of the above proliferating and egalitarian spirits of the 1960s. In short, my primary research focus is precisely to call into question, through the optics of their inherent “Chinese associations,” the dominant narratives about the movements of May '68 as merely a smoothening agent of massive “cultural reforms” in the capitalist West, instead of a continuous response toward the Maoist egalitarian principles that keeps unflaggingly catalyzing genuine political transformations in the sphere of global communitarian and quotidian practices.

However, one may ask: why cinema in particular? Why not other art genres? Suffice it to say that films are not always considered totally legitimate artworks or autonomous self-expressions because they are often associated with state interventions and the ideology of the dominant powers. For example, films like *Chung Kuo-Cina* created massive public controversy in China during the 1970s. Undeniably, one dominant interpretation is that this documentary produced by Michelangelo Antonioni in 1972 had been tragically mobilized as an ideological scapegoat to help stir up certain propagandistic campaigns in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). What is really at stake here is that the realist...
properties of cinematic vehicles were considered the best agent for rank-and-file
Chinese Party officials to attack Western bourgeois ideas during the Cultural
Revolution. Upon closer analysis, the documentary work as such does not simply
serve as Chinese propaganda. Unlike many other Western art forms which often
idealisticaly emphasize an absolute artistic autonomy of the author, I will argue
that it is precisely the sheer ambivalence between aesthetic self-expressions and
official propaganda pertaining to many controversial cinematic works in this
thesis that embody a different kind of Sino-Western cultural encounter of this
epoch. This encounter, as I believe, involved the constant negotiations between
the art and the state without being entirely foreclosed by one another.

But at the same time, there is still a potential risk concerning the
overreliance on Western film texts as the predominant cultural representation of
the 1960s. In fact, films are not only associated with state ideology; they are also
linked to commercial propagation. This is why films are particularly chosen as a
smoothening and depoliticizing agent to help perpetuate the functioning and work
etic of capitalist machinery. After a decade of worldwide leftist insurrections
between the 1960s and the 1970s, cinematic expressions were reappropriated by
the capitalist state as an ideal channel to help anesthetize social dissent. From the
1970s onward, many radical Western leftists chose to go into the film industry,
which was arguably a “less risky” option to continue their quest for social
alternatives. The overemphasis of Western films, therefore, can lead to a
reaaffirmation of the existing capitalist stereotypes of the sixties—the pluralization
of cultural identities—that may eventually conceal the true historical singularity
of China. Hence, another crucial aspect of my hypothesis of “China” employed in
this thesis is in fact tied to a unique set of Maoist historical realities that can offer
a continuous challenge to various symbolic reappropriations of the Chinese
lessons. In this same respect, I shall risk being accused of having regressed to the
sheer essentialization and idealization of “China” that typified the pre-1968
Eurocentric model.

My research hypothesis may be considered too old-fashioned compared to
the predominant models of new historicism and Foucauldian genealogy that seeks
to constantly problematize Western universal values today. Moreover, my
insistence on this Chinese singularity may also seem to deviate from the intellectual and cultural liberations brought forth by May ’68. However, I do not believe that these two positions are contradictory. Rather, I view this recuperation of Chinese singularity as a logical continuation and development of the unrealized liberations of 1968. As this study will gradually unfold, this kind of critical query and self-reflection—of whether the various European fascinations with the Maoist experiments during and after May ’68 were really essentializing China—had already been elusively raised in the 1970s, before the wholesale dissociation between theoretical abstractions and political subjectivity that characterizes the ethos of postmodern sophisms from the 1980s onward.

Contrary to many existing neoliberalist interpretations today which usually construe the Western Maoist fascinations as a display of historical ignorance toward the political realities of the Third World, this thesis will show that many European intellectuals and artists during the 1970s have been in fact already fairly well-informed about the Maoist violence involved in the movements of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Intellectuals like Julia Kristeva and Philippe Sollers were, on the one hand, well aware of the fact that Mao’s China bore a certain structural homology to the Soviet totalitarian regime. Yet, on the other hand, the most common question among those reflexive leftists was how could one maintain certain revolutionary aspirations towards China while at the same time being inevitably shaken by the news of Maoist violence towards her people? In the 1970s, the radical theoretical innovations that emerged in ’68 were not fully institutionalized as to what we now come to know the “French Theory” today. Rather, the ’68 ideas at this stage were more approximated to an ensemble of conflicting insights than to a system of theoretical beliefs. Instead of being a unified theoretical umbrella, these Western theories, which were dialectically connected to the changing Chinese political realities of the 1960s and the 1970s, were still subject to constant rereadings and reinterpretations.

In fact, there is an irrefutable story of revolutionary faithfulness among a spectrum of French Maoists during this epoch. That is why the plot of revolutionary treason in French Maoism can only, at best, be partially correct about French Maoism. Unlike many dismissive social commentaries which
associate with the heyday of French Maoism as a matter of transient revolutionary exoticism, this political episode was indeed far more enduring than elusive. According to Badiou, who still proclaims himself a “Maoist,” there were indeed quite a few committed French leftists who faithfully held and practiced an uncompromising double allegiance, “a fidelity to two entangled events” of May ’68 and the Chinese Cultural Revolution between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. During those days, several politically engaged intellectuals and innovative artists in Europe, such as Joris Ivens and the Tel Quel group, respectively defied the emerging Western reactionary current by continuously reworking new cultural and intellectual dialogues with revolutionary China as an ethical response to the political consequences and creative novelties of ’68.

Despite entertaining varying degrees of this “sinicizing turn,” most acknowledged that the name “China” was dialectically tied to a unique historical reality beyond both radically capitalist development and the Soviet experience. “China,” as an ongoing communist laboratory on both cultural and political fronts between the 1960s and 1970s, also served as a unique kind of nodal point for those who were politicized by the events of May ’68 to continually experiment with new revolutionary possibilities and alliances against the hegemonic state restoration in a post-1968 dystopian intellectual climate. Marxist historian Arif Dirlik argued that the name “Mao” did not simply represent a remote figure or a “principal of politics” that merely inspired and taught other revolutionary struggles during the 1960s and 1970s. He wrote: “Mao, of course, did serve as a political agent, playing a role in the initiation of the Cultural Revolution, as well as intervening personally at crucial points.” But more importantly, Mao also embodied the principle of politics that was constantly open to interpretations and even conflicting readings. “China,” to Western sympathizers, precisely embodied the Janus-face of political “principal” and “principle” to help perpetuate a dialectical thinking of revolution as such. In this sense, my recuperation of “China” in this study can be, to a certain extent, conceived as a

43 Badiou, Ethics, 42.
kind of strategic relay toward the various historical novelties and insights that should have been partially opened in post-1968 contexts to keep rethinking and reimagining new social alternatives and egalitarian possibilities.

Therefore, I view my methodology more as an internal critique of the so-called “May ’68 thoughts” than simply an explicit disavowal of the latter. I perceive my approach as being not entirely groundbreaking in defying all the intellectual legacies of the ’60s. Quite the contrary, I treat this exercise as a strategic recuperation of the unrealized revolutionary potentials and promises of the epoch that are now living under the all-encompassing shadow of a global capitalist structure. I call this recuperative gesture the “refusal of refusal”; that is to say, the continuous relay designated as an overt reabsorption of all the revolutionary novelties—the “two refusals” of capitalist hegemony and Soviet revisionism—that were opened up in May 1968. Rather, I consider this kind of tactical reactivation and repoliticization in relation to Western imaginations of “China” a highly subversive act that inherently refuses the lures of symbolic containment. In my view, the ambiguous legacies of “May ’68 thoughts” precisely epitomized the social symptoms of capitalist developments at large.

I also argue that this further refusal of overtly isolating the profound theoretical insights of ’68 from the invasive capitalist network enables one to remain truly faithful to the same revolutionary process that began in the world sixties. To facilitate this process, I will try to draw a parallel reference to a familiar revolutionary virtue long implicated in an old Chinese fable about a “Foolish Old Man” who is determined to remove the two lingering mountains that obstruct his way. Historically speaking, this fable was repeatedly recalled by Mao to encourage the continuous resistance of his people against the class enemies of communist China during his reign. In a renowned revolutionary speech that called for persistent struggles against the ongoing and lingering imperialist and feudalist tendencies in 1940s China, Mao recounted the fable as follows:

It tells of an old man who lived in northern China long, long ago and was known as the Foolish Old Man of North Mountain. His house faced south and beyond his doorway stood the two great peaks, Taihang and Wangwu, obstructing the way. He called his sons, and hoe in hand they began to dig up these mountains with great determination. Another greybeard, known as the Wise Old Man, saw
them and said derisively, ‘How silly of you to do this! It is quite impossible for you few to dig up these two huge mountains.’ The Foolish Old Man replied, ‘When I die, my sons will carry on; when they die, they will be my grandsons, and then their son and grandsons, and so on to infinity. High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher and with every bit we dig, they will be that much lower. Why can’t we clear them away?’… God was moved by this, and he sent down two angels, who carried the mountains away on their backs. Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism… We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too will touch God’s heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people.45

At first glance, the main virtue of this Foolish Old Man is his voluntary assumption of this “impossible” moving task resting on his shoulders and refusing the inactive posture of the Wise Old Man in relation to the two seemingly “unmovable” mountains. From an alternative angle, the true courage of this Foolish Old Man is that he bears and entertains an unshakable belief or confidence in the eventual triumph of removing both mountains thanks to the faithfulness of his offspring, who will continuously take on this gigantic task after his death. In other words, the confidence of the Foolish Old Man is not just directed at an anticipated final triumph. Instead, the Foolish Old Man’s assumption of the moving task fully demonstrates and acts out his confidence in the fidelity of his future offspring, who will persistently take up the same mission despite the assumed uncertainties of the future. This is precisely what Badiou called, while analyzing the same fable in his Théorie du sujet (Theory of the Subject), the “confidence in confidence” as a true revolutionary relay to suspend the ridicule of the Wise Old Man, who trivializes and belittles the continuous revolutionary project as being highly “improbable” and “unrealistic.”46

46 See Badiou, Theory of the Subject, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London & New York: Continuum, 2009), 326. Badiou also offered an interesting study of the behavior of the Foolish Old Man: “By attempting to move the mountain with a pickaxe, old Yukong turns it into the pretext for an impossible confidence. He courageously subjectivizes in discourse some point of the real—conceived as impossibility with respect to the rule—and takes it upon himself to divide this rule, that is, to attack the real, at the price of countless jibes. If the good genie then moves the mountain—the relay of belief, now subordinated to confidence—one should not at all see in it the multinational wisdom whereby ‘Heaven helps those who help themselves,’ but the conviction that having confidence in oneself, in the mode of the destructive scission of local constraints, generalizes the process of the subject.” See Ibid.
While I strongly agree with Badiou’s insight, there is still a minor remark that is somewhat neglected here. I argue that the Foolish Old Man’s revolutionary virtue does not simply come down to the confidence and faith in his future offspring. The true profundity is that he does not pronouncedly laugh (back) at the Wise Old Man; rather, he acts purely on his own conviction. That is to say, his assumption of the gigantic moving task as such is simultaneously an act of refusal against the repetition of the same cynical gesture of the Wise Old Man who ridicules him in the first place. By doing so (or by not doing anything other than his assumption of risk), this kind of (in)action of the Foolish Old Man retroactively refuses the symbolic efficiency of a *terroristic reciprocity*—the “pledge” usually established as an internal mediator between him and his “offspring.” In fact, one could also argue that the Foolish Old Man is still able to retain a minimal level of “hope” in arguably the nearest “enemy” and “obstacle” residing in the same social coordinates as his own. I will argue that this form of hope, which is subtly distinguished from traditional Western utopianism, is also profoundly indifferent to the logic of the above terroristic reciprocity, thus avoiding the perpetual oscillations between despair and cheer, disillusionment and fascination. As my thesis primarily argues, this generic version of “hope,” which can only be conceived retrospectively rather than preontologically, is virtually and historically named “China” that keeps continuously resisting the reigning ideology of neoliberalist pessimism today.

Yet this does not necessarily mean that one should embrace this Maoist recuperation of the Foolish Old Man fable at all costs. Quite the contrary, I just argue that one should not simply trivialize this kind of Maoist recuperation of old fables as socially regressive. Undeniably, this Foolish Old Man fable is predominantly written from a male perspective. Many important social issues like women’s liberation are left unaddressed by such revolutionary narrative. Even so, Mao’s recuperation of this Foolish Old Man fable is not ideologically innocent. It is possible to say that the same story was occasionally reappropriated by Mao and his believers as a kind of propagandistic rhetoric in order to maintain Chinese bureaucratic order. However, what I will argue throughout this dissertation is that it would be equally obscene to keep ridiculing this sort of problematic Maoist usage. By simply laughing at the obscenity of Mao, one risks falling back on the
same sort of *terroristic reciprocity*. After all, this study mainly argues that it will be much more constructive if one rereads this nagging “Maoist problem” as a set of **profound contradictions** long pertaining to the Western cultural logic and intellectual innovations advanced since 1968. I argue that this seemingly “redundant” or “generic” gesture of constantly *delinking* the different facets of creative novelties adhering to the aforementioned Western cultural representations of “China” from the unique intellectual innovations of ’68 is highly crucial and remarkable here, insofar as such redoubling of negativity and refusal may dialectically offer us a chance to keep persistently (re)searching for some even better and perhaps more edge-cutting forms of emancipatory possibilities and social alternatives to come.

**Outline of Thesis Chapters**

This thesis is divided into two parts—Part I (1960s–1970s) and Part II (1970s–2000s)—with eleven chapters arranged in chronological order. The first chapter is about the 1967 film *La Chinoise (The Chinese Woman)* by French director Jean-Luc Godard. I will argue that this film manages to recast an alternative representation of French Maoism beyond the ideological confines of male-dominated leftist intellectual discourses shortly before the unexpected outbursts of May ’68. While Godard’s “feminization” of French Maoism has somehow trivialized and reduced the profundity and complexity of Maoist revolutionary ideas, I will also argue that *La Chinoise* is still able to remind one that true revolutionary acts as such are always designated as a political delivery in preparing for some even more egalitarian social possibilities.

Chapter two is about the 1969 film *Vent d’est (The Wind from the East)*, which was collectively produced by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin under the Maoist label of the “Dziga Vertov Group.” I will argue that the collective filmmaking experiment in this film, despite failing to entirely transform traditional bourgeois coordinates of Western cinema into leftist settings after 1968, suggested a new way of countercultural resistance by refusing the lures of both revisionist thinking and consensual trade-unionism that are still highly relevant today.
Chapter three is about a less well-known historical fiction called Život je jinde (Life Is Elsewhere) by prolific Czech-French writer Milan Kundera. Banned in Stalinist Czechoslovakia for its ticklish political contents but rereleased in France during the 1970s, I will argue that this novel does not simply demythicize the cult status of the bourgeois-led May ’68 as a kind of farcical imitation of former revolutionary episodes. This Kundera work also unexpectedly decenters the sheer revolutionary achievement of the Prague Spring as the “perfect model” that epitomized the liberal-democratic ethos of the Soviet Fall in 1989.

The next five chapters are concerned mainly with the period of the 1970s. Chapter four is about a highly controversial documentary Chung Kuo – Cina (China) by renowned Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni. Having been heavily attacked by the Gang of Four as a maliciously “anti-Chinese” text, but later rehabilitated by Deng Xiaoping’s China during the early 1980s, this Antonioni work precisely redefines the ambivalent relationship between the revolutionary and the humanistic, and between the ultra-leftism of the Gang of Four and Zhou Enlai’s diplomatic pragmatics during the early 1970s. While Antonioni’s anthropocentric gesture in this documentary may have somehow idealized the “humanistic” aspect of the Chinese Cultural Revolution that eventually reaffirmed Western subjecthood, I will argue that Chung Kuo is still able to remind one of several much more subtle revolutionary legacies and characters of Maoist China radically beyond the moral convenience of Sino-Western diplomacy that first emerged in the period of détente.

Chapter five is about two so-called “detoured” and Situationist film works—La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques? (Can Dialectics Break Bricks?) and Chinois, encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires! (One More Effort, Chinamen, If You Want to Be Revolutionaries!) by French artist René Viénet. Seeking to liberate from the predominating ideological clichés and triumphant rhetoric of French Maoism and Chinese Maoism, the two films radically transmuted the source materials they were primarily using. While this kind of detouring exercise may still remain as long-standing Western cultural stereotypes of and even prejudices against China, I will argue that these two Viénet works are still able to remind one that the Sino-Western cultural dialogue
of the 1970s could not simply be contained by the emergent liberal ideology in the capitalist West.

Chapter six is about a popular French film called *Les Chinois à Paris (The Chinese in Paris)* directed by Jean Yanne. The film sought to draw an unlikely and speculative parallel between the Maoist revolution and the Nazi Occupation in an attempt to dismiss the idea of “revolution” in the official Gaullist discourses that emerged in the aftermath of World War Two. While the depoliticized “humor” of this film is highly politically incorrect and even offensive to Mao’s China, I will argue that the excessively satirical recasting of Maoism in *Les Chinois*, unlike its other cinematic contemporaries, helped resurface the latent historical parallel between the controversial Vichy collaborative affairs and the problematic revolutionary renegacy among many French Maoists since the 1970s.

Chapter seven is about how a group of post-1968 Parisian literary intellectuals called *Tel Quel*, including Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Philippe Sollers, recount in full divergence their own Chinese experiences and encounters shortly after a brief delegate trip to Mao’s China in 1974. I will argue that this very irreducible Chinese encounter could not be entirely washed away from their intellectual trajectories, despite the fact that the former members of *Tel Quel* subsequently abandoned their revolutionary rhetoric for a seemingly more “diverse” and “tolerant” American dissident culture in the 1980s.

Chapter eight is about two of the most remarkable episodes from an epic documentary called *Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes (How Yukong Moved the Mountains)* by Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens and his French wife Marceline Loridan. This chapter investigates why the two directors uncompromisingly insisted on dialectically combining certain innovative Western documentary film techniques with the profound liberation of people’s voices in Maoist China, despite the various obstacles encountered during and after the filming from both Chinese and Western sides. Although the film has been heavily misunderstood as a propagandistic mouthpiece of the authoritative Chinese regime for a number of years, I will argue that *Yukong* was able to outline an ethical approach to documentary filmmaking that both honored and acknowledged
the genuine multiplicity of the Chinese voices well beyond the capitalist ideology of multiculturalism practiced today.

My ninth chapter concerns the period of the 1980s, the time when Deng Xiaoping started his policy of reform and opening in the PRC. This chapter is about a fictional film called *Pékin-Central (Beijing-Central)* made by the post-1968 female director Camille de Casabianca. Set in the early Chinese reform era, its drama revolves around a group of private French tourists going to China for the very first time, mainly for leisure and relaxation instead of political purposes. I will argue that this cinematic work, unlike many Western feminist artworks of the 1970s and 1980s, gave a shameful reminder of the male chauvinistic tendencies long inhered in the so-called “revolutionary Third Worldism” that began in the heyday of the sixties.

The final two chapters are mainly concerned with the early 2000s. Chapter ten is about the 2003 film *The Dreamers*, directed by Italian auteur filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci, which sought to recapture the revolutionary glories and youthful charms of the sixties. Although Bertolucci’s excessively stylistic, aestheticized cinematic expressions failed to truly reenact the egalitarian spirit of the 1960s, I will argue that *The Dreamers*, unlike many exotic interpretations of the sixties constantly appeared in contemporary Hollywood, is still able to offer an alternative historical account of French May ’68 and its Chinese associations as the “antagonistic partner” of the predominant cultural order.

The final chapter is about a French black-and-white art film called *Les amants reguliers (Regular Lovers)* by French director Philippe Garrel. Although this melancholic and even self-indulgent representation of the personal revolutionary traumas and romantic failures experienced during and after May ’68 may have dismissed the emancipatory possibilities of many interesting Sino-Western cultural meetings and dialogues opened up by the sixties, I will argue that the redemptive dimension of this stark Garrel’s film profoundly helped resurface certain unrealized revolutionary potentials and promises of the world sixties in order to resist an overt romanticization and perfumed banalization of the legacies of 1968 that are highly symptomatic in our global capitalist culture today.
Rue d’Ulm and Other Maoist Factions in the 1960s

Contrary to the contemporary predominant ideology of Western neoliberalism, which has almost consensually discounted all revolutionary possibilities within the existing capitalist system, the notion of “revolution” remained a highly divisive issue among various Western leftist circles in the 1960s, especially shortly after the Sino-Soviet Split. As a highly unique cinematic text that is in many ways seen as a prophetic prelude to the May ’68 events in France, Jean-Luc Godard’s La Chinoise (The Chinese Woman) (1967), which idiosyncratically appropriates the imagery of a young female Maoist student as the embodiment of a sublime revolutionary ideal, actually received a much more polarizing response during the heyday of the sixties than one could have imagined today. When the film was released in 1967, it was heavily trivialized by the French Maoist intellectuals as an unimportant sort of work that bore little historical values and political insights in relation to the representations of the “Chinese fascinations” among many young European leftists. But in a year later, it was exactly the same picture that was valorized as a prophetic prelude to the events of May 68. As Jacques Rancière remarked, La Chinoise was ironically acclaimed as an impeccable anticipation of ’68, as well as “a lucid look at the passing infatuation with Maoism by bourgeois youngsters and at the outcomes of that infatuation: the return to order and terrorism.”

However, both of these commentaries, as I will argue, fail to address the true profundity and unique subtlety of the film itself in relation to the ongoing Cultural Revolution in China and the events of May ’68 to come. This chapter aims at reexamining how Godard’s La Chinoise has indeed presented an

alternative account of French Maoism that neither really focuses on an intellectually abstracted version of “China,” which was irrelevant to the Chinese empirical realities, nor simply takes Maoism as an ideological dogmatic lesson that was blinded to Western epistemological traditions. In addition, I will explain how Godard’s insistence on both art and politics in his cinematic representations is in fact a radically revolutionary act to help preparing for some even more profound social alternatives to come. I argue that the various critical potentials adhering to La Chinoise have not been entirely exhausted in our contemporary capitalist culture, if we are able to cautiously rehistoricize this important cultural text in relation to the dominant narratives of ’68 as a symptomatic rupture, instead of simply mythicizing it as a depoliticized prophecy and historical rapture.

Filmed in both Paris and a remote area, La Chinoise tells the story about how a group of young French students, who mainly have a petty bourgeois background, gather in a borrowed apartment in the suburban district of Nanterre during their summer vacation to undergo a certain kind of personal “ideological reeducation.” The five characters are namely Véronique (Anne Wiazemsky), Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud), Henri (Michel Semeniako), Kirilov (Lex Di Bruijin), and Yvonne (Juliet Berto). The heroine, Véronique, is a student of philosophy at the University of Nanterre (which was historically true in her real life). Her lover, Guillaume, is an avant-garde theatrical actor who is also highly obsessed with Brechtian aesthetics. Another male character, Henri, is the quietest one of the group and holds a rather skeptical opinion about revolutionary voluntarism. As a science major, he is the only group member who officially affiliates with the Young Communist League. Kirilov, the last male character, is a psychologically disturbed artist with constant suicidal thoughts. The seemingly “least” important female character, Yvonne, is a young provincial girl who serves as the group’s unpaid domestic helper and a subsidiary Maoist learner. As a group forming an eclectic collective, they convert the borrowed apartment into a Maoist revolutionary base (which they call the “Aden-Arabie cell”) where they study the ideals of Marx, Lenin, and Mao all day long, often taking turns to host various leftist “pedagogical” sessions as well as calling for a radical transformation of their existing bourgeois way of life.
Upon reading a number of philosophical texts and radical writings that demand revolutionary “violence” and “terror,” all of these Maoist students, except Henri who is highly rational and humanistic, thereby decide to assassinate the Soviet “revisionist” novelist and Minister of Culture, Mikhail Sholokhov, who is in Paris as a cultural ambassador. Véronique, the female protagonist, is chosen to complete the assassination after losing the luck of the draw. She goes to the hotel where the Soviet writer resides, reads his name and room number on the register counter, and then goes to the room to kill the target. Ironically, Véronique read the guest register upside down: Sholokhov’s room number is “23” but instead she goes to room “32” and consequently shoots the wrong man. Soon afterward, she goes back to the hotel once again to repeat her task. After finishing this “revolutionary mission,” the students’ summer interlude is almost over. Meanwhile, the painter, Kirilov, has chosen to commit suicide. Consequently, the remaining four students have to take their own different ideological routes when the apartment is soon returned to Véronique’s bourgeois relatives.

During the late 1960s, the signifier “China” occupied many headlines in the major newspapers in France. In the eyes of many leftist militants of this era, it is not an exaggeration to say that in France, 1967 was a “Chinese” year, as expressed by Hamon and Rotman. Jean-Luc Godard, the cultural emblem of the sixties in Europe, had probably forged the most uncompromising “paradigm shift” among all of his fellow Nouvelle Vague filmmakers. Within a single year, he made a few controversial pictures, Week End and La Chinoise, along with a film segment for a collective documentary entitled Loin du Vietnam (Far from Vietnam) to declare war on the “bourgeois conception of cinema.” He also describes his “Chinese fascination” in Le Monde:

Why La Chinoise? Because everywhere people are speaking about China. Whether it’s a question of oil, the housing crisis, or education, there is always the Chinese example. China proposes solutions that are unique…. What distinguishes the Chinese Revolution and is also emblematic of the Cultural Revolution is Youth: the moral and scientific quest, free from prejudices. One

Godard was not the only European auteur filmmaker who jumped on the bandwagon of “Chinese association.” Indeed, the “Chinese year” was not just limited to the French intellectual scene but also applied to the European leftist intelligentsia as a whole. Tommaso Chiaretti, in introducing Marco Bellocchio’s film _La Cina è vicina (China Is Near)_ (1967) that was released in the same year as _La Chinoise_, recognized the importance of Chinese influences as a revolutionary weapon used to resist the predominant bourgeois ideology in Western Europe. At the same time, he demanded in these cultural works a more historicized reexamination of Mao’s revolution in relation to its social resonances in the capitalist West.\(^{51}\)

In fact, the idea of “China” was also perceived as a profoundly new tactic to combat the emerging revisionism in Europe, especially after the Sino-Soviet Split of the late 1950s. Louis Althusser, the leading philosophy teacher at École normale supérieure on Rue d’Ulm, was arguably the first registered French Communist Party member who genuinely considered the Chinese Cultural Revolution as a radical political weapon to resist Soviet revisionism on the question of de-Stalinization. Althusser’s rereading of Marx through the lens of Chinese Maoism influenced a wide spectrum of the young intellectual generation who were arguably the most prominent left-leaning philosophers in the West nowadays, including Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Étienne Balibar, Pierre Macherey, Jean-Claude Milner, and Jacques-Alain Miller. Introduced by his later collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin to the intellectual circle of Rue d’Ulm, Godard had already started injecting a new critical inquiry into the notion of “authorship” or


\(^{51}\) The critic said: “China. Geographical region, nation, political regime, culture, tradition, rice, wall, cultural revolution, Mao, ideograms, danger, hope. China is an abstraction, a chain of abstractions. To say ‘China is near’ is to turn an abstraction into the pivot of a metaphor. What is it that really is, or ought to be, ‘near’ us? What does it represent for a peaceful bourgeois, for an integrated proletarian, for a student rebelling against school and family, for a young film director, for a housewife? What actually is that much-discussed, puzzling, contradictory movement which upsets exhausted terminology and defines itself ‘cultural revolution’?” See Tommaso Chiaretti, “Allegretto Con Pessimismo,” in _China Is Near_, Marco Belloccio, trans. Judith Green (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970), 1.
auteur cinema that was once fervently elevated by the influential film journal Cahiers du cinéma as a certain elitist and bourgeois conception of art, even prior to the political watershed of May ’68. According to Godard, “the notion of the author is a completely reactionary one,” as it equates with the Soviet revisionist way of thinking that accommodates the possibility of coexisting peacefully with capitalist imperialism.52

Perry Anderson said that Althusser and his students at Rue d’Ulm sought to restore an “organic unity of theory and practice” lost to Western Marxism since the generation of Lenin, Trotsky, and Luxemburg, and yet this was realized anew in Chinese Maoism.53 In the opening passage of his influential essay on the Cultural Revolution, Althusser recognizes the singular achievement of Maoist China: “It is not, first of all, an argument: it is first and foremost a historical fact. It is not one fact among others. It is an unprecedented fact.”54 The Cultural Revolution, according to Althusser, was “neither the exaltation of the blind ‘spontaneism’ of the masses, nor a political ‘adventure’ by which the movement itself appealed to as much as it was necessitated in the mass actions themselves. At the same time, the collective campaigns in China were a “considered, deliberate decision undertaken by the Party,” which rested on the scientific analysis of practical situations.55 The revolutionary potential of Mao’s China recasted by Althusser thus initiated a widespread interest in Maoist philosophy within European intellectual circles, especially in France and Italy. “Althusserianism,” as Julian Bourg suggested, “became a veritable phenomenon among left-leaning students who, through the baby boom’s numbers were beginning to felt, were stuck with a Party whose mythical role in the Resistance paled before its pitiful response to the Algerian War and its seeming abandonment of the world revolutionary cause.”56

52 Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard [Jean-Luc Godard on Jean-Luc Godard], ed. Alain Bergala (Paris: Editions de l’Etoile, 1985), 335.
55 Ibid., 10.
However, there was always a certain discrepancy between Althusser and his students toward their fascinations with Maoist China right from the very beginning. According to intellectual historian Donald Reid, “whereas Althusser sustained his balancing act with respect to the Party—offering the requisite autocritique when necessary—his students did not. They conceived of Althusserianism as offering the chance for ‘real participation,’ as intellectuals, in the transformation of the world.” After the Maoist Althusserians were kicked out of the Union des étudiants communistes (Union of Communist Students), a student organization under the Partie communiste français (French Communist Party - PCF), they immediately founded the Union de la Jeunesse Communiste Marxiste-Léniniste (Union of Young Marxist-Leninist Communists – UJCML) deliberately outside the official channel late in 1966. Yet, before the official establishment of the UJCML, the Maoist Althusserians of Rue d’Ulm published the first issue of Cahiers marxistes-léninistes (Marxist-Leninist Journal) with contributions by Robert Linhart, Jacques Rancière, Jacques-Alain Miller, and Jean-Claude Milner, highlighting the similarities and convergences between the political situations in France and China against the rise of Soviet revisionism.

According to Rancière, “Godard puts ‘cinema’ between two Marxisms—Marxism as the matter of representation, and Marxism as the principle of representation.” He argued that the Althusserianism of La Chinoise was precisely its actualization of Althusser’s Diderot-inspired practices to constantly

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57 Donald Reid, “Introduction,” in *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, Jacques Rancière, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), vii. On the other hand, according to A. Belden Fields, the Maoist Althusserians were initially very loyal to the teachings of Althusser. They were also very cautious about importing Maoism to France and did not prioritize the Chinese Revolution before the leadership of the Communist Party. The attraction to Maoism in the mid-1960s was seen as a political weapon to “safeguard” Althusserianism in France after Althusser had been severely criticized by the French Communist Party (PCF). See A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 153.


59 Rancière, *Film Fables*, 143.
separate “revisionism” from true “Marxism-Leninism.” In the early scenes of *La Chinoise*, both *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes* and Mao’s *Little Red Book* are mentioned and they share the same bookshelf. Historically speaking, *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes* was a Marxist journal founded by the students of Louis Althusser at Rue d’Ulm. Unlike the *Little Red Book*, *Cahiers* was a highly sophisticated militant periodical that assessed the theoretical foundations and practicality of Maoism in Western Europe. It involved a heavy theoretical rigor that aimed at reviving a spirit of scientific Marxism indebted to Althusser’s reexamination of Marxist legacies.

While I agree with Rancière’s insights above, I argue that Godard’s Althusserianism may not be entirely equivalent to the Althusserianism of the French Maoists at Rue d’Ulm. Unlike a direct representation of Maoist Althusserianism, *La Chinoise* is, first and foremost, an “anti-realist” cultural account of French leftist radicalism. This anti-realism in the film is most arresting in its seamless use of color. The apartment is painted mostly in primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—with a strong emphasis on red. These colors do not mix with one another, yet each gives a distinctive presence: a red lampshade, a yellow sweater, a blue wall, and a load of Mao’s *Little Red Book* resting on the bookshelves. Although there are two interrelated revolutionary works—*Cahiers marxistes-léninistes* and the *Little Red Book*—occupying the same bookshelf, Godard does not simply echo the triumphant political message spoken aloud by the young French Maoists in 1966. The “two Marxisms”—Maoist Althusserianism and general Maoist influence—in the French leftist scene are indeed given disproportionate emphasis in *La Chinoise*. Much of the film’s emphasis seems to be inclined to a more lyrical dimension of the Maoist influence of the *Little Red Book* in the West than to the Althusserian-inspired theoretical rigor of *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes*. Within the film’s narrative, there seems to

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60 As Rancière elaborated on the two types of Maoist imaginaries in the West during the 1960s: “To understand the formula [to give vague ideas a clear image] that is like an epigraph for the film [*La Chinoise*], we have to feel that the tension weighing down on the relationship between word and image is strictly parallel to the tension that fueled—in the China of the time and in the Western Maoist imaginary—the fight between two conceptions of the dialectic. ‘One is split in two,’ the formula reclaimed by Maoists; ‘two are joined in one,’ the formula stigmatized as ‘revisionist.’ The strength of the film is that it brings together cinema and Marxism by treating those two formulas as two different conceptions of art in general, and hence also of Marxist cinema.” Ibid., 144–145.
be a serious dialectical debate among the young Maoists in the Aden-Arabie cell about the correct use of image and sound in true socialist realism. Yet the debate is immediately undermined enhanced by Godard’s insertion of the pop song “Mao Mao” during the learning process and ideological reeducation among the young Maoists, which seems to generate some kind of cult pleasure.⁶¹

In fact, upon the first release of the film in 1967, La Chinoise provoked many controversies among the French intellectual scene. As Godard personally recounted, the comrades of the UJCML were highly infuriated and insulted by his ridiculous and playful depiction of the young French Maoists.⁶² The Maoist normaliens nevertheless accused the director of having simply exploited their purity of political militancy for his own sake of youthful romanticism, claiming that he had recorded a fanatical group of people who were immensely devoid of Marxist-Leninist intellectual rigor. One Maoist student even branded the film as “a police provocation” since it portrayed the French Maoists as some kind of “irresponsible terrorists.”⁶³ Jean-Pierre Gorin, who first introduced Godard to the militants of the UJCML,⁶⁴ also felt offended and was embarrassed by the idiosyncratic images of the Maoist fascination among the French youth in La Chinoise because a real gap remained between Godard’s filmic representations and the sheer political reality of that era.⁶⁵ As James Williams noted, there was only one authentic Senegalese Maoist, Omar Diop, in the film, who would later work closely with the student movement’s leader, Daniel Cohn-Bendit (Diop was

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⁶¹ As one film critic commented, in La Chinoise “politics had become a matter of attitude, sensibility, desensitized sensitivity.” See Howard Hampton, “From a Barrel of a Gun,” Film Comment 44, no. 3 (May–June 2008): 47.


⁶⁴ Before working with Godard as a colleague of the Dziga Vertov group, Gorin was a young journalist in the Parisian intelligentsia. His connection with the Maoist group at that epoch is precisely attributed to his friendship with Robert Linhart, who was the most beloved student of Althusser and one of the leaders of the UJCML.

killed by Senegalese authorities in May 1973). The rest of the actors and actresses had, more or less, a petty bourgeois background.

Can One Say No to Bourgeois Ideology?

Should a film like La Chinoise, which depicts the political lives of a group of eclectic young Maoists rather than the rigorous intellectuals from Rue d’Ulm, be taken so literally? As Godard said in an interview, La Chinoise was a film about the cultural imagination of the young “Red Guards” in capitalist France rather than the true Marxist-Leninist intellectuals who sought to revitalize Western Marxist theory through the revolutionary lens of Chinese Maoism.

Much of the film’s emphasis and interests are on the imaginary lives of the Maoist students in the everyday realm, instead of on the itineraries of the established Marxist intellectuals at the highly theoretical Rue d’Ulm. The director goes on to say that:

I’ve wanted to make a film on students for a long time. They seem to be the only people with whom I have any kind of affinity. I feel as though I’m an old student. I’ve been wanting to make a film on the politicization or de-politicization of students, as well as the phenomenon of The Little Red Book stirring up such a hornet’s nest.

So, it should not be too surprising that there was always a certain discrepancy between the Maoist Althusserians and Godard’s La Chinoise toward the notion of Maoist “ideological reeducation” from the beginning. Between 1966 and 1968, inspired by the Maoist ideal to “oppose book worship,” the members of the UJCML engaged in a specific political program: they voluntarily went to farms and factories to undertake enquêtes (investigations) of real farmers and workers in order to supplement and ground their highly abstract Marxism-Leninism. And in the fall of 1967, after his unofficial trip to Mao’s China,

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66 James S. Williams, “‘C’este le petit livre rouge/Qui fait que tout enfin bouge’: The Case for Revolutionary Agency and Terrorism in Jean-Luc Godard’s La Chinoise.” Journal of European Studies 40, no. 3 (2010): 209.


68 The interview was conducted at the editing table of La Chinoise in 1967 but the clip was shown for the first time in the La Chinoise DVD’s special features. See “Godard Editing Table Interview,” La Chinoise, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1967; New York: Koch Lober Films, 2008).

69 A. Belden Fields said: Through a method referred to as the enquête—going out to the people and learning from them—the UJCML could come to know and understand not only the workers but also such ‘secondary categories’ as students, the bourgeoisie, and small and tenant farmers. In other words, what the UJCML does not know it must ask. See A. Belden Fields, Trotskyism and
UJCML leader Robert Linhart even launched a new strategy called *établissement* (settling down), a move that Althusser identified the following year as a “long painful and difficult re-education … an endless external and *internal* struggles,” in which the intellectuals were required to overcome their petty bourgeois class instincts. That is to say, the goal of the *établir* was to abandon their petty bourgeois lifestyle and worldview and embrace a truly proletarian one in order to prepare for armed struggles in the future. Hence, in order to establish unmediated contact with the working class, the UJCML intellectuals were encouraged to leave the classroom and go to work in industry and live with poor farmers. Donald Reid remarked that the Maoist *établissement* was “a refusal not uniquely of bourgeois identity, but also of the illicit privilege accorded by a system that allowed students to accumulate cultural capital assuring them a place in the bourgeoisie.”

However, Godard’s position toward the UJCML’s *enquêtes* and *établissement* seems to be quite dismissive in *La Chinoise*. In the film, there is a scene where Véronique tells her real-life professor Francis Jeanson that she has learnt something from the proletarian class by doing manual work with them during the summer. Yet what she has in fact done is pick peaches with a friend near rural Avignon. At this point, Godard inserts a wash of guitar strings on the soundtrack, as if to underscore Véronique’s romantic delusions about manual labor, reminding her that there is always a non-sensical underside lying around her “Maoist reeducation.” The other female character, Yvonne, is interviewed in front of a plain blue wall on which is pinned a pamphlet about “women in rural France today.” She explains that she comes from a village near Grenoble where

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*Maoism*, 90. But at the same time, the Maoist tactics of *enquêtes* achieved mixed success insofar as the young intellectuals were still not quite willing to fully engage with the workers and the peasants. See Donald Reid, “*Établissement*: Working in the Factory to Make Revolution in France,” *Radical History Review* 88 (Winter 2004): 85.


71 Reid, “*Établissement,*” 90. And yet, many social critics argued that the UJCML’s practices of *enquêtes* and *établissement*, which aimed at unsettling and unlearning the members’ original bourgeois behaviors, were usually quite amateurish, elusive, and leaky. Kristin Ross commented that “the Maoist experiments of ‘going to the people’ play a big role in later trivialization of May.” They are not simply radical enough. Ross noted that the self-abnegating, masochistic dimension inherent in the tactics of *établissement* of the French Maoists and the stereotypically hedonistic figures of May 1968 were actually two sides of the same coin, ridiculously working in tandem like a “fun-house” mirror. As Ross further argued, both the self-denial “militant priest” of the Maoist *établissement* and the anarcho-libertarian “thrill-seeker” tried to “throw off the fetters of bourgeois constraint.” See Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 99.
she used to work on a farm. When she talks about her previous life on the farm, Godard inserts a couple of quite random shots of chickens clucking about a farmyard and cows grazing. While this scene might have intended to show the artificiality of the whole setting of the “investigations,” the shots also cynically mock Yvonne’s eclecticism, detracting from the seriousness of her speech.

But at the same time, Godard’s cinematic representation of all these “Maoist tactics” is perhaps never ideologically innocent either. What is even more symptomatic in La Chinoise is that “China” might have been excessively flattened and reduced to just the name “la chinoise” and nothing more. As a French idiomatic and colloquial use, “la chinoise” can also mean a kind of “nonsense” or “puzzle.” For example, “c’est du chinois” means “it’s all Greek to me” or “it’s totally foreign to me” in English, while “chinoiserie” can refer to different sets of meanings. On the one hand, it means the “unnecessary complication” of some simple doxa. On the other hand, it refers to the glamorous and extravagant seventeenth century European decorative style imported from imperial China. Andrew Sarris asked, “[I]s not Godard’s Maoism merely a mask for his chinoiserie?”72 Does this suggest that the “Chinese woman” in the film always denotes a certain kind of enigma or is actually a redundancy to its critics and audiences? In fact, as early as his first film, Breathless (1960), Godard had already been criticized as a “misogynist” for turning his heroine into a femme fatale character. In films like Masculin/Feminin (Masculine/Feminine) (1965) or 2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle (Two or Three Things I Know about Her) (1966), it is always the female character who lacks political vision or intellectual clout and becomes a prostitute to earn a living.

Douglas Morrey noted that “whereas the male figures are both convincing in their roles and come across as articulate exponents of sincerely held political views, the women in La Chinoise appear unconvincing and proffer comically inept or dangerously unthought-out opinions.”73 It is always the two male

73 Douglas Morrey, Jean-Luc Godard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 60. He added: “What seems undeniable in La Chinoise is that this judgment, like in Masculin/Feminin, is
protagonists Guillaume and Henri who lead the political discussions, whereas the female characters, who possess playful attitudes about politics, usually serve as the passive backdrop. Yvonne is even relegated to almost all of the domestic housework for the Maoist group, like a submissive mother or housewife. She even has to become a prostitute to sustain the daily expenditure of the Maoist cell. As such, she is also constantly mocked by the other male comrades for her sheer stupidity and incapability in understanding various philosophical concepts. For example, when Henri asks the group where the “just ideas” come from, Yvonne immediately suggests that they fall from the sky. The group laughs at her as the supposed “correct answer” is Maoism for its explicit reference to Mao’s writing “Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?”

The “foolishness” of Yvonne, under Godard’s cinematic rendering, is dichotomously contrasted with the “sublime” image of another female character, Véronique. She is the only character who acts faithfully to the revolutionary cause until the end. The cynical teasing of Yvonne by her male counterparts in the film is perhaps not the most idiosyncratic. There is a deeper level of cynicism in this Godard film. Why should Véronique and Yvonne always be treated as a contrastive, binary pair in La Chinoise? On many occasions, Godard appears to privilege the former and denigrate the latter. For example, when Yvonne and Véronique discuss politics, they must associate it with terms of darkness and light. Yvonne worked in darkness all the time as a maid in Passy while Véronique is approximated to the image of clarity as a political philosophy student at the University of Nanterre.

Still, I argue that it would be a far too oversimplified diagnosis to simply reduce the critical potentials of the “Chinese woman” in La Chinoise to merely passive vehicles. Godard’s attitude toward “women” is far more ambivalent. There is no such thing as a “universal woman” and essentialized character distributed along lines of gender: the male characters appear credible and command respect; the female characters are barely credible and held up for ridicule.” See Ibid., 57.

One should not forget that the idealization or romanticization of female protagonists is not uncommon in many of Godard’s features, such as the character Anna Karina in Vive sa vie (My Life to Live) (1960) and A Woman Is a Woman (1961). Like Anna Karina, Wiazemsky’s role as Véronique is intentionally invested with certain “sublime” qualities by the director (partly because Godard was in love with her). In his later work Hail Mary (1984), Godard tried to reexplore the metaphysical status of the Virgin Mary in Western cultural imaginations.
throughout this film. The most intelligent move of Godard is that he constantly oscillates between two types of identifications envisaged by the female characters. Women in *La Chinoise* are viewed as putting up different masquerades in different contexts that forever elude the male logic. For example, Yvonne embodies both the “mother” and the “whore” at the same time, as when she is seen in bed with Henri sucking her thumb and performing the role of a caring “mother.”

In a scene satirizing the collaborationism between the United States and the Soviet revisionists during the Vietnam War, Yvonne dresses like a “weak” Vietnamese “boat person” crying for the communists to help. A few shots later, however, she redresses herself as a female guerilla camouflaged behind dozens of the *Little Red Book*. In fact, it is particularly strange to see that while the whole cell seems to celebrate “Maoist egalitarianism” on the one hand, many of the members paradoxically spend a lot of time teasing and even unfairly exploiting Yvonne’s naïveté in reading the philosophical texts on the other. In this respect, one can reread this sheer ambivalence of Yvonne in relation to the male members in the same Maoist cell. Instead of being relegated to a parasitic object, the double-bindness between the mother and the whore constantly associated with the image of Yvonne precisely embodies the intrinsic self-hypocrisy or the obscene underside within the political desires of her male counterparts.

Interestingly, in Lacanian theories, the contradictory imaginaries of “mother” and “whore” are highly illusionary. They are just two sides of the same coin. Despite the two functions of “mother” and “whore” seeming to be strictly opposite, the absolute domination over women—that is, to posit them as an empty vessel—is the same for both. Yet in neither case do the women really exist; it is only the male fantasy of women that persists.\(^75\) Under the patriarchal setting,

\(^75\) In her *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un (This Sex Which Is Not One)*, Luce Irigaray wrote that both “mothers” and “whores” are emptied out of their own bodies by patriarchal regulation: “mothers, reproductive instruments marked with the name of the father and enclosed in his house, must be private property, excluded from exchange,” whereas the prostitute’s body is valuable “because it has already been used … its nature has been ‘used up’ and has become once again no more than a vehicle for relations among men.” Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 185–186. Slavoj Žižek also gave a similar comment that “Woman is not Mother and Whore, but the same woman is Mother in the private sphere and Whore in the private sphere – and the more is Mother in the private sphere, the more
women have to be either rendered as some transparent elements or simply discarded from the dominant symbolic map in order to bring enough consistency to the male hierarchy. Yet although a woman as such can only enter the psychic economy of a man as a fantasy object or as an object-cause of desire, she can also undermine the male symbolic fiction under certain conditions as she continually bears witness to the fundamental inconsistencies of male-dominated revolutionary ideology. In *La Chinoise*, Yvonne is the embodiment of this pure void of the male and of the contradictions inherent in the patriarchal implication of the Maoist cell. That is why Lacan regarded “woman as the symptom of man.”

Based on the Freudian myth of a primal father who enjoys all the women without punishment in *Totem and Taboo* and his hypothesis of “half-Jewish-half-Egyptian” Moses in *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (*Moses and Monotheism*), Lacan argued that the masculine form of sexuation depends on a primordial “exception,” a “privileged signifier” in justifying his own phallicism outright. It is precisely through this exception, though entirely imaginary, that submits all men to obey the law of castration. For example, in a constitutional monarchial system, when everybody is counted by his or her natural ability and intellect, the only one who can be exempted from this norm is the king, who basically founds the entire constitution. Yet the only validity to his being a privileged exception is not that he has some “inherent qualities” that make him an absolute master but, paradoxically and non-sensically, that he was born to be the king. In other words, the one who deviates from the phallic principle is not only a mere non-castrated exception but also the agent that helps sustain the so-called “universal” but fragile phallic dominance. The presence of the male exception

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76 In Lacanian theories, woman does not exist as an entity with full ontological consistency but only as a symptom of man. “Woman is a symptom of man,” meaning that man himself exists only through woman qua his symptom. Man can only be externalized in his symptom. In other words, man literally exists: his entire being lies “out there” but is constantly reminded by woman for his fundamental failure—his necessary mediation through his symptom. Woman, on the other hand, does not exist, but she insists in “her own way,” despite risking the loss of symbolic consistency during the course. Yet it does not necessarily mean that woman is located entirely outside the symbolic realm. Rather, she insists on the possibility of not coming to be herself through man. There must be something in her that escapes this relation to man.

Žižek argued that the difference between Mother and Whore is purely a performative one and that they are in fact not divergent but come from one and the same entity. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London & New York: Verso), 148–149; 149.
thereby offers a major illusion to all other men that they can be simply “transformed” into that privileged sphere by either “efforts” or “miracles.”

However, the feminine sexuation is quite different. There are two propositions on the female side. The first one is “not all x is submitted to the phallic signifier,” while the second one is “there is not one x which is not submitted to the phallic function.” Unlike male sexuation, the feminine side does not have a “universal exception” to claim a symbolic consistency, precisely because all women are already subordinated to the phallic order. In other words, castration functions for all women, but because of the radical absence of exception, “not all” women fully respect the law of castration. The woman’s side of sexuation, as Lacan puts it, “will not allow for any universality.” As such, women are not totally fallen within the phallic function. It is from this fact that Lacan derived the idea that “Woman does not exist.”

This notion leaves no room for the “essence” of femininity because, without the fantasmatic screen of “non-castration,” the concept of “woman” is always leaky and inconsistent. As this feminine “non-all” or “non-whole” constantly refuses to be mapped into a cognitively coherent and universal picture, it paradoxically helps (re)define the social fabric as a whole. The female “non-all” logic is like a constitutive obstacle that prevents the system from achieving its fullness and exhaustion—that is, to keep the momentum perpetually revolving against the social status quo. That was also why Godard himself once admitted that the highly marginalized character Yvonne, who originally came from a rural background, rather than the other eloquent male students or even the major heroine, Véronique, covers the most ground in the film.

**Racial Ghettos, Unlikely Identification, and Non-Stationary la folie**

In fact, the UJCML’s Maoist tactics of enquêtes and établissement may not be entirely symbolic and trivial. The Maoist knowledge of établi, thanks to its constant emphasis on the spontaneous and voluntary alliance with the proletariats,

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78 Ibid., 80.
79 Bontemps et al., “Struggles on Two Fronts,” 24.
ethnic minorities and the working-class, can at best act as an important trans-social nexus among the originally separated class groups and racial communities in capitalist France. Historically, the French Maoists indeed helped a lot of immigrant workers living in bidonvilles (shanty towns) to fight for improvements in wages and working conditions.\(^8\) Marnix Dressen commented that the Maoist emphasis on the overt changes in old bourgeois lifestyles was rather unique in the Western Marxist tradition: “At the heart of Maoism stood a militant engagement that changed all facets of life, a fact that differentiated Maoism from engagement as a Trotskyist militant.”\(^8\)

Interestingly, the central arena where a number of French bourgeois students underwent their own “ideological reeducation” initially resided in a rather remote area of Nanterre instead of the city of Paris. Many critics recognize that the place of Nanterre filmed in La Chinoise is strikingly prophetic toward the students’ and workers’ rebellions in Paris during May ’68. James Monaco compared the plot of La Chinoise with the actual events of 1968 and said that “it’s about a Maoist cell at the Nanterre campus of the University of Paris, and it turned out to be an uncannily accurate forecast of things to come, less than a year later, the students at Nanterre were instrumental in beginning in the university rebellion that led to the events of May 1968.”\(^8\) However, this kind of historical

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\(^8\) See Reid, “Etablissement,” 90. On the other hand, Fields also said that: “Through a method referred to as the enquête—going out to the people and learning from them—the UJC(ml) could come to know and understand not only the workers but also such ‘secondary categories’ as students, the bourgeoisie, and small and tenant farmers. In other words, what the UJC(ml) does not know it must ask.” See also A. Belden Fields, Trotskyism and Maoism, 90.


\(^8\) James Monaco, “Jean-Luc Godard,” in World Film Directors Volume Two: 1945–1985, ed. John Wakeman (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1988), 397. According to Margaret Atack, “[i]t is one of the great ironies of cultural history that Godard’s La Chinoise, the film that seems in so many ways to be the May 68 film par excellence, came out in August 1967.… But the inflexibility of dates does at least have the virtue of demonstrating in a very concrete fashion that history has many different, interlocking chronologies.” See Margaret Atack, May 68 in French Fiction and Film: Rethinking Society, Rethinking Representation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.
interpretation that asserts *La Chinoise* as an artistic “prophecy” to May ’68 is perhaps just a “retroactive judgment”—a moral judgment that is made *après-coup*. An overemphasis on the “prophetic” trait of *La Chinoise*, as I argue, may even further conceal and obfuscate the true dialectical relationship between this Godard work and the historical events of May ’68.

In fact, in *La Chinoise*, one cannot easily differentiate “prophecy” from “retrospection” in relation to the events of May ’68. Such interweaving ambiguity between historical “forecasting” and moral “judgment,” as I believe, is epitomized in a conversation scene between Véronique and her real-life philosophy professor Francis Jeanson during their train travel from Paris to suburban Nanterre. In their ten-minute long dialogue, it is not just about how “Maoist student” Véronique and “humanist professor” Jeanson hold adversary views about the question of urban terrorism and guerilla resistance; rather, what is even more crucial is that their trip to Nanterre reflects memories of the brutal colonial histories of the Gaullist regime and the unrealized potentials of emancipations long assembled in the imperial West since the Third-World decolonializations began in the early 1960s. Encountering her professor on the train, Véronique blatantly tells Jeanson about her intentions to bomb the various bureaucratic university buildings in Paris. Interestingly, the framing of this scene is, in an Althusserian sense, both ideologically “determined” and “overdetermined”: Véronique is on the left side and Jeanson is on the right, while the middle of the composition is composed of the flowing and blurred images of the French landscape, which alludes to an eternal ambiguity between the two sides, or in Rancière’s words, the “infinite complexity of the real.”

Initially, Jeanson is not surprised to learn that his student is going to carry out terrorist attacks in the urban sphere, as he was once an active militant alongside Sartre and a close associate with the Front de libération nationale (National Liberation Front – FLN), supporting armed Algerian citizens against the French colonial regime in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, from Jeanson’s perspective, the Algerian Cause was morally justified as long as it was

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83 Rancière, *Film Fables*, 149.
concretely led by the oppressed people’s will in the face of Western imperialism. He argues that Véronique may not have such a moral ground, that her actions merely demonstrate her juvenile impatience to start things anew. Jeanson also thinks that her so-called “political lessons” drawn from the Chinese Cultural Revolution is indeed very abstract. He warns her that the Cultural Revolution may not be a proper identification and its lesson will most likely turn out to be suicidal. Yet Véronique immediately defends herself, saying that while most people may not fully understand their political intentions, she “can indeed do the thinking for the masses,” though she does not care about the potential violence inherent in her mediation. When Jeanson interrogates Véronique about her political strategies after the terrorist attacks, she cannot give him a convincing answer. The idiosyncratic image of Véronique as a female “terrorist” coincides with the very ambivalent perception of Ulrike Meinhof seen as Antigone of the German Red Army Faction during the 1960s and 1970s.84

While Véronique and Jeanson are caught in a kind of fierce word battle, the train suddenly stops at a particular station situated in the area of Nanterre. The station is called La Folie, which literally means “madness” in English. But is this “madness” really addressed to Véronique? Godard’s position toward Véronique and Jeanson is still unclear. According to the film critic Royal S. Brown, Jeanson’s role in La Chinoise is not only to objectively present his ideas but also to tactically contradict the whole revolutionary raison d’être of the Maoist students in the film.85 However, according to Godard, he personally favors Véronique’s point of view over Jeanson’s argument, as can be seen in the way that the sequence is presented, but the audience can take the side they prefer.86 There is no metaphysical ground that can truly determine the “correctness” of these two kinds of ideological orientations between Jeanson and Véronique.

86 Bontemps et al., “Struggles on Two Fronts,” 20. However, according to Godard, Philippe Sollers commented that the scene was totally “reactionary” insofar as the director seems to have justified Jeanson’s position by giving him a real name. See Ibid.
In fact, the contradiction between Jeanson and Véronique can be an elusive one, as it is just an intermediary stop before the train keeps going. The negative connotation of “la folie” may correspond to neither Véronique nor Jeanson after all. The physical locale of this intermediary station may bear witness to one of the most brutal yet repressed historical memories of French colonialism during the twentieth century. As such, it could serve as a reminder of the sheer archaic brutality and unreasonable discrimination of the colonial French empire during the early 1960s—the tragic massacre of Algerian immigrants in Paris in 1961. It is no secret that after the state coercion in 1961, the French government was desperate to set up a “ghetto” in the shantytown in La Folie located in the suburban Nanterre district in order to rechannel and transport the massive discontent and anger that emerged from the Northern African immigrant communities (mostly with a Muslim background). According to Jim House, the underlying logic of building this seemingly self-sustaining African community in La Folie was to avoid and ghettoize their physical contact with the surrounding Parisian cityscape and the Gaullist establishment. Most of the Algerian immigrants living in the slum areas of La Folie worked as unskilled manual workers. Housing and transportation were also notoriously poor in Nanterre. It was as if the immigrants and ethnic minorities were overtly banished to a desolate land.

Historically, since the onset of the Third-World decolonializations, Algerian immigrants were identified as a “threat” to French society. In October 1961, the National Liberation Front (FLN) called on every Algerian in France to demonstrate against colonial occupation. Some 20,000 to 30,000 men, women, and children peacefully gathered in the streets of Paris on the afternoon of October 17 to support the FLN movement. Faced with this gigantic amount of protestors, who broke the suggested “curfew” for Northern Africans, the French police, headed by Maurice Papon, who had once treacherously organized the deportations of Jews during the Vichy period, eventually opted for severe suppression. The police violence was pitiless and completely unjustified as the unarmed demonstrators were fired upon with machine guns, beaten with

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truncheons, and subsequently thrown into the Seine River. Up to 200 people were killed and many thousands were seriously injured. Nearly 12,000 people were arrested and beaten. The “Paris massacre of 1961” thus epitomizes the worst chapter in recent French colonial memories and continues to linger in French cultural lives even today.  

However, the archaic violence and controversial ethnic policies of the Gaullist state during the mid-twentieth century is not simply limited to the ghettos and minor establishments for those immigrant workers from Northern Africa. In *La Chinoise*, adjacent to the La Folie sign on the platform is another sign, Complexe universitaire (University Complex). The university that is referred to here is the University of Nanterre, which was recently built in 1964 on the site of an army barracks next to the shantytown of La Folie. Connections between the immigrant communities and the students’ circles in Nanterre were therefore rather frequent under such geographical determination. In fact, there is a snapshot in this Godard picture that shows a brief alliance and handshaking between the students and workers on the same train platform. However, the state’s intention to build a new university campus in suburban Nanterre was a rather pragmatic and functional decision. Since the early 1960s, the several campuses in Paris were growing cramped and overcrowded. The University of Nanterre was thereby built to house and accommodate the Faculty of Letters (i.e., humanities, social sciences, and law), which was moved from the Parisian Sorbonnes.

The University of Nanterre was a new school that helped to rechannel overcrowded Parisian students. Meanwhile, some innovative and experimental academic departments such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology, which had been somewhat marginalized in traditional universities, were set up in Nanterre. However, similar to the poor infrastructure in the Algerian ghettos in La

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88 See Ross, *May ’68 and its Afterlives*, 44. Elsewhere Ross also stated: “France’s denial of the ways in which it was and is formed by colonialism, its insistence on separating itself off from what it views as an extraneous period irrelevant to its true national heritage, forms the basis of the neoracist consensus today: the logic of segregation and expulsion that governs questions of immigration, and attitudes toward immigrants in France…. To understand contemporary racist slogans such as ‘France must not become Africa,’ we must return to the era of ‘Algeria is France.’” See Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 196. For a recent depiction of Algerian memories in French bourgeois lives, also refer to the brilliant Michael Haneke film *Caché* (Hidden) (2005).
Folie, the Nanterre campus owned inadequate facilities and a handful of transport links to Paris. Atack argues, “The university itself was a bleak site with its tower blocks of student halls, administrative and other buildings (but symptomatically, no library, at first) surrounding a vast empty space…. There was no infrastructure, virtually nothing in recreational facilities.” 89 Interestingly, the abandoned experiences of the students and the immigrants as such also generated a sense of commonality between them. Precisely because the students of Nanterre had to cross the slum areas and African communities every day to attend classes on their new campus, they had a number of chances to gain a directed lesson, a profound reeducation in the uneven urban development and colonial contradictions in their seemingly well-developed country. This “lived” quotidian lesson is what French sociologist Henri Lefebvre saw as the foremost catalyzing factor of the revolutionary contestations in May ’68. 90

By witnessing the continual exploitations of Third-World countries in a First-World nation, the students living on the Nanterre campus received an unparalleled learning in applied sociology night and day. The contradictions between the city and the suburban area accumulated day by day in Nanterre, and the live encounters between two supposedly unrelated social classes outlined a historical backdrop for the future Parisian outbursts in 1968. 91 According to Le Goff, the moving of minority students from Paris to La Folie-Nanterre not only helped rechannel the central crowding but also, paradoxically, brought students and workers closer together in a remote area that awaited a future social outburst. 92

89 Atack, 28.
91 A student from Nanterre argued that the successive student unrests in this area were historically determined by a number of factors. He stated: “The Nanterre explosion was not accidental; it had to happen there. Suppose you take the children of the best neighborhoods of Paris and oblige them to go to a college in a suburban slum area where you have built, especially for them, the barest and ugliest functional concrete structure. Suppose you have chosen for a landscape, low-cost housing projects, railroad tracks, gas-tanks and construction sites; and you locate, only half a mile away, the worst shanty town in the whole Paris region, if not Western Europe, where thousands of North African and Portuguese migrant workers live in the mud. Who would not suspect that you intend to create, among the students, both personal resentment and enormous guilt?” See Michel Crozier, “French Students: A Letter from Nanterre-La Folie,” National Affairs 13 (Fall 1968): 153.
92 Jean-Pierre Le Goff, Mai 68, l’héritage impossible [May 68, the Impossible Heritage] (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2006), 34; 38. Margaret Atack added: “Nanterre’s history is a history of Paris and its limits: it is in Paris, yet not in Paris, part of the great belt of the banlieue rouge [Red
Another critic also suggested,

Nanterre is a geopolitical microcosm of the thematics of May: class, knowledge, and power. It is a symbolic site in more ways than one, as transitional link between the student protest and the events of May, and as embodiment of the relation of the University as institution to other sites of state power and to the powerless.93

The so-called “student-worker alliance” between the French and Algerians in Nanterre proved to be more symbolic and performative than anything really concrete. During the mid-1960s, although quite a lot of talking and interactions between the two communities emerged, there was no concrete student-worker alliance established to struggle against the French state power and coercive machinery prior to May 1968. Two months before May ’68, an escalation of student unrest at the University of Nanterre was recorded, and many historians perceive this period as the prelude to May ’68. The student movement in Nanterre, which is famously known as the “March 22nd Movement,” led by German-Jewish sociology student Daniel Cohn-Bendit, was primarily a refusal toward U.S. imperialism in Vietnam, as well as the emergence of a repressive technocratic society in France.94 In other words, the students’ explosions in Nanterre in 1968 had much more to do with their own sexually repressed and alienated modern experiences in the face of a new capitalist technocracy than the reworking of a traditional Marxian working-class movement.95 La Chinoise seems to emphasize, if not to prophesize, this very failure and impossibility of the student-worker fusions in Nanterre. In a section where Yvonne speaks to the camera to talk about suburb], and the story of May, with its intermingling of center and periphery, of Paris and Nanterre, is a restaging of an old history, not least in the unleashing of the forces of disruption from the banlieue.” See Atack, 29.

93 Ibid., 28. [my emphasis added]
94 In Western Europe during the sixties, many young people were voicing their opposition to what the American military was doing in Vietnam. On March 18, 1968 in Paris, left-wing student revolutionaries put bombs in the offices of Chase Manhattan Bank, the Bank of America, and Trans World Airlines, which were believed to have been involved in the war in Vietnam. Responding to the bombings a few days later, Paris police arrested two young men and three schoolboys. However, on the same day, at the University of Nanterre, a meeting was called upon with about 150 attendants to protest against the arrests. The gathering called itself the “March 22nd Movement” and the attendants also decided to address unpleasant studying and living conditions at their university. They were unhappy about overcrowding at the university and the possible implementation of education reform based on the American model. They were also unhappy about the sexually repressive dormitory rules.
95 According to Michael Seidman, the Nanterre agitations in 1968 were predominantly driven by the students’ libertarian concerns in the face of Gaullist sexual repression instead of being primarily preoccupied by the Marxist rhetoric to serve a working-class revolt. See Michael Seidman, The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 27.
the student-worker relationship in the suburban community near the Nanterre campus, as Rancière noted, Godard used a panoramic shot which rendered both the suburban lots and the university equally invisible.96

The Revolution that Misfires and Backfires

One cannot simply dismiss the “unlikely encounters” between the isolated students and the marginalized Arab workers in Nanterre during the early 1960s in sole favor of the student-initiated struggles in Paris during 1968. It is perhaps this sheer impossibility of the “shared community” between the French students and the Algerian workers in Nanterre in the early 1960s that may have helped prepare a radically new passage for another kind of “impossible identification” with an imaginary revolutionary cause in Paris during May 1968—epitomized by the main ’68 slogan—“Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” (We are all German Jews). Alain Finkielkraut, the Jewish son of two war refugees, displayed strong dismay upon revisiting that radical year of 1968: “Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands despoiled me and sullied my treasure, as if the demonstrators, while assuring me of their complete support, had picked my pocket of my special status.”97

According to Jacques Rancière, the idea of “nous sommes tout des Juifs allemands” is in some ways a deferred explosion. This kind of “impossible” French identification with the Jews of World War Two cannot really be conceived if not for those earlier exercises in establishing ways of including or allying with “the cause of the Other” premised on the stubborn refusal to identify with a certain “falsely” established identity of one’s own in 1961.98 Writing about the police massacre of Algerians on October 17, 1961, Rancière argued that the police

96 Rancière, Film Fables, 148.
98 Rancière said: “Insofar as it is a political figure, the primary meaning of the cause of the other is a refusal to identify with a certain self. It is the production of a people different from the people seen, named and counted by the State, of a people denied by the wrong done to the constitution of a commonality that was constructing an other communal space. A political subjectivation always implies a ‘discourse of the other’ in three senses. It is, firstly, a rejection of an identity established by an other, a degrading of that identity, and therefore a break with a certain self. Secondly, it is a demonstration addressed to an other that constitutes a community denied by a certain wrong. Thirdly, it always contains an impossible identification, an identification with an other with whom one cannot in normal circumstances identify: the ‘wretched of the earth’ or some other object.” See Rancière, “The Cause of the Other,” trans. David Macey, Parallax 4, no. 2 (1998): 29.
operation was in fact a double one: to sweep up the city space after the fraternal protestation of the French Arabs, along with an attempt to cleanse the very record or trace of that act. As Rancière pointed out, the second police “cleansing” was perhaps even more significant than the first for most French people. Other than arousing the first mass demonstration in France of the 1960s after such a cleansing, it was precisely the very inaugural experience of the police blackout of the news that catalyzed the subsequent French disidentification with the immoral Gaullist state machinery. He elaborated:

It was not the blinding sun that lit up the political scene in 1961. On the contrary, it was an invisibility, the removal of something by the action of the police. And the police are not primarily a strong-arm repressive force, but a form of intervention which prescribes what can be seen and what cannot be seen, what can be said and what cannot be said.⁹⁹

The attempted news blackout, perhaps even more brutal than the murders themselves, opened up a new subjective experience for most French people to redefine what is truly meant by “French” and “not-French” so as to truly dissociate oneself from the coercive state logic that had been predominating for a few decades after World War Two. This is what Rancière had in mind when he located political “subjectivation” primarily in the experience of disidentification instead of in the experience of a shared community. The student movement in 1968 from that point of view may not have had much to do with the increasingly repressive French university system. Nor was the slogan “nous sommes tout des Juifs allemands” a convenient one of pity or sympathy toward the oppressed Jewish communities during the Nazi period. However, such “impossible identification” with the Jews precisely reinscribes a disparity in the identity of the French bourgeois students and the identity of what it meant to be “French.” It was a profound discrepancy that eventually allowed for a new way to fraternally support the “cause of the Other.” In that peculiar construction of an impossible “we” in “nous sommes tout des Juifs allemands,” a subjectivation that passed by the way of the Other, laid an essential fracturing of certain established social identity that truly enabled an experimentation of new and alternative revolutionary alliances. The “wrong identification” with the German Jews among the young French protestors was therefore a constitutive denial for the sake of

⁹⁹ Ibid., 28.
allowing a new political subjectivity to emerge that perhaps went beyond even the spatial-temporal confines of 1968. Rancière added:

This did not create a politics for the Algerians. But in France it did create a political subjectivation, or a relationship between included and excluded in which no subject was specifically named. Yet perhaps that nameless subjectivation of a gap between two citizeships did find a name a few years later in an exemplary formula for an impossible identification: ‘We are all German Jews’. That impossible identification inverted a name that was meant to stigmatize by turning it into the principle behind an open subjectivation of the uncounted, but it did not politically confuse them with any representation of an identifiable social group.100

However, this “wrong identification” in relation to the imaginary “cause of the Other” is both revealing and idiosyncratic in La Chinoise. As an anti-Soviet revisionist film, it is really strange to see that the “Soviet image” is entirely missing throughout La Chinoise. Film scholar Colin MacCabe said that La Chinoise was not a proper Marxist-Leninist film. Its narrative focus was on the urban violence and the Maoist students’ attempt to assassinate the Soviet Minister of Culture when he made his official visit to France.101 According to Richard Brody, Godard also summarized the plot of this film as “a female student who reads Mao Zedong.”102 What one should be cautious about regarding Godard’s summary is that he precisely used the term “female student” instead of “male intellectual.”103 In this respect, one can say that Godard might have desired to do something against the grain in such a male-dominated political heyday, especially before the liberating era of May 1968. That is to say, rather than strictly confining the film to a “male reading” of Maoism typical of the young Althusserians of the time, Godard instead attempted to employ a certain “femininized reading” of Maoist China and the Cultural Revolution.

Suffice it to say that Godard’s representation of the political assassination carried out by Véronique is indeed far from realistic. His presentation of revolutionary violence is extremely tacky and darkly comical. The terrorist act is

100 Ibid., 30.
102 Brody, Everything Is Cinema, 294.
103 Elsewhere, Godard personally admitted: “I fell in love with a student at Nanterre [Anne Wiazemsky, who later became his wife], so I started going over there myself, and that’s how the film eventually came out.” See Jean-Luc Donin, Godard (Paris: Rivages, 1989), 27.
merely suggested by an interpolation of an American comic strip in which a man is shot by a revolver. Nevertheless, when Véronique drops by the hotel where the Soviet commissar resides, she naively reads his registration card upside down on the check-in counter and hence kills the wrong man the first time. Then she goes back to the hotel once again to murder the true target. As Royal Brown argued, the absurdity of such an assassination sequence is simply the logical extension of the comical and childish mindset of Véronique and her young colleagues within the Maoist cell.104

In the meantime, one can also say that Véronique is not entirely “childish” at all. Shortly before Véronique carries out her first assassination, she tells an anonymous, fairly sluggish male character that she may have read the room number of the targeted Soviet writer upside down at the hotel counter and hence she would probably end up shooting the wrong man. In other words, through this passing male character, it is hinted that Véronique already knew very well that she would likely murder the wrong person and she indeed ends up killing an innocent man. Véronique’s little transgressive insistence in her self-fulfilling prophecy gives her a weird kind of enjoyment. That is to say, her sheer “misrecognition” not only gives her a second chance to kill once more but also a chance to reexperience the very pleasures of killing without the moral burden of any prerequisite knowledge. In this respect, one is also quite surprised to see that Véronique is never repentant or apologetic for her misfire, nor is she actually penalized by the police for the murder.

However, I argue that Véronique’s misrecognition of the room number is in fact neither simply an accidental mistake nor an entirely transgressive insistence. Rather, this misrecognition can be conceived as a much more radical act of profound ignorance. Before her first killing, Véronique has only an obscure idea about the required information on the targeted Soviet minister. First, she desires to seek reassurance from her male companion about the Soviet’s name. And yet, he is uncertain and hesitant about the name of the writer, so he gives her two possible names. The most important thing here is that although she has been

104 Brown, 171.
semi-informed about the name and residence of the Soviet writer, she does not simply bypass the necessity of going to the hotel information desk to check on her target herself. That is to say, she does not privilege her obscure awareness about the Soviet target with the more scientific procedure of personally going to the hotel counter to acquire even more empirical information or data. Instead of acting out hysterically and impatiently, Véronique’s revolutionary act is still mediated by the concrete details of the hotel register, despite what she may have already entertained as partial knowledge about the Soviet writer in advance.

There is a crucial and profound twist to the subjective emphasis from Véronique to the anonymous male character in the second killing scene. Right before the first killing, the male character is rather lazy and uninterested in the whole issue of the revolutionary murder. When Véronique tells him that the room number was inverted, he eclectically denies her concern and query. Similar to Véronique, the male character is also not so sure about the correct name of the targeted Soviet Minister. Yet, after the misfire, the male character takes a 180-degree turn from his original passivity. He no longer acts as a mere witness to Véronique’s idiosyncratic and failed murder. He even abandons his inert position and spontaneously facilitates the second killing. In the second act, Véronique appears to be a sheer executor and stoic performer of the murder, while the male character is even more serious and restless about the effectiveness of the issue than she is.

In fact, what this scene may have ultimately revealed is that the first misrecognized murder was probably not just transgressive enjoyment solely bestowed upon Véronique herself. Rather, the first failure or misfire, to a certain extent, can be actually viewed as a driving force that leads both Véronique and the male character to work together thereafter. Instead of condemning Véronique to kill alone, the second killing involves the two of them working together as a unit toward a common revolutionary cause. Seen in this light, one is tempted to say that Véronique’s wrong or mistaken killing was in fact a kind of constitutive misfire that acted as a way to involve her impassive male partner to participate in the collective revolutionary actions that followed.
However, for structural reasons, it is ironically also the same subjective involvement of Véronique during her empirical verification at the hotel counter that distorts and confuses her very perception of the objective realities in *La Chinoise*. In other words, she may have taken the mirror reflection of the room number so literally and straightforwardly that she had simply forgotten to reinvert and rerender the direction of this symbol for a proper understanding and logical comprehension a second time. This failure of conceptual rerendering thus resulted in the eventual misfire. That is why Žižek also argued that the true revolutionary potential of the feminine act is always approximated to a certain form of unaccountable “madness.” He stated:

> [E]very act worthy of this name is ‘mad’ in the sense of radical *unaccountability*: by means of it, I put at stake everything, including myself, my symbolic identity; the act is therefore always a ‘crime,’ a ‘transgression,’ namely of the limit of the symbolic community to which I belong. The act is defined by this irreducible *risk*: in its most fundamental dimension, it is always *negative*, i.e., an act of annihilation, of wiping out—we not only don’t know what will come out of it, its final outcome is ultimately even insignificant, strictly secondary in relation to the NO! of the pure act.¹⁰⁵

Under a Lacanian framework, this “terroristic” dimension of Véronique ultimately can be seen as an “ethical act”—the act of uncompromising refusal of the status quo. Jacques Lacan compared the suicidal gesture of Sophocles’ famous heroine, Antigone, who unrepentantly defied the Law, to a dimension of “undeadness.”¹⁰⁶ That is to say, Antigone’s radical refusal toward the State is not simply immortal, but “a-mortal”—mortal yet it cannot die in her entirety. Antigone’s insistence and stubbornness about her desire to bury her brother lead to a final deathly outcome. As one of the daughters of Oedipus, Antigone’s passion for her brother seems to both echo and deviate from the incestuous episode of the Oedipal myth.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ According to Sophocles’ narrative, Antigone’s two brothers—Eteocles and Polynices—kill each other during the Theban civil war. The new king of Thebes, Creon, decides to honor Eteocles with a proper burial and to leave the second brother, Polynices, on the battlefield uncovered and deserted to be consumed by animals and vultures. However, Antigone is not satisfied with Creon’s extremely biased decision. She insists on the proper burial of her beloved brother Polynices in equal measure. Antigone argues that although she knew Creon’s agenda very well, she still chose to break it, expounding on the superiority of the “divine law” of kinship to that established by the
What is interesting about this famous Greek play is that such a “divine law” held by Antigone is also a sort of fairly “mundane” demand at its deepest core.108 All she wishes to do is to take both of her brothers in “equal” respect that is premised on the familial value. However, the burial of Polyneices is unfairly denied by Creon, leaving the former as a spectral existence. While many critics have seen that the various fascinations on Antigone’s suicide may illustrate a kind of fetish of suicidal death and violent self-annihilation, I argue that her death may never be simply an institutionalized form of sacrificial martyrdom that typifies religious fundamentalism.109 Rather, her suicidal act before the official sentence that is named by Creon is a radical refusal of the predominating symbolic order of the State. Her suicide literally results in nothing but her death, as her hanging does not help rehabilitate her brother’s full burial. Nor does Antigone’s death automatically dignify a sublime image of martyrdom because her death has already been granted and issued by Creon. Interestingly, it is precisely because her “death was for nothing” that it retroactively reinscribed an irreducible hole in Creon’s government. That is to say, Creon’s government fails to completely enact this official law (i.e., both its issue and the action) because Antigone had already hung herself before the execution of the full sentence. That is why Creon cannot rule over and discipline all “dissidents” in the name of the “universal” law of the State. This little impossibility attached to the enforcement of the supreme State law retroactively makes the name “Antigone” live on. She becomes literally “a-mortal”—not immortal—as her name is always associated with the founding impossibility of the State. Antigone continues to live as long as the official law of the State fails to perform seamlessly.

In 1967, Godard started emphasizing the necessity of “struggles on two fronts”—both politics and art—in cinema premised on Mao’s Yan’an talk on art and literature.110 Undoubtedly, despite risking certain intellectual confusions and

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108 Lacan said, “There is nothing Dionysiac about the act and the countenance of Antigone. Yet she pushes to the limit the realization of something that must be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire.” See Lacan, Book VII, 282.


110 Luca Bosetti argued that there are indeed: “two varieties of subversion, two types of terror, emerging from Godard’s film: on the one hand, the characters’ militant attempt at violent political
ideological misunderstanding, *La Chinoise* is the first experiment in which Godard sought to genuinely check and verify his “politics” within the method of filmmaking. In response to the various misinterpretations of this work made by many French Maoists, who considered it “apolitical,” Godard stated:

People still don’t know how to hear and see a movie. That’s what we need to be working on now. For one thing, the people who have training in politics hardly ever are trained in film too, and vice versa. My training in politics came out of my work in film. I think it’s almost the first time that ever happened. There’s a real gap between film and politics. The men who know all about politics know nothing about film, and vice versa.\(^\text{111}\)

However, on the other hand, in contrast to the predominant pessimistic view about how Western leftist impulses are always doomed to failure and state reappropriation, Godard also refused to entirely abandon the revolutionary image of the “Maoist woman” for an overtly dismissive diagnosis toward the end of *La Chinoise*. The film ends with Véronique’s voice-over of both pessimistic and optimistic remarks reminiscent of the two important phases of the Chinese Communist revolutions—the epic “success” of the Long March in 1930s and the historical “failure” of the Great Leap Forward in 1950s. The voice-over says: “I thought I had made a great leap forward, and now I realize that I have only made the first timid steps of a very long march.” What is really at stake here is that Godard simply inverted the actual historical sequence from Long March-Great Leap to Great Leap-Long March in this voice-over. While we generally agree that the Long March designates a remarkable revolutionary achievement in Chinese Communist history, it is also true that this Godard’s cinematic inversion shortly before the outbreak of May 68 may have altogether re-rendered the existing historical order from the failed social experiment of the Great Leap back to a concrete proletarian success of the Long March. The voice-over therefore reminded us a crucial historical data that the Maoist communist development began from the people’s “triumph” of the 1930s instead of a mass “disaster” of the 1950s. The name “Godard,” in this sense, becomes literally “a-mortal” even

until today. As one of the most profound legacies of the sixties, this Godardian label silently attaches to the founding impossibility of the predominant capitalist status quo that always confidently pronounces the death of revolutionary era ever since the Soviet Fall in 1989.
CHAPTER 2

“IT’S ALWAYS RIGHT TO REBEL!”

MAOIST CURRENT, SYMBOLIC TERRORISM, AND THE
QUESTIONS OF “UNMEDIATED FRATERNITY” IN
GODARD AND GORIN’S _VENT D’EST_

Grouped Subjectivity and Its Interesting Divorce

After the watershed of May ’68, Jean-Luc Godard realized that the proper
direction of art was not just to make political films but also to “make films
politically.” Back in 1967, Godard said that he was still searching for a radical
individuality in filmmaking. But in a year later, Godard heavily fumed at one
journalist who asked him something about his films’ aesthetics instead of the
ongoing happenings of 1968. Godard shouted, “I’m talking to you about solidarity,
and you talk about tracking shots. You’re a bastard!” Established in the winter
of 1968 by Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and an ensemble of young Maoist militants,
the _Groupe Dziga Vertov_ (Dziga Vertov Group – DVG) was one of the first
distinctive film collectives to practice and experiment with group subjectivity in
filmmaking of the era. The traditional _auteur_ mode of filmmaking, especially
after 1968, was dismissed as a sort of capitalist apparatus to indoctrinate
bourgeois and revisionist ideas. To Godard and his company, the notion of
collective filmmaking and group authorship was seen as a new pedagogical
possibility for circulating and distributing new revolutionary ideas away from
Western bourgeois ideology. However, such a revolutionary practice of collective

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112 Jean-Luc Godard, _Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard_ [Jean-Luc Godard on Jean-Luc
113 Peter Cowie, _Revolution!: The Explosion of World Cinema in the 60s_ (London: Faber and Faber,
114 Named after the Soviet revolutionary documentarian Dziga Vertov, the DVG believed that
Vertov had succeeded in his struggle on two political fronts—the Soviet tradition influenced by
“revisionist” filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and the commercial style of Hollywood cinema. The
membership of the DVG fluctuated over the course of their films and included French and Italian
Maoist revolutionaries, but the core was mainly established by Godard and Gorin, both of whom
explored the possibility of radical filmmaking.
filmmaking failed considerably due to some kinds of founding and irresolvable ideological conflicts pertaining to the traditions of Western leftism.\footnote{As Godard lamented, [t]he notion of an author, of independent imagination, is just a fake. But this bourgeois idea [of cinematic authorship] has not yet been replaced [by collective filmmaking]. A first step might be to simply gather people. At least then you can have a free discussion. But if you don’t go on and organize on a political basis, you have nothing more than a free discussion. Then collective creation is really no more than collective eating in a restaurant. See Kent E. Carroll, “Film and Revolution: Interview with the Dziga-Vertov Group,” in \textit{Focus on Godard}, ed. Royal S. Brown (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 51.}

In this chapter, I will argue that Godard and Gorin’s \textit{Vent d’est (Wind from the East)}, produced shortly after May ’68 in Italy, put forward a new type of dialectical thinking in leftist cinema, in part with its highly idiosyncratic approach to dissociating the predominant connections between image and sound heavily premised on Western bourgeois ideas. Strongly influenced by Maoist revolutionary ideas, the film suggests that the true radical potentiality of collective filmmaking is that it can constantly resist formal interpretations and symbolizations. While these kinds of hermeneutic obstacles and disruptions may still invite intellectual restorations by the dominant class, I argue that a rehistoricization of such interpretative difficulties in relation to the wider sociopolitical contexts of French Maoism during the 1960s and 1970s can actually yield some profoundly novel and sustainable leftist insights that can aid in rethinking the notion and praxis of cultural resistance against the continuous reappropriations bycapitalist modernity at large.

Between 1968 and 1972, Godard and his Maoist allies altogether made eight collective films, namely \textit{British Sounds/See You at Mao} (1969); \textit{Pravda} (1969); \textit{Vent d’est (Wind from the East)} (1969); \textit{Luttes en Italie (Struggles in Italy)} (1969); \textit{Jusqu’à la victoire (Until Victory)} (unfinished) (1970); \textit{Vladimir et Rosa (Vladimir and Rosa)} (1971); \textit{Tout va bien (Everything’s Fine)} (1972), and \textit{Letter to Jane} (1972) under the signature of DVG. However, it was not until the making of \textit{Vent d’est} in 1969 that Godard and Gorin co-directed for the first time. Peter Wollen, in his influential essay on “counter-cinema,” proposed that the overt plainness of \textit{Vent d’est} offered precisely the best example of foregrounding the myth of capitalist power as the mystic background, as well as deconstructing the fantasmatic illusion of the bourgeoisie that is supposed to be capable of pulling \footnote{As Godard lamented, [t]he notion of an author, of independent imagination, is just a fake. But this bourgeois idea [of cinematic authorship] has not yet been replaced [by collective filmmaking]. A first step might be to simply gather people. At least then you can have a free discussion. But if you don’t go on and organize on a political basis, you have nothing more than a free discussion. Then collective creation is really no more than collective eating in a restaurant. See Kent E. Carroll, “Film and Revolution: Interview with the Dziga-Vertov Group,” in \textit{Focus on Godard}, ed. Royal S. Brown (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 51.}
the strings behind the scene without restraints. In the meantime, *Vent d’est* also witnessed the first (and last) collaboration between Godard and anarcho-libertarian student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who provided original ideas for the film based on first-hand experience. Cohn-Bendit, who was famous for orchestrating the “March 22nd Movement” at Nanterre, was undoubtedly one of the most celebrated spokesperson of the youthful and libertarian “spirit of ’68.” This alliance between Godard and Cohn-Bendit might have thereby signified a true marriage of art and politics right after the events of 1968. Financed by a young wealthy Italian producer, *Vent d’est* was initially designated as a “left-wing spaghetti Western” in which a mining strike was casted to be the film’s central plot.

Unfortunately, the ideal collaboration between Godard and Cohn-Bendit did not formally work out in *Vent d’est*, as the cinematic ideas given by Cohn-Bendit were not fully accepted. According to Colin MacCabe, the DVG collective was initially rather dubious about making a “left-wing Western” insofar as it might create the same ideological relationship with the audience as that of traditional Hollywood cinema. The original mining strike proposed by Cohn-Bendit was rendered as “just fragments of narrative on the soundtrack in the opening section.” As Godard admitted, “To make a film as a political group is

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117 According to Gorin, during the making of *Vent d’est*, “there were twenty-nine people doing the script collectively and after two days, three-quarters of those guys were at the beach and Jean-Luc and I were alone doing that film, which took us six months to put together.” See Martin Walsh, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1981), 126. Almost forty years later, Godard recently recounted his filming experience with Cohn-Bendit and other anarchists shortly after ’68: “When we met for the first time, in Nanterre, we had nothing in common, but we lived in communal situations. We haven’t moved away from one another, because there’s a fraternal side, although we’re poles apart. When I think back to you announcing that you were going to throw a big party when you turned 68!” See Vincent Remy, “Jean-Luc Godard à Daniel Cohn-Bendit: Qu’est-ce qui t’intéresse dans mon film?” [Jean-Luc Godard and Daniel Cohn-Bendit: What Are You Interested in My Film?].” Telerama.fr, May 15, 2010, http://www.telerama.fr/cinema/jean-luc-godard-a-daniel-cohn-bendit-qu-est-ce-qui-t-interesse-dans-mon-film_55846.php (accessed March 7, 2012).  
119 Ibid., 225.
very difficult for the moment, because we are more in the position politically of just individuals trying to go on the same road. A group means not only individuals walking side by side on the same road, but walking together politically.\textsuperscript{120}

But what is his meaning of “walking together politically?” Of all the DVG films, \textit{Vent d’est} is thought to be the most radical experiment in redefining the usual relationship between image and sound. Constantly undergoing self-criticisms, \textit{Vent d’est} makes use of voice-overs, mainly two female voices, to present a dense political discourse on May ’68 and its aftermath. No single reading strategy offers the correct formula for the characters’ actions, while the film presents its political and philosophical concepts in a very loose and eclectic fashion, thus forcing the audience to evaluate them if they are to “understand” the film at all. Reducing the storyline to a minimal level, \textit{Vent d’est} arbitrarily uses the typical characters taken from the genre of the Western, both nominally and visually, to symbolize the essential figures during the uprisings in May ’68. A cavalryman symbolically represents “the ruling class” or “a capitalist,” while an Indian represents the “working class”; a pretty young lady and a handsome young man are the equivalents of the “bourgeois student rebels,” while a union delegate portrays the “revisionist trade union” in France; finally, a marginal figure named Miss Althusser symbolizes the abject role of Louis Althusser after ’68.

The film is divided into several chapters, namely “The Strike,” “The Delegate,” “The Active Minorities,” “The General Assembly,” “Repression,” “The Active Strike,” and “The Police State.” These seven parts address issues like the various conflicts and debates experienced in May ’68, the post-1968 political currents in France, Lenin’s commentary on left-wing infantilism, socialist self-management in Yugoslavia during the 1960s, egalitarian medical welfare in Maoist China, the necessity of French civil violence, and the relationship and contradictions between militant cinema and third cinema. However, the film puts particular emphasis on the disagreements between workers, students, and trade unions in ’68; the Chinese-Soviet debates among the different leftist groups after

\textsuperscript{120} Kent E. Carroll, “Film and Revolution,” 50–51.
and the justification for war and revolutionary violence in advanced bourgeois societies.

In fact, many film critics did not appreciate Godard and Gorin’s radical approach to leftist collective cinema. For example, Richard Porton thought that the film could serve only a handful of audiences. He discredited *Vent d’est* as being politically incoherent and tedious and having no more than an Olympian pseudo-rigor.\(^{121}\) Joan Mellen, in a review in *Film Comment*, argued that the so-called “Chinese wind” in the film was never visible and that the “Eastern current” was empty rhetoric that could not be taken seriously.\(^{122}\) However, I argue that this film, when carefully rehistoricized with the diverging and heterogeneous contexts of French Maoism during the 1960s and 1970s, offers an interesting insight into how one can dialectically bridge the historical contradictions between the Russian and Chinese revolutions without simply reducing one to the other.

The opening shot of *Vent d’est* is perhaps the most revealing example of how the DVG’s philosophy of divorcing image and sound finds its specific discursive position. In the eight-minute static long take, a young bourgeois couple is lying in a field without any apparent actions or dialogues. While the onscreen images seem to be rather peaceful and motionless, the parallel soundtrack features confusing and mixed opinions from the different perspectives of a manager’s family, trade union delegates, and working-class proletariats who are all commenting on a (fictional) miner’s strike that takes place in 1968. Interestingly, the intrusion of the voice-over commentary on the nascent scene could be seen as similar to a “strike” or an “uprising” aimed at disrupting the apparent status quo. The voice-over does not seek to explain the onscreen images but instead problematizes and challenges the stability and consistency of the images. Julia Lesage argued that *Vent d’est* was one of the first films from which the educated audience and elites could learn nothing except its own linguistic exhaustion and poverty of the language of bourgeois cinema.\(^{123}\) The notion of “dialogue” or

\(^{122}\) Joan Mellen, “Wind from the East: A Review.” *Film Comment* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1971): 66.
“communication” is usually rendered impossible in *Vent d’est*. In this sense, James Roy MacBean also commented that “in fact, when the voice-over ‘commentary’ finally breaks in, what we get is not dialogue but a critique of dialogue.”

As the film reveals afterward, this impossibility of dialogue is also historically found in the brief student-worker alliance during May ’68. In the short period in which joint factory occupations and street protests took place, both the students and the workers constantly harbored mutual skepticism and mistrust toward each other. The workers thought that the students were too lazy and not serious about revolution, while the students thought that the workers only seemed to be concerned about their pragmatic want of wage increases and to have forgotten the true meaning of proletarian insurrections. One worker says, “Then at least we will see that the students wake up early,” which is echoed by a student who says, “Then at least we will see the workers wake up early.” The two parties are not really allied because they hold their own stereotypical bias toward each other.

Historically, it is generally agreed that the events of May 1968 took place during three distinctive timelines. The primary stage, which is known as the “student crisis,” occurred between May 3 and May 13. It began with police coercion and armed dispersion in the courtyard of Sorbonne University on May 3, ascended to a violent confrontation between French authorities and students and the subsequent rise in the workers’ fraternal support for the repressed youth, and culminated in the memorable “Night of the Barricades” on May 10 to May 11. Consequently, that night of excessive police brutality led to the one-day strike and massive demonstrations on May 13.

The second stage, from May 14 to May 27, is considered the “worker crisis.” Throughout this period, the demonstrations by both workers and students grew and escalated to a nationwide general strike in which Gaullist France was brought to a complete standstill. This episode was characterized by the opposing

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attitudes between the two major trade unions, the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (French Democratic Confederation) and the *Confédération générale du travail* (General Confederation of Work), toward the new student-worker alliance and the failure of the communist-owned organs to halt the expansion of the strikes. The impotence of Prime Minister George Pompidou and French President Charles de Gaulle in dealing with the social unrest and the successive rejection of consensus on May 27 gave the impression that the Republican state had simply exhausted all possible solutions to finding a mutual agreement.

The events then moved on to the shortest yet perhaps the most critical final stage—the “political crisis”—which took place between May 27 and May 30 and nearly resulted in the overthrow of the Gaullist regime. This elusive episode was accentuated by the President’s enigmatic flight to Baden-Baden, the continuous inability of the French Left to collaborate on a win-win solution, and de Gaulle’s flamboyant address to the whole nation after his return upon which he regained massive public support. It was widely believed that the rise of the “silent majority” in support of de Gaulle on May 30 eventually drew the events of May 1968 to a close.

The true revolutionary virtue of May ’68 was that the events exposed the sheer inadequacy of utilitarian dialogue and constructive consensus drawn between the Gaullist state and the French protestors. According to the French literary critic Maurice Blanchot, who was an active militant in the historical episodes of ’68, “being-togetherness” was precisely the establishing link among the various kinds of individuals at the height of the May ’68 events. Despite the constant quarrels and disagreements between the emerging communities, Blanchot suggested that “May 1968 permitted a possibility to manifest itself, the possibility—beyond any utilitarian gain—of a being-together that gave back to all the rights to equality in fraternity through a freedom of speech that elated everyone.”

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126 Ibid., 30.
During the two elusive months in 1968 (May and June), bourgeois intellectuals, young artists, and the working class, who were supposed to remain as separate units under the typical Marxist-Leninist conception, were somehow brought into alliance to form a number of “action committees” that celebrated both collective decision-making and direct democracy against representative politics and trade unionism. Interestingly, these “action committees” were singularly characterized not by the infinite debates involved but by the overt “actionlessness” and “aimlessness” in their revolutionary enterprise. In the words of Blanchot, though, the revolutionary committees in ’68 were not just giving rise to an idle festivity and hedonistic carnival. Rather, they cast a new light on reconceptualizing metanarratives such as “communism,” “equality,” and “fraternity” insofar as the committees were a group in the making. It was “the circle of friends who disavowed their previous friendship in order to call upon friendship (camaraderie without preliminaries) vehiculated by the requirement of being there, not as a person or subject but as the demonstrators of a movement fraternally anonymous and impersonal.”

Therefore, what Vent d’est simply suggested about the failure of sustaining student-worker alliances during May ’68 was not truly down to the fact that the two protesting groups were pre-ontologically opposed. Rather, what the two directors may have wanted to highlight was the role of the trade union delegate who secretly mediates and even intensifies the gulf of misunderstanding between the students and the workers, which results in the loss of true revolutionary opportunity. On several occasions, the trade union, which is supposed to be responsible for facilitating the negotiation of the workers’ demands with the ruling class, further separates the alliances between students and workers by spreading rumors about each community.

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127 Ibid., 32.
128 Alain Badiou defines trade unionism as “a particular piece of the parliamentary State count which comes to complete the one’s designate, as a singleton, by the company head. The absolutely singular character of workers’ belonging to the factory is rendered invisible through the legal superimposition of a representative excrescence.” Alain Badiou, “The Factory as Event Site: Why Should the Worker Be a Reference in Our Vision of Politics?,” trans. Alberto Toscano. Prelom 8 (Fall 2006): 174.
In *Vent d’est*, the trade union delegates always speak two languages—French and Italian. This dual linguistic advantage gives them a sort of extra privilege with which to mediate the interests and smooth the conflicts between both the working class and the ruling authorities. The “Italian” language in *Vent d’est* has a particular meaning of “promiscuity” and “sexual seduction,” specifically emphasized in a scene featuring the seductive, womanizing “charm” of a young, handsome Italian man. In a voice-over, the audience learns that

> he is in every film and he always plays a Don Juan type…. The young man speaks in Italian…. The man is young and handsome. When he speaks, he disparages age and ugliness, and glories youth and glamor. What he wants is sex, what he offers is sex, inviting the audience to come up on the screen and have sex with him.

According to Godard and Gorin, the main purpose of the trade union was not to bridge the gap between the working class and capitalists or between students and workers but to assimilate the proletariats from the perspective of the established power. The trade union had simply abused its technical advantage for its own sake. By speaking on behalf of the workers, the trade union thus altogether rendered the true antagonism of the working-class invisible and eventually facilitated further capitalist exploitations in bourgeois society. The second female voice in the film says:

> The rumours say that their claims will be met. Who started these rumours? The union delegate. They say that 80 per cent of the workers have gone back to work, that only a few are carrying on with the strike. Who started this rumour? The union delegate. They’re talking about agitators. That’s what the bosses say when the workers start the struggle. And who speaks for the bosses? The union delegate. The union delegate translates the struggle of the working class into the language of the employers. And when the union delegate does this translation, he is acting as a traitor.

What is interesting is that the word “Italian” also had a specific derogatory meaning of “revisionism” or liberal “reformism” within French leftist intellectual imaginations during the 1960s. According to Sprinzak, the Italians, as a younger offshoot of the *Parti communiste français* (French Communist Party – PCF), precisely referred to the left-leaning French “revisionists” who were heavily influenced by Paolo Togliatti’s ideas from the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (Italian Communist Party – PCI) to de-Stalinize and liberalize the Communist Party from within. By accommodating a humanistic democratic ideology, the Italians were
somehow perceived by the French Maoists as “traitors” in proletarian movements, even before May ’68.\(^{129}\) During May ’68, the trade unions succeeded in facilitating the eventual consensus of wage increases for workers with the ruling class. Yet it was this same process of negotiation that simultaneously nullified the continuous revolutionary demands of the working class and thus finally discouraged the supporting alliances with the young students. It is quite obvious that the trade unions ultimately served as a lubricant for the predominant class at the bargaining table by disenabling the revolutionary alliances between the working class and the bourgeois students.

### The Sino-Soviet Split Reloaded

At the same time, the predominate narrative about such trade unionist “betrayal” or “sell-out” of both students’ and workers’ interests during ’68 was somewhat exaggerated in many radical leftist discourses. According to Louis Althusser, the dominant perception that the leaders from the PCF and the major trade unions had simply betrayed the French workers to the government was just an illusionary assertion. This was a “careless” and perhaps even “immature” perception, according to Althusser:

> Some students, in a rather too simplistic fashion, discovered the reason for this in the ‘betrayal’ by leaders of the CGT [the biggest French trade union aligned with the PCF] and the PCF. This is simplistic because it is not a Marxist-Leninist explanation to believe in the determining role of leaders when a mass movement of these proportions is involved.\(^{130}\)

Althusser went on to say that “[t]he truth is that the entire working class, and not just its leadership, was not, in general, at all disposed to ‘follow’ the suggestions of the students, which were based more on a dream-experience than on an understanding of reality.”\(^{131}\) Althusser believed that the students were far too indulged in their spontaneous actions during the “Night of the Barricades” on May 13, 1968, and hence they carelessly bypassed the precious moment of the

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\(^{131}\) Ibid.
worker-led insurrections that came afterward. The so-called “student-worker alliance” in ’68 became, according to Althusser, a mere “historic encounter” rather than an organic “fusion” insofar as there were no concrete demands made during such an alliance. He added: “An encounter may occur or not occur. It can [be] a ‘brief encounter,’ relatively accidental, in which case it will not lead to any fusion or forces.”

Under such Althusserian analysis, the name “trade union” as such was somehow retrospectively abjected by many student radicals as a kind of scapegoat to cover up the sheer ideological incommensurability within the camp of French leftism from the very beginning. However, I argue that Godard and Gorin’s approach to collective filmmaking in Vent d’est, instead of simply being “infantile” and “naïve” in the way it fantasizes and romanticizes the role of the students, is a bit more ambivalent and profound than the dismissive analysis offered by Althusser. On the one hand, similar to the aforementioned Althusserian diagnosis about the “brief encounter” of various revolutionary alliances in ’68, the collective solidarity pertaining to the crew members of Vent d’est, who were basically of heterogeneous ideological backgrounds, is rather elusive and symbolic.

132 Recuperating Lenin’s critique on the left-wing infantilism during the early twentieth century, Althusser laments that the bourgeois French students somehow misrecognized themselves as the revolutionary vanguard where “in May it was the working class, and not the students, who, in the final analysis, played the determining role.” The students’ revolt, in his eyes, was a highly ambiguous movement in the sense that it was overdetermined by a variety of incommensurable ideologies—the dominant libertarian anarchism, Trotskyism, anarcho-syndicalism, Guevarism and the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. Ibid., 304; 314.

133 Ibid., 306.

134 In the summer of 1969, when Godard and Gorin received financial support from an Italian tycoon to make this film, the duo fantasized that they could work perfectly together with several young anarchists and libertarians in Italy to demonstrate their political solidarity toward the rapid restoration of capitalist ethos in France shortly after 1968. On the film set, the crew lined themselves up as a “general assembly” to enjoy a good share of creative autonomy. They decided to work together as a non-bureaucratic collective throughout the production, filming on the basis of political discussions and collective arguments. And yet, according to Julia Lesage, the general assembly of this kind of radical filmmaking in fact never entirely worked out insofar as the film was later reshaped and reorganized during the editing and sound mixing processes, which were solely accomplished by Godard and Gorin. Lesage, http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC04folder/WindfromEast.html. One of the crew members remembered that the shooting of Vent d’est sounded “like a comic nightmare in which the collective delusions of ’68 were distilled into their purest form.” MacCabe, Godard: A Portrait, 223.
However, on the other hand, what is really crucial about this work is that this “failure” of group subjectivity in filmmaking was also self-reflexively put back into the textual level of *Vent d’est* itself. Within the plot of the film, there is a scene where a female voice-over is comparing and contrasting the policies of the “workers’ autonomy” in Tito’s Yugoslavia with the people’s medicine in Maoist China. Each line of the critique on Yugoslavia’s revisionist tendency is thereby read over a red freeze frame alternated with a scratched-up image of the film’s production company, along with a chain of on-screen sounds. This sequence features snatches of voices explaining how this film was made, but there is no coherent picture of how the ideas were worked out in the general assembly as a whole. Yet I argue that this kind of textual incoherence in *Vent d’est* reveals a much more profound historical reality about the internal conflicts of French Maoism in the wake of May ’68, which the former Althusserian analysis usually omits. Retrospectively speaking, it is perhaps through revisiting the intrinsic contradictions within the different strands of French leftism that one is able to truly learn from the “failure” of Communist fraternity.

As Colin MacCabe remarked, the key sequence of *Vent d’est* is structured around two parallel pictures of Stalin and Mao taken from an Italian left-wing newspaper with the words “Wanted for Murder” painted on them. The newspaper was pinned to the door of a wooden cabin with a Pepsi advertisement placed right above it. Thematically, this main sequence is centered on a mass meeting of the crew to debate whether an idiosyncratic image of Stalin should be included in the film.\(^{135}\) Each shot, which alternately shows the two pictures—one of a Pepsi advertisement and the other of Stalin (Stalin’s face is scored out with heavy black lines) and Mao (Mao’s face remains untouched)—is supplemented by the intermission of a commentary by a female voice. The use of this picture of Stalin immediately divides the opinions of the Maoist-libertarian collective. Some members argued that the image of Stalin should not have been included insofar as it rendered a nuanced sense of repression that was a reminder of the brutal Stalinist memories in Eastern Europe.

\(^{135}\) Ibid., 225.
However, the other half of the crew held the opinion that the signifier of Stalin should be included in the film. As for these comrades, the image of Stalin precisely embodied the so-called “Stalinist problem” that was prevalent in Europe since the late 1950s. The so-called “Stalinist question” here precisely referred to the cult of personality and stiffening of bureaucracy developed by Joseph Stalin that was supposed to have perverted Marxism-Leninism. The female voice-over goes on to discuss the genesis of this film:

Why is there an ever-changing relationship between these images and sounds? The intention was to talk about what we experienced in May ’68…. In May & June ’68, the established powers retaliated and repressed these revolutionary groups in France, Italy, Spain and Mexico. The filming of the general assembly was therefore the filming of the general assembly which debated the following sequence, in which the making of images and sounds of this repression is discussed.

The endless debates between “pro-Chinese” and “pro-Soviet” leanings in Vent d’est are not entirely meaningless and aimless though. Rather, the so-called “Stalinist problem” that emerged at the onset of the Sino-Soviet Split in the late 1950s undeniably divided and bred many different types of leftist orientations in Western Europe. In France, the “Stalinist issue” precisely summarized the core disagreements between two of the most important political currents of French Maoism during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The largest two Maoist groups were called the Parti communiste marxiste-léniniste de France (French Marxist-Leninist Communist Party – PCMLF) and the Gauche prolétarianne (Proletarian Left – GP).

The PCMLF was officially formed a few months before May ’68 in December 1967. Predominantly comprised of old working-class activists, the PCMLF subscribed to what A. Belden Fields called “hierarchical Maoism” insofar as it “accepted the Leninist concept of a centralized and highly disciplined party and attempted to build organizations along those lines.” Alain Badiou commented that the PCMLF was first and foremost “Stalinist,” as it was nostalgic for the great Maurice Thorez era of the PCF and the French Resistance during the

1940s. Historically speaking, the PCMLF was a splinter group that broke off from the PCF in the late 1950s over the question of Stalin. It argued that the PCF’s reluctance to denounce Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization actually supported the rise of revisionism in Europe. In this respect, the ideological orientation of the PCMLF was quite close to the stance of Maoist China during the Sino-Soviet Split. It also held a view similar to Mao’s historicist view, which argued that the idiosyncratic “Stalinist issue” had to be properly analyzed as a political and historical phenomenon rather than being completely purged from the discussion table in the context of a communist revolution.

_Gauche prolétarianne_ was, however, recognized by many critics as a “non-hierarchical” and “anti-Stalinist” Maoist group, as it was widely known as the _Mao-spontanex_ or _Les Maos_. Established in the fall of 1968, the founding core of the GP was constituted by many members from the former _Union des jeunesse communistes marxistes-léninistes_ (UJCML) and a large faction from the anarcho-libertarian current of the “March 22nd Movement.” After the failure of May ’68, the leadership in the UJCML underwent a severe self-criticism for their misjudgment in the crucial “Night of the Barricades.” Referring to Lenin’s teaching of _What Is to Be Done?_ and his commentary on left-wing infantilism, a small “liquidationist faction” of the UJCML, including Robert Linhart (the most beloved student of Althusser), argued that the misfire of ’68 was precisely the lack of a revolutionary vanguard party. However, for the rest of the “non-liquidationists” such as Benny Lévy and André Glucksmann, they were convinced that the overt Marxist-Leninist rigor and the revolutionary primacy of the working

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138 ibid., 130–131.
139 The UJCML argued that the student revolt culminated in pitched battles with the police on May 10, 1968, the “Night of the Barricades,” as a manifestation of the students’ petty bourgeois ideology. A. Belden Fields wrote: “It interpreted that a true revolution must be made by the workers and that confrontations without them were meaningless. It urged students to go out to the factories and the working class neighborhoods rather than mounting the barricades in the Latin Quarter. Members of the organization did not participate in the battle that night.” See, Fields, _Trotskyism and Maoism_, 93. Althusser also commented that the young Althusserians held an even more rigorous line than the PCF toward the students’ spontaneism in ’68. See Louis Althusser, _The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir_, eds. Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang, trans. Richard Veasey (New York: New Press, 1993), 229.
class trivialized the spontaneity that was demonstrated by the young students in ’68.\textsuperscript{140}

For Lévy and Glucksmann, it was the teaching of Mao, instead of the writings of Lenin, that had been misread in May ’68. After the fusion between the former UJCML members and the anarchist movements led by Alain Geismar in 1969, the GP thereby re-aligned themselves more seamlessly toward the Maoist principle of “mass-line” to break down the division between intellectuals and workers, and to allow students “to learn from the masses” and “to serve the people.”\textsuperscript{141} In the eyes of the GP, the Chinese Cultural Revolution was anti-bureaucratic and anti-authoritarian; in the words of Jean-Pierre Le Dantec, it was a “return to one of the forgotten origins of Marxism, that of the texts on the Paris Commune taken up by Lenin during the époque of the Soviets: the libertarian source.”\textsuperscript{142} Calling themselves the \textit{Nouvelle résistance populaire} (New Popular Resistance), the GP orchestrated a series of direct and voluntary actions, such as stealing and distributing free subway tickets to protest a rise in fares, and pillaging a luxury food store in Paris and handing the booty to immigrant workers living in the shantytowns, as a way to expand and widen the capacity and the scope of proletarian struggles.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{140} Benny Lévy argued that the “liquidationists” always read Mao through the lens of \textit{What Is to Be Done?}, so the liquidationists did not really understand the true knowledge and novelty of Maoism as such. See Benny Lévy [pseudonym Pierre Victor], “Investigation into the Maoists in France: Interview with Benny Lévy,” trans. Mitchell Abidor. \textit{Communist Archives}, February; April; November 1971, \url{http://www.marxists.org/archive/levy-benny/1971/investigation.htm} (accessed April 19, 2009).

\textsuperscript{141} “Mass-line” is an internal people’s critique of bureaucracy and the division of labor in revolutionary society. It was founded on the conviction that the eyes of the peasants always see more justly than those of the bureaucrats and technicians.


\textsuperscript{143} See Donald Reid, “\textit{Établissement}: Working in the Factory to Make Revolution in France.” \textit{Radical History Review} 88 (Winter 2004): 90. Beginning in 1969, the GP managed to attract widespread public sympathies, from prominent intellectuals to journalists and celebrities, including Michel Foucault, Maurice Clavel, Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, Godard, and the French actor Yves Montand. Within the single year of 1969, the number of GP members multiplied from a few hundred to a few thousand to celebrate the popular Cause. As Godard personally recounted, he joined Sartre several times to freely distribute \textit{La Cause du peuple} (\textit{The Cause of the People}), the newspaper founded by the GP, in railway stations. See Godard, \textit{Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard}, 374. Because of his political sympathies, Godard gravitated toward the \textit{Gauche prolétarienne}, collaborating in actions through their journal \textit{La Cause du peuple}. Godard also wrote five articles for the Maoist journal \textit{J’accuse} and helped create another Mao-leaning newspaper \textit{Libération}. For an account of Godard’s involvement with the French leftist press during his DVG period, see, for example, Michael Witt, “\textit{Godard dans la presse d’extrême-}
In a dialogue between Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, commenting on Godard’s *La gai savoir (The Gay Knowledge)* (1968) produced shortly before *Vent d’est*, they both agreed that compared to Stalin’s dictatorship of the party, the Maoist Cultural Revolution seemed to offer a more authentic revolutionary model to the young French intellectuals during the 1960s, as long as “… Mao actually provides a much easier access than classical Marxism to a position of untroubled knowledge.”¹⁴⁴ In *La gai savoir*, the “libidinal” and “anti-intellectual” appeal of Maoism was perhaps the most revealing to French intelligentsia. As Silverman noted, there was a scene where the camera focused on a poster with the words: “*Mao sait tout* (Mao knows everything).”¹⁴⁵ Farocki further responded that

[i]ronically, Mao’s simplifications have a primarily poetic appeal. They interpellate us into politics through their artistic radicality. You don’t have to become a Protestant just because you love Bach, but May ’68 activities began by admiring Mao’s prose and ended up by becoming Maoists. This shows that Maoism finally appealed less to conscious knowledge than unconscious desire.¹⁴⁶

A few scenes prior to the aforesaid sequence in *La gai savoir* shows shots of the black-and-white images of Stalin and Mao, with the color red painted on Stalin’s blackened background and Mao’s scarf, respectively. However, Godard did not insert any voice-overs to suture the two images. Silverman and Farocki interpreted that as Godard’s indifference to the fact that he favored neither image,

¹⁴⁴ Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, Speaking about Godard (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 121–122. Primarily addressed to Nietzsche’s book of the same title, *La gai savoir (The Gay Knowledge)* is one of the very rare examples of an almost purely intellectual discourse. Émile Rousseau (Jean-Pierre Léaud), the great-grandson of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Patricia Lumumba (Juliet Berto), a daughter of the Third World, stumble upon each other in an unused television studio on one particular night. Then they embark on a series of dialogues about Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, and the role of cinema and pedagogy in consumerist society as they try to develop a rigorous analysis of the relation between politics and film shortly after May ’68. They meet for seven late evenings to debate the issues, yet neither Godard nor Émile and Patricia give the kind of detailed, closely reasoned exposition that the audience expected. Instead, what is presented is merely a filmic summary of the areas that should have been investigated from scratch—which literally means “*la gai savoir*” (the gay knowledge).
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 122.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid. In this respect, Jean-Pierre Gorin also agreed on the very “libidinal appearance” of Maoism in ’68. He said that in films like *Vent d’est* and *Lutte en Italie*, “they are the perfect image of what was militancy at that time, that incredible drive of madness which was inside it. They are affected by history, not on a theoretical level, but in the flesh and blood of the films. It’s a kind of experiment, where you reach yourself, and not as an ego, but as an incredible amount of mutual energy. Let’s just call it a poetic vision.” Christian Braad Thomsen, “Jean-Pierre Gorin Interviewed: Filmmaking and History.” *Jump Cut* 3 (1974): http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinesays/JC03folder/GorinIntThomson.html (accessed May 7, 2010).
as they both represented some kind of empty signifier. They commented, “The French student movement championed Chinese over Soviet communism, but *Gay Knowledge* proposes that, at least in this respect, the one cannot finally be distinguished from the other.”\(^{147}\) What Godard really “knows” in advance is perhaps just his sheer ignorance, or his impotence in knowing all. He is indeed incapable of clearly differentiating who is morally “superior” between Mao and Stalin in *Lai gai savoir*. The political crimes and achievements of both leaders are radically mixed in the film, so all he can do is literally present the two bare images as such—as they really are.\(^{148}\)

Many critics regard the ideological orientations between the PCMLF and the GP as formally incommensurable. However, from the lessons of both *Vent d’est* and *La gai savoir*, their contradictions in relation to the “Stalinist problem” are merely illusionary. That is to say, regardless of how many controversies and hyperbolic feelings are provoked, Stalinist deviation from the pathways of Marxist egalitarianism was still part of the whole leftist movements and trajectories during the long twentieth century. Any premature negation of this Stalinist perversion was never the answer to the problem. Rather, such presumptive purification still, first and foremost, conferred a form of intellectual “repression” and epistemological “cruelty” toward the hyperbolical questions raised by the “Stalinist issue” as such. That is why one of the characters laments later in *Vent d’est*: “It’s always the same. You are anti-Stalin, but you still make Stalinist images.”

**The Dual Lessons of Theory and Terror**

However, the true paradox here is, can a radically non-biased, all-embracing historical judgment really be arrested and maintained in relation to this same kind of “Stalinist repression”? To make the whole issue a bit more complicated, what is really symptomatic about the “untroubled (gay) knowledge” is that it is perhaps not the images of Mao or Stalin that try to avoid the idiosyncratic “Stalinist association.” Rather, it is perhaps the latent cinematic

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\(^{147}\) Silverman and Farocki, *Speaking about Godard*, 121.

\(^{148}\) This bare presentation also can be summarized in a famous tagline in *Vent d’est* that refers to the “Stalinist” image as an empty signifier—“*Ce n’est pas une image juste, c’est juste une image* (It’s not a just image, it’s just an image).”
manipulation of the two filmmakers who constantly seek to evade being criticized. In this respect, Andrew Britton commented that *Vent d’est* is arguably “one of the most repressive films ever made.” He continued by saying, “The film precisely forbids analysis, or, rather the analysis has been made, and the only positions left are those of unbeliever or proselytizer.” Many may wonder whether Godard’s Maoism is just another name for his “Stalinist” mode of filmmaking.

Although I admit that this Godard and Gorin film is at times dogmatic and politically inflexible, I have observed that the two filmmakers do not simply hide and conceal their ideological “biases” against the male-initiated Maoist Althusserianism in the wake of May ’68. I argue that this “sincerity” of revolutionary bias is not simply a symbolic gesture of moral benevolence. Instead, it is a reminder that the predominating moral benevolence today may contain a certain irreducible bias of its own. Historically speaking, there was a major paradigm shift in the role of women as a particular type of liberated “educator” or “schoolteacher” in French and European cinema as a whole in the aftermath of ’68. According to Serge Daney, the master-discourse is, after 1968, somewhat systematically born by the voice of a woman. This means that Godardian pedagogy implies a distribution of roles and discourses by sex. The voice which reprimands, resumes, advises, teaches, explains, theorizes and ever terrorizes/theorizes is always a woman’s voice.

As Julia Lesage argued, the presence of the two female voices as kind of ideological “teachers” in *Vent d’est* can, to a certain extent, make up for the lack of self-agency of women during the uprisings in May ’68. But does the feminized teaching in *Vent d’est* automatically liberate the male-dominated tendencies of May ’68? It may or may not. The tone of the female voices is usually highly repetitive, mechanical, and prescriptive, while its speed is so fast

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150 See Ibid. Britton added, “It is only because of the unquestioned acceptance of Marxism as The Word that Godard can dismiss ‘the Western’ as a monstrous weapon in the hands of bourgeois ideology and, at the same time, make a film which violently denounces every political position but its own and elevates a rigid orthodoxy (with its own historical determinations) to the status of a transhistorical heal-all.” See Ibid., 9–10.
that it seems to elude any comprehension at all. As Daney described Godard’s vision of woman as “strange feminism”:

He puts woman (voice, sound) in the place of what spells out the law (the ‘correct thinking’ whose phallic character is easily understood) and of what gives life…. It is not certain that feminist claims will be satisfied with this ‘place’ men want no more, this ‘power’ they want to relinquish. It is not necessarily to the advantage of women, while man gets the benefit of masochism: he can become the director who stages how he wants to be punished, what kind of cruel mothering gives jouissance.\(^{153}\)

In Vent d’est, the heroine played by Anne Wiazemsky, who originally appeared as a young student revolutionary in a previous part of the film, is simultaneously casted as a trivial and even abject figure named Miss Althusser. In a section entitled “Pedagogie” (Pedagogy) there are two characters: one is a trade union delegate who dresses in a fancy coat and the other is Miss Althusser who is responsible for “teaching” and “instructing” the working class. Yet Miss Althusser plays a largely subordinated role compared with the Italian-speaking union official. Each time Miss Althusser distributes her writings to the workers, she must first submit them to the trade union delegate for approval and comments. In the meantime, Miss Althusser does not enjoy her teaching position. For example, while she is teaching how the university system has tragically become an ideological state apparatus, she immediately receives a massive negative response and booing from her students on the floor. A young male student suddenly comes into view and hijacks her teaching. He occupies the left side of the teacher’s desk and shouts out sentences that explicitly demand proletarian struggles (e.g., “Fiat is our university!”). He immediately receives great support and echoes from the audience. Shortly afterward, a peasant holds up a hammer to his chest as a sign to move forward to revolutionary insurrection. Miss Althusser’s open self-criticism is, however, not really accepted by her students, as her public speech is considered “too scholarly” and “impractical.”

This particular abjected fate of Miss Althusser in Vent d’est finds its resonance in the French leftist intellectual context.\(^{154}\) François Dosse recalled

\(^{153}\) Daney, “Le t(h)errorisé,” 40.
\(^{154}\) Althusserianism and structural Marxism, which were once so prevalent in Paris, became almost entirely outmoded in the aftermath of May ’68. When Althusser refused to leave the PCF, he was thereby severely criticized by his Maoist disciples at Rue d’Ulm for lending support to the
many slogans that were used in the student demonstrations at the end of 1968 to ridicule the passivity and inertness of Althusser’s teachings: “Althusser is useless!” “Althusser not the people!” “Althusser has gone to sleep, but the popular movement is doing fine!” As another normalien, Pierre Macheray, remembered, “May ’68 was the moment when texts against Althusser began to proliferate. I remember bookstore windows completely full of hostile books and journals. This was a very difficult time, exactly the traverse of the preceding period.”

However, among all the former students at Rue d’Ulm, it was ex-Althusserian Jacques Rancière who probably launched the most critical attacks against his previous teacher. In a pamphlet titled La leçon d’Althusser (Althusser’s Lesson), Rancière argued that Althusserianism ultimately revealed itself to be a kind of “philosophy of order” and hence perished the spontaneous “Night of the Barricades.” Although he may not have intended to dismiss all of Althusser’s teachings, Rancière still believed that Althusserianism was “fundamentally a theory of education,” while “every theory of education is committed to preserving the power it seeks to bring to light.” Because of Althusser’s stubborn allegiance to his own privileged position of the pedagogue, it left no time for his students to fulfill the promise of political actions and revolutionary alliances with the working class: “the logic of Althusserian discourse is such that it is never the moment, as the antagonisms of empirical revisionist enemy. Like the tragic fate of the aforesaid Miss Althusser in Vent d’est, François Dosse recalled many slogans that were used in the student demonstrations at the end of 1968 to trivialize Althusser’s teachings. Another normalien, Pierre Macheray, remembered when texts against Althusser began to proliferate. François Dosse, History of Structuralism, vol. 2: The Sign Sets, 1967–present, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 119; 120. 

155 Ibid., 119.

156 Ibid., 120.


158 Ibid., 52. Althusser, in his Reading Capital, suggested that the art of “symptomatic reading” in ideologically loaded text was not open to all, but required a kind of “instruction” and “education”: “to see this invisible, to see these ‘oversights,’ to identify the lacunae in the fullness of this discourse, the blanks in the crowded text, we need something quite different from an acute or attentive gaze; we need an informed gaze, a new gaze, itself produced by a reflection of the ‘change of terrain’ on the exercise of vision.” See Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, Reading Capital, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2006), 27.
politics never give philosophy the moment to conclude, to bind rational politics to empirical politics.”

However, Godard and Gorin did not entirely abject the “revisionist schoolteacher” in this work. Is the didactic female voice-over really corresponding to the derogatory image of Miss Althusser alone? Not at all. While the aforementioned young male student has hijacked Miss Althusser’s teaching position, his tactic of such a pedagogical capture is not entirely unproblematic. Right before this pedagogical scene encouraging popular struggles, the same male student receives booing and rejection similar to his teacher’s as he ecstatically plays raw, lousy music with a flute in front of the other students. However, his musical performance is not really welcomed by the spectators. This young man, though, desperately urges his audience to appreciate his music. He asks, “Don’t you like it? Isn’t it nice? Don’t you like it? You must like it.” However, the negative responses grow even stronger and the young student, highly discouraged, leaves the stage.

Suffice it to say that the repetitive tone of the female voice is not only for the sake of annoying the audience but perhaps also to reconceptualize the very notion of “revolutionary violence” in Vent d’est. Although the female voice-over repeats over and over again the same instructions—“Think. Manufacture. Simplify. Reflect. Learn.”—Godard and Gorin’s showcase of guerilla terror and domestic violence in Vent d’est is indeed highly anti-realistic and metaphorical. While Godard and Gorin include a scene about the process of making a “home-made bomb,” the essential tools for making this bomb are simply composed of a

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159 Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 55. In fact, the philosophy department of Vincennes, headed by Foucault since the late 1960s, was heavily predominated by many former Maoist Althusserians such as Badiou, Rancière, and Miller. In the meantime, there were a number of young GP militants who had set up their Maoist base and revolutionary stunts at Vincennes. The GP’s leader, André Glucksmann, who was hired to teach Marxist classes at Vincennes, regularly organized shocking “hijackings” toward the “bourgeois, aristocratic and revisionist schoolteachers” on the campus. Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 266–267. As François Dosse remembered the Maoist heyday at Vincennes, “Many Maoists were there, who, missing the red guards, tended to view this microcosm as the center of the world, or limited their world to the university campus. The lively forces of protest of May ’68 met there, trapped within this confined and padded universe where agitation could flourish freely at a healthy remove from society. Distances would mute the effects of student protests between the campus and the heart of Paris. Indeed, the government was all too happy to have circumscribed the sickness in a forest, which also served as a cordon sanitaire.” Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, vol. 2, 142.
set of toy tanks and a handful of domestic explosives. In the meantime, the two
directors also make use of several revolutionary writings of Mao and cigarette
matches to convey the meaning of the great explosive chemistry between theory
and terror. As the matches ignite, they cut to a shot of a ruined factory, with the
noise of an explosion on the soundtrack. In this respect, no real explosion is
filmed as the explosion is envisioned only in terms of injunctive voice-overs and
simple visual metaphors.\textsuperscript{160}

In commenting on the two directors’ attempts at an experimental blending
of “theory” and “terror,” Daney also identified that there are in fact always two
female voice-overs at work, which perpetuates the various ideological debates
throughout the film. He argued that after May ’68, there was an obvious paradigm
shift as Godard transformed the bourgeois, entertaining dimension of cinematic
theater into a classroom of living aspirations and class struggles.\textsuperscript{161} With regard to
the issue of terrorism, the first female voice, which resembles a typical
humanitarian position, blasts the terrorists’ utmost cruelty and inhumanity. In her
eyes, terrorism is never justified in any circumstances. She says, “It’s disgusting.
A bomb has been thrown in a supermarket. A lot of people have been injured.
What have you got out of it?… Fanatics are sent to do the killings, gangsters
whose only aim is to kill and destroy, even though no advantage can be gained
from it.” The second female voice then hits back at the lazy dogmatism of the first
female voice by revealing the obscene underside of her bourgeois humanitarinism:

That’s what bourgeois humanitarianism says when the oppressed get the means of
grasping the exploiter by the throat. When bourgeois humanitarianism talks about
innocent victims, unnecessary violence, what is it hiding?… The daily reality of
bourgeois terror, the reality of the struggle.

The second female voice goes on to criticize that in May ’68 the

\textsuperscript{160} The film critic Joan Mellen was highly dismissive of this filmic portrayal of a terroristic attack.
She accused Godard of being as “impatient as a child with the long process of convincing a
majority and building a revolutionary organization” where his prescription of bomb-throwing was
“the most attractive action for the adolescent revolutionary who spends most of his time
picnicking on the grass.” She added, “[T]he end of \textit{Wind from the East} is a call for terrorism—
which for serious revolutionaries should mark a lack of confidence in the ability to win through
persuasion the great majority of a people.” See Mellen, “Wind from the East,” 67.

\textsuperscript{161} Daney, “\textit{Le (t)errorisé},” 34–35.
bourgeoisie and the established powers presented the “secondary contradiction” (i.e., the division of labor and sex) as sheer “primary contradiction” (i.e., the civil war between labor and capital), and eventually concealed the primary struggles in society. To such an extent, the second female voice argues that it is precisely this overdetermination of the “secondary contradiction” that sets up the condition to rebel. The violent concealment of the “primary contradiction” in French social life thus provides justification for popular rebellions in return. The second voice then raises the core question of the film:

What is to be done? You’ve made a film, you’ve criticized it. You’ve made mistakes, you corrected some of them. Because of this you know a little more about making images and sounds. Perhaps now you know better how this production can be transformed. For whom and against whom? Perhaps you have learned something very simple.

Eventually, the second female voice receives an answer from her students: “Marxism, which is composed of multiple principles, can be summed up as ‘it’s right to rebel.’”

While Godard and Gorin worked quite closely with the members of the GP during the late 1960s and early 1970s, both shared a similar view on the “justification” of revolutionary struggles—“on a raison de se révolter” (it’s right to rebel).162 Within the worldview of the GP, “revolution was like theatre, a show that depicted the war to come.”163 On February 26, 1972, a group of young GP Maoists distributed polemical tracts outside the Renault automobile factory in Boulogne-Billancourt that called for a demonstration against racism after the assassination of a young Arabic worker at the Goutte d’Or. In the midst of a fight between the Maoists and the plant managers, a 24-year-old Maoist worker named Pierre Overney was killed by one of the factory security guards. The police came to the scene the next day and demanded that the factory owner fire all possible

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162 In a book that recorded a series of conversations between Sartre and two GP leaders during the early 1970s, it unambiguously stated that “[i]n 1969–1970, when a worker wanted a short break and so sabotaged production we would say ‘well done.’ When a guy had reached the end of this tether and thumped his foreman we would say ‘well done.’ And we would add that it’s better done in small groups and done discreetly otherwise you’re bounded to be sacked but we said ‘well done.’ In short our thinking could be summed up as: it is right to rebel.” Philippe Gavi, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Pierre Victor, eds., On a raison de se révolter, discussions [It Is Right to Rebel, Discussions], (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 154.

witnesses. In response, about 200,000 people attended Overney’s funeral and participated in the subsequent commemorations.

Historians believe that this episode was highly significant and symbolic because it was literally the last large-scale mass gathering among the French militants to show comradeship and solidarity after ’68. As a quick response to Overney’s death, Sartre and Maoist journalist Maurice Clavel immediately wrote a plea in the newspaper that called for a popular trial to investigate this highly unjust and suspicious murder. However, the GP militants, who were even more impatient than Sartre, kidnapped the factory’s head of personnel, Robert Nogrette, as a quick manifestation of the people’s resistance. After forty-eight hours, when the GP members finally judged that it had defied the authorities long enough and had gotten sufficient publicity and media coverage of the kidnapping, the group simply released Nogrette without receiving anything in return.164 Sartre, who originally rejected the whole idea of kidnapping, thought that the young Maoists had not kept Nogrette long enough and hence missed the chance for real insurrections.165

Indeed, the GP’s revolutionary tactics were often branded as being “hysterical” and “childish.” Jacques Lacan was arguably the most dismissive critic of the symbolic revolt of the French Maoists.166 He proclaimed the

165 David Drake, Intellectuals and Politics in Post-War France (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 141. Historically speaking, the 1970s saw a chronicle of left-wing violence spreading across Western Europe. However, French leftist radicalism, most notably the Gauche prolétarianne, compared to the adjacent German Red Army Faction and the Italian Red Brigades, seems to have evaded the reign of true terrorist activities. As David Drake wrote, the very “non-violence” of French Maoism had more to do with the young intellectual’s faith in symbolic terror than actual bloodshed. Instead, the terrorist attacks in Munich prompted the French Maoist group to rethink the future of struggles for an egalitarian society. Being caught in an irreconcilable impasse and disagreement, the GP eventually disbanded in the fall of 1973, only to find that their initial Maoist fascination had been in fact more or less turned back to their various domestic moral concerns on several occasions. See David Drake, “On a raison de se révolter: The Response of La Gauche Prolétarianne to the Events of May–June 1968,” in Violence and Conflict in the Politics and Society of Modern France, eds. Jan Windebank and Renate Günther (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1995), 72.
166 However, according to Peter Starr, the association that Lacan was entirely dismissive about French Maoism was somewhat misconstrued. He said that “most decidedly, there was nothing in Lacan’s work to countenance either the extreme voluntarism of Maoist political thought or the Maoist faith in spontaneous revolution.” Starr, Logics of Failed Revolt, 38. In fact, Lacan was quite sympathetic to the ’68ers in the first place, as he had suspended his seminars for a whole year to support the student movements. According to Sherry Turkle, it was indeed Lacan himself

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revolutionary actions of the young ’68ers as a kind of hysterical “acting out” rather than a true “revolutionary act.” In his *Seminaire X*, Lacan also made a crucial differentiation between “acting out” and “passage à l’acte (passage to the act)”. He highlighted the sheer performative or demonstrative nature of acting-out, which he claimed “is essentially something in the behaviour of the subject that shows itself. The demonstrative accent, the orientation towards the Other of every acting out is something that ought to be highlighted.” While both acting out and *passage à l’acte* were the very last resorts against the collapse into anxiety, the subject who acted something out still remained on the scene, whereas *passage à l’acte* retroactively involved an “exit” from the scene altogether, as a true liberation to come.

In other words, acting out was a symbolic message addressed to the big Other, whereas *passage à l’acte* was a flight from the Other into the dimension of the Real. *Passage à l’acte* was thus a radical escape from symbolic efficiency, a dissolution of the social bond. Although the passage to the act did not, according to Lacan, necessarily imply an underlying psychosis, it eventually entailed a dissolution of the subject-object binaries. For a brief moment, the subject became a pure object, a desire at its purest. As Lacan elaborated in his *Seminaire XVIII*,

[...] the limits of discourse, in so far as it strives to make the same semblance hold up, there is from time to time something real, this is what is called the *passage à l’acte*.... Note that in most cases, the *passage à l’acte* is carefully avoided. It only happens by accident; and this is also an occasion to illuminate what is involved in what I have long differentiated from the *passage à l’acte*, namely, acting out, to bring the semblance onto the stage, to put it on the stage, to make an example of it, this is what in this order is called acting out.168

168 Ibid., *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan livre XVIII: D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* [The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book 18: In a Speech that Would Not Pretend], ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 32–33. Lacan believed that the GP revolutionaries were simply not being radical enough in also radicalizing their own hysterical craving. They lacked courage to become truly “naked” in front of the people. Their overt hystericism risked falling back to the master’s shelter, the discourse of the master, in which the whole regime secretly watched these kinds of youthful rebellions as some sort of farcical spectacle. Lacan (in)famously said, “The aspiration to revolution has but one conceivable issue, always, the discourse of the master. That is what experience has proved. What you, as revolutionaries, aspire to is a Master. You will have one ... for you fulfill the role of helots of this regime. You don’t know what that means either? This regime puts you on display; it says: ‘Watch them fuck.’” See Ibid., *Television/A Challenge to
The Three Logics of Resistance

Indeed, what Lacan was really worried about was the institutionalization of the youthful hysterical outburst after 1968 as a new form of governmentality in Western bourgeois society. In the wake of 1968, Lacan formulated four discourses to explain the (failed) logics of revolution: the “master’s discourse,” the “hysteric’s discourse,” the “university’s discourse,” and the “analyst’s discourse.” To Lacan, May ’68 bore witness to the transition from traditional “master-slave society” to the advanced “university society” predominated by “quasi-experts” and “intellectual professionals.” What was symptomatic about this new university discourse was that traditional mastery was not simply wiped out. Rather, the establishing power was now hidden behind the veil of “neutral” and “objective” knowledge prescribed by the “experts.”

For instance, after the failure of ’68, many philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists alike gradually came out to justify this kind of mass disappointment and popular sense of defeat. “Scientific explanations” like “generational conflicts” or “Oedipal revolt” to account for the very “necessity” as well as the “failure” of ’68 were proliferated not only from traditional academic circles, but also appeared seamlessly in media journalism and public discourses. This kind of seemingly “neutral knowledge” in fact concealed the true tyrannical underside of its inherent mastery. Meanwhile, the objective accounts simply reduced the fundamental impossibility of revolution to sheer symbolic impotence, if not a “psychodrama” intended to usurp repressive Gaullism.169

While I agree with Lacan’s insight here, I argue that the “symbolic terrorism” in Vent d’est, unlike the predominant practices of the GP, provides a much more profound and enduring critique of the social status quo and state


169 Lacan added: “The way in which everyone suffers in his or her rapport to jouissance, in so far as we only connect it by the function of surplus-jouissance, this is the symptom—it appears from this, that there is only an average, abstract social truth. This results from the fact that a knowledge is always paid at its price but below the use-value that truth generates, and always for others than those who are in truth. It is thus marked by surplus-enjoyment. And this Mehrlust laughs at us since we don’t know where it’s hidden. This is where things are at, my dear children. That’s why in May, all hell got loose.” See Ibid., Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan livre XVI (1968–1969): D’un Autre à l’autre [The Seminar of Jacque Lacan Book 16 (1968–1969): From an Other to the other], ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 41.
reappropriation. In fact, upon closer analysis, the second female voice in this film, who is supposed to favor “revolutionary terror” over “dogmatic humanism,” reminds the audience that the “correct idea” of Marxism-Leninism is never about a single phrase that is summarized as “it’s right to rebel,” but instead, the proper analysis is—“Marxism which is composed of multiple principles, in the final analysis, can be summarized into ‘it’s right to rebel.’” If this is the case, then what is the main difference between these two sentences?

In his early work written during the height of the Red Years, Alain Badiou distinguishes among the three logics of “it’s right to rebel against the reactionaries.” First, he argued that the primary rebellion (being the reason) is always justified in itself insofar as revolt is always there, which does not wait for the symbolic mandate to simply prescribe its reason, or its sheer legitimacy. That is to say, revolt is precisely its very reason to exist in the first place. However, it is highly arbitrary and non-sensical. Second, it is this same rebellion (having the reason) itself that will have its own symbolic justification right after the commencement of such a revolt by mankind. Therefore, rebellion at this level is similar to a subjective wager, but at the same time, it is also an obligation or moral duty designated for the sake of its own victorious future. It is a subjective embodiment of the name “revolt” itself. Finally, it is the third dialectical link, or the excess that retroactively emerged in the final analysis, that re-fuses or links back to the primary and secondary rebellions in an organic fashion. At this level, “the statement itself ‘it is right to rebel against the reactionaries’ is both the development of kernels of knowledge internal to the rebellion itself and the return into rebellion of this development.” Badiou continued by saying,

Rebellion—which is right, which has reason—finds in Marxism the means of developing this reason, of assuring its victorious reason. That which allows the legitimacy of rebellion (the first sense of the word ‘reason’) to become articulated with its victory (the second sense of the word ‘reason’) is a new type of fusion between rebellion as a practice that is always there and the developed form of its reason.

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171 Ibid., 675.

172 Ibid.
Therefore, Marxism as a set of multiple and objective principles can never be unproblematically fused with the subjective actions of the revolutionaries as a single dictum that is called “it’s right to rebel.” True Marxism can never be lazily reduced to one single doctrinal voice, or else it would fall back to a kind superegoic injunction that obliges and compels the revolutionaries to rebel unconditionally. The main problem with this simplistic fusion is that it privileges the lazy, pre-theoretical dogma of the “sake” of rebellion, and hence overlooks the primordial scission pertaining to such moral injunction itself.

In fact, there will always remain an irreducible gap between the objective theory of Marxism and the subjective wager of rebellion in the final analysis, as they are not entirely fused as one. Retrospectively speaking, the obligatory or mandatory side of revolt redoubles back with the most literal meaning of “the right to rebel.” That is to say, “revolt,” as the primary righteousness and the driving will, can only be found after the revolt has started. One can easily reverse this sequence, however. As a sort of teleological vision, one is tempted to lazily transcendentalize and immortalize revolt as a certain “innate” righteousness that will find its moral “use” and “righteousness” in the future. Instead, it is only through this retroactive sequence from “righteousness” back to “rebel” (but not the reverse) that a new dialectical link between “righteousness” and “rebellion” is reconstituted. This redoubling, which is embodied by the statement of “it’s right to rebel” as a generic hypothesis, precisely constitutes the new dialectical link between the “right to rebel” and the “rebel of the righteous” as embodied by the generic statement “it’s right to rebel.”

Andrew Britton, who had severely criticized this Godard and Gorin work for almost his entire essay on the film, noticed that the poverty of the “correct” images of terrorism bore a certain relationship with the intellectual plainness of the film as a whole. He said,

The image of the books of matches, plus the sound of explosion, is supposed to show us revolutionary action: in fact, the impoverishment of image, its trite obviousness and banality, are a sufficient measure of the sloppiness of thought and paucity of feeling which can even suggest it as being inadequate. 173

According to his logic, the “correct” image of revolutionary violence should not have been a vulgar metaphor like that in *Vent d’est*. It should have been far more “explosive” and “realistic,” and the terror emphasized should have been more “mature” and “serious.” Hence, Britton demanded a more “correct” usage of revolutionary images in *Vent d’est*.

However, Britton, as well as many other dismissive commentators on the “spectacular terrorism” of French Maoism during the 1960s and 1970s, may have somehow confused cinematic representations of “revolutionary violence” with its intellectual ramifications. They are not entirely the same. That is to say, what Britton may have crucially missed is that the sheer poverty of revolutionary images may have always been “explosive” and “revolting” at its core. If a more “mature” representation of terror simply permitted an easier identification, the lack of a “correct” and “realistic” revolutionary image would have been even more radical, as it resisted its true “message” in being entirely recognized and conveniently symbolized.

The poverty of revolutionary realism seems to have yielded zero meaning, as it seems to be a non-sense. However, the true critical potential of this “immature” and “inferior” representation of revolutionary terror resides in the fact that it keeps problematizing and bombarding the long-standing apprehension of “revolution” itself. It is a reminder that established revolutionary logic is perhaps unable to totally grasp and explain this farcical version of leftist terror. The predominating conception of leftist revolution, which is now highly influenced by neoliberalist denunciation, has to be constantly mediated by the idea (or self-deception?) that its own practicality in the social world is always ideologically far superior and feasible to the Marxist-Leninist one, especially in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. Like Lacan’s aforesaid *passage à l’acte*, the excessively tacky and fictional exemplification of leftist resistance in *Vent d’est* “violently” turns and brackets the contemporary neoliberalist dismissal of revolutionary struggles into a “pure object”—an elusive object that is, similar to the “vulgar” leftist representations in the film, unable to truly arrest a complete symbolic consistency and intellectual self-evidence of its own. Inspired by this Godard and Gorin film, one is tempted to say that many contemporary capitalist
denunciations and trivializations of the sheer “symbolic terror” associated with the legacies of May ’68 are also some kind of questionable and idiosyncratic cultural myths.
CHAPTER 3
UTOPIA AND ITS INNER OTHERNESS:
REIMAGINING LYRICISM, REVOLUTIONARY LIFESTYLES, AND AN ALTERNATIVE “EAST” IN KUNDERA’S HISTORICAL NOVEL ŽIVOT JE JINDE

The Impossible Unity of “East” and “West”

Exiled Czechoslovakian writer Milan Kundera, who is most famously known for his astounding literary work Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí (The Unbearable Lightness of Being), wrote a rather minor historical novel entitled Život je jinde (Life Is Elsewhere) during the late 1960s that sought to recast an alternative version of “1968” which conformed to neither the Soviet revolutionary teleology nor the Western bourgeois moral narrative. However, in doing so Kundera also seemed to have prioritized the revolutionary significance of the “successful” Prague Spring over the “failed” events of May ’68 in France. In this chapter, I will argue that the novel Život je jinde does not simply dismiss the revolutionary potentials of May ’68. Instead, what Kundera was truly skeptical of was the ubiquitous leftist rhetoric and revolutionary lyricism that were constantly elated in his home country during the Stalinist era. I will also argue that Kundera’s criticism of the lyrical and utopian “other side” in relation to Red Communism was actually a profound ethical act that not only deconstructed the latent narcissistic tendencies inhered to various revolutionary yearnings and romanticism among a wide spectrum of young Western leftists during the 1960s and 1970s, but also enabled future generations to reimagine global capitalist societies anew and otherwise.

It is undeniable that the insurrectionary year of “1968” helped to reimagine a new sort of Czechoslovakian-French cultural nexus in relation to a wide spectrum of leftist movements. As Kundera recently wrote, “By ‘marvelous chance’ those two Springs—out of synch, the two coming from different
historical experiences—met on the ‘dissection table’ of the same year.”174 As one critic suggested, “Life Is Elsewhere is the first novel [in] which the exiled Czech writer Milan Kundera wrote explicitly for the reading public aligned along the Paris-New York axis.”175 Život je jinde is borrowed from a celebrated sentence enunciated by French Romantic poet Arthur Rimbaud—“Quelle vie! La vraie vie est absente. Nous sommes pas au monde. (What a life! Real Life is absent. We are not in the world.)”176 It was also cited by André Breton on the final score of his Surrealist Manifesto presented in 1924.

During the French May ’68, the phrase was also taken up and scribbled on the walls of the Nanterre and Sorbonne universities as one of the major revolutionary slogans fervently chanted by the young rebels, students, and Situationists. In May ’68, Parisian youngsters retrieved Rimbaud’s message about the primacy of poetic license during the revolutionary uprising—that is, “le pouvoir du l’imagination (the power to the imagination).” In 1971, for the centennial of the Paris Commune, the largest French publisher, Gallimard, issued a pamphlet called Rimbaud et la Commune (Rimbaud and the Commune), celebrating the role of popular imaginations in the realm of proletarian revolt, where Rimbaud was viewed as a kind of visionary and prophetic poet who first saw that revolutionary aspiration was always driven by youthful imaginations.177

Život je jinde chronicles a fictional biography of a young gifted male poet named Jaromil (also known as “the poet”) in socialist Czechoslovakia during the early-to-mid twentieth century. The novel is composed of seven parts, showing the various stages of Jaromil’s life development. At the same time, the author

176 Arthur Rimbaud, Complete Works, Selected Letters, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 186–187. In an interview with Jordan Elgrably, Kundera said: “Already Life Is Elsewhere (the novel I wrote in Prague in 1969) is not situated exclusively in Prague. True, the protagonist is a native of Prague who never leaves the city. However, the novel’s décor is larger than the décor of my protagonist’s story. In effect, although the character cannot be in several places at once, the spirit of the narrator experiences absolute freedom of movement. I tried to develop all of the resultant consequences. Thus, my novel not only deals with events which took place in Prague, but with those in Paris during May ’68; it not only deals with Jaromil (the protagonist) but also with Rimbaud, Keats and Victor Hugo.” Jordan Elgrably, “Conversation with Milan Kundera,” in Critical Essays on Milan Kundera, ed. Peter Petro (New York: G. K. Hall, 1999), 57–58.
seems to parody many of the communist clichés surrounding the romanticized and lyricized visions of the world. Interestingly, most of Jaromil’s life has been heavily dominated by women, especially his neurotic yet incredibly loving mother (called “Maman,” which indicates her dual identity as both “mother” and “man”). Considered a child prodigy in poetry by his mother, Jaromil becomes increasingly narcissistic beginning in his teenage years. His desire is to be recognized by the adult world and to become one of the Czech literary adepts in the future. In order to earn a name in the Czech communist circle, Jaromil personally undergoes an “epistemological shift” from Surrealist automatic writing to socialist realism. He begins to write propagandistic poems after determining to step into socialist literary circles to escape from his mother’s all-penetrating influence.

However, Jaromil’s selfishness and naïve infantilism cause him to falsely denounce his girlfriend (the “redhead”) and her brother for committing the crime of treason. Both are sentenced to many years in prison for things they have not done. Soon afterward, Jaromil sets up a new romantic ideal in the image of a young female film student, who has both exceptional socializing talent and a captivating appearance. Later, he receives an invitation to an elitist ballroom party, at which many famous journalists and artists from around the country will gather. During the party, Jaromil is tremendously neglected by his desired woman and he is even occasionally mocked by a number of sophisticated intellectuals. However, what traumatizes him the most is finally realizing that there is something even more horrific and primordial in his life. He realizes that he has been betrayed by his own imaginary double, his artistic “muse” and “companion” Xavier, who eventually takes Jaromil’s place in consummating sex with his idealized woman. After such a painful epiphany, he catches a fatal cold on the balcony. Mixed up with this illness are the lurking feelings of impotence, which lead to Jaromil’s silent death. Unlike the deaths of the great poets in the Romantic era, Jaromil’s death is rather trivial as he has not created a single “masterpiece” within his short lifetime. Unfortunately, he may not have been mature enough to have gained a full assessment of himself over the sheer cruelty and profound ordinariness of reality itself.
Narratively speaking, there is a special literary technique employed in this novel where Kundera merges the bloodless *coup d’état* by the Czechoslovakian communists in 1948 with the student-worker movements of May ’68 in France. In *Život je jinde*, it is the male protagonist Jaromil, a young talented lyric poet resembling Rimbaud, who is dictating romantic slogans to his Czech comrades, in which they are saying exactly the same thing as that of the French students who scrawled it on the walls of the Sorbonne and Nanterre universities twenty years later.¹⁷⁸ The novel refers to May ’68 in the following passage: “For real life is elsewhere. The students are pulling up cobblestones, overturning cars, making barricades; their entrance into the world is noisy and magnificent, illuminated by flames and glorified by explosions of tear gas grenades.”¹⁷⁹ With its double telescopic vision, *Život je jinde* melts Paris in May 1968 into Prague of 1948, and the hero, Jaromil, thereby marches step in step with his revolutionary partners in Prague as if he were demonstrating alongside the “thousands of Rimbauds [who] have their own barricades’ in the Latin Quartier.”¹⁸⁰

As the novel further relates:

In the midst of excitement … Jaromil discarded his own speech and chose to act as a medium for someone else. Moreover, he did so with a feeling of intense pleasure; he felt himself to be part of a thousand-headed multitude, one organ of a hydra-headed dragon, and that seemed magnificent.¹⁸¹

This feeling of “intense pleasure” supported by the imaginary, hypothetical multitude may ultimately be what Kundera criticized as the most dangerous, if not totally nihilistic, “other side” within those romantic ideas of youthfulness, lyricism and revolutionary life itself. The imaginary “elsewhere” is not simply an inexhaustible reservoir or plentitude of revolutionary inspirations; however, it

¹⁷⁹ See Kundera, *Life Is Elsewhere*, 175.
¹⁸⁰ Ibid.
¹⁸¹ Ibid., 128.
exactly embodies a non-sensical blind alley for those young romantic revolutionaries. As Kundera added in the novel,

[a] mile away, on the other bank of Seine, the present owners of the world continue to live their normal lives and think of the turmoil in the Latin Quartier as something happening far away. Dream is reality, the students wrote on the walls, but it seems that the opposite was true: their reality (the barricades, the overturned cars, the red flags) was a dream.\textsuperscript{182}

The ironic narrator of the book is quick to point out that “for Czech students the year 1949 marked that interesting transition when a dream is no longer just a dream. Their jubilation was still voluntary and yet it was already compulsory as well.”\textsuperscript{183}

To convey the acute sense of spatial-temporal fusions between Prague and Paris, Kundera used an alternate narration technique in his writing, that is to say, the demonstrations in Prague were relayed by the events in Paris and vice versa. At first glance, this kind of entwining juxtaposition of the two historical happenings appears to be highly idiosyncratic since it is not historically accurate at all. Yet the formal use of such narrative alternation might also simulate the very fraternal rhythm of the “grand marching” of the proletarian masses between Prague and Paris. What concerned Kundera the most was probably how the transhistorical influences of revolutionary populism were going to march through, as well as aligning the territories of both Eastern and Western Europe across, the years 1948 to 1968. As this literary simulation was only a metaphorical device, Kundera’s intention here was probably to remind his readers that the spatial-temporal fusion between Prague and Paris and the so-called East-West “proletarian fraternity” during the 1960s was just a formal and generic technique instead of carrying any substantial meaning.

For Italian Marxist Maria-Antonietta Macciochchi, who would soon join the editorial staff at the pro-Chinese Parisian literary journal \textit{Tel Quel}, the revolutionary East—Maoist China—was “the most astounding political laboratory in the world,” a place where morality suffused politics and where “politics means

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 175.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 176.
sacrifice, courage, altruism, modesty and thrift.” In China, “a people is marching with a light step toward the future. This people may be the incarnation of the new civilization of the world. China has made an unprecedented leap into history.”

However, such a proletarian fraternity between East and West marching toward a better future was, according to Kundera, mostly banal and rhetorical. It was empty and perhaps carried no weight. At the same time, this imaginary link-up may not be a historicized reading of the revolutionary East after all. In assessing a conversation between Foucault and Deleuze on the subject of “intellectuals and power” at the height of French Maoism, Gayatri Spivak commented that:

intellectuals, however, are named and differentiated; moreover, a Chinese Maoism is nowhere operative. Maoism here simply creates an aura of narrative specificity, which would be a harmless rhetorical banality were it not that the innocent appropriation of the proper name ‘Maoism’ for the eccentric phenomenon of French intellectual ‘Maoism’ and subsequent ‘New Philosophy’ symptomatically renders ‘Asia’ transparent.

In the opening sentences of his pamphlet about the historical “farce” of Louis Bonaparte, Karl Marx famously wrote that “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world historical fact and personages occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” According to Marx, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III) was a sort of “benevolent dictator,” a farcical imitation of the former absolutist ruler, Napoleon I, who had unprecedentedly overthrown the monarchial system in the French Revolution of 1789. Marx commented that the bourgeois coup d’état led by Bonaparte contributed very little originality and novelty. Like Marx’s dismissive comment on Bonaparte’s bourgeois and bloodless coup d’état as a vulgar imitation of the former French regime, Kundera also found that the revolutionary rhetoric among the bourgeois students during May ’68 was highly problematic because the May events seemed to have recuperated nothing but the old revolutionary myths,

187 Marx added that Bonaparte’s coup d’état of 1848 had contributed only one original idea and action to his final seizure of power: the organization of Parisian lumpenproletariats. However, the remobilization of these large lumpenproletarian forces was no more than a reappropriation of the formerly excluded parties for Bonaparte’s own private army and military reserve. See Ibid., 63.
especially the grand imaginative explosions of the 1871 Paris Commune. In his novel, Kundera also juxtaposed the communist coup d’état of Prague ’48 and France ’68 as a case of revolutionary lyricism for “festive parades [which] are not only pale imitations of great demonstrations, that they have no substance, and vanish like smoke in the air.” Kundera added:

1968 came to mean that they were being forced back to 1948, stripped of all their old as well as their newer illusions, revisited by the ghost of the Munich surrender in 1938. On the French side, the grand revolt of the Parisian students assumed the appearance of a sham carnival, a staged event postponed from late winter to the sensuous complacency of May and reserved for the children of the bourgeoisie. The show must play again, after a decent interval, but it would change nothing.

Widely regarded as a communist “dissident” in his home country, Kundera’s literary works were heavily censored by the Czech authorities. His Život je jinde, which was published in 1969, was banned by the Czechoslovakian government due to enhanced censorship in the wake of the Prague Spring in 1968. Obtaining official permission to reside in France in the late 1970s, Kundera’s novels since then have received revitalized interest and critical acclaim in both Western European and North American intellectual communities. Yet this did not necessarily mean that Kundera had simply forgotten his Czech origins. Despite the fact that he had been repeatedly marginalized in Czechoslovakian circles, Kundera said that when he first arrived in Paris in the fall of 1968, his “eyes [were] still seeing Russian tanks parked on Prague’s streets.” He added that:

May in Paris was an explosion of revolutionary lyricism. The Prague Spring was the explosion of post-revolutionary skepticism. That’s why the Parisian students looked towards Prague with mistrust (or rather, with indifference), and the man in Prague could only smile at Parisian illusions which (rightly or wrongly) he thought discredited, comic or dangerous…. Paris in May was radical. What had paved the way over many years for the Prague Spring was a popular revolt of the moderate…. There was a national allergy to radicalism as such, and of whatever kind, for it was connected in most Czechs’ subconscious minds to their worst memories.

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188 Ibid., Life Is Elsewhere, 177.
189 See Ibid.
191 Ibid., 15–16. [italics in the original] Compared to the May ’68 events, Kundera assumed that the happening of the Prague Spring resembled Western liberal traditions even more so than the French ones. He said: “Prague, this dramatic and suffering center of Western destiny, is gradually fading away into the mists of Eastern Europe, to which it has never really belonged. This city is the first university town east of the Rhine, the scene in the fifteenth century of the first great European revolution, the cradle of the Reformation, the city where the Thirty Years War broke out,
For many Western dissidents, the Prague Spring, despite finally being oppressed by Russian totalitarian forces, displayed every detail of a “genuine” revolution in its fight for freedom and democracy within communism, which the protesters called “socialism with a human face.” Under this view, true revolutionary life resided in Prague rather than in Paris. In an article entitled “1968: The Year of Two Springs,” Jacques Rupnik echoed an opinion similar to Kundera’s, that there were always two versions of “1968” in Europe. He said, “The May Movement in Paris wanted to put culture and the universities at the service of a political project. In Czechoslovakia, however, the 1960s stood for a process of freeing culture (albeit provisionally) from the shackles of the existing political structures and were a prelude to the upheavals of 1968.”

In her highly impressive and original study May ’68 and Its Afterlives, Kristin Ross mentioned a small, baffling, yet rather symptomatic incident where she had been somewhat challenged by a German sociologist when she was giving a talk about the various kinds of epistemological dilemmas presented by the cultural and historical memories of May ’68 in the contemporary Western intellectual scene. The German scholar said, “But nothing happened in France in ’68. Institutions didn’t change, the university didn’t change, conditions for workers didn’t change—nothing happened…. ’68 was really Prague, and Prague brought down the Berlin Wall.” But as Ross argued, such an emphasis on the fact that “there was no violence and death involved in May ’68” in relation to the tragic suffering of the Prague Spring was still, first and foremost, a Cold War teleology that pointed to the ultimate triumph of capitalism and the death of

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194 The observation above put forward by this German scholar was not a lone phenomenon in Western critical circles. Gilles Lipovetsky, a famous sociologist in France, also said: “May ’68 was a ‘soft’ revolution, without deaths, traitors, orthodoxies, or purges. Indeed, it manifested the same gradual softening of social mores that Tocqueville first noticed in personal relations characteristic of an individualistic and democratic age…. The spirit of May recaptured what historically has been the central tenet of the consumer society: hedonism. By emphasizing permissiveness, humor, and fun, the spirit of May was largely molded by the very thing it denounced in politics … : the euphoria of the consumer age.” Gilles Lipovetsky, “May ’68, or the Rise of Transpolitical Individualism,” in New French Thought, ed. Mark Lilla (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 214–216.
communism. That is to say, by conferring this latent binarism that opposed the historical significance between May ’68 and the Prague Spring, one can easily fall back to the capitalist lure of simply preserving the social status quo.

**Lyrical Youth and Its Totalitarian Implications**

However, what I am trying to argue in this chapter is that Kundera had not merely dismissed the aforementioned fraternal affinity, which had been kept elevated in many Western left-leaning communities during the heyday of the sixties, as being just rhetorically banal and artificial. Rather, the author also perceived that there was always a potential danger, if not a totalitarian terror, inhered to this kind of imaginary communist fraternity. In an interview conducted during the early 1970s, Kundera commented that a certain kind of masochistic desire among many Western European leftist intellectuals has always existed, especially in their imagined unity with Maoist China and other Third-World political causes since the late 1960s:

They are only too eager to agree with the very people who deprive them of their liberty. To understand truths unfavorable to oneself requires great mental effort, and such an effort flatters the intellectual. Recently, while speaking with some Western intellectuals who expressed remarkable understanding and sympathy for the anticultural work of the Chinese Red Guards, I knew I was witnessing that vice of passionate self-denial which has proven so destructive in my own life.192

In the same interview, Kundera also discussed the potential terroristic implications of “poetry,” especially lyric poetry, at great length and provided an idea of why he constantly puts it up to strong doubts. As he argued, a country’s excessive love of poetry may create a social mentality that, while not being entirely irrational, could be described as “rather hysterical, sentimental, and partial to kitsch.”196 A one-sided interest in lyric poetry could create a problematic life-attitude that turned “everything into perfumed, rosy, clouds.”197 The original title of *Život je jinde* was *The Lyric Age*, which, according to Kundera, was equivalent to the idea of “youth” that denoted a particular value system or disposition of mind rather than a certain definitive time span. For example, in the

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196 Ibid., 144.
197 Ibid.
book, “the youth of the world is socialism.” This very frame of mind inherent in Kundera’s notion of youth, of what he calls “the lyric attitude,” can be both beautiful and dangerous. After all, the main purpose of Život je jinde was, as the author suggested, to give a more skeptical interpretation of “youth” as well as a critical analysis of the “lyric attitude” that had been associated with it.

Since Kundera’s own poetic activity and youthfulness exactly coincided with the worst phase of Stalinist terror between the late 1950s and the 1960s, he was always mistrustful toward the various romantic communist ideals, such as “youth,” “lyricism,” and “class struggles.” He connected these kinds of ideological signifiers with the actual totalitarian horror as two sides of the same “lyrical blindness,” describing in the novel that the Stalinist period was “not only an epoch of terror, but also an epoch of lyricism, ruled hand in hand by the hangman and the poet.” It was, nonetheless, this murderous smile and angelic innocence of poetry that facilitated the coercive Czech communist regime at large.

Historically, lyric poetry first gained its sacred meaning and inviolable status in the Romantic era and particularly in the heyday of Surrealism. In the preface of Život je jinde, Kundera argues that a great lyric poet always stands for a number of sublime personae throughout European history. He is “a symbol of national identity,” “a spokesman of revolutions,” the “voice of history,” “a mythological being,” and “the subject of a virtually religious cult.” In fact, there has always been a natural affinity between revolution and lyric poetry. As Kundera wrote in the novel, “[l]yricism is intoxication, and man drinks in order to merge more easily with the world. Revolution has no desire to be examined or analyzed, it only desires that the people merge with it; in this sense it is lyrical and in need of lyricism.”

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198 Kundera, Life Is Elsewhere, 169.
199 Ibid., v. Kundera added in the novel: “The genius of lyrical poetry is the genius of inexperience. The poet does not know much about the world, but he arranges the words that stream out of his being into structures as formal as crystals.” See Ibid., 212.
200 Liehm, Politics of Culture, 145.
201 Kundera, Life Is Elsewhere, 270.
202 Ibid.
203 Ibid., v.
204 Ibid., 261–262.
attributed the very “poetic” aspect of communist manifestation to the original Greek meaning of *poesis* as a sort of revolutionary act. “Poetry,” according to many Marxist interpretations ranging from Lukács to Jameson, always possesses an intimate tie with the social *praxis*, the process of revolutionary engagement. As Martin Puchner argued in his *Poetry of the Revolution*, French Situationists in May ’68 radicalized the revolutionary potentials of *poesis* inherent in Marxian manifestos into a quotidian, communitarian form of everyday revolt instead of just confining it to sheer proletarian association.205

However, inspired by the symbolic revolt of the former Maoist generations, there were still some terrorist attacks involved in France during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The faction *Action directe* (Direct Action), for example, was one of the French revolutionary groups that orchestrated a series of assassinations and violent attacks in France between 1979 and 1987. Members of *Action directe* considered themselves libertarian communists who established an “urban guerrilla organization” which was thereby banned by the French government. However, according to Michael Dartnell, the very genesis of *Action directe* was indeed highly indebted to the various strands of post-1968 radicalism, most notably the violent Maoist rhetoric of the *Gauche prolétarienne*.206 That is also the reason Kundera was so reserved in truly identifying with the student-led insurrections of May ’68:

May ’68 was a revolt of youth. The initiative in the Prague Spring lay in the hands of adults who based their action on historical experience and disillusionment. Of course youth played an important role in the Prague Spring, but it was not a predominant role. To claim the opposite is to subscribe to a myth fabricated a posteriori in order to annex the Prague Spring to the epidemic of student revolts around the world.207

In fact, Kundera found these evidences about the open alliance between revolutionary terror and lyric poetry, by which he called this relationship the “poesy of totalitarianism,” everywhere in Europe, especially during the heyday of

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207 Kundera, “Paris or Prague?,” 15.
Soviet Communism in the 1950s. On many occasions, Kundera, as an eyewitness to such a fanatical era, repeatedly relayed a highly ridiculous yet quite typical incident that happened during his youth in revolutionary Czechoslovakia:

I was shocked when, in 1950, the great French Communist poet Paul Eluard publicly approved the hanging of his friend, the Prague writer, Zavis Kalandra. When Brezhnev sends tanks to massacre the Afghans, it is terrible, but it is, so to say, normal—it is to be expected. When a great poet praises an execution, it is a blow that shatters our whole image of the world.

In this respect, the main story of Jaromil portrayed in Život je jinde may not simply embody the romantic flight of Rimbaud but may also portray the scandal of Eluard. Like Eluard, who abandons Surrealism for Communism midway through his life, young Jaromil is constantly compelled to transcend his original bourgeois literary confines through overtly identifying with the grandiose proletarian Cause. In the novel, “poetry never plays a more important role than it does during revolutionary periods; poetry gave the revolution its voice and in return the revolution liberated poetry from isolation; the poet now knows he is being heard by the people, especially young people; for youth, poetry and revolution are one and the same.” At one point in the book, Jaromil goes to the bureau office to falsely denounce his girlfriend’s brother for suspected treason and intended escape to a capitalist country. The hero is, of course, naively convinced that by making such a violent denunciation he has conducted a supreme revolutionary act purely for the sake of communism. To Jaromil, the writing of propagandistic poems and denunciation of treason are probably two sides of the same coin. Unfortunately, as the reader learns soon afterward, the intended flight as such was merely fabricated by Jaromil’s girlfriend as a trivial excuse to make up for her being late to one particular date with the hero. The treason never existed, yet the Czech police seem to be ecstatically satisfied with this one-sided, fairly ungrounded accusation by Jaromil and they arrest both the redhead and her brother for the non-existent crime.

208 Roth, “The Most Original Book of the Season,” 78.
In many cases, totalitarianism is solely regarded as the sheer embodiment of the cult of evilness. Yet Kundera added that this familiar critique in Western intellectual circles crucially forgets the very “poetic license” which has already been attached to this evilness, as well as the responsibility for keeping that terror firmly in place. That is why he is always doubtful of someone who criticizes the demonic side of totalitarianism while leaving its angelic aspect aside. Kundera elaborated on this point when he said, “The totalitarianism of the ’50s was not just oppression alone. It was not by means of its execution posts that it attracted the masses, the young, the intelligentsia. It was by its smile.” With this statement, Kundera offered a very different perspective toward the popular demonization of communism prominent in Western democratic countries. There is a crucial discrepancy, according to Kundera, between totalitarianism and the Stalinist Gulag. He argued that “totalitarianism is not a Gulag; it is an idyllic house of glass, with the Gulag put to one side. Totalitarianism is the fruit of [simplistic] Manicheanism, and the preachers of Manicheanism are angels, not devils.”

Totalitarianism, for Kundera, was always double-tailed and even more ambivalent. As he told one interviewer during the early 1980s, “totalitarianism is not only hell, but also the dream of paradise—the age old drama of a world where everybody would live in harmony, united by a single common will and faith, without secrets from one another.” Along the same vein, Kundera added:

Jaromil, the hero of *Life Is Elsewhere*, denounces his girlfriend to the police not as a devil, but as an angel. He is the most authentic form of lyric exaltation: he has the impression of going beyond himself, of identifying himself with something that is greater than he is. Paul Eluard publicly and solemnly approved the death sentence of his friend Zavis Kalandra, the Czech Surrealist. He did this with all the pathos of an archangel of poetry.

Undeniably, Kundera’s analysis of totalitarianism is much more profound than the one-sided and heavily biased approach to communist terror frequently disseminated by many ex-Western Maoists or renegade revolutionaries, who allied themselves with the so-called *Nouveaux philosophes* (New Philosophers) in

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212 Finkielkraut, “Milan Kundera Interview,” 40.
213 Ibid.
214 Ibid.
216 Finkielkraut, “Milan Kundera Interview,” 40.
the late 1970s. Bernard-Henri Lévy, one of the most eloquent spokespersons of the group, polemically wrote that the dictionary in the year 2000 would define socialism as “Socialism, n., cultural style, born in Paris in 1848, died in Paris in 1968.” A critic called Lévy and his allies “bohemian intellectuals.” With the frequent sentimental and kitschy dramatizations of Red Terror in both the Stalinist Gulag and Maoist labor camps by a great many of these ex-Maoist-turned-intellectual celebrities and bohemian journalists, the media culture in France was largely dominated by what Dominique Lécourt called “mediocrity”—that is, a highly reactive sentiment toward communism along with an overt oversimplification of history and a quasi-critical morality.

Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann, who are still very active and eloquent in today’s Euro-American dissident circles, usually invoked vulgar humanitarian ethos in TV talk shows (e.g., in the TV program “Apostrophes”), newspapers, and even in Playboy magazine to dramatize their denigrations of totalitarianism in Maoist China and the Soviet regime, as well as the “tyrannical” implications found within Marxist and Hegelian texts. “China” and “Marx,” in the eyes of the Nouveaux philosophes, were merely a reincarnation of a bad name. Unlike Kundera, Lévy and Glucksmann did not actually live through real revolutionary terror. Their “analysis” was primarily based on the secondary reading of dissident writings and memorials, most famously Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s The Gulag Archipelago. What radiated throughout their “diagnosis” of communism and May ’68 was a highly superficial and ahistorical sentiment as

217 The collective identity of the Nouveaux philosophes was established by Bernard-Henri Lévy in an article unambiguously titled “Les Nouveaux Philosophes,” published in Les nouvelles littéraires on June 10, 1976. The key working members of the Nouveaux philosophie included Guy Lardreau, Christian Jambet, André Glucksmann, Philip Nemo, Jean-Paul Dolle, and Alain Finkelkraut. Most were also former militants with political roots in Maoism, “Third-Worldism,” and the GP. The New Philosophers believed that the revolution had backfired. Politics, they argued, was a dead end. Disillusioned with political theories of renewal and deeply pessimistic after 1968 about the perfectibility of the social order, they sought solace in the domain of ethical theory that sometimes flirted with religion and the Jewish question.


220 “Mediocrity” is a strange modern scenario which combines mediocrity and technocracy in so-called “democratic societies.” These societies, under the veil of the master-signifier “Democracy,” are always subordinated to the quasi-egalitarian ideology defined by the mediocre ex-leftists, as well as apologetic “media intellectuals,” in trivializing the possibilities of revolutionary insurrections. See Dominique Lécourt, The Mediocrity: French Philosophy since the Mid-1970s, trans. Gregory Elliot (London & New York: Verso, 2002).
a kind of light journalism. Michel Foucault, who once associated with many Maoist leaders (especially Glucksmann) at the University of Vincennes, argued that the “Gulag question” must be contextualized specifically.\(^ {221}\)

Unlike those French media intellectuals, Kundera refused to use the term “dissident intellectual.”\(^ {222}\) According to Kundera, it is never a moral act to apologize for the Stalinist victims without including oneself in such a realm: “We no longer say: the bloody totalitarianism of the ’50s had a poetry that we succumbed to. If we blame it on the Gulag, we feel pardoned. If we speak of the poetry of totalitarianism, we remain implicated in the scandal.”\(^ {223}\) Kundera warned that such a new trend of anti-intellectual mediocrity or uncritical naïveté that emerged in Western countries was also equally as dangerous as the revolutionary lyricism of the Red countries. Kundera added:

> And if we wish to understand the essences of hell we must examine the essence of the paradise from which it originated. It is extremely easy to condemn gulags, but to reject the totalitarian poesy which leads to the gulag by way of paradise is as difficult as ever. Nowadays, people all over the world unequivocally reject the idea if gulags, yet they are still willing to let themselves be hypnotized by totalitarian poesy and to march to new gulags to the tune of the same lyrical song piped by Eluard.\(^ {224}\)

**Stalinist Motherhood and the Unbearable Fullness of Being**

Ironically, while he constantly emphasized the “collective lyrical delirium” during those Stalinist years, the poetic activity of Kundera may not have been entirely exempted from such a romantic trap and revolutionary fanaticism.\(^ {225}\)

\(^ {221}\) Foucault said: “Refusing to question the Gulag on the basis of the texts of Marx or Lenin or to ask oneself how, through what error, deviation, misunderstanding or distortion of speculation or practice, their theory could have been betrayed to such a degree. On the contrary, it means questioning all these theoretical texts, however old, from the standpoint of the reality of the Gulag. Rather than of searching in those texts for a condemnation in advance of the Gulag, it is a matter of asking what in those texts could have made the Gulag possible, what might even now continue to justify it, and what makes it [sic] intolerable truth still accepted today. The Gulag question must be posed not in terms of error (reduction of the problem to one of theory), but in terms of reality.” See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 136.

\(^ {222}\) See Finkielkraut, “Milan Kundera Interview,” 33.

\(^ {223}\) Ibid., 40.

\(^ {224}\) See Roth, “The Most Original Book of the Season,” 80.

\(^ {225}\) Kundera recounted that it was not just the poet who made such false denunciations, “the whole period of Stalinist terror was a period of collective lyrical delirium.” See Ibid. Kundera added elsewhere: “But I have seen, and at close hand, great poets doing much worse things than poor Jaromil. And they do not do them in spite of their poetic genius, but with it as their support. Jaromil betrays his girlfriend’s brother not as a vile scoundrel would, but with the rapture of a true
In this respect, Kundera may not have acted simply as a neutral narrator of the fate of Jaromil or as an entirely uninvolved eyewitness to the scandal of Eluard. Rather, he may have been subjected to such a lyrical age as a certain “revolutionary poet.” Although one cannot truly prove that there was a strict homology between the “lyrical monstrosity” of Jaromil and Kundera’s poetic involvement during the Stalinist heyday, the author tellingly confessed that the hero (or anti-hero) Jaromil precisely embodied the tragicomical archetype of a “lyrical poet” who appeared time and again across different historical contexts. In his preface to the English version of Život je jinde, Kundera wrote:

Don’t say that Jaromil is a bad poet! That would be too cheap an explanation of his life’s story! Jaromil is a talented poet, with great imagination and feeling. And he is a sensitive young man. Of course, he is also a monster. But his monstrosity is potentially contained in us all. It is in me. It is in you. It is in Rimbaud. It is in Shelley, in Hugo. In all young men, of all periods and regimes. Jaromil is not a product of communism. Communism only illuminated an otherwise hidden side, it released something which under different circumstances would merely have slumbered in peace.226

Although Stalinist bureaucracy has always been considered the symbolic realm of the Father and the Iron Law, Kundera’s vision of totalitarian reality in this novel reversed the usual Western perspective by connecting the utmost bureaucratic operation of all with a possessive maternal superego. Stalinism, in Kundera’s universe, was thereby similar to a kind of intricate and extensive psychic networking reminiscent of all-encompassing maternal care. Like the French romantic poet Arthur Rimbaud, who always desired to flee from the overarching influences of both his mother and his rural birthplace of Charleville, Kundera’s hero Jaromil, as the young Czech Rimbaud, also yearns for a radical escape from his mother’s omniscient watching and manipulations, once and for all. As Kundera wrote, “[Jaromil] felt that his mother was attached to his head, that poet. His poetic genius plays its ample role in the act of denunciation.” See Liehm, “Milan Kunder: Czech Writer,” in Milan Kundera and the Art of Fiction: Critical Essays, ed. Aron Aji (New York: Garland, 1992), 33.

226 Kundera, Life Is Elsewhere, vi. There is a similar textual resonance in his Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí. As he wrote: “The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own ‘I’ ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author’s confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.” Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 221.
she has spun herself around him like a cocoon enveloping a larva, depriving him of the right to his own likeness." At one point in the novel, Jaromil seems to identify with his ideal woman, who is supposed to facilitate his life-changing flight from his mother. The hero’s idealized target is a gorgeous, extremely self-confident film student from the Prague Film School. She is also affiliated with the cultural propaganda department of the Czech Communist Party. The first encounter between Jaromil and the attractive, sophisticated female is at a local literary event that has gathered many prominent socialist (male) artists and poets from around the country.  

Like everyone else at the venue, Jaromil is compellingly captured by the film student’s mysterious charm and sophistication and he immediately falls in love with her, despite his relationship with the “ugly” but kind-hearted redhead. After the literary event, Jaromil has a precious chance to make love with the film student. Embarrassingly, however, Jaromil fails to take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of physical consummation with her due to an extremely mundane and trivial reason. During the climactic moment of mutual excitations, Jaromil suddenly realizes that he is wearing standard “Bohemian boxers,” which are hopelessly dull and incredibly ugly. This is the unfortunate result of his mother taking care of all of his clothes and other major daily itineraries so he can focus on his poetry (when he is not invested in his wild and romantic imagination). However, when Jaromil is with his girlfriend, he always secretly trades his poor and inferior underwear prepared by his mother with sporty and colorful “trainers” to avoid embarrassment during their sexual encounters. This time he is stuck...
wearing the ugly boxers, which he considers to be a massive blasphemy toward the sacred and sublime nature of his sexual consummation with the young woman. The hero, having failed to foresee this chance at sexual contact with the beautiful film student, has no chance of changing his underwear. Thus, the moment passes him by.

This maternal “curse” seems to incessantly remain in his psyche vis-à-vis the rural boxers, which contaminate any such “romantic occasions.” However, the ugly and mundane underwear may be just an empty signifier and nothing more. Such an object was not designed to spoil the romantic encounter between Jaromil and the film student; instead, it purely embodied the irreducible shame of the hero in relation to his mother. The ugly underwear reminds him of something far more primordial and horrific lurking beneath this romantic union. That is to say, the hero is not only impotent during this romantic ritual; he is also impotent in every aspect of his life, no matter how much he desires to stay away from his mother.

Jaromil’s fundamental impotence is perhaps not just a result of the overwhelming power of his mother. Quite the contrary, it is probably because Jaromil is far too weak and fragile to refuse the all-pervasive “care” of his mother. On the one hand, Jaromil desires to escape from the overarching influence of his mother through identifying with some idealized notions (i.e., lyricism, communist revolution, and shining youth) outside the self-enclosed familial realm. On the other hand, as a young man he still heavily relies on the maternal care and warm shelter his mother provides, perceiving Maman as the ultimate comfort zone and safe haven from all the troubles in his life. Therefore, he lets his mother take care of his daily routine in order to concentrate solely on his (narcissistic) revolutionary aspirations and fantasies.

Initially, the film student is thought to embody the same romantic aspirations that Jaromil has, such as youthfulness, a lyrical life, and a revolutionary attitude, in the form of one gigantic “master-signifier” to bring some degree of order and stability to the endless struggles between the hero and his mother. However, Jaromil’s transient life is devastatingly stirred up and becomes even more unsettled and unstable by the introduction of such an
aggressive woman. In fact, if the film student is supposed to represent a sort of master-signifier to help stabilize Jaromil’s ambiguous life passions, this master-signifier is just like any other signifier. Instead of referring to other signifiers, it refers only to itself. It forces the other floating, competing signifiers to temporarily “crystallize.” In Lacanian terms, the master-signifier is also called *point de capiton* (literally, “quilting point”) which refers to “the knot of meanings.”

Under the traditional Stalinist worldview, the signifier “Communism” stands for the rigidity of human determination, that is, the “men of iron will,” which is supposed to help people endure even the most terrible ordeals and ferocious enemies and pertains to every cultural realm and social fabric. However, precisely because the quilting point is always self-referential, it is also tautological and radically lacking. The very reason for making this master-signifier a master is already suspended and missing. The only logic that privileges or qualifies its status of mastery is purely that it is an arbitrary “chosen master.” Each master-signifier works not because it is a pre-existing fullness that already contains all of the meanings attributed to it, but rather because it is an empty place from which to see the “equivalence” of all other floating signifiers. Thus, such an ideological operation of the master-signifier must never fully rid itself of its own built-in tautological or non-sensical underside. Moreover, the master-signifier always lacks a formal explanation with which to define all of its intrinsic non-sense and ridiculous pre-symbolic kernel.

It is important to note that the Real is far from an underlying harmony but instead represents a fundamental antagonism, an irreconcilable deadlock, and an unbearable tension lurking within society. The Real is simultaneously an unimaginable fullness and a destructive void, which I have termed “the unbearable fullness of being.” On the one hand, the Real is an impossible oversaturation of life, a pure positivity in the sense that nothing is lacking in this Real. On the other hand, the Real is unbearable and embarrassing to every individual precisely because it embodies, at the same time, a fundamental void or radical lacking already inherent in human lives. In a Lacanian sense, the Real is nothing but the impossibility of its own inscription: the Real is not a
transcendental positive entity, persisting somewhere beyond the symbolic order like the Kantian thing-in-itself. It is in fact just a void, a sheer emptiness in a symbolic structure marking some central failure. As this Kundera novel reveals, the ideology of revolution, youth, and lyricism never coexist harmoniously. These three ideologies are fundamentally uneven and disproportionate so they cannot be totally quilted by the umbrella term “utopian life.”

To elaborate more on the story, the affair between the young film student and Jaromil does not simply end in sexual failure. After that failed sexual adventure with the hero, the woman does not entirely give up her “interest” in him, as can be seen when she immediately pays a visit to Maman’s house without informing the hero beforehand. The film student tells Maman that she would like to make a documentary film about Jaromil, as she admires his artistic talents tremendously, and the film would be screened through the channels of socialist literary circles. The film student thereby befriends Jaromil’s mother and the two of them work together hand in hand, like a pair of close and intimate siblings, during the entire process of filmmaking. Gradually, this filmic collaboration between the two females becomes even more domineering and commanding to Jaromil than the maternal influence alone. The documentary is supposed to be about the hero, but at the same time, it is not about the hero. Jaromil is just the stand-in for this female-driven filmic collaboration.

Although Jaromil holds grudges about the banal treatment of the film, he has in fact no choice of his own. However, as the novel soon reveals, the intention of the film is actually just one of the many vulgar, opportunistic moves that are supposed to help the film student climb higher up the social ladder among the political elites. That is to say, she does not entertain and harbor equal proportions of the notions of youth, lyricism, and revolution as a consistent master-signifier. There is always a certain intrinsic “bias” and “unevenness” spilled over these three ideas and there is no metalanguage to bridge and stabilize the trio. Her youthful and lyrical charm is just a means to capture more symbolic power. She is young and lyrical but is, unlike Jaromil, deprived of true socialist revolutionary aspirations. Interestingly, while the Real cannot be inscribed symbolically, the impossibility of the inscription itself can be reinscribed by locating its own empty
place, the traumatic kernel that causes a series of failures. That is to say, this failure of symbolization is actually constitutive in disguise. As a formal impossibility, it succeeds in paving the way to the possibility for one to encircle perpetually this empty place of the Real. The supposedly “dark side” and voided revolutionary aspirations, according to Kundera’s narrative, retroactively facilitates the true reconciliation between Jaromil and his mother.

As a highly sensitive person, Jaromil’s mother finally detects the “impure” intention of the film student and wastes no time in alienating herself from her. However, Maman’s realization ultimately may be a bit too late, as Jaromil has already become highly obsessed with the film student. Yet this growing obsession of Jaromil’s only rewards him another chance at humiliation in the ballroom filled with the socialist elites. Such humiliation finally proves to be too costly for Jaromil, as it indirectly takes his life in the finale. Still, right before Jaromil’s comical death, he has managed to experience an unprecedented reconciliation with his mother in which it seems to show the last glimpse of hope in his short life. When Jaromil decides to move back to his mother’s home after successive humiliations, he receives complete forgiveness for his constant rebellion and voluntary escape. In fact, Maman’s arms are always open for Jaromil, from the very beginning to the last breath. She is the only one in the novel who fully cares about Jaromil as a person and who gives him her unconditional love. After going through all sorts of tragedies and misunderstandings, it appears that she will be victoriously reunited with her son. When the Czech secret police suddenly barge into their house to interrogate the hero about his denunciation of the redhead and her brother, Maman deterministically responds by repeating the same communist jargon that her son frequently used during his lyrical years. “Everything he’s ever done has been in the interests of the working class.”

Kundera further portrayed the aura of Maman: “She is guarding it like an armed angel guarding the gate of paradise.” He added, “As she pronounces these words, so often used by Jaromil but heretofore alien to her, she feels a sense of enormous power. Those words link

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231 See Ibid., 303.
her to her son more closely than ever. They are now wedded in one soul, one mind. She and her son form a single universe composed of the same matter.”

What is interesting in this Kundera novel is that this victorious aspect of the mother-son reconciliation was probably not pre-written as a sublime, pre-symbolic agreement or transcendental archetype between the mother and the son. Rather, what made this grandiose reunion possible was, as Kundera implied in the last section of his novel, precisely defined by a certain subtraction and a radical sacrifice of something that had been deemed extremely “crucial” in their relationship in the first place. For many years, Maman told Jaromil a fabricated story about his father being a good communist fighter and that he bravely sacrificed himself during the war against the Nazis. She also displayed a glorious photo of her husband in their house. This ideal image of Jaromil’s father had maintained the relationship between son and mother for a long while. And yet, in the precise moment of the mother-son reconciliation, Maman finally gave up on the fabricated myth about her husband. She disclosed the truth to her son, telling him that her husband was actually a brute and a coward who did not even want Jaromil to born in the first place. She was very determined to annihilate and forget the good image of the father as a master-signifier between her and her son, once and for all.

However, I argue that the mother’s act did not simply end by telling her son the truth about his father. Rather, Jaromil’s mother conducted an even more radical act by simultaneously removing the little photo of her husband. What makes this decision both weird and groundbreaking is that Maman has unrepentantly liquidated the remaining excess left by her husband (it is the last photo of him that they own). In this act, the entire role of the “father,” including the mother’s role as a certain mediating agent speaking for her absent husband, has been altogether nullified. In fact, if she just reveals to her son the wrongdoings of her husband without removing the photo altogether, she is not truly liberated from her traumatic past. This kind of disclosure does not bring upon a radical change in existing order in the family as she still refuses to let go of

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232 Ibid.
her trauma. Only through this dual gesture of both truth disclosure and removal of paternal excess can such reconciliation between the mother and the son be realized without secret, reserve and insincerity.

In this respect, the mother no longer bespeaks the father’s glory to make the house more patriotic. Nor does she hold a hypocritical attitude toward her husband by indulging herself in her unpleasant memories. In other words, she gives up a certain obsession with her traumatic histories in relation to this paternal excess, the little piece of the Real. In this respect, what the mother actually enjoys is just a circulating void, or the non-phallic jouissance in the Lacanian sense. Without this constant gesture of maintaining the “good” or “bad” image of the absent father in the house, one cannot simply say that the love of the mother for her son is only conditional, hypothetical, and temporary. Rather, it persists in all possible circumstances within Jaromil’s family. Ultimately, this kind of maternal jouissance not only helps her son to escape from the tyranny of endless symbolic yearnings, but also probably signifies a radical liberation of Maman’s inner conscience from her traumatic past.

**Bourgeois Celestial Harmony and Middle-Way Bohemianism**

Slavoj Žižek, as a citizen and dissident of former Titoist-Stalinist Slovenia, added that there were always some sort of cynical transgressions already at work within the pre-ideological core of the Eastern Bloc. According to Žižek, rather than overthrowing the socialist states in its entirety, this internal cynicism was precisely what kept the ruling performance and symbolic efficiency of Stalinism stable and intact. He said

...we all know that behind the scenes there are wild factional struggles going on; nevertheless, we must keep at any price the appearance of Party unity; nobody really believes in the ruling ideology, every individual preserves a cynical distance from it and everybody knows that nobody believes in it but still, the appearance has to be maintained at any price that people are enthusiastically building socialism, supporting the Party, and so on.233

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233 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & New York: Verso, 1989), 197. Kundera also held a similar opinion with Žižek. He said that “[i]n Prague we used to say cynically that the ideal political regime was a decomposing dictatorship, where the machine of oppression functions more and more imperfectly, but by its mere existence maintains the nation’s spirit in maximum creative tension.”233 Kundera, “Paris or Prague?,” 14–15.
Speaking of the demise of Eurocommunism after 1989, Žižek argued that instead of conceiving the “really-existing socialism” as an externally imposed system, “what disintegrated in Eastern Europe was le grand Autre [the big Other], the ultimate guarantor of the social pact.” As Žižek commented elsewhere, “the last support of the ideological effect (i.e. of the way an ideological network of signifiers is ‘holding us’) is the non-sensical, pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment.”

While I agree with Žižek’s insights, I argue that this Kundera novel has also suggested that this dissolution of le grand Autre as an internal middle-ground that held together many individuals in the socialist societies may have already happened within the social realm of Stalinist Czechoslovakia right before 1989. In Život je jinde, there is a weird character, a “middle-aged man,” who elusively appears in the final few sections. The novel does not show many details about or hints at the very origin of this character. The middle-aged man may be the artist who taught and inspired Jaromil’s drawing during the hero’s childhood. Or he could be the “Jew” who always invites high school students to his apartment to discuss Marxist politics. On the one hand, he is rather anonymous throughout the book. On the other hand, he can be the very embodiment of “everyman” in Život je jinde. All the reader knows about him is that he has had an affair with Jaromil’s girlfriend, the redhead, for a number of years, even after she has been released from prison for the fabricated crime of treason. He is also very calm, well ordered, and heavily detached in his own way, living in a “celestial harmony” “just as he was interested in the world springing up around him, which he observed from the warm comfort of his bathtub.” Thus, he knows how to enjoy life and relax.

Kundera admitted that he always loves to drink good wine, read something interesting, and casually make love to a woman or two. However, Kundera’s middle-age man is massively frightened of real tears, especially “female tears” as an example of kitsch. He considers that “tears” as such are always innocent in disguise, and they are highly oppressive and manipulative to the very core.

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235 Ibid., The Sublime Object of Ideology, 24.
236 Kundera, Life Is Elsewhere, 277.
According to the logic of this man, human tears can irrationally drag somebody into the personal lives and privacies of others. As Kundera wrote:

> Since the death of his wife, whom he loved very much, he didn’t care for female tears. He was as terrified of them as he was of the danger that women would make him actively participate in the drama of their lives. He regarded tears as tentacles endeavoring to ensnare him and drag him from his idyllic state of non-fate, and he shrank from them in abhorrence. That’s why he was taken aback when he felt the dampness of tears on his palm.\(^{237}\)

It is actually easy to say that this abjection of real tears by the middle-aged man is sexist and arrogant, as well as being highly unsympathetic to human needs. However, within the context of this novel, I argue that this kind of “male cruelty” is much more ambivalent and profoundly complex. On the one hand, Kundera seems to satirize the very stability of this “celestial harmony,” the “idyllic state of non-fate” that the middle-aged man has cynically self-constructed and encircled himself with. In fact, the middle-aged man is not simply a non-engaging, passive witness in view of the various tragedies experienced by his secret lover, the redhead. As the novel soon reveals, the middle-aged man, rather than enjoying a certain safe and shielding distance from others, is primarily included in orchestrating the violent denunciation of Jaromil toward the redhead’s brother. He is actually the obscene puppeteer who teaches the redhead to fabricate the story of her brother’s “treason” to make up for her being late in the first place. What is even more ironic is that the reason for the redhead’s lateness has indeed something to do with the middle-aged man. Her being late is not a coincidence, as it is primarily due to the secretly arranged meeting between her and the middle-aged man right before her date with Jaromil.

On the other hand, Kundera’s position toward the middle-aged man is fairly idiosyncratic because the author himself seems to avoid an imposing or coercive moral judgment on all of his characters, including this middle-aged hero. Ironically, Kundera’s very withdrawal of moral judgment redoubles with the so-called “celestial harmony” that the author seems to place on the middle-aged man in the first place.\(^{238}\) In fact, the middle-aged man in Život je jinde, who always

\(^{237}\) Ibid., 282.
\(^{238}\) Kundera had once written that the Czechoslovakian 1968 was “a popular revolt of the moderates.” Among many intellectuals, the term “moderation” is just a synonym for consensual
tries to take flight from excessive involvement in other people’s lives, may
suggest a different sort of living attitude unlike Stalinism. Guy Scarpetta argued
that the so-called “anticonformist,” “acute,” “clinical,” or even “cruel” gaze,
which has long characterized Kundera’s literary universe, courageously “extracts
ambiguous truth, truths that are embarrassing for all camps, truths that cannot
‘serve.’” 239 According to another critic, the middle-aged man precisely
demonstrates a living virtue that resembles Kundera’s anti-Stalinist philosophy.
That is to say, rather than being simply carried away by the sheer negativity of the
Stalinist (maternal) universe, the middle-aged man succeeds in confronting social
tyranny by affirming or assuming freedom on his own shoulders, which is
reminiscent of the mythical and existentialist Greek hero Sisyphus. 240

According to Žižek, Kundera’s gaze did not simply take refuge in private pleasure,
but instead enjoyed the sheer stupidity and absurdity of the entire Soviet
bureaucratic system in looking at all social individuals. Commenting on
Kundera’s “cold looking,” he said,

[t]he depoliticized private sphere in no way functions as the free domain of
innocent pleasures; there is always something damp, claustrophobic, inauthentic,
even desperate, in the characters’ striving for sexual and other pleasures. In this
respect, the lesson of Kundera’s novels is the exact opposite of a naïve reliance
on the innocent private sphere: the totalitarian Socialist ideology vitiates from
within the very sphere of privacy in which they take refuge. 241

In this Kundera novel, the middle-aged man is not simply watching behind
the screen to cruelly ridicule the affair between Jaromil and the redhead; the
middle-aged man also embodies a certain virtue of gentleness and kindness. In

inertia or restrained middle-of-the-road that constitutes nothing but a bourgeois virtue. See
Finkielkraut, “Milan Kundera Interview,” 6. While Kundera is uniquely branded for his cynical
humor and ironic treatment, his literary works are, at the same time, accused of being highly
unsympathetic and dismissive toward any form of political idealism or revolutionary engagement
on the contemporary scene. Kundera’s novels have been thereby associated with the labels “ultra-
elitist” and “bourgeois intellectualist.” Many leftist critics see Kundera’s works as some
depoliticized form of art, as the author tends to privilege a certain static gazing position, that is, a
radically non-engaging or God-like figure who examines and scrutinizes silently over the various
historical changes from May ’68 to the Prague Spring, and to the Velvet Revolution.

239 Guy Scarpetta, “Kundera’s Quartet (One The Unbearable Lightness of Being),” in Critical
240 The critic said, “[t]he middle-aged man’s way of confronting the falsity and abjection of mass
phantasms is by intentionally withdrawing into alienation imposed by the official ideology…. Opposing and resisting the lyrical merger, the middle-aged man cultivates his autonomy in
forgetfulness, accepting existential dread with irony that heals.” Longinovic, 198–199.
York: Verso, 1994), 64.
fact, throughout the book, it is the middle-aged man alone who offers selflessly to care for the redhead. Unlike Jaromil, he sincerely wants to give her some kind of protective shielding. While the redhead refuses to have sex with him after she has been released from prison, the middle-aged man does not force her to please him sexually but instead patiently listens to her confession.

Interestingly, at one point in the book, the reader finds that the middle-aged man is somehow touched by his secret lover—paradoxically by the tears of the redhead as well. When the girl talks about her brother’s fate and how she could not dare go back to her parents’ home after her release, she cannot help crying. At this precise moment, the middle-aged man shows his greatest sympathy. He finds that he is touched by her tears as he fails to take flight from her. He is emotionally stirred not simply because the redhead is crying primarily for him. Ironically, it is because the tears are not literally directed at him that his fragile core of self-protection is thus exposed by these kinds of “detoured” or “escaped” tears. He says: “This time he knew they were not tears of love directed at him, that they were neither deception nor extortion nor show. There they were, pure and simple, streaming from the girl’s eyes in the same natural way that sorrow or joy invisibly emanates from a person’s body.”242 Her tears are mixed with the “other side” of Jaromil. In this respect, the tears of the redhead are no longer commanding in their sheer disguised innocence because the tears are simply bare and pure in their “impurity” for getting mixed up with Jaromil. Of the middle-aged man, “[h]e had no shield against their innocence, and he was touched to the depths of his soul.”243 Soon afterward, his stagnant, self-imposed defensive mechanism seems to be broken down permanently by the “pure tears” of the redhead, tears that have already been withdrawn from this man in advance.

Kundera once said, “The greatness of the era of the ’60s and the Prague Spring does not lie in the politics of the time but with the culture.”244 Unlike his Czech contemporary Václav Havel, who famously blended politics and literature to bring the liberalizing outcry of the Prague Spring a step closer to the cause of

242 Kundera, Life Is Elsewhere, 282.
243 Ibid.
244 See Ibid., 34.
the Velvet Revolution, Kundera’s literary dissection indeed fails to propose any truly concrete and timely social “alternatives” to help liberate and awaken the democratic consciousness of the masses since the 1960s. That is to say, the very unique kind of liberal and anti-Stalinist demands inherent in Kundera’s Bohemian universe, despite being highly acclaimed in Western dissident and critical circles, seems to have failed to capture mass attention in his home country. In rethinking this rather strange phenomenon, Žižek once asked: “why does Milan Kundera even now, after the victory of democracy, suffer a kind of excommunication in Bohemia? His works are rarely published, the media pass them over in silence, everybody is somehow embarrassed to talk about him.”

In retrospect, this “detoured” revolutionary success of the Prague Spring in other cultural realms in both Western Europe and Anglo-Saxon circles perhaps gives Kundera’s writings an even more enduring and far-reaching influence in world literature insofar as the communicative gap as such also helps prevent his literary works from being overtly ideologized as certain texts that simply serve and reaffirm the predominate public discourses that appeared in the post-1989 social climate to glorify the so-called “ultimate triumph” of late capitalism.

245 Havel’s most famous work Moc bezmocných (The Power of the Powerless) is the best literary example to use artistic form to help advance the ideas of democratic reform and a common Cause (i.e. charter 77) against totalitarian ruling. See Vaclav Havel et al., The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe, ed. John Keane (London: Hutchinson, 1985).

246 Žižek, Metastases of Enjoyment, 63.
CHAPTER 4

THE MANDARIN FACE/OFF:

“HERETIC IMAGE,” ANTHROPOCENTRIC REALISM, AND

THE OBSCENE NEUTRALITY IN ANTONIONI’S

CHUNG KUO – CINA

Unveilings and Frustrations

The early 1970s undeniably recorded a new chapter in world history. With China and the Soviet Union still displaying strong antagonism since the Sino-Soviet Split, it was no secret that the Mao regime preferred to recover and normalize certain diplomatic dialogues with the capitalist West in this new epoch of détente. The most remarkable event of the period was, of course, the groundbreaking meeting between Mao and American President Richard Nixon in Beijing in 1972. It was in this context that the renowned left-leaning Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni was invited by Maoist China to make a documentary film called Chung Kuo – Cina (China) (1972) about the latest renewal of Sino-Western friendship. However, the resultant film led to massive public controversies in China because the filmmaker eventually chose his own visions and interpretations of the Maoist Cultural Revolution that went far beyond the original expectations of the Chinese officials. According to a Chinese commentator in 1974, “[t]he appearance of this film is a serious anti-China event and a wild provocation against the Chinese people.”

However, in retrospect, this highly controversial work was also used as a scapegoat by the Gang of Four to help advance a large ideological campaign aimed at denouncing Premier Zhou Enlai, the official who granted Antonioni permission to film in China in the first place.

248 The latent political agenda of the Pi-lin-Pi-kong was to denounce Premier Zhou, who remained as the last threatening enemy of the Gang of Four right after the death of Lin Piao in 1971. The propagandistic subtext of the Pi-lin-Pi-kong was actually “Pi-lin-Pi-kong-Pi-Zhou-Gong.” Zhou Gong was the Duke of Zhou in ancient Chinese history. In everyday use, Zhou Gong is also referred to as “dreaming” and “sleeping.” According to Ma Jiasen, “Zhou Gong” was also a name used to refer to Zhou Enlai during his underground works for the communists in the 1920s. See Jiasen, Ma, The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry of China (Hong Kong: Chinese
In this chapter I will argue that the sheer antagonism between Antonioni and the Maoists in relation to the concept of the “New Man” advanced throughout the world during the 1960s is indeed more performative than ontological. To a certain extent, the two kinds of interpretations can be considered two sides of the same coin. Yet it does not necessarily mean that these two symbolic realms are entirely equivalent and homologous. Instead, I will argue that their superficial ideological discrepancies as such are actually a reminder of a deeper level of structural incommensurability between the two affiliating cultures, which has usually been ignored in both Western humanist and revolutionary discourses since the heyday of the 1960s. In my view, this irreducible opposition pertaining to such a Sino-Western cultural encounter during the early 1970s continuously resisted being entirely neutralized and nullified by many capitalist-related morals that were assumed to bear certain universal implications in speaking for humanity.

In 1971, Antonioni and his crews stayed in China for a brief period of eight weeks. He shot an impressive thirty thousand meters of film in twenty-two days in places such as Beijing and the vicinity, a mountain village in the Linshien district of Henan Province, a valley near the Yangtze River, and the cities of Suzhou, Nanking, and Shanghai. He filmed factory workers, farmers, market people, river people, soldiers, schoolchildren, acrobats, and masses of pedestrians and passers-by. He shot a caesarean birth during which the only anesthetic was acupuncture. He tried to shoot a funeral but was told that it was too private a matter, so he had to content himself with shots of the grave digging. As a four-hour-long documentary, Chung Kuo is mainly divided into two parts concerning the plural layers of quotidian life in Mao’s China. Interestingly, contrary to its wholesale rejection in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Chung Kuo was highly appreciated in the United States, particularly among liberal-humanitarian circles, for its interesting renderings of Chinese people’s lives outside the realm of various political clichés.249


249 Generally considered one of the best films of the year in America, the copyright for its U.S. distribution was bought by the right-leaning American Broadcast Company. According to Chen Dunde, President Nixon watched Antonioni’s Chung Kuo twice in order to understand more about
However, in 1974, two years after the release of the film, Chung Kuo was severely denounced by the Chinese bureau office as a “quasi-documentary” and a malicious distortion of Maoist revolutionary achievements. According to this official Chinese view, the film’s objective or realistic appearance was actually a symbolic disguise to cover up the reactionary essence and despicable underside pertaining to Antonioni’s attitude toward Mao’s China. The top officials of the PRC, headed by Jiang Qing, relentlessly orchestrated a yearlong “Anti-Antonioni Campaign,” along with the major movement of the Pi-lin-Pi-kong in 1974, and published many articles denouncing Antonioni’s evil intentions and ferocious impressions of China in Chung Kuo. Maoist leaders even forced the Swedish and other European governments to ban the film indefinitely, and as a result, heavy protests by many Italian Maoists, who remained fairly loyal to the Chinese embassy during this epoch, blocked the showing of Chung Kuo at the Venice Biennale in 1974.250

As Chinese critics noted, Antonioni’s Chung Kuo paid very little attention to the collective Maoist achievements of then present-day China. Instead, the director chose a recourse to petty bourgeois (psychological) realism in documenting the boring lives and insignificant details of the Chinese people. For example, the critics claimed that the director heavily neglected the Chinese-built oceangoing vessels in Shanghai’s harbor and shot only foreign freighters and little Chinese junks. In the footage from Linshien County in Shandong, the proud site of the Red Flag Canal is scarcely noticed; instead, Antonioni focused on “a boring succession of shots of fragmented plots, lonely old people, exhausted draught animals and dilapidated houses.”251 In addition, they claimed that there was no single clean or healthy image in the film. With the director’s constant focus on


251 Linshien villagers accused Antonioni of neglecting socialist achievements: “Antonioni distorts the image of Linshien County which he presents as ‘China’s first socialist mountain,’ his aim being to sling mud at China’s socialist countryside. The Red Flag Canal here, known in China and abroad, is shown casually in passing and the film presents neither the magnificence of this ‘man-made river’ nor the prosperity in the county following the transformation of its mountains and rivers. Instead, there is a boring succession of shots of fragmented plots, lonely old people, exhausted draught animals and dilapidated houses....” See Renmin Ribao, Commentator, “A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks,” 8.
Chinese people going to the toilet, spilling ashtrays, or other trifles, the film simply conveyed a nuanced impression of this new China. While Antonioni seemed to glorify the most sacred political space in China by opening the film with a shot of Tiananmen Square, it turned out to be a highly insulting remark to Chinese audiences because the director also inserted a clip of an infant with split pants as part of the scene.252

Yet according to Antonioni, all of these earthly ways of living and their mundane connectedness to human bodies in Mao’s China reflected the country’s unique sense of modesty, sincerity, and humility and its people resembled the most literal and profound meaning and morality as an ordinary “Mandarin.”253 In the voice-over at the beginning, Antonioni calls the ordinary Chinese people the main heroes and heroines of the film above all: “It is them, the Chinese, who are the protagonists of our motion picture. We’re not pretending to understand China. All we hope for is to present a large collection of faces, gestures, customs.”

During filming, Antonioni stated that his intention was to capture the New Man and the new face of ordinary people living in Mao’s China: “The China I saw is no fairy tale. It is a human landscape, very different from ours, yet also concrete and modern. These are the faces that have invaded the screen of my film.”254 Unlike in Western capitalist societies, where he found only alienation, boredom, and extravaganza, Antonioni simply appreciated that there was in fact “no sense of anxiety or haste” in the PRC.255

252 The real irony of history is that Tiananmen Square was later remembered as a humiliating stigma to the future leaders of the PRC after they brutally persecuted and massacred a number of dissident students in June 1989.

253 Antonioni also argued that “[c]ertainly, Mao Tse-tung is not Confucius. ‘Mao’s Marxist-Leninist-thought’ wanted to represent a break with Confucianism, and for this reason it sped up to the highest degree the process that brought millions of men to be protagonists on the world scene. But Mao, too, is a teacher of morality. I am truly convinced that the Chinese, in their everyday life, more than just obeying formal laws, are conditioned by a common idea of what is right and wrong, from which they gain a greater simplicity of life—that is, a great serenity in human relations.” See Michelangelo Antonioni, “Is It Still Possible to Film a Documentary?,” in The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema, eds. Carlo di Carlo, Giorgio Tinazzi, and Marga Cottino-Jones, trans. Allison Cooper (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 112–113.

254 Ibid., 109. Antonioni said elsewhere, “When I talk of man, I want to see his face. In China, when I asked them what they felt was the most important thing in their revolution, they said it was the new man. That is what I tried to focus on. Each individual, each one creating his own little revolution, all those little revolutions which together will change humanity. That’s why I insist upon a personal viewpoint, concretizing it with the camera; every change in history has started from individuals.” See Bachmann, “Antonioni after China,” 124.

255 John Francis Lane, “Antonioni Discovers China.” Sight and Sound 42, no. 2 (Spring 1973): 87.
Ironically, early in 1972 when the film was just finished, the reception from Maoist China was surprisingly positive. As Antonioni recounted, the director of the New China Agency and the Chinese representatives gathered in Rome all expressed their admiration and delight after the screening. Moreover, they were grateful to Antonioni for looking at their country "with a very affectionate eye." In response to such reactive sentiment toward his work, the director made the following statement in an interview: "It has been said that I’ve denigrated Chinese children, I really don’t know why. I made shots of those children while they were singing their little songs, of their delicious little faces. They are really beautiful, Chinese children, and if I could, I would adopt one.

And yet, what had proven to be totally unacceptable to Antonioni was that he was considered a fascist filmmaker. For example, in the article “Whose ‘Instrument’ Is He?,” the Chinese commentator claimed that Antonioni was a "fascist-revisionist" early in his film career. The far-fetched ideologizations of Antonioni with the rightist enemies of China were not only unfettered and vulgar but also they may have inverted some significant historical truths. Italian writer Umberto Eco summarized this kind of tragic irony when he said,

Antonioni, nervous and troubled, was once again suffering his very personal and paradoxical drama—the antifascist artist who went to China inspired by affection and respect and who found himself accused of being a fascist, a reactionary in the pay of Soviet revisionism and American imperialism, hated by eight hundred million persons.

During World War Two, Antonioni was a member of the Leftist Resistance against Mussolini’s Italy. That is why he found it totally indigestible to be

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256 Bachmann, 127–128. Carlo di Carlo, the long-time collaborator with Antonioni, says; “What’s very important is the slowness and reflectiveness of it, which is very Chinese, in a way, Antonioni’s film language, in its understanding of time and space, is very close to the Chinese aesthetic.” See Geoffrey York, “China Lifts Ban on Film Icon,” The Globe and Mail, December 2, 2004, http://license.icopyright.net/user/viewFreeUse.act?fid=MTA2ODA2NTQ%3D, (Accessed 6 December 2010).

257 See Bachmann, 128. To his dismay, Antonioni also responds to a reporter: “They just did not understand what my documentary meant. They went just incapable of viewing the enormous stage that is their country and fathoming what a score of actors and eight hundred million extras were saying in the most colossal and mysterious of dramas.” Michel Stern, “Antonioni: Enemy of the People.” The Saturday Review/World, May 18, 1974, 15.


accused as a “fascist” and compared to the “Nazi-leaning” director Leni Riefenstahl.\textsuperscript{260}

However, what was truly at stake was the fact that China’s “Anti-Antonioni” stance that adhered the director to an early fascist instrument was not an entire fabrication. It had been an open secret that Antonioni worked as a critic for the proto-fascist film journal \textit{Cinema}, whose editor was Vittorio Mussolini (Mussolini’s son), between 1935 and 1949. According to David Rosenfeld, Antonioni joined the Italian Resistance shortly after the fall of Mussolini’s regime.\textsuperscript{261} Thus, the Chinese campaign criticizing Antonioni may have doubly traumatized him; what really unsettled the director so much may not have been the sheer vulgar language used by the Chinese officials or even the fabricated historical truths about him, but it was perhaps the campaign itself that reminded him of a more primordial and fundamental horror. As such, the excessive Chinese criticism that confronted Antonioni coincided with his early collaborative history of Italian proto-fascism, even if that brief association was only a symbolic kind of relationship or was simply an act of teenage ignorance.

Thematically, the Chinese accusations were not entirely groundless. There are in fact several instances in the film where Antonioni simply transgressed the cultural taboos presented by the host. In a scene where Antonioni discovers a kind of black market selling cheap items in Shandong, he is immediately asked to stop his camera. Apparently, Antonioni told his cameraman to pretend to stop filming but to secretly continue to film the scene,\textsuperscript{262} which was retained in the final footage.\textsuperscript{263} When the film critic Thomas Waugh compared Joris Ivens’ (who will

\textsuperscript{260} Bachmann, 129–130.


\textsuperscript{262} Lane said, “Antonioni, was not always encouraged to film everything he wanted, though often he ignored gentle remonstrations from his hosts. Filming from a moving car in a suburb of Peking, he was suddenly asked to stop the camera. Antonioni told his cameraman to pretend he had stopped shooting.” Lane added, “A group of ragged-looking people in a country land aroused his curiosity. He was asked not to film them, but he did. They were participating in a kind of exchange market, something which is frowned upon but not actually forbidden.” See Lane, “Antonioni Discovers China,” 87.

\textsuperscript{263} That is why many Chinese critics cannot forgive Antonioni’s self-proclaimed posture as a “spy”: “He openly boasts in the film’s narration of how he took sneak shots of many scenes in the film like a spy.” See \textit{Renmin Ribao}, Commentator, “A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks,” 10.
be discussed in detail in Chapter 8) Chinese documentary with Antonioni’s “transgressive shooting” in Chung Kuo, he argued that:

Antonioni in his film repeatedly violated the right of the subject (in progressive filmmaking, at least) to control his or her own image. He seems perversely to have insisted on filming whatever his hosts requested him not to: for example, a gunboat in Shanghai labor, a free-enterprise peasant market on a rural road, even a burial caught in telephoto when his hosts suggested that the filming of a burial would offend the Chinese sense of privacy.264

In short, Antonioni’s desire to disclose the surface of China’s ideology can be compared to what Alain Badiou identified as a dominant trait of the twentieth century, a “passion for the real,” that is, the fervent passion to unravel every barrier that disappoints or frustrates any contact with the real.265 In line with Badiou, Joan Copjec elaborated:

The passion for the Real treats every surface as an exterior to be penetrated, a barrier to be transgressed, or a veil to be removed. The violence of this passion insists in each penetration, transgression, and in removal, which is only exacerbated by the fact that each arrives on the other side, only to find that the Real has fled behind another barrier.266

While I agree with the fallacies and transgressions potentially inherent in Chung Kuo, I argue that Antonioni did not deliberately seek to violate the official moral codes of Maoist China. Instead, his so-called “moral deviation” was silently permitted by the Chinese officials in the first place. As Antonioni personally

265 See Alain Badiou, The Century, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2007), 48. Elsewhere, Badiou also commented that “[i]t is reality that forms an obstacle against the discovery of the veil as a pure surface. There is the struggle against the semblance. But since the semblance of reality adheres to the real, the destruction of the semblance identifies with the pure and simple destruction.” See Ibid., “One Divides Itself into Two,” in Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth, eds. Slavoj Žižek et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 15. Historically, this phenomenon was highly prevalent and symptomatic in Maoist China particularly during the Red Guardist movement of “Posjiju” (破四旧) (Against Four Olds) that was sparked in 1966. “The Four Olds” were old customs, old culture, old Habits and old Ideas. One of the stated goals of the Cultural Revolution in the People’s Republic of China is to bring an end to the Four Olds. The campaign to destroy the Four Olds began in Beijing on August 19, 1966, shortly after the launch of the Cultural Revolution by raiding the homes and shops of members of the “backward” classes. These classes were often referred to as the “black elements,” and included former landlords, former merchants, former rich peasants, and persons perceived to be counterrevolutionaries, rightists, or criminals. The provincial party authorities assisted the Red Guards in finding targets for their raids. The students carried out this assignment with great enthusiasm, marching through the streets with banners, singing revolutionary songs, and shouting slogans. 266 See Joan Copjec, “May ’68, The Emotional Month,” in Lacan: The Silent Partners, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London & New York: Verso, 2006), 111.
recounted, his “transgressive filmmaking” was not solely down to his own abusive choice. Rather, the director recounted that everything he had done in China was “in complete accord with the people who were there to accompany [him]” and that he never conducted anything that was not allowed and without the presence of the Chinese delegates. The director also vividly remembered that “[u]sually there were eight delegates to accompany with them from time to time. In Nanking there were fourteen.” According to Antonioni, the Chinese representatives did not tell him what he couldn’t shoot. Instead, they said, “You may shoot, if you wish, but it displeases us.” Sinologist Simon Leys commented that “anti-Antonioni campaign” was simply a farcical episode in Chinese history. It had nothing to with the film itself insofar as many of those Chinese “critics” had yet to watch the whole picture during such epoch.

Toward the end of Chung Kuo, Antonioni quotes a Chinese idiom—“zhiren zhimian buzhixin” (知人知面不知心) (It is easy to know men’s faces, but not their hearts), which he may have meant as a summary of his main view on the double-facedness of Mao’s China. After making the comment, the filmmaker then ends his film with a long sequence documenting a performance by Chinese acrobats at a circus with no further commentary. This performance is a grand finale of sorts. The acrobat sequence begins with footage of an audience filling the theater, followed by a show featuring plate spinning, juggling, tightrope walking, and other gymnastic acts. Antonioni shot the performance in a static long take, alternately in a wide frame that includes the whole stage and in close-ups that focus on the faces of the acrobats with their red and white makeup. This sequence at the end of the nearly four-hour-long film is exceptionally lengthy in duration. The circus scene appears perpetually to be on the verge of concluding the film only to keep proceeding to another act. It renders the impression of watching a recording of a theatrical performance that appears to have been conceived that way from the start.

267 Bachmann, “Antonioni after China,” 129.
268 Ibid., 123. On the other hand, the tight shooting schedule granted by the Chinese bureaus compelled Antonioni to make a quick scan of Mao’s China. In fact, the director did not have the luxury to prepare and study for this filming visit.
In this scene Antonioni wanted to argue that the sheer absence of “tricks” or “secrets” behind all these acrobatic performances done virtually on the spot in Maoist China disclosed the new China. In other words, Maoist cultural identity had been presented in its most literal and mundane form imaginable. It is indeed counterproductive to keep digging to get to the “truth” or “essence” beyond the visual surface of the acrobats because the performative surface already embodied the truth. That is why Antonioni contended that the Maoist reality of the 1970s was perhaps “a propaganda” but it was not necessarily “a lie.” The truth of Maoist China was in its earthly ways of quotidian living, with nothing beyond this surface of the every day. That is why one critic argued that “[t]he acrobat sequence thus retroactively codes the entire film in this manner, as a recording of a series of performances and displays rather than as ‘documentary’ per se.” The brief glance or the survey of Chinese faces by Antonioni as such was therefore the most in-depth investigation of Mao’s China possible.

Antonioni, Pi-lin-Pi-kong, and the Nominal Excess of “Confucian Moderation”

But at the same time, another problem simultaneously arose: Antonioni’s implication of “no essence but sheer performance” may have already been adhered to a particular (or peculiar?) kind of China’s national identity. Moreover, Antonioni’s refusal to believe there were secrets or tricks to the performance may have been simply another form of secrecy. What is really problematic is that Antonioni seemed to really know this paradoxical essence and the core of Maoist ideology, despite the fact that it was supposed to be ignored. In this respect, China’s antagonistic criticism toward Antonioni may represent something else, as the signifying plainness of “China” seemed to embody a new kind of spiritual “awakening” for him in this final moment of the film. In other words, the Chinese national identity is nothing but a performance, yet this awakening is primarily endowed to Antonioni alone. Moreover, it is the filmmaker himself who truly knows this little secret of his Chinese neighbor, even more than the Chinese people themselves. However, this does not reveal anything new about the Chinese,

270 Antonioni, “Is It Still Possible to Make a Documentary?,” 110.
but perhaps it is more about the Western subjecthood itself (as a knowing subject). It is no wonder that Maoist critics have said, "In the narration, the film says that it does not ‘pretend to explain China but only wants to start to observe this great repertoire of faces, gestures and habits’ in China. This is a downright fraud. Every scene in the ‘documentary’ makes its own explanation."\(^{272}\)

This final realization of Antonioni’s is indeed similar to what Emmanuel Lévinas called the face of the Other as a certain epiphany or revelation. For Lévinas, the face of the neighbor embodies an infinite moral responsibility and demand on oneself. It compels one to keep constructing an ethical face-to-face relationship. Lévinas said that “the Other who addressed me with the unconditional call and thus constitutes me as an ethical subject is—in spite of the fact that this is an absolutely heteronomous call which commands me and so comes from a height—the human other, the face, the transcendental form of the neighbor as radical Other.”\(^{273}\) Lévinas added, “To seek truth, I have already established a relationship with a face which can guarantee of itself, whose epiphany itself is somehow a word of honor … deceit and veracity already presuppose the absolute authenticity of the face.”\(^{274}\)

However, simply theorizing this Chinese strangeness and peculiarity outside the realm of the Western cliché about the “Yellow Peril” is still an insufficient answer to truly recasting a new understanding of the cultural Other. Rather, this kind of honoring gesture conducted by Westerners somehow reaffirms the long-standing Eurocentric supremacy over China. While it may recognize the profundity of other cultures, this cultural mentality also confers a self-congratulating tendency to bless its own inner self.\(^{275}\) The American critic


\(^{274}\) Ibid., 202. On the question of the “Sino-Soviet Split,” Lévinas commented that the “Chinese question” was even more hyperbolical to the so-called “Stalinist problem” predominantly circulated in the West during the 1960s: “The yellow peril! It is not racial but spiritual. Not about inferior values but about a radical strangeness, strange to all the density of its past, where no voice with a familiar inflection comes through: a lunar, a Martian past.” See Ibid., *Unforeseen History*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 108.

\(^{275}\) Elaborating in an article recorded in *The Neighbor*, Slavoj Žižek said that “[f]ar from displaying ‘a quality of God’s image carried with it,’ the face is the ultimate ethical lure … the neighbor is not displayed through a face; it is, as we have seen, in his or her fundamental
Jennifer M. Barker, in her award-winning essay, argued that *Chung Kuo* was indeed a kind of quasi-realist work since Antonioni’s voice-overs often mistranslated the various actions and gestures of the native Chinese subjects. She also argued that Antonioni’s *Chung Kuo* was founded on the premise of conventional ethnographic filmmaking in the name of a Western scientific method. However, instead of commenting on *Chung Kuo* as being far too objective, Barker asserted that the major fallacy of this film was precisely in Antonioni’s voice-overs—the director’s sincere and humble self-criticisms of his own moral supremacy as a way to give back the necessary honor to the native Chinese informants.

Barker pointed out a defining scene in which the director seemed to make a “humble” gesture by self-criticizing his own ethnic predominance but ultimately reasserted the entire Western interpretive paradigm. The sequence focused on a group of village people in Linshien County who had never seen a foreigner during their lifetime. The camera records the fearful and doubtful faces and gestures of the native Chinese people while Antonioni narrates. The voice-over implies that while the native people may feel awkward in the presence of unfamiliar Westerners and all their film equipment, it is all the more evident that the whole film crew of *Chung Kuo* realizes that they are the “real strangers” in front of the
dimension a *faceless monster.*” See Slavoj Žižek, “Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence,” in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology,* eds. Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 185. [italics in the original] That is to say, what Lévinas may have missed was the very “inhumanity” that has been placed onto the “godly” face of the neighbor—the monstrous tiny “sur-face” (where “sur” in French means “on” or “toward”) which is a constant reminder of the radical strangeness long pertaining to the “inner core.” The inhuman neighbor precisely embodies the sheer inescapable banality of oneself. This so-called “monstrous underside” may have always resided within Antonioni’s craving to expect and look for a “new Chinese man” in the first place. The true ethical gesture is not merely suspending the symbolic order and embracing the human face of the Other, but rather is dissolving the symbolic order, which is intimately tied to the face itself, and embracing thoroughly the “inhuman monstrosity,” which is the human neighbor. That is why Žižek asserted that the ultimate ethical act is to totally “lose face,” a “defacement in all dimensions”—both morally and physically—in order to traverse the fundamental fantasy of a “new awareness” that is retroactively sustained by the self-congratulating lure of the “face.” See Ibid., *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London & New York: Verso, 2001), 187.

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277 Ibid.
Chinese subjects. Barker argued that in this particular scene, Antonioni’s self-criticism may have somehow dissolved the usual Self/Other dichotomy, yet it also reinforced Western subjecthood insofar as it was the director’s voice-over that offered the master reference to the final narrative.

Concerning the awkward and embarrassing responses from the Chinese subjects, Barker argued that it was potentially Antonioni’s voice commentary that imposed this fear onto the native people, rather than the latter’s own spontaneous feelings toward the unfamiliar people and film technology. However, later on, Barker also mentioned that there was indeed an overlooked exception within the cinematic frame who resisted the brutal imposition of fear by Antonioni’s voice-over:

The contradiction between the bodies of the Chinese, their physical behavior, and the reading of that behavior offered by the narrator comes to a head in the final shot of the sequence, in which a villager approaches the camera, about to walk past the crew. The narrator continues to speak of fear and doubt while the villager, staring directly into the camera, provides a physical challenge to that interpretation; this man is clearly not afraid.

According to Barker’s logic, the omnipotence of Antonioni’s voice-overs was totally illusionary. The exception that kept transgressing or refusing the coercive and threatening tendency of this voice, a fearless young Chinese man who is seen at the final moment of the scene, precisely embodied a certain kind of flexibility and dissidence within the dogmatic narration. However, while Barker

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278 Antonioni’s voice-over was as follows: “These Chinese have never seen a Westerner. They come to the doorways: amazed, a bit scared and curious. They can’t resist the temptation to stare at us. We go on with filming. But soon, we realize that it’s us who are peculiar and foreign. For the people to the other side of the camera, we’re completely unknown and perhaps a bit ridiculous. A hard blow against our European arrogance! For one forth of the earth’s population, we’re so unfamiliar that it fills us with awe. Our big eyes, curly hair, big long noses, pale skin, extravagant gestures, outlandish costumes…. They are taken aback, but very courteous. Afraid to offend us by fleeing, they come out and stand still in front of the camera, often motionless and as if petrified. During our brief digression into the highland, we’ve witnessed a gallery of astounded faces, but we’ve never noticed any expression of hostility.”

279 While this acknowledgement occurs during the voice-over, the overall narration sought not to dissolve but to reinforce subjecthood along the lines of the Self/Other split: as the voice-over talks about those “strange” European features, the visual track consists of close-ups of Chinese faces, proceeding rhythmically in synch with the narrator’s words, as if cued by them. The Otherness associated verbally with the Westerners is transferred visually onto the non-Westerners—the Chinese, the “natives.” Thus, the division driving the text is, at the level of narration, maintained.

See Barker, 67.

280 Ibid., 57.

281 Ibid. [italics in the original]
did not elaborate further on this point, she tried to reassert the omnipotence and brutality of Antonioni’s voice-over. If Antonioni’s commentary had really consolidated Western legitimacy over the native people, the same kind of subjecthood may also be shared and reinforced by Barker’s criticism of *Chung Kuo*.

However, I argue that Barker’s analysis may have missed one crucial historical element—that perhaps this young Chinese man very much submitted to the didactic voice. Instead of being subordinated by Antonioni’s off-screen narration, this young man may have already been subjugated by another set of Maoist injunctions spoken at a real location—the voice of the Chinese communist delegate who accompanied Antonioni all the way through the filming of the Linshien sequence. On this point, Antonioni vividly remembered a strange detail during his stay in Linshien County:

> Generally, in China, the crowd applauds the Westerners who pass by. Here they were paralyzed they did not even dare to approach us…. The president of the revolutionary committee of the city had given us permission to carry out the shooting, and was walking ahead of us. And as soon as he saw an old man, he approached him and told him to go away, to hide.  

> In other words, rather than directly attributing the very coercive imposition of fear to the director’s voice-over, the fear may have already been spread at the shooting location by this Maoist delegate even *before* being captured by Antonioni’s camera. There was a kind of excessive moderation made by the Chinese delegate at the shooting locale. Ironically, precisely because the young man somehow lagged behind the other passers-by or simply because the Chinese delegate was too impatient and walked much faster than Antonioni’s crew in order to tidy up the shooting venue in advance for propaganda purposes, this particular young man might not have heard the threatening command to hide given by the delegate. Yet this does not necessarily mean that the young man deliberately transgressed the imperative. The reason that the young man somehow remained outside of this injunction might have had nothing to do with a pre-

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exceptional status to the rule; he simply failed to synchronize his footsteps with the delegate’s and had no time to hide.

However, the voice injunction to hide given by the Chinese delegate may not have been simply aimed at the local Linshien people. Rather, these few words urging the Linshien people to hide were perhaps a kind of ritualistic coda to retroactively remind the entire film crew of the ongoing revolutionary process in China. According to Roland Barthes, who participated in the Telquelian visit to China in 1974, the voice exhortations during the heyday of Pi-lin-Pi-kong (批林批孔) (Criticize Lin Piao, Criticize Confucius) were also directed at foreigners (both external and internal) who were ideological indifferent to Maoist doctrines. According to Barthes, “[t]he discourse always represents, the way narrative does, the struggle between two ‘lines.’ No doubt we foreigners never hear anything but the voice of the triumphant line.” In this sense, the reason why the young passer-by failed to hear concretely the command to hide was perhaps that he was not the major targeted audience of the injunction in the first place. What the Maoist delegate may have already had in mind was mostly the foreign film crew. This voice announcement was probably part and parcel of the whole revolutionary Cause to constantly remind the foreign friends (or enemies) of the triumph and achievements of Maoism during the 1960s and 1970s. Although this kind of triumphant vocal repetition seemed to be highly generic, it was still a necessary gesture to keep the revolutionary momentum in motion during the Cultural Revolution as a whole. As Barthes added, “that triumph is never triumphalistic; it is an alert, a movement by means of which the revolution is continuously kept from losing its momentum, from chocking on itself, from congealing.”

Obviously, Antonioni was always coy and ambiguous about this kind of Maoist triumph and revolutionary achievement, which he may have regarded as ritualistic and boring. He also kept an aloof distance from not only capitalist ideology but also didactic leftist victory. The ambiguous endings of Blowup (1966) and Zabriskie Point (1970), about the youthful revolutions of Euro-American

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284 Ibid.
1960s, suggested that he did not show enough faith in either the Left or the Right in the West. He perceived that the revolutionary insurrections that happened in the bourgeois West could risk breeding a new moral crisis, if not valuing a nihilism that belonged to the same spectrum of modern alienation that emerged after World War Two. Despite being a leftist sympathizer, he was simply too polite and modest regarding the question of proletarian revolution, which may have also reinforced his pessimistic attitude. Antonioni’s personal fascination with “human ambiguity,” “indeterminancy of the reality,” and “metaphysical neutrality” could have been an excuse to escape from political engagement.\textsuperscript{285} Serge Daney commented that \textit{Chung Kuo} exuded an excess of neutrality.\textsuperscript{286} He added:

\textbf{For ambiguity involves not a failure of knowledge or an uncertain knowledge (in which case it would be enough—armed with superior, indeed absolute knowledge—simply to fill in the gaps) but another type of knowledge…. The inexplicit is not the opposite of positivity, it is one of the forms it takes (the dominant form, even).}\textsuperscript{285}

It was no wonder that one Chinese commentator regarded Antonioni’s film philosophy as the specter of Confucian virtue. The critic believed that \textit{Chung Kuo} uncannily demonstrated the Confucian ideals of moderation and humility, which was ultimately a passive and submissive move to facilitate the imperialist exploitation of China.\textsuperscript{288} Another commentator wrote: “The imperialist element Antonioni who yearns to restore the reactionaries’ lost ‘paradise’ in China sings the same tune as Confucius and Lin Piao and wants us to turn back the wheel of history. But it’s all daydreaming!”\textsuperscript{289}

\textsuperscript{285} Antonioni’s documentary always disguised itself as being merely descriptive, as if “China were simply a thing to be described” or a thing as it really was, and ultimately hid the director’s own cultural limitations and exotic position. Meanwhile, as Aumont argued, Antonioni’s occasional refusal to speak or make comments in \textit{Chung Kuo} was indeed a highly problematic gesture. It was actually a sort of “\textit{silence contemplatif}” (contemplative silence) that already spoke for everything. The film was politically loaded in the way that it was silent and neutral about Maoist politics on the one hand, while it mythicized the landscape and the traditional way of life of the Chinese people on the other hand. See Jacques Aumont, “Sur la Chine” [On China]. \textit{Cahiers du cinéma}, 248 (September 1973): 44.


\textsuperscript{287} Ibid., 59.


\textsuperscript{289} “Antonioni’s Anti-China Film Denounced.” \textit{Peking Review} [in English] 17, no. 13 (March 29, 1974): 19. To a wider spectrum of the \textit{Pi-lin-Pi-kong}, the Gang of Four criticized the Confucian
Yao Wenyuan argued:

[Those who uphold ‘moderation’] always displace a seemingly humble and rightful outlook. Actually, they adopt a kind of ambiguous attitude to cover up their ultra-rightist essence. In appearance, it looks as if it were just and moderate. But in essence, it tries to protect all the reactionaries by all means and tries to liquidate all the revolutionaries by all means.\(^{290}\)

In his Antonioni essay, Eco also said that even if *Chung Kuo* was used as a propagandistic pretext, “the fact remains that a *casus belli*, to work, must be credible.”\(^{291}\) In this respect, I argue that the Antonioni film still possessed “something” that was subject to such disastrous misinterpretations. In *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni narrates that he is indeed fascinated by one particular national museum in Nanjing that displayed different sorts of antique mud figures. He says in the voice-over:

> A visit to the tomb is a festive occasion. There is nothing stern or solemn about it. There isn’t much of a point in going inside. The interiors are nothing more than giant underground chambers containing similar rectangular coffins. One could better have a look at the museum. There are many treasures there, but the one that impressed us most is this specimen of political art.

notion of moderation as being a highly eclectic and reactive gesture at large. It had also been said that Lin Piao’s celebration of Confucian virtue, such as a peaceful friendship with foreign enemies, was precisely meant to eliminate all class antagonisms and social contradictions in China. Renmin tiyu chubanshe, ed., *Pilin pikong wenxuan* [*Selections of Criticize Lin Piao and Confucius*] (Beijing: People’s Sports Press, 1974), 19; 122; 175. In the early 1970s, many ultra-leftists Chinese called Confucius “konglaoer,” which can literally mean “Confucius the Second” and “Confucius the Prick.” See Louie, Kam, “Confucian the Chameleon: Dubious Envoy for ‘Brand China’.” *Boundary 2* 38, no.1 (2011): 83.

\(^{290}\) Jiaqi, Yan and Gao, Gao, *Wenhua geming shinianshi* [*The Ten-year History of the Cultural Revolution*] (Tianjin: Tianjin’s People’s Press, 1986), 505. Meanwhile, although many have interpreted the *Pi-lin-Pi-kong* as a completely erratic event, the campaign itself might still have managed to maintain some sort of reasonable ground. Historically speaking, revisionism and pragmatism began to gain legitimacy with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after the massive destruction of traditions and old customs in China during the 1960s. That is to say, the revolutionary desire of Maoist China seemed to vacillate in the mid-1970s. Widely known as a diplomatic “foreigner” of the CCP, seeking peaceful coexistence between China and the West, Zhou was the most influential cadre to contribute to the Chinese (partial) opening to the foreign world during the early 1970s. Zhou’s moderate policy was thought to be an example of the inert practice of the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean, and his efforts to reemploy some of the veteran cadres overthrown in the Cultural Revolution were seen as an attempt to lazily restore pre-Cultural Revolution order, representing a very defunct state. See Ma Jisen, *The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry of China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2004), 365. To a certain extent, the *Pi-lin-Pi-kong* campaign could somehow be conceived as a kind of rekindling of revolutionary enthusiasm. Speaking of the objective of the campaign, Jiang Qing wrote: “[*Pi-lin-Pi-kong*] is not only a sole criticism of Confucius, but it is also about the question of revolution in the ideological superstructure, it is a continuum to Mao’s political line of ‘Ten Relationship.’” See Yan and Gao, 496–497.

\(^{291}\) Eco, 531.
This specimen of political art that he referred to was a number of clay models which were boxed in several gigantic windows. The models illustrated a barbaric story about how a band of landowners pillaged a poor peasant family during the Ming Dynasty and how those oppressed villagers resisted against the feudal landlords afterward. As Antonioni remarked, the female museum guide explained to them that the various people’s suffering and their plebian resistance during feudal times perfectly corresponded to the crucial Maoist teaching of the day—that is, the people’s right to revolt. Obviously, this kind of familiar ideological lesson to “learn from the past” was not Antonioni’s main interest. Rather, what captured his attention the most was the mud models with different exaggerated expressions and postures, which seemed to be self-expressive enough to narrate their own stories without the unnecessary ideologized explanation given by the museum guide.

After showing the clay models in the museum, Antonioni idiosyncratically cuts to Maoist students who are just about to go to the countryside for farm labor work. Soon afterward, his camera jumps to the Sino-Albanian Friendship People’s Commune. In the eyes of the Chinese, such visual juxtaposition exemplified Antonioni’s latent political commentary on Mao’s rural program for young people. From this sequence, the Chinese critics had the impression that the ongoing Maoist experiment of “serving the people” and the collectivism of the People’s Commune were treated somewhat as the equivalent of the pre-revolutionary sufferings of the people embodied by the clay models.292 Although this juxtaposition was perhaps “unintentional,” the misunderstanding as such could have been avoided if Antonioni had been more cautious and sensitive to the potential political taboos in Maoist China. He seemed to have preferred a rather

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292 The Maoist commentator said: “In so far as editing is concerned, the film seems to be a jumble of desultory shots pieced together at random, but in fact all are arranged for a vicious purpose. For instance, the director presents the clay sculptures shown in the exhibition hall at the Underground Palace in the Ming Tombs depicting how the working people were oppressed and how they fought in resistance during the Ming Dynasty, accompanied by narrations about the peasants’ suffering at that time. This is followed first by a shot of a group of young students with shovels going to the fields to work, and then by a scene in the Sino-Albanian Friendship People’s Commune in which a woman commune member is wiping the sweat off her brow, all intended to show that ‘life in the fields means daily hard labor,’ and to assert that China’s countryside is no ‘paradise.’ The director obviously uses these scenes to suggest that the condition of Chinese peasants today is little better than it was in feudal society [a] hundred years ago.” Renmin Ribao, Commentator, “A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks.” 9.
neutral editing style and the juxtapositioning of raw elements. The director admitted that he made no effort to editorialize.²⁹³

But can “mistranslation” be completely avoided? As Rey Chow suggested, every cultural translation must involve a certain form of betrayal and mistranslation of the original. For example, the Italian expression “transductor” (translator) already implied a certain level of “treason.”²⁹⁴ In this respect, I argue that there is also a scene in Chung Kuo, which the Chinese audience found to be deeply unsettling and agitating, that is a reminder of something primordial about the most powerful Maoist officials themselves. That is to say, this scene may recall an inconvenient truth that the Gang of Four may have somewhat betrayed certain Maoist ideals of collective egalitarianism for its continuous craving of personal interests and power-worship.

The scene in question juxtaposes two very unlikely elements—an aria from the Chinese model theater and an image of a swine. The aria “Raise your head, expand your chest” from the cultural revolutionary song “Longjiang Song” (龙江颂) (“Song of the Dragon River”) and sung by Chiang Shuiying is inserted into an image of a swine that is about to shake its head (and “expand its chest,” which literally matches the lyrics of the song). The montage effect of the scene is that it was as if the revolutionary music had awakened (or disturbed) the pig from its sleep, from its nascent harmony. A Chinese commentator claimed that the director did not film a single sequence of China’s model theatrical works, and yet he unscrupulously hijacked and ridiculed the arias from these theatrical works. Moreover, Antonioni’s gesture was a total fabrication because there was no such music being played when the scene was shot according to one of the official Chinese facilitators. The commentator concluded that “[t]his is a deliberate slander against China’s model revolutionary theatrical works and an attack on

²⁹³ See Stern, 15. James Clifford summarized, in his introduction to Writing Culture, that the deadlock of the anthropological situation in postcolonial society quite clearly showed that one cannot simply think about or represent non-Western cultures in intellectual circles without a minimal level of anthropologizing gesture; and yet anthropology and ethnography, in their respective epistemological basis, remain “very much still a one-way street.” See James Clifford, “Introduction,” in Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 22.
China’s revolution in art and literature. It is venom carried to extreme! A similar criticism appeared in a booklet criticizing Antonioni several times as if it were a stigma, a stain that compelled the Chinese officials to make such a national defense.

However, from an Italian point of view, Eco commented that the notorious scene was purely coincidental for reasons of sound mixing and sheer technical purposes. Objectively speaking, according to Eco, the same kind of misinterpretation and negative reaction would similarly occur in Italy if a bishop saw an image of an embrace that was accompanied by the hymn “Tantum Ergo.” As Eco remarked, “…at the editing table, it seems, there was a consultant from People’s China who realized nothing and told no one about the blunder.” Meanwhile, the cameraman for Chung Kuo said that while Antonioni’s crew was shooting in China, all of the crew members heard songs that were played again and again. During that period, they did not know what the songs were all about. Soon afterward, they knew that many of the revolutionary songs that they were hearing were actually selected by Jiang Qing. The cameraman said that they should have removed the songs from the scene, but unfortunately they did not.

Such non-synchronization between image and sound in this scene may have helped disclose another level of truth. The sheer discrepancy or disharmony between the model theatrical songs and the bare image of a head-shaking swine may have exposed the inherent obscenity and violence within the revolutionary music as well. The image neutralized or moderated the song, as well as radicalized the obscene underside of the music. In this scene, the aria and the action of the swine are literally “synchronized.” To the Chinese officials, this juxtaposition was a total blasphemy toward their revolution. However, the image may not have contaminated or perverted the song. The truth is rather the reverse. The image itself was highly empty but it was probably some of the rank-and-file

296 Eco, “De interpretatione,” 534.
297 Ibid.
people in the Chinese bureau office that idealized the revolutionary music to the extent of religious obsession. The revolutionary song and the triumphant Party line were elevated and sacralized to a level of holy purity and were unconditionally given the highest moral ground of all.

Hence, the film portrayed a very traumatic message to the Chinese officials during the 1970s. This idiosyncratic sequence ironically helped reawaken and disturb the Chinese power group in terms of both its political idealization and its perversion. It also confronted them with the most primordial issue of the cult status of the (second) Cultural Revolution during the mid-1970s. Indeed, Chairman Mao, who was very ill at that time, displayed a certain critical distance from the ultra-factionalism of the Gang of Four. Through this footage, Jiang Qing and her gang may have found their fantasies of safeguarding Maoism from its fascist-revisionist enemies heavily ruptured as they were also promoting their own cult and ultra-leftist obsession just like the “traitor” Lin Piao. Jiang Qing may have identified with the uncanny message between the swine and the revolutionary music in this anti-Chinese scene insofar as she was also well known for her self-comparison to Empress Wu, the first empress in Chinese imperial history.

**Soft Anesthesia and the Unquenchable “Foreign Pain”**

Actually, the opening up of Chinese-Western dialogue in the 1970s, contrary to the ultra-leftist view, did not necessarily mean that the Maoist revolution had been overtly betrayed and nullified. According to Ma Jisen, the normalization of Sino-U.S. diplomacy “was merely a readjustment in tactics, and did not mean that Mao Zedong’s understanding of the world situation has changed.” 299 Unlike the aforementioned footage about the idiosyncratic juxtaposition between the image of a swine and the revolutionary aria, there is actually a scene in Chung Kuo that had somehow escaped such public controversy, about a working-class mother in labor at a Chinese hospital. According to the film critic Serge Daney, this labor scene concerned the use of acupuncture anesthesia in an advanced surgical operation that evaded the list of ruthless denunciations

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written in Renmin Ribao. The scene is “doubly positive.” In his The Hypothetical Mandarin, Eric Hayot also commented that this surgical scene in Chung Kuo received no complaints from the Chinese officials insofar as Antonioni’s visual treatment of the combinative use of traditional acupuncture anesthetic and modern medical technology in Maoist China was more or less a compliment. He added: “[N]o matter how discontinuously shot it was, no matter how much the symbolic superstructure of its representation differed from China’s, it nonetheless testified powerfully at the level of its content to the fact that the Chinese had ‘learned’ how to do modern surgery.”

With many Chinese traditions tragically subjected to annihilation during the early radical years of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese medicine, especially acupuncture, was contrarily identified as one of the foremost national treasures that needed to be defended and preserved. The use of acupuncture anesthesia was seen by Mao as an active blending of East-West scientific culture. Because of its relatively low cost, high mobility, and efficiency, acupuncture treatment was tremendously popular among the various young “barefoot doctors” who left medical school to serve the peasants and provide free medical services to the poor in the rural countryside during the late 1960s, the Maoist heyday of medical

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300 Serge Daney, “La remise en scène” [The Restoration Stage]. Cahiers du cinéma 268 (July 1976): 22–23. Daney said, “It does play on two tables. For Chinese, it illustrates an undeniable success in traditional medicine: acupuncture success, but also success in the ideology of ‘serving the people’ in medicine. This image (birth, instead of being traumatic, takes place with so much care, precision, quite lucidly, with confidence), the Chinese can rightly be proud of.” Ibid., 22.

301 Eric Hayot, The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity and Chinese Pain (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 242. In Chung Kuo an electric apparatus was connected to the acupuncture needles to enhance the sheer efficiency of the anesthesia.

302 See Ibid. On the other hand, acupuncture anesthesia gradually gained a new edge in diplomatic use during the early 1970s. Richard Nixon, like many foreign experts who visited Mao’s China, arranged an official visit to watch a live surgery facilitated by the use of acupuncture anesthesia. However, the true promotion of acupuncture anesthesia in the West during this epoch was mainly conducted by an American writer from the New York Times. Prior to Nixon’s trip, the famous columnist James Reston, who accompanied Kissinger’s delegate on a rehearsal visit to the PRC in 1971, personally experienced the true efficiency of Chinese acupuncture. When Reston was in China for this diplomatic rehearsal, he unfortunately suffered from immediate appendicitis. He was then transferred to a local Chinese hospital for surgery and was treated with acupuncture for painkilling. It was an eye-opening experience for him to see those small needles doing wonders. Upon his return to America, he wrote a series of articles to help promote Chinese acupuncture as a kind of “alternative medicine.” James Reston, “Now, About My Operation in Peking.” New York Times, July 26, 1971, Section A, 1; 6–9. In retrospect, the American President of the National Academy of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine commented that Reston’s reporting in the 1970s more or less paved the way for Western interests in traditional Chinese medicine thereafter. William L. Prensky, “Reston Helped Open a Door to Acupuncture.” New York Times, December 14, 1995, Section A, 30.
egalitarianism. Between 1966 and 1969, according to John Bonica, “there was a
great impetus to reintroduce acupuncture anesthesia and expand its clinical use, as
part of Chairman Mao’s movement to fully integrate Western and traditional
medicine … [as] the technique was not only revived but its use extended to all
hospitals and to the rural areas.”

The discourses on “self-agency” and “individual liberation” that
proliferated in the post-1968 capitalist West away from “scientific Marxism”
ushered in the use of acupuncture anesthesia in surgery, which offered a new kind
of subjectivity in Western science in the 1970s. Unlike modern Western
anesthesia that annulled pain by overtly de-sensitizing the patient shortly before
surgery, acupuncture anesthesia helped patients retain a minimal sense of
consciousness and mobility while relieving pain. As one Asian scholar
commented about the procedure, “Yet, fully awake, she claimed to feel no pain.
And she did look quite comfortable, in fact, than we were—fifteen weak-
 stomached, impressed strangers.”

In Chung Kuo, the laboring Chinese mother talked rather freely to the
nurse, doctors, and the filmmaker from the surgical table, and she casually
chewed a slice of fruit during the operation. Her lively act seemed to defy the
usual Western conception of an “indifferent” and “cruel” operating theater that
privileges the surgeon over the patient. In her China Past and Present, Nobel
Prize-winning author Pearl Buck referred to an ordinary scene of an operation to
remove a tumor in a PRC hospital photographed by Marc Riboud.

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American Medicine.” Journal of the American Medical Association 229, no. 10 (September 1974):
1318.
304 See Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, China! Inside the People’s Republic (New York:
Bantam Books, 1972), 228. Concerning the “electric shock” administered before the application of
acupuncture anesthesia, one Asian scholar wrote: “The last operation was spectacular—just as we
arrived, the doctors were lifting a thyroid tumor from the throat of a young woman. Here, too,
needles flashed in the high-powered lights, and small wires ran to some of them. Electric current,
it seemed. In consternation we asked, ‘Are they giving her shocks?’ Again our guess was wrong;
the current is extremely small comes from two ordinary flashlight batteries, and is used to
stimulate the nerves more efficiently than having a nurse constantly agitate the needles with her
fingers. We watched, we fascinated; a nurse came in to speak to our guides.” See Ibid., 229.
305 Modern Western anesthesia perceived the subjectivity of the patients as a certain kind of
obstacle in surgery. See Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s
According to her account, it was photographed in a modern Chinese hospital in Wuhan.... The patient, a Chinese woman, is having a tumor removed ... [and] is conscious; she is eating slices of fruit put in her mouth by a medical assistant; she feels no pain under the surgeon’s knife although she has not been given an anesthetic. She is anaesthetized by acupuncture.\(^{306}\)

In this respect, the surgical theater in Mao’s China appeared to be far more “humanistic” than that of a Western one. The use of acupuncture anesthesia, as some liberal Western critics have suggested, could even help remedy the various shortcomings long pertaining to modern Western anesthesia, which tended to reduce the patient to a passive and inert object.

The activity of a patient receiving acupuncture anesthesia is not only a technical issue but perhaps also a moral one. The fact that the patient’s subjective desire could be met without necessarily interrupting the ongoing operation was, ultimately, a crucial lesson to the West. It suggested that human subjectivity, instead of being a mere obstacle to scientific works, could in fact coexist with the latter under acupuncture anesthesia to establish “a new form of pain management” in the post-1968 context.\(^{307}\) Western moral crises, according to Antonioni, were based on the tendency of individualism extended after the end of World War Two. However, China gave Antonioni the hope of a new collectivism that was not simply an ideological cliché but rather a will to freedom. After all, it seemed that Antonioni’s film had conveyed such a liberating dimension through his portrayal of the active and conscious laboring mother.

However, Susan Sontag, who was both a leftist sympathizer and a liberal-humanitarian critic, argued that this Antonioni work was in fact highly instructive rather than liberating.\(^{308}\) She also described her experience of watching a factory

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\(^{307}\) Hayot argued that the patients being operated on under acupuncture anesthesia did not have to be considered an “inert matter” for the surgeon to penetrate through. Rather, the surgical penetration to the body could proceed alongside with the fact that the patient remained self-aware as a subject. See Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin*, 243.

\(^{308}\) In her *On Photography*, Sontag commented that “[f]or photographic images tend to subtract feeling from something we experience at first hand and the feelings they do arouse are, largely, not those we have in real life. Often something disturbs us more in photographed form than it does when we actually experience it.” See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 168.
worker in Shanghai have nine-tenths of his stomach removed under acupuncture anesthesia. She managed to follow the whole three-hour process “without queasiness, never once feeling the need to look away.”\textsuperscript{309} But when Sontag watched the less gory operation in Antonioni’s film, it “made [her] flinch at the first cut of the scalpel and avert [her] eyes several times during the sequence.”\textsuperscript{310} Her eyes had to withstand Antonioni’s violent images, which were shot from above. She added: “One is vulnerable to disturbing events in the form of photographic images in a way that one is not to the real thing.”\textsuperscript{311} Sontag explained that her vulnerability encountered in the process of watching the photographic images were partly due to the “double passivity” that the spectator was holding, that is to say, the “spectator of events already shaped, first by the participants and second by the image maker.”\textsuperscript{312} On the contrary, in the real surgical scenario, despite being primarily a spectator, Sontag enjoyed some freedom by playing the role of an “inhibited adult, well-mannered guest, respectful witness.”\textsuperscript{313} Yet Antonioni’s images clearly minimized her role as an active agent in choosing her own angle as she watched the anatomical scene:

The movie operation precludes not only this modest participation but whatever is active in spectatorship. In the operating room, I am the one who changes focus, who makes the close-ups and the medium shots. In the theater, Antonioni has already chosen what parts of the operation I can watch; the camera looks for me—and obliges me to look, leaving as my only option not to look.\textsuperscript{314}

Yet what really annoyed Sontag the most was not the “instructive” images of \textit{Chung Kuo} but the overt Chinese moral criticisms, which were far more “coercive” than that of Antonioni’s photography itself.\textsuperscript{315} For her, the repetitive moral emphasis of the Maoist criticisms was so excessive it was as if they had already denied any human ambiguities in all circumstances. Unlike modern photography, which is intimately connected with the discontinuous and hence

\textsuperscript{309} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{310} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{311} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{312} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{313} Ibid. However, almost two and a half decades later, Sontag herself admitted that this kind of moral spectatorship to witness the pain and trauma of others may no longer be valid in today’s “society of the spectacle” where the so-called “ethical dimension” of human suffering has already been purified and neutralized by the media industry as merely apathetic spectacles and indifferent commodities. See Ibid., \textit{Regarding the Pain of the Others} (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 105–106.
\textsuperscript{314} Ibid., \textit{On Photography}, 169.
\textsuperscript{315} Ibid.
pluralizes multiple ways of seeing, Sontag wrote, “in China it is connected only with continuity” that serves nothing but didactic and ritualistic purposes. She added: “Photography for us is a double-edged instrument for producing clichés (the French word that means both trite expression and photographic negative) and for serving up ‘fresh’ views. For the Chinese authorities, there are only clichés—which they consider not to be clichés but ‘correct’ views.” Photography “in our sense,” Sontag concluded, “has no place in their society” at all.

By simply opposing “continuity” with “discontinuity,” “dualism” with “polyvalence,” and “dull” with “interesting” that the Chinese communist regime and modern Western photography embodied, respectively, I argue that Sontag may have also essentialized the very differences between Mao’s China and the West, thus paradoxically approximating her own idea of the “continuous” or “Maoist” way of thinking per se. In fact, was the Maoist Cultural Revolution connected only to a ritualistic “continuity”? Contrary to Sontag’s dismissive account, I argue that Antonioni’s film suggested that the Chinese quotidian realities during the Cultural Revolution were indeed much more ambivalent and profound. Just as film scholar Sam Rohdie has argued, there are indeed two kinds of births or deliveries oscillating in the caesarean birth scene in Chung Kuo:

The scene oscillates between the figuration of the birth and the visual abstraction of the change in surface; there seem to be at least two births—of a child coming out of a depth, and of surface emerging within a surface, appearing, changing, disappearing. It is a familiar occurrence in Antonioni’s films: a new figuration taking place within an original one, eventually making the first disappear, and, at the same time, the dissolution of any shape whatsoever into the informality, the uncertainty of abstraction.

What is truly crucial here is that the “two births” indeed give rise to both “continuous” and “discontinuous” narratives. At the same time, I argue that this

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316 Ibid., 169–170.
317 Ibid., 173.
318 Ibid., 174.
320 Rohdie elaborated: “One is of the woman giving birth, the acupuncture anaesthetic, the incision and so on, and the entire series of events from the initial acupuncture needle to the emergence of the baby. It is a small narrative: linear, causative, self-contained… The other subject takes place alongside or within the narrative one and, though connected to it, intimately, is also autonomous from it, and seems at times to overwhelm its narrative subject. It is difficult to put into words or to ascribe any particular sense to it; it involves the sight of the taut, round, swollen surface of the women’s belly, the insertion into that surface of the long acupuncture needles, the marking out of
kind of narrative “discontinuity” radiating in the caesarean birth scene in Chung Kuo, unlike the aforementioned personal, direct, and raw experiences of Sontag when she was standing in a real surgical room in China, was not entirely “spontaneous” or “uninhibited” at all. In fact, this scene is not solely about the Chinese working-class mother who is casually eating fruit during her laboring surgery. Rather, simultaneously, a Chinese nurse is handing a slice of fruit to the laboring mother. At first glance, this “fruit-feeding” gesture by the nurse is beyond her professional requirements but she is perfecting her job because this handing of the fruit precisely completes the true meaning of “nursing” and “care.” Instead of simply ignoring the presence of the laboring mother, the nurse’s feeding, despite being practically useless, somehow exemplifies a warm and caring gesture to help alleviate (rather than aestheticize by medicine) the mother’s strain and pressure during the unfamiliar surgery. This is not strictly a compulsory medical procedure, as this “fruit-passing” is not written in the official Maoist doctrines. Rather, it is largely up to the voluntary will of the nurses, doctors, and other social actors to make this gesture during excessive labor in the course and hardship of the continuous Maoist revolution.321

The “Cult of Personality” and a New Patience in the Making

Unfortunately, the aforementioned verdicts by Daney and Hayot about the “exceptional” status of the laboring footage may not be entirely accurate. Although they may have invested most of their attention on the defining essay “A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks,” both of the critics seemed to have missed the parallel leaflet “Shi ‘liangxin’ huanshi ‘henxin’?” (Is It a ‘Conscience’ or a...
‘Hardened Heart’?) from the same criticizing booklet. In this short article, the female writer, who was in charge of that surgery as the doctor, quotes a portion of an open letter written by the laboring mother, who said that the Italian director distorted the whole image of the acupuncture-assisted laboring surgery, as well as exaggerated the pain that the mother experienced.\(^{322}\) The female doctor was also disgruntled by the way in which Antonioni filmed the acupuncture anesthesia similar to a kind of “clandestine witchcraft,” while portraying the medical team as “senseless” and “paralyzed” individuals.\(^{323}\) In other words, this laboring scene was still very much submitted to the official Chinese propaganda at that time.

In fact, upon inspecting the scene closely, one may find that the act of “fruit-feeding” may not be accomplished by a single nurse. Rather, there are always two “visible hands” simultaneously at work to hand out little pieces of fruit to the same working-class mother—one feeding the patient while the other adjusts her head at the same time. However, what is really unusual about this documentary scene is that Antonioni does not simply show the faces of the “two nurses” who perform as a team in taking care of the laboring mother at such occasion. As long as the “collective” helping hands are not shown with two respective faces to exemplify two distinctive individuals, one can argue that the two hands, despite an apparent difference in movement, in fact belong to one and the same “faceless” person. It is indeed quite disconcerting to see that these “caring” and “adjusting” gestures perhaps pertain to the two sides of the same coin—the same hidden and “faceless” machinery. This kind of soft anesthesia is still secretly “instructive,” as it somehow mixes up the two distinctive roles of “nursery” and “regulation” all along the same plane.

I argue that this scene is a precise reminder of Mao’s irreducible “cult of personality” during the Cultural Revolution, where the working-class was secretly mobilized through the use of exotic fruit while at the same time making adjustments to the student rebellions in Beijing. Indeed, one of the weirdest historical episodes during the Maoist era was not the cult fetish of Mao’s personal portrait or the waving of the \textit{Little Red Book}; rather, it was the “fruit worship” that

\(^{322}\) Renmin wenxue chubanshe, ed., 83. 
\(^{323}\) Ibid., 81–82.
was fanatically embraced in the late 1960s. During the National Day Parades of 1968, there was an extremely unconventional and eccentric form of ideological exhibition that was uplifting and dedicated to the so-called “Maoist mangoes” parallel to the typical celebrations and grand displays of the gigantic portrait of Mao and Maoist revolutionary slogans.324 Usually stored in a transparent jar with several Maoist writings inside, mangoes were generally considered a sacred cultural relic Mao’s selfless love and care to his people during this epoch. But why did it have to be the mango in the first place? As one critic has suggested, mangoes were extremely rare in Mao’s China (most of the Chinese had yet to see a real mango in their lifetime due to China’s unfavorable climate), and they simultaneously carried a sort of dual sanctity to suggest both the utmost care and devotion from the Chairman and their own exotic scarcity and exceptionality.325 When the mangoes were gradually delivered and passed on to different social classes and local areas, most of the revolutionary committees there would organize a solemn mass welcoming the arrival of the Maoist relic. Some of them would even set up an altar and practice several religious activities for the coming mangoes.326 Mangoes have been put into the national museum for public memorial since that time, and there is even a Maoist propaganda film, Mangguo zhige (Song of Mango) (1973), that was deliberately named after the fruit.327

324 As the Maoist mango quickly gained huge popularity all over the PRC, it became a norm and ritual that most of the local communes would order boxes of models of this fruit, while many households chose to buy souvenirs that had its image imprinted on the surface.
325 Chau stated: “The exoticism of the mangoes is another important quality that must have contributed to the mango fever. Because the mango is a tropical fruit commonly grown in South Asia and Southeast Asia but not at all common in China, most Chinese in 1968 had not seen or heard of mangoes.” See Adam Yuet Chau, “Mao’s Travelling Mangoes: Food as Relic in Revolutionary China.” Past and Present 206, suppl. 5 (2010): 262.
327 Mangguo zhige tells the story of a critical moment about the height of Red Guardist violence in July 1968. After receiving Mao’s official reassurance in terms of the Maoist mangoes, a female textile worker leads the Workers’ Propaganda Team to the Oriental Textile Industrial University to disarm the students. The university had been pulled into various factional conflicts for months. After entering the university, the Workers’ Propaganda Team commenced a series of investigations and soon found that the chemistry professor Nie Jialiang was the “black hand” who secretly manipulated the students’ division for personal gains dedicated to Mao. While the Nie camp was rather resistant, the Workers’ Propaganda Team did not resort to violence to resolve the problem but instead used extensive persuasion and the telling of sentimental personal stories to soften the hearts of the rebellious students. Finally, the students who supported Nie were moved by the workers’ speeches and disarmed themselves immediately. The Maoist mangoes reappeared again in the university when all concerned parties had reached a final consensus.
Historically speaking, mangoes were originally received from the Pakistan ambassador during his visit to Beijing in 1968 as a sort of diplomatic gift. Soon afterward, Mao decided to pass down the mangoes (it was rumored that Mao personally disliked the taste of mangoes), the so-called “precious gift from a Pakistani friend,” to the workers’ propaganda team, which had just taken control of the Qinghua University campus shortly after the successive unrests and armed turbulence among the young intellectuals. Between 1966 and 1968, spearheaded by the Red Guards, schools and universities were undergoing great chaos. Massive ideological scissions sprouted up all over the country. However, the most notable event of all remained the upsurge at the Qinghua campus, where factional struggles were far more intricate in that they involved university professors, college students, younger Red Guards, and even some crucial members from the bureau office. Kuai Dafu, one of the most famous Red Guard leaders at the time, demanded the capture of the hidden “black hand” who constantly manipulated and maneuvered the various factional conflicts among the students. According to Russo, Mao mockingly claimed to be the “black hand.” This historical incident also involved Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, the two notorious “revisionist” cadres of that period who had already sent down workers’ teams to liquidate the nascent student movements on Beijing campuses in 1966.

As an urgent remedy, the Workers’ Propaganda Team was thereby called up by Mao to help calm the strikes and disarm the students’ factional struggles at the universities in Beijing during the summer of 1968. This gesture of handing down the fruit to the workers was loaded with heavy ideological meanings. The Maoist mangoes, originally a symbol of “warmth” and “care,” were in fact

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330 On the one hand, mangoes were used as a reward to honor the workers’ efforts in facilitating reconciliation among the young intellectuals. On the other hand, insofar as the date of this gift sending (i.e., August 5, 1968) was precisely the second anniversary of Mao’s ideological call to the Red Guards “to bombard the headquarters” in 1966, it was commonly believed that the mangoes also indicated the sheer disillusionment of the Chairman regarding the young students after various movements at schools and universities in the late 1960s. After 1968, many young students and intellectuals were gradually sent to the countryside for ideological reeducation by the hard-working peasants. Thus, after 1968, it was no secret that Mao had replaced and resettled his proletarian trust on the working-class and the peasants.
pragmatically mobilized as a propaganda vehicle to help nullify or anesthetize the tensions among the different ideological camps at the Qinghua campus. Even so, they idiosyncratically became a kind of cult object that symbolized the “immortality” of the Maoist reign as a whole.\(^{331}\) While the Maoist mangoes were idiosyncratically jarred at such heyday, the body of Chairman Mao is now still embalmed for public commemoration in the political center of Beijing. That also explained why the Workers’ Propaganda Team, who first received Mao’s gift on the campus of Qinghua, were so particularly touched, as it simultaneously signified an official revolutionary reassurance from the Great Helmsman. They smelt the mangoes, walked around with the gift, waved the *Little Red Book*, and constantly cried out “Long Live Chairman Mao!” to glorify this exceptional “grace” Mao bestowed to them.\(^{332}\) One of them said, “Our great leader Chairman Mao has not only sent us a gift but also the invincible thought of Mao Tse-tung, a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power.”\(^{333}\) In the meantime, the students at Qinghua were overjoyed by the same mango event. They felt spiritually empowered and uplifted by the spiritual presence of the Maoist mangoes. According to an official report,

Young revolutionary Red Guard fighters and revolutionary teachers, students and staff of Tsinghua University were overjoyed at this happy event. Many young Red Guard fighters declared excitedly: ‘This joyous event is also the greatest inspiration, greatest education and greatest encouragement given us by

\(^{331}\) According to Hinton’s interviews, workers stayed up through the night and, looking at and touching the mangoes, discussed the implications of the new policy and Mao’s generous act. See William Hinton, *Hundred Day War: The Cultural Revolution at Tsinghua University* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 226–227. No one even dared to eat the mangoes since such an act would be considered the utmost blasphemy to Mao’s trust and love that was dedicated and bestowed to them. Literally speaking, the ancient name for “mango” in Chinese is “chuanshaoguo” (peach of longevity). Aside from its exotic implication, the mango also symbolizes the mythical meaning of “longevity.” Thus, early in 1968, the members of the Workers’ Propaganda Team had already aspired to preserve this priceless Maoist mango and extend its spiritual life for remembrance by future generations. This mango episode seems to indicate that superstition and foreign influence were not completely purged from the PRC, even after the “Four Olds Movement”; what remained was a tendency to preserve the regressive move or ancient practice of cult idolatry and totemic worship in the same Maoist era.

\(^{332}\) According to Alice de Jong, the recipient of the gift “would look at the mango again and again, smell it again and again. Then they all took to the streets, in blissful spontaneous demonstrations…. [The workers’ propaganda members were] waving and cheering with their little red books, and holding up a portrait of Mao, showing him waving back at them.” See Alice de Jong, “The Strange Story of Chairman Mao’s Wonderful Gift.” *China Information* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 52.

Chairman Mao. We love what Chairman Mao loves and support what he supports. We are determined firmly to support the revolutionary actions of the propaganda team’. 334

It is in fact easy to dismiss the failure of the Cultural Revolution as Mao’s personal error. According to the prominent neoliberalist ideas today, it was Mao himself who constantly changed his policies during the course of the Chinese revolution. Mao seemed to have casually advanced and removed many ideological campaigns simply according to his own will. However, this kind of narrative fails to identify the concrete and heterogeneous social realities in China and overestimates the power of the “cult of personality” that may have been a repeat of the same form of abstract and reactionary mentality that Khrushchev displayed when he casually denounced the “Stalinist cult” during the 1950s.

While I agree that the latent tendencies of the “cult of Mao” remained throughout the course of the Cultural Revolution, I argue that the Chinese laboring patient, as a concrete social individual, did not react passively to the head-adjusting gestures conducted by one of the “two nurses” in Chung Kuo. In fact, upon closer analysis of this Antonioni film, one may find that the working-class mother was not silent throughout the course of her laboring, as she expressed feelings of pain during the procedure, although she may have been told that she should not feel any pain under acupuncture anesthesia. 335

Before the child is born, she tells her anesthetic doctor that she felt a tiny discomfort inside her body. In Antonioni’s representation, the anesthetic doctor immediately reassures the mother by saying, “It is natural how you feel this way under acupunctural anesthesia.” The mother momentarily feels relieved. Surprisingly, the anesthetic doctor’s reassurance was not a totally “objective” or “scientific” explanation and is thus not completely satisfying in terms of being a scientific measurement or

334 “Chairman Mao Sends Treasured Gift to Peking’s Worker-Peasant Mao Tse-tung’s Thought Propaganda Team,” 6.
335 In fact, the laboring mother tells the nurse adjacent to her in Mandarin that she felt a little bit of teng (疼) (literally translated as “ache”) instead of tong (痛) (literally “pain” in English). The mother claims that the teng does not hurt at all. The feeling is quite hard to describe or express perfectly since it is just like something chronically stretching and lurking inside her abdomen, not simply a discomfort. At the linguistic level, “teng” and “tong” are closely related terms in Chinese usage. However, they have a crucial difference. Usually, teng is considered comparatively less intense than tong, yet teng may have a more enduring and long-lasting effect than tong. Compared to tong, teng seems to illustrate a much more ambivalent feeling on the part of the subject insofar as it embodies both a “lingering nuisance” and a kind of “painlessness.”
parameter. In other words, acupuncture anesthesia does not relieve all of the mother’s discomfort, so it still places a certain kind of “unscientific” stigma on the anesthetic doctor’s “professional” reassurance. The acupuncture anesthesia practiced in the Maoist operating theater did not answer or foreclose all the queries put forward by the experienced and embodied subjects. Instead, the reassurance can be seen as part of the larger social inquiry in the PRC during the 1970s—the nagging problems concerning the ideal merging of Chinese and Western knowledge.

Xiao Jiwei argued that Chung Kuo “not only challenged the two extreme Western perceptions of China as a hellish state of political fanatics, or as a utopian land of revolution—but proposed the possibility of a new sort of relationship.”

Of his Chinese experience, Antonioni said, “I took a dive into unpolluted waters. Now I am back in the polluted ones of the West. As I am a pessimist by nature I am afraid there is much more likelihood of China becoming polluted than there is of us getting depolluted.”

One is tempted to read Antonioni’s comment as proletarian China will soon be overhauled and assimilated politically and economically by the capitalist countries. Yet this reading may fail to take the director’s commentary at sufficient face value. What Antonioni might have suggested was that China, unlike many affluent foreign countries, could remain somehow “unpolluted” or “unpoisoned” during the 1970s. To him, it did not necessarily mean that China would be totally different from the West in the future. To Antonioni at that very moment, Maoist China of the 1970s remained radically outside the Western capitalist model. The predominant logic of capitalist “regulation” therefore does not entirely work for this Chinese political reality.

The achievement of the partial diplomatic opening of the PRC during the 1970s was that it somehow remained an internal exception to the West. Maoist China, like the aforementioned young Chinese passer-by who had been submitted to the voice injunction to hide, may have been long subjugated by Western capitalist commandments and mandates at its core. However, precisely because

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337 Lane, “Antonioni Discovers China,” 87.
China had been lagging behind the West (or Western countries had impatiently outrun China) during the global modernization process, the former could simultaneously bypass or ignore the predominant capitalist injunctions that constantly demanded the annihilation or removal of its own undesirable and inhumane “tyrannical appearances” (e.g., lack of human rights). No matter how triumphant and urgent this type of moral injunction seems to be today, this little piece of “radical inhumanity” may still find its way to the various progressive facets and liberal ideologies presented by today’s global capitalist cultures.
CHAPTER 5
DISSIDENCE AND STEREOTYPES:
VIÉNET’S CINÉMA DÉTOURNE, OPEN SOCIETY, AND
THE DE-DIALECTICAL “SPIRIT OF ’68”

Unbridled Enjoyment as an Open Secret

“The first detoured film work in entire cinema history,” according to the voice-over in La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques? (Can Dialectics Break Bricks?) (1973), which was produced by French Situationist artist René Viénet, attempted to radically defamiliarize and deconstruct the predominant historical understanding of the events of May ’68 through an idiosyncratic juxtaposition between the existing visual images extracted from a typical Hong Kong kung fu movie and a dense critical political commentary on the post-1968 intellectual climate among a wide spectrum of French leftist groups.\(^{338}\) According to the Situationist International, which first made use of the idea, “détournement” (semantic hijacking) literally means “the reuses of the pre-existing elements in a new ensemble” against the dogmatic, stagnated usage of various cultural codas.\(^{339}\)

At a deeper level, Meaghan Morris thereby described this Situationist practice as “twisting or diverting a text away from its presumed original meaning and making the second text do something different from, or antagonistic to, the first text’s project”\(^{340}\) so that certain interpretative multiplicities and signifying ambivalence can be reopened once again. In reality, however, this kind of textual twisting or thematic diversion pertaining to many Situationist experiments always came at the expense of the content of the original work in order to be able to truly convey its intended messages to the target audience.

\(^{338}\) In fact, La Dialectique was predated by Woody Allen’s debut What’s Up, Tiger Lily? (1966), which overdubbed the original dialogue of the Japanese spy film International Secret Police: Key of Keys with a new narrative use that had nothing to do with the original plot.

\(^{339}\) Ken Knabb, ed., The Situationist International Anthology, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 67. Established in 1957 by core members Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, and René Viénet, the Situationist International perceived that the poetic recreation of languages, following the avant-garde tradition of the Surrealism and Lettrist movements of the early twentieth century, could be highly subversive toward the predominating social order.

By rehistoricizing the two “detoured” cinematic works, namely *La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?* and *Chinois, encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires!* (One More Effort Chinamen, if You Want to Be Revolutionaries! a.k.a. *Peking Duck Soup*) (1977), produced by Viénet during the 1970s in relation to the popular Western Maoist discourses that were prominently circulated and propagated during the same epoch, this chapter argues that the creative practice of détournement cannot be a completely self-evident or transparent art exercise, because certain irreducible blind-spots and uncritical biases, which may have initially characterized the original works according to the Situationist theories mentioned previously, remain in the eventual detoured version as well. While my approach is to primarily criticize the potential dangers of reformulating or recuperating some initial cultural and political stereotypes during the course of Situationist détournement, that does not necessarily mean that I am entirely dismissive of this novel Western artistic strategy, which advanced during the heyday of the 1960s. Rather, I will argue that those “inscrutable stereotypes” are not simply undesirable or useless with respect to the application of cultural détournement. By reinscribing all these seemingly “unproductive” stereotypes back into the emancipatory context of the 1960s, this chapter indeed seeks to rediscover certain unrealized revolutionary potentials that may have been long inhered in such Situationist cultural tactics in resisting the continual predominance of global capitalist ideology that has loomed large worldwide since the late 1970s.

Idiosyncratically ripping off the original dialogue track of the Hong Kong kung fu movie *The Crush* (1972) directed by Tu Guangqi, René Viénet reinserted a series of voice-over commentaries and subtitles in French in his *La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?* that discussed the daily possibilities of revolutionary insurrections and repoliticizations in the context of post-1968 Western Europe. In *La Dialectique*, the best embodiment of revolutionary spirit is found in a Bruce Lee-like Chinese action film hero, namely a “dialectician” (Pai Piau) who, according to the narrator, has read all the radical and divergent philosophical works from Marx to Reich and the books published by *Champ Libre* (the radical French publisher set up by Viénet himself). The hero’s advanced “dialectics” help
him to freely oscillate his own argument without too much restraint (demonstrated by his flying kung fu, drifting from one side to another).

The film begins when the hero revisits the Situationist camp (represented by a group of taekwondo-practicing Koreans) that is loosely filled with Trotskyists, anarchists, and other active minorities a few years after ’68. While there, he realizes that many of his old comrades are now increasingly dominated by state bureaucrats and exploitative capitalists. The government representatives have tried different reappropriation methods to suppress leftist ideas, including tempting the revolutionaries to participate in the bureaucratic pyramid and creating internal divisions within the leftist camp. Yet the hero helps the leftists to resist this kind of state ideology with his self-cultivated “dialectical method.” However, at a certain point, the dialectician is confused about his true ideological orientation, as he decides to accept an invitation to visit the bureau office. This decision upsets and bewilders the rest of the French revolutionaries. Because of this conflict between the dialectician and the Situationists, the bureaucrats take further advantage of alienating the French leftists. At the end, the hero manages to realign himself with the Situationists and other revolutionaries to defeat the state’s coercions victoriously.

Unlike traditional Marxian rhetoric, which emphasized proletarian struggles against the capitalists and the bourgeoisie, the Situationist idea of détournement that emerged in the 1960s focused on the refusal of “spectacle” and “homogeneous time.” What the Situationists were really interested in was precisely a new temporal consciousness emancipated from the “society of the spectacle.” To the Situationists, spectacle not only related to capitalist commodification, it was also intimately tied to concentrated communist bureaucracy, such as the Eastern Bloc. In his seminal work Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord presented détournement as a minute “device” that was able to resist both the “diffuse spectacle” and the “concentrated spectacle.”

341 Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 206. As Debord suggested, there was a third “integrated spectacle” that borrowed traits from the “diffuse spectacle” and the “concentrated spectacle” to form a new synthesis. According to Debord, the integrated spectacle is labeled “liberal democracy.” This kind of spectacle
argued that “[t]he spectacle, being the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time, is a false consciousness of time.”

The Situationists used the method of détournement to create unstable, open-ended artefacts that constantly defamiliarized and estranged existing representations of daily realities. In fact, the term “situation” had a special meaning and connotation to the Situationists. According to the Situationist collective, the “constructed situation” is “a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events.” In other words, the situation is always related to a kind of contextual setting created by and particular to a certain uprising moment in history. The historical situation of which the Situationists are mostly associated with is undoubtedly the events of May ’68 in France.

During the events of May 1968, the Situationists allied with other student revolutionaries to occupy Sorbonne University and the Odéon-Théâtre as a fearless demonstration of self-expression. Situationist slogans like “Jouir sans entraves” (Enjoy without restraints) and “Livre sans temps mort” (Live without dead time) were scribbled all over the walls and streets of universities in Paris. To a certain extent, the Situationist idea of détournement and the creative “spirit of ’68” are almost inseparable historically. The detouring tactic was highly profound, as it not only detoured capitalist modernity but also the usual Marxist revolutionary conception to resist capitalism. In his book documenting the Situationist activities in ’68, René Viénet recounted the way in which the sudden outburst during that period cut across the empty and repetitive temporality of capitalist modernity and unleashed a new creative energy in the originally alienated masses:

Capitalized time stopped…. Everyday life, suddenly rediscovered, became the center of all possible conquests. People who had always worked in the now-

introduces a state of permanent general secrecy, where experts and specialists usually dictate the morality, statistics, and opinions of the spectacle.

342 Ibid., 158.
occupied offices declared that they could no longer live as before. People strolled, dreamed, learned how to live. Every one was able to measure the amount of creative energy that had been crushed during the periods of survival, the days condemned to production, shopping, television ... to passivity erected as a principle.\(^{344}\)

The application of detouring practices in film, as Abé Mark Nornes has suggested, is actually called “abusive subtitling.”\(^{345}\) Although the name “abusive subtitling” seems to connote a kind of exploitation and offense toward the foreign Other, Nornes argued that such cinematic détournement may have exemplified a “sign of respect” for native cultures, since repressed cultural uniqueness was allowed to resurface within the original text. As such, it refused the homogenization of a single monolithic worldview that was found in the usual practice of “faithful” subtitling.\(^{346}\) In other words, rather than simply removing the “unwanted” foreignness in advance and purifying the source culture into something readily comprehensible for the audience, the “abusive translator” would resituate the subtitles in the position of the foreign Other so that the audience was confronted by the sheer strangeness and unfamiliarity inherent in the practice of cross-cultural translation. It could also be perceived as a form of resistance to the translator’s initial diplomatic “politeness” toward the original. However, this optimism about “abusive translation” may not be absolute. Because such a hermeneutic obstacle generates a transgressive and drifting pleasure during the process of reading (or unreading), the very interpretative discrepancy that this abusive translator is aiming at, as Lo Kwai-cheung has remarked, may ultimately invite a wholesale fetishization of the cultural particularity and peculiarity itself. This hermeneutic failure may not lead to a reunderstanding of the Other but instead may further transmute and foreclose the presence of the original text.\(^{347}\)

For example, in the first few minutes of La Dialectique, there is a playful and fairly self-referential scene that plays on a certain in-joke about the events of May ’68. A group of Situationists establishes two passwords, either of which must be said before entering their camp. When a young anarcho-libertarian (represented


\(^{345}\) See Abé Mark Nornes, “For an Abusive Subtitling.” *Film Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 17.

\(^{346}\) Ibid., 27–28.

by a Chinese teenager living on the Sino-Korean border) attempts to join the Situationist group, he is told that he must first give the correct password in order to enter the camp. These passwords are, ironically, “Jouir sans entraves” and “Livre sans temps mort” two of the most famous and popular Situationist slogans that exemplified the “spirit of ’68” as a whole. Apparently, the passwords serve as a reminder of the revolutionary spirit of May ’68 in this film. Moreover, it can be said that this scene has already played itself out as a kind of password in itself, exclusive to those who are familiar with the French cultural politics of the era.

For those who were familiar with the intellectual discourses of ’68, it was precisely such “meaninglessness” and “emptiness” of the open slogans that were really at stake in relation to the context of French May ’68—to resist homogenous meanings prescribed by grand ideologies. Here, Viénet has not simply assumed that his audience knows all the in-jokes of ’68 in the literal sense; however, he expects his viewers to possess certain prerequisite knowledge about the punchlines of the jokes in order to genuinely be able to laugh. That is why the so-called “password verification” staged in this scene, however playful it is, is not simply a spontaneous or independent task. Instead, when one of the Situationists gives a particular password, the respondent is required to say another Situationist slogan from the revolutionary heyday that historically “matches” the initial one. That is to say, the in-joke is not simply a “joke” after all. The punch-line is much more than a comical digression insofar as it requires a certain epistemological remapping and even expertise historical information on the events of ’68. The laughing and enjoyment here is therefore not totally unrestrained but is rather constrained by certain exclusive and discriminative historical knowledge limited to historical “experts.” Unfortunately, as most of the audience may not be historical experts, the “joke” of unlimited enjoyment remains a mystic and opaque “password.”

That is why cultural scholar Meaghan Morris argued that this Viénet detoured film is indeed blankly racist and Orientalist, and completely ignorant of the Hong Kong wuxia genres and certain important Asian cinematic contexts. There are necessary distinctions between kung fu and swordplay subgenres, such as karate from chambara, and La Dialectique seems to obfuscate and mix all
these internal differences and particularities only to survive an uncritical camp sentiment. In the meantime, Morris said that she was not really interested in the condensed political rhetoric of the epoch of ’68 while she was watching this Viénet film. As an expert in film and cultural studies, Morris believed that the intellectual humor in relation to the dense and sophisticated political discourses of ’68 carried in this film were almost entirely meaningless to her, as well as to most of the curious audience.

In other words, what is really at stake here is that it is ultimately the self-congratulating Situationist passwords, not the initial openness to embrace the general revolutionary sentiments of May ’68, that survive a sort of mysterious cult of pleasure. In fact, one can even say that the so-called “spirit of May” as such, similar to the subversive Situationist slogans, was more prone to an exclusive password bestowed to certain privileged experts or social participants than to an inclusive fraternal sharing among common people. According to Kristin Ross, the 1980s witnessed a wholesale consensus between the ongoing capitalist reappropriations and the revolutionary sentiments of the previous era. The “spirit of ’68” was a synthetic product of consensual politics. It served as a new epistemological umbrella under which, however obscure and ambiguous, the movements of the 1960s and the status quo of the 1980s existed. Ross argued that the so-called “spirit of May” that was elevated by the neo-liberalist discourses beginning in the 1980s was in fact part of the heuristic tools used to help justify the present state of affairs and hence consolidate capitalist legitimacy. As she has suggested, the spirit of May was indeed fundamentally empty and tautological: “To make something called the ‘spirit of May’ the protagonist of the narrative is to first attribute to May, without any clear justification, certain social ‘effects’ of the present, and then to make those effects into May’s essence, effectively recuperating that essence.” Ross, in this sense, summarized the sheer ambivalence of the legacies of May ’68:

The paradox of May’s memory can be simply stated. How did a mass movement that sought above all, in my view, to contest the domain of the expert, to disrupt the system of naturalized spheres of competence (especially the sphere of

348 See Morris, 182.
349 Ibid.
specialized politics), become translated in the years that followed into little more than a ‘knowledge’ of ’68, on the basis of which a whole generation of self-proclaimed experts and authorities could then assert their expertise.\footnote{Ibid., 5–6. Yet Jean-Claude Milner was also keenly aware of how the narrative establishment of the “spirit of 1968” more or less succeeded in undoing all the potential threatening consequences posed by the same historical event. Milner argued that the late capitalist system was capable of adopting and appropriating, by addressing the spirit of “unrestrained enjoyment” in the wake of May ’68, a new “liberal” and “permissive” self-image to conceal its true paternal and tyrannical underside within its own discursive formation and circulation. In this respect, it was exactly the capitalist reappropriation of the “spirit of May” that ultimately helped disarm and turn against the social antagonism that had been set up by the revolt of ’68 itself. He said: “Those who hold power know very well the difference between a right and a permission…. A right in a strict sense of the term gives access to the exercise of a power, at the expense of another power. A permission does not diminish the power of the one who gives it; it does not enhance the power of the one who gets it. It makes his life easier, which is not nothing.” Jean-Claude Milner, L’arrogance du présent: regards sur une décennie 1965–1975 [The Arrogance of Present: Looking on a Decade 1965–1975] (Paris: Grasset, 2009), 233. Milner elaborated: “The spirit of 68 made itself the best companion of the restoration. Here is the secret of the violence increasingly produced on the margins of the cities: the spirit of 68 now persists only with those who are inaugurated in the cities. The depleted youth does not know what to do with it.” See Ibid., 237.}

Worse still, by simply indulging in this sort of ambiguous pleasure, one is also very likely to forget who really “allows” this enjoyment and even “instructs” how to enjoy in the first place. Enjoyment and leisure, in this sense, can easily become a kind of compulsive duty or burden rather than a true subversive activity. Eventually, this notion of “unrestrained enjoyment” in the name of “spirit of May” may return as an even more restraining moral injunction that virtually binds and enslave the subject to seek pleasure for oneself unconditionally. Without knowing the true alternatives that radically resist the predominating system, one is more or less dragged into an endless chain of “meaningless” enjoyments and “blind” pleasures. Deprived of its leftist subversive potentials, the “open secret” of ’68’s unstrained enjoyment becomes nothing but a cliché. It is clear that the uncritical usage of the Situationist détournement to a certain extent can work compatibly with what Todd McGowan has called the contemporary capitalist “imperative to enjoy,” which obliged social individuals to break all the moral rules and restraints after May ’68—only for the sake of perpetual consumerist escape from the founding impossibility of such a revolt.\footnote{See Todd McGowan, The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2004), 7. McGowan wrote: “The contemporary imperative to enjoy—the elevation of enjoyment to a social obligation—deprives enjoyment of its marginal status vis-à-vis the social order, bringing it within confines of that order, where we can experience it directly and fully.” See Ibid.} The most traumatic thing here is that the supposedly liberating dimension of unrestrained enjoyment that emerged in ’68 was reincarnated as the new suffocating maxim “you must
enjoy!” under a relentless capitalist structure. The very injunction to enjoy, following this same vicious circle,kidnaps enjoyment so that, paradoxically, the more one obeys this command, the more one finds an impotence in following it.  

Self-Management or Dialectics?

In this chapter I argue that if one is too quick to equalize the “spirit of ’68” and the mechanism of capitalist reappropriation, one may also inevitably glorify the magic of capitalism and help legitimize the social status quo as well. What is really interesting is that La Dialectique may have somehow restaged this inherent gap between the extensive capitalist containment and the Situationist method of semantic hijacking. Although Meaghan Morris argued that Viénet’s La Dialectique may not have paid enough historical respect to the Hong Kong film genres, she still recognized and admitted that this cinematic détournement still possessed a minimal sense of “faithfulness” to the original work. As she has suggested, La Dialectique still received a certain poetic justice for its détournement because the original filmmaker of The Crush, Tu Guangqi, was also a cinematic “hijacker” who detoured many leftist dramas between the 1950s and the 1970s.

However, Viénet’s cinematic détournement in La Dialectique, unlike the original Hong Kong kung fu feature, which may have attempted to detour a left-wing drama from the perspective of rightist ideology, indeed somehow recuperated a “stereotypical” and “familiar” leftist notion of the ultimate triumph of the collective masses over capitalist exploiters. The finale of La Dialectique repeats the same stereotypical finale of a typical leftist drama that bespeaks a

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353 According to Alain Badiou, this same ambiguity compounded the very epistemological basis of the so-called “open” and “tolerant” capitalist society. He suggested that, “each and every day we see that this tolerance itself is just another fanaticism, because it only tolerates its own vacuity.” See Alain Badiou, Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano (London & New York: Continuum, 2009), 511.

354 Morris, 182. With regard to Stephen Teo, Tu Guangqi joined many of his Nationalist contemporaries in Hong Kong who were exiled from Shanghai after World War Two so they could continue their film careers outside Communist China. In escaping from the communists, these exiled Shanghai directors flocked to the British colony of Hong Kong and reestablished the so-called Nationalist film base, such as the “Asia Film Company,” which was funded by both the Taiwanese Nationals and American companies. Being one of the company’s main directors, Tu thereby helped remake or in fact “detour” various successful left-wing dramas from a right-wing nationalist perspective. Stephen Teo, Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), 14; 23–24.
victorious plot in the name of the unity of the oppressed. *La Dialectique* ends with a final victory of defeating the capitalist and bureaucratic forces. Yet this final triumph is not conducted by the male dialectician alone. Rather, several survivors from the leftist camp remain after the final battle. The Chinese dialectician is therefore just one of the few “survivors” and “victors” there. What is even more revealing is that Viénet immediately displayed the end credits, announcing that the detoured film work was realized by a group of individuals shortly after their victory over the bureaucrats. The film experiment of *La Dialectique* can be considered a shared and collective experience of *détournement*. That is to say, there remains an irreducible leftist element within this French *détournement* (of a Hong Kong “nationalist” detour). This leftist element is, in the final analysis, ultimately “non-detourable” because it has been entangled with the subversive form of the Situationist practice of *détournement* itself. In other words, *La Dialectique* not only helped an uncritical camp sentiment survive but also incessantly reproduced certain unrealized leftist revolutionary potentials in its finale.

Indeed, the main theme of *La Dialectique* is actually about a specific and symptomatic kind of cultural phenomenon that grew prominently shortly after the events of May ’68—the reappropriation of leftist ideas by both the French state and the capitalist machinery. After the watershed of ’68, the capitalist system seemed to become more and more capable of reabsorbing all forms of cultural radicalisms, ranging from intellectual disseminations to populist doxa. Recruiting various neo-liberalist critics and academics under its bureaucratic pyramid, the post-Gaullist regime finally learned that the best method to effectively reappropriate the leftist forces was to adopt their theoretical language as a new form of ideological interpellation. That is why one of the chief bureaucrats in a satirical scene in *La Dialectique* states that he will send out his “Foucauldian” and “Lacanian” experts to hijack the Situationists’ ideas and revolutionary affects.

Historically speaking, the notion of “*autogestion*” (self-management) gained an ascending currency within French left-leaning political circles beginning in the early 1970s. Many French workers might not have been influenced by the leftist emancipatory ideas during May ’68. However, in the
1970s, many workers eventually accentuated a new class consciousness in the practices of self-management. At the same time, this working-class slogan of “self-management” had also been reappropriated by left-leaning political opportunists as certain electoral tactics and rhetorical gimmicks. Right before Socialist Party candidate François Mitterrand came into full presidential power in the early 1980s, he had already drafted a certain kind of “Common Program” in the mode of the workers’ self-management in order to draw consensus between the traditional communists and the nascent socialists in the early 1970s.

Mitterrand, while seemingly open and tolerant to radical leftist ideas, proposed a certain “cohabituation” campaign to merge French communism and to break away from the Marxist “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Through the Mitterrand years to the days of Jacques Chirac, leftist tendencies had been more or less self-censored under the new ideological umbrella of consensual politics. However, by focusing on the workers’ welfare and living conditions instead of really resisting the capitalist system, this kind of Common Program contained no true political project or emancipatory goal. Rather, the consensus within the leftist camp sought to “cohabituate” with the capitalist technocracy than to truly reestablish a capable

355 For example, in 1973, there was a famous historical episode about workers’ self-management in the Lip factory that captured widespread media attention in the capitalist West. The Lip factory was a French watch and clock company in Besançon, which defied closure in 1973 when the workforce occupied the factory and began running it themselves. Throughout the summer and fall of 1973, the struggles of the Lip Company workers served as a rallying point for the French working class. In June, the workers occupied their factory and seized 65,000 watches as security. They then resumed production, selling watches and paying themselves from the proceeds. The workers organized the production, the plant management, and the conduct of their strike on a democratic basis. In the eyes of the liberal French leftists, this Lip episode exemplified the continuation of the “spirit of ’68,” which not only kept challenging the capitalist wage-labor system but also redefined traditional Marxist orthodoxy.

356 Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman wrote an excellent summary on this consensual leftism in France: “The Socialist and Communist Party finally agreed in 1972 on a Common Program of Government, which became their platform in succeeding elections. This platform proposed an electoral path toward a new kind of socialism based on public ownership and democratic management, but in any case distinguishing French socialism clearly from Soviet communism. Pompidou was followed in the presidency by Giscard d’Estaing, and finally, in 1981, by Mitterrand, representing the left electoral alliance and its Common Program. Mitterrand’s long rule confirmed the worst fears of the activists of 1968. At first he carried out the main provisions of the Common Program by immediately nationalizing most of French industry, banks, and insurance companies. But as soon as economic problems threatened, he just as quickly privatized the recently nationalized firms and so ended France’s final flirtation with socialism. The modernization de Gaulle failed to achieve occurred largely under Mitterand, as the French economy grew tremendously. The French left has since become a liberal force, admirable in its opposition to racism and willingness to defend the welfare state, but with no independent and original project.” See Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman, When Poetry Ruled the Streets: The French May Events of 1968 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 67–68.

resistance force. With the presidential victory of Mitterrand in 1981, the consensual Common Program of the 1970s thus prepared the way for overt depoliticization and capitalist spring cleaning in French political culture beginning in the 1980s.

While the above is true, it is also true that one of the main profound historical lessons taken from the events of May ’68 was the necessity to enlarge revolutionary self-agency, even beyond the ideological confines of the traditional working-class struggles. While the Common Program was still defied by socialist experts within the communities of the working-class, the Situationist idea of self-management had expanded to resist also the notion of expertise bureaucracy. Situationist Raoul Vaneigem defined “total self-management” as “the form of social organization in which everybody has the right to make the decisions that affect their everyday life, whether individually or collectively in self-managing assemblies.”

Unlike the worker’s autogestion, this “total self-management” was not confined to the working-class but addressed all individuals. It was constantly seeking new linkages and alliances among the revolutionary subjects in the everyday sphere to problematize all patterns of expert knowledge. True self-management, in the Situationist view, must be radicalized and extended to all forms of lived experiences, from workers to neighborhoods.

However, I argue that the notion of “self-management” realized in La Dialectique may still bear a crucial discrepancy from the Situationists’ main version. Unlike the hero who is morally unambiguous in the original Hong Kong kung fu film The Crush, the “detoured” male figure in La Dialectique, on the contrary, possesses a certain moral imperfection. The hero is incapable of possessing complete self-mastery under Viénet’s creative détournement. At some


359 Avoiding the historical context of post-1967 leftist riots in Hong Kong, the original film The Crush (which is a color film, unlike La Dialectique), written by the prolific Hong Kong science fiction author Ngai Hong, presents a bunch of Japanese samurais who try to colonize the taekwondo-practicing Koreans and a handful of Chinese peasants living on an unnamed Chinese-Korean border but encounter stubborn resistance from the colonized. With the help of a Han-Chinese kung fu hero who travels from Mainland China to this Sino-Korean border to visit a friend, the taekwondo-practicing Koreans finally win back their land and sovereignty from the Japanese colonizers, a main plot that is also shared by Viénet’s film.
point, the hero becomes confused about his true ideological orientation, as he is tempted to visit the capitalist camp halfway through the film. In contrast to traditional proletarian heroism, this dialectician is not invincible and self-moralized at all. During the opening credits of the film when the hero showcases his “dialectical method” (kung fu), he is simultaneously mocked in a voice-over by the filmmaker as being a “jerk.” However, the voice-over admits that it is not the hero’s fault: “He is alienated; he has no choice of his own but is subjected to the producer’s manipulation.” One can even say that he is in fact a “dialectician without philosophical dialectics,” as he is unable to offer any counterforces (or antithesis) against the producer’s control and containment.

What is really symptomatic here is that the sheer tyrannical producer is not someone from the capitalist camp. Rather, this manipulator precisely refers to the filmmaker himself. In other words, it is Viénet’s cultural position that is not subjugated to any moral boundaries. He can virtually define and change the rules of interpretation and representation as much as he wishes. In La Dialectique, this arbitrariness of the director has indeed radiated throughout the film. Viénet’s eclectic editing of the original action images even bypasses the sheer logical understanding of this detoured film. For example, there is a scene where the dialectician and the Chinese teenager, who should be at least minimally antagonistic toward each other, miraculously reconcile without any explanation.

As I have slightly discussed in the film’s synopsis, the Chinese “dialectician” in La Dialectique has made a bold decision to visit the bureau office, which has tremendously upset the Situationists and other activists. One of those disappointed individuals is the aforementioned Chinese teenager who practices “dialectics” with the Situationists. Initially showing admiration toward the hero, the teenager is thereby alienated from him after the hero promises to join the bureaucracy. Yet in a scene where the hero encounters the teenager in front of a temple, the two suddenly talk like friends. At this point, the teenager should still be hostile to the hero for his “renegacy.” The hero has not fully settled his fault yet, but their sheer antagonism is altogether rendered invisible by Viénet’s détournement. In the original Hong Kong film, this kind of narrative inconsistency is avoided, as the Chinese hero has already indicated clearly to the
boy that he is actually on their side. In fact, the hero proved his moral righteousness by saving the boy from capture by the despotic Japanese samurais. However, it seems that Viénet does not really care about narrative consistency throughout his film at large.

Indeed, this Viénet detoured work causally dismisses the existing action images through the French voice-overs. The commentary is always self-congratulating, defying and paying little respect to the original images. In the final battle between the dialectician and the bureaucrat, the voice-over states: “No suspense here. Anybody but a jerk knows how this one will turn out.” In the middle of this fight, the voice-over impatiently implores the hero: “OK. Finish off this scum.” During an extended fight between the dialectician (Pai Piau) and a bureaucrat (a Japanese samurai), the voice-over states: “For this sequence, consult *Enragés and Situs in the Occupations Movement* in the Gallimard edition pages 207 and 231.” What is really idiosyncratic here is that this book was written by Viénet during the student occupations in May ’68. The “missing element” here is the idea of “authentic self-management” that should be taken at both local and international levels in order to resist state bureaucracy and the capitalist system. As Viénet wrote:

The barricades and Molotov cocktails of the Berkeley students, the very same who had launched the agitation in the university four years earlier, responded at the end of June. In the middle of May a revolutionary organization had been formed by the Austrian youth around the simple program of ‘doing the same as in France.’ At the end of the month occupations of university buildings has taken place in Germany, Stockholm, Brussels, and at the Hornsey Art College in London.  

At the same time, Viénet’s book is not just a creative work simply taken from wild and unrestrained imagination. Despite its extensive applications of Situationist *détournement*, it is by and large a historical record of the events of May ’68. In other words, the detoured record in Viénet’s book still pays a certain respect and faithfulness to the “original” text—the historical text of May ’68 in France. I argue that this failure to entirely dissociate the Situationists’ artistic practices and the historical realism of May ’68 gives rise to a new form of dialectical linkage between the “original” inputs and the “detoured” outputs.

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360 See Viénet, *Enragés et situationnistes*, 207.
pertaining to a revolutionary situation. Contrary to the predominant perception that considers May ’68 more or less a local phenomenon, the failure to entirely withdraw the inherent tendencies of détournement from the same historical event enables one to rethink the revolutionary “spirit of 1968” as something profoundly transnational and transhistorical. In fact, the genuine practice of détournement, according to Giorgio Agamben, does not simply mean a complete diversion of the original perspective into an absolutely “new” use. Quite the contrary, Agamben posited that “at the heart of every creative act there is an act of de-creation.”

Viénet’s La Dialectique, in this respect, cannot fully detour away from its “master references”—be it the “stereotypical” Hong Kong kung fu film or the “profound” historical events of May ’68 in France. This inherently self-restraining tendency pertaining to Viénet’s cinematic detour, far from being simply an insurmountable obstacle that undermines its creative potentials, may offer a truly alternative kind of “dialectical imagination” of critical self-agency that is perhaps neither fully Marxist nor entirely Situationist at its core.

**Cultural Decoding and the Inscrutable “Chinese Prejudice”**

In his last detoured film work, *Chinois, encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires!* (One More Effort Chinamen, if You Want to Be Revolutionaries!) (1977), Viénet moves on to detour certain stereotypical documentary records instead of a typical drama feature, which was previously appropriated in *La Dialectique*. In this last work, whose title is inspired by the Marquis de Sade’s pamphlet *Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains* (One More Effort, Frenchmen, if You Want to Be Republicans), Viénet reuses a great variety of primary sources, particularly archival footage of Chinese leaders such as Mao, Zhou Enlai, Lin Piao, and Jiang Qing, to compose a dense political commentary sharply critical of Maoist histories and legacies in *Chinois, encore un effort*. Released shortly after the death of Mao and the arrest of the Gang of Four around 1976 and 1977, the film presents the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a bizarre story of an unending power struggle with excessive bureaucracy.

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Under Viénet’s cinematic rerenderings, the ideological universe of the CCP is no different, with its unruly criminal world and secret society reminiscent of both Hollywood gangster films and the game of Russian roulette that constantly awaits the killings and persecutions. According to the filmmaker, the various revolutionary campaigns sparked in Mao’s China actually belong to one and the same chessboard played by crazy power-hunters, if not sadistic madmen who used human lives as their chess pieces. The archival clips featuring the Anti-Rightist Movement against the revisionist tendency within the CCP are intercut with parts of Hong Kong kung fu movies, along with the musical insertion of the famous Cantonese pop song “Money, Money, Money” by Hong Kong singer Sam Hui, to parody the internal disagreement between Mao and Liu Shaoqi about Soviet-style bureaucratization. Moreover, a controversial French popular song about female orgasm (Serge Gainsbourg’s *Je t’aime moi non plus*) is inserted in the footage of the Cultural Revolution to satirize the Red Guards’ fanaticism and their sheer idolization of the Great Helmsman.

The premiere of *Chinois, encore un effort* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1977 immediately caused havoc among the remaining faithful French Maoists such as Alain Badiou and his leftist group. The chief editor of the Mao-leaning *Cahiers du cinéma*, Serge Toubiana, was also angry about the film’s extremely loose connection between the archival images and the political commentaries. However, the renowned anti-Maoist sinologist Simon Leys believed that this Viénet film was indeed “dreadfully subversive” and “liberating” toward the Maoist propaganda worldview under the guise of its radiating “black and ferocious” humor. He added, “The commentary to *Peking Duck Soup* restores to this bloodthirsty carnival its original vigor, which for too long has been suppressed by upright and decent-minded conformist.”

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365 Ibid., 69.
During the late 1960s and early 1970s, critical reviews of Maoist China were extremely lacking and insufficient. Unlike today’s global propagation of “victim testimonies” about the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward, it was precisely the “praise report” on Maoist achievements, such as Macciocchi’s *De la Chine* (*Daily Life in Revolutionary China*), that was the predominant form of writing in that revolutionary era. According to Claude Cadart, most of the French Maoists were highly Sinocentric, as they tended to uncritically accept the Chinese revolutionary lesson over all kinds of Soviet experiences, without perceiving their structural homology. Casually obtaining their historical information from Mao-leaning French sinologists such as Jean Chesneaux, the Maoist intellectuals in the West tended to view themselves as the master figure of “know all” who could thereby prescribe the future of revolutions in capitalist countries.\(^{366}\) Simon Leys’ dissident writings on Maoist China were, of course, the profound exception in this epoch. Yet Leys’ writings, together with Viénet’s polemical tracts, were both heavily marginalized and ignored by the French intelligentsia that had been heavily flirting with Maoism. The *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (The National Center for Scientific Research) (CRNS), which was under the supervision of the pro-Mao faction during the 1970s, had expelled Leys and Viénet twice for their sheer anti-Chinese tendencies, thus forcing the two intellectuals to seek job opportunities in Asia instead.\(^{367}\)

However, the main problem of this film was that the cinematic *détournement* did not seem as creative as in his previous film. In the eyes of its critics, Viénet’s last work was more approximated to a recuperation of certain preestablished political commentaries and polemics than an interesting exercise of *détournement*. Although *Chinois, encore un effort* may have escaped from serving as a propagandistic vehicle for official Maoist views, another critic, Merrilyn Fitzpatrick, noted that the film commentaries were still often “overlong and overstated, even for a polemic tract.”\(^{368}\) If *La Dialectique* already assumed that its

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audience had sufficient knowledge about the events of May ’68, Chinois, encore un effort exceedingly assumed that its audience had already been equipped with the whole background of Chinese political culture since 1949. In commenting on the interpretive “difficulty” of this Viénet work, Fitzpatrick added, “It is also, with its density of specific references to Chinese political figures and events, esoteric even for the specialized intellectual audience at which it is aimed.”

While the above is true, it is also true that Viénet did not entirely neglect the comprehensive capacity of his viewers. The director offered certain “annotated subtitles” or “written footnotes” in Chinois, encore un effort that were supposed to give an elliptical guidance and contextual supplement to the viewers. However, the subtitles that were appropriated were not faithful transcriptions of the voice-overs. Rather, they were intentionally inserted to annotate the archival footage and image documents. In some circumstances, the subtitles served as a certain buffering function to the esoteric voice-overs. The annotation took the role of the narrator to help distill several phrases or taglines in giving the general idea of a particular Maoist scene, especially when Viénet’s voice commentaries went on for far too long and were incomprehensible.

At first glance, this annotation seems to embody certain gestures of respect to his common viewers. However, inspected more closely, the subtitles are fairly idiosyncratic. There is a scene in Chinois, encore un effort where the source images and the annotations are in opposition. At the narrative level, the archival clip is about a guest reception hosted by CCP officials to welcome a visit by renowned Dutch-French documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens (who was reputedly regarded as “a friend of China”) and his wife, Marceline Loridan, during the early 1970s. From the images, the audience can see that Jiang Qing (who was supposed

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369 Ibid. According to Simon Leys, he argued that a true “China-expert” was not entirely equivalent with the typical “Orientalist.” As he suggested, a genuine “sinologist” or “China expert” did not simply hold onto one’s own professional Chinese knowledge but rather persisted in a radically generic involvement in historical prescription. He said that “the knowledge factor is, after all, quite irrelevant,” whereas the China expert “should in all circumstances say nothing, but he should say it at great length, in four or five volumes, thoughtfully and from a prestigious vantage point.” See Simon Leys, The Burning Forest: Essays on Chinese Culture and Politics (New York: Holt, 1986), 195–196. What Leys had tried to argue was that the China expert should be able to steer a skillful middle ground and neutrality between its “expertise knowledge” and “blissfully ignorance” afloat against various kinds of political odds. As he suggested, “[t]he Expert is not emotional; he always remembers there are two sides to a coin.” Ibid., 196.
to “head” the CCP on behalf of Mao because of the deteriorating health of both the Great Helmsman and Zhou Enlai) stands in the foreground and enthusiastically welcomes these two honorable guests. Meanwhile, Viénet’s annotation is as follows: “Joris Ivens is warmly greeted by his crony Mrs. Mao.” Ironically, upon closer inspection, one finds that Ivens did not actually shake hands with Jiang Qing. Instead, he gives her a fleeting and polite smile. Ivens was, literally, quite “neutral” toward Mrs. Mao, and it was in fact his wife, Marceline, who did the handshaking for him.

In the voice-over, the commentator denounces Ivens as a “Stalinist liar” who helps the Chinese dictators to spread Maoist propaganda views in the West. In fact, Viénet included Ivens’ name on the official poster for Chinois, encore un effort as a “special guest” to accentuate his “scandalous friendship” with Jiang Qing. With respect to the same scene, Simon Leys once wrote that Ivens should have been immensely annoyed and traumatized if he saw himself in the archival images in Chinois, encore un effort actually being involved in sheer fraternity with Mrs. Mao while having at the same time denounced the Gang of Four. However, it was even more apparent that it was Viénet himself who was agonized—by the very fact that the sheer symbolic gesture of fraternity between Ivens and Jiang Qing had yet to be completed. The synthetic aspect of the annotation here thus renders Viénet’s personal bias and prejudice toward Mao’s China even more obvious and explicit.

Jacques Derrida, contrary to Hegel before him, argued that the Chinese linguistic system was in a certain sense less despotic and tyrannical than the Western one. Following Leibniz’s praise of the Chinese language, Derrida was fascinated by the “non-phonetic Chinese script” that was somehow liberated from Western logocentrism. Since the Chinese ideographic character frees itself from

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371 Leys wrote: “And what about Joris Ivens, the filmgoer’s best-known source of ‘information’ about China: when he is busy denouncing Madame Mao, do you think he gets any fun out of having his nose rubbed in those images which show him to have been the Empress’s ecstatic courtier in her days of splendor?” See Leys, Broken Images, 68. But according to Loridan’s account, this Viénet scene that associated Ivens with Jiang was an entire fabrication. See Marceline Loridan, Ma vie Balagan: Écrit en collaboration avec Elisabeth D. Inandink [My Life Balagan: Written in Collaboration with Elisabeth D. Inandink] (Paris: Edition Robert Laffont, 2008), 209.
submission to the external authority of the transcendental voice that constitutes the primacy and supremacy of Western phonocentrism, Derrida argued that Western phonocentrism (which is heavily related to ethnocentrism) precisely produces the founding illusion of hearing oneself speak, thus providing the speaking subject with the sense of immediate transparency of self-presence and self-evidence.

This profound illusion of self-presence and unmediated spontaneity in turn facilitates the entire submission and slavery of oneself toward the supernatural voice, an external reference that is in fact a largely imaginary construct. Yet the Chinese script, as Derrida suggested, fundamentally lacks any kind of metaphysical and founding injunction. There is no transcendental voice that can simply assure the immediacy of “hearing oneself speak” in the Chinese script. In his reading, Derrida cited three types of “prejudices” which constitute different philosophical pathways: “theological prejudice,” “Chinese prejudice,” and “hieroglyphist prejudice.”

By discussing Leibniz’s praise for Chinese script through Descartes, Derrida claimed that “Chinese prejudice” thereby offered a perfect blueprint—but also a blueprint and nothing more—for a new philosophical writing to compensate for its fundamental “lack” of a “simple absolute,” of which he traced back to the “absence” of the logos of a Judeo-Christian God in Chinese history. According to Derrida,

[The concept of Chinese writing ... functioned as a sort of European hallucination. This implied nothing fortuitous: this functioning obeyed a rigorous necessity. And the hallucination translated less an ignorance than a misunderstanding. It was not disturbed by the knowledge of Chinese script, limited but real, which was then available.... The occultation, far from proceeding, as it would seem, from ethnocentric scorn, takes the form of a hyperbolical admiration. We have not finished verifying the necessity of this pattern. Our century is not free from it; each time that ethnocentrism is precipitately and ostentatiously reversed, some effort silently hides behind all the spectacular effects to consolidate an inside and to draw from it some domestic benefit.]

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372 Theological prejudice takes it for granted that writing itself has transcended from the hand of God. This prejudice therefore considers writing a mere pre-given logic, thus relegating the science of language as unnecessary and redundant. Hieroglyphist prejudice refers to the Egyptian script that is too sublime to be deciphered and deconstructed.

373 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 80. That is to say, the “non-phonetic Chinese script,” according to Derrida, reminds one of the fundamental impossibility of a Judeo-Christian God to subordinate any individuals from afar. This Chinese script thus opens up the possibility of the multiplicity of writing, thus fracturing the Western theological prejudice as a universal writing system. However,
In this respect, instead of simply being unsympathetic toward the problematic style of annotation inhered in *Chinois, encore un effort*, I argue that certain kinds of internal contradictions related to Viénet’s usage of subtitles may be a reminder of something even more primordial pertaining to an overtly Westernized semiotic order. For example, in a scene featuring people mourning in Tiananmen Square for the death of Premier Zhou Enlai in the spring of 1976, where Viénet was not able to use any Chinese archival footage due to the excessive media control by the Gang of Four, the filmmaker instead chose a few stock images from this voluntary mass event while repeatedly inserting an annotation with the word “Decode!”. This subtitle urged the audience to decode the latent Maoist obscenity behind the stock photos of the mass mourning in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). According to the official Chinese view in 1976, there was a hidden machination (which was likely to be in reference to Deng Xiaoping, who was personally a good friend of Zhou) that provoked the occurrence of the “reactionary” movement under the guise of mass mourning. Soon afterward, Jiang Qing called on state repression to halt the “counterrevolution.” Historically, this event is known as the “first Tiananmen incident.”

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this Derridean “Chinese prejudice” can reformulate another kind of European “stereotype” about Asian cultures. Rey Chow, in her influential book *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, however, posed a serious criticism on Derrida’s ethnocentric scorn and essentializing tendency within his sheer idealization of the Chinese script. Quoting John DeFrancis’ demystifying study on Western fascination with Chinese characters, Chow went on to argue that Derrida indeed blissfully missed a crucial fact that Chinese writing is, by and large, “phonetic” in nature. Insofar as he appealed to a certain kind of ahistorical version of Chinese writing for the sake of his radical rep hilosophizing attempt, Derrida did not, according to Chow, depart so much from the European missionaries and sinophilic Enlightenment thinkers (e.g., Voltaire) from the sixteenth century, who reduced China to a pure ideogram and an “inscrutable (sur)face.” Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 62. Chow concluded, “Derrida’s Chinese writing is a specter, a kind of living dead that must, in his philosophizing, be preserved in its spectrality in order to remain a utopian inspiration.” Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic*, 66. Another critic wrote: “Derrida’s placement of China ‘outside of all logocentrism’ is symptomatic of the Chinese prejudice from which French intellectuals in general suffered throughout [the] twentieth century.” See Sean Meighoo, “Derrida’s Chinese Prejudice.” *Cultural Critique* 68 (Winter 2008): 199.

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374 The incident occurred on the traditional day of mourning, the Qingming Festival, after the Nanjing Incident, and was triggered by the death of Premier Zhou Enlai earlier that year. Zhou Enlai was a widely respected Chinese leader. For several years before his death, he had been involved in a political power struggle with other senior leaders in the Politburo of the Communist Party of China. Premier Zhou’s most visible and powerful enemy was the Gang of Four. Hundreds of mourners posted handwritten poems there as well. Many of the poems seemed to refer to and commemorate ancient Chinese historical events, but most were intended to criticize China’s current leaders. It was an indirect way of expression without compromising the possibility of arrest by security forces. China’s leader, Jiang Qing, saw the popular gathering as a threat to the forward movement of the Cultural Revolution. To diffuse an expected popular outpouring of sentiment for
However, I argue that this scene is open to two possible, if not conflicting, interpretations. On the one hand, what is really idiosyncratic is that the stock photos of the people mourning in Tiananmen Square, which were initially still images, were rerendered by a rather banal cinematic technique of zoom-in-zoom-out to convey an illusion of movement of the Chinese pictures themselves. Obviously, Viénet’s intention was to render a sense that the Chinese people there actively demanded proper decoding of the scene away from the official view offered by the bureau office. Yet it is not known whether it was Viénet’s preliminary anti-Maoist prejudice itself or the Chinese people at Tiananmen Square that demanded and obliged “correct” decoding. The truly oppressed peoples’ views were radically silenced—not simply by the official story but also by Viénet’s presumptive cinematic technique that imitated the movement of Chinese citizens. This obscene position of Viénet’s has him repeating the same dictating logic that he tried to denounce (or detour) in the first place.

However, on the other hand, studying the scene more closely, one finds that aside from this textual annotation in the film there is a parallel female voice-over (during the Cultural Revolution it was always a female voice that announced official news) that monotonously recapitulates an official Beijing newspaper in a foreign language. The official Chinese report is about the immediate success of state restoration after various “bad elements” and “counterrevolutionary tendencies” were found during the mass memorial of Zhou in Tiananmen Square. The most interesting aspect pertaining to this voice-over is not simply its mechanical recuperation or repetition of the Chinese propaganda lines. Rather, the true profundity of such recapitulated commentary is precisely its sheer discrepancy with the previous injunction to “decode” appearing in the subtitle. What is really at stake here is that Viénet has not further instructed the audience how to decode or deconstruct this scene. It is as if the Maoist propaganda and the

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Zhou’s death, the Communist Party of China limited the period of public mourning; for example, the national flag was inhumanly lowered to half-mast for only one hour. Some people were strongly discontented with the removal of the displays of mourning and began gathering in the Square to protest against the central authorities, then largely under the auspices of the Gang of Four, who ordered the Square to be cleared. The event was labeled counterrevolutionary immediately after its occurrence by the Communist Party’s Central Committee and served as a gateway to the dismissal and house arrest of then-Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, who was accused of planning the event. The Central Committee’s decision on the event was reversed after Deng came to power in 1978, as it would later be officially hailed as a demonstration of patriotism.
Spectral Revisiting and the Internal Fracture of Modern Hospitality

Instead of solely denouncing the authoritarian Maoist regime, Viénet seemed to renounce even more severely the sheer hypocrisy of French neoliberalist policies heralded by new president George Pompidou during the early 1970s. According to Simon Leys, there is a scene where Viénet recreated dialogue, retrieving once again “the unforgivable” and “carefully buried obscenity” inherent in the very resumption of Sino-French diplomacy during the early 1970s.375 Following the footsteps of Richard Nixon’s monumental visit to China in 1972, French president George Pompidou paid his first visit to the PRC a year later. Pompidou’s trip was the first official visit ever made by a French president. However, compared to his American counterpart, Pompidou apparently received a much warmer greeting and hospitality in the PRC because of the long-standing friendship between France and China.376

Here the filmmaker intercuts the footage of this epic encounter between Pompidou and Mao in Beijing in 1973. Idiosyncratically as it is, Viénet removed his own commentary (and of course the original soundtrack of the archival images) and inserted the soundtrack for “Jingle Bells,” along with a collection of dogs barking, to ironize such a “historic” moment. On the other hand, Viénet also made use of the annotations to recreate an imaginary conversation between Mao and Pompidou during their diplomatic meeting on the subject of Napoleon’s stomach

375 Leys, Broken Images, 71.
problems. In the written dialogue, Chairman Mao asks the French president if Napoleon died of an ulcer or cancer, and Pompidou answers that Napoleon suffered from an ulcer and it was a really bad one.

At first glance, it seems to be totally senseless to talk about something so highly irrelevant in a formal diplomatic exchange. Yet, according to Dick Wilson, both Mao and Pompidou really did discuss certain issues about Napoleon as a relieving gag in such a formal setting. However, instead of talking about his stomach problems, they exchanged jokes about Napoleon’s foreign accent, which was exactly the same as one of the participating French Ambassadors in the conference room. According to a journalist, the conversation between Mao and Pompidou was not so much about Sino-French relations; rather, it was more oriented toward the question of another foreign counterpart, the revisionist Soviet Union. The Chinese side warned the French president to stay alert to the imperializing tendency of the Soviet Union, yet Pompidou replied to Mao that his country would still seek to normalize relations with the Soviet Union.

However, this relieving gag, as Leys has suggested, was followed by something really hard to stomach. The recreation of these annotations helped retrieve a well-buried historical memory concerning the inhumane treatment of a young ailing Chinese dissident between France and China. According to Leys, this ill-stricken Chinese dissident was initially promised medical asylum in a prison hospital in France as a friendly gesture between the two countries in the new “tolerant” ideological climate of détente. However, Pompidou’s government finally broke its promise and sent him back to the PRC for persecution. The tragic fate of this young Chinese dissident traumatically revealed the fundamental obscenity within Pompidou’s neo-liberalist government. This Viénet film

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377 Dick Wilson wrote: “Mao was handicapped by his Hunanese speech, which was almost unintelligible to the Chinese of Beijing. He shunned radio broadcasts. During French President George Pompidou’s 1973 visit to China, Mao observed that the French Ambassador, who was with them throughout their discussions, spoke French like Napoleon. To this Pompidou noted rather severely that Napoleon had spoken with an Italian accent. ‘Yes,’ Mao replied, ‘and people laughed at him.’” See Dick Wilson, “The Great Helmsman.” The Wilson Quarterly 4, no. 4 (Autumn 1980): 112.


precisely recuperates the very “ulcer,” or the internal bleeding within the core of French neo-liberalist ideology, which seemed to openly celebrate “hospitality” and “cosmopolitanism,” unlike the former Gaullist regime.

In the wake of May ’68, Pompidou, as de Gaulle’s successor, immediately advocated a French modernization that was partially based on the American liberal model to establish an “open society” and “tolerant government” as a way to rechannel revolutionary impulses, as well as the various racial and minority concerns put forward during the May ’68 events. On the other side of this neo-liberalist ideology, it was no secret that there was a parallel hardening of the penal system and disciplinary mechanism shortly after May ’68. President Georges Pompidou, on a path of modernizing France, secretly perpetuated, if not intensified, the social conservatism and paternalism of his Gaullist predecessor, only to find that the coercive power was hypocritically veiled under the hospitable modernization project itself.380

However, there is still something radically crucial left unresolved. Since Viénet himself also hilariously recreated, rather than faithfully transcribed, this kind of dialogic annotation of this diplomatic Sino-French encounter, his imaginary subtitling was in fact hardly ideologically innocent. There is a trace or a footprint that is a reminder of Viénet’s irreducible subjective involvement and even manipulation over the Chinese archival images during his recreation of the East-West dialogue about the Chinese dissident.381 This manipulative tendency

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380 Michel Foucault, when he was involved in the prison’s investigation at the time, recounted a criminal incident that happened during the early 1970s that ultimately invited an even harsher restoration of penalty by the French state. On September 21, 1971, two French prisoners, who were incarcerated at a prison for a bloody crime, killed a nurse and kidnapped an officer during an escape attempt. This murderous incident coincided with the ongoing social demands for prison reform after May ’68. Debates on keeping or abolishing the death penalty became a political question between the Left and the Right in French society. In December 1972, President Pompidou, however, refused the two murderers’ appeal for mercy and thereby condemned the two to the guillotine in the courtyard soon afterward to alleviate the administrative discontent in the prison hospital. See Michel Foucault, “Pompidou’s Two Deaths,” in Power, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 2000), 418.

381 The so-called “Western dissidence” is perhaps never innocent. Dissidence as such can be seen as one particular strategy or tactic to trivialize and flatten the complex and even contradictory historical views and phenomena. According to Robert Linhart, Western “dissidence” was a novel ideological formation of the 1970s that ended up serving as a slogan for a major political disagreement by the intellectuals in favor of a “revolt” or “resistance” that was nothing more than a name for a convenient and cheap refusal—a refusal to participate in the mass struggles that could yield a revolutionary outcome to the crisis they were living through. Robert Linhart, “Western
was perhaps best epitomized in another example that appeared later in the film. In order to convey his desired political message about how Chinese dissident voices could not be entirely foreclosed during the Maoist heyday, Viénet idiosyncratically inserted a minor subtitle, “Deng (Xiaoping) will return,” several times while the voice-over simultaneously argued that Deng Xiaoping, notoriously branded by Mao as an “unrepentant capitalist roader,” could not be entirely annihilated during the Maoist heyday.

The voice-over repeatedly explains that the several denunciatory campaigns waged against pragmaticist Deng Xiaoping between the 1950s and the 1970s failed to entirely expunge him from the central bureaucratic list. The name “Deng Xiaoping,” like a specter yet to be fully exorcised, came back to haunt the Maoist supremacy within the Chinese Communist Party. Although Viénet seemed to constantly maintain his “neutral” position during his presentations of this designated political message and reminder, one can easily detect that this ideological neutrality was not entirely achieved. Insofar as the filmmaker had indeed elevated this “specter of Deng” over the official Maoist narrative, no entirely objective position could be maintained as a reminder of the internal contradictions within the CCP without implicitly aligning with the Party. This may explain why this anti-Maoist film, as Viénet’s fellow filmmaker Guy Debord recounted, led some leftist press in Italy to accuse Viénet of sparing his denunciations over Deng’s betrayal of the revolution in Chinois, encore un effort. It was even rumored that this Viénet work was a new counterrevolutionary propaganda tool to prepare for the passage of future Chinese reform orchestrated by Deng Xiaoping.382

That is to say, all the gags that are associated with the core obscenity of both Maoist doctrines and French neo-liberalist policies in the film are indeed something hard to stomach. The comical elements in the film are not simply

relieving or neutral. Rather, Vienet’s creative reappropriations of certain imaginary jokes forbid any further reinterpretations and reworkings in relation to the Maoist archival footage as such. After all, it is the problematic use of this joke itself that ultimately renders true cross-cultural dialogues impossible and invisible. As a result, Viénet’s “dissident” annotations in Chinois, encore un effort may bear and exemplify a certain logic of what Derrida has called “the dangerous supplement.” The appropriation of the supplement as an additional reiteration of the main message simultaneously implies a compulsive necessity of the supplement as a practice of overt substitution of the designated target.

According to Derrida, writing (or “annotated subtitling” in this case) can, in a certain respect, supplement and enrich the voice. Yet it is also the writing itself that becomes a kind of seizure to take over or substitute the official meaning. On the other hand, voice has not simply been spirited away, but it has instead transformed itself into a hazy and impenetrable object that keeps rendering the self-sufficient presence of the supplemented text obsolete and impossible to understand. That is to say, the voice returns as the master injunction to redirect the sheer impossibility of the written supplement. Therefore, it is voice, rather than writing alone, that finally occupies the place of what Derrida called the “dangerous supplement,” a term that he borrowed from his readings of Rousseau.

The supplement causes this presence to be involved with an unfavorable fear of not (totally) filling the absence. Because the supplement supplements itself through substitution, it constantly instigates itself to be replaced once a certain form of substitution has reached the degree of stability. In this respect, the process of supplementations would simply be endless. The supplement is always an “exterior” and “artificial” addition as an adjunct and proxy. As such, it cannot be comfortably positioned within the vicissitudes of the self. Derrida wrote:

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383 Derrida introduced the term “supplement” to describe the paradoxical relationship between the completion and incompletion of a written subject in relation to the voice. Derrida contended that “when speech fails to protect presence, writing becomes necessary. It must be added … it diverts immediate presence of thought to speech into representation … [it is] a sort of artificial and artful ruse to make speech present … a violence done to the natural destiny of the language.” See Derrida, Of Grammatology, 144. [emphasis in the original]
But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [*suppleant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-(the)-place* [*tieut-lieu*]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it *produces no relief*, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can be filled up *of itself*, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself.  

Although I agree with Derrida’s insights on the supplement, I argue that there are still certain internal discordances toward the reformulation of the official doctrines— the counterrevolutionary messages— throughout this Viénet work. To illustrate this point, I will reexamine one more annotation that the director used in the final part of his film. Upon closer analysis, while the filmmaker has repeatedly used the phrase “Deng will return,” this does not necessarily mean that Deng Xiaoping has already returned to the main political scene in 1977. Historically speaking, Deng, as the future president of the Chinese Communist Party, had not fully arrived at the top of the bureaucratic ladder during the year the film was produced. As Viénet’s film also revealed, Maoist influences still dominated Chinese political culture, even after Mao’s death. During an official Party activity that exemplified the continual spreading and allegiance of the various Maoist doctrines in 1977, the occasion was still predominantly hosted by President Hua Guofeng, who was thought to be handpicked by Chairman Mao in his final days.  

While this propagandistic ceremony was supposed to gather the most important Party members to announce new official messages, it was Hua himself who was the main protagonist of the event. In one ritual, he picked up a shovel and put some sand into a hole around a founding stone to gesture his determination and confidence in establishing a Chinese society that was premised on Maoist ideas.  

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384 Ibid., 145. [emphasis in the original]  
385 When Hua succeeded Mao as the new CCP Chairman in September 1976, he immediately proposed the so-called “Two Whatevers” policy that reinstated the strict fidelity to the correct political lines of Mao. The term literally means, “China should uphold whatever policies Mao Zedong has adopted and abide by whatever instructions the late Chairman has given.” Hua pursued the notion that whatever policy decisions Mao had made must be firmly upheld and whatever instructions he had given must be followed unswervingly. The remarks, however, were replaced by Deng Xiaoping’s more pragmatic slogan: “It doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.”
Xiaoping was “missing” in this official scenario. Deng, as a future leader of China, had yet to be entirely rehabilitated by the Chinese public shortly after Mao’s death in 1976. In other words, he was not fully available to overtly substitute and fill the void left by Mao. For those who simply take Deng’s economic detour and his policies of reform and opening as the direct substitution or replacement of the ultra-leftist errors made during the Cultural Revolution, at the core, they fail to address the fact that the transition as such was indeed more historically contingent than compulsory. At this point in Chinese society, there were perhaps still occasional moments of political uncertainty and anxiety radiating throughout the general public. However, the radical potentiality of this hazy moment during the ideological transition from Mao to Deng in the late 1970s was that it probably provided a new idea about what was meant by “heterogeneity” among Chinese people, which could not be fully contained or comfortably inscribed within the setting of the contemporary predominant neo-liberalist narrative that continued to portray the three decades of post-Mao reform and opening as the main reason for China’s global success today.
[Part II: 1970s-2000s]

CHAPTER 6

THE FRENCH NATION-THING IN BEIJING:

*LES CHINOIS À PARIS*, “CHINA’S THREAT,” AND

THE FARCICAL RENEGACY OF THE PARISIAN LEFT

The Left-Right Oscillations from Vichy to the 1970s

If the context of the 1970s was predominantly marked by the various political rhetoric about the rising opportunities of Sino-Western normalization, the sheer ideological message pertaining to Jean Yanne’s French cinematic farce *Les Chinois à Paris* (*The Chinese in Paris*) (1974), which offensively imagines the Maoist Liberation Army as a kind of global colonial threat occupying Paris that is in some ways reminiscent of the Nazi era, highlighted that this elated period of East-West détente was unable to entirely harmonize certain long-standing ethnic tensions and racial antagonism. At first glance, *Les Chinois* could be considered a politically incorrect racist film that simply fabricated an imaginary colonial occupation for the sake of despising Maoist China and its revolutionary achievements. However, upon closer analysis, Yanne’s work does not mainly target the penetrating influences of Chinese Maoism at the time of the Cultural Revolution. Instead, the central target of the film is French leftism and the collaborationist ideology that emerged from the onset of World War Two.

In this chapter, I will argue that Yanne’s representation of China does not simply belong to the traditional category of Western racism. Nor does its farcical representation of the ambivalent relationship between the traditional French Left and the French Right render an ahistorical version of the Republican histories in *Les Chinois à Paris*. Rather, I will argue that *Les Chinois*, through its excessively idiosyncratic displacement of the shameful French collaborative past with the Nazis during the 1940s into an imaginary “Chinese threat,” unexpectedly outlined and avowed certain heavily ignored historical linkages between the controversial Vichy Collaboration and the scandalous leftist renegacy in France in which many French Maoists sought to abandon their revolutionary projects for capitalist state
security from the late 1970s onward. The revisiting of Les Chinois in relation to both the historical contexts of the Vichy surrender and the predominant revolutionary retreat in the détente era can shed new light on the reconceptualization of the subtle connections between pragmatic vitalism and moral relativism that is now highly symptomatic of global capitalist cultures today.

As a mixture of fantasy and comedy, Les Chinois à Paris is about how a gigantic multitude of the Maoist Liberation Army effortlessly invades France overnight and how the occupied French people collaborate with their colonizer thereafter. The film opens with a public speech given by the French president calling for national solidarity in resisting the Chinese invaders in the name of their glorious Republican tradition. However, after disseminating his speech, the president is the first one to take off to America and hence leaves his citizens alone with the colonizer. To survive the colonial occupation, the remaining French citizens have no choice but to collaborate with this new Chinese regime. After setting up its headquarters in a department store, the Maoist officials thereby ban most of the leisurely activities and sex-related hobbies, such as clubbing and drinking, that the French people were used to. However, some of the characters begin to actively collaborate with the colonizer. The male protagonist, Régis (Jean Yanne), who can speak a few words in Chinese, is the only one in the film who is somehow exempted from the Maoist bans. Employed by the new government as a coordinator between the French people and Chinese officials, Régis receives exclusive privileges, such as keeping his own car, which many of his French counterparts were not allowed to do.

As time goes on, various ideological discrepancies between French and Chinese ways of life begin to surface, along with the occasional social unrests that take place after the occupation. To remedy this gap, Pou Yen (Kyozo Nagatsuka), the chief commander of the occupying Maoist army, opts to restore countrywide some of the old bourgeois rituals and hedonistic lifestyles. Ironically, although the Chinese coup appeared to be highly puritanical, diligent, and self-controlled when they first marched into Paris, these same Maoist soldiers gradually fail to resist these capitalist temptations after a long period of warless self-complacency. Similar to most of the French hedonists before the occupation, General Pou Yen
and his underlings all indulge in sensual pleasures after the relaxation of these initial prohibitions. As such, the Chinese army has simultaneously relaxed its original stronghold to battle. Subsequently, the Chinese soldiers are liquidated by the French resistance force, which is newly assembled in a Parisian underground circle. After France reclaims full independence, the main hero, Régis, is forced into exile because of his extensive collaborative affair with the Chinese invaders.

In 1974, the political campaign of *Pi-lin-Pi-kong* (Criticize Lin Piao, Criticize Confucius) had been gathering huge momentum throughout the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Cultural works were then generally considered important and useful, if not solemn, propaganda material to promote Maoist ambitions and to resist counterrevolutionary messages. Although China and France had maintained a good diplomatic relationship since the Gaullist era, the highly offensive content of *Les Chinois* tickled the nerves of many Maoist officials during this politically charged period. According to an article called “Peking’s Pique” published in *Time* magazine on May 11, 1974, Chinese authorities charged that the film drew “an unacceptable parallel between socialist China and fascist Germany.”386 Elsewhere, the Chinese embassy also accused this Yanne film of being disrespectful to their country and ideological beliefs: “The Chinese People’s Army is mocked and slandered. Our modern theatre, one of the products of the Cultural Revolution, is made to look ridiculous.”387 The Chinese state even threatened the French government, stating that if they did not ban the screening of *Les Chinois à Paris*, they would risk several serious diplomatic consequences.388

On the other hand, the release of *Les Chinois à Paris* also tremendously angered the (remaining) Maoists in France as well. As Jacques Ellul remembered, the film was considered scandalous among the French Maoists insofar as it portrayed the Chinese revolutionaries as being vulnerable to the lure of capitalist lifestyles and decadence.389 According to Bourseiller, one of the French Maoist

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groups of the era, *L’Union des communistes de France marxiste-léniniste*, led by Alain Badiou, Natacha Michel, and Sylvain Lazarus, launched a boycott of the screening of *Les Chinois à Paris* in France, angrily calling the film an overt “anti-communist” and “reactionary” piece of work.\(^\text{390}\) The Maoist group even fustigated the filmmaker of being a “large shark of the cinema, billionaire, joint owner of Gaumont.”\(^\text{391}\) In 1974, the Mao-leaning literary journal *Tel Quel* also argued that the sheer parallel between Yanne’s anti-Chinese sentiment and the Western sinophobic current that emerged in the mid-1970s was uncannily similar to the “Yellow Peril” complex emitted in Germany by Wilhelm II during World War One. It was through this hatred of China that the various Western counterparts regained their Eurocentric supremacy as a kind of metaphysical “navel of the world.”\(^\text{392}\)

*Les Chinois à Paris* portrays both the Maoist soldiers and the French resistance forces as a group of ordinary individuals and average men. Farcical as it may be, the Maoist soldiers effortlessly colonize France within one night because most of the French people have already departed from the country. The Chinese occupation is entirely peaceful. The Maoist invaders face no armed resistance from the French people and they do not kill a single French individual during the process of colonial invasion. On the other hand, the sheer ideological turn of many of the French “Maoists” in *Les Chinois* is non-sensically taken. For instance, a former decadent and bourgeois businessman mysteriously becomes a dogmatic Marxist-Leninist shortly after the Chinese occupation. He volunteers to go to the Maoist camp to do labor work and accept an ideological reeducation. However, the oscillation of his ideological orientation does not make any sense, especially since the director does not mention the cause of this change. The reason he is suddenly attracted to Maoism remains an utmost enigma to his wife within the film narrative.


\(^{391}\) Ibid., 275.

At the same time, this Yanne work also extensively depicts the French rightists and collaborators as hypocrites, opportunists, and cowards. The French president, in particular, is incessantly mocked as a puppet leader, who “seriously” calls for national unity against the invader but immediately escapes from his Parisian headquarters. That is why the pro-state newspaper *La Nation* argued that “[y]et in his film it is we who are the targets. In his parody of the Nazi occupation the French appear as cowards, ridiculous and contemptible. In France, spitting in your neighbor’s eye is taken in good fun. But the Chinese do not appreciate it.”393 Another critic, Jacques Ellul, also noted that “what was characteristic about the film was that [Yanne] took shots at everything, at everybody. He went after the Right and after the Left—it made no difference to him.”394 Indeed, what I will continue to argue in this chapter is that Yanne’s problematic mixing of “humor” and “racism” in *Les Chinois* is not simply a vulgar exercise. It is rather difficult to easily detect the central ideological message of the film precisely because the director seems to constantly oscillate his ideological orientation. Who is the actual target to be mocked in *Les Chinois*? Is it the Chinese, the French, or even the nonexistent Germans? There is no definite answer from the director. In fact, a definite answer is not a primary concern for him.395 According to Roland Barthes, “Farce is an ambiguous form, since it permits us to read within it the figure of what it mockingly repeats … which is merely the farce of one of the highest values: the exemption of meaning.”396

Suffice it to say that this Yanne work was produced in a context where the French Left and the French Right were radically confused and ambivalent. This kind of ideological confusion or psychic complex is perhaps best epitomized in French cultural and intellectual scenes in what intellectual historian Henry Rousso

393 Breeze, 4. Yanne cynically replied to China that “if the cinema is going to cause diplomatic crises, then it’s time to worry about the mental health of the great powers.” See “Peking’s Pique,” http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,943568,00.html.

394 Ellul, 6.

395 Enjoying a highly prolific cinematic career until his death in 2003, the filmmaker Jean Yanne had appeared in both the “leftist” cinema of Godard and commercial films without a clear and stable ideological orientation. He performed in both “serious” *auteur* films like the award-winning *Nous ne vieillirons pas ensemble* (*We Won’t Grow Old Together*) (1972) by Maurice Pialat and many other “vulgar” French sex comedies in the 1970s and 1980s. It seemed that ideological positions were not a true concern to Yanne, even during the highly politicized heyday of the 1960s.

calls the “Vichy syndrome.” During the mid-1970s, there was a strong obsession within the general public to revisit and reassess the French collaborative controversies with the Nazis in World War Two. As Rousso argued, the 1970s was an era that the “inception, influence, and acts of the Vichy regime played an essential if not primary role in the difficulties that the people of France have faced in reconciling themselves to the history.”

The controversial events of the 1940s suddenly became the subject of anxious debates in French newspapers and journals, as films and novels flocked to display a compulsive fascination with those dark and somber Occupation years.

This massive desire to revisit Vichy history, according to Rousso, had much to do with the fracturing of the mythical role of de Gaulle within the French political psyche, particularly in the wake of May ’68. Under standard Gaullist indoctrination and preaching, the unity and consistency of the Republican national identity was sustained by the historical narrative of the so-called heroic “resistancialism”—the notion that the German Occupation resulted in the vast majority of the French people joining in proletarian struggles and popular resistance against the foreign invader. This idea had been inherent and predominant in French cultural memories for almost three decades. Yet the events and aftermath of May ’68 led to the shattering of the supremacy of this Gaullist narrative, especially among the younger post-war generation.

In the intellectual arena, for example, the emergence of cultural historiography and the Annales School, which emphasized the plurality and complexity of mass quotidian experiences, may have exemplified the liberating dimension of a multiple, non-totalized historical understanding. In the cultural

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398 Rousso said: “By resistancialism I mean, first, a process that sought to minimize the importance of the Vichy regime and its impact on French society, *including its most negative aspects*; second, the construction of an object of memory, the ‘Resistance,’ whose significance transcended by far the sum of its active parts (the small groups of guerilla partisans who did the actual fighting) and whose existence was embodied chiefly in certain sites and groups, such as the Gaullists and communists, associated with fully elaborated ideologies; and, third, the identification of this ‘Resistance’ with the nation as a whole, a characteristic feature of the Gaullist myth.” See Ibid.,10. [italics in the original]

399 As a French historical school, the *Annales*, whose journal was first published in 1929, had been extremely influential on the practice of history in Europe. Its founders, Marc Bloch and Lucien
realm of the 1970s, there was also a new trend called “la mode rétro” (“the retro mode”) or le stylo rétro (“the retro style”), which revisited the historical memories of the Vichy experience in a less judgmental and morally ambivalent frame of mind. Different from the grandiose period pieces and costume dramas produced shortly after the French Liberation, the revival of historical films in France during the 1970s was instead highly devoid of many epic and heroic elements. Human ambiguity and historical indeterminacy became the leitmotif of those cultural works and products. Les Chinois, in this respect, falls into the “retro films” category, which did not prescribe what was morally “right” and “wrong” during wartime. Collaboration does not necessarily equate to a moral error. Rather, it is more approximated to a sort of pragmatic and adaptive skill in response to situational changes and a drastic social rupture.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, collaborators are always the “dregs” of society who essentially fail to integrate into the autochthonous body politic; collaboration is a “phenomenon of disassimilation” that “never finds its place”—it is a “social hesitation.” On the other hand, what was really strange about the Nazified context of 1942 in France was that almost all of its citizens were literally collaborationist at that time. This collaboration with the occupiers should not simply be dismissed as an exemplification of “pure evil” resulting from the collective delirium of the era. Rather, such a collaborative desire may have

Febvre, desired to break down the boundaries between history and other disciplines and incorporate ideas from literature and psychology of particular historical periods to reopen a multidisciplinary perspective. In the 1940s, Fernand Braudel developed the “total history” paradigm, which introduced the idea of different levels of historical time, or the longue durées. The distinction of the third generation of Annales historians as a group started after May 1968, when the members of the original school of thought began branching out in their interests and approaches to the study of history. The third generation broke with Braudel’s methodological structuralism, as the movement shifted its focus on the study of history further toward the discipline of cultural anthropology. The third generation of Annales historians continued to critique some of history’s earlier schools of thought, claiming that events could not be explained using the reference points and cultural background of the time because the exact disposition of the minds of those really involved in the events could not be known in their entirety but could only be speculated upon. For a more elaborated reading of the Annales School, see François Dosse, New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales, trans. Peter V. Conroy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

Jean-Paul Sartre, The Aftermath of War (Situations III), trans. Chris Turner (New York: Seagull Books, 2008), 45. Sartre consequently defined collaboration not only as a fixation on foreign forms of thought or ideology that consolidate the maladjusted and marginal members of society but also as inherently unassimilable by indigenous French culture. He suggested that collaborators are actually foreigners, outsiders who come from the “marginal elements” and are unable to properly integrate into either of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. See Ibid., 61.

Ibid., 33–34.
pertained to the very core of humanity, as an instinctual act of living and survival against the severity of reality.

In extreme and life-threatening historical situations like the Nazi Occupation, one cannot simply isolate the desire to collaborate as an evil-minded intention or a cowardly move. Moreover, collaboration cannot be solely trivialized as an equivalent to revolutionary betrayal and national treason. Michel Foucault offered a similar example: “And when, in 1940, you have men driving their bikes into a ditch and saying, ‘I’m going home,’ you can’t just say, ‘What a bunch of cowards!’ and you can’t just hide it either.” Instead, the collaborative act may even exemplify a certain beauty of human vitality, or a will to survive. The traditional notion of morality, especially the dichotomous Marxist worldview, may not be adequate in addressing the true complexity of this historical phenomenon.

The Pétainist Transcendental

What is really idiosyncratic here is the sheer cultural position that exceptionally allowed Yanne to mock and ridicule both the leftist and the rightist camps from the very outset. The ideological camouflage in Les Chinois is not for instinctual survival but, rather, it is a calculated means to capturing capitalist power. The contexts of the 1940s and the 1970s were fundamentally different in terms of the urgency of survival and the presence of colonial threat. Unlike the Nazi period, the 1970s did not experience any warfare but instead recorded a peaceful period of the bourgeois order, as well as a general complacency that emerged with the economic fruits brought by the so-called “thirty glorious years” (1944–1974) under post-war Gaullist leadership.

Yanne did not rely on the permanence of a single political position. Ironically, the main hero, Régis, who is arguably the most cynical character throughout Les Chinois, is in fact played by the filmmaker himself. The idea of “political allegiance” for this male character is nothing but a means to consume

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and marketize. First, in order to show initial allegiance to the Maoist occupiers, Régis turns his sex toys shop into a Chinese restaurant and offers the incoming soldiers a discount. Later, he also offers managing advice to the Chinese officials from time to time. In return, he receives many benefits from the Maoist delegates. After the Chinese soldiers are defeated, Régis then serves as the official advisor to the French president, who has recently returned, concerning the restoration of the social status quo. He continues to do business with the French government in exchange for a chance to leave the country. Obviously, Régis has no true fidelity to any ideological camp. What interests the director-actor is perhaps an exempted gap that he can freely occupy only for the sake of a persistent ridicule toward and an escape from the solemnity of a fixed ideological mindset.

In fact, the use of popular and contested memory as a liberating tool to escape from the traditional Gaullist myth and its ideological operation in the wake of May ’68 may have created, unfortunately, a new counterrevolutionary myth that helped restore the moral order of the bourgeois state. The historical retrospection on the ambiguity of human choices during World War Two has indeed one very clear ideological mindset—the rise of neoliberalism in France since the mid-1970s. Historically speaking, the birth of this “ambiguous” sentiment in French historical films and other cultural works in fact coincided with the death of George Pompidou, the heir apparent to de Gaulle, in 1974. The historical significance of the year 1974 is that it officially marked the definitive closure of the epic Gaullist era with the neoliberalist candidate Valéry Giscard d’Estaing immediately succeeding Pompidou’s presidency in the fall of 1974 after marginal electoral success.

In other words, the sheer rekindling of the historical interest to revisit the Vichy controversy is perhaps not an innocent act. These cultural works are not simply the objective representations of the ambiguous collaborative histories of the 1940s. Rather, they are part of the historical continuum of collaborative affairs with colonial power extending from the 1940s to the 1970s. As a critic from Cahiers du Cinéma wrote:

*Lacombe Lucien, The Night Porter, Les Chinois à Paris, Le Trio infernal,* etc. These films, whose avowed aim is to rewrite history, are not an isolated
phenomenon. They are themselves inscribed into a history, a history in progress; they have—as we are sometimes criticized for saying—a context. This context, in France, is the coming of power of a new bourgeoisie, of a fraction of the bourgeoisie along with its ideology (Giscard, president of all the French, a more-just-and-caring society etc.), its conception of France, and of history. What goes by the name of ‘après-gaullisme’ is also an opportunity for the bourgeoisie to rid itself of a certain heroic, nationalist but also anti-Pétainist and anti-fascist image, which was still reflected if not by Pompidou, at least by de Gaulle and Gaullism.  

This compulsive fixation on the Vichy past may not have simply helped rewrite French national identity. Instead, it propelled the growth of a new capitalist spirit that was emerging in the 1970s. The above critic from Cahiers also argued that the 1970s’ historical retrospection on the 1940s was nothing but a new kind of marketing strategy that grew hand in hand with the birth of French neoliberalism—the “selling out” and “marketing” of capitalist power as a new form of national “glory” as a way to overtly usurp the old Gaullist one. He added:

What is emerging is a cynical ideology: that of big business, of the multinational and technocratic culture that Giscard represents. The French, it is thought, are ripe for this cynicism (cynicism of the ruling class, disillusionment of the exploited classes): a cynicism illustrated, on the screen, by the phenomenon known as the ‘retro style’, i.e. the snobbish fetishism of period effects (costumes and settings) with little concern for history.

Yet this tactic of ideological camouflage, which dates back at least to the collaborative spirit of the 1940s, confers a social symptom that is still prominent in French political culture today. In a recent interview about the historical legacies of French Maoism, Alain Badiou wound up the conversation by telling a notoriously well-known episode that happened during World War Two:

Jacques Doriot, the great hope of the 1930s when he was Communist mayor of Saint-Denis. He was the Dionysian leader who set off for battle at the head of his proletarian troops. That kind of visionary can make a total about-turn, because the moment comes when, to remain in the spotlight, to maintain your own excited self-image, you have to be able to pull off a complete change of course. Doriot became a notorious fascist, an extremist collaborator with the Nazi…. When Doriot was killed in his car by machine gun-fire, he was wearing an SS uniform.

403 Ibid., 159.
404 See Ibid. And if we do not further challenge and contest the sheer legitimacy of the so-called “popular memory” that is annihilated of heroic element, Jacques Rancière also reminds us that le stylo rétro here, which is supposed to resist against militant and revolutionary stereotypes, can easily regress back to a highly conservative kind of historical logic. See Serge Daney, Jacques Rancière and Serge Toubiana, “L’image fraternelle (Entretien avec Jacques Rancière),” Cahiers du cinéma 268-269 (July-August 1976): 13.
At the end of his dialogue, Badiou paralleled the ideological turncoat of the 1940s to the ironical fate of French Maoism at that time. He added, “As far as our ‘Maoist’ renegades are concerned, we should really speak of Doriotism as farce.” 406 In order to maintain one’s self-image and profile, the typical collaborator during World War Two and post-1968 France was compelled to oscillate ideological positions to cater to the ever-changing hegemonic current like a perennial camouflage or a chameleon. As such, there was no political ideal; there was only one rule—to keep alternating one’s ideological posture to fit the change in symbolic reality in order to survive. Only through this perpetual flight could one maintain the initially privileged and uninhibited position and be assured of various vested interests.

However, these alternations also found a temporary place with exceptional shielding. Although the Chinese part in Les Chinois is meant to be mostly an imagination, the French portion of the film bears a subtle historical reference to the highly problematic Vichy memories. During the height of World War Two, General Marshall Pétain, who was the French Prime Minister at the time, cunningly sold out France to Nazi Germany in order to establish a puppet and uninhibited Vichy regime in 1942. Though severely under German control, the Vichy regime enjoyed a certain degree of self-management and military protection, unlike its other European counterparts. Eventually defeated by the Gaullist army along with other communist-led French forces in 1944, Pétain was sentenced to life imprisonment for his national treason. Recently, Badiou has compared the overt racist and anti-1968 attitudes of Nicholas Sarkozy to Pétain’s collaboration with Nazi power during the 1940s as a renewed logic of “transcendental Pétainism” within the far-right Western political scene.

Marshall Pétain, who acted as the right-wing leader of moral restoration and national rejuvenation, actively collaborated with Nazi power to form the Vichy. In the 1940s, Pétain tirelessly indoctrinated the moral primacy of “Travail, famille, patrie” (Work, Family, Fatherland) on many occasions to elevate the reconstruction of French national unity and to replace the Republican motto of the

406 Ibid.
three French colors. To Pétain, the sheer “idleness” of the Jews, the freemasons, and the communists that emerged after World War One was the main reason for the recent French defeat. Thus, Pétain wanted to protect the citizens from those various “disastrous effects” thereafter—by collaborating with Germany. Yet this motif of Pétainist transcendentalism seemed to linger in the French political psyche from time to time, even after the war. Badiou argued that former French president Nicholas Sarkozy was precisely the last contemporaneity to embody this kind of neo-Pétainism with regard to his ultranationalist desires and deep hatred toward Arabic immigrants.

The Unparalleled “Chinese Plot” and the Really-Existing Confusions

Toward the end of Les Chinois, Régis, the most cynical hero of the film, cannot escape from all the “Chinese influences.” There is no such thing as “ultimate liberation” for him in his quest to completely stay outside of and even overcome this gigantic Chinese network. As the supposedly most opportunistic

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408 Badiou compared Sarkozy’s political discourses to neo-Pétainism on five counts: the alliance of fear and war; the displacement of politics by morality; the paradigmatic function of foreign experience; the source of the moral crisis lying in a disastrous past event; and, finally, overt racism. See Ibid., The Meaning of Sarkozy, trans. David Fernbach (London & New York: Verso, 2008), 78–84. Sarkozy, like Pétain before him, also made use of a similar strategy to show a deep resentment and hatred toward the “threats” of ethnic minorities, leftist culture, and the various social outcasts in France, as well as emphasizing moral restoration based on those “successful” foreign experiences such as Bush’s America and Blair’s Britain. In response to the civil unrest that occurred in various Parisian suburban ghettos in 2005, Sarkozy, who was then the Interior Minister of National Defense, notoriously declared “zero tolerance” toward the young rioters, mainly of Muslim background. Most of the rioters were unemployed second- or third-generation African and Arabic immigrants residing in the poor banlieue, or slum areas, since the onset of Third-World decolonization during the 1960s. Sarkozy even called the young protestors racaille (“scum” or “riff-raff”), who were nothing but living parasites of the country. Two years after the suburban riots, when Sarkozy was giving his infamous campaign speech at Bercy in 2007, he attributed the events of May ’68, pointing to the latter’s “excessive egalitarianism” for working-class and ethnic minorities, as the main “cause” of moral relativism, national incompetence, and mental corruption in France at that time. Similar to Pétain, Sarkozy proposed a new populist doctrine of “ensemble, tout est possible” (Together, everything is possible) as a way to reconstruct a new French identity completely liquidated from the legacies of 1968. Sarkozy was elected president, as Badiou explained, because he successfully presented himself as the defender of French wealth and privilege against a diffuse global threat in the figure of “May ’68” and “young Muslim foreigners.” Sarkozy also waged a campaign based on a “dread” of foreigners, workers, immigrants, youth, terrorists, and outsiders of all sorts, coupled with a ruthless determination to use whatever force might be required to keep them at bay. Badiou said: “Sarkozy is not seriously talking about May ’68. His diatribe merely symbolizes a moralizing propaganda.” See Ibid., 37.
character, Régis, who sold out his country to the Maoist occupiers, does not enjoy exceptional supremacy or experience any individual triumph at the finale. After he has been deported to the Vatican, he realizes that the Roman Catholic Church and the Maoist soldiers have jointly established a new collaborative regime there. But why is it specifically “China” in Les Chinois? Suffice it to say that Yanne’s representation of China was not exceptional but conformed to many existing Western stereotypes, which cast the gigantic Chinese population as a potential “threat” to the global social status quo. At the beginning of Les Chinois, when thousands of Maoist soldiers are striding forward to Paris, a decadent French boss and his secretary hurry to have their last, unrestrained sexual transgression because they are both very much frightened by the advent of Chinese asceticism.

In a parallel scene, another bourgeois couple is also prepared to leave Paris because the wife is afraid of the seven billion Chinese people who can simply take away their originally unbounded sexual pleasure. News of the Chinese invasion therefore stirs up substantial fear among the French bourgeoisie in relation to the deprivation of sexual enjoyment and prompts them to leave the country. The desperate flight of the French people finally culminates in a farcical car-crashing scene, a sequence that is reminiscent of the famous eight-minute-long-take of the traffic jam in Godard’s mesmerizing film Week End (1967), which cast Yanne as the main protagonist who teases the impotence and cowardice of the French bourgeoisie. In Yanne’s depiction, all the French automobiles are confiscated upon the arrival of the Chinese. Brothels, bars and nightclubs are indefinitely closed, while alcohol is banned in public spaces. It seems that the Maoist Chinese

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409 Casting Jean Yanne as the main protagonist in this black comedy, Week End is about the married French bourgeois couple Roland and Corinne who begin a journey from Paris to the rural countryside in order to secure the inheritance of the wife’s dying father. Yet both of them have secret lovers and both are planning each other’s murder. During the journey, the couple faces numerous obstacles and sudden chaos brought about by various bizarre characters, finally punctuated by a series of violent car accidents on the highway. After their own car has been destroyed, the two main characters walk through the forest where they encounter revolutionary figures, as well as meeting some people with an ancient background. It is, after all, both a beautiful and nightmarish experience for the couple. Eventually, Roland and Corrine manage to arrive at her parent’s house, only to find that her father has just passed away. Corrine’s mother refuses to give them the father’s property. The couple thereby kills the mother and sets off on the road again. However, on their way back to Paris, Corrine and Roland encounter a group of Maoist hippies who sustain themselves through theft and cannibalism. Godard ends their erratic journey by depicting Roland as being eaten by those radicals.
embody the monstrous, omnipresent “threat” that can deprive the French of all kinds of hedonistic enjoyment and bourgeois sex.

In fact, the theme of “China’s threat” has been a long-standing tradition in Western literary imaginations. Jack London’s futuristic and controversial short story An Unparalleled Invasion, which was written in 1910, had already anticipated that the year 1976 would usher in the climatic period of regional conflicts between China and Western nations. In London’s literary universe, China, after a long nascent sleep, is finally awakened during the 1970s. The Chinese eventually realize their latent great power and military potential fueled by their gigantic population. As a result, China detaches itself from collaborating with the Japanese economic and military support in order to run its own state army. Interestingly, China was not entirely invasive in London’s story. The reason for China’s constant expansion lay “in the fecundity of her loins”; by 1970, the country’s population is half a billion and is spilling over its boundaries, which begins to unsettle Europe and its associated Third-World colonies. When France makes a firm defensive stance for its colony Indo-China, China sends down an army of a million men and “the French force was brushed aside like a fly.”

France, to its utmost anger, leads a punitive expedition of 250,000 men to the Chinese capital. However, the French coup is immediately “swallowed up in China’s cavernous maw.” By the end of the story, the great powers of Europe

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In a more recent example, the novel Mao II written by renowned American author Don DeLillo idiosyncratically draws a parallel between the spreading of Maoist legacies and Islamic terrorism pertaining to our contemporary context. Starting the narration in the large Yankee Stadium, the image of “crowds” is seen as a potential source of extreme terrorism and dangerous fundamentalism that continually threatens Western identity. See Don DeLillo, Mao II (New York: Viking, 1991).

London wrote: “China rejuvenescent! It was but a sleep to China rampant. She discovered a new pride in herself and a will of her own. She began to chafe under the guidance of Japan, but she did not chafe long. On Japan’s advice, in the beginning, she had expelled from the Empire all Western missionaries, engineers, drill sergeants, merchants, and teachers. She now began to expel the similar representative of Japan. The latter’s advisory statesmen were showered with honours and decorations, and sent home. The West had awakened Japan, and, as Japan had then requited the West, Japan was not requited by China. Japan was thanked for her kindly aid and flung out bag and baggage by her gigantic protégé.” See Jack London, “An Unparalleled Invasion.” The Jack London Online Collection: [http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/StrengthStrong/invasion.html](http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/StrengthStrong/invasion.html) (accessed March 8, 2011).

410 See DeLillo.
411 Ibid.
412 Ibid.
come together and decide that the Chinese threat must be eradicated, once and for all.\textsuperscript{414}

Interestingly, this kind of “Chinese fabrication” has a strong political appeal. According to Slavoj Žižek, racism is not simply manifested in an apparent form of hatred and antagonism toward other races. Rather, the real core of racism is comprised of an unspeakable confusion over the foreigners, whereas one way to exit this ticklish or annoying predicament is to precisely construct and even fabricate a plot and narrative about the particular ethnic group. That is to say, it is the inexplicably paranoiac dimension toward the foreign Other that literally resides in the true “racist desire.” During the Nazi period, one major characteristic used to maintain and justify Hitler’s rule and subsequent genocide was to construct a kind of “Jewish plot” by constantly equating the Jews with the primary “theft” of long-standing European racial harmony.

In Žižek’s opinion, Hitler’s Germany was in fact desperate to construe this Jewish plot in order to maintain the consistency of its own perverted ideological landscape. As a paranoiac construct, Jews were thought to have embodied both the upper and the lower class, the intellectual and the filthy, as well as simultaneously the impotent and the highly sexed.\textsuperscript{415} Under this Jewish plot, Jews were assumed to be capable of stealing the jobs of other Europeans and perpetually troubling the nascent peace of Western order. There is no historical Jew found in this narrative. Rather, the Jewish figure is distorted and abused by the Nazis as an ideological quilting point to cover up the latter’s failure to come to terms with its own inherent lacking. As a certain poetic license, the Jewish plot

\textsuperscript{414} In this respect, by the summer and fall of 1976, as London depicts “China was an inferno” since the great Western powers had ultimately dropped their devastating biological weapons on Chinese territory. Millions of Chinese die by plagues, starvation, and infectious disease. The biological weapons were not only destructive, they also stirred up civil warfare within Chinese communities. London wrote: “Cannibalism, murder, and madness reigned. And so perished China.” Ibid. Significantly, London’s story ends as a profound and probably “prophetic” commentary on the irreconcilable tensions within Western communities, even after the removal of this common “Chinese threat.” Similar to the aftermath of the collaborative Western military campaign that jointly brought down the Boxer Rebellion in 1901, France and Germany, two of the most influential Western nations in the story that allies in 1975 to form a common cause against the “Yellow Peril,” become antagonistic toward each other again as they renew their “ancient quarrel” from then on. See Jack London, “An Unparalleled Invasion.” http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/StrengthStrong/invasion.html.

helped positivize and rechannel the destructive negativity of the Nazi terror. By constantly referring back to this imagined “Jewish conspiracy,” the legitimacy of the Nazi Occupation and even its massacre was able to be kept safely intact.

While agreeing with Žižek’s argument about the Nazi fabrication of the Jewish conspiracy, I find that the so-called “Chinese plot” in Yanne’s Le Chinois is milder and more generic than the fabricated Jewish narrative. Although this Yanne film recuperates many Western stereotypes about the potential “threat” of the Chinese multitude in the 1970s, Zhang Enhua argued that Le Chinois does not display deep hatred toward Mao’s China and the Chinese people. Rather, it exposes a certain degree of paranoiac confusion about the rise of Maoism in the West during the 1960s. While the Nazi fabrication of the Jewish plot is designated for aggressive ideological means and purposes, the “Chinese narrative” radiating in Yanne’s film may not serve any pragmatic ends. Rather, as a cinematic farce, Yanne’s representation of China is excessively trivial most of the time, designated as just a nominal existence and nothing more. Yanne’s use of China is radically ahistorical in that it simply mixes many different racial stereotypes about “Asia.” For example, the Chinese national flag is depicted as a pure flag with all of the five stars missing. In addition, the traditional Chinese way of greeting changes from shaking hands to the Japanese ritual of bowing and even the Thai custom of putting palms to palms.

However, the most ridiculous part of the film is that the chief commander of the Maoist army, Pou Yen, is not a Chinese actor at all. Ironically, he is Japanese. His Chinese language is almost incomprehensible and embarrassing at times. He represents a China that is deprived of its inherent “Chineseeness.” Historically speaking, the employment of Japanese actors as Chinese characters was still quite understandable during that epoch (in some Hollywood movies in the 1970s, the Chinese role was even played by Caucasians!). During the Maoist era, the availability of Chinese actors in Europe was very limited, if not entirely nonexistent, insofar as the Chinese regime had yet to open its door to allow labor

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forces to enter the world market. But if this is true, the film’s title, *The Chinese in Paris*, according to Zhang Enhua, was itself a massive irony because there were virtually no “Chinese” really staying in Paris in this picture.417 Zhang added, “It is a double irony that Chinese government takes this film offensive because no Chinese is really involved in the film and Chinese government could just dispense with it by disclaiming since this film has no association with Chinese except the title.”418 Instead of simply channeling aggressive thoughts toward the Jews through the “Jewish plot” in Nazi ideology, the ridiculous “Chinese fabrication” here is more approximated to a sort of historical ignorance and naïveté of the director himself.

Indeed, the comical elements radiating in this Yanne work are perhaps more relieving than repressive. Sigmund Freud, in his pamphlet *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten (The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious)*, distinguished a “contentious joke” and “non-contentious humor.” According to Freud, jokes, like dreams and slips of the tongue, bear the traces of certain repressed desires in a particular culture. Jokes, to a certain extent, can offer a relieving channel to an underlying social suppression. Through the various inscriptions of jokes, forbidden sexual desires and aggressive thoughts can somehow be diluted and shared in society in order to maintain the healthy landscape of public order.419

However, in Freud’s opinion, humor is even more radical, as it transcends the realm of the “pragmatic use” of jokes. Freud argued that humor is often subversive and silently rebellious toward the existing order. While jokes still bear some forms of repression due to the incomplete liberation of sexual and aggressive desires, humor is instead highly instinctual in that it cannot simply be delimited and contained by the social norm. Unlike the use of jokes, which is always confined to a specific purpose of comic relief, humor not only suggests a simple relieving feeling but also helps elevate and sublimate oneself to receive a

417 Ibid.
418 Ibid.
certain form of catharsis. Freud said, “Like jokes and the comic, humor has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity.”

However, upon closer analysis of the film, I argue that the idiosyncratic usage of “China” in Les Chinois may not simply offer the French audience a humorous relief as such. Rather, the excessively ahistorical effigy of China in Les Chinois may even remind one of something even more horrific and primordial long pertaining to the French political psyche since World War Two. As the chief Maoist commander is performed by a Japanese actor in relation to the represented context of the Nazi Occupation, the resultant combination thus retroactively rerenders a strange and uncanny mirage of the mixed relationship between “occupier” and “victim.” As an Asian partner to Nazi Germany, the imperial army of Japan was also a colonial invader of China in the 1940s. At first glance, it seems that the opportunistic French characters collaborated with China in Les Chinois, of which the latter was a true historical victim in World War Two.

Yet, the true nation that the French citizens really collaborate with in this Yanne picture is “Japan,” which was a genuinely cruel invader of China in the 1940s. In this respect, this idiosyncratic usage of “China” thus reminds the French people of their irreducible collaboration with the true invader—Nazi Germany—instead of an imaginary victim during the 1970s. In this respect, the unbearable humor in relation to the “Chinese plot” denies and desublimates the potential French identification with the historical victims during World War Two—both the Jews and the Chinese—for the sake of obtaining a kind of spiritual catharsis and psychical escape. Instead, the excessively fabricated China prompted the French people to identify with the two colonizers—Japan and Germany—in the historical tragedy. Unlike the context of the Vichy, there is no exempted historical position that falls outside of national embarrassment. The humor here thus offers no comic relief or moral escape from the national taboo but, rather, reminds the

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French people of the 1970s of the core trauma of Nazi collaboration. That is to say, the radical (mis)use of the notion of “China” here eventually offers nothing more than a reinscription of this irreducible historical trauma back into the French cultural unconscious.

Moral Relaxation and the Myth of Mutual Pleasures

Indeed, the core disparities between the two countries, as this film has suggested, are their sheer moral attitudes toward the idea of the “liberation of the self.” In the film, although the French collaborators work hand in hand with the Chinese occupiers, they feel that they are not totally submitted to the Maoist ideology of overt asceticism and working ethics. Rather, the collaborators allege that Pou Yen and his Maoist troops are workaholics and do not know how to enjoy their lives like the French do. The Maoist Liberation Army may have “liberated” France in a military sense, but at the psychological level, the Chinese soldiers have yet to truly “liberate” themselves in the first place. This is the reason why the Maoist coup can never entirely occupy or colonialize French minds. The French collaborators go on to teach the Chinese officials what “true liberation of the self” means—to simply relax one’s moral restraints and be less serious about labor work and job duties.

In fact, earlier in Les Chinois, there is a scene that shows the Chinese occupiers’ desire to categorize the various national modes of production in Western Europe in a socialist and straightforward way—that is, to assign each country a product that they will specialize in—for example, Britain will make hats, West Germany will make electronics, and Austria will make automobiles—to maximize each country’s strength in its own manufacturing. Based on one United Nation’s report which states that the French citizens are specialized in producing “la fumisterie,” the Chinese interpreter immediately reads it as making “chimneys.” While this is true, it is just the sheer literal meaning of la fumisterie. This word has another latent meaning in French usage—that is, “to make jokes” and “evade duty.” But what is interesting is that this double meaning of la fumisterie is literally interpreted by the Chinese troops as making chimneys and nothing more. The Chinese occupiers fail to perceive the gag pertaining to this French national “specialization.” In the French view, the Maoist soldiers take
things so seriously and literally that they fail to become as playful and relaxing as they can be in cultural interpretations.

The collaborators thereby suggest that the Chinese ruler host a playful Olympic Games in Paris in order to alleviate the increasing tensions between them so they can share joy altogether. Once again, the Games and the opening ceremony turn out to be highly unsuccessful because Pou Yen is very much perplexed by the sheer carnivalesque attitude exhibited by the French collaborators and the athletes during the opening ceremony. The Maoist representatives exit the venue halfway through the ceremony, leaving the collaborators to watch the show alone. While the ritual of celebrating Sino-French friendship through the hosting of the Olympic Games fails to work out, Régis, entrusted by the Maoist bureaucrats, suggests that the Chinese government reopen all the brothels and relax all the stoic laws in order to turn bourgeois hedonistic enjoyment itself into a new social imperative and obligation for the sake of disarming French antagonism toward China.

The restoration of the old French capitalist lifestyle is supposed to gradually indulge the French people in their previous decadent ways of life and finally undermine their hatred toward and potential resistance against Chinese ascetic ideology. However, the true irony is that the Chinese soldiers cannot resist these hedonistic temptations. Though first appearing as self-disciplined and hardworking soldiers, the Maoist troops unwittingly relax their morals under these unexpected circumstances. The Maoist soldiers join the French hedonists and visit the brothels and nightclubs regularly to demonstrate an idiosyncratic sort of “Sino-French friendship.” Pou Yen, the Chinese chief commander, even falls in love with a “promiscuous” female character (once again, quite stereotypical and sexist) who has had several sexual affairs with a few French male characters in the film, including Régis. Ironically, although Régis eventually shares the “same woman” with Pou Yen, he does not seem to be bothered about it.

Yet, despite the fact that this film is a farcical representation of individual enjoyment, it still outlines certain important aspects about how the idea of pleasure itself can somehow serve as a political factor in concrete scenarios.
Indeed, the aforementioned instruction or teaching about how one should enjoy oneself offered by the French collaborators is hardly an innocent act. Rather, this kind of cultural assimilation is a prominent political strategy frequently used by dominant powers. The objective of this “relaxing” (im)moral lesson is didactic at its core for the sake of reassuring the latent anxieties within Western subjecthood. According to Žižek, racist ideas or stereotypes are not triggered by conflicts with a deep hatred of others’ inferiority or superiority. Rather, regional conflicts always reside within the conflicts of the organization of national enjoyment. As he argued in his *Tarrying with the Negative*, “National identification is by definition sustained by a relationship toward the Nation qua Thing,” that is to say, “...the unique way [in which] a community organizes its enjoyment.”

However, this Nation-Thing is not simply deployed as a stable entity but has always been bound up by a number of contradictory features. Žižek added that “it [the Nation-Thing] appears to us as ‘our Thing’..., as something accessible only to us, as something ‘they,’ the others, cannot grasp; nonetheless it is something constantly menaced by ‘them.’” Žižek further gave an example of why the American media today often claims that Japanese people do not know how to enjoy themselves like U.S. citizens do. Yet the reason why there is such an assertion about the Japanese people in the West is not simply because of the latter’s impotence to enjoy. What really unsettles the American psyche is precisely the fact that the Japanese seem to have found a peculiar way of enjoyment in their renunciation of enjoyment:

>The reason for the growing Japanese economic superiority over the U.S.A. is located in the somewhat mysterious fact that the Japanese do not consume enough, that they accumulate too much wealth. However, what the American ‘spontaneous’ ideology really reproaches the Japanese for is not simply their inability to take pleasure but rather the fact that their very relationship between work and enjoyment is strangely distorted. *It is as if they find an enjoyment in their very renunciation of pleasure*, in their zeal, in their inability to ‘take it easy,’ relax and enjoy—and it is this attitude which is perceived as a threat to American supremacy. Thus the American media report with such evident relief how Japanese are finally learning to consume, and why American TV depicts with such self-satisfaction Japanese tourists starting at the wonders of the

422 Ibid.
American pleasure-industry: finally, they are ‘becoming like us,’ learning our way of enjoying.\(^{423}\)

What is really at stake in *Les Chinois* is that the French people should have already known and experienced the discrepancy in personal enjoyment with the Maoist occupiers. Why did the French not resist this Chinese “invasion” in the first place? Why did the French resistance come after they realized the Chinese soldiers could literally commit the same kind of moral relaxation? Is that a bit cynical? That is to say, although the French people already knew that the “Chinese way of enjoyment” was sharply different from that of the French bourgeois lifestyle before the occupation, they still did not choose to safeguard their cultural traditions. It was only after the Chinese troops became morally contaminated and had fallen from grace (i.e., of ascetic purity) that some of the French people finally realized their ideological discrepancy and incompatibility with Mao’s China. Of course, the true irony here is that the final French resistance force is assembled by a number of “ex-Maoists” rather than those unassimilated dissenters in Paris. The moral and sensual corruptions of the occupiers finally anger the French Maoists who voluntarily believed in Chinese asceticism. What the French Maoists are actually disillusioned about regarding the Chinese leader is not simply the occupying soldiers’ ascetic way of living. Instead, their true discontent that leads to eventual resistance is a hatred of Chinese infidelity toward their own Maoist ascetic morals and revolutionary principles.

Historically speaking, the oscillation from Western bourgeoisie to a religious-implicated ascetic is perhaps not entirely inconceivable and incomprehensible. In fact, the act of renouncing one’s enjoyment is not solely a symbolic Chinese enterprise but is also shared by Western cultural logic. There has been a long-standing ritual of religious asceticism, especially for the Calvinist puritans in Europe. In Christian tradition, religious asceticism, like Calvinism, was once very prevalent in the Methodist Church and in the Holy Roman Empire. They each organized a self-confined communal lifestyle to stand against all sorts

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\(^{423}\) Ibid., 205–206. [italics in the original] In 2008, when the financial tsunami hit worldwide, the American media also recuperated a similar discursive strategy over China. However, the American position toward China was even more contradictory. On the one hand, Obama’s government recognized that the enormous amount of China’s foreign savings was extremely crucial in stabilizing the world economy. On the other hand, some of the U.S. officials accused the lack of consumption in China as one of the major causes of the financial breakdown.
of secular temptations—to be more approachable and more approximated to the transcendental purity of Jesus Christ. Yet it seems that this Western ascetic behavior did not gain too much currency in modern Europe in the mid-1970s. Thus, the Maoist soldiers’ turn from ascetic to hedonist, rather than being a mystery solely belonging to the Chinese, also reinscribes the irreducible ascetic rite long practiced in the Western world. It is perhaps not possible to fully evade all moral duties, even if the French people are truly used to la fumisterie, which has been hilariously recasted by Les Chinois.

The reason why the French ex-Maoists hold an antagonistic view toward the “corrupted” Chinese soldiers in Les Chinois is not simply because the Chinese are an entirely “different species” to the French but that they belong to the “same” ascetic origin. The Chinese moral decadence is thus a reminder of something even more primordial to the French people, as it upsets certain fundamental fantasies about the French themselves. That is to say, the reason why some French citizens feel radically unsettled about the moral relaxation of the Maoist soldiers is that the Chinese organization of enjoyment simply became “too close” to their own way of living. That is why Žižek argued that the hatred of Other’s enjoyment is always the hatred of one’s own enjoyment.424 In this sense, the very title of the film, The Chinese in Paris, exemplifies these irreducible Chinese elements inhered in the French political and cultural psyche.

That is also the reason why the East-West discrepancy as such is not simply an inexplicable “thing.” In fact, in Chinese nomenclature, this “thing” is called dongxi (东西), which literally means “East-West” and nothing more. There is nothing particularly exotic, cultish, special, or mysterious inherent in dongxi, just as there is no undisclosed inner essence or hidden aspect pertaining to dongxi itself. The entire meaning of dongxi is displayed and disclosed nominally and literally. In other words, dongxi, as an arbitrary signifier just like any other, embodies the core essence of this Chinese “thing”—as a pure non-sense. The excessively plain meaning of dongxi here suggests that there is a radical

424 Ibid., 206.
redoubling and short-circuiting, or even a different kind of “dialectical synthesis,” between its name and its content as such.

For Western Orientalists who are fascinated with or even mystified by this inexplicable “thing” inherent in the Chinese symbolic enterprise since the colonial heyday of the seventeenth century, the radical plainness of dongxi in Chinese nomenclature precisely renounces an imaginary realm or fantasmatic rapport that lies beyond this sheer signifier. The true profundity of dongxi is a reminder that there is no metalanguage that can entirely reveal the true meaning of this Chinese “thing” since its whole meaning has been entangled with its representation as such. Insofar as there is nothing that is left undisclosed, for Western Europeans it is in vain to seek out this mysterious Chinese “thing” in order to consummate an ideal cross-cultural encounter. In fact, the so-called “East-West encounter” may have already arrived at the most literal level of dongxi as a pure contingency. This kind of cross-cultural encounter is more prone to a symbolic performance than something truly veiled.

Indeed, this traumatic encounter of one’s impossible proximity in relation to the “Thing” of the Other, rather than simply being an absolute horror, is in fact constitutive according to the teachings of Jacques Lacan. In his early seminars and writings, Jacques Lacan had already differentiated between das Ding and die Sache in German for the word “the thing.”425 Die Sache is the representation of a thing in the symbolic order as opposed to das Ding, which is the thing in its “dumb reality,” or the thing in the real, which is “beyond-of-the-signified”426 that shows clear affinity with the Kantian thing-in-itself. Yet this Lacanian notion of das Ding is not a transcendental entity that lies completely outside the inherent contradictions between the “sublime” and the “mundane.” Rather, the Lacanian thing stands for the impossible goodness to an extent that a subject can never forbear but has to remain a certain distance with it in order to maintain the sheer symbolic consistency of the unconscious.

426 Ibid., 54.
As one cannot withstand the extreme perfection and fullness of *das Ding* brought to oneself, this Lacanian thing must be somewhat experienced as a kind of “suffering” and “failure” in order to receive a rather consistent psychical picture of oneself. That is to say, if one stays too close to *das Ding*, one will also be “burnt by the sun” or simultaneously liquidated by an impossible fullness. All human activities are entirely nullified and exhausted under this kind of proximity to *das Ding*. Retrospectively speaking, the radically “negative” or “horrific” experience that *das Ding* brings to a subject in fact designates a constitutive failure or an inherent impossibility of full enjoyment so that complete foreclosure and exhaustion of the symbolic system can be well avoided.

However, one problem still remains in Yanne’s film. There are perhaps still certain irreducible discrepancies between the French and the Chinese toward the notion of the “renunciation of enjoyment.” In the aforementioned Olympic scene, the Chinese chief commander Pou Yen is not simply renouncing the carnivalesque and farcical underside of the opening ceremony that was supposed to demonstrate and exhibit Sino-French friendship. Although he refuses to enjoy the Olympic ceremony with the French collaborators by “mysteriously” retreating from the scene, this Maoist refusal is in fact much more radical. Halfway through the opening ceremony, the performers suddenly fight with each other, and yet the French collaborators seem to be even more ecstatic and enchanted by this fighting. They ecstatically shout, “Let the show continue!”

What is really idiosyncratic is that, while Pou Yen and his Maoist officials are leaving the venue, the French collaborators do not take their Chinese discontent seriously, as they continue to enjoy the farcical show. The Chinese soldiers are not just perplexed by the inexplicable fighting, they are also confused by the cynical attitude of the French collaborators who continue to watch the show, despite the obvious dissatisfaction of Pou Yen. Pou Yen’s retreat from the scene may not only exemplify his reservation about the failed exhibition of friendship between China and France in the opening ceremony, but his insistent leaving is indeed also a gesture of renouncing the sheer cynical enjoyment of the French collaborators and their disregard for the obvious Sino-French tension that Pou Yen shows to them. In this respect, the “thing” that Pou Yen renounces on the
part of the French collaborators in this scene and the “thing” that the aforementioned French ex-Maoists renounced on the part of the morally corrupted Chinese soldiers are somewhat different. While the ex-Maoists are obviously discontented with their moral vulnerability and that of the Chinese soldiers, the Maoist Chinese are actually provoked by the unchanging and even unrepentant cynical attitude of the French collaborators. The Chinese soldiers refuse to enjoy this kind of cynical pleasure with the French collaborators. As such, there remains an irreducible gap between these two types of renunciations of enjoyment.

Historically speaking, the political image of “China” became increasingly irrelevant in the predominant Parisian leftist intellectual scene in the mid-1970s. According to Olivier Rolin, the head of the Nouvelle résistance populaire (New Popular Resistance), the Maoist Cultural Revolution, unlike the heyday of 1968, was basically unimportant to the leftists of the Gauche prolétarienne (GP) during the 1970s. As Michael Scott Christofferson also pointed out, the icon of Mao on the front page of the GP’s newspaper La Cause du peuple had been declining from that time. Rather, the various French domestic concerns and moral issues, such as gay rights, women’s issues, and prisoners’ rights, gradually took over and usurped the previous revolutionary fascinations on China in the French radical intelligentsia. The 1970s saw the demise of the image of Mao as an invincible figure of rebellion and resistance among many French leftist intellectuals. After gradually “waking up” from the political delusions about the Stalinist Gulag and the labor camps in Maoist China, many young Western intellectuals jumped onto the bandwagon of the so-called “ethical turn” to identify with the victims and the oppressed in communist regimes. As a result, the ideal of Maoist revolution has more or less fallen from grace among many Western leftist intellectuals.

While this is true, it does not necessarily mean that “China” as such has entirely retreated and withdrawn from the French intellectual scene since the 1970s. The most radical aspect of this “Chinese linkage” pertaining to French

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429 Ibid., 113–155.
political cultures between the 1960s and the 1970s precisely resides in its stubborn refusal to casually dismiss the latent farcical underside of many Sino-French cultural encounters. That is to say, despite the apparent “impossibility” of Franco-Chinese alliances, a lot of French Maoists still renounced a convenient turn to a new ideological position and other moralizing ventures during the sixties and seventies. This kind of “Chinese thing” in relation to the French leftist cultures may not solely belong to the Maoist heyday. Rather, it is probably still somehow hooked onto the predominant capitalist individualism of today, which constantly indoctrinates the myth that endless consumptions can simply lead to a mutually beneficiary position between both the social and the individual levels.
CHAPTER 7
A TRIP TO THE VOID:
TEL QUEL, INTIMATE MILITANCY, AND THE RADICAL NEGATIVITY OF COMMUNIST CHINA

1968, the Cultural Revolution, and Tel Quel

On April 11, 1974, a delegation of five French intellectuals, including Roland Barthes, Marcelin Pleynet, François Wahl, Julia Kristeva, and Philippe Sollers, from the Mao-leaning French literary journal Tel Quel were granted a three-week stay in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and traveled to the cities of Beijing, Xi’an, Laoyang, and Nanking. Guided around the country by official representatives, the Telquelians visited many propaganda sites for Western leftist tourists, such as cadre schools, model factories, farms, museums, and hospitals, and watched performances and examples of Chinese revolutionary theater and operas. Through mainly Chinese facilitations, the French writers were also able to engage in discussions with the Chinese peasants, factory workers, intellectuals, and artists. Upon their return to Paris, each of the Tel Quel members who participated in this trip published an account of the group’s Chinese voyage. Unlike the traditional Western colonial mindset, which tended to constantly accentuate the “grand discovery” or “great disillusionment” of native countries, the group’s recounting of this trip was far more subtle and implicit in that they focused more on underlying hyperbolic feelings than on several truly obvious cultural positions. According to Philippe Forest,

[i]t is possible that, in the Chinese estrangement, something secret and decisive on which the future of Tel Quel depended played itself out… The voyage of April 1974, as we would see, would not announce the writing of any *Mea Culpa*; there would be no thundering revelation of a ‘return’ from China. But, more subtly, the Telquelians abandoned somewhere between Beijing and Xi’an that which gave their political passion its sense.430

The *Tel Quel* group disbanded a few years after this Chinese trip.\(^{431}\) Some of the initial members resided in America and adopted a far less politicized approach to literary inventions and explorations. As if completely abandoning their previous Maoist revolutionary aspirations for a more abstract kind of intellectual pursuit, the group even renamed their journal *L’Infini (Infinity)* in the 1980s.\(^{432}\) However, in this chapter, I will argue that the hyperbolic “Chinese experiences” of *Tel Quel* cannot be entirely wiped out, even if the group had forsaken their Maoist ideals after the death of Mao in 1976. I will also argue that the philosophical divergences among the *Tel Quel* writers expressed shortly after their visit to China, despite being extremely subtle and implicit, actually prompted those Western intellectuals to confront their own underlying epistemological predicament that was traditionally held by certain Eurocentric perceptions and interpretations of Third-World cultures. While the “Chinese associations” among the *Tel Quel* members were quite elusive, I will argue that the social implications of their Maoist encounters were both historically unique and profoundly relevant in helping to reconceptualize the sheer dialectical linkage between “revolution” and “writing” that is usually dichotomized as two irreconcilable traits under the predominant symbolic structure of neoliberalism today.

Unlike the major Maoist groups in France between 1966 and 1976, such as the *Parti communiste marxiste-léniniste de France* and *Gauche prolétarienne*, the *Tel Quel* group stood out as the foremost “literary Maoists” that was supposed to

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\(^{431}\) In the winter 1976 issue of *Tel Quel*, the following note appeared on the journal’s last page, under “*À propos du maoïsme*” (About Maoism): “Reports continue to appear, here and there, on *Tel Quel*’s ‘Maoism.’ Let’s make it clear that if *Tel Quel* did, for a time, attempt to inform the public about China, especially in order to counter the PCF’s systematic distortions, it cannot but continue to do the same today. For a long time, indeed, our journal has been under attacks by the ‘real Maoists.’ We willingly let them do so. The events now taking place in Beijing can definitely open the eyes of even the most hesitant ones to what one no longer refrain from naming it as the ‘Marxist structure,’ whose sordid consequences in terms of handling the power and information can now be verified…. We must do away with the myths, *all* myths.” *Tel Quel*, “*À propos du maoïsme*” [About Maoism]. *Tel Quel* 68 (Winter 1976): 104. [italics in the original]

\(^{432}\) As Kristeva admitted in an interview that was entitled “The U.S. Now,” “…the trip to China made me finally understand that this was instead a reissue, somewhat revised perhaps, but a reissue nonetheless, of the same Stalinist or Marxist-Stalinist model. It was therefore curiosity and the desire for some other solution to the impasse of the West that took me twice to the United States and once again for a third and longer stay. It was a ‘journey,’ but not necessarily ‘to the end of night,’ that is, not necessarily with an apocalyptic or desperate vision. It was more a trip in an attempt to understand, perhaps also with a particular and subjective perspective.” Julia Kristeva, Marcelin Pleynet, and Philippe Sollers, “The U.S. Now: A Conversation,” trans. Phoebe Cohen. *October* 6 (Autumn 1978): 3.
have stayed away from any concrete political struggles in the French scene. Tel Quel, which is literally translated as “thing as such” or “such as it is,” was an avant-garde Parisian literary journal founded by French writers Philippe Sollers and Jean-Edern Hallier in 1960. Seen by its critics as being far more polemical than political, the Tel Quel literary collective undeniably placed experimental concepts and revolutionary language high above that of Maoist militancy. Different from their Maoist counterparts, Tel Quel did not engage in full-blown ascetic établissement and ideological reeducation. They never considered literature and theory as being promoted only for the service of the people. In this respect, a critic branded the political moments of Tel Quel as a certain kind of Parisian hype, a “salon-styled Maoism.”

But according to Julia Kristeva, one of the most famous luminaries of the group, “Tel Quel’s Maoism is an anti-organizational, anti-partisan antidote, a utopia in pure form.” “Textual Maoism,” in the parlance of the group, was not simply a trivialization of true Maoist thought but rather its very logical extension. Coined by Alain Badiou as the “latter-day Maoists,” the Tel Quel members were indeed associated with the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Soviet official Party line for quite a long time before converging themselves into a highbrow

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433 See Michael Scott Christofferson, French Intellectuals against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 203. However, there is one exception from Julia Kristeva, whose name is listed among many other women’s names, who protested against the imprisonment of the psychiatrist Eva Forest under the Franco regime in Spain. See Ieme van der Poel, “Orientalism and the French Left: The Case of Tel Quel and China,” in Oriental Prospects: Western Literature and the Lure of the East, eds. C. C. Barfoot and Theo D’haen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 203.

434 In May 1960, the new literary journal Tel Quel, referring to the primacy of art, appeared on the Parisian scene: “I want the world and I want it as it is [tel quel], and I want it again, eternally; I cry insatiably: again!—not just for myself alone, but for the entire play and the entire spectacle; not for the spectacle alone, but fundamentally for me, since I require the spectacle—for it requires me—and because I make it necessary.” See Tel Quel, “Déclaration” [Declaration], Tel Quel 1 (Spring 1960): 1. Retrospectively speaking, Kristeva said that “Tel Quel—never a whole, but rather a provisional association of individuals as they were, tel quels—continued to develop, more than ever emphasizing the irreducible nature of writing, style, passion.” Kristeva, “My Memory’s Hyperbole,” in The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century, ed. Donna C. Stanton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 234.


437 Cadart, 28–29.

“pro-Chinese” collective in 1971.\textsuperscript{439} Within that particular period, the Telquelians saw themselves as the true heirs of the Party’s revolutionary vanguard in which they also silently approved the rigid dogmatism of the PCF during both May ’68 and the Prague Spring. However, in the early 1970s, the conflicts between \textit{Tel Quel} and the PCF escalated. In the French Communist festival held in September 1971, the banning of the book \textit{De la Chine (On China)} by Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, a close associate with the Parisian group, catalyzed the break-up between \textit{Tel Quel} and the PCF.

As Macciocchi stated in her book, “[t]here is not a trace of alienation in China, nor of those neuroses or that inner disintegration of the individual found in the parts of the world dominated by consumerism. The Chinese world is compact, integrated, an absolute whole.”\textsuperscript{440} Her overt optimism about Maoist China was, however, heavily criticized by the rank-and-file communists as being far too uncritical. The PCF’s decision to censor Macciocchi’s study was seen by \textit{Tel Quel} as a “sinophobic” reaction. Moreover, Sollers and other members of \textit{Tel Quel} accused the PCF of being increasingly sluggish in world revolutionary movements, as well as being completely ignorant about the new historical reality demonstrated by the Chinese model. The way in which the PCF dealt with China was, according to the Telquelians, analogous to the capitalist abjection of Stalinism as a way to eventually deny the possibility of collective actions. In a polemical tract called “\textit{Positions du movement de Juin 71}” (Positions of the Movement of June 71), the \textit{Tel Quel} collective wrote:

\begin{quote}
Alain Badiou, “Roads to Renegacy: Interview by Eric Hazan,” trans. David Fernbach. \textit{New Left Review} 53 (September–October 2008): 131. For example, the relationship between \textit{Tel Quel} and the PCF was deliberately made to be highly symbolic. Their alliance was marked by a kind of mutual calculation and opportunistic means. For the Telquelians, they viewed the PCF as the best mouthpiece and most powerful propaganda machine during the mid-1960s, and believed that affiliation with the Party was advantageous for the group to work out various literary and theoretical experiments, as well as profiling their reputation and extending their readership in Parisian leftist circles. Kristeva, “My Memory’s Hyperbole,” 231. While this is true, the PCF also saw \textit{Tel Quel} as an ideal new partner for the Party after the death of the Communist-Surrealist André Breton in 1966. According to Niilo Kauppi, the PCF hoped that \textit{Tel Quel} could help the Party to restore its competitiveness in the intellectual market, as well as reinforce the positions of young Party intellectuals who had considerable cultural capital and who promoted theoretical productions in return. Niilo Kauppi, \textit{The Making of an Avant-Garde: Tel Quel} (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 154–155.

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‘The reader of Tel Quel’ … will see that, inside and outside Tel Quel, there are two lines, two views, two antagonistic objectives. Out of the issue of the struggle between these two lines results either the victory of the avant-garde, or its concession in academicism, opportunism, and repetition. Comrades! We’re not in 1920 or 1930, not even in 1960, but in 1971. [Our] avant-garde is not formalism, futurism, surrealism, or a ‘new nouveau roman,’ but rather a breakthrough of revolutionary production for today. And today, that is, which has seen the Chinese Cultural Revolution, May 1968 in France, and, on the international scene, a resurgence and irreversible spread of the revolutionary theory and practice of our time: Mao Zedong’s thinking.  

As Margaret Atack suggested, Tel Quel demonstrated a “strange paradox” for the fact that “it was close to the ideological and cultural sensibilities of May”, and yet politically it also supported the conservative PCF and the main trade union Confédération générale du travail (General Confederation of Work).  

Atack believed that Tel Quel’s subsequent passion for China, America, and eventually Jewish culture illustrated that its revolutionary project merely revolved around a kind of political hollowness and symbolic superficiality. Badiou’s own Maoist group, L’Union des communistes de France marxiste-léniniste (The Communist Union of French Marxist-Leninist – UCFML), was the only French leftist group that collaborated regularly with Tel Quel during the early 1970s. Unlike the predominant trend of French Maoism, both the UCFML and Tel Quel emphasized literary militancy and theoretical praxis until the affinity of the two groups dissolved in the mid-1970s.

441 Tel Quel, “Positions du mouvement de Juin 71” [Positions of Movement of June 71]. Tel Quel 47 (Autumn 1971): 135–136. In its declaration article, Tel Quel claimed that “[r]evisionism’s inevitable censoring of China is the price it pays so that this hegemony remains total…. We understand how, then, under these conditions the Chinese Cultural Proletarian Revolution, the greatest historical event of our epoch, so disturbs the revisionist reasoning that they will do everything to falsify it. And so, for our part, we will do everything to illuminate it, to analyze it, and to support it.” See Tel Quel, “Déclaration sur l’hégémonie idéologique bourgeoisie/révisionnisme” [Declaration on the Bourgeois/Revisionist Ideological Hegemony]. Tel Quel 47 (Autumn 1971): 134.

442 Margaret Atack, May 68 in French Fiction and Film: Rethinking Society, Rethinking Representation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 75.

443 Ibid.

444 The main disagreement was, curiously enough, centered on the “shifting” ideological orientation of Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, who was a famous Italian communist journalist commonly known among European intellectuals. She was also the first communist intellectual to bring Tel Quel closer to Maoist China. Badiou’s UCFML argued that Macciocchi, after her trip to China in 1970, had further leaned toward the ideology of “fascist sexuality” by mixing up various supposedly incommensurable ideologies—revisionism, fascism, and women’s liberation—as a single dogma. For the initial collaboration and ideological disagreement between the Maoist group headed by Badiou and the Tel Quel writers, see Forest, 472–474. There was also a criticizing campaign held at the University of Vincennes in which Badiou was involved, deliberately targeting both “Italian revisionists”—Macciocchi and film director Michelangelo Antonioni, who had just made a highly controversial and perhaps “dismissive” documentary on Maoist China.
Suffice it to say that the idea of Tel Quel’s Chinese visit was primarily initiated by Macciocchi.445 As François Dosse elaborated, “[t]he 1974 trip to China was based on the idea of a possible leap forward thanks to the ‘Cultural Revolution,’ even though the Cultural Revolution had been over since 1969 and the Chinese Communist Party again had an iron grip on the Chinese population.”446 Through this Chinese trip, the Telquelians wanted to find out whether Mao’s China was equally confined by the same kind of Western cultural unconsciousness in social upheaval—the logic of Oedipal struggles between father and son that was somewhat recorded in the aftermath of May ’68. But while Macciocchi was the initiator of the visit, the true organizer of this trip was Sollers, who had friends and connections in the Chinese embassy in Paris. Elisabeth Roudinesco recounted, “As for Sollers, he took care of the world revolution with his friends in the embassy. From his office on the rue Jacob, he directed an ardent campaign against the thought of Confucius: exactly what was going on in Peking.”447 That is to say, the campaign of Pi-lin-Pi-kong (Criticize Lin Piao, Criticize Confucius) that was fervently happening in Mao’s China gave a certain historical parallel and synergy to the leftist campaign that Sollers raged against, namely the restoration of the conservative state after May ’68.

Elsewhere, Sollers repeatedly conceded his admiration for the poetic qualities of the Cultural Revolution that recalled the romantic spirit of May ’68. In 1976, Sollers, during a series of radio interviews with Maurice Clavel, gave a description of the Cultural Revolution that appeared to be even more similar to Paris than to Beijing:

May 1968 would not have happened, I think, without the turbulence that Chinese cities had just raised, the youth in the streets, the migration of people suddenly drawn up in a state of apprehension, the da zibaos (big-character posters), contradictory posters, in short, a whole political mass art covering the old walls of human resignation.... This time, in any case, will remain as one of the key moments in recent history, like the Paris Commune, as in May 1968.448

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For Sollers, the Maoist Cultural Revolution as a whole was a gigantic literary laboratory, an extensive poetic workshop. The *dazibaos* and ideological posters were actually examples of the creative outburst of street calligraphy:

I think this workshop in Nanjing where calligraphy of a Chinese ideogram paths before me as a poem. Another way of being in space, gesture, language, meaning. Never a Western university will understand easily such style of getting involved immediately in the signs, making it as revolutionary consciousness….

May 68 in France, workers struggles recover spontaneously such type of written protest. Is it quite a coincidence?  

Admittedly, Sollers said that it was Chinese literature and philosophy, rather than politics, which brought him closer to Mao’s China in the first place. His novel *Drame* (*Event*) was a literary experiment dedicated to “China.” Sollers said, “I was introduced to China through literature, that is to say through my personal experience…. *Drame* was published that year [1965]; it is an attempt at finding an ‘empty’ narrative form, as ‘empty’ as possible. It was an on-going experiment, awaiting some kind of confirmation in the Chinese symbolic fabric.” In his view, it was precisely the group’s intermittent commitment to revolutionary language that eventually helped sustain their continuous Maoist engagements, even at a time when most of the French Maoists had disbanded in the mid-1970s. As he further elaborated to his critics,

[The Maoist Telquelist was Maoist as a posture of dissent in order to rebel. He immediately found himself in contradiction with the Maoists, that is to say, with

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449 Philippe Sollers, “Mao contre Confucius” [Mao against Confucius]. *Tel Quel* 59 (Autumn 1974): 18. In this respect, he summed up his Chinese fascination as a kind of “aesthetic reeducation” for his French compatriots: “I wanted to educate very quickly the people [the French Maoists] who were in charge of the insurrection of ’68; I wanted to draw them out of their stereotyped habits—which incidentally they still have not abandoned; this goes to prove that the revolution of language and the revolution in action must go hand in hand. This was an idea inherited from the formalists or the surrealists, an illusion among the European avant-garde of the twentieth century. It should be given up altogether because it is a mistake to think that everything must march to the sound of the same drum.” See Shuhsi, Kao and Philippe Sollers, “Paradise Lost? An Interview with Philippe Sollers.” *SubStance* 10, no. 1 (1981): 43; 36.

450 In this novel, Sollers mocked those who imagined that they could find their true identities by reorienting to the East: “But East? I’m asking you how to go east? Why this vague gesturing? Imprecise? East? E. A. S. T. How to head gradually east? To the right of the image, in other words…. Couldn’t we change places for a second? I’d really like to see where I am, see myself through you.” Sollers’s aggressive questioning of the reader resides in the double meaning of the French word “est.” In French usage, “est” can be referred to as both “is” and “east.” Thus, Sollers mocks Western Orientalists who desire to lean toward the East as a confused (re)search for being. See Sollers, *Event*, trans. Bruce Benderson and Ursule Molinaro (New York: Red Dust, 1986), 12.

451 Kao and Sollers, 34.

452 Sollers wrote: “Meanwhile the non-Telquelist Maoists vanished into thin air, under the bright light of reality, that is to say of scientific rationality. I don’t know what became of them. *Tel Quel* continues whereas the Maoists disappeared.” Kao and Sollers, “Paradise Lost?,” 42.

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the cohorts of Maoists who were thinking according to an archaic model, i.e. the return to the strict tradition of Marxism, to Stalinism. The Maoist Telquelist of that time found himself isolated in more than one way. He knew that the Cultural Revolution was a very important phenomenon, but he simply could not make other Maoists share his interpretation. He was in contradiction with them because of what he proposed: for example, on the literary plane, a highly refined technique and product, a very important laboratory for experimentation. 453

Blandness, Doxa, and the End of Hermeneutics

According to Lisa Lowe, the lyrical fascination with Mao’s China among the major members of Tel Quel was in fact an opportunistic atonement to compensate for or redeem most of their original aloofness and stubborn inactivity in May ’68. 454 Their turn to Maoism in France during the mid-1970s could have had something to do with a new promotional strategy to gain readership. During the anarchic and libertarian eruptions of May ’68, the Tel Quel writers did not actually lend their support to the activist movements but rather clung steadfastly to the PCF, subordinating mass spontaneity to the Party’s principles and stifled ideologies. 455 As a result, they lost many readers. Intellectual historian Richard Wolin suggested that “[w]hereas the journal’s peak sales during its 1960s structuralist, pro-PCF phase had never exceeded twelve thousand copies, the two special issues on China, both of which appeared in [1972 and 1974], sold upwards of twenty-five thousand copies.” 456

Anne-Marie Brady argued that Western political tourism during the Maoist heyday always involved high ideological management by the host: “Every

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453 Ibid., 41. Unlike the eloquent New Philosophers who were stirred up by the predominant “Gulag question” in the mid-1970s, Michael Scott Christofferson argued that, rather than having instantly declared their disillusionment with Mao’s China, “Sollers and other Telqueliens held onto Maoism as late as the summer of 1976,” as they chose to neglect the major reactionary sentiments of the time. See Christofferson, 203–204.
455 Adopting a quasi-Leninist interpretation of the May ’68 events, Tel Quel’s overall mistrust toward the student revolts was indeed reflected in their “Mai 1968” (May 1968) manifesto published in the summer of 1968. The whole manifesto insists on the necessity of the vanguard Party. Yet what seemed to be more at stake for Tel Quel was that the May movements simply lacked a coherent and objective theoretical foundation. According to the group, all that dominated the May ’68 enterprise was the “pseudo-revolutionary lexicography” such as the likes of “power to the imagination” and “creative imagination of the masses,” the kinds of Situationist slogans that were highly deprived of Marxist elements and objective analysis. The Tel Quel members were convinced that the pseudo-revolutionary gestures of the ’68 revolutionaries would lead to nowhere aside from repeating the Surrealist delusions of the 1920s. See Tel Quel, “Mai 1968” [May 1968]. Tel Quel 34 (Summer 1968): 94–95.
Western visitor … fell under the Chinese policy for the management of foreign visitors … the “Chinese shadow play” by which foreigners’ perceptions were carefully stage managed by the centralised leadership of the Chinese Communist Party." In fact, according to Enzensberger, the notion of “delegate visit” that the Chinese proposed to *Tel Quel* was first and foremost a Soviet legacy. Paul Hollander said that the reason the communist officials usually offered good hospitality to foreign visitors, especially the famous intellectuals and experts, was that the act had a latent ideological rationale. He argued that “[i]n many visitors such generous and attentive treatment created a disarming sense of obligation. They are not ‘ bribed,’ but they could not help feeling that it is not nice to turn around and be harshly critical of those who showered them with kindness, who took such good care of them.”

Partially taken as an opportunistic means, Sollers invited Jacques Lacan, the most prominent psychoanalyst in France at the time, to go to China with them. “Lacan chez Mao,” a headline that Sollers had once dreamed of, would receive wider publicity to promote counterviews to the PCF. In Sollers’s view, if Lacan went to China, “the objective alliance of Lacanianism and revisionism” would at last be broken,” according to Lacan’s biographer Roudinesco. While Lacan first accepted *Tel Quel*’s invitation to join them on their China visit, he enigmatically

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458 As a Russian invention, according to Enzensberger, “[t]he delegate is always cared for by an organization. He isn’t supposed to—no, he isn’t allowed to—worry about anything. Usually he receives a personal guide who functions as translator, nanny, and watchdog. Almost all contact with the host country is mediated through this companion, which makes distinct the delegate’s segregation from the social realities surrounding him. The companion is responsible for the traveler’s program. There is no traveling without a program. The guest may express his wishes in this respect; however he remains dependent on the organization that invited him. In this respect he is treated as though he were still under age. The combination of being spoiled and impotent is reminiscent of infantile situations.” See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Tourist of the Revolution,” trans. Michael Roloff, in *Critical Essays: Hans Magnus Enzensberger*, eds. Reinhold Grimm and Bruce Armstrong (New York: Continuum, 1982), 165.
broke his promise shortly before the trip.\textsuperscript{461} However, what was even more disappointing for the group was that the trip to China may not have totally matched the same level of enthusiasm that the Telquelians had in the first place. Sollers even conceded that in the late 1970s, “[t]he romantic vision of an insurrectional China inventing another model for society was bound to result in a reenactment of the Soviet experience, which Chinese history itself has since corroborated.”\textsuperscript{462}

However, the question of whether the Telquelians were really idealizing or orientalizing “China” remains largely debatable to date. Even to their most severe critics such as Lowe, despite being highly dismissive of the Telquelian visit to China as a kind of “political fetish” and “reified utopian moment” to cover up their sheer sluggishness during May ’68, she admitted that the various Tel Quel texts on the PRC, upon closer inspections, were “at once both strikingly different from the earlier French colonial orientalism and disturbingly reminiscent of its postures and rhetorics.”\textsuperscript{463} I argue that there are two kinds of literary approaches to looking at the symbolic fabric of Mao’s China and even the communist rhetoric at large within the ensemble of Tel Quel. This gap pertaining to the group had been rendered even more clear and explicit shortly after the Chinese trip. As such, I argue that the tiny discrepancy among the Tel Quel members was especially

\textsuperscript{461} According to the Telquelians, it was probably due to the ongoing Pi-lin-Pi-kong campaign in the PRC that discouraged Lacan’s decision to go to China. In the special issue “En Chine” (In China) published in the fall of 1974, the Tel Quel collective wrote: “He was supposed to come with us to China. Unfortunately, as he says himself when making his apologies, he wouldn’t have had enough time to brush up his knowledge of the language. Personally, we’d have liked to see Lacan talking off the cuff with the Chinese people. It would have been an interesting experience. Admittedly, he had begun to be uneasy about the anti-Confucian campaign and the fact that Confucius is being presented as the ideologue of slavery in China. But as to the criticism of the ‘will of heaven,’ ‘innate knowledge,’ and ‘a moderate approach to usual’—can criticism of these things shock an established psychoanalyst? Well, perhaps.” Tel Quel, “À propos de ‘La Chine sans utopie’” [About the ‘China without Utopia’]. Tel Quel 59 (Autumn 1974): 7. However, according to Macciocchi, it was the Chinese proposal of the “delegate visit” that really upset Lacan and discouraged his decision to visit. See Macciocchi, Deux mille ans de bonheur [Two Million Years of Happiness] (Paris: Editions Headset & Fasquelle, 1983), 433.

\textsuperscript{462} Kao and Sollers, 36.

\textsuperscript{463} Lowe, Critical Terrains, 163; 137. Lisa Lowe particularly identified that Kristeva’s book About Chinese Women, for all the controversies it generated, seemed to occupy “a peculiarly paradoxical position within the French orientalist tradition.” See Ibid., “Des Chinoises: Orientalism, Psychoanalysis, and Feminine Writing,” in Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva’s Writing, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993), 150. In fact, the Telquelian “Maoist” texts, rather than carrying directly the orientalist implications of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as one critic suggested, may have helped revise and revitalize what was meant by “orientalism” instead. See Van der Poel, “Orientalism and the French Left,” 208.
crucial, as it helped keep the group from being overtly categorized as an ensemble of Western Orientalists.

For example, while Sollers may have fervently called the *daizabos* poetic ideograms in Mao’s China, another prominent intellectual of the group, Roland Barthes, saw the same kind of ideological banner that welcomed the *Tel Quel* visitors as highly vulgar and cliché.\(^{464}\) In fact, it was Barthes himself, among all the members of *Tel Quel* who went on the trip, who harbored the most skeptical view of and reserved position on the Maoist Cultural Revolution. As an open admirer of Zen Buddhism in Japan, Barthes was thought to have entertained the most dismissive opinions about the revolutionary possibilities of Maoist China. After the trip, Barthes wrote a companion piece called “*Alors, la Chine?*” (Well, and China?).\(^{465}\) He began his essay as follows:

> When you go to China, you carry in your baggage a thousand urgent questions, urgent and seemingly natural ones. What are things like there with respect to sexuality, women, the family, morality? What is the situation in the humanities, in linguistics, in psychiatry? We shall shake the tree of knowledge hoping the answer will fall to the ground and we will be able to return home bringing back with us our chief intellectual nourishment: a secret deciphered. But nothing falls from the tree. In a way, we go back home (except for the political answer) with: **nothing**.\(^{466}\)

Compared to other Telquelians, Barthes was particularly detached and self-reclusive throughout the whole Chinese journey. According to an account by Kristeva about their entourage, Barthes did not seem to be enjoying his stay in the PRC. He often harbored little desire to join the group in attending the well-handled itineraries and scheduled visits.

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\(^{465}\) “*Alors, la Chine?*” was originally published in *Le Monde* on May 24, 1974. This article was translated into English by Lee Hildreth and was reprinted in *Discourse* 8 (Fall–Winter 1986–1987). My quotation is thereby based on the English translation.

Kristeva wrote:

In China, in 1974, a bus took us through millennia of history which, at the time, was inaccessible to most Westerners. We pored greedily over each stone, each statue, each jewel, each character. As for Barthes, he often stayed in the bus or waited for us at the museum door. He was bored by this commemoration, this linearity, this dream of flirtation.467

Shortly before his departure for Beijing, Barthes went to London to give a seminar. While he was there, he explained to the seminar’s organizer that he had to go to China for reasons that were mainly due to his intellectual image. He thought that he would never be forgiven if he did not make such a trip as a radical writer.468 Yet, in his Roland Barthes: A Biography, Louis-Jean Calvet revealed that from the very beginning, Barthes obviously showed clear enthusiasm in recording and listening to every detail (from Mao’s teachings in nursery schools and the explanations about contraception) that was heard in the PRC.469 Upon their arrival, Barthes and the rest of the group “went along quite happily with the official rhetoric of friendship in China, sometimes wearing ‘Mao costume’ and asking serious questions, even though they received only bureaucratic formulae in reply.”470

So, what exactly made Barthes lose hope in decoding China all of a sudden? Unlike his hypothetical notion of Japan, for Barthes, China was so linguistically inconsistent that it seemed to constantly annul its own narration.471

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467 Kristeva, “La voix de Barthes” [The Voice of Barthes]. Communications 36 (1982): 121. In a similar vein, Louis-Jean Calvet added: “Then gradually [Barthes] lost interest in trying to decode what was going on around him and imperceptibly withdrew into himself, making plain his indifference and voluntarily excluding himself from the group. On one occasion, when Philippe Sollers and Francois Wahl were involved in a heated discussion about Buddhism and the Cultural Revolution, he went off to his room, not wanting to witness (according to Sollers) such a confrontation between his friends. He did not take part in the group visit to see the Guardians of the Tombs of Xian, preferring to stay behind on his own. He refused to bathe in the hot springs of the Black Horse mountain above Xian.” See Louis-Jean Calvet, Roland Barthes: A Biography, trans. Sarah Wykes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 200.

468 Ibid., 202.

469 Ibid., 200.

470 Ibid. Apart from wearing Maoist clothes, the Telquelians also bought some souvenirs from China with great enthusiasm. See also Forest, 480.

471 When Barthes talked about the Japanese haiku, he commented on it in terms of this little “something” related to decoding desire: “The haiku is something else again: it’s the essential, musical future of the fragment, its form of becoming. I encountered it in its real and historical nature during my travels in Japan. I have a profound admiration, that is, a profound desire, for this form…. The haiku is a very short form, but unlike the maxim, an equally short form, it is characterized by its matteness. It engenders no sense, but at the same time it is not non-sense.” See
To him, China resembled a text that completely lacked a symbolic function—it was nothing but a pure blank surface, a textual corpus that simply contained no meanings to elucidate, no bodies to eroticize. The “China” described by Barthes was therefore radically boring. One critic summarized Barthes’s views on Japan and China:

In contrast to the eminently savory Japan, China does not create for him the same link between savoir and saveur. As with Japan, China is also a staging of the nothing to Barthes…. But this ‘nothing’ is not shot through with the pleasure of signs, with desire. For Barthes, the writing of travel has to be grounded in desire.

Bernard-Henri Lévy once asked Barthes in an interview why he wrote barely anything after he returned from China. Barthes replied, “I wrote very little, but I saw and listened to everything with close attention and interest. Writing demands something else, however, some kind of piquancy in addition to what is seen and heard, something I didn’t find in China.” He continued: “Signs in themselves are never enough for me, I must have the desire to read them…. In China, I found absolutely no possibility of erotic, sensual, or amorous interest or investment.” In this sense, Barthes admitted that in China there was nothing close to the haiku of Japan, which could at least motivate him to write. He wrote in his Chinese diary, “I don’t know how to look at—I resist looking at—what presents itself as watchable—what I cannot surprise.”

Within Barthes’s universe, his major disappointment with the trip to the PRC was that China appeared to be a country that was on its way to being largely “phenomenological.” That is to say, everything in China seemed to be merely

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“descriptive,” or more precisely, “descriptive without a final signified,” in almost every facet of life. Barthes wrote:

In short, China offers very little to be read aside from its political Text. That Text is everywhere: no area is exempt from it. In all the discourses we heard, Nature (the natural, the eternal) no longer speaks (except on one point, curiously resistant—the family, which would seem to have been spared by the critique currently directed against Confucius). 478

The various propaganda campaigns in the PRC, according to Barthes, revealed nothing but compulsory displays of pre-ordained political clichés and stereotypes. The Chinese campaign was therefore a sheer “phenomenological” form of work which undoubtedly involved and encompassed massive descriptive details but ultimately revealed nothing new at all, just like a meaningless string of “bricks” (a term that Barthes borrowed from cybernetics). In referring to the Maoist slogans of “class struggles” in a Chinese factory, Barthes wrote that “[they get] rarely an answer to a concrete question such as ‘who are the class enemies in your factory?’ There are: numbers and bricks.” 479

For instance, while Barthes was rereading his notes during his stay in China and trying to formally index and reorder the various details, he immediately “realize[d] that if [he] published them as they stand, it would be exactly another ‘Antonioni.’” 480 By “Antonioni,” Barthes was referring to the overheated campaign of “criticizing Antonioni’s film Chung Kuo” (parallel to the Pi-lin-Pi-kong campaign) sparked in early 1974. Antonioni’s 1972 film was termed “anti-China” and even “fascist cinema” by the Chinese bureau office two years after its release. For Barthes, the “Anti-Antonioni campaign” seemed to have no real substance at all. It was just a chain of empty descriptions, a plane of “neutral space,” a serial of “bricks,” and a purely “phenomenological” experience. The slandering target was not all that important in the campaign since every “anti-Chinese opponent” was simply equivalent to the Party authorities. The symbolic associations of Antonioni with Confucius, Soviet revisionists, Beethoven, and

478 Ibid., “Well, and China?,” 118.
479 Ibid., Carnets du voyage en Chine, 33. See also Ibid., 108; 204; 207.
480 Ibid., 215.
even fascism were so logically loose and superficial that they merely provoked a sense of ridicule to Barthes.\footnote{Ibid., 44; 214.}

However, the film was tragically used as a scapegoat for the internal power struggles between Premier Zhou Enlai, who originally granted the Italian director permission to film in China, and the “Gang of Four,” who were desperate to bring Zhou down from the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In the text “\textit{Cher Antonioni…}” (Dear Antonioni…), written for the awarding of the Archiginnasio d’Oro prize to Antonioni on January 28, 1980, Barthes wrote:

\begin{quote}
It was your film on China that prompted us to want to go there; and if this film was provisionally banned by those who should have understood that the strength of its love was superior to any propaganda, this is because it was sentenced according to a reflex of power and not in accordance with a demand for truth. The artist is without power, but he has some relationship with truth.\footnote{Barthes, “\textit{Cher Antonioni…}” [Dear Antonioni…], in \textit{Œuvres complètes vol. 5, 1977–1980} [\textit{Complete Works vol. 5, 1977–1980}], ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 902–903.}
\end{quote}

Similar to the disappointment of Barthes, Marcelin Pleynet, who is an expert in Chinese art history, was also sickened by the excessive dogmatism in the PRC. During his three-week stay in China, Pleynet found that the speeches and actions of the Chinese hosts (from the tourist guides to the theatrical actors and the Party officials) were always fully, if not unnecessarily, self-monitored, (melodramatized, and banally politicized to an extent that he found deeply suspicious and unsatisfactory.\footnote{Pleynet believed that the various discourses and the unearthed objects given and explained by the museum interpreters during their stay in Xi’an were usually half convincing and depressing, as if he himself knew the “truth” of Chinese history more than the Chinese themselves. See Pleynet, \textit{Le voyage en Chine}, 84–85.} In one instance, a planned trip to two ancient temples was suddenly canceled simply because of, as Pleynet suggested, the Party’s anti-religious stance under the heels of the \textit{Pi-lin-Pi-kong} campaign. He wrote:

\begin{quote}
They tell us they’re closed, but it’s quite apparently the same Marxist naïveté which reduces six thousand years of history into a few vulgar sociological terms, which alienates us away from anything that might give such history a dimension worthy of it. In sum, everything that doesn’t bring into the focus of the most stereotyped fictions (of culture or history) is either hidden or forbidden.\footnote{Ibid., 85.}
\end{quote}
Marcelin Pleynet recalled a similar incident with Barthes on the notions of food and cuisine in revolutionary China. From the beginning, the Chinese hosts seemed to serve tea to the Telqueliens as a kind of polite and modest gesture, and yet the French visitors soon found out that this friendly hospitality was a kind of didactic lesson designated for the French visitors. There actually was no pure “modesty” and “sincerity” in Maoist China:

While we got to the house/museum where the first CCP congress took place, in front of the red table with a teapot and several teacups on it, R. B. tells us that he had initially thought that the table was established for us, and that we had to sit on the seats (for a moment I had had the same idea). It was explained in the moment that we were facing a reconstruction of the room (table, cups, and teapot included) in which the first CCP congress took place.485

However, amidst all the political stereotypes and clichés that the Chinese guides and interpreters displayed, Pleynet believed that they could not “keep one from seeing the masses of the villages and countryside which engages him more attentively, with curiosity and calm, into another way of life.”486 Pleynet began by describing his discomfort with what he had originally felt was the political purpose of the trip. He said that he felt totally bewildered and out of place in China: “I very quickly found myself too far out of my element to reconcile whatever was familiar about the Marxist arguments put forth by our Chinese interlocutors with my own presence in this faraway country, much less an even more faraway culture and a past.”487 In other words, what actually disappointed Pleynet was not the “people” but the “Party” in the PRC, and that the only way out of the political staging in China was to revert back to its grandeur of Nature and History. On Pleynet’s attempt to return to the purity and innocence of China, Eric Hayot argued: “[This] indicates his belief that these representations have only the most tenuous link to actual China—a sense that China (and Chinese people) are somehow more than what they seem to be in the museums or on stage.”488 As an elitist specializing in art history, Pleynet seemed to know what the “real” China

485 See Ibid., 41. Elsewhere, Pleynet wrote: “It seemed to me that R. Barthes wrote in Le Monde, our Chinese hosts were especially attentive, ‘unusually attentive, not to our identity but to our attention,’ and that every encounter or visit we had was determined first of all by the quality of that attentiveness.” See Ibid., “Pourquoi la Chine populaire?” [Why Is China Popular?]. Tel Quel 59 (Fall 1974): 34.
486 Ibid., Le voyage en Chine, 93. [my emphasis added]
487 Ibid., 14.
488 Eric Hayot, Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel Quel (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 144–145. [italics in the original]
was beyond the kitschy surface of the current Chinese political campaign. In commenting on Pleynet’s pre-ordained elitism being similar to the rigidity of the CCP, Hayot added: “The refusal to ‘believe in’ or enjoy the representations by the Communist Party points out to the limits of Pleynet’s political commitment. He remains, in front of Chinese theater, a demanding reader of culture.”

What is actually at issue here is the very cultural position that Pleynet was bound to during his compulsive idealization of Chinese history and its people. Ironically, Pleynet’s “sublime” demands in front of (or behind?) the Chinese socialist theater depended on a predigested and quite “vulgar” Orientalist view of China, namely, a sense of their profound historicity and calmness of the ordinary people. When Pleynet criticized the Party’s new revolutionary theater, he complained about it in the name of Chinese history and nature as a powerful backdrop and disagreed with its official political line. In this sense, Rey Chow described the position as symptomatic of many Western sinologists who assumed or in fact appropriated China’s classical culture: “In the case of the sinologist’s relationship with his beloved object, ‘China,’ melancholia is complicated by the presence of a third party—the living members of the Chinese culture, who provide the sinologist with a means of externalizing his loss and directing his blame.”

Yet unlike Pleynet’s idiosyncratic naturalization of an immovable pre-revolutionary China, Barthes somehow recognized a crucial and singular element in the PRC—textual “blandness” or “peacefulness”—that may well have annulled the “war of meanings” that had long-prevailed in the West, especially during May ’68 where speech was the predominant form. According to Charles Forsdick, Barthes’s short article on China “focused not (as was the case with Japan) on the very existence of an alternative, independent system of signification,

489 Ibid., 145.
490 Rey Chow, Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 4. [italics in the original]
491 Barthes, “Well, and China?,” 118. In addition, the “war of languages” was also one of the key features that Barthes believed characterized the events of May ’68. Diana Knight commented: “In short he found himself caught up in an exacerbated form of the ‘war of languages’ that he had probably hoped—along with the events and discourse of May ’68—to leave behind him in France.” See Diana Knight, Barthes and Utopia: Space, Travel and Writing (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 122–123.
but instead on the sheer absence of such system.” Nevertheless, Diana Knight commented that it was precisely the subtlety of Barthes’s response to China that has always been misinterpreted by his “intellectual” readers as a mere denigration of the PRC. Barthes’s personal response to his critics after his trip seemed to confirm this kind of misunderstanding as well. As Barthes said, he was not expressively “choosing” China like many Western critics did. Rather, he was silently “acquiescing” China and yet his critics failed to perceive this important subtle dimension.

Barthes admitted that what the so-called “public intellectual” wanted from China was always a conclusive choice, a concrete answer purified of any ambiguity and subtlety: “[O]ne was to come out of China like a bull crashing out of a toril in the crowded arena, furious or triumphant.” As for the Chinese trip, Barthes concluded: “About China, an immense object, and for many a crucial one, I have tried to produce—this was my truth—a discourse that was neither assertive nor negative, not neutral—a commentary whose tone would be: no comment.” Barthes’s remark was clearly at odds with Pleynet, who asserted that there was “something” more still undisclosed in Mao’s China:

We believe our intellectual task is always to discover a meaning. China seems to resist yielding this meaning, not because it hides it, but more subversively, because (in this respect very un-Confucian) it defeats the constitution of concepts, themes, names. It does not divide up the targets of knowledge as we do; the semantic field is disorganized, the question indiscreetly addressed to meaning is turned inside out into a question of meaning, our knowledge is turned into a figment of the imagination: the ideological objects that our society constructs are silently declared im-pertinent. It is the end of hermeneutics.

**Rebels, Restoration, and the Chinese Model Theater**

For this particular “no comment” in relation to Mao’s China, Diana Knight nevertheless saw it as a profoundly ethical category within Barthes’s theoretical universe. It is perhaps at this disjunction that Barthes discovered a certain “exceptional” phenomenon in the PRC. That is to say, if everything was

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492 Forsdick, “‘(In)connaissance de l’Asie’,” 70–71.
493 Knight, 191.
495 Ibid., “Well, and China?,” 120. [highlighted in the original]
496 Ibid., 116–117. [highlighted in the original]
497 Knight, 183.
submitted to the political text in China, there would be some internal resistance, no matter how elusive they were, within this gigantic text as well. As Barthes suggested, although political doxa (which is composed by chains of stereotypes) was overwhelming in China, this ideological stiffness was not entirely incomprehensible since it was still made up of a certain combinatory structure of language. Barthes should have decoded this doxa “through the slips or the marks of certain stereotypes.” He added in his diary: “Furthermore, active, individual thinking (‘political consciousness,’ analytical skill) should be readable in the gaps of the stereotypical fabric (whereas for us, to make anything new, to escape from the mortification of common belief, the only way is to kill the stereotypes themselves).” Elsewhere in “Alors, la Chine?,” Barthes wrote: “Then, is there no liberty? Yes, indeed there is. Beneath the crust of rhetoric the Text is sizzling with energy (desire, intelligence, struggle, work, everything that divides, overflows boundaries, passes).” At the end of this article, Barthes moved toward the very “exception” of theatrical performance in China to account for a rather unique relationship between “hysterical theatricality” and “everyday life” during the time of the Cultural Revolution:

In this country, the site of a great historical experiment, heroism is not cumbersome. It could be said that it is confined, like an abscess, to the stage of the opera, the ballet, posters, where is this an honor, or is it mischievousness? it is always Woman who receives the task of making the body rear up on its political high horse, while in the streets, in the shops, in the schools, on country roads, a people (who in twenty-five years have already constructed a great nation) move, work, drink tea or do gymnastics without theatrics, without commotion, without striking poses, in a word, without hysteria.

However, although he refers to the achievement of Maoist China as the “great historical experiment” and the construction of “a great nation,” this does not necessarily mean that Barthes had simply valorized all revolutionary experiments in the PRC. On the one hand, Barthes tended to praise the simple and

498 Barthes, Carnets du voyage en Chine, 34.
499 Ibid. [italics in the original]
500 Ibid.
501 Ibid., “Well, and China?,” 118.
502 Ibid. As Eric Hayot suggested, “[f]or Barthes, Chinese theater, by confining itself to the stage, seemed to offer a defense against the theatricality of everyday life.” Hayot, Chinese Dreams, 136. That is to say, if all the theatrical poses were confined only to the Chinese revolutionary theater, then the everyday realm would be, simultaneously, freed from the various theatrics and lyrical exaggerations that displayed a certain internal playfulness and freedom within this same political text.
modest relation to social meaning within the everyday realm in China, as Chinese people lived “without theatrics” and “without striking poses.” In the PRC, hysterical heroism disappeared from daily life insofar as the exclusive site of its performance was left only to the Maoist revolutionary theater. On the other hand, Barthes also tended to hold a highly reserved attitude toward the role of female characters in Chinese revolutionary theater. Elsewhere in his *Carnets du voyage en Chine*, Barthes voiced his discontent over the theoretical gestures of the Chinese revolutionary heroines. He believed that the gestures (especially the singing) of the Chinese actresses were extremely tacky in that they were like “mannequins” displayed in an outlandish shop window.503 Barthes thereby offered two possible interpretations of the role of Maoist women in parentheses—“honor” or “mischievousness.”504

In fact, the role of “woman” in Chinese model theater was thought to be the most irritating subject, “a nagging and potential ‘problem’,,” as one critic argued, that greatly divided the views of Maoist social experiments among the *Tel Quel* writers.505 In the same vein as Barthes, Philippe Sollers made a similar comment and curious query regarding the heroine in Chinese model opera: “[I]s it a coincidence that the principal characters in the operas are women, that it is women who are most often charged with housing the cultural memory?”506 I argue that it was Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva, the only female traveler of the group, who offered the most interesting and profound insights on the role of the Chinese revolutionary heroine. In an interview conducted shortly after the trip, Kristeva pointed out that it would be highly unnecessary and counterproductive to go to Mao’s China if one did not really care about Chinese women. According to

503 See Barthes, *Carnets du voyage en Chine*, 129.
504 Ibid., “Well, and China?,” 119.
505 See Hayot, *Chinese Dreams*, 135. However, Pleynet challenged both Barthes’s and Sollers’s notions, because on the one hand, they affirmed the “positive” role of the Chinese heroines, and yet on the other hand, they could not fix their opinions on these woman protagonists. Pleynet wrote: “[Sollers] notes that in both the cinema and the theater, it’s always the woman who holds the positive role, or more precisely it is the chauvinistic girl who holds such role in that occasion. He added that in fact in all these scenarios there is never a woman. [Barthes]: ‘It’s true, no woman of thirty years old,’ [Sollers]: ‘Indeed only young chauvinistic girls and the aged women.’ I wonder if it is really possible to draw any conclusion at all from the fictions we see.” See Pleynet, *Le voyage en Chine*, 81. As long as the Chinese theatrical characters (both male and female) were ultra-stereotyped and papier-mâché, he wondered whether it was indeed possible to draw any conclusion from all the things they had really seen in the PRC. Ibid., 82.
Kristeva, one “would get nothing out of the experience; [one] would be bored there; [one] might even become exhausted from thinking [one has] understood nothing (or everything).”

Kristeva’s observation of the Maoist women, as I believe, was precisely the most unique analysis among all the Telquelsians. As she observed, while it was always the chauvinistic woman who embodied the male heroic ideal in Maoist revolutionary theater, it was even more crucial to see that “there was not a single hero but a number of heroines who rise up in rebellion in Chinese theater.”

However, the strange fact was that, simultaneously, the same woman “give[s] a dramatic turn to events because, if the situation remains in [her] hands it deteriorates and the party has to intervene to set things straight.” Kristeva hence argued that the role of the Chinese heroines and Maoist women at large, despite being an essential force of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, was so inconsistent that they were thought to be the bearer of “half of the sky” to orchestrate the tempo and momentum of the revolutionary events, and yet at the same time, they intensified the social chaos that had to be restored by an external agent. In her About Chinese Women, Kristeva admitted that she was indeed heavily bewildered by the fact that the Chinese heroines could only act as a catalyst in dramatic situations or as “the oracles of the hidden truths of society” but could never become the miraculous agents of final revolutionary success. She wrote: “They initiate, they set in motion a series of events, they suffer, they do not know, they learn; they fail. And then some representative of the Party intervenes, some deus-ex-machina who gives the performance a happy ending and validates the efforts of the heroine/pioneer.”

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507 Kristeva, “Woman Is Never What We Say,” in Julia Kristeva Interviews, trans. Ross Guberman, ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 99. Kristeva said elsewhere: “For after all you know now about Chinese society, you will well understand that it’s not worth the trouble to go to China if you’re not interested in women, if you don’t like them. You will fall ill from incomprehension, or will return home cocksure of having understand it all – but you’ll never have crossed the Great Wall; fossilized in your own universe, you’ll never have touched the uncertain, hard-to-decipher reality behind the posters and the clichés.” See Kristeva, About Chinese Women, trans. Anita Barrows (London: M. Boyars, 1977), 157–158.
509 Ibid.
510 Ibid.
511 Ibid., About Chinese Women, 152.
512 Ibid.
To Kristeva, another curious case about the Maoist heroines was that “despite the majestic Stanislavskian poses affected by women in posters or on stage, the trend [did] not seem to be toward an establishment of power with the help of women who, as former slaves, would become the new leaders of a new order.” 513 While the words “majestic” and “affected” may have suggested an underlying intention of contrived artificiality and hence denoted a “Brechtian” and distanciated gesture of the women protagonists, the other description of the “Stanislavskian pose” seemed to indicate that the female leading role still conveyed a minimum sense of “realistic” quality. As Hayot explained: “[T]he poses are supposed to have a Stanislavskian effect—to encourage women to take up a certain kind of power—and yet they have the opposite effect on Kristeva, since their affectedness reveals the intentional gesture behind them.” 514 That is to say, the Chinese heroines tended to recognize power through a kind of Stanislavskian posture but at the same time, they refused to take up power in an overt manner. Therefore, precisely because all women were submitted to power, not all women paid the same respect to this power.

Although the Chinese female characters may have been seen as both “staged” and “affected,” the Chinese heroines were neither “Brechtian” nor “Stanislavskian.” 515 Because the Chinese female characters embodied these inherent contradictions, these two seemingly conflicting aesthetic gestures were, first and foremost, foundational to the very (re)establishment of power and contributed to its permanent redefinition in return. Were Chinese women submitted to power and the various Maoist political ideals? Obviously, yes. As Kristeva revealed, “women, more than anyone else, apparently long for it” and identify with it. 516

However, the only reason women aspired to power was to, instead of liquidating it, overthrow or refuse the seizure of power altogether. 517 If the “phallic function” was related to the power of representation, Kristeva’s idea of

513 Ibid.
514 Hayot, Chinese Dreams, 137.
515 See Barthes, Carnets du voyage en Chine, 128–129.
516 Kristeva, About Chinese Women, 151.
517 Ibid., 152.
the “female role” was to ensure that “power” as such would not be entirely captured or even totally represented.\footnote{Kristeva added: “However, a power (what I called ‘a paternal function’ above) assumed (and not represented) by a woman is already a power with a body, and a body that knows about power: symbolic contract, economic limits, but also impulse, desire, and contradiction. A power in infinite process: a power that cannot be represented.” See Ibid., 199. [italics in the original]} Ultimately, the very “Chinese lesson” for Kristeva was that power itself was not all the more tyrannical. However, this does not necessarily mean that phallic power had to be “abolished.” Quite the contrary, it had to be kept minimally intact, or else it would lead to a series of revolutionary violence just like the Jacobin terror or the Stalinist Gulag. The various historical disasters embodied by the “reign of terror” of 1789 and the more recent Stalinist labor camps, according to Kristeva, revealed that both the overt representation and the sheer liquidation of power in a majestic, overwhelming overtone would only lead to an extreme state of male-dominated political tyranny.\footnote{Ibid., 152.}

Kristeva then turned to Chinese revolutionary opera to confirm her utopian vision on the redefinition of gender roles in the PRC. As she wrote, the most repeated story in Chinese model theater is that of the young girl, whose vehement revolutionary impulse must be guided by a male Party representative to a new Chinese society near the end of the play. What was striking for Kristeva was that the girl was incredibly “asexual” in a way that could not simply be explained by Freudian terminology. Perceiving this girl as a new revolutionary archetype, Kristeva concluded that the Freudian family failed to offer a contrastive mirror to politics in Chinese theater, but rather political ideology had overtly taken its place, once and for all:

[The theater] leaves no room for whatever in the psyche, the libido, the imagination, has not been channeled into political sublimation. As if the family, that harbor of the imagination, had consumed itself; and the desires of the community—represented by the desire of the girl—had vested themselves directly in politics, deeply and fully, but not without failure or drama. If this is not the reality, it is certainly the image that we are offered by the current ideology.\footnote{Ibid., 155.}

As Eric Hayot argued:

\begin{quote}
[T]he particular role played by women in Chinese theater threatens to disrupt the notion of an undisrupted system, since in the West ‘Woman’ names a highly transparent and
\end{quote}
especially ‘psychological’ kind of social being, one whose imbrications in the system of shame and signification cannot be in doubt. In the Western theater, ‘Woman’ embodies shame and channels sublimation.\textsuperscript{521}

In Chinese revolutionary theater, however, there was no Oedipal family or Freudian psychodrama to give a certain kind of fantasmatic support to serving a proper political sublimation. Rather, this process always happened without sexuality, without libido, or without any kind of psychic trauma and repression symptomatic of the Western theatrical tradition. The Chinese female character is so radically flattened it is as if she were made purely for political purposes. In this respect, Kristeva seemed to suggest that the space of the family and the erotic had overtly given way to political concerns as a complete externalization of the psyche. Kristeva wrote: “Is this a definitive submission to the paternal, political ‘ideal of self,’ ‘in power’? Or the continual erection (by this political element) of temporary barriers against the permanent discontent, against the ‘not that,’ the ‘not enough’ of feminine desire? A guard rail, a door, against which anarchy and the counter-current lean?”\textsuperscript{522} The “theatricality” of the Chinese revolutionary theater perpetually revolved around this far-fetched politicization rather than undergoing an individual transformation based on a Freudian self-fulfilling journey.

On the other hand, Kristeva also discussed the strange role of the male Party representative, who was supposed to render a definitive foreclosure to the catalyzing efforts of the female protagonists in the Chinese model theater. Kristeva pointed out that, in the eyes of the Telquelians, the male Party member was never omnipotent but was simply “a dramatic artifice, and nothing more.”\textsuperscript{523} Eric Hayot explained that the term “nothing more” meant that the male representative did not have a broader cultural meaning, that is, a meaning outside the revolutionary theater.\textsuperscript{524} There was no correlative or correspondence in Maoist society that could really match up with the efforts of the male character in the model theater. The male Party representative was so excessively symbolic that he was merely a signifier that helped pragmatically perform a closing purpose in the

\textsuperscript{521} Hayot, Chinese Dreams, 135.
\textsuperscript{522} Kristeva, About Chinese Women, 152.
\textsuperscript{523} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{524} Hayot, Chinese Dreams, 137.
socialist opera. Outside of this very restorative purpose, the male character had no other unique social functions. In Kristeva’s analysis, the woman “catalyst” and the male Party “representative” in Maoist revolutionary theater remained in an irreducible antagonism that denied the development of a romantic relationship and hence pertained to the impossibility of courtly sublimation.

Although I agree with most of Kristeva’s insights, I argue that her analysis of the Maoist revolutionary heroine might have missed certain crucial historical remarks. While Kristeva may have considered the male Party function as just performative and highly artificial in itself and entirely devoid of phallic violence, she may have underestimated the restorative dimension constantly practiced in socialist China, which was usually highly coercive and regulatory at its core. According to an official Chinese view after 1976, Jiang Qing, who was formerly a Chinese theatrical actress and successively the chief of the Cultural and Propagandistic Committee after having become Mao’s (fourth) wife, was highly responsible for the chaotic “ten-year disaster” during the Cultural Revolution. Jiang’s (in)famous “silence” during her public trial in 1981 was generally perceived as the utmost example of showing her “unrepentant” and ultra-leftist attitude. However, the sheer epistemological violence pertaining to this kind of public trial, which constantly sought to indoctrinate the Chinese people with a new kind of didactic or moral message that emerged in the official culture in the late 1970s, should not be underestimated.

Philippe Sollers, who was initially fascinated by the substantial poetic license of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, did not actually see Jiang’s defiant silence as utterly disconcerting. Rather, as he suggested, it was precisely the ideological moral setting of Jiang’s trial in 1981 that was indeed problematic in the eyes of familiar Westerners. In a discussion about the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Sollers remarked that this kind of public set-up to balance the weight of revolutionary terror was in fact nothing new for Western audiences. The Thermidorrean restoration of 1815 and Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization in the

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525 When she was asked by the prosecutor whether she had falsely denounced Premier Zhou Enlai in the early 1970s, Jiang responded to the charge contumaciously and defiantly: “No, I don’t know (anything about that). How would I know?”
late 1950s were two well-documented historical predecessors of the reentrance of the moral lesson. As the last widow of Mao, Jiang was accused of being the utmost and primal reason behind all the revolutionary disasters that happened between 1966 and 1976. On the other hand, she was also considered a sheer surrogate, a sacrificial figure in post-Mao China tasked with redirecting the Party line toward economic modernization in the late 1970s. As Sollers noted: “[S]he is the widow of the Great Man and consequently this is probably intolerable for the Chinese society, sexually speaking.”

Sollers added that making Jiang Qing sexually “intolerable” under the phase of post-Mao modernization led to China creating the same Freudian structure of primal repression long familiar to him and the rest of the intellectuals in the West. There were always “two women” with opposite and contrasting fates at work—one “liberal” or “open-minded” and the other “ultra-narrow-minded”—to help restore Chinese social order and justify the historical consistency of post-Mao reform. Sollers wrote: “China’s history has become a tale about women. Look, there’s Madame Zhou Enlai, who in a way represents China abroad, while the other, the horrible, the unnamable, is also a woman. The symptom has become, finally, a female symptom.” In October 1976, Sollers wrote in *Le Monde*, “On the subject of the situation in China today, one mustn’t, in my opinion, speak of ‘doubts’ or ‘worries,’ but of genuine drama.”

**Archipelago, Hyperbolic Wholeness, and the “China-as-such”**

It cannot simply be said that there was no historical uniqueness or singularity pertaining to this Chinese visit by the members of *Tel Quel* based on the reality that Chinese socialism still bears a certain structural homology with Western capitalist culture. Despite the fact that communist China may still predominantly rely on some didactic messages or moral lessons to reassure its own symbolic consistency, I argue that *Tel Quel*’s travel to Mao’s China in 1974 has indeed profoundly suggested an alternative form of Western interpretation of subaltern culture that is not simply confined to an Orientalist framework nor

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526 Kao and Sollers, 44.
527 Ibid.
purely a gesture or experiment of self-marginalization. The result is rather subtle, if not even quite difficult to detect. Philippe Forest summed up the eccentric “gains” of this Chinese journey:

Each [Tel Quel] traveller, to a certain degree, was affected by what one saw. But this adventure is still a singular collective experience. Of the sum of five distinct individuals, they are constrained by some common existence, the group of telqueliens turns over the day they shared. The ‘enstranged feeling’ is expressed not by a separation but a separation insideout, setting a distance from oneself and others…. And this strangeness suggests another in his identity, that is to say in its distance and proximity. The look on telqueliens posed by China is deeply a look of sympathy, in the strongest sense that this word can take. This sympathy expressed readily in the language of politics. Without silence some of their reserves and their concerns, telqueliens bet on China. He would like ‘to accompany a revival unheard distance, and still full of risks, a new humanity, which begins right here.’

In June 1974, a month after their return from the PRC, François Wahl, one of Tel Quel’s chief editors at Seuil, published a series of articles in Le Monde under the title “La Chine sans utopie” (China without Utopia). His articles were actually composed of four parts, which were published separately over four days. Each article tackled a different aspect of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and worked together to expose what Wahl saw as the haunting Stalinist influences over the PRC. For Wahl, Mao’s refusal to disavow Stalin’s political crimes of the Gulag, along with its ongoing emphasis on a Soviet-style bureaucracy and its socialist-realistic model of cultural productions, all contributed to a sense that Maoist China was fully endowed with an economic and political model that Western intellectuals had long been familiar with and simultaneously disillusioned about.

In Wahl’s frame of mind, the collective experiments in China were merely a dark prolonged symptom of Stalinist failure. The various Maoist attempts to “Sinicize” Marxism in both political and quotidian spheres failed to produce anything truly new that most of the Western left-leaning intellectuals were hoping for since May ’68. As Wahl said, “[f]or the Cultural Revolution, we [the Telqueliens] ha[d] gone to hear and get such response in one day, ‘it was not to debunk against foreign economical basis, but a copycat of it.’ Or, economism and

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See Forest, 477–478; 480.

nationalism, is it not precisely the essence of the Stalinist heritage—the Stalinist deviation?" Wahl added: “As soon as one arrives at Beijing, one has the strange and worrying feeling of finding oneself in Eastern Europe … one might feel that s/he was in East Berlin. Where is China?" The very “Chineseness” of Maoist China, in Wahl’s opinion, seemed to be silently taken away and dismissed. In this respect, China appeared to have offered not something like “Marxism-Leninism with Chinese characteristics,” but rather a Chinese Stalinism, a wholesale repetition without even a cultural and geographical difference.

Obviously, Wahl’s reactionary stance on the PRC was, nonetheless, nothing new within the French intellectual scene. Like those old European sinophobes and the New Philosophers before and after him, Wahl’s subsequent disappointments about the Orient were precisely rooted in his very exotic and Eurocentric investments on the lyrical “other scene,” which were, by definition, lacking in the first place. Thus, it was rather unsurprising to see that Wahl’s articles were immediately met with a scathing critique by the rest of the Tel Quel members who, at that moment, still refused to denounce Maoist errors.

The journal’s first post-trip issue, namely “En Chine” (In China), argued in an unsigned editorial that Wahl’s point of view had been deeply influenced by his unwillingness to see and confront what he could not accept and admit—that Maoist China could not literally produce a “difference” that would be “meaningful” under the Western epistemological mindset. All of Wahl’s complaints about China’s Sovietization and compulsive repetition of Stalinist experiences, as Tel Quel argued, stemmed from his sheer desire to transmute the PRC in the absolute past. Instead of reinscribing this Chinese reality into the cognitive map of the contemporary world, the “China” that Wahl had in mind was an old-fashioned one. The Tel Quel collective stated:

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531 Ibid.
532 Ibid.
533 Wahl therefore asked, “Does China of the Cultural Revolution intend—as it has been affirmed in the West—to propose a ‘different’ model of knowledge?” See Ibid., “La Chine sans utopie,” Le Monde, June 18, 1974, 6. Wahl added in his fourth article “Cultural Revolution or Westernization” that “[a]s for the ‘literary’ books, that is to say, the symbolic practice as such, one must—if one wants to comprehend China—come to terms with the fact that there aren’t any.” See Ibid., “La Chine sans utopie,” Le Monde, June 19, 1974, 8. [italics in the original]
When one is in China, one senses very clearly the moment in which the Chinese can no longer answer our questions. Indeed: they are our questions. And we do not know how to answer them ourselves, whence the temptation to make the Chinese responsible for them, instead of taking account of a new reality: theirs.\(^\text{334}\)

After the Chinese trip, Sollers also maintained a crucial difference between China and the Soviet Union:

It is too easy to say: the Cultural Revolution was a terrible period during which everybody was persecuted, artists and intellectuals. Certainly that is true. But maybe without if we would never have heard of the Chinese, who would have remained ‘good old Russians’ who looked Chinese, Russians embodied as Chinese. I for one was interested in the fact that the Chinese were Chinese and not Russians in Chinese bodies. I think that still is the fundamental point.\(^\text{335}\)

Among all the Maoist experiences of the Tel Quel group, I argue that it is precisely Kristeva’s own Chinese encounter that offers a novel perspective that can perhaps go beyond the traditional confines of Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism. Admittedly, Kristeva related the Chinese experience of Tel Quel to a psychic economy pertaining to creative desires and revolutionary aspirations:

I can say, however, that for most of the Paris-Peking-Paris travelers (Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, Marcelin Pleynet, François Wahl, and myself), this arduous journey, one that from the outset was more cultural than political, definitively inaugurated a return to the only continent we had never left: internal experience.\(^\text{336}\)

Kristeva elaborated on the relation between this Maoist lesson and herself:

I myself was alarmed by the profound, unflagging, shy presence of the Soviet model, the only sign of the twentieth century in this land of peasants, and all the more evident because it was violently resisted. This led me to write an awkward book, \textit{Des Chinoises}, in which I tried to convey the strangeness of China and to explain the fascination we Occidentals feel for it, a fascination unquestionably involved with our own strange, foreign, feminine, psychotic aspects.\(^\text{337}\)

\(^{334}\) Tel Quel, “\textit{A propos de ‘La Chine sans utopie’},” 7. [italics in the original] Pleynet responded to Wahl that any ‘realistic’ approach to China must first face this undeniable fact: “China is a socialist, Marxist-Leninist, revolutionary country. All debates on the objectivity of the story or account of a trip to this country, can in no way abstract this fact.” See Pleynet, “\textit{Pourquoi la Chine populaire?},” 32.

\(^{335}\) Kao and Sollers, 37. According to Kristeva in the late 1970s, she still commented that the political campaign of Mao’s China, unlike the Soviet Union, always held two revolutionary logics—both “time” and “strength” as well as both “bureaucracy” and “anarchy”—ever since the country’s establishment in 1949. Kristeva, “\textit{Des Chinoises à Manhattan},” [The Chinese Women in Manhattan], \textit{Tel Quel} 69 (Spring 1977): 13.

\(^{336}\) Kristeva, “My Memory’s Hyperbole,” 234.

\(^{337}\) Ibid., 233.
Just as Toril Moi argued,

Kristeva, having been bought up under an East European Communist regime, was probably never as uncritically enthusiastic about China as some other French intellectuals at the time. For her, China could not function as the absolute Other, in the way it obviously did for other members of Tel Quel. In this way, she avoided suffering their disillusionment when the truth about the Cultural Revolution became generally known, and Mao turned out to have been a Stalinist wolf in the Chinese clothing after all.\(^{538}\)

In the opening paragraph of *Des Chinoises (About Chinese Women)*, Kristeva offers a hyperbolic remark on a peasant village in Huxian:

Forty kilometers from the former Chinese capital of Xian (the first capital of China after it was unified under the emperor Qin Shi Huangdi in the second century B.C., and the great capital of the Tang Dynasty [619–906]) is Huxian, the chief village of an agricultural region. The road we travel to get there is hot; the sun beats down on peasants in broad bamboo hats, on unsupervised children skipping about in quiet games, on a hearse drawn by some men while others, in two parallel lines alongside it, surround it with thin parallel poles carried across their shoulders. Everyone from the village is in the square where we are supposed to attend an exhibit of peasant painting in one of the nearby buildings. An enormous crowd is sitting in the sun: they wait for us wordlessly, perfectly still. Calm eyes, not even curious, but slightly amused or anxious: in any case, piercing, and certain of belonging to a community with which we will never have anything to do. They don’t distinguish among us man or woman, blonde or brunette, this or that feature of face or body. As though they were discovering some weird and peculiar animals, harmless but insane. Unaggressive, but on the far side of the abyss of time and space. ‘A species——what they see in us is a different species,’ says the interpreter, always sensitive to the least of our tropisms. I don’t feel like a foreigner, the way I do in Baghdad or New York. I feel like an ape, a martian, an other. Three hours later, when the gates of the exhibit are opened to let our cars pass through, they [the Huxian villagers] are still there, sitting in the sun——amused or anxious?——calm, distant, piercing, silent, gently releasing us unto our strangeness.\(^{539}\)

In Kristeva’s detailed description, one may vaguely discover that the observer’s gaze or subject position was not simply reversed from the eloquent Western intellectuals to the Chinese natives. Rather, it could be the very notion of “gaze” itself that is somewhat short-circuited and suspended here. That kind of temporal rupture took place precisely in the moment Kristeva was so compellingly conscious of herself being gazed at. However, this gazing back by the Chinese natives may not have had so much to do with fresh anthropocentric


curiosity and spectacular interest in the foreigners alone. It could have been more approximated to an unspeakable act on the part of the native Chinese informants during such a cultural encounter. As Kristeva wrote, it was “[a]s though they were discovering some weird and peculiar animals, harmless but insane.” In front of these Chinese strangers, Kristeva and her Tel Quel colleagues were like animals, species from another planet; she felt like an ape, a Martian, an infinitesimal other.

The Chinese peasants were not simply foreign to her. However, in facing them, she became a stranger, perhaps even a kind of stranger toward herself, whereas this realization had never been experienced before in other foreign cities such as Bagdad or New York. The gaze was ultimately so “frightening” and “unbearable” precisely because she could not find a way out; it was a sort of mutual blindness, a radical void that led to nowhere. In the opening of her autobiographical novel Les Samouraïs (The Samurai), which recounts this Chinese experience, Kristeva stated quite clearly the “significance” of the trip to Maoist China. She asked, “What are the extravagances, the oddities, the chinoiseries, I feel within myself but cannot formulate?”

Many critics immediately called this “feminizing” gesture of Kristeva a reversed form of Eurocentricism, a “cultural essentialization” of China that paradoxically reaffirmed Western subjecthood. Jane Gallop, at this point,

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540 Reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir’s Les Mandarins (The Mandarins), Kristeva’s Les Samouraïs brilliantly reconstructs a pivotal era of post-war French history—Paris in the late 1960s—and at the same time records the political disillusionment and ferment of a generation. In a brisk narrative spanning three continents, the novel follows an array of passionate and promiscuous intellectual warriors—the “samurai” for whom “writing is the only lasting act of pleasure and war combined.” Readers will instantly recognize finely sketched and often searing portraits of some of this century’s most influential minds: Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, Althusser, and many others. With an authorial voice that modulates between the erotic and the meditative, the ironic and the rancorous, Les Samouraïs moves from Paris to Mao’s China—where revolutionary idealism collides with cold pragmatism—to New York and back to Paris. Over a twenty-five year period, the characters experience countless battles involving love, depression, maternity, and disease, while the various themes of the text—language, prison, madness, emotional ruptures—are brought to fruition with astounding insight. The English quotation of this book is based on Barbara Bray. See Kristeva, The Samurai: A Novel, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

541 Ibid., 147.

542 In the case of Huxian, Gayatri Spivak believed that Kristeva’s fascination with the Chinese women had to do exclusively with the Western self and nothing to do with China: “In spite of their occasional interest in touching the other of the West, of metaphysics, of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centered.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 1988), 137. [italics in the original] She claimed that this
challenged the possible dangers of Kristeva’s self-marginalization. She argued that Kristeva, as an Eastern European, may have taken her political proximity with Mao’s China as a form of concealment of her primary intellectual privilege and superiority over the native informants. That is to say, rather than seeing her own otherness as an obstacle in understanding the Chinese women, Kristeva paradoxically took her marginality as a vantage point to establish cross-cultural identification that ultimately annulled the Asiatic otherness into an absolute European Sameness. Although I agree with much of these criticisms about the latent ethnocentric tendencies inherent in Kristeva’s realization of such “intimate foreignness” in China, I argue that her idiosyncratic self-sinicization here may still outline a kind of cultural identity that is neither simply Eurocentric nor entirely Sinocentric. In fact, there is a defining scene in this Kristeva work that the feminist critics had more or less underestimated. In a visit to the Buddhist caves in rural Longmen, a native Chinese woman suddenly asks Kristeva a question in Chinese. Surprisingly, Kristeva does not answer her through the usual mediation of the Chinese translator. She speaks to this woman directly with the same language (Kristeva had a degree in Chinese language). However, Kristeva’s accent betrays her immediately. This woman is then electrified, runs away, and shouts “Waiguoren, Waiguoren!” (Foreigner, Foreigner!).

Paradoxically, Kristeva herself took pleasure from such misrecognition. She believed that the Chinese woman “took [her] for a Chinese at first,” which was probably based on her “Asiatic appearance.” After that Longmen visit, according to Kristeva in her memoir Des Chinoises (About Chinese Women), she became

an eternal stranger, frozen in [her] thwarted desire to be recognized as one of [the Chinese women], happy when they lost themselves in contemplation of [her] face and when only [her] bell-bottomed trousers made the old peasant woman at the Great Wall cry out

Kristeva work could be at best understood as a case of Western “colonialist benevolence” in the wake of post-May ’68 political disillusionments in Europe. Ibid., 161. So she concluded: “Who is speaking here? An effort to answer that question might have revealed more about the muted women of Huxian Square, looking with qualified envy at ‘the incursion of the West.’” Ibid., 141.

543 Gallop wrote: “[Kristeva] alone might be able to bridge the abyss of otherness, to contact and report the heterogeneous, and this is in a book precisely about the dangers of using oneself as a measure for the other.” Jane Gallop, Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter’s Seduction (London: Macmillan, 1982), 119.

544 Kristeva, The Samurai, 188.
‘waiguo ren!’… Neither Asian nor European, unrecognized by the women and detached from the men.\textsuperscript{545}

What is really at stake in this Chinese episode is that there was perhaps no such thing as a \textit{necessary misrecognition} which could simultaneously be extracted from the scene. Kristeva’s enjoyment taken from the Chinese misrecognition was perhaps also a “fictional” staging as well. In her semi-autobiographical novel \textit{Les Samouraïs}, Kristeva wrote: “Olga [Kristeva] found she was a true actress: nothing was true but the play. Thus a Chinese peasant woman who took Olga for another Chinese woman might be making a mistake, but you couldn’t, all things considered, be sure.”\textsuperscript{546} One can interpret this improbable misrecognition in two senses. On the one hand, one reason why this kind of misrecognition was “unlikely” is that many Maoist people during the 1970s usually called foreign visitors “comrade” to demonstrate a kind of proletarian fraternity. It was a typical Maoist inclusive strategy to emphasize the communist friendship between China and other foreign countries.

On the other hand, there was another aspect which was perhaps even more profound. I argue that the “Chinese lesson” that Kristeva truly learned during the trip was precisely the radical lack of a completely “qualified misrecognition” in Maoist societies. That is to say, the sheer ability to recognize such “misrecognition,” to differentiate “recognition” from “misrecognition,” is fundamentally “missing” in Mao’s China. This ability, which may have been characterizing the Western rational mindset for centuries, was perhaps radically “fictional” and “performative” at its core. There is no such thing as a proper identification of a strictly “wrong identification.” Or one can say “recognition” and “misrecognition” are fundamentally mixed and confused in the first place.

\textsuperscript{545} Ibid., \textit{About Chinese Women}, 157–158.
\textsuperscript{546} Ibid., \textit{The Samurai}, 147. [italics in the original] Kristeva also wrote: “What could be more ‘Chinese’—in the French sense of strange, absurd, quirky—than China? Through the Chinese you could free yourself of yourself. Break the mask of conformity. Delve down not merely to your roots … but deeper still—to the level where there are no roots left, where everything is eradicated. You could find a counteridentity for yourself and realize how utterly strange it was by contemplating the country: a giant at once civilized and backward, a demographic atom bomb, the genetic Hiroshima of the twenty-first century.” See Ibid., 146.
In *Des Chinoises*, Kristeva wrote:

Brecht, the precocious ‘Chinese man’ of socialism (cf. in his *Mei-ti*, for example) had realized that the failures of the Eastern regimes were not temporary mistakes or faults of such-and-such a personality; rather they were due to the fact that ‘something was missing.’ For me … what seems to be ‘missing’ in the system is, indeed, the stubborn refusal to admit that anything is missing. More concretely, the refusal to admit that social entente, inasmuch as it is possible, is sustained by desire, by eroticism.\(^{547}\)

As far as this “missing link” in Mao’s China may not have had a concrete form in itself, it is difficult for one to tell or foresee whether such ambivalent feelings between “identification” and “disidentification” can truly lead to a profound liberation from Western rationalism or will simply reaffirm male domination and the social status quo. In this respect, Kristeva also added:

Unless, in the arrangement of the Chinese universe, this ‘other scene’ which in the West gives rise to ‘the sacred,’ ‘the erotic’ (or, when we ignore it, the ‘totalitarian’) is constantly present, as an undercurrent imperceptible to us, like Taoism—the subtle but permanent lining of all Chinese life… Will this ‘permanent lining’ of Chinese socio-political life preserve China from the totalitarian blindness typical of our western rationalism, until, with the help of economic development, a new discursive, familial, feminine and masculine realization of ‘what’s missing’ may be achieved?\(^{548}\)

After this Chinese trip, the very lyrical desires (but not necessarily the political yearnings) among the Telquelians had been radically disrupted and undermined. Patrick Ffrench commented on the dividing reactions among the *Tel Quel* members shortly after their China visit: “Each individual reacts to the experience differently … a symptomatic moment when *Tel Quel* ceases to function as a group and becomes a community of individuals” insofar as “the trip to China was a rupture of phantasy and the emergence of the real.”\(^{549}\)

\(^{547}\) Ibid., *About Chinese Women*, 155. Kristeva added: “By a ‘negative’ that may take the form of a ‘manual of the bedchamber,’ or of the ‘sacred’; but which is there at the bottom and which, if ignored, rises to the polished political surface to form the Gulag ‘archipater’ of China today. There is no ‘sacred’; nor is there any talk about desire. One’s immediate reaction is, ‘let’s look for the archipelagos, they must be there somewhere, well-camouflaged under Confucian civility and the elegance of the writings.’ The big question, as they say, is precisely that.” See Ibid., 156.

\(^{548}\) Ibid.

\(^{549}\) Patrick Ffrench, *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel (1960–1983)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 203–204. This sentiment is recasted by Kristeva in her novel as well. She wrote: “They didn’t see one another anymore…. They’d become like Chinese to one another—indifferent, cut off from themselves as well as from their group. They are no longer part of a whole; they are blank…. A group was held together by an obsession, an enthusiasm. But here the frenzied and factitious enthusiasm of the Chinese was undermining the visitors’ own obsession. [*Tel Quel*] might survive their return from China, but the spirit of [*Tel Quel*] certainly wouldn’t. Their
critic, Eric Hayot, also pointed out: “China offered the Telquelians the uncanny feeling that the turn eastward involved not only seeing the other side of the world, but the other side of themselves.” However, what is truly crucial and profound about the visit is not simply this kind of painful epiphany—a trip to the void—among the Tel Quel intellectuals. Rather, the true profundity lies in the fact that the long-standing notion of “dystopia” has been altogether shattered.

Under the predominance of neoliberalist discourses today, one is used to hearing that Maoist China was a “false utopia.” The Maoist ideal was at best a “beautiful misrecognition” among the romantic Western leftists during the 1960s and 1970s. Yet from this Chinese lesson of Tel Quel, one also comes to realize that this neoliberalist recognition of “Maoist misrecognition” is also subject to permanent challenge and query. This type of discourse cannot be entirely self-evident or completely qualified to confidently announce and recognize the Tel Quel members’ Maoist fascinations and utopian yearnings during the 1970s as just some kind of lyrical “misrecognitions.” They are also, by and large, several ideological artifices and nothing more. After all, the main virtue that Tel Quel’s Chinese lesson has offered today is precisely that it helped catalyze a radical rupture toward contemporary neoliberalist fantasy itself—an ignorant self-belief that it is seemingly the best moralizing agent remaining to maintain the social harmony of our predominant global capitalist system.

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550 Eric Hayot, Chinese Dreams, 122. In retrospect, Pleynet believed that he still managed to learn something “radically eccentric” about himself through his experience in the PRC, as he recalled its significance in the opening pages of his travelogue: “If it weren’t for, I must say, the peculiar manner in which a writer, or better yet a poet, has of apprehending the spectacle of the world, if it weren’t to some degree for the defenses of eccentricity, I wouldn’t have brought back anything else from China. But this eccentricity created a situation where, in a certain way, I was never completely the person to whom the Chinese politicians and unionists were speaking. I could hear, obviously, the grounds and logic of their speeches, which even convinced me sometimes. But, as frequent, repetitive, and hammering as the speeches were, my living relationship to the reality they represented remained somewhere else, completely other.” See Pleynet, Le voyage en Chine, 14.
CHAPTER 8
“NEVER GIVE UP ON ONE’S RELAY!”:
REVOLUTIONARY COLLECTIVISM, VOICE INJUNCTIONS, AND THE ETHICS OF FAILURE IN IVENS AND LORIDAN’S UNE HISTOIRE DE BALLON AND LA PHARMACIE N°3

Foolish Old Man between Spontaneity and Truthfulness

If there is a Western filmmaker that will always be remembered as the “friend of New China,” renowned Dutch documentarian Joris Ivens, who had indeed been acquainted with the country since the onset of World War Two, is possibly the most suitable candidate to fill such a role. Receiving his career Golden Lion Honorary Award at the Venice Film Festival in 1988, Ivens is widely acclaimed for being one of the most inspiring pioneers in Western documentary filmmaking. As a committed leftist filmmaker, he was also regarded as “the flying Dutchman” for travelling to a number of revolutionary countries, such as the Soviet Union, Spain, China, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, and Cuba, between the 1910s and the 1970s to record the many precious militant struggles of the common people throughout the twentieth century. Among the various countries that he had travelled to, it was China where Ivens dedicated his utmost affection.551 His twelve-hour-long epic documentary, Comment Yukong déplaca les montagnes (How Yukong Moved the Mountains) (1976), was generally conceived as a paramount cinematic achievement in faithfully recording the profound liberation of people’s voices and daily expressions during the Cultural Revolution. However, at the same time, the Right Bank held a dismissive perception of the film, arguing that the film was merely a propagandistic mouthpiece for the Maoist authoritarian regime. Even so, Ivens was severely

551 Throughout the five years in Yan’an before the official establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, most of the Party’s activities, including the heroic story of Mao and the parades of The Eighth Army, were recorded by Ivens. It was this recording that made Ivens famous in Chinese communist history. See Joris Ivens and Robert Destanque, Joris Ivens, ou, La mémoire d’un regard [Joris Ivens, or, the Memory of a Glance] (Paris: Éditions BFB, 1982), 186. Ivens also recorded three other pivotal moments in Chinese communist history—the Anti-Japanese Resistance, the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). As a Western documentary record of Maoist China, these works by Ivens are profoundly exceptional within the history of world cinema.
denounced by many Western humanists as a “liar, propagandist, Chinese lunatic, blind communist, trumpeter for inhuman system, a Nazi filmmaker like Leni Riefenstahl.”

In this chapter, however, I will argue that the film Yukong, which was co-produced by Ivens and his French feminist wife, Marceline Loridan, during the final years of the Maoist era, is neither strictly a communist propaganda tool nor entirely a documentary of realism in the traditional sense. Precisely because of Ivens and Loridan’s stubborn and perhaps untimely insistence on dialectically integrating the various innovative documentarian techniques that emerged in the 1960s with the interesting and novel social realities of the Maoist liberation of people’s expressions during the Cultural Revolution, I will argue that the film Yukong actually illustrated and presented a profoundly new, greatly ethical and engaging approach in Western documentary filmmaking. The major aesthetic achievement and sociopolitical significance of Yukong does not simply lie in the fact that the two directors respectfully honored and duly recognized the gigantic complexity and profound multiplicity of the liberation of Chinese voices and people’s expressions in Mao’s China during the 1970s. Rather, the film’s true artistic virtue and social strengths are the result of the filmmakers’ constant acknowledgement of their own inherent limits pertaining to this kind of “ethical filmmaking” within the context of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. I will also argue that the critical self-consciousness that the two directors gradually realized during the very process of their documentary filmmaking in Mao’s China provides another chance to explore and reexamine once again certain unrealized emancipatory potentialities that may have been inherent in the legacies of the global film projects and revolutionary art practices during the 1960s as a whole. In retrospect, it is perhaps through this persistent, if not further, reinscription of the potential “failure” of the promises of the 1960s in relation to the so-called “triumph” of the contemporary neoliberalist mindset today that one can be genuinely approximated to certain crucial yet heavily forsaken revolutionary aspects of both May ’68 and the Maoist Cultural Revolution.

Historically speaking, the initiation of the *Yukong* project was a reaction to the Chinese détente policy adopted by Premier Zhou Enlai. In 1971, Ivens and his wife, Marceline Loridan, embarked on an unofficial visit to China. They brought along a few short films that they recently recorded in Paris about the student-worker revolts in May ’68. After watching the films on the revolutionary insurrections and democratic uprisings in the West, Zhou immediately asked Ivens, “Why didn’t you come with your camera? It’s time to make a movie here.”\(^{553}\) Ivens and Loridan agreed with Zhou that there was an urgency to make a film on revolutionary China. However, instead of simply confining the documentary to a sheer political study and even ideological abstraction, the two directors wanted to film both the achievements and the limits of the Maoist Cultural Revolution, especially because the social complexities and subtle transformations of the people’s quotidian lives were very much neglected in both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the West.\(^{554}\)

Premier Zhou, in particular, granted a certain artistic autonomy to Ivens and Loridan in making their film. In his autobiography, Ivens recounted what Zhou had once said to him: “There is no use to hide the fact that China is a poor country, a Third World country. Our gigantism does not change anything to this reality and we must not play the superpowers, it would be a lie and it turns against us. The purpose is not to make a mellow movie, you have to show China as it is today.”\(^{555}\) Unlike the ill-fated Antonioni, who has been extensively mentioned in previous chapters, the long-standing friendship Ivens had with Premier Zhou and Maoist China afforded him a more flexible schedule, as well as relatively more freedom in making his film in the PRC. In fact, the filmmaker was introduced to the Chinese community through the cinema people working in Maoist China, instead of simply being mediated through official channels.\(^{556}\)

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\(^{554}\) Ivens and Destanque, 325.

\(^{555}\) Ibid., 317.

Eventually, the two directors opted to name their film *Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes*, which they borrowed from a well-known Chinese fable of the same title. *Yukong* is considered one of the longest works in film history and it took Ivens and Loridan almost five years to finish it. Divided into twelve parts, or films within the film, *Yukong* covers a variety of topics, including the creation of a new society among the oil fields in Northeastern China; the daily workings of an experimental pharmacy in Shanghai, which conducted a community outreach program for the poor; the activities of the first women sailors in a small fishing village; the life of a young woman as wife, mother, and union official; a portrait of a noted professor of physics who was a target of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution; the regimen on a People’s Liberation Army base in Nanking; an impressionistic look at daily life in Shanghai; a classroom debate about a student who impatiently kicked a ball in front of a teacher in a Beijing high school; the workers’ revolts that launched a criticism campaign against several oil factory directors and administrators; and, finally, the behind-the-scenes coverage of the training and rehearsals of the Peking Opera, the circus, and a group of young craftspeople.\(^{557}\)

In the view of Ivens and Loridan, the two major stumbling blocks of their revolutionary approach to filmmaking in Mao’s China were tied to the various problems concerning the cultural representations of the PRC. On the one hand, there were many banal stereotypes of various Maoist achievements circulating in the West. On the other hand, there was also the inevitable social phenomenon in Mao’s China where many Chinese citizens tended to uncritically self-glory the Maoist realities with which they were living. In fact, the filming process of *Yukong* was not entirely devoid of difficulties and obstacles effectuated from the official network. According to Ivens, the filmmaking experience in the PRC was an exhausting and extensive struggle with both the Maoist people and the officiated views. Every time they set off for a new place, they had to go through

certain negotiations for shooting the reality as they truly wished. Recounted in his autobiography, Ivens said: “When the shooting team arrived, at least five or six official cars lead the road for us, they only left all those possible filming angles that they had already selected for us.”558 Between 1974 and 1975, the Chinese cultural and artistic committee issued a long list of sixty-one changes and demanded that Ivens make major corrections and reedit those parts.559 According to Ivens, there were always “two Chinas,” one of sincerity and one of propaganda, that needed to be simultaneously addressed during the process of filming.560

In this respect, Ivens and Loridan recognized that most of the cinematic records of revolutionary China did not, whether they were produced inside or outside of the PRC, actually “let the people speak.” According to Ivens, Yukong recorded “the very first time that the people of China have a voice.”561 To Ivens, the very individualization of the Chinese voices was not only aimed at imitating the Maoist revolutionary philosophy but also hoped to expand the artistic potentiality of Western documentary—that is, to challenge and go beyond the various limits found in common exotic documentaries without the self-agency of the represented people. As Ivens recounted: “We don’t pretend to know everything about China, far from it. If we had pursued this idea, we would only have succeeded in making an exhaustive but ultimately false film, one that was irrelevant. That is why we preferred to grasp reality where it is the most intense—in everyday life.”562 The key here was to gain the trust of the Chinese subjects. In making the film Yukong, both Ivens and Loridan spent months with the subjects in each shooting location, not only to conduct on-the-spot researches but also to

558 Ivens and Destanque, 322. Ivens recounted that there was indeed a “nightmare” that he encountered in Kashgar in the Xinjiang region. Ivens vividly remembered that most of the scenery in Kashgar was propagandized to present the sheer “harmony” and “contentment” of the Chinese people: “At seven o’clock in the morning, an intersection and whole streets enlivened with hundred of extras: men and women, all smiling, dressed in immaculate blue; and school children, each wearing a brand-new apron.… The mosque with several men sunk in prayer to show that there really was freedom of religion; a tradesman in a working class neighborhood—a tinker—to convince us that individual enterprise really did exist in China; and as the climax of this astonishing display, a large store with happy citizens filing through it and picking products at will from fully stocked shelves.” See Ibid., 323.
559 Ibid., 330–331.
560 Ibid., 331.
spend time befriending the Chinese subjects to ensure a more authentic record of the epoch. Nevertheless, Ivens and Loridan also recruited a Chinese cameraman to assist in the filming in an effort to calm the nerves of the subjects so they could provide a more naturalistic record.

Of the twelve parts of the film, I have chosen to focus on Une histoire de ballon (The Football Incident) and Le pharmacie N°3 (The Shanghai Pharmacy) as the two main texts for closer analysis. Le pharmacie scrutinizes how a model drugstore in Shanghai, namely the Shanghai No. 3 Drugstore, experimented with egalitarian measures and a community outreach program to maintain its status as the best “socialist enterprise” in town. The interaction between the community and the pharmacy workers is shown in the film, along with many staff meetings that evaluate the pharmacy workers and their roles in the drugstore. Historically, the operation of the drugstore was an outgrowth of the Cultural Revolution’s attempt to demystify the value of medicine and the bureaucratic ideology of clinical experts. Its twenty-four workers, none of whom were professional doctors, not only filled prescriptions and dispatched free medicine to the countryside but also diagnosed ailments and applied acupuncture to the workers and peasants in their ambitious outreach program. At the same time, Ivens and Loridan recorded both the potentials and the limitations of this kind of extremely egalitarian revolutionary program during the Maoist heyday in terms of extensive discussions and debates among the pharmacists and other Chinese delegates.

Une histoire, a comparatively much shorter film, is about a playground confrontation between a teacher and a high school student that reveals through many small details the conflicts between youthful passion and the necessity of

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563 Thomas Waugh compared this work to Chung Kuo: “As [Antonioni] and Ivens/Loridan have demonstrated, it is easy to shoot film in China; it is far more difficult and a far greater achievement to receive and honor the people’s trust. For Ivens and Loridan, their first responsibility was to their subjects.” Thomas Waugh, “Filming the Cultural Revolution,” in New Challenges for Documentary, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 155.
564 Ivens admitted that the recruitment of the Chinese cameraman gave the subjects a certain kind of friendly intimacy and made them forget about the existence of the camera. Sklar, 63.
565 According to Waugh, Le pharmacie N°3 was the most fully achieved work among the twelve parts for its dialectical approach to recording the experimentation between the pharmacy business and socialist commitment during the 1970s, while Une histoire was seen by Western critics as a microcosm of the class struggles between teachers and students at the height of the Cultural Revolution. See Waugh, “Filming the Cultural Revolution,” 157.
moral commandment during the Cultural Revolution. As a female teacher rings a bell to signify the start of class time, a teenage boy engrossed in play kicks a ball in her direction, which ultimately strikes her in the face. She immediately confiscates the ball. The teacher thereby calls for a class debate to discuss whether the student was right in kicking the ball by his own will and defying the school’s principles or she was right in confiscating the ball and following the school’s rules. At first, both sides are evasive and self-righteous: the boy provides justifications for his behavior and even accuses the teacher of not respecting his ideas, and the teacher remains steadfast to her moral principles. However, soon afterward, both the teacher and the student realize their own subjective mistakes. The debate finally arrives at a moment of reconciliation with a handshake between the two concerned parties. Facilitated by some up-to-date documentary film techniques and ideas such as “synchronized dialogues” and “active directorial engagements” derived from the practices of direct cinema and cinéma vérité (truth cinema), the two major tasks that the directors aspired to fulfill in Yukong were giving the Chinese people the chance to speak spontaneously and rendering those voices and speeches audible and comprehensible to Western audiences. Nevertheless, Ivens admitted that there was indeed a timely urge to show the world the sheer individuality of the Maoist people in order to correct many age-old Western misunderstandings, if not a number of fabrications about communist China over the years. As Ivens emphasized in an interview with Claire Devarrieux:

Marceline Loridan and I shot the film in the PRC when Western people were entirely ignorant about China. What they have in their mind was a series of vulgar impressions about Maoist people, for example, yellow perils, gray crowds, groups of blue ants…. The only few newsreels about China were superficially made in some formulae. In sum, the Chinese people have never been allowed to be themselves to speak in those films. Yukong wants to make Chinese people to

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566 Originated in France in the 1960s, cinéma vérité was a “participatory mode” of documentary filmmaking that combined naturalistic techniques with the stylized cinematic devices of editing, camerawork, and staged set-ups to render the “truthfulness” of the scene. It involved formal settings or restaging and interaction between the filmmaker and the subject, even to the point of provocation. Some argued that the overt presence of the filmmaker and the camera helped reveal the “truth” in cinema. On the contrary, direct cinema, which originated in North America in the late 1950s, was largely concerned with the recording of events in which the subject and audience were unaware of the camera’s presence, operating within what many have attributed to the “observational mode” of documentary filmmaking. Many, therefore, saw a paradox created by drawing attention away from the reality of the camera and simultaneously declaring the discovery of a cinematic truth. It was characterized initially by filmmakers’ desire to directly capture reality and represent it truthfully, and to question the relationship of reality with cinema. For more elaboration on these two documentary modes, see Bill Nichols, Introduction to Documentary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 109–113; 115–117.
be a unique individual and to be as diversified as us. Like any other places China has its own individualities.\(^{567}\)

Ironically, the officials of Maoist China may not have seen the importance of “Chinese individualities” as much as Ivens and Loridan did. According to Zhang Tongdao, the reason that Zhou Enlai invited his old friend to make a new film in the PRC was, like the case of Antonioni, primarily to help rehabilitate the Chinese national image in the sphere of world diplomacy, especially after several dark years of the closed-door policy.\(^{568}\) Ivens was the ideal candidate to help promote the image of China because of his impeccable friendship and long-standing fraternal tie with Zhou, as confirmed by Ivens himself. He mentioned that he would have no problem assisting in such “rehabilitation.”\(^{569}\) He also admitted that Mao’s China always “regarded [him] as the one who will never betray her.”\(^{570}\)

What is rather idiosyncratic here is that there is a certain “propagandistic” remnant lurking in this epic documentary. Hans Shoots claimed that “the main objection, however, remained that Yukong gave a false picture because it did not probe beneath visible reality, did not penetrate to the underlying mechanisms of Chinese society.”\(^{571}\) While Ivens repeatedly emphasized the spontaneous expressions of the Chinese people, it is indeed quite surprising to see that there are still quite a few restaged or reenacted scenarios in this film.\(^{572}\) For example, the

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\(^{569}\) Ivens added that the unfair ghettoization of China by various foreign powers during the late 1960s was a latent reason that prompted him to make the film. He commented: “Obviously China needed a film and I felt that a film was a need to China. At that time China’s international reputation dropped to its lowest level, Chaos caused by the Cultural Revolution further confused western people, which subsequently made the images of China ever darker. What is worse is that it seemed like western media were just wishing for more problems for China. China needed to stand on her feet again. As a result, giving lots of approval for *The 17th Parallel*, Zhou Enlai entrusted me to make a film that would change China’s international image.” See Ivens and Destanque, 315.

\(^{570}\) Ibid., 12. In his autobiography, Ivens expressed that he would never betray Chinese people by making a film that was against China, against socialism, and against his beliefs. See Ibid., 317.


\(^{572}\) Ivens repeatedly emphasized that he never manipulatively restaged any scenes in Yukong. See Devarrieux, *Youlisi yiwensi de changzheng: yujizhe tanhualu* 34. As Shoots recounted, “[s]till, the filming of Yukong had been much less spontaneous than was first suggested. When Guangdong Television interviewed a number of characters from ‘The Pharmacy’ for a documentary about
two directors might not have shown sufficient evidence of their “friendship” with the Chinese subjects during the classroom debating sequence in the short film *Une histoire*. Moreover, one critic argued that the incomplete engagement of the two directors might have consequently rendered the Chinese subjects as looking “a bit stuck and not completely at ease.”\(^{573}\) Another critic, Wu Wenguang, who is also a documentary director and who personally lived through the bitter years of the Cultural Revolution as a child, expressed ambivalent feelings when he watched several parts of *Yukong* in an Ivens retrospective film festival hosted in China:

> My personal feeling is rather hyperbolical: China of the 1970s filmed by Ivens is a China on stage. There are obviously many re-presented scenes and staged sequences in the film…. I am certain that the reason for my uncomfortable feeling originates from my witness of such ‘ugly expression’ twenty years ago. It was like confronting an old scar in the mirror. I could affirm that this is the very truth of being a Maoist Chinese, which we all had experienced. This truth is like a reminder of both their voluntariness and a compulsion of assuming the role as an ‘actor’ in that revolutionary era.\(^{574}\)

Perhaps one of the main factors that led so many critics to label *Yukong* a “false picture” was precisely that the Chinese subjects occasionally looked awkward and unnatural, especially during interview sessions where the interviewees sometimes looked directly into the camera. But does cinematic reenactment or reconstruction necessarily mean that the filmmakers had overtly “falsified” and “fabricated” Maoist realities? I do not think so. Indeed, it is quite natural to see that the very presence of an unfamiliar camera renders the represented subjects as feeling a bit restrained and uptight. This kind of awkwardness among the subjects, instead of representing an overall “fakeness” of the film, may have perhaps added a sort of naturalistic aspect to *Yukong*. Since the Chinese subjects did not simply conceal their natural reactions in front of the camera, such unpretentious, unmediated awkward moments suggest a new form of “authenticity” or “truthfulness” that is somewhat different from the overtly politicized social lives during the Maoist Cultural Revolution. According to one critic, “Ivens [felt] they were so successful in overcoming self-consciousness on

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\(^{574}\) Wenguang, Wu, *Jingtou xiang ziji de yanjing yiyang* [Camera Is Like Your Own Eyes] (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2001), 83–84.
the part of their Chinese subjects that he tended to retain in the completed films the occasional shot of someone looking at the camera."

“Let One Hundred Flowers Blossom” and Real Democratic Conflicts

However, this overcoming of self-consciousness may not be entirely possible. Insofar as the sheer reservation of all these “awkward” images is still, by and large, a mediation of the two directors at the editing table, they must simultaneously create another kind of “boldness” and “awkwardness” to show the audience. In fact, many commentators wondered why Ivens and Loridan did not choose to record the Chinese political realities and the internal power struggles in 1976. Were they trying to conceal the undesirable political moments of Mao’s China, which were still part of the social truth of the entire historical period? It seems that the two directors failed to capture the various political changes in the PRC during the final years of Mao, as well as the general paradigm shift in Western leftist cultures in the mid-1970s. Some critics even claimed that the twelve parts of Yukong were so ideologically restrained, old-fashioned, and awkward in themselves that they were not able to synchronize with the emerging global anti-authoritarianism that sought to predominantly criticize the sheer political cruelties of Chairman Mao and the Gang of Four. For instance, as one critic commented:

Generally greeted with enthusiasm when first released in 1976, Ivens and Loridan’s Yukong films have since been much criticized for their passivity towards the Chinese official line. When that line changed drastically after 1976 their films were left looking culpably gullible, at the very least. Certainly the filmmakers’ distance from the positions set forth in the films is ambiguous; they seem to rely on the excuse that the camera is a neutral observer to account for their own failure to make comment, verbal or otherwise, on their subject’s remarks or situations. The twelve hours of film also contain a fair share of tedium.\(^{576}\)

While I agree with some of these comments, I argue that the critic may have missed crucial historical data pertaining to Ivens’s prolific filmography. Indeed, it would be ill-advised to simply suggest that Ivens failed to synchronize and keep pace with the predominant leftist trends and cultures of the world. Shortly after May ’68, Ivens and Loridan, like many liberated Western

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575 Sklar, 64.
intellectuals, collaborated with a group of young French militants to make several leftist collective films in Laos and Vietnam. In Western political and intellectual contexts, especially after the uprising moments of the 1960s, spontaneity and immediacy emerged as major concerns of the young revolutionaries in resisting a coercive form of Party politics. Collective filmmaking, as discussed in Chapter Two regarding the “Groupe Dziga Vertov,” was a rather fashionable trend in European art circles between the late 1960s and early 1970s. The film *Le peuple et ses fusils (The People and Their Guns)* (1969) made in Laos by Ivens and other young European militants particularly addressed the liberated cultural moments shortly after May ’68.577

As an active anti-fascist in World War Two, Joris Ivens saw virtuous parallels in the youthful insurrections of ’68 and that of the Resistance. His wife, Marceline, who was a French Jew who successfully escaped from Nazi persecution during her childhood, similarly admired the courage of the young people in resisting their oppressors. Marceline was also closely tied to a small French feminist cell that was derived from the events of May ’68. Although both Ivens and Loridan had not officially joined any of the European Marxist-Leninist groups, they still highly sympathized with the Maoist currents in France, especially the newspaper *La Cause du peuple* chaired by Jean-Paul Sartre.578 On the other hand, Ivens, as a former close associate with the Soviet Union in the 1910s, seemed to be a bit more reserved and skeptical than his younger colleagues about the various emancipatory notions of 1968 such as “self-agency” and “direct democracy.” Admittedly, Ivens could see that there was a striking homology between the uncritical celebration of democracy in the West and a certain reemergence of dogmatic tendency.

577 The story of *Le peuple et ses fusils* is about the fight of the Pathet Lao against the feudal structure of their country and the intervention of United States troops to help the rightist government. In the liberated zone, people continue their struggle to have a better life through more production, the end of dependence on a foreign economy, and a change in the relations of forces in society. The story was filmed in the jungles, in a liberated village, and in the caves that served as headquarters for the Pathet Lao. It contains an element of active and conscious self-criticism as it records the life of a liberated area. This Laos film is somewhat chronically parallel to the events in Paris in May ’68. On their return from Laos, Ivens and Loridan decided to link up with some of those who had participated in the French May ’68 and form a new collective to complete the film. Many of the aesthetic arguments in the wake of May ’68 are present in the film, which particularly refuses the traditional form of narrative cinema and its relevant visual pleasure.

578 For a comprehensive record of Ivens’s and Loridan’s sympathy toward French Maoism after May ’68, see Shoots, 303–306.
As Ivens personally admitted, the radical films made after May ’68 were almost all artistic failures. In his autobiography, Ivens commented that his film *Les people et ses fusils* turned out to be a “strong, didactic political film.”

He thereby coined the so-called “democratic” environment and “egalitarian” method advocated by the Laos film collective as a kind of “intellectual terrorism” that was more or less dominated by an intolerant, “small-minded atmosphere.” The Laos film was prone to an immediate “instruction” insofar as it constantly obliged the audience to look at the picture from a certain viewpoint through various inter-titles. Like Godard and Gorin’s film *Vent d’est* produced outside of France, the collected works made by Ivens and Loridan and other young French militants were originally based on a “democratic” approach, purified of any cinematic hierarchies. Yet as the film shooting proceeded, the creative freedom soon became suffocating and unbearable. The endless debates among the various individuals in the group turned the editing of the film into a protracted and painful process. Recounting the film process in an interview, Ivens recalled that it was actually ridiculous and overbearing to “[let] ten people around the cutting table discussing and then voting where to make the cut.”

What is even more striking was that, according to Bert Hogenkamp, the democratic ideas celebrated by the Laos film collective were more or less founded on the logic of exclusion. That is to say, the virtues of spontaneity and democratic freedom paradoxically precipitated into a sort of categorical commandment and imperative. Throughout the process of filmmaking, it was Ivens himself who felt uninvolved and alienated by the young revolutionaries during the extensive ideological debates. Contrary to the shooting of *Yukong*, where he had to constantly “inspire” his Chinese crews about the methods of camera movements and the synchronized sound, Ivens encountered immense difficulties in explaining certain subtleties of editing to the young militant artists in Laos. Eventually, Ivens found himself being caught up in a marginal position in this post-1968

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579 Ivens and Destanque, 308.
580 Ibid., 307.
582 Hogenkamp, “Joris Ivens and the Problems of the Documentary Film,” 25.
experience of “democratic filmmaking” that was heavily dominated by the young and the restless.

The failure of these ideal egalitarian politics based on either the post-1968 Western liberal ideas or Mao’s “democratic dictatorship” prompted Ivens and Loridan to locate a new collective experiment elsewhere. Interestingly, this new aspiration led them back to Mao’s China once again—in the 1970s after the Great Leap Forward. According to Serge Le Peron, the cinematic success of Ivens and Loridan in *Yukong* in capturing the liveliness of Chinese political realities, unlike Antonioni’s *Chung Kuo*, lay in the former’s correct use of “division of labor” between directing, cinematography, and sound-recording.\(^{583}\) Concerning the “real” collective work during the Maoist Cultural Revolution that was somewhat different from that of the French May ’68, Ivens defended it when he stated: “It does not mean a false democracy, or voting on everything, or that the majority is always right. It is more that everybody should bring his utmost potentiality to the film, but at a certain moment decisions have to be made by one person.”\(^{584}\) This “decisional” power could be bestowed to anyone at any time. According to Ivens, real collective works should tolerate this contingent and additional “one person,” who on the one hand is always self-included in group discussions but on the other hand also enjoys certain exemptions from mass debates at will.

In this respect, some critics wondered why the sheer signifier of the Chinese Communist Party was particularly absent in many parts of *Yukong*, especially considering the long friendship between Ivens and Mao’s China. Loridan confidently answered those critics when she stated that “[t]he Party does not appear, except when there are events in the film that justify its intervention.”\(^{585}\) In other words, the Party referent was not entirely absent but was instead retroactively reinscribed rather than having it be pre-ontologically valorized before the people. Loridan added that the elusive Party signifier was not


\(^{584}\) Shaffer, 14.

\(^{585}\) See Daney et al., “Entretien avec Joris Ivens et Marceline Loridan,” 19.
designated to stop the movements of the people but precisely to develop and enable them in an even more organic fashion.\textsuperscript{586}

\textit{The Party does not appear as such, it is embedded in all situations, all the structures. It is not like a tentacular administration but it is sprawling everywhere. All components of the film are the members of the Party. But this is not the Party as we imagine when we think of the P.C.U.S. [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] or the P.C.F.}\textsuperscript{587}

However, Ivens also equally pointed out that his revolutionary film languages might not have completely entered the cinematic lexicon of the Chinese facilitators themselves.\textsuperscript{588} There was obviously a certain discrepancy between Western direct cinema and the Chinese style of documentary filmmaking. Ivens believed that his Chinese cameraman in \textit{Yukong} was always either “too sluggish” or “too excessive” in handling the camera movement. Also, the Chinese crew was not used to filming close-ups due to the deep-seated “Confucian” tenet to avoid prying too deeply into others’ privacy, thus restraining spontaneous movement.\textsuperscript{589}

The Dutch filmmaker added:

- Chinese movies are different from ours, they’re more contemplative, more static. The camera is not part of the action, but records it, observes it…. For a Chinese cameraman to understand that he can move along with his camera is staggering. Most often, when he finally gets to do it, he goes to the extreme and moves too much. So you have to explain the role and function of each movement of the camera.\textsuperscript{590}

\textsuperscript{586} Ibid., 19; 22.
\textsuperscript{587} Ibid., 22. In fact, Ivens also said that he never totally identified with the rigid form of the Communist Party: “[F]or me, the road to socialism in China is open, it is a very intelligent and wise party, that sees all ancient currents that are in the traditions and the habits of the people and does not force these; it forces changes in ownership, they take socialism seriously, also in an ethical sense. In the Soviet Union I think the roads to socialism are closed, the party is away from the people.” See Carlos Bökér, \textit{Joris Ivens, Film-maker: Facing Reality} (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 125.
\textsuperscript{588} The so-called “democratic” division of labor within \textit{Yukong} cannot be seamlessly worked out. According to Marceline Loridan, there was an obvious difficulty for the Chinese cameraman to work with synchronized sound. See Rayleigh, 22. Yet, at the same time, the overall interpretive difficulty toward the various spontaneous talking of the Maoist subjects could also be exemplified by the sheer impossibility of translating the multi-dialects of Chinese in terms of French alone. In this respect, Loridan confessed: “We had two interpreters with us, the same ones for a year and a half. After a few months, they were like … real movie assistants. Sometimes they were helped out by local interpreters, recruited on the spot, because of the different dialects. They not only had to translate words, but feelings and thoughts as well. Our first big job was to explain what we wanted, not in our language, but in that of the Chinese. This was a big problem. That’s why some of the questions we ask are formulated in a way that might seem a little strange. They had to be understood by Chinese and Westerners alike.” See Doublet and Sergent, “15.
In fact, according to the Chinese cameraman Li Zexiang, he entertained a certain disagreement with Ivens about the notion of “naturalism” presented in Mao’s China. What is really at stake here is that there was always an irreducible antagonism between the two sets of cinematic languages and vocabularies in representing the Maoist liberation of people’s voices and expressions. As Thomas Waugh argued, the result always ended up in staggering and embarrassing experiences for the audience “when the resources of direct cinema were finally applied to a [Maoist] society which itself [already] ‘lets the people speak.’” As one can easily identify in this documentary, the various debates among the Chinese people always ended with a highly synthetic and artificial “reconciliation” toward the end of the narratives in Yukong. This kind of “harmonious finale” immediately renders high suspicion to foreign eyes. Une histoire is particularly about how the “harmonious” relationship between two social classes—teacher and student—is restored after an open classroom debate about an incident in which a student defies school regulations by impatiently kicking a ball in front of a teacher. Waugh described this scene as at once both “curiously ritualistic” and “affecting and authentic.”

Narratively, this minor offshoot of high school conflict ruminates around a female teacher and a male student. The student, named Jia Yuming, who kicked the ball that accidentally hit his teacher’s face, is also a Red Guard and he believes he is right to rebel against his teacher in such a way. At first glance, this episode seems to entertain a presupposed gender orientation that shows the stunning contrast between “male impatience” and “female rationality,” especially considering that the film was shot just a few years after the disastrous lessons of high Red Guardism. Yet what is even more surprising to the audience is that such sexual bias is somehow reversed during the course of the film. While the audience is led to believe that the teacher has “democratically” invited the class to give

591 Li Zexiang said: “Ivens wanted us to film lively, natural scenes in the classroom. I later realized that Ivens made this requirement out of his understanding of our way of presentation…. Ivens obviously wanted to reflect real school life through natural details, which I consider his demands naturalistic. Real life is not necessarily what is attended to film. The classroom for serious teaching and concentrated listening, I felt that was the true situation in our school.” Li Zexiang, “The Style and Characteristics of Ivens’ Films,” in Joris Ivens and China, ed. Film Archive of China and the Editorial Department of New World Press (Beijing: New World Press, 1983), 119.
593 Ibid., 160.
their own opinions about the incident, this does not simply mean that the discussion is really democratic and open at all, as the teacher has a pre-written agenda in trying to ridicule and denounce the infantile naïveté of her students.

Near the end of the film, a student points out that it is in fact the teacher who is impatient in listening to the mass opinions instead of the student Jia Yuming. The teacher immediately makes a self-criticism (by referring to the doctrines of Mao) and apologizes to the class about her subjective point of view and her old bourgeois frame of mind. Soon afterward, Jia Yuming apologizes to the teacher and to the class as well because he, too, has his own personal fallacies and wrong assumptions. The film then concludes with an awkward handshake between the teacher and the student, which seems to reopen even more queries than to answer the lingering conflict. In this particular debating sequence, one critic argued that this episode exemplified the failure of Maoist democracy in the classroom during the feverish moment of the Cultural Revolution heavily dominated by the Gang of Four.

In this ultra-leftist period between 1972 and 1974, young students seemed to have regained their rebellious power once again under the support and tutelage of Jiang Qing. Within such a frightening atmosphere, there were many famous intellectuals of the time who were compelled to make self-criticisms and write confessional letters. Critic Nie Xinru pointed out that the female teacher was in fact largely pressured to come to terms with her student under this strange historical setting. Although Jia Yuming later apologized to his teacher, it still vividly demonstrated the predomination of the youth over the adult because the student's apology was not really sincere or genuine. This scene illustrates that

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594 Celebrated Chinese communist poet and historian Guo Moruo, for example, was the most famous person in China who suffered as a scapegoat to sustain the fire of the campaign. In a criticizing assembly during 1974, Guo was charged by the Gang of Four as having possessed the “same non-criticizing attitude” toward Emperor Qin, Confucius, and Lin Piao. Although he had been so distinguished throughout Chinese communist history for his well-known denunciation of Chiang Kai-shek during the civil war (even Mao himself respected Guo very much), he was forced to write a self-criticism publicly. See Wen, Han, “‘Wenhua dageming’ zhong de Guo Moruo” [Guo Moruo in the Cultural Revolution]. Dangshi bolan [The Encyclopedia of the History of the Party] 10 (2000): 17; 16.
there was a highly coercive background behind this ideological ritual in 1970s China.595

In fact, Ivens personally agreed that the student might not have been entirely satisfied with the mutual reconciliation. He looked a bit awkward and unnatural when he was shaking hands with his teacher.596 However, what is interesting is that the camera did not simply end its recording there but kept running for a short while to film a few empty chairs and desks after both the teacher and the students have left the classroom.597 As Li Zexiang, the cameraman of Yukong, recounted: “But how should we conclude our story? The ending would have been planned beforehand were it not a documentary, but in our impromptu filming it was not. The director and cameraman must be able to grasp typical actions reflecting the theme so that they do not end up with simply a naturalistic record.”598 In other words, contrary to those commentators who simply criticized this Ivens-Loridan work as utterly propagandistic and tedious, the “unnatural” conclusion in this classroom sequence as such was still able to offer a kind of implicit critique of the sheer artificiality of “democratic reconciliation” permeating in Maoist societies. The impromptu, contingent addition of “one more shot” suggests that there was still something unresolved at the seemingly “reconciled” finale that prevented the interpretation of the same episode from being completely foreclosed.

Proletarian Supervision and the Re-domesticated Maoist Women

In fact, although the above propaganda tendencies may not have been entirely equivalent to the falsification or fabrication of social realities, it was exactly the sheer incompleteness of “democratic openness” pertaining to the Maoist Cultural Revolution that aroused a certain hyperbolic feeling among many Western leftist sympathizers. If one of the major characteristics of sexual

595 Xinru, Nie, Jilu dianying dashi yiwen si yanjiu [The Study of Documentary Cinema Master Ivens] (Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Press, 2010), 257.
596 See Sklar, 60.
597 The cameraman Li Zexiang recounted: “Suddenly, Jia and Tong [the female teacher] approached each other, warmly shook hands and walked out of the picture together. This raised the ideological level of the film. But we continued filming until all the students had left the classroom and all we had to take was four rows of desks and seats. And that was how the film ended.” See Li, “The Style and Characteristics of Ivens’ Films,” 123.
598 See Ibid., 122.

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liberation in the post-1968 West was more and more women leaving the nuclear family to occupy the roles of supervision and administration in both the government and business sectors that were long the domain of men, women’s liberation in Mao’s China seemed to have partially followed this Western path by gradually promoting some female proletariats into cadre status or Party delegacy. On the one hand, as Antonioni recounted in his filming experience in the PRC: “Every district has its representative charged with maintaining order, and they are almost always women. If something happens they immediately turn up and maintain order. They are respected and listened to; they represent power, but in an unassuming way.” On the other hand, unlike the so-called “equal opportunity” celebrated in the post-1968 West, sexual inequality still very much persisted in Maoist China. According to Claudie Broyelle: “[In the 1970s,] there are still many areas with a majority of men, and some areas almost exclusively reserved for women. If you look, for example, at the structure of leadership you will find that the ratio of women to men in positions of power is markedly low, and that the higher you look in the power structure, the lower it will be.”

In the film La pharmacie, the supervision that the Maoist women are charged with is perhaps only marginal, if not redundant. Nie Xinru pointed out that there was a strange middle-aged woman who seemed to have appeared in every corner of this film. When the patients are queuing for free medical consultations in the drugstore, this woman sits next to them and talks to them. Then, the woman appears in a pharmaceutical factory where she actually works. The workers in this factory politely reflect their opinions and wishes to this woman. Soon afterward, she is also present at a meeting with the pharmacists, clerks, and shop owner of the drugstore, where she reports the workers’ concerns. According to the voice narration, this “omnipresent” woman was the workers’ representative of a “supervision committee” appointed by the pharmaceutical factory to keep the running of the drugstore constantly in check. Yet an immediate query pops up: Why did such a supervision committee exist in

601 Nie, 131.
the first place? The supervising job was indeed highly time-consuming as this female workers’ representative had to manage both her daily factory work and regular monitoring of the drugstore. If sexual liberation in Mao’s China involved promoting female comrades to some cadre and delegate roles, it also increased the burden on and workload of women as well.

On the other hand, as Nie pointed out, the establishment of this supervision committee was greatly cost-ineffective. With regard to today’s capitalist logic, retail and the market determine and supervise the production lines, rather than the reverse. The pharmacists who are on duty in this relatively small-scale drugstore can hear their customers’ opinions directly, which means that the supervision committee is highly unnecessary and a wasteful use of time and energy in the sense that the customers themselves serve as invisible “supervisors” of the shop. Thus, one is tempted to ask: Did the supervision committee exist merely as some sort of symbol during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s? As Nie quickly identified, there was actually a distinct purpose for this seemingly “repetitive” supervision committee run by the proletariats, and their existence could not simply be replaced by the customers’ active monitoring. As the customers seldom disclosed their real social identities (i.e., peasants, workers, or even petty-bourgeoisie) when they voiced their opinions, their monitoring of the drugstore was largely ineffective because the staff were unable to identify the true needs and concerns of a particular class. That is to say, who are the people that need to be served and addressed? The supervision committee, in this sense, helped concretize and legitimize a unique set of class interests, thus facilitating the drugstore’s staff in gaining more effective and direct responses from the customers.

Nevertheless, according to Nie, the proletarian supervision committee had a far more crucial function in social relations than the sheer supervision of the business alone. It was, first and foremost, a political vision. Since the supervising delegate had to abandon her regular work at the factory to go to the

602 Ibid.
603 Ibid., 133.
604 Ibid.
605 Ibid.
drugstore for various surveying and meetings, this seemingly “cost-ineffective” gesture of working-class supervision in fact became an indispensible ritual that exemplified or exhibited the historical singularity and revolutionary primacy of proletarian monitoring. That is to say, working-class interests were repeatedly valorized high above business and profit-making during the Maoist heyday. Despite this “ritual” sounding a bit tautological, proletarian supervision reminded everyone in Maoist society of the sheer importance of class consciousness, even during the most quotidian activity, which kept the revolutionary momentum constantly moving forward.606

Toward the end of Nie’s analysis, he mentioned the presence of a female peasant delegate in parallel to the workers’ representative in the constitution of a joint “worker-peasant supervision committee.” Regretfully, he did not elaborate any further on this female peasant cadre member and tended to use the workers’ representative as a stand-in for the whole proletarian supervision. Nie’s negligence of this peasant is perhaps due to the striking resemblance of appearance between the two middle-aged female delegates. Moreover, there was no dramatic device used in the film to link the two female characters. However, upon closer analysis, the two representatives—one from the factory and one from the rural countryside—appointed are highly different in the way they gather the opinions of their respective class groups, despite occupying the same roles in their proletarian supervision committees. Compared with the workers’ representative, the peasant delegate, who looks slightly older, received and assembled the opinions of the other farmers rather casually while they were working in the fields. Yet for the workers’ delegate, she had to temporally stop her work on the assembly line for a while to go out and listen to the reflections of the other workers quite seriously and carefully.

In fact, in Le pharmacie, the two delegates never really communicate with each other, and they appear in the film rather separately and discontinuously. Although the two women finally come together at a joint committee meeting with the drugstore’s owner and staff at the end of the film, it is quite surprising to see

606 Ibid.
that they do not arrive at the conference room in synch. Instead, the peasant delegate arrives at the meeting venue after the workers’ representative has already started discussing some issues with the pharmacy’s staff. This does not necessarily mean that the peasant delegate deliberately arrived late but, rather, it was probably owing to the long geographical distance between the rural countryside and the drugstore located in the city compared to the closer distance between the factory and the drugstore. In this respect, Ivens and Loridan used an extended sequence to depict how long the peasant delegate traveled from the farmland to the city.

The so-called “worker-peasant supervision committee” in the film may never be consummated in ideal synchronicity, as the two female delegates cannot supervise the pharmaceutical business in perfect unity because of the geographical difference between the peasant and the factory worker in relation to the drugstore located in Shanghai. However, does this necessarily mean that joint proletarian supervision was doomed to fail during the Cultural Revolution? Interestingly, looking at the film more closely, this unevenness between the female delegates is not absolutely pre-ontological but also temporal. In the meeting, the peasant delegate explains to the rest of the participants that the farmers in their county are all very busy because of the harvest, and hence they cannot travel to the drugstore as frequently as before, as they have to take care of the crops first. In fact, the peasant delegate, like the workers’ representative, also appears frequently in the film, but the location where she appears is always tied to the rural countryside because the filming coincided with the harvest period.

While it seems that the peasant delegate embodies a certain “lagging behind” compared with the workers’ representative in performing the same proletarian duty of supervision, she actually has a very unique monitoring role that has outgrown the original duty of monitoring the drugstore’s economic decisions. Toward the end of the joint meeting, it is the peasant delegate, instead of the workers’ representative, who points out that most of the staff in the drugstore seem to have gradually lost interest in political study. As she observes, the staff may have become self-confined in their busy daily routine and gradually carried away by the socialist business. They also have forgotten to keep
expanding their intellectual scope in learning Maoist politics. This verdict from the peasant delegate turns out to be a profound reminder to everyone. Soon afterward, one of the female pharmacists of the drugstore suggests that they can in fact use their free time to study Maoist writings so that the entire staff and owner can balance their political studies and busy itineraries in a more organic way. The notion of “free time” that this female pharmacist suggests is perhaps somewhat different from the idea of “leisure” imagined in the post-1968 feminist culture of the West, where leisure time was considered an aesthetic way of living that freed women from domestic housework and the naturalized burden of child-rearing so they can “play.” In Maoist women’s liberation, the meaning of “leisure” is a further reinscription of an extra “workload” of political study added to their free time, if not also to their family time.607

In conceiving the various (re)politicized activities in Yukong, dominant scholarships on Maoist women today tend to reduce the sheer political subjectivization of female proletariats in revolutionary times as merely a kind of passive, subordinated process under ideological interpellation.608 This type of criticism, however, fails to notice the very voluntariness of the Maoist women as a real subject, thus contributing nothing novel to understanding the Cultural Revolution. In fact, what seems to remain as a true historical legacy of Maoist liberation is precisely the people’s courage and fidelity to repoliticize all walks of life, including family and sexuality in Chinese society. As discussed in the Tel Quel section on the model theater in Chapter Seven, “family” as a motif in the Chinese revolutionary theater is denied the fantasmatic support of political ideology. The heroine is always submitted to political discourses wholeheartedly, unlike Western Oedipal drama which views “family” as a site outside of the symbolic realm. Likewise, in Yukong, the roles of the female subject and the familial sphere are excessively surrendered to the political realm. In Le pharmacie, for instance, there is a scene where Ivens and Loridan follow a young female

607 After the worldwide leftist insurrections of '68, the notions of “play” and “leisure” were reimagined by many Western feminists as a profoundly political issue and they began to resist the ideological coordinates of “time” that were traditionally predominated and domesticated by men.
pharmacist, together with her husband and daughter, on a visit to her parents-in-law’s house during a leisurely weekend. This young pharmacist is precisely the aforementioned participant who suggested that the entire staff in the drugstore should make the best use of their spare time studying Maoist politics.

What is striking about this sequence is that the usual gender assumption of patriarchy seems to be somewhat reversed. It is the husband who is actually doing the housework at the washboard while his wife is listening to model revolutionary music in the dining room. Shortly before her visit to her parents-in-law’s home, the female pharmacist in fact admits that she is basically a liberated woman in the country. She is also in charge of the family’s finances, even though she earns less than her husband. The two respective activities between the husband and the wife at the two corners of the same house are exemplified by a long take, which gives an impression that the two kinds of actions are happening almost simultaneously. However, what actually exhilarated Western critics is that in this scene the husband spontaneously finishes the laundry without any verbal command from his wife or anyone else, while the wife enjoys her revolutionary music without any trace of shame on her face. This very long take immediately embodied a kind of utopian aspiration for some Western liberal critics, as the age-old discursive violence inhered in Western logos seemed to be altogether suspended in this Chinese scenario.

Such spontaneous reversal of patriarchal order, as well as the preservation of mutual respect between the couple that is staged in this scene, aroused feminist attention, especially in the post-1968 Western cultures. Under the traditional patriarchal mindset, the husband enjoys his leisure time while the wife works around the house, but this logic has been reversed in this scene, and the traditional concepts of “work” and “leisure” may, too, have been more or less reciprocated. According to Claudie Broyelle, the achievement of the Maoist revolution was having reeducated men value housework and no longer contemptuously dismissing it as mere women’s work.footnote[609] Moreover, the housework is shared among all the members of the family, and no one has an exceptional privilege to

ignore it.  In this respect, some commentators have called *Yukong* a kind of “progressive feminist film.”

At the same time, this Chinese example of reversing male predominance without a complete liquidation of familial basis can be rather disconcerting. According to Waugh, the twelve parts of *Yukong* suggested that the liberation struggle of women had advanced much further in the vocational area than on the home front in the 1970s. Indeed, the wife in *La pharmacie* is not exempt from all familial duties as she concentrates on her personal enjoyment during the family visit. While her husband is doing the laundry on the other side of the dining room, she may have minimally shared in this kind of male-initiated “housework”—but in a radically different and alternative fashion. Initially, the wife tunes in to a “leisurely” radio program as if she were going to enjoy her music all alone. Soon afterward, however, she finds that this “leisurely” channel is not the “correct” music that she was looking for and she searches for the (politically) “correct” channel that plays revolutionary music. It seems that her musical leisure is not enjoyed alone because it is wholly submitted to the Maoist political field.

This is one reason many Western feminists were rather skeptical and dubious about women’s liberation in Mao’s China. For example, in an interview with Julia Kristeva, Josette Féral commented that “the problem in China [was] to liberate women without breaking up the family.” She also wondered if it was possible that “over-concern for safeguarding the family could impede the liberation.” From the wife-husband sequence in *Yukong*, one can see that it is not the wife who monitors her husband (as she is immersed in her music); she has nothing to do with him. Instead, it is Ivens’s camera that “silently” represents “progressive” Chinese women reversing gender roles. This is where the main problem of the whole sequence lies. As Claudie Broyelle warned, the so-called “benevolent” liberation given to women in the West was perhaps still predominantly a *male invention*: “[W]e must struggle against the reactionary ideas

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610 Ibid., 42.
612 Ibid., 161.
614 Ibid.
about women’s inferiority that are left over from the past. But to say only that much is to keep silent about the contemporary material foundations on which relative inferiority rests.”

Upon closer analysis of the wife-husband scene in *Yukong*, the very musical leisure enjoyed and domesticated by this Chinese wife may not be immediately political, hence reaffirming official Maoist rhetoric. Rather, I argue that her retuning from “leisure music” to “revolutionary music” involves a certain kind of temporal delay, as there can be no entirely spontaneous transition from “leisure” to “revolution.” The idea that the wife is retuning her music only for a political purpose is just an assumption. What if the wife did it simply without any pragmatic purpose? In other words, the music retuning is a reminder that there is still an alternative interpretation of the relationship between “leisure” and “politics” during the Maoist era. No single doctrine is fully able to dictate and domesticate all the possible meanings, consciously and unconsciously, generated in the vibrant social fields of Mao’s China.

**Communist Commerce, Rural Investigations, and the “Ideal” Prescription**

Historically speaking, this kind of private transgression has always been relegated to a minimal level when it is compared to some major egalitarian principles advanced during the time of the Cultural Revolution. It was commonly believed that communist business and enterprise, during the revolutionary epoch of China, were ultimately established to serve the proletariats. Profit or private interest was thereby rendered as unimportant, if not illegitimate. In *La pharmacie*, the shop owners in Shanghai continually contemplate how to cater their business in addressing the needs of the proletariats. The city’s pilot shop, the Shanghai No. 3 Drugstore, gives the best example to the public in showing how pharmacy business can in fact link with proletarian customers organically. In regular meetings and discussions among the staff and the owner, they decide that the shop should experiment with a chain of measures that resembles Maoist egalitarianism. Free medical consultations and acupuncture treatments are provided at this drugstore through an affiliated doctor. The shop lends medical equipment to the

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poor for free, and the owner is very willing to explain the methods of contraception to customers who may not even buy anything in his drugstore. The staff takes care of many roles in the drugstore at the same time to ensure a dynamic socialist environment.

Obviously, “serving the people” as an unconditional social demand is an extremely idealistic move. The master injunction assumes that there are simply unlimited resources in society and that every individual should be hooked onto the same revolutionary line and become synchronized with the footsteps of this national goal. There is a large banner in this Shanghai drugstore that highlights the primacy of an equal attitude toward every proletarian customer. Of course, the overt emphasis on servant attitude over profit-making in the drugstore encourages abuses and an over-reliance on social welfare. Consequently, this may undermine the medical rights of the truly needy in the long run.

The sheer communist duty of serving others during the Cultural Revolution may not have been an innocent undertaking. Under certain heady historical moments, this injunction was employed as a social regulation of excessive bourgeois tendencies and reactionary ideologies within the Maoist state. Partially as a strategic measure, the Maoist slogans of “serving the people” and “down to the countryside” were historically determined to bridge the increasing developmental unevenness between the city and the rural countryside, especially after the heyday of 1968. As schools and universities were mostly paralyzed in the cities after the various factional struggles among the Red Guards between 1966 and 1968, Mao and his allies realized that the large population of young intellectuals in China had to be sent down to the countryside, not only to learn from the hardworking peasants but also to avoid further cramping and uproar in the cities due to insufficient employment and studying opportunities. That is to say, the Maoist egalitarian injunction was a timely prescription to help resolve the side effects of Red Guard violence. Seen in this light, the free medication offered by the drugstore portrayed in *Yukong* was perhaps part of a bigger Chinese ideological project for social remedy. One could well argue that the “affiliated doctor” of the drugstore exemplified a charitable stand-in instead of a true
egalitarian measure oriented at the poor insofar as this service was still largely worked within the ideological confines of the Maoist mentality as a whole.

What is really problematic about Mao’s “pharmaceutical prescription” in the wake of Red Guardism is that it was also a sort of self-negating injunction. The factional violence and fanaticism of the Red Guards should have helped Mao’s political appeal to the young rebels to resist the bourgeois reactionaries in 1966, but this was not the case. In response, the “new” Maoist remedy of “going down to the countryside” was actually a prescription to cure the failure of Mao’s first mandate to revolt. In this respect, the injunction of “down to the countryside” seemed to be more approximated to a “self-renunciation” of Maoist policy itself. However, this kind of “self-reprimanding commandment” was by no means a mindset exclusively limited to the Chinese symbolic enterprise. Rather, this idiosyncratic prescription may have been inhered in the Western metaphysical tradition which, according to Jacques Derrida, tended to idealistically favor “speech” over “writing.”

From Derrida’s rereading of Plato’s Phaedrus, the Greek origin of the word “pharmacy” is pharmakon, which means both “medicine” and “poison.” In his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida argued that pharmakon, as a primordial injunction or commandment that has long characterized Western metaphysics, is inherently ambiguous: “This [Plato’s] pharmakon, this ‘medicine,’ this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be—alternatively or simultaneously—beneficent or maleficent.” On the one hand, the sheer ambivalence of pharmakon constantly enlivens the hermeneutic cycle to resist being symbolically foreclosed. On the other hand, the fundamental ambivalence of the injunction essentializes all sorts of interpretations as well. As Derrida argued, the discursive ambiguity of pharmakon can be excessively violent insofar as it presupposes and predetermines all sorts of possibilities—“good” and “bad,” “cure” and “poison”—within the very confines of the commandment itself.

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This all-encompassing injunction can indeed be logically incomprehensible and inconceivable if all sorts of possibilities are to be simultaneously taken into consideration. To render a somewhat consistent picture, *pharmakon* always involves the recruitment of a certain scapegoat to help rechannel its own primordial contradictions. That was why Derrida believed that the preference of speech over writing implicated in Western metaphysics and logos (which he called “phonocentrism”) was prone to encourage an even harsher binarism of the world rather than really celebrating differences and equalities. He elaborated: “In order to cure the [logos-zoon] of the *pharmakon* and rid it of the parasite, it is thus necessary to put the outside back in its place. To keep the outside out. This is the inaugural gesture of ‘logic’ itself, of good ‘sense’ insofar as it accords with the self-identity of *that which is*: being is what is, the outside is outside and the inside inside.”

In retrospect, looking more closely at the *Yukong* film about the Shanghai pharmacy, the Maoist injunction of “serve the people” is much more than a self-contained activity or a symbolic mandate. As one of the model communist enterprises in the 1970s, the Shanghai No. 3 Drugstore, for example, had perhaps gone beyond a certain ideological confine of simply providing free acupuncture treatment within the pharmacy itself. Instead, the staff and owner of the drugstore also engaged in community outreach to the rural countryside on a weekly basis. The outreach provided by the drugstore team was not simply an enactment of their “profession” offering free medical consultation to the rural class; they also followed in the footsteps of the young “barefoot doctors” who epitomized the Maoist egalitarian spirit of the 1960s and helped the peasants in their labor works. According to Rebecca Karl: “[W]ith the full capitalist commodification of the medical and pharmaceutical business, such transformative experiments have not only been abolished but repudiated as ‘unscientific,’ ‘irrational’ and ‘inefficient.’” She argued that the excessive outreach and social commitment of the drugstore to the rural countryside could actually help redefine the meaning of “commodity” itself.

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617 Ibid., 128.
As she remarked:

Simultaneously, through political and social commitments to bringing medical treatment to the peasant village connected to the Shanghai store, the meaning and significance of the commodity—the medicine itself and the service—also gets re-organized around the differentiating times of the rural.619

This is why the various Maoist practices enacted in the everyday realm cannot simply be dismissed as merely brainwashing activities. In an article written for the 40th anniversary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Rebecca Karl noted that Joris Ivens’s documentary films exemplified succinctly this kind of constant repoliticization of the social lives in the Maoist era: “Unlike most dramatic or documentary films on the Cultural Revolution, Ivens’s films concentrate on common people living their everyday lives in the terms of the cultural revolutionary politics—of the history within politics—of the time.”620 In Ivens and Loridan’s *Yukong*, one can actually find the Maoist slogan “serving the people” that had been deeply embedded and relayed in every corner of society. Unlike the predominant neoliberalist discourses that dismissed the revolutionary potentials of Maoism, Karl was amazed to see that “[t]he attempts of … each person to put into everyday practice the desire for the merging of the temporalities of culture and politics, not as mass spectacle but as individualized activity as part of a collective project of radical social transformation, appear as a genuine discovery of a political actualization that can no longer be thought today.”621

However, as Karl may have failed to elaborate, the most interesting point is that the Shanghai drugstore may have gone a step further in the Maoist ideology of “unconditional egalitarianism.” In fact, a former “capitalist” jeweler worked at the model pharmacy, and he occasionally held different kinds of ideological opinions than the other pharmacists with a more proletarianized background. According to Ivens, he and Loridan wanted “to show that the old shopkeepers [had] become a part of the new society” and that the old and the new could work together in a very intelligent way without the Maoist revolutionary regime.622 On the other hand, unlike the barefoot doctors, the staff, who had committed

619 Ibid.
620 Ibid., 696.
621 Ibid.
622 Rayleigh, 23.
themselves to a community outreach program in the rural countryside, had not simply forgotten to conduct their pharmaceutical business in the countryside as well. That is to say, they were not simply barefoot doctors but were also salespeople. It seems that the Shanghai pharmacists, by simultaneously selling their drugs to the peasants, may have excessively “poisoned,” “contaminated,” or “ruined” the very reputation of the model drugstore during the Maoist era. In other words, the so-called “unconditional charity” to the poor as an exemplary moral duty was still minimally bound up with certain realistic “conditions,” if not politically “impure” desires—in the form of making business itself. The symbolic consistency of the Maoist egalitarian injunction was somewhat internally ruptured by the “commercial break” conducted in the rural countryside. Instead of simply “serving the people,” the model pharmacy also “serves the self” to a certain extent.

Unlike the diversity of pharmaceutical products displayed in the drugstore, the drugs presented in the remote areas were far more limited and were displayed in a highly mundane and boring fashion. Moreover, unlike the patient explanations given when the peasants are in Shanghai, the pharmacists in the rural countryside do not make an effort to promote the drugs or explain their ingredients to the peasants. Rather, it is precisely the behavior of the peasants that has changed. Interestingly, despite the drugs’ trivial appearances, the peasants still queue up to buy the goods without raising too many questions. There is nothing exotic about the goods but it seems that the peasants are familiar with them. Indeed, the peasants may have already gotten some basic knowledge about their limited choices, or they might have experienced the effectiveness of the drugs when a similar kind of medicine was presented to them long before the drugstore’s community outreach program.

A scene previous to the drugstore’s community outreach shows that most of the entrepreneurs in Shanghai have in fact linked up with the workers’ representatives to conduct regular commodity surveys in the rural countryside. From time to time, the workers’ representatives bring a variety of goods down to

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623 One of the peasants complained that the acupuncture treatments conducted by some medical apprentices during their community outreach, when compared with one of their professional doctors, were not very effective at all.
the countryside to investigate which types of products are in fact the most popular among the peasants. Some critics may argue that this kind of rural investigation is highly symbolic and ritualistic since the surveyors collect relevant information from only a handful of rural representatives, so most of the rural people do not have a chance to voice their opinions about the goods. While this may be true, I argue that this does not necessarily mean that all the proletarian customers in Maoist society were deprived of having choices and the freedom of consumption.

In the scene where the workers’ representatives are presenting a variety of alarm clocks and water bottles to the peasants in the countryside, the rural farmers are somewhat fascinated by the pretty “colorful” and “fashionable” products. Compared to the aforementioned medical outreach team, the commodities that are presented here are more lively, appealing, and diverse. In fact, the goods presented to the peasants during the rural investigations are comparatively new. The workers’ representatives, on the other hand, seem to be more animated in introducing their alarm clocks during the course of the rural investigation. The peasants do not simply reject this rather enchanting presentation either. Instead, most of the farmers look quite curious as they circle around the presentation table. However, as most of the peasants lead very modest and unassuming lives, they are not compelled into blind consumption by the products’ appealing appearances or their diversity. During this rural investigation, one of the peasants tells the workers’ representative that she would prefer an alarm clock with a simple and austere design instead of the more captivating and expensive ones (which cost thirty dollars RMB), since they are comparable in function. Unlike the usual stereotypes about the Chinese rural countryside as being “bland” and “plain,” it seems that the Maoist peasants in this scene actually prefer new and diverse things, yet the products presented to them did not need to be the most fashionable ones. That is to say, the rural consumers are still somewhat constrained and limited by several pragmatic concerns during the process of their buying decisions. The peasants refuse to be carried away by the fanciful appearances of the products because they also place equal consideration on their practical necessities as well. At the same time, they are not entirely predominated by the Maoist injunction of “serving the people,” as this kind of “window shopping” among the rural informants still generates certain private pleasures.
Indeed, what is truly radical about the repoliticization of the everyday during the Maoist era is perhaps that this was considered a long-term social experiment when the traditional divides between “private” and “public,” “rural” and “urban,” and “pragmatic concerns” and “lively leisure” are dialectically blended together. Obviously, many critics have argued that this Maoist experiment was a massive failure and an abundant waste of resources. Some dismissive commentators have heavily criticized the Maoist regime as an inhuman system that simply sacrificed and ruined millions of people in a quest to fulfill an impossible utopian ideal—the ideal of one particular man. However, one should realize that this Maoist ideal was never simply about the utopian desires of one single man, that of Chairman Mao himself. Rather, one should remember that this ideal was supposed to be a collective goal, a goal that was composed by masses of people. The majority of the Chinese people (but surely not all) during the Maoist era not only truly believed in such a collective mission but also faithfully enacted and practiced this goal in the realm of the everyday.

The profound political lesson of the Maoist Cultural Revolution, as both vividly recorded and creatively recasted in *Yukong*, is that this kind of egalitarian ideal cannot be entirely contained by the long-standing dichotomy between “poison” and “medicine” in the political prescription itself. Instead, the concrete Chinese experiences that were tied to such Maoist egalitarianism during the 1960s and 1970s pertained to the very deadlocking of the seemingly “universal” dichotomous thinking—which usually made economics economical and politics political with no true dialectics. In this respect, instead of simply lagging behind the predominant intellectual trend of humanism in the late 1970s, Ivens and Loridan seem to have gone much further than most of their post-1968 Western colleagues in their quest to reinscribe their subjective and practical limits back into their corresponding historical moment—the unique context of the sixties where both revolutionary “failures” and “opportunities” were allowed—in order to persistently seek further socially transformative potentials that can radically resist the ongoing predominance of global reactionary current.
CHAPTER 9

“Feminization” of China and Post-revolutionary Reform

Contrary to the previous Western leftist generations who visited communist China largely for the sake of political and ideological purposes during the heyday of the 1960s and 1970s, young French female director Camille de Casabianca came to the same place in the mid-1980s to make a feature film called Pékín-Central (Beijing-Central) (1986) under a far more depoliticized perspective and sexually liberated mindset. Seen as a rare cultural record of the Sino-French encounters during this epoch, the film blatantly journals the exotic anecdotes and erotic adventures among members of a private European tour group who are travelling to the newly established regime of Deng Xiaoping for the first time to enjoy a leisurely vacation. Unlike the usual formalities of being accompanied by a delegate during a visit to communist China, Casabianca and her left-leaning production team were not asked to take a propagandistic approach during the process of filmmaking in the post-Mao era, which had been undergoing the so-called “reform and opening” since the late 1970s. Rather, the organization and scheduling of this trip was far more casual and spontaneous than that of the officiated diplomatic encounters that have been discussed in previous chapters.624

624 Having succeeded Hua Guofeng’s statesmanship in 1978, Deng Xiaoping, as the head guide and chief architect of the Chinese economic detour, wasted no time in implementing a set of economic liberalizations and modernizations within both the Chinese party and society, gradually substituting the paramount Maoist dictums of “continuous revolution” with a much more pragmatic injunction of “seeking truth from facts.” He thereby heavily relaxed the collaborations with many First-World capitalist countries and encouraged foreign investments within his four newly-established Special Economic Zones that were set in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen. From 1978 to 1988, the value of China’s foreign trade more than quadrupled, growing from $20 billion U.S. dollars to $80 billion. See Harry Harding, China’s Second Revolution: Reform after Mao (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1987), 139.

625 According to renowned Chinese documentary filmmaker Wang Bing (who usually collaborates with French film companies today), he believed that Pékín-Central was almost the first foreign cultural text that recorded the color and variety of the Chinese people’s clothing, unlike all the dull and monotonous Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda clothing of the time. Nevertheless, he commented that this Casabianca film offered a subtle portrayal of the intimate spatial
In this chapter, I will argue that this Casabianca work, which has been largely ignored in both film studies and cultural historiography, precisely suggests and captures an alternative Western vision of communist China that does not fall into the stereotypical trajectories of political didacticism and revolutionary exoticism. Although Pékín-Central was made by a female director who was personally inspired by the emancipatory potentials of the French May ’68, this does not necessarily mean that the film as such is saturated with feminist concerns about sexual liberation or gender equality in post-Mao China. Instead, I will argue that Casabianca’s work here has somehow embodied the male chauvinistic tendencies of simply using a Paris-centric perspective to view the reforming nation of China, effectively recuperating the same epistemological failures that characterized many of the former Maoist generations and French leftist circles during the 1960s and 1970s in relation to their utopian yearnings for the Third World. This inherent limit pertaining to Pékín-Central may not be entirely counterproductive. I will argue that the film Pékín-Central, thanks to the irreducible “shame” of male-led European revolutionary yearnings within the text, outlines certain novel expressions of the Western female gaze that is perhaps neither deliberately self-marginalizing nor brutally colonializing.

Narratively speaking, Pékín-Central is a quite typical French screwball comedy about three educated, bourgeois protagonists who are caught between friendship and sexual desire during a private French tour to the reopening China in the mid-1980s. The film adopts a typical ménage à trois formula, which centers on the two middle-aged male protagonists, Yves and Bruno, and the young heroine Valerie. Of the three characters, Yves is obviously the most chauvinistic and selfish. As a married French journalist-editor, he is going to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to report on how Deng’s recent economic reforms and relaxation of foreign restrictions has changed the perceptions of Western tourists. He then invites his mistress Valerie, who is an emerging French petty-bourgeois intellectual, to join him on his Chinese trip as a sort of “subsidized” exotic vacation. They, along with the photography assistant Bruno, participate in a relationships and fleeting encounters between the foreigners and the ordinary Chinese citizens, especially in the service industry, such as restaurants and hotels, during the early phase of Deng’s reforms and opening. See “Les Propos de Wang Bing,” Pékín-Central. DVD. Directed by Camille de Casabianca. Paris: Felix Films/Epicentre Films, 2008.

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private tour with ten individuals from very different backgrounds (e.g., a young unmarried couple, elderly tourists, and gay lovers) to travel around the various cities in China—Beijing, Lanzhou, Ulan Bator, Xiling, Suzhou, Shanghai, and, finally, Hong Kong. Yves and Valerie initially enjoy a brief moment of extramarital pleasure and secrecy in the PRC. However, while Yves is suddenly called back to Paris halfway through the trip, his mistress Valerie begins her next erotic journey with Bruno, who is also married. Valerie and Bruno’s passion grows even more intense when they arrive in Hong Kong, the British colony where all socialist moral restraints have been relaxed. However, when the journey finally approaches its end, it seems that all the short-lived transgressions and amorous encounters in the East have failed to really transform their original social roles.

What makes Pékin-Central a curious case about China is that Casabianca, compared to established and mature European auteurs such as Joris Ivens and Michelangelo Antonioni, who were permitted to make their documentaries in the PRC during the 1970s, was by no means a well-known Western artist or expert. Rather, Pékin-Central is Casabianca’s cinematic debut. She was previously a young leftist intellectual and liberal-humanist photojournalist in France. As one of the first few Western intellectuals who benefited from Deng Xiaoping’s foreign relaxations, this film, according to Casabianca, was not too heavily censored by the Chinese official organ during its making. Instead, she obtained Chinese filming permission with little obstacles. In contrast to the rigid Maoist formalities during the 1970s, the director was asked only to attend a casual and informal meeting with Chinese officials shortly before shooting the film. Although she was originally invited to make a documentary by the Chinese agency, Casabianca was eventually granted permission to make a fiction film in Deng’s new regime precisely because she was misrecognized as a “harmless” young female translator and subsequently a student director who might want to make her graduate film project in the PRC. During the 1980s, there were in fact several examples of Sino-Japanese co-produced film works that elucidated the renewing or

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626 Ibid.
627 Ibid.
normalizing friendship between China and Japan. However, Sino-European cultural productions remained a rarity during this epoch.

This treatment of Casabianca’s film does not necessarily mean that it was liberated from all Chinese censorship. Like her Western leftist antecedents who came to the PRC before her, Casabianca did not experience absolute independence in managing both her script and her directing in the Deng regime. Rather, she and her crew still had to undergo constant negotiations with Chinese officials. As one actress remembered, there was always an officer sent by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who disguised himself as a friendly “tour guide” to accompany the whole crew throughout filming. The major duty of this “tour guide” was to speculate whether the French visitors would do anything more than sheer filmmaking (such as spying for other Western countries or morally corrupting Chinese citizens) in the early reforms and opening-up of China. She added that the crew even had to evade Chinese inspections from time to time, particularly when they were going to film nude scenes in the hotel. In those days, when the import of foreign commodities was still regarded as morally “unclean” and “suspicious,” there were indeed quite a lot of local “granny police” and neighborhood watch groups recruited from the residents’ committee by the CCP propaganda organs to self-organize guerilla house-to-house inspections, while industrial workers were mobilized to search for pornographic books and videos in factory dormitories.

Ironically, pornographic works and sexual vulgarity were not the central agenda among the moral concerns of the Chinese rank-and-file officials during the 1980s, as they were merely considered secondary during the early years of the post-Mao reforms. Instead, the CCP could never “respectfully” tolerate “serious” Marxist humanist ideas and bourgeois liberalism influenced by a certain accompanying cultural opening to the Western world. In the wake of the nationwide “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign” sparked in October 1983, Deng and his allies had identified that European existentialist writings and Marxist

629 Ibid.
humanism alike could spread cynicism, nihilism, and moral laxity among the Chinese youth and Party members, thus highly deteriorating the reforming unity and objectives of the country. Deng heavily criticized humanism as highly “un-Marxist” and philosophically abstract, claiming that it would “lead the youth astray.” According to Communist Party Propaganda Chief Deng Liqun, “spiritual pollution” included “obscene, barbarous or reactionary materials, vulgar taste in artistic performances, indulgence in individualism” and statements that “run counter to the country’s social system.” Similar to Maoist ideas on art and literature, Deng openly alerted his citizens that “people working in the ideological field must not spread mental pollution.” In retrospect, one can assert that while Pèkin-Central was not really a “serious” humanist or existential work but was more inclined to be a “trivial” French sex comedy, it was not taken too seriously by the Chinese censors. Thus, this Casabianca film was, to a certain extent, eventually “tolerated” by Chinese officials.

However, the main reason the film was somehow tolerated and exempted by Chinese officials and given a certain Western autonomy was, ironically, because Deng had prematurely ended his “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign” due to various fundamental ideological incompatibilities encountered during the period of reform and opening. It was actually Deng Xiaoping’s son, Deng Pufang, who warned his father that if the campaign had been excessively extended and was pursued too vigorously to harass foreign investors and experts, it would be...

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631 This sixty-day campaign spanning from October to December 1983 began as a criticism of the Chinese intellectuals who had rediscovered the early Marxist theories of humanism and alienation, and who had sought to apply them to socialist society. Over time, however, the movement also extended to ordinary citizens, with local leaders attempting to restrict the freedom of younger Chinese people who wanted to attend disco dances, grow long hair and moustaches, or wear fashionable clothes. See Thomas B. Gold, “‘Just in Time!’ China Battles Spiritual Pollution on the Eve of 1984.” Asian Survey 24, no. 9 (September 1984): 947–974.


634 Deng, Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (1982–1992), 50. Premier Zhao Ziyang was even more severe toward the counterrevolutionary tendency among the humanist intellectuals. Early in June 1983, he had already linked the “bourgeois” trends in writing and artistic circles to rising instances of crime, murder, rape, and corruption, blaming the growing crime rate on “political and ideological apathy.” See Zhao Ziyang, “Report on the Work of the Government.” Beijing Review [in English] 26, no. 27 (July 4, 1983), xx. In seeking the Party’s consolidation and rectification, he therefore called for law enforcement to commence a severe “strike-hard” campaign to suppress counterrevolutionaries and criminal activities. Ibid., xxi.
reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution and it could undermine the reform program, thus eroding Deng’s own prestigious image as the leader of Chinese development.\textsuperscript{635} As Chinese critic Liu Kang commented, the early period of reforming China was like “a language in transition, neither entirely new nor old, somewhat like a hybrid and intermediary discourse of a foreign language that the beginner has yet to master.”\textsuperscript{636}

**Western Female Gaze, Lumpenproletariat, and the Dislocated Chinese Subjects**

I argue that this Casabianca film can still be considered “un-Marxist,” as it appropriated many “reactionary” types of shots and “vulgar” images, such as “unproductive” labor and idle Chinese drifters in big cities like Shanghai. The sheer emergence of the city’s overcrowding was somehow captured in this Casabianca film. One of the most distinctive features of *Pékin-Central* is that there is quite an unusual amount of accidental and unnecessary shots of Chinese faces and non-diegetic passers-by, especially in the coastal and more developed cities like Shanghai. It is particularly strange for a fiction film to record so many dislocated Chinese subjects, especially at the risk of a certain level of narrative disturbance. Suffice it to say that such a coincidental record of excessive Chinese faces in *Pékin-Central* may have something to do with the general relaxation of foreign surveillance in Deng’s China. Compared to the Maoist era, foreign filming in the PRC after 1978 was more or less loosened, as can be seen in the enhanced freedom that Western image-makers had while shooting in China after the state rehabilitation of the Antonioni film *Chung Kuo* in 1979.\textsuperscript{637} Moreover, there were fewer, or at least less explicit, Chinese Party delegates who assisted foreign


\textsuperscript{637} After the rehabilitation of *Chung Kuo* in 1979, CCP officials made a drastic correction in the regulation of “the question of foreigners who film in China,” which was passed in the Maoist epoch. This proposal was documented in an official notice, namely “Guanyu suqing ‘sirenbang’ zai pipan Zhongguo yingpian wenti shang de liudu, boluan fanzheng de qingshi” [A Notice about the Clarification of the Mischarge on What the Gang of Four Had Criticized the Film ‘Chung Kuo’]. See Zhongwen chubanwu fuwu zhongxin [The Service Center of Chinese Publishing Materials] ed., *Wuchan jieji wenhua da geming’: you tuichao er fanxing: 1971–1980 nian qijian de xiangguan zhongyang wenjian shibian zhuanji* [The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: From the Ebb to Reflection: The Compilation of the Central Documents Related to the Years between 1971 and 1980] (Los Angeles: The Service Center of Chinese Publishing Materials, 2003), 2–6.
filmmakers in clearing a venue or controlling the crowds in advance. This is why the wandering Chinese subjects, unlike the pictures that were made in the Maoist epoch, remain so rampant in this Casabianca film.638

In Pékin-Central, many of the anonymous Chinese subjects, who are wandering and drifting in the street or are busy with their itineraries, suddenly discover the foreign actors and actresses standing near them.639 Many spare a moment of interest with anthropomorphic curiosity toward the Westerners. Some of their reactions are quite subtle, unassuming, and elusive, like those of Chinese people of the previous Maoist era. After smiling or giggling for a second, most of the Chinese drifters continue walking. Compared to the Maoist time, the Chinese urban dwellers of the 1980s seem to have become more familiar with and obviously less antagonistic toward foreign visitors. As the film shows, the Hollywood blockbuster Superman and Coca-Cola have already been imported to the affluent regions of Deng’s China. However, some of the Chinese drifters are compelled to look back at the foreign actors and actresses. For instance, on the main street of Shanghai, a man keeps gazing back at Bruno and Valerie embracing while he is riding a bicycle. According to one of the actresses, some Chinese people who had never seen a foreigner with blue eyes kept following the car of the film crew in order to see their blue eyes.640 These actions of moving...
back and forth immediately create an impression of certain rural infantilism and curiosity. It is as if they were still looking for something more from the unfamiliar foreigners.

But why did Casabianca retain these idiosyncratic Chinese elements in the finalized version? It may have been to give the audience the impression that the drifting Chinese subjects look fairly ridiculous. Even if this was not the director’s intention, Casabianca still somehow exploited such “eccentric” Chinese elements to give a certain “extra pleasure” to the audience. In this respect, it was with a highly Eurocentric mindset that the director retained those elements, hijacking the “insatiable” responses of the Chinese drifting subjects as a consuming pleasure with her camera. This idiosyncratic craving of the Chinese drifters helped add further exotic values to Pékin-Central. As the main actor explained in an interview, Casabianca herself was never too bothered by and impatient with the shooting schedule in China. All she was concerned about with this film was simply the diversity of the Chinese people under Deng’s reforms. However, what is really at stake is that the idea of “China” was also used in a rather eclectic and idiosyncratic manner throughout Pékin-Central.

The Chinese people walk in and out of the scenes with little or no dialogue. They seem to enjoy their cameo roles, despite the director’s original intention to record the new faces of China. Quite unusual for a fiction film, the director used many generic shots to “study” the various Chinese reactions toward the foreigners in this film. While it seems to be a kind of benevolent address toward the Chinese responses, the result is often embarrassing. Looking at them carefully, one can see that the two perspectives between the Chinese subjects and the French visitors are literally unmatched. This asymmetry often produced and even intensified an odd stereotype of the Chinese people. Without the cognitive support of the shot-reverse shot, the Chinese reactions are indeed rendered as excessively fictional and flattened. Some shots are essentially meaningless, such as when one of the Chinese subjects mysteriously laughs at the French protagonists. However, Casabianca’s camera retains all these non-sensical moments to serve as a kind of

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641 Ibid.
cult pleasure. Ultimately, these generic shots of Chinese people only pertain to the overt arbitrariness of the filmmaker as well.

Interestingly, I argue that these contradictory positions within Casabianca’s vision of “China” are usually concealed by her essentially “female” traits and potentially “subaltern” characters.642 Contrary to the French Maoist intellectuals that always referred to the Chinese natives as having a male persona in the 1960s and 1970s, it was often the Western female subjects, especially in the wake of post-1968 sexual liberation, who enjoyed a dominant relationship with the Third World inhabitants in the late 1970s. Many Western female critics now understand themselves as being the beneficiaries of a reversed patriarchal hierarchy that considered them superior in the East-West divide of colonial male logic. A female European traveler in the East was somehow considered more “legitimate” than a male political tourist under the contemporary ethos of political correctness. Instead of casting the Third World natives as passive victims, Western female intellectuals viewed them with an autonomous, mobile, and sovereign subjectivity. The radical women activists in the West were usually the ones who claimed the privilege of articulating on behalf of the “poor indigenous” in the Far East.643 However, this intellectual privilege at the expense of the native informants was problematic in itself.

642 Although there was no evidence that Casabianca was a “feminist filmmaker,” her work in Pékín-Central was still conceived by the critic Ginette Vincendeau as an exemplification of French women’s cinema. In fact, according to this critic, women’s cinema literally encompassed all feminist works, yet this film could not simply be reduced to being a “feminist film.” While some of the French female filmmakers may have needed to revert to the old auteur model in order to make “serious” (and possibly lower-budget) feminist works partially due to the various economical constraints they encountered, there were indeed some female directors like Casabianca who chose to break out of the traditional auteur paradigm by entering the mainstream industry and seeking international co-productions. Although it seems to be a more realistic and practical move to embrace the market and industry, this commercialization of feminist concerns is immediately coupled with a substantial amount of epistemological dilemmas. Calling Pékín-Central a good attempt at ironizing “French machismo,” Vincendeau identified that there was still a high risk of injecting “liberal feminist” ideology into commercial cinema. This particular kind of “female cinema,” without existing feminist content, could eventually turn women into even more vulgar, debased, and far-fetched alienated objects, if not reappropriated by the capitalist machinery. Ginette Vincendeau, “‘Not Looking Back at ’68: Contemporary French Women Film Makers,” in May ’68: Coming of Age, eds. D. L. Hanley and A. P. Kerr (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989), 161.

643 Rey Chow went on to criticize the so-called Western “Maoists” as always identifying with the subaltern population by positively “naming” and “speaking for” them (zhengming), thus elevating their own cultural positions while depriving the minorities of their true revolting potentials. “Chinese women,” in this respect, were the most popular category identified by such “guilty” Western intellectuals. As the “Maoists” valorized the notions of “woman doesn’t exist” and “woman as holding up half of the sky,” they were indeed further depreciating Chinese women as
Rey Chow wrote in her *Writing Diaspora*:

The hardest lesson from Chinese communism, as with Soviet communism, is that it has not been an accident but a process in the history of modern global enlightenment. This is a process that strategizes on the experiences of the ‘subalterns’ while never truly resolving the fundamental division between intellectual and manual labor, nor hence the issues of hierarchy, inequity and discrimination based on literate power.644

During the early 1970s, Jacques Lacan had already commented that the young French Maoists of the time, especially the members of the *Gauche proléterienne* (GP), seemed to utopianize and essentialize the various revolutionary experiments of Mao’s China without a simultaneous awareness of their honte (shame). Lacan believed that most of the French Maoists, while perceiving the subaltern and proletarian image of “China” as a potentially strong agent that could help liberate their initial bourgeois restraints, were merely indulging in a somewhat imaginary political Cause. The “Maoist base” of the GP, which was primarily set in the newly established University of Vincennes after May ’68, was seen by Lacan as an emblem of primal “obscenity.” As he suggested, the Maoist Vincennes was a scene where shame simply had no currency; in fact, shame was not active at all in Vincennes during that epoch. “Vincennes” in French sounds like “vain scène” (vain scene), which implies a fundamentally bare and naked scenario that coincides with the etymological meanings of “obscenity” and “vanity” as such. Lacan referred to this kind of “shamelessness” as the raging and emotional sentiment prevalent in French radical leftist circles between 1968 and 1974. In this respect, Jacques-Alain Miller added: “This is what psychoanalysis is able to point out, that the shameless are shameful.”645

Facing the growing revolutionary hystericism within French intellectual culture that constantly sought to transgress the social status quo, Lacan emphatically urged the young Maoists to confront their own shame, a radical void

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644 Ibid., 22.
inherent in their uncritical spiritualization of proletarian Maoist knowledge. Avowedly intending to “shame” his Mao-leaning young listeners at his seminars, Lacan may not have aimed at seeking his own private pleasure. As the final sentence of Seminar XVII reads, “I happen to make you ashamed, not too much, but just enough.” Without such a “shaming” posture, Lacan suggested that it would only repeat a certain form of mass hysteria, a revolutionary semblance at most. That is to say, the literal meaning of “revolution,” which is “to return to a start,” indeed remained largely unchanged under a “shameless” kind of symbolic revolt. Although Lacan claimed that every revolutionary aspiration should always point back to the discourse of the master, this did not necessarily mean that revolutions as such always leads to failure. Jacques-Alain Miller pointed out: “Making ashamed is an effort to reinstate the agency of the master signifier.”

Lacan also added elsewhere:

Today I have brought you the category of shame. It is not a comfortable thing to put forward. It is not one of the easiest things to speak about. This is perhaps what it really is, the hole from which the master signifier arises. If it were, it might perhaps not be useless for measuring how close one has to get to it if one wants to have anything to do with the subversion, or even the rotation, of the master’s discourse.

At the conclusion of his Seminar XVII, Lacan returned to the key political wager of his teaching that was in connection with the events following May ’68. The wager was formulated through the odd juxtaposition of “shame” and “lumpenproletariat,” rather than “shame” and “proletariat” alone. He prompted the Maoist students to look “on the other side” of their revolutionary aspiration, the side of those who were truly “dominated”:

If they search on that side, they find that with my little schemas they can find a way of justifying that the student is not displaced in feeling a brother, as they say, not of the proletariat but of the lumpen-proletariat. The proletariat are like the Roman plebs—these were very distinguished people. The class struggle perhaps contains this little source of error at the start, that it absolutely doesn’t take place at the level of the true dialectic of the master’s discourse—it is located on the level of identification. Senatus Populusque Romanus. They are on the same side. And the entire Empire includes all the rest. The question is why students feel that they belong with all the rest. They don’t all seem to be able to see clearly how to resolve it. I would like to point out to them that production is one essential point of the system—the production of shame. This translates as—it’s

impudence. This is why it would perhaps not be a very bad means not to go in that direction.649

In traditional Marxist lexicology, “lumpenproletariat” in fact always had a negative denotation that was literally translated as “raggedy proletarian” or “knave proletarian.” The term was originally introduced by Marx and Engels to describe the layer of the working class, unlikely to ever achieve class consciousness, lost to socially useful production, and therefore of no use in revolutionary struggle or as an actual impediment to the realization of class society.650 In Das Capital, Marx ascribed the lumpenproletariats to the social intermediary between wage laborers and peasants.651 However, in his later texts, Marx radicalized his former usage and equated lumpenproletariat to dangerous “social scum” and the “refusal of all classes” that included all social marginals, such as “vagabonds,” “swindlers,” “brothel-keepers,” “beggars,” and so on. Marx wrote:

On the pretext of founding a benevolent society, the lumpenproletariat of Paris had been organized into secret sections…. Decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, rubbed shoulders with vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaux, brothel-keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short, the whole of the nebulous, disintegrated mass, scattered hither and thither, which the French call la bohème; from this kindred element Bonaparte formed the core of the December 10 Society. A ‘benevolent society’—in so far as, like Bonaparte, all its members felt the need to benefit themselves at the expense of the labouring nation.652

What Marx was obviously unhappy about regarding the Parisian lumpenproletariats was that they seemed to enjoy being lazy at the expense of the whole working nation or the proletarian class. They were merely parasitic to the proletarians and yet they were entropic and remained foreign to class struggles.

649 Ibid., 190.
651 Marx wrote that the expelled peasants were “driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded, tortured by laws grotesquely terrible, into the discipline necessary for the wage system.” See Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers Co., 1967 [1867]), 737.

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According to Marx, lumpenproletariats escaped from proletarian responsibilities and socialist morality, and they tended to enjoy their secret transgressions at the margins of the working-class and at the threshold of the law. Meanwhile, lumpenproletariats, due to their restless traits, could corrupt the working-class from within. Marx viewed the latter as, by definition, a nebulous and disintegrated group without stable collective determination—they were a “non-class,” a “people without a definite trace.” Most of all, Marx was worried that the “classless” lumpenproletariat was reappropriated as the brutal reactionary reserve by the bourgeois state to crush the genuine French revolutionaries, as in the case of the June Days of the 1850s.

Jacques Alain-Miller argued that the popular gesture of “leaning towards East” among the French leftist students in the aftermath of ’68 would leave a stigma of “impudence,” or a little piece of lumpenproletarian excess in their midst. The students’ humble gesture to “learn from” subaltern China may have become a reverse humiliation toward themselves as well. For Lacan, similar to the Marxian dismissal of the lumpenproletariat as a “classless subject,” the revolutionary Maoist discourse was clearly no more than a chain of empty manual knowledge, an inert imposture. Lacan stated: “I won’t risk going into this, I would only go into it cautiously, but if there is something whose tone strikes me in the thematics called Maoist, it’s the reference to the knowledge of manual labor.” However, it was not a “progressive” kind of knowledge. Rather, the Maoist rhetoric could be seen as progression “only at the price of a deprivation.” The proletarian discourse was a “knowledge [that] no longer ha[d] any weight”—“the proletariat [was] not simply exploited, it ha[d] been stripped of his function of knowledge.” This seems to bear a very distinct appearance, but at the same time,
the very “content” had been lacking in the first place. What obviously unsettled Lacan was that the young puritan Maoists who helped the workers in the factories, namely the “communist priests,” always enjoyed a highly abstract paradigm of “joyful ambiance” in relation to the Chinese proletarian signifier.

In other words, Lacan believed that the French students were indeed always in league with the “lumpenproletariat” that was inhered in their own idealization of an abstract, ahistorical China. The Lacanian notion of “China” represented a kind of quasi-proletariat in relation to French leftist imaginaries. At the superficial level, the term “China” seemed to be a very distinguished signifier pertaining to French intellectual imagininations. On the other hand, the same “China” had no inherent value under this form of political spiritualization. The young Maoist intellectuals had somehow indulged themselves in a highly problematic version of “Maoism” without conceiving that there was always a hidden gaze that followed them. This kind of “Maoist virtue” was, ultimately, a fragile and fleeting position that had to be constantly objectified and fixated by other scientific discourses. Lacan was uncertain of whether this kind of purified form of Maoist knowledge prominent in French intellectual culture during the 1960s and 1970s could “carry enough weight to be a subversive factor” since it always coincided with the predominant bureaucratic machinery and the existing related terms that might have jointly depoliticized Chinese histories to a great extent in the 1960s. She said: “The Orientalist has a special sibling whom I will, in order to highlight her significance as a kind of representational agency, call the Maoist…. Typically, the Maoist is a cultural critic who lives in a capitalist society but who is fed up with capitalism—a cultural critic, in other words, who wants a social order opposed to the one that is supporting her own undertaking…. What she wants is always located in the other, resulting in an identification with a valorization of that which she is not/does not have. Since what is valorized is often the other’s deprivation—‘having’ poverty or ‘having’ nothing—the Maoist’s strategy becomes in the main a rhetorical renunciation of the material power that enables her rhetoric.” See Rey Chow, Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 10–11. [italics in the original]

According to Lacan: “What is strange is the passionate integration that came from the heart of someone I’ll call the communist priest (you recognize his silhouette) whose virtue has no limits in nature. One can trust him to be duly rebuked and moralized, these are things that come with old age…. I’ll call him forever Mudger Muddle, which is my definition. This is meant to call up a crocodile and the mud in which he wallows, and the fact that, with a delicate tear, he draws you into his meaningful world. He told me that he was looking for a Marxist theory and was then overwhelmed by so much atmospheric happiness. But it hadn’t come into his thick head that happiness could be generated by truth which it is on strike.” Jacques Lacan, Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan Livre XVI (1968–1969): D’un Autre à l’autre [The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVI (1968–1969): From an Other to the Other], ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 42.
power in making itself audible. Since this kind of Western spiritualization of the Third World subalterns and the minor discourses implies a simultaneous “silencing” of the identified sources, the “turn to China” that was prominent in the late 1960s might therefore paradoxically have become the sheer reaffirmation of the state bureaucracy that the French leftist students sought to criticize and go beyond in the first place.

A Tale of Two Cynicisms with the Little Maoist “Green Hat”

In inspecting the city scene mentioned previously more carefully, one will find that not all of the Chinese drifting people in Pékin-Central were fascinated by the anthropocentric differences of the foreign actors and actresses. Rather, some were subtly interested in something perhaps even more “fundamental,” if not something truly “obscene.” There is an internal discrepancy between the Chinese people in their gazing at the French foreigners within a certain framing of the film. Upon closer inspection, not all of the Chinese passers-by are interested in the French protagonists; in fact, some of them gaze back precisely at Casabianca’s camera off-screen. In other words, on several occasions, there are two kinds of asymmetrical actions simultaneously taking place among the moving urban Chinese multitude—gazing at the foreign actors and looking at the camera itself.

I argue that the true novelty of Pékin-Central is that it has precisely captured two kinds of gazes among the Chinese drifters. While there is a form of gazing in the anthropocentric curiosity to look back at the foreign actors and actresses, simultaneously there is another form of Chinese gazing that curiously is aimed at the hidden French camera—that is to say, the veiled position of the director and her film crew. What is interesting in the second type of “Chinese reaction” is that it helps lay bare the very existence of this hidden camera once again. It is a reminder that Casabianca’s camera primarily captures the Chinese scenery. In other words, the cultural position is not ideologically innocent. Instead

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of simply standing outside the scene, this directorial gaze has included in the same locale both the French actors and actresses and ordinary Chinese people.

The true profundity of this second version of Chinese gazing is exactly its potential to deconstruct or demystify the sheer solemnity of the masked position of the filmmaker. This kind of gazing back of the Chinese subjects is important because it undermines Casabianca’s potentially obscene pleasure. If the aforementioned session is concerned with the contradictory attitude of the director toward the “useless” Chinese reactions, this type of unwitting record suggests that her female gaze on “China” as such should be critically reexamined once again. In his bestselling book *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk puts forward the argument that the predominating cultural coda operating in the late 1970s was “cynicism.” Contemporary cynical subjects are fully aware of the differences between the ideological mask and social reality, and yet they nevertheless insist upon that fictional mask for a special kind of enjoyment. Cynical logic is thus no longer a naïve or ignorant response but is, rather, a far more intricate paradox of an “enlightened false consciousness.”

661 Slavoj Žižek, who had been inspired by Sloterdijk’s insight, also elaborated on this modern cynicism on many occasions. He claimed that “one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.”

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As the “enlightened cynics” (but usually unhappy ones) had already taken into account the sheer gap between the ideological form and the existing reality in advance, they could simultaneously wipe out any possible resistances that might have come from such discrepancies. One way to overcome this sort of suffocating predicament, as Sloterdijk suggested, was to revive and resort to the age-old tradition of “kynicism,” an ancient Greek form of “pantomimic argument” which uses commonsensical, plebian, and primitive subversive tactics to confront the pathetic phrases or obscene underside within the ruling ideology. That is to say, kynic mocks solemnity through vulgarity and sarcasm, and it does so by

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extremely pragmatic and mundane, rather than argumentative, methods. The term “cynic” is derived from *kynikos*, meaning the “dog-like” that rejects conventional manner. Sloterdijk wrote: “Ancient kynicism begins the process of ‘naked arguments’ from the opposition, carried by the power that comes from below. The kynic farts, shits, pisses, masturbates on the street, before the eyes of the Athenian market. He shows contempt for fame, ridicules the architecture, refuses respect, parodies the stories of gods and heroes….”663 Kynicism shamelessly (but perhaps not “unashamedly” I would think) succeeds in breaking the “structures of cares”664 and blaspheming the piety of seriousness through the “physiologically irresistible energy of laughter,”665 where modern ideological critique fails.

In fact, the Chinese subjects are not the only ones who gaze in this Casabianca work. The filmmaker also extensively mocks the French travelers throughout their trip. There are several scenes in the film that are deliberately written to mock the impatience, childishness, and overbearance of the egocentric main character Yves during his stay in China. For instance, in one scene, Yves is so impatient to piss like a wild animal that he naïvely mistakes the litter box on the train as the toilet. During the first day of his trip, Yves has already complained that the bed in the Chinese hotel room is simply “too soft” for him to have sex with Valerie, while the floor is also not fitting for him since he deems it far “too hard” for his sexual enjoyment.

There is a defining scene that shows the sheer discrepancy between the two cultural mentalities of France and China. While the Chinese tour guide leads the group in climbing up a mountain in Lanzhou, most of the French visitors do not follow his orders. Rather, they are indulged in their discussions about the growing economy in Deng’s China and how they can maximize and capitalize their profit margins by the exchange ratio between renminbi and francs. When they reach a temple halfway to the mountaintop, the tour guide stops and draws their attention to the best view of the gorgeous Yellow River. However, the French visitors seem to be completely uninterested in such Chinese landscape and

663 Sloterdijk, 103–104.
664 Ibid., 124.
665 Ibid., 110.
walk ahead of him soon afterward. The director also teases the specters of French colonialism several times in Pékín-Central.

One may argue that Casabianca wanted to highlight the recolonizing desires of the Westerners in terms of economic exchange with the reforming China in the 1980s. In fact, unlike the Western political tourism prevalent in the 1970s, this Chinese guide does not take the group to visit previously necessary Maoist revolutionary spots during their travels. Rather, there are far more records of their leisurely eating, drinking, and consumption within the story. The French travelers are also granted a relatively large amount of free time and autonomy to go around the city with very little Chinese guidance. Two of the major protagonists, Bruno and Valerie, therefore take advantage of this freedom and enjoy their own romantic meal in the luxurious French restaurant Maxim de Pékín, which has just opened in Beijing. The director herself appears in the last scene of the film as the wife of Bruno. While she submissively waits for her husband in a Parisian airport, it seems that Casabianca also mocks the ignorance of this character, a bourgeois housewife in France, about the sexual affair between Bruno and Valerie during the Chinese visit.

However, this extensive ridicule and self-ridicule may not actually lead to a genuine critique of capitalism but, paradoxically, to a reassertion of capitalist ethos. Formerly associated with the French Trotskyist group Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League) in the 1970s, Casabianca may be celebrating collectivity over individualism in this film. According to one of the crew members, they wanted to use this Chinese experience as a demonstration of egalitarianism and communitarianism. Each actor and technician was responsible for multiple roles in this film. To show their

666 As Andreas Huyssen wrote in the foreword to Sloterdijk’s ambitious work: “In a certain sense, the growth of cynicism during the 1970s actually provided the cultural soil for the revival of ideological conservatism of the 1980s, which has filled the void left by the post-1960s disillusionment with a simulacrum of homey old values.” Andreas Huyssen, “Foreword: The Return of Diogenes as Postmodern Intellectual,” in Critique of Cynical Reason, by Peter Sloterdijk, trans. Michael Eldred, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xvii.

667 Ligue communiste révolutionnaire is a French democratic revolutionary socialist party formerly led by Daniel Bensaïd and Alain Krivine. It published the weekly newspaper Rouge and the journal Critique communiste. Established in 1974, it became the leading party of the far left in the 2000s.
commitment to this leftist collectivity, all the participants of *Pékin-Central* received an equal wage of 1,200 francs, regardless of their film positions.\textsuperscript{668} However, as a “communitarian” film without truly arousing leftist discussions in either Western Europe or Deng’s China during the 1980s, this kind of egalitarian principle was perhaps much more symbolic or nominal than anything concrete. It remained an isolated, self-contained phenomenon whereas the celebration of egalitarianism may have exerted just minimal effect after all.

Such triviality of egalitarianism pertaining to the film itself is however epitomized by the trivial signifier of a Maoist green hat with a communist red star, nominally representing the “spirit” of communitarian hope and joy. As an exotic present, one of the female French visitors buys a Maoist green hat during her stay in Shanghai. She puts on the green hat and dances with her tourmates joyfully in a Chinese ship near the end of the journey. At first glance, this Maoist green hat appears to be an exceptionally unimportant remark showing the tendency of the Western consumption of Chinese political culture during the 1980s. But one should equally consider that in Chinese daily usage the phrase “*daihulaozi*” (戴绿帽子) (literally translated as “wearing the green hat”) was an extremely humiliating and derogatory term for one’s manhood and male self-pride, referring to a cuckold, meaning that the husband has an unfaithful wife. The “green hat” as such is excessively heavy to bear as it is a constant reminder of the husband’s sexual impotence in front of a sexually-charged partner. At the narrative level in *Pékin-Central*, it is Yves himself who literally wears this kind of Chinese green hat, as Yves is cuckolded by his mistress’s affair with Bruno after Yves returns to France.

However, what is really problematic is that Yves seems to casually “tolerate” this kind of supposedly damming and traumatic cuckold. In other words, Yves does not take the green hat too seriously at all. Even so, Yves’s “liberal” and “tolerant” attitude toward this cuckold and betrayal may have little to do with his sexual impotence. Quite the contrary, the very “sexual tolerance” of Yves is indeed partially a result of his overt promiscuity from the very beginning. Yves is

\textsuperscript{668} Pibarot and Cabanes, “Retour à Pékin,” 2008.
not simply betrayed by Valerie; as a married man, he has betrayed his wife by having an extramarital affair with Valarie. Yet, I argue that Yves’s casual attitude toward this Chinese green hat is strikingly homologous to the French revolutionaries who did not take Maoism very seriously in the post-1968 ideological climate. As such, the use of “China” was rather casual and eclectic among some strands of French Maoism during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The most eclectic French Maoist current of all in that revolutionary heyday was perhaps a group called *Vive la revolution* (Long Live the Revolution – VLR) led by Roland Castro. In opposition to the somewhat ascetic and dogmatic Maoism of *Gauche prolétarienne*, VLR, which was a minor offshoot of the GP, was rather more interested in the “cultural” aspect of the Maoist Cultural Revolution. Although the VLR Maoists also practiced the idea of working in factories and other establishments similar to the GP leaders, they seemed to have had a lot more fun than the hardcore militants of the GP. Renaming themselves “Mao-spontaneists,” the VLR members were far more open-minded toward sex, drugs, and partying, activities in which a committed leftist militant was supposed to have little interest. The VLR therefore represented a “strange kind of Maoism,” as Guy Hocquenghem explained in 1974,

whose attraction resulted from its conjunction of numerous different currents that were thought to be irreconcilable: ‘respect for and attention to the masses’ in the Chinese fashion, individualism in the grand tradition of French anarchism, American-style communitarianism, and soon enough the emerging sexual liberation movements.\footnote{Guy Hocquenghem, *L’Après-mai des faunes* [The Faunas after May] (Paris: Grasset, 1974), 83.}

What unified the VLR was less a shared philosophy than a loose, common style of thought and action, which they referred to as a “revolutionary attitude.” They distinguished themselves theoretically from the pro-working-class GP, as

\footnote{Ideologically, VLR differed from the GP in centering its criticism of bourgeois society on a concept developed by the French neo-Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre, that of “everyday life.” This concept was developed within the VLR’s paper, *Tout* (All), and greater emphasis was placed on that aspect of everyday life stressed by Wilhelm Reich, the libidinal revolt. *Tout*, which appeared every two weeks during its sixteen issues of existence, was the first widely distributed, French political publication to stress the problems of sex, women’s liberation, and gay rights. According to Remi Hess, both the women’s liberation movement and the gay movement in France grew out of the VLR experience and were initially led by former VLR members. See Remi Hess, *Les Maoïstes français: Une dérive institutionelle* [The French Maoists: An Institutional Drift] (Paris: Édition anthropos, 1974), 160; 167.}
well as from the other Maoist and Trotskyite groups, by contrasting the “isms” of
the traditional Left to a loose *la pensée-maoïstèneg* (Mao Zedong’s thinking).
Whereas “Marxism-Leninism,” “Maoism,” and “Trotskyism” all may have
signified a mindless obedience to foreign revolutionary doctrines, *la pensée-
maoïstèneg* demanded that the communists think for themselves based on
concrete daily and quotidian circumstances. Like *la pensée-maoïstèneg*, the
“legitimate” Maoist doctrine was a kind of “sinicization,” if not a sort of
“deviation” or “betrayal,” of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. Unlike Western Europe
and the Soviet Union, which more or less experienced the industrial revolution, it
was the peasantry and agriculture that was the main embodiment of the notion of
“proletariat” in Mao’s China. The Maoist sinicization of or deviation away from
official Marxism always had a material base and historical necessity. Even so, the
Maoist recreation of Marxism was to expand and modify the spectrum of
proletarian struggles according to various historical situations and realities. As
Maoism was a certain “transgression” to Marx, VLR’s loose *la pensée-
maoïstèneg* could be conceived as a sort of “fidelity” to this transgressive spirit of
Chinese Maoism in relation to Marx. For the militants of VLR, then, it was not so
much the model of Maoist society that mattered—most of them knew and cared
little about China—but Mao’s insight that each nation should blaze its own
particular trail toward the goal of socialism in different lived experiences.

However, it was perhaps also this casual, ahistorical, and eclectic approach
to China that led to the rapid exhaustion of VLR, which was, comparatively
speaking, the most short-lived Maoist organization in France. Quite a lot of critics
commented that the VLR was inspired by the American counterculture and a
loosely defined “Woodstock Nation,” which included mind-altering drugs, the
sexual revolution, a communal lifestyle, psychedelic music, and post-beat-

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671 As one of the major “philosophers of desires” Jean-François Lyotard recounted: “If the May
1968 movement can continue to mean anything, it is because it extended criticism to a number of
forms of representation, to the union, the party, the institution of culture in general, which ‘big
politics,’ including Trotskyism and Maoism, either ignored or considered merely secondary. On
the contrary, the movement of 22 March found these forms of representation to be immediate and
persistent obstacles to the liberation of potential critical energy.” See Jean-François Lyotard,
*Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* [Drift from Marx and Freud] (Paris: Galilée, 1994 [1973]), 108–
109.

672 Ron Haas, “Guy Hocquenghem and the Cultural Revolution in France after May 1968,” in
Julian Bourg (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 188.
generation literature, much more than by Maoist cultural politics. Many of its former militants, who valorized the liberation of the everyday, became liberal-humanist intellectuals, professionals, and capitalist roaders during the 1980s. In this respect, Hocquenghem harshly criticized his former Maoist-turned-Rotarian VLR comrades as being “dog-like” servants shamelessly gatekeeping capitalist machinery:

There you sit, guarding the door to the future, and like the dog from the parable, the food you could not eat—utopia, the nourishment of spirit—you prohibit others from consuming…. Out of your repudiation squared, cubed, you constructed a pyramid which you’ve pulled yourselves up onto, reaching for power and money. And there you’ve remained, occupying all the posts, your networks blocking entry to all newcomers…. And from the top of our pyramid of arrogance and hypocrisy you coldly declare, holding down those who would take a look for themselves, that there is nothing to see, just a sad wasteland extending to infinity.673

Shamelessness, Rabbles, and Apologies for the ’60s

In Pékin-Central, there is a certain irreducible element that cannot be entirely turned away among the French “left-leaning” fellow travelers. Toward the film’s end, when all the French visitors have returned to Paris, the aforementioned woman who hedonistically consumed post-Mao China still wears her Maoist green hat. This “Maoist green hat” returned to France during the 1980s as well. In other words, the return of the Maoist green hat to Paris in the 1980s is a reminder that there was an irreducible stigma or totemic remark of “cuckold” and “betrayal” that could not be completely trivialized or taken casually thereafter.674 This truly painful reminder thus kept reinscribing a certain nuanced impression among a number of backsliding ex-leftists in the West. To those who celebrated “Maoist thinking” first in the 1960s and Western humanist democracy thereafter, it was also true that this simple “retreat” from China could not fully minimize their primordial “trauma”—the trauma that they were not simply betrayed by

674 Hocquenghem added elsewhere in the same book: “May 1968–May 1986: Your careers have reached maturity. The time has come to take an assessment. You would love to escape from this fate; how quickly the time has passed! But I will hold you to it, this double-bind assessment, of eighteen years of radical leftism followed by five years on the Left. The past has been already out of fashion, you would voluntarily condemn it to oblivion; but to prevent you from making clean slates of yourselves … this book will shove your noses in your own shit, throw back in your faces all of your recent ignominies.” See Ibid., 33.
others but were also actively betraying their original French companion, like the main character Yves.

To many contemporary continental critics, one of the most enigmatic legacies of French Maoism was the premature retreats and resignations from China and Marxist politics among the Maoist intellectuals that became such a normative injunction since the mid-1970s. As Alain Badiou recounted, “[t]hose who gave up on revolution, whether they talk about the Gulag or the retreat of the masses, show that, if they were part of the movement, of ’68 and its consequences, they never seriously partook in the subject whose evanescent cause they beheld in those consequences.” After the demise of May ’68 and the Cultural Revolution, there was, in the words of Badiou, a resurgence of “Thermidorean reaction” in the French left-wing intelligentsia. But this reactive sentiment was by no means confined to European elitist culture. In post-Mao China, for example, Deng’s capitalist restoration right after the arrest of the Gang of Four, to which Badiou has called “the politics of Coca-Cola,” to many extents deproletarianized the Maoist revolution reminiscent of the same Thermidorean betrayal of the French Revolution in 1794. In France, the highly ephemeral intellectual movement New Philosophy established in 1976 epitomized a strange depoliticizing phenomenon of the time.

Comprised by mainly ex-Maoists turned intellectual celebrities and bohemian journalists, the New Philosophers received extensive media coverage and TV exposure in the West for their polemical and even sensational accent to dramatize the horror and brutality of the Red countries. But what characterized this “new” thinking mentality the most was precisely its deliberate casual attitude toward serious intellectual debates. To their most severe critics such as Gilles Deleuze, the so-called “New Philosophy” could be at best understood as a kind of impressionistic journalism and a quasi-moral philosophy that bred nothing but

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678 Author Bernard Henri-Lévy admitted, it is “not a book of philosophy,” but “it’s journalism, it is literature, it is funny.” It was also, still in his words, “un geste philosophique” (a philosophical gesture). See Fatos Tarifa, “The Poverty of New Philosophy,” Modern Age (Summer 2008), 226.
“philosophical marketing.” Deleuze harshly commented that they seemed to have invented a highly idiosyncratic “witness function” toward the imaginary victims and corpses in those totalitarian countries that simply defied proof and records. Cynically exploiting their previous leftist engagement as reversed evidence or a self-negation, the New Philosophers were simply “writing a martyrology” on behalf of “the Gulag and the victims of history,” acting as if they were either the sufferers of the Left or the eyes of the righteousness. Talking about the general audiences who uncritically consumed all these “apologetic confessions” made by the ex-Maoists on popular intellectual TV programs, Deleuze remarked that “[t]echnically, the program’s very well done, the way it’s put together, the shots. And yet it’s the zero-state of literary criticism, literature as light entertainment…. It’s rather worrying that there’s an enthusiastic audience that thinks it’s watching some cultural activity when it sees two men competing to make a word with nine letters.” That was why Deleuze thought the whole setting between mediation and consumption was about the ex-leftist experiences in France as a demonstration of cruelty—a cruelty deeply entangled with infantilism.

Interestingly, this kind of idiosyncratic and journalistic arrangement of “China” by French intellectuals, as Pékin-Central suggests, may not be solely limited to the Maoist era. The main character Yves in the film, who leaves his

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680 Ibid.


682 As Deleuze elaborated on this point: “Cruelty is crushing someone else’s personality, reducing someone to the state where they’ll make a total confession of anything. If there was some point in getting the confession, I could accept it, but if it’s all done by a voyeur, someone sick, then we have to call it cruelty. I strongly believe that cruelty is always an expression of infantilism. All art these days is becoming daily more infantile. Everyone has the crazy desire to become as childish as possible…. Cruelty and infantilism test the strength even of those who indulge them, and they force themselves even on those who try to evade them.” See Ibid., 129.

683 This kind of Western exotic interest that impressionistically blows up the “eccentricities” about Chinese communism is still very popular today, as with the book *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* written by Mao’s personal doctor Li Zhisui. The book describes the time during which Li was Mao’s doctor, from the height of Mao’s rise to power to his death in 1976, including the diverse details of Mao’s personality, sexual potency, party politics, and personal habits. According to the book, Li witnessed Mao’s private life on a daily basis, mostly dealing with Mao at the height of his bureaucratic powers. The book has two major focuses: Mao’s personal sexual history and selection of numerous sexual partners in following the Taoist belief that frequent sex prolongs life. See, Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, trans. Tai Hung-chuo (London: Chatto &
tourmates and Deng’s China prematurely, gives a phony Chinese news report to the French audience. Sent by his chief editor of a local tabloid to write a “moody” and “not-too-serious” article on the reforming China, Yves seems to be the ideal man for the job. When he is in Mongolia and discovers some exotic elements that can enhance the marketing value of his reporting, he instantly asks his assistant Bruno to take photos. Yves says, “Did you get the kids with the red flags, Bruno? You sure, no hitch? Get the guy with the zoom. Zoom on the guy eating peanuts! Hurry, before he moves. Right next to you … don’t let him see you.” Actually, Yves abused his professional right to travel subsidies by inviting his mistress to come to China for private sexual pleasure. Shortly before he returns to Paris, Yves even admits that he is going to make up some stories about the reforming China based on the diary that Valerie kept while in China.

Compared to Yves, Bruno seems to be more “moral” and “professional” in both his photojournalism and his sexual attitude during the early phase of the trip. As a fan of influential “investigative journalist” Albert Londres, Bruno does not always take the exotic position in framing the Chinese natives. Rather, he desires to engage with the Chinese subjects before he takes the photos. He tries to seriously set up an “ambiance” that can be mutually shared between the photographer and the subject matter. In one scene on the train where Bruno has successfully established a desirable photography atmosphere with the Chinese passengers, Valerie suddenly pops up in the scene and therefore disturbs this ideal setting and aura. Bruno scolds her immediately. He then angrily tells Yves that he cannot tolerate sex and hedonism during his work. But soon afterward, Bruno and Valerie reconcile and eventually commence an affair. During the first night of staying together in a single bedroom in Suzhou, Bruno precisely abstains from having sex with Valerie, even after she has already made some sexual advances.

Windus, 1994). In other popular accounts, such as Jung Chang and Jon Halliday’s Mao: An Unknown Story, Mao was depicted as a coward who hid behind the ferocious power of Jiang Qing and silently recognized the fanaticism of the Gang of Four. Focusing extensively on biographical details rather than on a historicized account, Chang and Halliday’s book is the latest one that has economically benefited from stirring up sensational controversies about the Maoist histories across the twentieth century. The book portrays Mao as a monster worse than both Hitler and Stalin, as he alone was responsible for seventy million deaths during his reign. They depict him as a tyrant who manipulated everyone and everything he could in pursuit of personal power. In their narration, Mao, far from moving China forward, did nothing good but instead ruthlessly eliminated his rivals, starved millions of innocent people, and treated his wives abominably. See Jun Chang and Jon Halliday, Mao: The Unknown Story (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).
However, after they reach the Peace Hotel in Shanghai, Bruno seems to take a 180-degree turn and becomes more and more aggressive in his flirting with Valerie. Interestingly, Casabianca seemed to have added some social commentaries on the sexual consummation of Bruno and Valerie as a parallel to the early success of Chinese reform. Trivial as it may be, there is a TV program running parallel to the sexual transgression between the two protagonists. As a background support to the onscreen actions, the TV shows a chain of images that imply the mass celebration of the early economic boom and national glory in Deng’s China. Dramatized by the Chinese anthem on the off-screen soundtrack, it seems that the very sexual transgression of Bruno and Valerie, at the same time, encounters an “ideal marriage” with the early triumph in Deng’s reforming regime. In this respect, Casabianca seems to tease that the self-moralized Bruno and the cynical Yves correspond to the same fate when it comes to sexual transgression.

What is even more idiosyncratic is that shortly after this sexual perfection, Casabianca inserted an elusive shot that shows a gigantic cargo ship named “Karl Marx” slowly moving through the Huangpu River. Bruno, who is now standing in a tour ship on the same river, tries to take a photo of this moving container ship. In fact, if the shot was simply isolated within the whole text, there is perhaps no meaning at all behind such an odd insertion of “Marx.” Rereading it again in relation to the previous shots filmed at the Peace Hotel, I argue that there are indeed some interesting social implications yielded behind by this scene. At first glance, one is tempted to interpret this insertion as primarily a kind of parody to tease that the Marxist legacy has been overtly reduced to a minute and minor figure in Deng’s China. Unlike in the Maoist heyday, “Marx” in Deng’s era may represent just a nominal placeholder that exemplified the ideological core of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

However, I do not think that this insertion of the Marxist signifier was done only out of cynicism. Obviously, the filmmaker herself has still not fully abandoned her left-leaning aspirations, as can be seen in her recent documentary called C’est Parti (Let’s Party) (2010). The film is about the establishment of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (New Anticapitalist Party) in 2009, which is composed of members from the former Trotskyist camp Casabianca once
belonged to and other small leftist factions. In this sense, I think that her insertion of this shot, which carries the label of “Marx,” is perhaps more of a social commentary than a cynical pleasure. Indeed, putting the shots of Deng’s economic boom and the shot of “Marx” together gives the impression that the filmmaker may be offering a subtle critique on the seemingly “triumphant” process of post-Mao Chinese reform. Rather than simply teasing the obscene core of the so-called “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” it is more likely that the filmmaker was indeed expressing her sympathy for the sheer departure of “Marx,” which had gradually taken place in the predominant sceneries of Deng Xiaoping’s regime. She seems to regret that the initial Marxist ideal had been somewhat betrayed for overt economic prosperity and political status quo in the process of reforms and opening-up.

But this sort of regretful, sympathetic attitude toward the loss of certain egalitarian ideals (i.e., the remorseful or rueful feeling for “poor Marx”) in post-revolutionary society was not ideologically innocent in itself. In fact, there were two forms of expression—nostalgia and apology—that were prominent in Western leftist cultures in the 1980s. In the so-called “postmodern turn” in the West during the 1980s, Fredric Jameson warned that the nostalgic celebrations of the emancipatory “triumph” of the world in the 1960s (e.g., the civil rights movements, sexual liberation, and so on) and the apologetic repentance for the “failure” of these global insurrections (e.g., capitalist restorations, terroristic implications) were deemed highly inadequate, if not actually immoral in themselves, in reviewing the true political values and profundities of those highly entangled historical events of that era. In his famous essay recorded in an anthology called The Sixties without Apology, Jameson wrote:

Nostalgic commemoration of the glories of the 60s and abject public confession of the decade’s many failures and missed opportunities are two errors that cannot be avoided by some middle path that threads its way in between. The following sketch starts from the position that History is Necessity, that the Sixties had to happen the way it did, and that its opportunities and failures were inextricably intertwined, marked by the objective constraints and openings of a

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determinate historical situation, of which I thus wish to offer a tentative and provisional model. 

While the Marxian lumpenproletariat may have encompassed both the restless la bohème that was mentioned previously, Hegel, on the other hand, preferred the term “rabble” to “lumpenproletariat” to avoid confusion. Slightly different from Marx, Hegel criticized strongly the seemingly charitable act and the quasi-humanitarian injunction typical of Western bourgeois societies. According to Hegel, “rabble” and “poverty” always share a minimal difference. He believed that “rabble” should be conceived as a kind of “ethical frame of mind,” a sympathetic feeling toward and understanding of poverty instead of truly “being poor” in reality. That is to say, rabble may have nothing to do with the concrete situation of poverty. Hegel wrote: “Poverty in itself does not make men into a rabble; a rabble is created only when there is joined to poverty a disposition of mind, an inner indignation against the rich, against society, against the government, & etc.” Rabbles can therefore be well developed among the rich and wealthy as a kind of criminal mentality. “A rabble of paupers” is therefore not a group of poor people; they are people who have lost the meaning of dignity and self-respect. Hegel added: “It hence becomes apparent that despite an excess of wealth civil society is not rich enough, i.e. its own resources are insufficient to check excessive poverty and the creation of a penurious rabble.” Therefore, Hegel judged the rabble’s attitude as “impudence.” The rabble drops the “subjective bases of society”—shame and honor—and becomes “frivolous and shy of work … like the Napolitan Lazzaroni for example.” In this way it fundamentally loses the “habit of working” and the “need for industriousness disappears” as it abandons itself to “laziness extravagance.”

686 Hegel wrote: “The maxim, ‘Help the poor,’ expresses the suppression of the specific thing, poverty. The maxim, ‘Help the poor,’ tested by being elevated into a principle of universal legislation, will prove to be false because it annihilates itself…. Either there are no poor left or there are nothing but poor; in the latter event no one is left to help them. In both cases the help disappears. Thus the maxim, universalized, cancels itself.” Georg W. F. Hegel, Natural Law, trans. T. M. Knox, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974 [1802/1803]), 80.
688 Ibid.
689 Ibid., 150.
690 Ibid., 150; 277.
Along this line, one can understand why Lacan would urge the petty-bourgeois French Maoist students to confront their shame through lumpenproletariat instead of spiritualized proletariat. While the young Maoists seem to be radically different from the actual lumpenproletariats in terms of wealth, they are both in fact radically homogenous in their mentalities. Both of two revolutionary mindsets indeed pertain to certain “lazy” and “convenient” cultural positions irrelevant to true political engagement. This is also the reason many ex-Maoists recuperated the same logic of symbolic repentance by reducing their Maoist “errors” under the loose umbrella of several humanitarian maxims. That was perhaps why the hysterical activism of the 1960s and the 1970s and the ideological turn from “Maoists” to “consultants” and “experts” for state and private companies in the 1980s were just two sides of the same coin. As Lacanian scholar Éric Laurent commented, 

[a]s soon as we became as one after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, we began to encounter the language of morality. We experienced an unfolding of the demand for apologies, for regrets, for forgiveness, for repentance, all terms borrowed from the language of morality ‘being ashamed’ has become a worldwide symptom. 

Cornelius Castoriadis, one of the most important contemporary thinkers in Western democracy, claimed that many apologetic accounts on May ’68, such as Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut’s book, were a historical misconception of personal revolutionary delusion and impotence. Castoriadis wrote:

[F]or the tens or hundreds of thousands who participated in May–June 1968 but who no longer believed in a real movement, who wanted to find a justification or a legitimization both for the failure of the movement and for their own incipient privatization while also retaining some sort of a ‘radical sensibility’—for all these people, the nihilism of the ideologues, who had at the same time managed to jump on the bandwagon of a vague sort of ‘subversion,’ was admirably convenient…. ‘Sixty-eight thought’ is anti-’68 thought, the type of thinking that

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Éric Laurent, “Symptom and Discourse,” in Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis, eds. Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 231. Calling the thought of ’68 a predominantly “anti-humanist” idea, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut demanded that the liberal-libertarian spirit of May needed to be exorcised by calling upon the enchanting power of the morally responsible individual of the Republican tradition in the name of Rousseau. They invoked ethics, specifically a Kantian categorical imperative of individual responsibility, as a solution to problems induced by May ’68. According to Ferry and Renaut, who had once entered the French bureaucratic pyramid as the Education Minister, the various philosophical ideas (i.e., Foucault, Lacan, Bourdieu, and Derrida) propagated in and after May ’68 deviated from the traditional French Republican traditions and humanist values. See Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism, trans. Mary H. S. Cattani (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), xxii–xxix.
has built its mass success on the ruins of the ’68 movement and as a function of its failure. The ideologues discussed by Ferry and Renaut are ideologues of man’s impotence before his own creations; and it is a feeling of impotence, discouragement, tiredness that they have come to legitimate, after May ’68.⁶⁹²

Still, this demand for “apologies” and “regrets” in the name of vulgar moral language may have yet to be fully universalized as a worldwide phenomenon in the mid-1980s. I argue that the final act of Pékín-Central suggests a profound twisting of such a predominant apology for elusive “Chinese affairs” among many of the French fellow travelers. The final scene is about the return of the French visitors to Paris. Despite having already retreated from the tour, Yves also goes to the arrival hall of the Parisian airport to welcome his friends. Although he has already been informed about Bruno and Valerie’s sexual transgression through the female spy he recruited in China, Yves does not demand Valerie’s apology for her “sexual betrayal”; nor does Valerie actively ask for his forgiveness. Valerie just looks at him in silence. The final shot is a static close-up of Valerie, who is both silent and without blunder. She just is. Yet her silence and immobility here is perhaps the most active witness imaginable. Valerie, at this point, bears witness to the fundamental impotence of the symbolic fabric itself—either in the form of “apology” or “forgiveness” in relation to this transgressive episode of the “Chinese affair.”

Historically, while many ex-French Maoists came to dominate the scene by announcing their regrets and apologies for their previous “Chinese affairs” in the late 1970s, it is also possible that the sheer “impudence” still incessantly remained as the mainstay among all these convenient historical narratives. As Joan Copjec suggested, “shame is not a failed flight from being, but a flight into being, where being—the being of surfaces, of social existence—is viewed as that which protects us from the ravages of anxiety, which risks drowning us in its borderless enigma.”⁶⁹³ As such, this inescapable “Chinese shame” constantly lurking within their historical recounting, instead of simply being an obstacle that needed to be transgressed or overthrown, is precisely a powerful reminder to help

the former Mao-leaning French intellectuals in truly coming to terms with their own guilty complex and impotent feelings for the so-called “great failures” during the heyday of the 1960s so as to be able to confidently reimagine a new Sino-Western cultural nexus without blunder.
CHAPTER 10

THE EYES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY: ECSTATIC SPECTACLES, MÉNAGE À TROIS, AND THE LACANIAN “EXTIMACY” IN BERTOLUCCI’S THE DREAMERS

Back to the Antagonistic “Chinese Partner”

Renowned Italian filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci, who is famously known for making controversial works such as Last Tango in Paris (1976) and The Last Emperor (1986), made a film called The Dreamers in 2003 that sought to revisit and recast the May ’68 events in France and their latent “Maoist” romantic yearnings in light of the liberation of sex during the sixties. As a pronounced left-leaning artist during his formative years, the director conspicuously added the third element of “cinephilia” (cinema-loving) to his usual themes of human sexuality and historical taboos in The Dreamers in an attempt to truly reenact the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s. However, The Dreamers was not welcomed by Western critics. One commentator harshly pointed out that in many scenes in The Dreamers, the blending of cinephiliac passion and sexual excitement in fact “proceed to no purpose” insofar as it was a “mere showing off,” an empty spectacle that facilitated capitalist self-refashioning.694 To some Italian leftist reviewers, this Bertolucci work seemed to bear no genuine Marxist implications but instead exemplified only a quasi-revolutionary impulse and various lifestyle revolts that greatly conformed to the Western bourgeois mentality.695

In this chapter, however, I will argue that Bertolucci’s The Dreamers still possesses certain unrealized revolutionary potentials indebted to the heyday of the 1960s that highly deserve further reexamination and revisiting, particularly in

connection to the predominant perception of the omnipresent and all-penetrating effects of global capitalism on every aspect of daily culture today. I will also argue that Bertolucci’s cinematic mixing of footage from Western film classics, archival documents from May ’68, and idiosyncratic sex scenes is not entirely confined to the familiar formula of Hollywood filmmaking that mainly aims at drawing on exotic gimmicks and spectacular pleasures. Instead, despite the fact that the filmmaker long resided in the American film industry in order to stay away from the overt politicized tendencies in Western cinema shortly after 1968, it is precisely Bertolucci’s alleged fascinations with the sheer “theatrical aspects” of the Maoist Cultural Revolution and May ’68 in the 1960s that eventually made *The Dreamers* rather unique. This uniqueness, as I will argue, stems from the film’s latent transgressions of the usual ideological and moral limits of the mainstream capitalist coda by excessively exposing its own obscenity to the audience on several occasions—that is, the irreducible manipulation lying behind the cinematic treatments of historical materials. Borrowing from the Lacanian notion of “extimité” (extimacy), I will argue that this unexpected revelation of obscene moments is profoundly crucial here, especially in reading this stigma as an inherent resistance against the symbolic foreclosure of the events of ’68 in contemporary historical narratives. To a larger extent, Bertolucci’s failure to seamlessly merge the elements of sex, films, and leftist histories under the optics of the often mythicized “spirit of the sixties” in this work may also bear witness to the fundamental impotence long pertaining to the predominant capitalist knowledge today, which is supposed to be able to contain all sorts of theatrical inputs without leaving any undesirable remains.

Based on the English novel *The Holy Innocents: A Romance* by Scottish novelist Gilbert Adair and mainly sponsored by Hollywood capital, *The Dreamers* starts in February 1968 when a young, provincial Californian, Matthew (Michael Pitt), comes to Paris to study French and become a “true cinephile.” He meets the young French twins Theo (Louis Garrel) and Isabelle (Eva Green), who are also great film lovers, during a demonstration against the government dismissal of the founder of the Cinémathèque Française, Henri Langlois. Soon afterward, Matthew is invited to stay in Theo and Isabelle’s luxury apartment after the twins’ parents leave for a vacation. The apartment is stylishly decorated, blending petty-
bourgeois taste (e.g., film posters) and quasi-revolutionary accessories (e.g., Situationist slogans printed on the wall along with various Maoist decorations). Enjoying a reclusive bohemian life without restraints, the three discuss politics and cinema, drink expensive wines, and play film-buff rituals and sexual games. As time passes, Matthew falls in love with Isabelle and wishes to take her away from her incestuous proximity to Theo.

When Isabelle discovers that her brother is dating a woman, she becomes jealous and completely devastated. For revenge, she builds a tent in the sitting room in order to keep her eye on her brother. The parents return home unexpectedly but are astonished by their ambiguous sexual affair, so they leave the apartment immediately. Isabelle wakes up and realizes that her parents were there and decides to turn on the gas to kill all of them, including herself. In the meantime, Bertolucci intercuts the final suicidal scene of Robert Bresson’s *Mouchette* (1967) with Isabelle’s deadly thought. However, a paving stone thrown by an anonymous May ’68 demonstrator breaks their apartment window and ironically saves the trio from being killed. In the final moment, Isabelle and Theo retain their spiritual closeness by leaving the reluctant Matthew for the violent street barricades. The film ends with a rather ambivalent scene rendering a slow motion shot of the police crackdown on the young militants accompanied by the well-known song “*Non, je ne regrette rien*” (“No Regrets”) by the legendary French singer Edith Piaf.

Back in the early 1960s, Bertolucci was a twenty-year-old poet who was raised in a bourgeois family. He left his hometown of Parma and traveled to Paris mainly to advance his craft and search for new ideas for his artistic creations. At that period of time, he was particularly intoxicated by Godard’s films and the *Nouvelle Vague* aesthetics to an extent that he even wished to become one of their family members. He visited the Cinémathèque Française regularly to watch masses of movies, as well as to meet emerging young European directors. In the Cinémathèque, Bertolucci was acquainted with many friends and filmmakers such as Marco Bellocchio and Jean-Luc Godard, both of whom were interested in
Maoism just like many other French intellectuals of the sixties’ era. Despite the director not admitting the real parallel between the plot in _The Dreamers_ and his biographical history, there was indeed much evidence implying that the twenty-year-old American character, Matthew, was Bertolucci’s alter ego. For example, both bore a certain “foreign status” when they first arrived in France; they admired the French cinematic culture very much; and both were especially skeptical of and reserved about the emerging Maoist current spreading in French intelligentsia. According to Matthew’s opening voice-over, the younger generation of 1968 got their “real education” at the Cinémathèque Française.

According to Bertolucci, he was never actually attracted to the revolutionary dogmas of Maoism from the beginning. Instead, he was much more “fascinated by the theatrical element of the Cultural Revolution … by the idea of Utopia” during ’68. The filmmaker added: “I must admit that, on an aesthetic level, the extraordinary presentation of the Maoist spectacle within a Brechtian framework seemed to me nothing short of a miracle.” In an interview for his film _The Last Emperor_, which was made in post-Mao China, Bertolucci confessed: “I was never involved with the pro-Chinese movements in Europe, although all my friends were, starting with Godard and Bellocchio. In fact, I joined the Italian Communist Party specifically to be against the pro-China people.”

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696 In the year 1964, Bertolucci made his second film called _Prima della rivoluzione_ (Before the Revolution), a film that is strongly indebted to Godard’s early jump-cut aesthetics. The main story of _Before the Revolution_ is structured around a young male Italian intellectual who is caught between his current Marxist beliefs and his bourgeois past, and between his incestuous love for his cousin and the social norms that are elevated in a traditional Catholic family. This film, however, was heavily trivialized in Italian circles but received massive critical support from the French film community. The film was even given a special screening at the Cinémathèque Française by its legendary founder, Henri Langlois, which is why both Henri Langlois and the Cinémathèque played such an important role in Bertolucci’s career.


699 Interestingly, Bertolucci’s depoliticizing tendency may have already been characterizing his cinematic career as early as the heyday of 1968. During May ’68, Bertolucci was in Italy to shoot his film _Partner_ (1968), which starred French actor and Maoist militant Pierre Clémenti. Bertolucci was not involved in the student-worker uprisings in Paris. All his knowledge about Paris ’68 was actually obtained from Clémenti, who travelled back and forth between Italy and France in May and June. Yosefa Loshitzky, _The Radical Faces of Godard and Bertolucci_ (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 20. In this sense, Bertolucci’s vision of May 1968 had already been deprived of his own authentic engagement in the first place. After 1968, Bertolucci even broke from his artistic mentor, Godard, for the latter’s radical and uncompromising turn to Maoist politics. Godard accused Bertolucci of receiving “dirty” American money to make his film.
In fact, what Bertolucci really learned from the lessons of ’68 was the very possibility of staying away from the various forms of political didacticism, as well as the importance of reaching out to a wider spectrum of audiences. As he admitted: “I think the most important discovery I made after the events of May, 1968, was that I wanted the revolution not to help the poor but for myself. I wanted the world to change for me. I discovered the individual level in political revolution.”

While this personal awakening is perhaps profound, Bertolucci’s revolutionary depiction in *The Dreamers* is, however, highly problematic. It is in fact not extended and connected to the outside world during the height of ’68, but rather is restricted to the safe and highly self-contained bourgeois apartment in Paris. As one critic commented, “within the apartment, sex becomes the proving ground and then the battleground for the revolutionary ideas in the air.” Owing to the highly introversive characteristics of his films, it is generally perceived that many of Bertolucci’s works, as an *auteur* filmmaker, are rather self-indulging. However, before reaching this conclusion, I argue that a crucial moment should be revisited first that may undermine this usual impression of Bertolucci’s films. Indeed, there was a certain embarrassing and defining moment within his

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*The Conformist* (1970), as well as living compromisingly and uncritically with the “exploitative” bourgeois cinema and Hollywood industry thereafter.

Goldin, Marilyn. “Bertolucci on *The Conformist*: An Interview with Marilyn Goldin.” *Sight and Sound* 40, no. 2 (Spring 1971): 66. Elsewhere, Bertolucci also elaborated on his very ideological “renegacy” from left to right: “In ’68, I changed very much. There was at the time a great confusion between film and politics. We thought that to work in cinema and to be political were the same thing. Then I told myself that it was one thing to make films with political arguments, and another to put politics inside films. Two very different things. I ‘discovered America’—that is, I discovered something evident: that a political film, for me—not to speak as an absolutist—is political from the moment that one communicates with a very wide audience…. I wanted to make a film for many people. Political effects otherwise remain only for an elite. And this marked a change in my cinema, for which I moved away from the master Godard. But I don’t think I made any sorts of easy compromise.” Deborah Young, “History Lessons: Bernardo Bertolucci Interviewed by Deborah Young.” *Film Comment* 13, no. 6 (November–December 1977): 17.

Ebert, Roger. “The Dreamers.” Review of *The Dreamers*: RogerEbert.com: Movie Reviews, February 13, 2004: [http://rogerebert suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040213/REVIEWS/402130302/1023](http://rogerebert suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040213/REVIEWS/402130302/1023) (Accessed December 20, 2008). At the same time, this very “real education” received in the Cinémathèque was also fairly idiosyncratic. In *The Dreamers*, Bertolucci portrayed the Cinémathèque as showing American B-films far more often than the European masterpieces. Thus, it was rather strange to see that Matthew, as an American visitor, going to Paris to become a truly “qualified” American filmgoer rather than being a genuine European cinephile. Consequently, this “learning journey” was probably approximated to a certain kind of self-congratulating gesture that confined the original cross-cultural dialogues between Europe and America to a sheer nostalgic sentiment for self-maturation.
cinematic career that plagued him tremendously, which was, like most of the Western leftist filmmakers of the time, his highly “didactic” piece of work Partner during the height of 1968.

Partner is a very loose adaptation of Dostoyevsky’s novella The Double, structured around two self-splitting characters (both acted by Pierre Clémenti), an avant-garde theater professor and a young revolutionary antipode, both named Giacobbe. Yet many commentators have pointed out that this film is indeed far more approximated to Godard’s Maoist aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s than the usual Bertolucci narrative film centered on the psychic struggles of petty-bourgeois characters. As Robert Kolker noted, “Godard’s film Le gai savoir, made in the winter of 1967-8, contains a sequence in which the Jean-Pierre Leaud character teaches the making of a Molotov cocktail. In Partner, made in 1968, there is a sequence in which Jacob … gives his theatre class instructions on how to make a Molotov cocktail.” That is to say, the film finds the Italian director at his most politically abstract and perhaps the least narrative point of his career. In retrospect, Bertolucci said that this work was “his least natural film, because it came out of four years of empty, theoretical thoughts that were never tested in practice…. Partner is a film that has made [him] suffer the most” and “seems to be a film that Bertolucci needed to make in order to understand that it was the kind of film he could not make.”

In this sense, I argue that Jacques Lacan’s notion of extimité (“extimacy” or literally translated as “external intimacy”) may help illuminate Bertolucci’s

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702 The film tells that acting teacher Giaccobe was tired of talking to himself so he invented a personal double. The two have bizarre discussions while Giaccobe brings the madness of life into his classes. His private life is even more insane. He murders a piano student and crashes a fellow professor’s party in order to see his imagined sweetheart Clara. Giaccobe’s behavior becomes more politically charged and absurdist as he romps in soapsuds to a rock song. He eventually loses control of his students when he takes them out in Rome to perform their show.


psychic ambivalence. This Lacanian notion suggests that the innermost core of an individual is actually outside of that individual. That is, individuals are unable to see themselves from the inside, but instead can only see themselves through the mirror of the symbolic order, from the gaze of the symbolic Other. As Lacan commented, the Other was always “something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me.”

Therefore, what is outside of an individual is in fact the most intimate kernel or the innermost being of that individual. Yet Lacan’s son-in-law Jacques-Alain Miller also commented that “[e]xtimacy is not the contrary of intimacy. Extimacy says that the intimate is Other—like a foreign body, a parasite,” as it signals “the presence of the Other and of its discourse at the very center of intimacy.” That is to say, extimacy is not the strict binary of intimacy. Rather, it radically blurs and collapses the boundary or distinction between the internal and the external. Extimacy therefore does not allow for a simple reduction between the categories of “friend” and “enemy” and “mentor” and “tormentor.” It is a radically “silent” partner, an impossibly “muted” companion that always resides in the unconscious.

What makes Partner so difficult to accept may not have to do with the fact that the film is simply too “un-Bertolucci-like.” Rather, it is probably because it was far too inclined as “Godard-esque” militant filmmaking. The film Partner not only highlights Bertolucci’s ideological incompatibility with Godard’s Maoism, since this incommensurability was not realized until after 1968, but also highlights his elusive leftist fraternity and comradeship with Godard under the same revolutionary banner during May ’68. That is to say, Partner represents Bertolucci’s impossible individualist escape from all Godardian influences, including political influences, in the 1970s. The revolutionary spirit of ’68 that the


706 Jacques-Alain Miller, “Extimité,” in Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society, ed. Mark Bracher et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 76. Dylan Evans defined “extimacy” as the problematization of the opposition between inside and outside, and between container and contained. Such problematization of oppositions entails a desire for and the deferral of the limit between inside and outside, and between private and public. In other words, the polarity between what is socially accessible and what is intimate, between public and private worlds, is in fact not a polarity at all but a distinction that collapses before it is even formulated. See Dylan Evans, An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), 59.
name “Godard” embodied during such an epitomizing year seemed to be “more Bertolucci than Bertolucci himself” to an extent that the Italian filmmaker was once compelled to follow elusively in the footsteps of the political Godard. The image of this Godardian partner suggests something “too big” for Bertolucci to forbear, as well as his inability to arrive at a completely individualized form of cinema. The signifier “Godard” is like an irreducible stigma that serves as both “mentor” and “tormentor” throughout Bertolucci’s cinematic and ideological orientations. Bertolucci commented: “China for me was always enshrined in a certain fascination but was part of a world that simply did not belong to me.”

**The Cold Beach beneath the Cobblestones**

What does this Lacanian “extimité” mean regarding the events of May ’68? I argue that the “intimate strangeness” residing in Bertolucci’s own self-realization after the sixties can help to reconceptualize the core disputes surrounding the predominant narratives about May ’68. The main epistemological disagreements pertaining to the legacies of ’68 were usually torn between two kinds of perceptions of the same event—“sexual liberation” and “political movements.” To Bertolucci, the historical episode of May ’68 in France was a kind of unusual intersecting platform that simply encompassed and merged various cross-cultural dialogues and issues within the same temporal and spatial vessel. Calling ’68 a nearly magical and majestic moment, Bertolucci added: “The fact that we were … let’s use the word ‘dreaming’ together. Cinema, politics, music, jazz, rock ‘n’ roll. And sex and the discovery of how these things could conjugate together and how they could interact between each other, how they could be really mixed up in a kind of harmony that I don’t see today.” In another interview, Bertolucci also commented that the events of May ’68 simply orchestrated and stirred up “almost everything” in modern Western cultures—women’s autonomy, sexual liberation,” as well as “the fight for human rights.”

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707 Ranvaud and Ungari, Bertolucci by Bertolucci, 237. At the same time, as the Italian filmmaker also admitted, “Partner is one of the moments, one of the schizoid elements of that period of my life. At a certain point I needed to understand better and to try to see inside myself better.” See Bernardo Bertolucci, Bernardo Bertolucci: Interviews, eds. Fabien S. Gerard, T. Jefferson Kline, and Bruce Sklarew (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 58.


709 Bertolucci added: “What is remaining from ’68? I think people, the relationships between people are very different after ’68. Life before ’68 was a number of authoritarian figures. Then
Elsewhere, Bertolucci also admitted: “[A]s a post-'68 Italian director, I had put politics not just in the foreground but also completely exposed.”

According to Kristin Ross, from the 1980s onward the May events were reduced and consensually trivialized to “a mellow, sympathetic and poetic ‘youthful revolt’ or ‘lifestyle reform’” in dominant historical representations and imaginations. To Ross, May ’68 was first and foremost a political revolt instead of a cultural one. It was “a historically situated cross-section of workers and students” that had “little to do with the social group—students or ‘youth’—who were its instigators,” meaning ’68 was less about the individual than about collective revolt, less about liberty than about equality, less about humanitarianism than about Third-Worldism. Considering French May ’68 as first and foremost a political relay in the European revolutionary tradition, Ross wanted to highlight that the dominant emphasis on the “cultural changes” of ’68 failed to do enough justice to this highly complex historical episode.

However, while Ross is right in accounting for the 1980s’ consensual “ethical turn” as a sort of trivialization of the emancipatory lessons of ’68, it seems that she may also have trivialized the very remoralizing “trivialization of May ’68” as well. Ross’s diagnosis risks becoming a trivialization of trivialization if there is no parallel discovery of the political virtue, however minimal, inhered under this new moral umbrella. In this respect, Ross may have fairly dichotomized “politics” and “ethics,” as the two terms are rendered highly ambivalent in light of the events of 1968. Julian Bourg, in his impressive study *From Revolution to Ethics*, argued that “the ethical turn [had] been largely misconstrued.” In other words, there was a latent tendency among the leftist communities to perceive the political traits of ’68 as superior to its “ethical” ones.

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710 See Bertolucci, Bernardo Bertolucci: Interviews, 171.
712 Ibid., 2–3.
In Bourg’s view, the “betrayal” model in the name of “ethics” after 1968 led to the French Maoists, such as Christian Jambet, Guy Lardreau, Sartre, and Foucault, turning their backs on that moment in their personal political history in favor of a lukewarm, domesticated version of politics. However, Bourg’s aim was to show that the Maoist influence was a genuine democratizing force in France. The Maoist affiliation among a wide spectrum of French intellectuals, instead of simply politicizing the European scene, served as a crucial agent to help problematize and liberate the long-standing Eurocentric notion of political subjectivity. Bourg added that while Ross seemed to claim that the revolutionary legacies of 1968 had been betrayed by its own protagonists, her account “implicitly validates the judgment that May ended in failure.” That is why Ross’s analysis may have defeated her own premise at some point. Bourg added:

She, too, weighs the ethical turn, interpreting it as a flight from genuine politics to cultural questions and personal meaning as well as to the sanctimonious ‘pity’ and ‘ambulance politics’ of humanitarian organizations like Doctors Without Borders. Ross sees the 1970s’ turn to ethics the defeat of revolution, whereas I maintain that this turn proved 1968’s success. Ethics is much more than ‘pity,’ and the turn to ethics was far more than the ‘reactionary’ by-product of a betrayed revolution.

Yet I argue that both Bertolucci’s and Ross’s perceptions about May ’68 are not truly contradictory. Rather, it is the sheer method of how “politics” as such is exposed or revealed in Bertolucci’s works that is in genuine opposition to Ross’s political stance regarding May ’68. While Bertolucci may have been fascinated with the ethos of sexual liberation during May ’68, this sort of “sublime harmony” was retranslated as a series of infantile sex games and movie trivia that seemingly blended music, cinema, politics, and sexuality rather trivially in The Dreamers. In that film, the so-called “sexual revolution” largely equates to an unbounded exposure of naked bodies and a wholesale celebration of sexual ambiguities, a ménage à trois, among the three young dreamers. In other words, the sex scenes are used as a cover-up for the failure of true political change during ’68. For instance, the director tried to make the heroine Isabelle a renewed object of desire by embodying her in the mythical sculpture Venus de Milo. Bertolucci also refraamed Francis Bacon’s famous triptych with the dreamers’

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714 Ibid.
715 Ibid., 12–13.
naked bodies resting shamelessly together in a bathtub reflected in three-way mirrors to convey the nostalgic sentiment of returning to the sinless, pre-contaminated Garden of Eden.

Yet what is really symptomatic about this kind of “exposure” is that it is not radical or democratic enough. There is a certain position that is reserved and exempted from the scene. This quasi-radical and half-opened viewing experience is best epitomized in the highly idiosyncratic deflowering scene. Isabelle, who is a virgin, realizes that she has to “fuse” with her American lover, Matthew, in a more naked and complete way. Orchestrated by Theo, Matthew and Isabelle finally consummate their sexual relationship in the dining room. While the plot of sexual perfection may be as vulgar as an American situation comedy, Bertolucci’s visual treatment is rather unusual here. Instead of highlighting the scene with a close-up of the love-making couple, Bertolucci precisely renders an equal emphasis on Theo, who is frying eggs in the same dining room but looks completely uninterested and indifferent toward the lovers’ “romantic behavior.” In this sense, Theo’s gazing position is highly problematic to an extent that it cannot even qualify as typical “voyeurism” because he is highly detached. On the one hand, Theo commands them to have sex under the Delacroix painting with the Marilyn Monroe head in place of the personified Liberty, joking that “one reproduction will inspire another.” On the other hand, Theo seems to be overtly impotent in enjoying this procreative “reproduction.” His expressed goal of demanding that they have sex is to “see everyone happy,” but while Matthew and Isabelle are “happy,” Theo may only “see.”

What is really at stake is that Theo does not even “see” because he is disinterested in the sexual act. The one who really “watches” the whole scene from afar is Bertolucci himself. The director always occupies a certain obscene position to cruelly watch over his protagonists’ playing through the camera as his private peephole. Interestingly, I argue that Bertolucci does not simply use the camera as a mere apparatus to capture this kind of idealized harmony. On several occasions, the filmmaker also mobilizes his characters to perform this role. In another interview, Bertolucci said that it was more appropriate for the audience to see the American character, Matthew, as a certain symbolic agent in assisting the
sheer perfection or capture of the genuine intimacy between Theo and Isabelle. The twins are always aware that they cannot consummate a physical relationship between themselves, which is why Bertolucci also dismisses the notion that the twins are “incestuous.” Rather, the director suggests that the twins indeed entertain a “very special intimacy” insofar as they have lived in the same womb for nine months. Obviously, this is still a very romantic account in relation to the Oedipal myth.

However, the harmonious perfection between the twins is not completely seamless. Matthew, whose original role is the ideal agent that will help perfect the ritual of French “incestuous” desires, somehow becomes a “threat” to the pre-ordained harmony of the twins. As the film goes on, Matthew becomes more and more possessive of Isabelle, wanting her to break her impeccable bond with Theo. The American visitor even demands that the twins grow up and separate from each other, but the twins refuse such a difficult demand. By this point Matthew has lost Theo’s admiration. Initially, Theo sees Matthew as a clever young man who seems to offer a new perspective to countenance his own decadent, bourgeois father, who is a writer. However, Theo is gradually frustrated by Matthew’s pacifism and his unwillingness to engage in revolutionary struggles. As the twins become increasingly alienated from each other under the continual presence of Matthew, Isabelle decides to restore the harmony she and her brother shared, once and for all. Yet this harmonious restoration is enacted by a kind of self-annihilation. One evening, Isabelle turns on the gas and tries to kill all three of them. Ironically, a paving stone that is thrown by an unknown demonstrator during the height of the May ’68 movement breaks one of the windows in the apartment. The sound of breaking glass wakes up the three youngsters and therefore saves them from being killed by the gas. Regarding this unexpected intrusion of the paving stone, Bertolucci said that it was precisely “history” itself that eventually called and woke them.

Bertolucci, Adair, and Thomas, “Feature Commentary.”
What is rather exceptional about the intrusion of the anonymous paving stone is that it helps designate an irreducible “hole” within the self-enclosed window of the three young protagonists in *The Dreamers*. Interestingly, Bertolucci suggested that such an ideal Franco-American cultural sublation may not have succeeded in relation to the paving stone, which, rather than cementing the bond between the French twins and the American, precisely orchestrated their final separation and dissociation, once and for all. After the three youngsters are awakened by the paving stone, they seem to have also been “awakened” from their own fundamental discordance toward the notion of barricades and revolution. While Theo and Isabelle join the other French protestors in resisting police coercion, Matthew, because of his own inflexible pacifism, is reluctant to stick with his French friends any longer and leaves the scene in the opposite direction of the twins without even a climactic farewell. Matthew is only able to passively “watch” (while in fact not “watching”) the French twins disappear into the crowd at the student barricades.

Historically, the image of a paving stone was often mythicized as a heroic and courageous exemplification of resistance against Gaullist rule. There was a famous revolutionary slogan in ’68—“sous les pavés la plage” (Beneath the Cobblestones Is the Beach)—that glorified the transgression of existing order and the various romantic possibilities thereafter. That is to say, the Gaullist paternal order was a “falsity” or a “semblance,” whereas its repressed underside was the alternative “beach” and “another possible world” representing the fullness of life. As Margaret Atack suggested,

May [was] a grand spectacle for its participants, a fact compounded by the historical self-consciousness inseparable from building barricades in central Paris. May [was] grounded in repetition, of images of revolt from 1871 or 1944, and of discourses of history, of anti-fascism, of the German Occupation, of the Algerian War.719

Interestingly, the lived “spectacle” that May ’68 demonstrated was highly enabling. The very historical singularity of May was characterized as many “mini-theatres” simultaneously and forcefully imprinted on the street barricades as a

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spectacle of hybridity, festivity, and vitality. The subversive spectacles of 1968 were supposed to be both a continuation and redefinition of the grandiose French revolutionary tradition. Instead of simply capturing the power that typified the traditional revolutionary mentality, it was “expression” and “theatrical stage” that was designated for continuous performance and exposure in May ’68, exemplified by the important slogan “La poésie est dans la rue” (Poetry Is in the Streets). According to Jean-Louis Barrault, who was the leader of the Odeon occupation, “[f]or nearly a week the words had been flowing nonstop: 7 x 24 = 168 hours of words. ‘In ’89 [i.e. 1789] they took the Bastille, in ’68 they have taken the Floor…. In Paris, in four weeks, we had lived through the whole of the French Revolution: from the celebrations of the Federation in ’89 to the Terror, and then to Saint-Just.”

According to Gilles Deleuze, “May 68 was a becoming breaking through into history, and that’s why history found it so hard to understand, and why historical society found it so hard to come to terms with.” He added: “And I think ’68 was this discovery itself. The people who hate ’68, or say it was a mistake, see it as something symbolic or imaginary. But that’s precisely what it wasn’t, it was pure reality breaking through.” The unexpected outburst of ’68 thereby prompted both Deleuze and Félix Guattari to rethink what was genuinely meant by “political desire.” For Deleuze and Guattari, “desire” was traditionally cast as an imaginary force based on “lack” and “impossibility”—both in Marxist and Freudian terms. Yet the lesson of May ’68, and especially the afterlives of ’68, which unleashed an incalculable amount of psychic energy regardless of class, gender, and race, had outlined a new possibility of engaging the supposedly unlikely, useless, if not entirely abjected social subjects (e.g., prisoners, ethnic minorities, women, and the schizophrenic) in the same spectrum of active participation and revolutionary insurrection as the “main protagonists” of the events—the students and workers. During May ’68, Deleuze commented that the

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722 Ibid., 144–145. Deleuze elaborated: “Becoming isn’t part of history; history amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to ‘become,’ that is, to create something new. This is precisely what Nietzsche calls the Untimely.” See Ibid., 171.
blossoming of desires and an explosion of different forms of libidinal energies had “stripped bare all power relations wherever they were operating, that is, everywhere.”

However, as I argue, what is really at stake here is that this historical legacy brought about by the paving stones in ’68 was radically ambiguous in itself. In The Dreamers, Bertolucci included Edith Piaf’s mesmerizing song about “no regrets,” which played after the final separation between the twins and Matthew. Is this “no regrets” referring to the leftist positions of the French twins or the rightist orientation of Matthew? Bertolucci does not reveal this. Or is this “no regrets” even pointing to the separation of the trio? One can only guess. This kind of knowledge remains forever elusive. As Bertolucci confessed in the documentary of this film,

there [was] a kind of, like a bad memory, and I think that that’s the reason why people who belong to the movements in ’68, in general they haven’t told to their children the story of ’68. There’s a kind of black hole there for young people today. And I think it depends a bit on their parents who are not keen to talk about that moment.

Obviously, Bertolucci was not very keen to reveal this. In this respect, Slavoj Žižek commented that the recent developments in Bertolucci’s work were

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723 Ibid., 105. Guattari suggested that producing desire was not simply a propelling social movement, but the movement as such also constituted and added a new layer to the social strata: “If, on the contrary, desire constitutes the very texture of society in its entirety, including in its mechanisms of reproduction, a movement of liberation can ‘crystallize’ in the whole of society. In May 1968, from the first sparks to local clashes, the shake-up was brutally transmitted to the whole of society, in some groups that had nothing remotely to do with the revolutionary movement—doctors, lawyers, grocers. Yet it was vested interests that carried the day, but only after a month of burning. We are moving toward explosions of this type, yet more profound.” See Félix Guattari, “Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium,” trans. David L. Sweet, in Chaosophy, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995), 60.

724 In fact, unlike Deleuze and Guattari, Jacques Lacan was rather reserved, even nearly entirely dismissive, toward this “new possibility” during the heyday of May ’68. Rather than seeing the imaginary beach as a revolutionary plentitude, he called the same “paving stone” radically negative, an objet petit a. Elisabeth Roudinesco, Jacques Lacan, trans. Barbara Bray (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 336. Insofar as it is one of the chief components in composing the whole paternalistic Gaullist society, the paving stone, according to Lacan, was like a suicidal bomb. Such heroic confrontation with the paving stone gave way to a moral restoration led by the true hidden master, since the very weapon for this struggle was property possessed by French technocratic society. While the governance of de Gaulle and his successors allied closely with the Western capitalist system, this revolutionary ideal of 1968 may not have been able to radically transform French political culture.

725 Bertolucci, “Bertolucci Makes The Dreamers’ Documentary.”
hopelessly depoliticized to indoctrinate a highly obscure and mystical New Age ideology about human “self-discovery” and the pursuit of “inner peace.”

Even worse, this leftist sentiment was hijacked as a new kind of “alternative lifestyle” to help transform capitalist ideology. Historically speaking, it was no secret that many former ’68 militants, who initially waved the banners of Marx, Lenin, and Mao to fight against the bourgeois state, soon abandoned their revolutionary hopes and based their utopian future on the California lifestyle and American way of libertarianism. Some even condemned their own leftist past in the name of human rights. In other words, they probably discovered another “beach” of late capitalism after having been frustrated by the failure of ’68. Written on the tenth anniversary of ’68, Régis Debray, a former student of Louis Althusser and a close associate of Che Guevara, commented that his intellectual “renegade” peers, who once embraced Maoist ideas during May ’68, were in fact capitalist collaborators helping to establish a New Age ethos of “spiritual consumerism” and “bohemian lifestyle” in California. The “revolutionaries” wanted to smash capitalism, but their repentance to leftism during the commemoration of ’68 served as unwitting accomplices and structural components to its growing domination. He ironically remarked:

In France, all the Columbuses of modernity thought that behind Godard they were discovering China in Paris, when in fact they were landing in California.

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726 Žižek wrote: “The shift from political engagement to the post-political Real is perhaps best exemplified by the films of Bernardo Bertolucci, that arch-renegade, whose works range from early masterpieces like Prima della rivoluzione to late aestheticist-spiritualist self-indulgences such as the abominable Little Buddha. This span achieved full circle with The Dreamers, Bertolucci’s late film about Paris ’68, in which a couple of French students (a brother and sister) befriended a young American student during the whirlwind of the events. By the film’s end, however, the friends have split up, after the French students become caught up in the political violence, while the American remains faithful to the message of love and emotional liberation.” See Slavoj Žižek, First as Tragedy, Then as Farce (London & New York: Verso, 2009), 58–59.

727 In the last decade, the popular term “bourgeois-bohemianism” (“Bobo”) was coined by the American journalist/columnist David Brooks to portray the middle-class elites who were highly fascinated with anti-doctrinal ideologies. Compared to the yuppies’ current of the 1980s, the Bobos today merge supposedly contradictory ends between bourgeois and rebellious mentalities in a far more blatant, seamless, and conspicuous fashion. Increasingly fed up by the triviality of capitalist exploitations, there are admittedly many cultural elites and big-city professionals who now flock to philosophical books, serious literature, self-healing psychology, art movies, and so on. Like the hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s, many of the Bobos today travel to the East (e.g., Tibet and India) to engage in “alternative” spiritual quests, as this kind of trivial “bohemianism” does not upset the status quo. Quite the contrary, it stimulates more capitalist consumption by promoting a “different” lifestyle. The “life-affirming attitude” as such may be just one of the many cultural “alternatives” invented by the capitalist machinery for the sake of further manipulation and exploitation. See David Brooks, Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
Their sails were filled by the West wind, but they were steering by the *Little Red Book* which said the opposite, like explorers equipped with Ptolemy’s *Geography*.728

**Bertolucci’s Third Phrase, or the Historical Poetics of Reenactments**

Does it necessarily mean that this ambiguous legacy of May ’68 has no political effect on our capitalist present? As Daniel Gordon pointed out, “1968 is both hard to transmit a heritage and hard to turn into an uncontested official memory precisely because it was a contestation that reached into so many areas of society, and continues to both inspire and irritate in the present.”729 On the one hand, in contemporary global capitalism there is a prominent social phenomenon of casually blending artistic sentiment and commerce. What is truly symptomatic is that it is precisely the transgressive legacy of ’68 that helps facilitate this kind of merging to bring together two seemingly opposite worlds.730 The ’68 slogan “Never Work” is conspicuously printed on a Dior perfume bottle as an advertising gimmick. Two other famous slogans from May ’68—“Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible” and “Enjoy without Restraints”—have been reappropriated by Adidas and Nike for their slogans “Impossible is nothing” and “Just do it,” respectively. As Jacques Rancière has suggested, we now live in the midst of a seminal aesthetic regime. The paradigm of this regime is hybridity and diversity. According to Rancière, everywhere we look, we witness continuous and unfettered border crossings between genres, high and low art, art and non-art, and art and commodity.

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730 Slavoj Žižek probably offered the harshest critique on the Western fascination with Zen Buddhism and the worldwide countercultural movements in the 1960s and 1970s. He argued that the fascination of the so-called “Zen spirituality” typical of the hippies returned in the New Age ethos of “Do-It-Yourself” (DIY) and self-help as a new spirit of global capitalism. Žižek thereby launched a scaffolding critique on the Western romanticization of Buddhism and the New Age “Asiatic thought,” as it “[presented] itself as the remedy against the stress of capitalism’s dynamics—by allowing us to uncouple and retain some inner peace—it actually functions as the perfect ideological supplement.” See Žižek, *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings Volume Two* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 252. Žižek associated the Western appeal to Buddhism as a modern exemplification of Nietzschean “passive nihilism.” He added: “The ‘Western Buddhist’ meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way, for us, fully to participate in the capitalist dynamics, while retaining the appearance of sanity. If Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely have written a second, supplementary volume to his *Protestant Ethic* titled *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism.*” See Ibid., 253.
At the same time, there may be another kind of new emancipatory potential that is associated with the tendencies of overt border crossings. As Rancière commented, unlike the traditional mode of artistic representation (what he called the “representative” or “poetic” regime) that is heavily indebted to Aristotle’s poetics of mimesis, the contemporary “aesthetic image” that is historically indebted to the legacies of the 1960s is based on montage and assemblage in its circulation, sharply distinguished from the old common belief in a specific measure for each art form. In the representative regime there was a necessary relationship between image and text; the textual part carried the ideal chain of events within the narrative, whereas the function of the pictorial part was to give it concrete flesh and a more permanent sense of presence. As Rancière pointed out, the representative logic “[was] performed mostly by the idea of the plot, the story as an arrangement of actions. [It] is based on the privilege of action.”

The traditional representative paradigm tended to hierarchize the use of division of labor over contingency, unity over multiplicity, and purity high above the profane.

For artistic modernity, though, there is a constant transformation and renewal. Rancière said: “The point is not to create an organic whole; the point is to create a rupture between two layers of sensory experience.” In this respect, Rancière introduced a term called “phrase-image” (or “sentence-image,” which was partially inspired by Flaubert’s notion of “orchestration” of aural imagery) to elucidate a new fashion of connection between the image and the text that was liberated from the hierarchical combination typical of the old representative model.

The function of the phrase is to assemble and create a sense of commonality, but now the textual sentence connects through giving a kind of permanence to the chaos rather than rendering a certain consistency, while the image, at the same time, carries an active and eruptive power in its own right. In short, the phrase-image tempers the “chaotic force of the great parataxis” by

732 Ibid.
733 When discussing text and image relations, Rancière coined the term “sentence-image” or “phrase-image,” which represents not merely the merger of a verbal sequence and a visual form but, rather, “the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically—that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image.” See Ibid., The Future of the Image, trans. Gregory Elliott (London & New York: Verso, 2007), 46.
bringing together the sheer incompatibility of the “phrase power of continuity” and the “imaging power of rupture.” Often citing Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* as his prime example, Rancière argued that the phrase-image was a montage that made new connections, which created a “redistribution of the sensible” that opened up new spaces and made room for new political subjects.

However, slightly different from Rancière’s account, I argue that the cinematic montage used by Bertolucci in *The Dreamers* may not have the full emancipatory qualities of the “phrase-image” produced in this so-called “aesthetic age.” Several sequences of historical and cinematic reenactments in *The Dreamers* seem to oscillate between both the old-fashioned “representative logic” and the new “aesthetic image” without an obvious destination. To a certain extent, the two modules of artistic representations mentioned earlier are blurred and even further obscured by Bertolucci’s cinematic reenactment of both films and history. This kind of obscure moment is perhaps best exemplified by a sequence in which the trio attempts to break the record set by their cinematic ancestors in Godard’s *Bande à part* (*Band of Outsiders*) (1961) by racing through the whole lobby of the Louvre Palace within thirteen seconds. Unlike movie-guessing trivia, this joint racing is a fairly important symbolic ritual of recognition and acceptance of Matthew within the lives of the twins. The Louvre museum, in this sense, exemplifies a certain Franco-American alliance in the months of ’68 as seen today.

In that sequence, Bertolucci employed a rather unconventional editing technique to juxtapose the film footage of *Bande à part* with the ongoing narrative of *The Dreamers*. That is to say, the trio in *The Dreamers* is racing hand in hand with the other young threesome in Godard’s film along the same corridor of the Louvre in different temporalities. What this sequence generates therefore is a kind of doubly charged affective and youthful energy emanating from both the 1960s and the 2000s. The sheer recapturing of the lost moment of ’68 through juxtaposing the sequences of *Bande à part* and *The Dreamers* also help redeem

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734 See Ibid.
735 By contrast, Godard’s vast project *Histoire(s) du cinéma* operated by means of what Rancière called “anti-montage.” For Rancière, these procedures bespoke a Romantic conception of history, not as the recounting of a development, but as “a mode of co-presence,” of “shared experience in which all experiences are equivalent, and the signs of any one are capable of expressing all the others.” See Ibid., *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 178.
again in the 2000s the glorious and triumphant memories of the 1960s that were personally experienced by Bertolucci. He said that “it was a great privilege to be able to live in that moment … the chance to be a part of big ambitious dreams: to want to change the world.”

The director also ambitiously described *The Dreamers* as “a period piece” that tried to blend the old and the new.

However, this seamless blending of the past and present was perhaps only illusionary. It would indeed be delusional to say that both past and present enjoy the same share of importance in the reenacted sequence insofar as a certain privilege on a particular period of time had already been given. While Bertolucci may have sought to relay and recuperate the same transgressive spirit of the 1960s that was embodied in the 1960s’ film *Bande à part* (which is literally translated as “a group of outlaws”), in *The Dreamers* that kind of reactivation was done at the expense of the agency of the recuperated historical records and materials. What is really at stake in this “periodic scene” is that it is predominantly translated in visual terms. The soundtrack for *Bande à part* is quite minimized. Without the inclusion of the soundtrack, the Godardian clips produced in 1960 would be deprived of any real voice, but they were passively subjugated to the synthetic editing of Bertolucci in 2003.

Consequently, the juxtaposition as such may give a certain radiating emotional ambiguity—the feeling of “eternal youthfulness.” By putting the two scenes together under the same umbrella of the “spirit of the 1960s,” Bertolucci simultaneously sacrificed, if not violently ignored, the genuine existence of the archival clips. This cinematic montage does not really help recreate a fraternal sharing between the present communities and the true open characters of the sixties. Rather, it is merely a closed and arbitrary selection in relation to the personal historical knowledge of the director in 2003. It can be even argued that

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737 Bertolucci, “Bertolucci Makes The Dreamers’ Documentary.”
738 The denial of the historical present is not deemed unusual in Bertolucci’s works. As Bertolucci once said in an interview, his intention to reconstruct fascist Italy from the nodal point of the 1970s for his film *The Conformist* was precisely because there was “a kind of refusal of present, a refusal which preoccupies [him] … which in any case has nothing to do with a lack of interest. It’s an awareness that the times we live in are becoming more and more depressing, and we’re beginning to feel the repercussions of what Pasolini called ‘cultural homogenization.’” See Bertolucci, *Bernardo Bertolucci: Interviews*, 168.
Bertolucci tried to challenge the usual perception of “time” itself. Since the Godardian clip is related to the characters in *The Dreamers* without the soundtrack, the filmmaker conveniently assigned the idealized notion of the unchanging “spirit of the 1960s” as a form of injunction to cover up the apparent discrepancies between the two scenes. By simply keeping the same revolutionary spirit of the sixties intact, I argue that Bertolucci may have desired to break and defy the golden rule of “aging” that was set by Godard, constantly refusing to admit changes over time. That is to say, even though the “appearance” of time has undoubtedly changed from the 1960s to the 2000s, the sheer “essence” of the revolutionary heyday of the sixties, that is, the youthful “spirit of 1968,” remains largely unchanged. This romantic “eternity,” however, only embodies Bertolucci’s narcissistic idealization of the 1960s, which may have nothing to do with the historical sixties.

In this respect, Bertolucci’s immortalization of the sixties well reaffirms, rather than undermines, the long-standing Eurocentric ideal about “time” itself. In the Hellenistic tradition, the notion of “time” takes on at least two different forms and manifestations—*chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is time as duration, passage, flow, and flux. *Kairos* is time as event, appointment, juncture, and opportune moment. However, insofar as *chronos* is far more elusive and indistinct and constantly eludes seizure or capture, *kairos* can be redeemed time and again, and there is a great tendency in Greek philosophy to place *kairos* over *chronos*, which gives rise to a new mythical time. This idealistic privilege thus becomes a sort of Hellenistic myth that despises the elusive *chronos* in favor of the capture of supreme opportunity. By mythicizing the temporal changes under the realm of the “spirit of the 1960s,” Bertolucci simply recuperated this Hellenistic myth of *kairos* over *chronos*. In this respect, the rather unconventional film technique of rearranging the various images serves only as a conventional end to perpetuating the myth of “eternal youth” in the 1960s—a myth that eventually served capitalist ideology. By simply mystifying historical changes, all Bertolucci can do is preserve the predominance of Western idealism.

Against the lure of postmodern sophism that is paradoxically quite indebted to cultural reasoning after 1968, Fredric Jameson thereby called for an
untimely gesture of “periodization,” instead of fragmentary arbitration, toward the historical studies of the 1960s. He said: “To speak of the ‘situation’ of the 60s, however, is necessarily to think in terms of historical periods and to work with models of historical periodization, which are at the present moment theoretically unfashionable, to say the least.”739 Written time and again in his essays on postmodernism and the “cultural turn,” Jameson considered the various revisiting of the themes of the sixties among the First-World countries as residing in the ideological confines of “nostalgia” and “remorse” in both intellectual productions and countercultural representations. The cultural remembering of the 1960s thus gave rise to an ambiguous form of “historical deafness,” which includes “a series of spasmodic and intermittent, but desperate, attempts at recuperation.”740

Jameson also considered postmodern theory a desperate attempt at making sense of contemporaneity but in a way that refused the traditional forms of understanding. For postmodernists, there is no “outside of ideology” text. In fact, postmodern theory questions any claim to “truth” outside of culture. However, Jameson viewed this situation as a symptom of our age that perpetuated “a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary ‘theory’ and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum.”741 He pinpointed a weakening of historical consciousness “both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose ‘schizophrenic’ structure will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts.”742 This hermeneutic “superficiality,” according to Jameson, in turn played right into the hands of late capitalist machinery: “[P]ostmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order, but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself.”743 To go beyond this predicament, Jameson henceforth urged the necessity to “return to history” under the mandate of “always historicize!”.

740 Ibid., Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), x.
741 Ibid., 6.
742 Ibid.
743 Ibid., xii.
I argue that Bertolucci’s historical reenactments of ’68 do not simply end and wallow in nostalgia and historical narcissism. To a certain extent, he attempted to rehistoricize, rather than simply abstract, the memories of 1968 in the historical present. If *The Dreamers* is a nostalgic representation of ’68, it is perhaps also a kind of “nostalgia without remorse.” There is another reenacted sequence portrayed earlier in this film about the famous “Langlois Affair” that happened in February of 1968 at the Cinématèque Française, the much-celebrated film archive that influenced the events of May ’68 that came a few months later. The Cinématèque Française is precisely the venue where the three young protagonists of *The Dreamers* first encounter one another during the police intervention. The reenacted scene highlights Bertolucci’s narcissism insofar as he invites the same militants, such as the New Wave icons Jean-Pierre Léaud and Jean-Pierre Kalfon, to play themselves as they were in 1968, quoting the same revolutionary leaflets and petitions that they read at the original event. As Bertolucci claimed, “You see them today and in newsreels. You can see the time that has passed. We’re shooting today and dreaming of the sixties.”

But what is really singular about this reenactment sequence is that the maintenance of continuity between the past and the present is exactly sutured in both the image and voice levels instead of the visual performance of the actors/participants alone. This visual technique of using a long shot thereby renders a certain illusion of seamlessly merging the young and the old Léaud and the black-and-white archival footage of his speech at the actual demonstration in 1968 and the color dramatization of the same event in 2003 as one and the same.

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744 The “Langlois Affair” began on February 9, 1968. Despite an undercurrent of general discontent in France, the Gaullist cultural minister, André Malraux, tried to fire the co-founder and head of the Cinématèque Française, Henri Langlois, over a long-running budget dispute. He was replaced by a man named Pierre Barbin, who was an obscure and relatively inexperienced film-festival organizer. Langlois was a cultural hero, widely respected and recognized among film buffs and emerging figures, particularly the French New Wave directors. The reaction was nearly instantaneous after hearing news of his sacking. Within twenty-four hours, forty filmmakers, including François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Robert Bresson, had withdrawn permission for their films to be shown at the Cinémathèque. On Wednesday, a crowd of three thousand showed up at the Trocadéro, in front of the Palais de Chaillot. The demonstration was broken up by a police charge, leaving a number of people slightly wounded. At one rally, the then fifteen-year-old actor, Jean-Pierre Léaud, who had played Antoine Doinel in Truffaut’s *Les quatre cents coups* (The 400 Blows) (1959) gave a speech exhorting the crowd. Malraux was left stunned. On April 22, 1968, the general assembly of the Cinémathèque voted to reinstate Langlois, with the tacit approval of Malraux.

745 Bertolucci, “Bertolucci Makes *The Dreamers’* Documentary.”
While one can still have a somewhat consistent impression of the continuity between the young Léaud (age 24 in 1968) and Léaud in *The Dreamers* (age 59 in 2003) on a visual level in Bertolucci’s cinematic rendering, the same kind of consistency, however, cannot be found easily on the soundtrack.

It may not be possible to defy historical changes in the mythicized “spirit of the 1960s.” In fact, the voices of the two Léauds, when combined with his old and young images, remain radically different. What is really at stake here is that the combination of the two Léauds by Bertolucci does not easily establish a consistent notion of “eternal youth.” Since the voice of Léaud had already been transformed from a rather acute expression in 1968 to a more coarse sound in 2003, in addition to the apparent changes in his face, there was a certain impression of inevitable “aging” implicated in this cinematic juxtaposition. While the sole combination of the young and old faces of Léaud may have failed to truly undermine the sheer consistency of the notion of “eternal youthfulness” (since this mythicized vision was more defined by “unchanging essence” than by “appearance”), the added juxtaposition of Léaud’s two voices between the 1960s and the 2000s rerendered a certain form of rupture and discontinuity in the director’s subjective idealization and fetishization of the sixties as such.

That is to say, in addition to the apparent record of changes in Léaud’s face, there was also a noticeable transformation in his voice. Gilbert Adair, the original novelist and screenwriter of this film, recounted that the “actor Jean-Pierre Léaud, who, like a wilder-eyed and more demonic Jesus, was declaiming in a hoarse voice the text of a muddily photocopied tract that was simultaneously being distributed among the demonstrators below.” The vocal juxtaposition of the two Léauds, along with its visual blending, thus fails to render a perfect impression of the youthful “spirit of the 1960s” as simply “never growing old.” Rather, it implies that there is perhaps a radically different set of revolutionary demands—a much more “coarse” and “raw” petition or agenda—bespoken in contemporary capitalist cultures today.

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The Last Tango of Cinephilia and Sinophilia in Paris

A problem still remains. What many nostalgic leftists idealize as the “spirit of the 1960s” may not be lost in today’s capitalist culture; it simply “grows old.” The true loss is perhaps something else. As Christopher Connery argued, unlike Herbert Marcuse’s notion of the “Great Refusal,” “[t]he sixties had given to youth culture both the refusal of the adult world and the joy of occupying the present.” He added that “[t]he global sixties had activated the relay between world politics and revolutionary subjectivity at the level of the everyday. It was the last time this link has been achieved.” While this last section deals with the fading of the revolutionary spirit, it is rather the passion for cinema that assembled the young Western intellectuals from different ideological backgrounds and artistic realms that has been lost today.

According to Susan Sontag, the loss of cinematic passion has much to do with the tremendous growth of new media technology that began to replace traditional spectatorship and cultural habits in the mid-1990s.

Historically speaking, the city of Paris is arguably the ideal capital in which to exemplify the heyday of European cinephilia during the 1950s and 1960s. However, with the meteoric rise of global modernity and the advance of the video industry in the aftermath of May ’68, traditional cinephilia has recorded a drastic decline. In her article “The Decay of Cinema” written shortly after the centennial of (French) cinema in 1995, American critic Susan Sontag bemoaned the contemporary demise of auteur cinema, as well as the gradual disappearance of cinephilia. Following the discourse of “the death of cinema” asserted by Godard during the mid-1980s, the primitive passion for cinema has now somewhat been substituted by mass and even home consumption of (Hollywood) films.

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748 Ibid. [my emphasis added]
749 Cinémathèque Française, one of the grandiose symbols of ’68, has recently been removed from Palais de Chaillot in central Paris to the more remote suburban area of Bercy, the area Nicholas Sarkozy notoriously declared the “liquidation of May 68” in 2007. The Cinémathèque that is reenacted in The Dreamers is therefore not entirely the genuine location in correspondence to its contemporary address.
find a seat as close as possible to the big screen, ideally the third row center.⁷⁵¹

For classical cinephiles, the cinematic screen and the film house are considered a kind of sacred temple, whereas the habit of movie-going is similar to a sacred religious ritual. Sontag added:

Perhaps it is not cinema that has ended but only cinephilia—the name of the very specific kind of love that cinema inspired. Each art breeds its fanatics. The love that cinema inspired, however, was special. It was born of the conviction that cinema was an art unlike any other: quintessentially modern; distinctively accessible; poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral—all at the same time. Cinema had apostles. (It was like religion.) Cinema was a crusade. For cinephiles, the movies encapsulated everything. Cinema was both the book of art and the book of life.⁷⁵²

For true cinephiles, their passion for cinema is not only an act of movie-watching, but rather of living a certain experience of cinema, of reenacting particular scenes or lines that may have impacted their lives and prolonging them beyond cinema into life as a special kind of fidelity.⁷⁵³ According to Thomas Elsaesser, cinephilia is both mourning and a stubborn insistence on a dead object. Classical cinephiles, as I argue, are always prepared to submit to “the anxiety of possible loss, to mourn the once sensuous-sensory plenitude of the celluloid image, and to insist on the irrecoverably fleeting nature of a film’s experience.”⁷⁵⁴ In The Dreamers, the main character Matthew, who is cast as a figure of the “last cinephile” of the 1960s, deliberately came to Paris to taste the fruits of true cinematic culture. When he arrives in front of the Cinémathèque, he describes it

⁷⁵¹ Ibid.
⁷⁵² Ibid. According to Thomas Elsaesser, twenty-first-century cinephiles (despite that it is still primarily a Western concept), unlike the classical ones of the 1960s, are not simply fascinated by the “whole” and “total” cinematic experience tied to a sensuous materiality. Rather, this New Age cinephilia is obsessed with the “partial” and “fragmented” viewing experience in relation to certain film clips and selected cinematic scenes (as having been facilitated by the up-to-date new media and DVD technology and simultaneously limited by the increasing respect for intellectual property rights). Elsaesser therefore acknowledged the need to rethink the temporality of cinephilia today: “Cinephilia take two [the second wave of cinephilia today] is therefore painfully aware of the paradox that Cinephilia take one [the Sixties’ heyday of Eurocentric cinephilia] may have lived out in practice, but would not ultimately confront. Namely, that attachment to the unique moment and to that special place … is already (as psychoanalysis was at pains to point out) the enactment of a search for lost time, and thus the acknowledge that the singular moment stands under the regime of repetition, of the re-take, of the iterative, the compulsively serial, the fetishistic, the fragmented and the factual.” Thomas Elsaesser, “Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment,” in Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory, eds. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 39.
as “a freemasonry of cinephiles.” The mythical identity of Paris thereby melts on the divine altar of Cinema with a capital C. Matthew thinks, “Only the French would house cinema in a palace.” Within the movie theater, Matthew always sits as close to the screen as possible, desiring to be the first one to receive those moving images. This “larger-than-life” cinematic experience finally reaches its climax when the events of ’68 erupt outside. The voice-over says, “There was one evening, in the spring of 1968, when the world finally burst through the screen.” Matthew proudly adds, “It was our very own cultural revolution.”755

However, I argue that this sublime aura of cinephilia is perhaps not ideologically pure and innocent in the first place. To a certain extent, cinephiliac obsession was probably a Eurocentric invention that was based on a narcissistic underside.756 Among all the movie-sexual trivia, there is indeed one particular game called “forfeit” that may have embodied the utmost ambivalence within Bertolucci’s idea of “sexual liberation.” To play this game, one of the participants first acts out a particular scene from a movie. If the other participant is unable to name the correct actor/actress or the film name, he or she has to be “punished” for failing to come up with the right answer. After Theo fails to pronounce the correct film title, Isabelle immediately demands that he masturbate in front of both Matthew and her. At the same time, Isabelle, as the “blind” commander of this “punishment” (she puts on a pair of sunglasses to exemplify her cruelty and indifference), excites Theo with a brush while he is masturbating. Soon afterward, Isabelle scrapes Theo’s semen off the wall and sniffs it.

Insofar as the name of this game is called “forfeit,” the movie trivia may not be simply childish playacting but rather a “calculated” means to an end. What

755 In the same vein, Bertolucci also recounted: “You remember that in 68, everything started with the cinemateque. It was the first time that the police became so violent. They were just students, film buffs, Paris intellectuals. Everything started there, then spread around, Rome, Germany, Berkeley, Columbia. All the ambitions and the thoughts were very connected with cinema. It was like a projection of illusions that have a cinematic value.” See Morales, “The Dreamers”: http://www.blackfilm.com/20040130/features/bertolucci.shtmlBlackfilm.

756 As James Morrison also suggested, “[c]inephilia may have craved knowledge of the beloved, but this longing was, in part, conditioned on the unattainability of the object, an elusiveness that was what gave movies some of their mystic allure.” James Morrison, “After the Revolution: On the Fate of Cinephilia.” Michigan Quarterly Review 44, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 413. That is why Morrison also commented that this Bertolucci scene was “an ultimately masochistic gesture in the direction of sexual liberation—is not so much the narcissism inherent in taking movies as a substitute for sex.” Ibid., 398.
this scene may have revealed is that “punishment” can sometimes be in the form of a staged performance. This kind of spectacle of punishment is not naïve. Rather, it is a repetitively rehearsed performance, a serious ritual. It is not a “spontaneous” masturbation; it is a deliberate show of masturbation that involves a cooperative performance between Isabelle and Theo. As Bertolucci said, the game “forfeit” is not simply a game but a “real punishment” for the “wrong answer.” Such a punishing spectacle may not be primarily aimed at Theo, the “true sufferer,” but, rather, targeted at Matthew, who seems to constantly avoid watching the other’s “suffering.”

However, from his facial expressions, the audience can see that Matthew, as the spectator of this punishment show, is deeply stunned and unsettled by such obscenity between the twins. After watching this idiosyncratic spectacle, Matthew feels a bit frightened to play these games with them. He realizes that there will always be a certain “cultural gap” between him and his French hosts in relation to this sadomasochistic pleasure. Matthew thereby calls the twins “freaks” and l’enfant terrible (horrible child), which is highly reminiscent of Jean Cocteau’s surrealist pair in his film of the same title. In this respect, the real purpose of this image of punishment, rather than serving as a disciplinary act for Theo, is exactly to give a certain didactic moral lesson to Matthew to tell him that he should not stay too close to the twins during the heyday of 1968.

In addition to the critique above, I argue that there are certain important moments that have to be revisited carefully. Toward the end of the film, the three young protagonists are clearly less interested in playing the film-buff rituals and unrestrained sexual games. The two young men, Theo and Matthew, in particular, become more and more “politically charged” for a “larger than life experience” that goes beyond one’s own confines as they seek to relate their initial cinephiliac passion to their political orientation. Theo reads the Maoist Little Red Book loudly,

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758 In Jungian terms, as John Izod has suggested, the French twins in The Dreamers are in an “uroboric state.” He said: “Natural in childhood, it becomes ‘freakish’ in later life because the uroboros needs to be outgrown if the individual is to achieve complete adulthood.” See John Izod, Screen, Culture, Psyche: A Post-Jungian Approach to Working with the Audience (New York: Routledge, 2006), 124–125.
instead of Chaplin or Keaton, and discusses “Maoism” with Matthew. He asks Matthew,

You’re a big film buff, right? Then why don’t you think of Mao as a great director, making a movie with a cast of millions? All those millions of Red Guards marching together into the future with the *Little Red Book* in their hands. Books, not guns. Culture, not violence. Can’t you see what a beautiful epic movie that would make?

However, Matthew, as a foreign outsider, seems to hold a far more reserved, “mature” sensibility toward revolutionary fanaticism in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In this regard, Matthew challenges Theo’s juvenile admiration of Mao and the Red Guards:

I guess, but it’s easy to say ‘books, not guns.’ But it’s not true. It’s not ‘books,’ its ‘book.’ A book. Just one book…. The Red Guards that you admire, they all carry the same book, they all sing the same song, they all parrot the same slogans. So, in this big, epic movie, everybody is an extra.

From this citation, Matthew seems to be more critical of the Cultural Revolution in China. He lays bare the invisible violence of Maoism and de-mythicizes Theo’s sinophiliac ideals of Maoist dictatorship and the parallel between theater and revolution. Furthermore, Matthew’s phrase “…but it’s easy to say ‘books, not guns’…” in fact carries a crucial meaning that exemplifies Bertolucci’s changing political orientation after May ’68. The director once said, “There was a moment in ’68 when everybody doing movies thought cinema was like a machine gun to do revolution. I didn’t believe that.”759 This confession, along with Matthew’s interrogation, clearly challenges Godard’s famous dictum “I think an idea is a theoretical weapon and a film is a theoretical rifle.” Matthew goes on to say:

If you really believed what you were saying, you’d be out there … out there, on the street…. Something’s going on out there. Something that could be really important. Something that feels like things could change. Even I get that! But you’re not out there. You’re inside with me, drinking expensive wine, talking about film, talking about Maoism. Why? Because I don’t think you really believe it. I think you buy the lamp, and you put up the poster…. I think you prefer … when the word ‘together’ means not ‘a million,’ but just ‘two’ or ‘three’….”

Ironically, it is Matthew himself who is finally reluctant to join the street barricades. Both Theo and Isabelle are courageous enough to join the street

fighting, despite exhibiting revolutionary naïveté. But does Bertolucci really favor Matthew’s political retreat? What is really at stake is that Bertolucci changed the ending of Adair’s original novel and reversed the primary perspective. In Adair’s novel, both Matthew and Theo (and Isabelle) contribute to the final battle with the police.\footnote{Gilbert Adair, *The Dreamers: A Romance* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 185.} In fact, Matthew even sacrifices his life to save Theo and Isabelle. However, Bertolucci removed this plot and does not portray Matthew as a sort of all-powerful superhero who sacrifices his life to save the “childish” and “impatient” French twins. Rather, it seems that Matthew cowardly stays inside his comfort zone rather than giving in to the revolutionary Cause. In this respect, Bertolucci seems to identify with the courage of Theo in joining in the revolutionary masses.

Yet I argue that what Bertolucci truly admires about his character Theo may not be the epic image of Mao that Theo is fascinated with. Rather, he is more interested in the act where Theo joins the street barricades manned by a number of young protestors. Instead of admiring Mao as a mobilizing director or orchestrator, Bertolucci seems to have been much more enthralled by the revolutionary vitality of the anonymous, forward-looking Chinese masses, like a gigantic “living theater” in revolutionary China. Bertolucci commented:

> I lived through the Cultural Revolution as if it was a grandiose *mise-en-scène* with an old director called Mao Zedong in charge of millions of young extras conceived and raised for the sole purpose of being there at that glorious moment. I was attracted above all by the aesthetics of the Cultural Revolution, like a form of street theatre: post-Living Theatre, pre-Pina Bausch.\footnote{Ranvaud and Ungari, *Bertolucci by Bertolucci*, 237.}  

He elaborated: “China had become the front projection of our confused utopias. I’d rather have young people brandish a red book than a rifle!”\footnote{Ibid., 238. In making his film *The Last Emperor*, the Italian filmmaker told his interviewer: “This is a big part of re-education. So I think that re-education is a very Chinese, let’s say, ceremony. Because Chinese consider themselves eternal students; they always say they’re learning, they are learning until the day they die. In fact, if you look at the Cultural Revolution, they didn’t have machine guns in their hands, but books, red books, as a proof that they were learning. Of course, students need teachers; a teacher could have been the emperor in the past or Mao Tse-Tung in the recent past. I noticed that there is a dialectic of teachers/students in China which more or less is there all the time.” See Bertolucci, *Bernardo Bertolucci: Interviews*, 197.}
At the same time, in addition to his sympathy for the Red Guards, I argue that Bertolucci was nonetheless reluctant to give up a certain spectator’s position, however little and performative it was, in the revolutionary happenings of the 1960s between the East and the West. He does not entirely identify with the courage that Theo demonstrates in front of the coercive French police. Nor does he completely identify with the energetic young protestors. Matthew’s political retreat may not be an entirely cowardly gesture in Bertolucci’s universe. Instead, it is a radically contemplative position in which the resistance and containment is more or less confessed. In his film *The Last Emperor*, Bertolucci was unwilling to completely give up not only the living spectacle inherent in the Cultural Revolution but also his own reflective, observational gaze on the Maoist lessons by means of cinematic representation and historical reenactment. Bertolucci related:

> There is a scene in the movie, towards the end of the life of Pu Yi, which is during the Cultural Revolution. Pu Yi is in a street which suddenly becomes full of young Red Guards going to the great Tiananmen Square. So I attempted to give the emotion that I had at the moment, in ’68, ’67, but at the same time not to ignore what I learned about the Cultural Revolution actually going to China in the last three years. I had never been pro-Chinese in the sixties as many of my friends used to be. But I was fascinated by the spectacle, by the show of the Cultural Revolution; the aesthetic of this kind of theatre in the street was very fascinating for me. So in the movie I tried to create that fascination and then to contradict it, giving a judgment about what had happened.\(^{763}\)

Seen in this new light, Bertolucci may presently make his films in Hollywood’s spectacular film industry, the global cinematic empire. However, this does not necessarily mean that he simply embraces the Hollywood ethos and American moral values. Ever since the 1970s, Bertolucci has been reluctant to give up a certain self-reflective position in his film works. He has refused to accommodate the whole hierarchical body of global capitalism without reserve. While he refused to be totally assimilated by the leftist doctrines at the expense of his radical individuality shortly after the sixties, it is also true that Bertolucci still maintained the same skeptical distance toward the predominant capitalist ideology by being consistently faithful to his fascinations with the alternative “living theaters”—both East and West—imagined and enacted since 1968. The “last encounter” between cinephilia and sinophilia during the 1960s may have occurred

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\(^{763}\) Ibid., 199.
mainly in Paris, but this last meeting remains and resides in today’s ever-expanding and omnipresent capitalist machinery as its very “intimate stranger.”
CHAPTER 11
THE DULL SACRAMENT:
MELANCHOLY, BORING EXISTENCE, AND THE
“MESSIANIC REDEMPTIONS” IN GARREL’S LES AMANTS RÉGULIERS

From Romantic Delusions to Bare Life?

Widely regarded as a dismissive response to the glorious commemoration of May ’68 in Bertolucci’s The Dreamers, Philippe Garrel’s film Les amants réunis (Regular Lovers) (2005) sought to revisit the utterly “dark spot” pertaining to the historical and cultural memories of the same event in an alternative fashion. Shot entirely in exquisite black-and-white cinematography, Les amants, which also stars the same male protagonist from The Dreamers as the main hero, focuses on the depressing and traumatic underside inerded in this youthful and lyrical revolutionary period. Heralded as the “Rimbaud of French cinema” and “the son of French New Wave,” Garrel is in fact a lesser-known filmmaker for audiences living outside the Continent.\(^\text{764}\) Despite the fact that Garrel’s international fame is much lower than Bertolucci’s, Les amants is generally perceived as being aesthetically superior to The Dreamers.\(^\text{765}\) Winning unanimous critical support at the Venice Film Festival and the European film academy, Les amants is mainly appraised for its austere and sincere cinematic rendering of the various impasses experienced in romantic love and revolutionary movements during and after May ’68.

In this chapter, however, I will argue that the sheer antagonism between the two kinds of historical remembrances in Les amants and The Dreamers is highly illusionary. Rather, both of these recent cinematic recastings of May ’68 may pertain to the same fundamental deadlock between capitalist cultural logic and moral order that has become increasingly prominent in modern Western

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societies, especially in the aftermath of the sixties. Compared to the bittersweet memories in *The Dreamers*, the profoundly tragic representation of *Les amants* is undeniably more radical in suggesting that there is simply no escaping point or comfort zone capable of diminishing and rechanneling the inherent impasse of May ’68. Using mainly a psychoanalytical optic to reassess this Garrel work and its contributions to the commemoration of ’68, I will also argue that the overt melancholic sentiment radiating in *Les amants* is predominantly a male symptom of failing to come to terms with the radical otherness of oneself. However, I believe that the failure of *Les amants* to completely settle its own predicament retroactively offers a chance to search again for some even more profound and radical cultural representations of May ’68.

*Les amants réguliers* is about how a group of young Parisian artists struggle through their uneasy lives after the upheavals of the May ’68 events in Paris. The story begins with a 20-year-old Rimbaud-like petty-bourgeois poet, François (Louis Garrel), who is fascinated with the ferment of art and revolution. He escapes from mandatory military duty and joins the underground youth resistance. There, François is acquainted with some other artist friends who are also frustrated by the repressive machinery underpinning de Gaulle’s France. After a whole night of battling with the French police in Saint-Michel during May ’68, François and his comrades are greatly exhausted and unsettled. At the same time, the trade union, which represents the interests of the workers, decides to negotiate with the French government to settle the conflicts. Soon afterward, the barricades start to come down. The youth are highly frustrated, feeling betrayed by the workers and gradually losing their hopes of a leftist revolution. Subsequently, some of the militant artists choose to reside in a huge apartment owned by a wealthy young bohemian named Antoine (Julien Lucas). Disillusioned but not entirely discouraged, they enjoy a communal life while waiting for another chance at a revolutionary movement.

During one gathering in Antoine’s apartment, François meets Lilie (Clotilde Hesme) for a second time. She is an aloof, working-class sculptress whom François has already encountered once during the barricades in Saint-Michel. Lilie admires François’s artistic talent and falls in love with him.
immediately. Reclusive from the outside world, the young artists spend almost two years together in the inherited apartment. From time to time, they hold music parties, discuss Maoism and religious topics, work on their artworks, and smoke opium. When Antoine abruptly commits suicide, the young artists soon disperse once again as lonely and fleeting individuals. Lilie finally decides to leave François to renew her art career in New York with the help of a middle-aged male American painter. To his dismay, François eventually kills himself by taking an excess of opium with his inner “angel” whispering to him right before his death.

Formally speaking, Garrel’s distinctly minimalistic film languages are precisely the source of admiration among Western cinephiles, especially in left-leaning intelligentsia. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze even called Garrel “one of the greatest modern authors” of the twentieth century. Early in his film career, Garrel was already fascinated with the modernist conception of the “aesthetic of poverty” as a particular moral gesture. As a result, his films have little dialogue and minimal plots. Static long takes and black-and-white cinematography are frequently employed. At first glance, the mise-en-scène of Garrel seems to be very simple and the decorative setting is far from spectacular yet highly economical. Moreover, Garrel’s framing is always carefully architectured to convey the modern feeling of solitude and dullness experienced among the various artists and bohemians. In Les amants, Garrel thereby de-romanticized and de-familiarized the very ideas of youthfulness, lyrical lifestyles, and the revolutions of ’68 as silent, solitary, and even boring events. For Garrel, May ’68 was truly a revolutionary failure, a serious historical defeat, which may be why Les amants can be viewed as a “loser’s film.”

After the revolution has failed, the main hero François runs away quickly and fearfully. He knocks on the door of an anonymous person. “Were you the one flipping over the cars?” a voice asks. “Yes,” he says trembling, “please, mister,

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I’m very scared.” But the door shuts. To escape arrest, François then flees onto a rooftop where he spends the whole night. When morning comes, he is utterly tired and his face is blackened. He looks vulnerable until he finds temporary shelter in the house of his father’s friend. In parallel, another comrade of François’s returns home from the street-fighting nocturne. He also looks completely exhausted and defeated. Meanwhile, it seems that the trade union has just started negotiations with the government and soon the workers’ concrete demands seem to be met. François’s comrade thereby says to his mother, “They [The workers] do not know that it is never money that counts, but life itself…. We lose. But the question for now is that: ‘can we make a revolution for the proletarians without the proletarians?’.” His mother does not respond and does not even look surprised, but instead takes his dirty shoes back into the cabin and prepares breakfast for him as usual, as if the student uprising were nothing more than a regular youth party taking place week in and week out.

Giorgio Agamben explained that the ancient Greeks had two words for “life”—bios and zoē. Zoē is thought to be in common with all living things. Humans, plants, animals, and gods all have zoē; it is “the simple fact of living.” Zoē is thought to be in common with all living things. Humans, plants, animals, and gods all have zoē; it is “the simple fact of living.”

In addition, each living creature that has zoē also has its own bios or particular way of living; for humans, this is often described as a political, social, thoughtful life, but in every case bios is “a qualified life, a particular way of life.” This qualified or political dimension is what allows the possibility of conjoining “the good and the evil and the just and the unjust.” Agamben maintained that this separation between bios and zoē formed the basis of politics and political power from prehistoric imagination to the present day. Yet this separation hides far-

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769 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1. Since its origins, Agamben noted, law has had the power of defining what “bare life”—zoē, as opposed to bios; qualified life—is by making this exclusive operation, while at the same time gaining power over it by making it the subject of political control. The power of law to actively separate “political” beings (citizens) from “bare life” (bodies) has carried on from antiquity to modernity and from Aristotle to Auschwitz. However, in his groundbreaking work, Agamben also analyzed an obscure figure inhered in Roman law that poses some fundamental questions about the nature of law and power in general. Under the Roman Empire, a man who committed a certain kind of crime was banned from society and all of his rights as a citizen were revoked. He thus became a “homo sacer” (sacred man). In consequence, he could be killed by anybody, while his life on the other hand was deemed “sacred,” so he could not be sacrificed in a ritualistic ceremony.

770 Ibid.

771 Ibid., 3.
reaching possibilities—namely, the possibility of being reduced to zoē, which Agamben calls “bare life.” Through the reduction of human existence to a bare life, one can no longer consider the importance of how life is lived; the possibility of the just and the unjust are therefore excluded and discarded. Any such relation to life is limited to a spectrum of management of a population, which ranges from protection to violence but does not allow an assessment of the former and the latter as just and unjust, respectively.

However, I argue that this kind of “qualified life,” bios, is never fully achieved in Les amants. There is a radical redoubling between bios and zoē that characterizes many of Garrel’s works, where one cannot really detect the noticeable differences between a “qualified life” and a “bare life.” They are literally “the same.” In fact, the question of “can we make a revolution for the proletarians without the proletarians?” bemoaned by the defeated young protestor perhaps summarizes the traumatic message of the entire feature. In fact, Garrel’s vision of May ’68 may be a kind of “revolution without revolution” in the first place. According to Garrel’s cinematic rendering, the students’ revolts are far too fragmentary and simply lack a collective strategy to resist the police. In Les amants, the figures representing proletarians and the working class have been idiosyncratically reduced to a minimal level. Images of proletarians are shown only once in a very idiosyncratic fashion—in François’s dream during the nocturnal battle with the police. At the height of the barricades, François rests behind a car, falls asleep, and dreams about another proletarian uprising—the French Revolution in 1789.

In François’s dream, a group of anonymous peasants and revolutionaries, who are dressed in the fashion of the eighteenth century, exist like many voiceless specters, aimlessly advancing their footsteps to gather around a chambermaid wearing a Phrygian cap. What is really problematic here is that the original boundary between “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie” is radically blurred in Les

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772 Adrian Martin noted a common characteristic radiating in many of Garrel’s films: “All European cities seem the same. The interior walls are always bare, featureless. All apartments look the same, as do all cafes: Garrel rarely plays on the class differences of his characters in terms of their environment, or on the visible vicissitudes of their social mobility, preferring to subject them all, equally, to the same austerity.” See Adrian Martin, “A Cinema of Intimate Spectacle: The Poetics of Philippe Garrel.” Cineaste 34, no. 4 (September 2009): 38.
amants. In the imagined sequence of 1789, it is difficult to “name” or concretely “identify” this group of revolutionaries as distinctive “working-class proletariats” because of the exceptionally dim lighting and the elusiveness of the quote. Are they purely “proletariat”? From their clothing, one could argue that they are “petty-bourgeoisie.” But from their darkened facial gestures, they are arguably a group of French revolutionaries in 1789. However, the director has not clarified this, so what is the true objective of this scene? There is no definite answer to this question. While one can interpret Garrel’s intention as a desire to de-romanticize both the revolutionary dreams of 1968 and 1789, the true purpose of this sequence in relation to the two historical sequences remains unclear.

Interestingly, the sheer revolutionary objectives of the events of May ’68, in the eyes of many Western neoliberalist sociologists, bore the same form of ambiguity. Pierre Nora argued that May ’68 was just a trivial bourgeois event. Compared to the French Revolution, which advanced the democratic development of the entire Western world, Nora argued that ’68 would always live in the shadow of its historical predecessor: “After it was over, everyone wondered what had actually happened in terms of revolutionary action, of history in the Hegelian sense, written in letters of blood. Not only was there no revolution, but nothing tangible or palpable occurred at all.”773 The renowned sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky offered the harshest and most dismissive critiques on how the revolutionary “aimlessness” in May ’68 eventually helped breed a new narcissistic cultural mentality based on the “emancipation of the individual” at the onset of the mid-1980s.

In his book L’ère du vide (The Era of Void) and other writings, Lipovetsky lamented that all the youthful, lyrical, and revolutionary demands during May ’68, composed mainly by bourgeois students, did not actually help generate any concrete programs for societal transformation but, rather, championed the new supremacy of individualistic hedonism and consumerism as “transpolitical individualism.” Narcissism and moral nihilism, under an all-encompassing

capitalist framework, were repackaged in a new liberated image of the individual, a new “psychological man,” which was no more than an infinite egoistic expansion. According to Lipovetsky, May ’68 was “a revolution without a historical project” and “a revolution without a revolution.” In sum, the moral lacuna, in his view, generated nothing but a new consumerist ethos that opportunistically capitalized on the gap opened up by the bourgeois demands of ’68 to “change life.”

**Policing Repressions and the Traumatically Naked Vision**

Robin Bates argued that “May ’68 did not reshape the world politically, nor did it create a new way of knowing.” However, the profound virtue of the French May ’68 is that it helped bring into being the various unrealized emancipatory promises of the earlier revolutions in France, such as the groundbreaking insurrections in 1789. The events in ’68, seemingly a “black hole” pertaining to the continuum of history, served as a unique vantage point from which to prepare for better social formations to come in the West. While agreeing with this insight, I argue that the sheer recasting of this historical “black hole” of ’68 as such involved multiple sets of narratives and acts of commemoration, as the remembering and recounting of May ’68 was far from a homogeneous exercise.

“Traumatic experiences,” according to Garrel, were precisely the main substance that divided the historical memories of 1968 between him and Bertolucci. In the press conference at the Venice Film Festival in 2005, Garrel said, “I think for me it was the trauma of a night in Denfert-Rochereau and I think

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775 Ibid., 311.
776 Lipovetsky wrote: “The prevailing mood of May was not a petit bourgeois individualism but an individualism that can be called *transpolitical*, in which the political and the existential, the public and the private, the ideological and the poetic, collective struggle and personal gratification, revolution and humor, all become inextricably intertwined…. ‘Change life!’ meant to change society and one’s own life all at the same time. What made May ’68 unprecedented was the hybrid union of revolutionary intent and passionate individualism.” Ibid., “May ’68, or the Rise of Transpolitical Individualism,” in *New French Thought: Political Philosophy*, ed. Mark Lilla, trans. Lisa Maguire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 215–216. [italics in the original]
778 Ibid.
for him [Bertolucci] it was the trauma of a night in *Campo de'Fiori*…. Frederic Pardo, who was there [in *Campo de'Fiori*], told me there were people in Italy in '68."779 As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Bertolucci was not actually involved in the Parisian barricades during May '68. Rather, he was in Italy shooting his film *Partner* during those ecstatic two months. Garrel commented during the same press conference that the sheer emotional, dramatic confrontation between the student revolutionaries and the police force during the ending of *The Dreamers* had much to do with Bertolucci’s primary absence or non-involvement in the French protests.

Although Garrel did not openly blame such a romanticized treatment in *The Dreamers*, he claimed that he would always strive to give an “authentic” and “personal” account of the events as a first-hand witness of the French barricades. As a twenty-year-old, coming-of-age young artist, Garrel did not join the struggles and participate in the events by throwing paving stones and chanting revolutionary slogans like many other young protestors of the time. Rather, he chose to involve himself in the barricades by chronicling a documentarian record of this singular history along with his cinematic mentor Jean-Luc Godard and other militant filmmakers like Chris Marker. The collective documentary that they made at that epoch was called *Cinétract*. It was a silent piece of work with many empty black screens flashing in the interims. *Actual révolutionnaires* (*Actual Revolutionaries*) was the part Garrel made. Unfortunately, Garrel’s footage from *Cinétract* was lost in the laboratory during film processing in 1968. In this respect, many segments in *Les amants* were deliberately filmed as fictional reenactments,

779 Philippe Garrel, Louis Garrel, and Clotilde Hesme, “Venice Film Festival Conference,” *Regular Lovers (Les amants réguliers)*; DVD, directed by Philippe Garrel (2005; London: Artificial Eyes, 2006). In Italy there was short-lived fraternal support in Rome and Milan for the student-worker protests in Paris. Yet, unlike French '68, which was thought to be a rather “explosive” and “immediate” insurrection, 1968 in Italy was generally considered a far more “logical,” “long-lasting,” and “contemplative” revolutionary response to the increasing revisionist tendencies of the Italian Communist Party led by Paolo Togliatti, as well as the various state crises that emerged within the Roman Catholic Church and the “neo-fascist” bureaucracy in the government at the end of WWII. See John Foot, “Looking Back on Italy’s ‘Long '68’: Public, Private and Divided Memories,” in *Memories of 1968: International Perspectives*, eds. Ingo Cornils and Sarah Waters (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 104. According to Steve Wright, the lessons of French May '68 had had a far-reaching galvanizing and catalyzing effect on the Italian far left, if not prompting Italian workers to intensify their autonomous self-management as a radical weapon against state monopoly as such. See also Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 114.
or more precisely, as a “resurrection” of his lost documentary episode. But if this is true, it is also true that the very historical “authenticity” of Les amants regarding May ’68 was not only simply based on Garrel’s personal experience; it was also structured around the sheer irretrievable loss of a primary record. According to one critic, the final result of this cinematic resurrection was “a double feeling of loss: loss of the documentary record, and loss of the very political ideals of ’68.”

It is in fact quite obvious that the barricades of ’68 are almost unsentimentally portrayed in Les amants. Garrel preferred to use many real-life actors and actresses in order to enhance the “authenticity” of the film. Unlike The Dreamers, there is no background music or soundtrack employed in the scenes of the student protests in Garrel’s work. Moreover, the lighting is often underexposed for the entire nocturnal student struggles with the police. There are only environmental, everyday sounds used in the battle sequences, highly reminiscent of a newsreel style. In addition, Garrel preferred long-take-long-shots to de-familiarize the various dramas surrounding the history of ’68 to convey a feeling of solitary and silent revolt. Garrel commented: “For me, history is the enemy of art … cinema is only mis-en-scène—an attempt to rebuild our imperfect memories.”

Although the two main characters in The Dreamers and Les amants, Theo and François, respectively, are both acted by Louis Garrel, there is indeed a crucial difference in the temperament between the two young screen personas. While Theo of The Dreamers sings and heralds the revolutionary slogans blatantly and joyfully together with other young protestors, François of Les amants treats the same slogans with boring and lonely agitation. In fact, he does not even have the courage to throw a Molotov cocktail. In the meantime, the other young protestors seem to set up their blocking defense rather awkwardly and produce only fragmented, ineffective attacks against the French police.

780 Grissemann, [link](http://www.cinema-scope.com/cs25/int_grissemann_garrel.htm). Garrel had acknowledged that in Les amants, he was trying to resurrect and reproduce the images and sounds of the lost film, approximating a newsreel style. For example, the scenes of crowd violence were apparently portrayed in random camera movements to render a concerted sense of collective anonymity. See Ibid.


782 Grissemann, [link](http://www.cinema-scope.com/cs25/int_grissemann_garrel.htm).
Interestingly, what is really at issue here in *Les amants* is that the French police force seems to be far less “brutal” and “coercive” compared with the police in *The Dreamers*, at least on a visual level. In Garrel’s depiction, the Gaullist police are not omnipotent in enforcing the law of the state. In the beginning of the film, Garrel portrays a police officer as having failed to command François to sign up for mandatory military service. Instead, François casually and rather playfully escapes from police entitlement and national duty. When Garrel was filming his part of *Cinétract* in ’68, he experienced precisely the same kind of exemption from “non-repression” from the police. According to Jonathan Rosenbaum, who heard the news from Garrel’s assistant director in May, the police did not actually forbid Garrel to film his collective documentary. Rather, the police entertained and even tolerated the collective filmmaking. As Rosenbaum wrote: “Godard had an Alfa Romeo with a 35mm camera [at the time], and he and Alain Jouffroy and Garrel went around shooting footage,” adding that “[b]ecause of the Alfa Romeo [a famous automobile], the police left them alone.”

François, for his part, refuses to enlist in the military to realize his status as a “true French citizen.” Surprisingly, François’s stubborn refusal of his French civic duty does not undermine the general operation of the police state. Instead, his denial of such “ideological hailing” may have even intensified the policing tendency within the Gaullist regime.784 In an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*, Garrel pointed out that those young revolutionaries in *Les amants*, despite living reclusively from the outside world, were indeed severely monitored by the French police force. The whole group soon enters into a phase of paranoia precisely because of the constant police observation and intervention right after the

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784 In this respect, the leniency of the law enforcer here may bear a certain discrepancy toward Louis Althusser’s famous teaching on the “police figure” as a strong agent for ideological interpellation. “Ideological hailing,” as Althusser centrally claimed in his article “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” “…‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation that I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police[man] (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’/Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject.” See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 130–131. In *Les amants*, the “hailed individual” François seems to resist such a 180-degree physical conversion toward the police to become a full “subject.”
exceptional year of 1968, the period when the young agitators could enjoy a
certain amount of freedom in escaping state coercion.\textsuperscript{785}

It has often been argued that the state violence in Italy was far more
oppressive than that in France after 1968.\textsuperscript{786} Although there were some ultra-leftist groups that incurred a certain terroristic threat to the French state, the
political situation in France seemed to be generally much more mild and moderate
than the extreme leftism in Italy. Yet, in Julian Bourg’s account, there was real
repression going on in France, both in terms of the shrinking of traditional
expressive freedoms of the press and the initiation of arbitrary arrests of young
radicals, in which more than a thousand people were imprisoned for politically-
driven charges between the late 1960s and early 1970s.\textsuperscript{787} After the resignation of
de Gaulle, police repression in France became more severe than ever. Jean-Paul
Sartre gave a vivid example of the sheer repressiveness of the new Pompidou
government. He said that after ’68, when young people were found carrying only
two copies of the same issue of the banned newspaper \textit{La Cause du people}, they
were directly sent to prison without the possibility of suspended sentences.\textsuperscript{788}

According to Garrel, police repression/state censorship and spectacle were
in fact two closely related entities. They were two sides of the same coin. Ever
since his early film works, Garrel tried to avoid filming spectacular, entertaining
representations of scenes featuring barricades and social protests. In \textit{Les amants},
he realized that it was also necessary for him to receive just a limited amount of
money from the Left Bank so he could pursue his personal account of May ’68
without facing too much economic pressure or censorship so typical of

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Hollywood industries. Commenting on his lost documentary film *Actuel révolutionnaires*, the director said in 1968:

I wanted to show that it was crucial not to continue with spectacle, not to go on filming the barricades because doing so was a way of playing the government’s game by making films so that people could get off on the images. I simply wanted to show, in an abstract way, an analysis of what is going on … and to completely avoid showing the barricades just as one would avoid showing a naked girl.

On the relationship between repression and spectacle, Garrel further elaborated that “it [was] completely contradictory to film the barricades because … doing so means that you are away from the barricades and that you are reporting the event in the present by saying, ‘look, this is what happened while I was carrying on with my life,’ which is a way of not thinking.” In other words, the various spectacular representations of the barricades may actually have encouraged this very “non-thinking” tendency by engaging in a kind of senseless injunction to repress the historical “truth” of those protests even more ferociously and coercively. Garrel henceforth argued that “the cinema must never be a place where the viewer finds pleasure…. The film must always be something that disturbs … it must be completely intolerable for the viewer.” In Garrel’s view, there was indeed not too much difference between a spectacular demonstration of the barricades and an obscene staging of a naked body. Actually, in many of his works, there was a strong ascetic self-consciousness for him to present the various scenes of barricades and sexuality.

In fact, Garrel’s “ascetic” film philosophy does not necessarily mean that all the “spectacular” scenarios of social demonstrations and sexuality are entirely wiped out from or annihilated in his pictures. Rather, it is more symptomatic that these scenes are simply substituted by other means—some more subtle and unassuming rerenderings. That is, instead of directly showing the barricades and naked bodies themselves, Garrel thereby presents regular couples on the streets, or ordinary agitators in May ‘68, attempting to go on with their sheer mundane and

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791 Ibid.
792 Ibid.
bare existences. Paradoxically, the cinematic use of these bare images is not actually bare. Garrel’s gesture of not showing various “spectacular elements” further encourages the audience that there is “something” left to see. At worst, it may eventually generate a new kind of “spectacle.” For a film that celebrates sexual asceticism, it is rather strange to see that there is actually a young rioting couple who are gently kissing and hugging during the “Night of the Barricades.” However, this gentle act of love is cast in a very ambiguous way (due to its excessive dim exposure). It is difficult to truly differentiate whether this is part of the barricades or a romantic plot outside the insurrectionary narrative. That is why a journalist said at a press conference at the Venice Film Festival that this Garrel film actually offered another level of “sexuality,” a new sexual ambiguity. The “non-spectacle” raises a substantial level of ambiguity and thus encourages the audience to “speculate” and “anticipate.”

Ironically, referring to Jacques Rancière’s notion, Garrel’s ascetic film idea to constantly and self-consciously avoid spectacle was perhaps demonstrating the logic of the “police.” Rancière wrote:

Police intervention in public space is little about interpellating demonstrators than it is about distributing them. The police are not the law that interpellates the individual (the ‘hey, you there’ of Louis Althusser) unless we confuse the law with religious subjection. The police are first and foremost a certitude about what is there, or rather, about what is not there: ‘Move along, there’s nothing to see.’ The police say there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done but to keep moving, dispersing; they say that the space of circulation is nothing more than the space of circulation. Politics is comprised of transforming that space of circulation into the space of the manifestation of a subject: be it the people, workers, citizens. It implies refiguring that space, what there is to do there, what there is to see, or to name. It is a conflict about the division of what is perceptible to our senses.

The “police,” then, for Rancière, are less concerned with repression than with a more basic function: that of constituting what is or is not perceivable, self-consciously choosing what can or cannot be seen, predetermining what can be heard from what cannot be heard. This verdict of “there is nothing spectacular in the scene” sums up the whole essence of Rancière’s idea of the “police.” That is to say, the true police function is to constantly maintain symbolic fiction in society so that nobody has been excluded from participating in the egalitarian

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793 Garrel [Philippe], Garrel [Louis], Hesme, “Venice Film Festival Conference.”
determination of a common life or civic responsibility. Everything has already been shown, included, and even laid bare. According to Rancière, while the police define the community as a unified and consensual whole, real politics consists of contesting the very definition of this community and designates the sheer antagonism inherent in such a carefully policed frame of mind.\textsuperscript{795}

To Kristin Ross, this sort of cultural mentality of “there is nothing spectacular in May ’68” is precisely the very ideological mindset of the “policed memories of May” that emerged in the events’ aftermath.\textsuperscript{796} Calling these carefully policed historical landscapes the very “sociologization of 1968,” Ross argued that the prominent hermeneutic model used to explain the events of May was predominantly a de-dramatizing one in the early 1980s. As she pointed out, the mass obsession with the commemoration of ’68 in the 1980s and 1990s did not really help to rediscover certain unrealized potentials of the history itself. Rather, the gigantic narrative labor became a new active forgetting of ’68 insofar as the very historical perspective of looking at history had already been purified and well managed by many social experts.\textsuperscript{797} She argued that the mass oblivion of the revolutionary traits of ’68 was not simply accomplished by a brutal silencing of the commemoration of the events but, rather, by “an enormous amount of narrative labor” that “facilitated the active forgetting of the events in France.”\textsuperscript{798} That is to say, the obliteration of the core memories of May ’68 was precisely facilitated by a series of compulsive memorizations—by a moral obligation or duty to remember the events of ’68 under a certain precontained epistemological framework and sociological construct.

The events of ’68, according to this carefully managed view, which was usually prescribed by certain academic experts employed under the gigantic state machinery, were just one historical example of what had long existed in French history as a whole. Under this specific “sociologized frame of mind” which eventually discouraged the necessity of barricades and social struggles, the academic experts argued that May ’68 was indeed a very “mundane” and

\textsuperscript{795} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{796} Ross, \textit{May ’68 and Its Afterlives}, 22.
\textsuperscript{797} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{798} Ibid.
“ordinary” sequence, a “revolution without revolution.” There was barely anything spectacular or novel about this incident, as the same thing could happen every now and then according to a certain foreseeable scientific or historical pattern. The historical actors in 1968 were by no means revolutionary heroes/heroines. It was just a “regular” event after all. Ross summed up this historical predicament about ’68: “The management of May’s memory—the way in which the political dimensions of the event have been, for the most part, dissolved or dissipated by commentary and interpretations—is now, thirty years later, at the center of the historical problem of 1968 itself.”

Aphasia and the Monstrosity of the Courtly Lady

What is really at stake in Les amants is that the state coercions and policed restoration during and after ’68 were intimately tied to those inner scars or unspeakable wreckages that the French youngsters had already experienced in romantic love. As Les amants suggests, compared to the trauma imposed by the state machinery, there was another form of depression that was even more difficult to come to terms with among the various social protagonists in ’68. If the external coercions could frustrate the protagonists into abandoning their revolutionary dreams, the “interior traumas” seemed to have a far more devastating effect, as they condemned the young lovers into eternal silence and motionlessness. They simply lost their symbolic capacity to communicate, to act.

Famous film theorist Serge Daney once commented that Philippe Garrel’s works stood firmly against the grain insofar as his films bore little resemblance to the major currents of post-1968 French cinema. While the predominant coda of French cinema during this epoch was exactly the primary saturation of discourses and words over the economy of images, Garrel’s pictures are deprived of many of these verbal narratives and dialogue in an attempt to present a somewhat dystopian and alienated community among the young artists in a post-1968 context. By comparing the era-defining film La Maman et la Putain (The Mother and the Whore) (1978) by Jean Eustache with Garrel’s L’enfant secret (The Secret Child) produced in a similar period between the late 1970s and early 1980s,

799 Ibid., 1.
Daney concluded that while the Eustache piece definitely involves excessive speeches by his characters, the protagonists in Garrel’s work are always far too quiet and reclusive, and that the words they do use are usually extremely awkward and boring. As Daney remarked, “Garrel carves out a zone of ‘blank’ monologues at the heart of aphasia.” This particular kind of “speechlessness” precisely constitutes the very distinctive blueprint of Garrel and offers an antithesis to what Michel de Certeau has called prise de parole (the capture of speech) as one of the major characteristics and virtues of French May ’68 par excellence.

The sheer “silence” is, therefore, not just limited to the representation of barricades alone in Les amants. Aphasia is found even more prominently in the sphere of romantic love according to Garrel’s unique cinematic renderings. For instance, the first encounter between François and Lilie in Antoine’s apartment is represented through shot-reverse shots without any dialogue, but with Jean-Claude Vannier’s heartbreaking piano music in the background. The young lovers, of course, share a lot of time together after ’68, but they seem to abstain from committing any sensual activities (at least it is not represented in the film) that are so typical of young lovers in the sexually liberated context of 1968. Indeed, they literally just keep hanging around together, exchanging gazes without too much talking. Even when Lilie is going to “tell” the inconvenient truth to François about her decision to leave him to commence a new life in America, she does not actually explain very much, nor does the male hero react hysterically. Everything is very calm and even robotic. It is as if the impossibility of both dialogue and

801 Ibid., 6
802 Ibid., 7. In this respect, Ehrenstein also noticed that the motifs of depression, breakdown, shock therapy, and drugs that recurred in Garrel’s films “appears as full-blown manifestations of the oppressive gloom and sense of dread common to the films from the 1974–1978 period.” See David Ehrenstein, Film: The Front Line 1984 (Colorado: Arden Press, 1984), 80.
803 According to de Certeau, 1968 in France saw an unprecedented proliferation of spontaneous communication and restless conversation instead of just recuperating the old revolutionary logic of “seizure of power” and hegemony. Despite the constant quarrels and disagreements between the emerging communities, May 1968 permitted a possibility to manifest itself beyond any utilitarian gain and give back to all the rights to equality in fraternity through the freedom of speech that elated everyone. See Michel de Certeau, The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings, ed. Luce Girad, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3–48.
804 Garrel said that he had deliberately employed the style of a newsreel to show a scene where Francois meets a girl crossing the street. See Grissemann, http://www.cinema-scope.com/cs25/int_grissemann_garrel.htm.
romantic love has always been predestined and has characterized their encounter from the beginning, and the young lovers have no desire to change this fate.

Although Garrel has repeatedly emphasized the sheer “ordinariness” of his film, the relationship between François and Lilie, as I argue, may not be “mundane” or “regular” at all. Rather, this “regularity” is always coupled with a certain “abnormal” underside. As long as this love relationship goes hand in hand with the various symbolic failures such as aphasia and paralysis of reaction, there is perhaps no such thing as a purely “regular lover” residing in this film. Quite the contrary, the young couples may even suffer from severe melancholic attacks deep inside their hearts. According to Julia Kristeva, melancholia is a kind of psychological condition that involves an inexplicable loss of symbolic efficiency, an instant racking of aphasia, as well as a sudden loss of all interest in words, actions, and even life itself. The final suicidal act of François without an obvious reason seems to crystallize this very thesis of melancholia.

Sigmund Freud well distinguished two phenomena that pertain to psychic life—“mourning” and “melancholia.” According to Freud, mourning is a process of healthy and normal grieving. In mourning, the person who experiences loss can gradually come to terms with or relinquish one’s attachment to the lost object. Since mourning is always object-related, the mourner is willing to accept the necessity of remedial substitution so that one can displace its desires and attachment from the dead into the living. In other words, the mourner is able to relinquish lost objects precisely because s/he has experienced them as separate entities. The ego can overcome and integrate the painful reality of separateness without relapsing back into infantile narcissism. However, melancholia, as Freud argued, is an idiosyncratic reaction to loss in which the person does not simply admit the difference between the object and oneself. In one sense, the object here is not purely an “object” at all but a kind of narcissistic extension or elongation of the ego. Freud wrote that “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and

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empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”

Freud added that the melancholic’s object-choice “has been effected on a narcissistic basis, so that the object-cathexis, when obstacles come in its way, can regress to narcissism.” For Freud, melancholia is a pathological reaction, a regressive self-enclosure of an individual against the various difficulties and obstacles that are often encountered during adulthood.

In fact, what is even more symptomatic is that in *Les amants*, the melancholic sufferings of the main characters may well have been resublimated or positzivized into another form of aesthetic beauty—through the spiritualization of the “silent” heroine. That is to say, what makes their relationship deeply romantic and compelling is not the dramatic quality of the film but rather its diegetic ellipsis. For instance, in the final sequence of the film, after François has already taken an excessive amount of opium for the sake of self-destruction, he evokes his very last dream in which he is going to save his pure and innocent “goddess,” Lilie, from the various cruelties of life experienced in historical reality. In his dream, both of them are dressed in aristocratic clothing from 1848, highly reminiscent of Rimbaud’s escape from his overarching mother. Although Francois projects himself as a loyal knight-servant rescuing the Lady in his dream, Lilie, as the sublime feminine object, is constantly reduced to just a bare image, an abstract Ideal greatly deprived of many concrete features. As Jacques Lacan wrote, such spiritualization of the Lady “noted that all the poets seem to be addressing the same person…. In this poetic field the feminine object is emptied of all real substance.” Compared to the male hero François who is a more expressive poet, Lilie, as a working-class sculptor, indeed possesses the least agency in speaking up for herself. All that is left to her is her tearful eyes and sorrowful, despairing face. This female aphasia is thereby immortalized and transcendentalized as another level of idealized sublimity to cover up the sheer romantic failure between François and Lilie.


807 Ibid., 249.

Lacan commented that the so-called “courtly love” is by definition the “absence of sexual relationship.” He added: “courtly love is, for man—in relation to whom the lady is entirely, and in the most servile sense of the word, a subject—the only way to elegantly pull off the absence of the sexual relationship.” In the same vein, Žižek elaborated that this kind of abstract Lady had indeed nothing to do with any spiritual purification but rather pointed back to a cold, distant, and inhuman female partner with a far more dreadful and horrific underside. Žižek added that “the idealization of the Lady, her elevation to a spiritual ethereal ideal, is therefore to be conceived of as a strictly secondary phenomenon: it is a narcissistic projection whose function is to render her traumatic dimension invisible.” In Les amants, the very spiritual Lady, Lilie, is also strangely cast as a silent, greatly immobile character, as if she were cruelly indifferent to and disinterested in anybody but herself. She informs François that she is leaving him, but she says nothing about her plans with her new lover. Lilie’s departure happens suddenly, leaving François with barely any time to react. The cruel silence and abruptness of the heroine is so traumatizing that it drags François to suicide. Like the primordial father, the female figure in courtly love, as Žižek has suggested, is also a kind of mercurial and erratic master who cannot be restricted by law. The sublime Lady, in the field of courtly love, is endowed with the ferocious power to constantly inflict pain on her male worshippers. Idiosyncratically, she always bears the satisfaction of desire from her male lovers.

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810 Ibid.  
811 Slavoj Žižek, The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality (London & New York: Verso, 1994), 89. Lacan elaborated on how the Lady “torments” her male servant: “By means of a form of sublimation specific to art, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner. The Lady is never characterized for any of her real, concrete virtues, for her wisdom, her prudence, or even her competence. If she is described as wise, it is only because she embodies an immaterial wisdom or because she represents its functions more than she exercises them. On the contrary, she is as arbitrary as possible in the tests she imposes on her servant.” See Lacan, Book VII, 150.  
812 See Žižek, Metastases of Enjoyment, 90.  
813 Actually, the notion of “woman” may have occupied a very problematic position in Garrel’s universe. In a dialogue with Thomas Lescure, Garrel admitted that he would like to associate woman with a certain motionlessness and speechlessness: “I would like to risk an ‘affective’ hypothesis: it seems that immobility and silence manifest themselves above all when a woman is present on the screen.” See Philippe Garrel and Thomas Lescure, Une caméra à la place du coeur [A Camera in Place of the Heart] (Paris: Admiranda/Institut de l’image, 1992), 55.
That is why Žižek called the Lady “the courtly ‘imp of perverse’” in relation to the male servant.\(^{814}\)

While this is true, it is also true that Lilie may not be invested with such unrestrained power to frustrate the hero in the first place. Instead, she is perhaps just an agent who is acting for someone else in posing the traumatic truth to the male protagonist. François’s true tormentor is actually the American painter who brings (if not seduces) Lilie to the art scene in America. For example, there is a scene where the American artist horrifies the heroine tremendously in his studio. He explicitly tells her that there will be no future for French artistic circles after 1968. Lilie retains her silence as usual but she cannot help bursting into tears at the same time. It is out of this utmost despair over the death of modern art in the aftermath of French ’68 that finally compels Lilie to make her decision to fly to America for new aesthetic possibilities.

Yet Lilie hides this traumatic fact from François, as if the reason that she is leaving the hero is totally out of pragmatic self-interest. In this respect, she has kept this horrific secret to herself. Her silence is in fact a constitutive disguise to protect fragile François from suffering a total psychological collapse and overt devastation over the death of European modern art after 1968. In other words, she retains a fundamental fantasy for François regarding the fate of art in France after ’68. Seen in this light, it is true that this Lady is still an “exception” to the law to a certain extent, yet she cannot live completely outside the male law and phallic principle. Rather, she is playing the sheer persona of the “symbolic father” (i.e., the American artist) who exercises phallic castration, while simultaneously she is a cruel and merciless agent that seemingly enjoys only her own self-interest. However, one should equally notice that such a “traumatic dimension” of the heroine is not simply intended to frustrate the male subjects; it is also intimately tied to an unconditional or stubborn safeguarding of the law itself.

Interestingly, Lilie is not entirely “silent” throughout the film. At one moment, she even asks one of her comrades in Antoine’s apartment whether he

\(^{814}\) Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 94.
has ever seen the film *Prima della rivoluzione* (Before the Revolution). She does not wait for the comrade’s answer but instead talks directly to the camera, murmuring the words “Bernardo Bertolucci.” A similar strategy has actually been used in other Garrel works, which he regards as an “image” rather than a sound.

The main plot of Bertolucci’s *Prima della rivoluzione* is structured around a young male Italian intellectual who is caught between his current Marxist beliefs and his bourgeois past, and between his incestuous love for his cousin and the social norms inherent in a Catholic family. The most famous sentence of the film is: “I have another fever … nostalgia for the present…. As I live, the moments I live are already very far off…. That’s why I don’t want to change it, the present.”

Several years ago, Garrel openly renounced Bertolucci for his abrupt turn from leftist cinema to the Hollywood film industry. Garrel claimed that when a director had chosen to turn to the other side, it would be very difficult to turn back. However, Garrel’s recuperation of “before the revolution” in *Les amants*, instead of the nostalgia for a lost personal memory, is perhaps a melancholic fixation on the “loss” of a certain precious signifier, a defense of a lost Cause. He seems to refuse renouncing the very notion (or “image”) of “before the revolution” of the 1960s, even today.

At the Venice press conference, Garrel stated his reason for including an inter-textual reference to this particular Bertolucci work:

I quote *Prima della rivoluzione*, which was made in 1964, Bertolucci made his first film in 1964 and I made mine in ’67. *Marie pour memoire*, so that was before 1968. So the meaning of ‘before the revolution’ was very important for us. No one talked about that. We were the generation born immediately after the war. Our fathers used to speak about the Holocaust or anti-Nazism, but no one talked about revolution. So the fact that a young man in Parma made a film called *Prima della rivoluzione* is part of this whole journey with Daniel Cohn-­

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815 As Garrel himself admitted, it was like a kind of “interior dialogue.” He said to an interviewer in 1968: “‘Jean-Luc [Godard] says: ‘The cinema for me is an image and a sound.’ For me it is an image. It is completely silent for me. The dialogue is all interior dialogue as in a dream. It is spoken but cannot be heard.” See Emmanuel Mairesse, “Dix ans après: Philippe Garrel,” [Ten Years After: Philippe Garrel]. *Cahiers du cinéma* 287 (April 1978): 62.

816 The full voice-over in *Prima della rivoluzione* is: “I take it as it comes. But my bourgeois future is in my bourgeois past. And so, for me, the ideology has been a vacation, a holiday…. I believe in the revolution and instead I lived the years before the revolution because it’s always before the revolution when you’re like me....”


In this respect, I argue that it is precisely the repetitive formal structure of failure in the spheres of history and love in the film, instead of the painful loss of a certain precious “object” represented by the cruel retreat of Lilie in Les amants, that keeps traumatizing Garrel and his (male) characters to a great extent. Although there is a striking parallel between Garrel’s personal suffering over the loss of his beloved female singer Nico after 1968 and the plot in Les amants, the true trauma resides elsewhere. As Garrel himself admitted, Les amants is actually about how an individual “goes through history, and how history wounds him/her [you] and how love saves him/her [you] and then loses him/her [you] again, like history nearly did…” While Garrel commented that the first part on “1968” was all about the disappointment in “history” and the second part on “1969” an elegy of “love,” it was also true that the second episode of love could never fully rechannel all the failures experienced in the historical arena. Rather, it appears that the sphere of love repeated exactly the “same” failure of the former defeated historical experience.

What is even more symptomatic is that the two signifiers that demonstrate this periodic transition from “’68” to “’69” are in fact demonstrated by the same type of name (i.e., street sign) in this Garrel work. They both correspond to a single Parisian street as a different street number. Strangely enough, the street that envelops the two divided periods is called Rue Garrel (Garrel Street). At first glance, it seems that the street sign represents an egoistic elongation and extension of the director’s troubled psyche. However, upon closer analysis, the film’s main message is that there is an unquenchable boredom and mundaneness both at the heart of every character in Les amants and in the post-1968 social order in Europe at large. Both sections on “history” and “love” corresponding to 1968 and 1969 are more or less subjulgated to the “same” boring and repetitive formal structure; there is probably no escape in fleeing from one’s failed encounter to the other side.

819 Garrel [Philippe], Garrel [Louis], and Hesme, “Venice Film Festival Conference.”
Regarding repetition, Lacan claimed that it first appears in a form that is obscure but it is “very close to a hauling [haler] of the subject, who always drags his thing into a certain path that he cannot get out of.”  However, the compulsion to repeat may not be defined simply as a repetition of the Same, or the simple recuperation of the “original.” Rather, the only thing that is repeated in symbolic reality is its impossibility to repeat in its full capacity, because there is always a minimal gap between repetition and sameness that in turn gives rise to a new “difference.” What has actually been repeated is thus its formal failure. This formal impossibility always returns to the “same place” as trauma.

Interestingly, such traumatic repetition of the same structure is not a pre-ontological condition. Instead, it is the strange redoubling between a narcissistic elongation of an unsettled Garrel and the sheer objective, mundane reality of the Rue Garrel. In fact, this precious “object” of history and love may not have been lost during and after 1968; in fact, it has always been “there.” But the very “object” that is possessed (and then lost) in the first place is a kind of “object without object.” What is really lacking at the core is precisely the “object-cause”; that is to say, the desire of this object is fundamentally deprived of its reason to desire. Žižek argued that the melancholic is not primarily the subject who is stubbornly fixated on the lost object, unable to perform the work of healthy mourning; rather, it is the subject who possesses the object who has lost his desire for it because the cause that made him desire this object has withdrawn and retreated, has lost its efficiency at its heart.

According to Žižek, the melancholic usually confuses the two categories of loss and lack. While the object-cause is originally, in a constitutive way, lacking, the melancholic interprets this lack as a loss, as if the lacking object was once possessed and then lost: “In short, what melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack,

822 Žižek wrote: “Far from accentuating to the extreme the situation of the frustrated desire, of the desire deprived of its object, melancholy rather stands for the presence of the object itself deprived of the desire for itself.” See Žižek, “Melancholy and the Act.” Critical Inquiry 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 662.
823 Ibid., 662.
that this object is nothing but the positivization of a void or lack, a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself.\textsuperscript{824} For instance, the street name Rue Garrel is not a kind of specter that haunts the temporal transition from “1968” to “1969,” or from “history” to “love.” This type of signifier is indeed highly arbitrary and meaningless from the beginning if one does not retroactively relate it to the psychic landscape of Garrel as such. But here Garrel seems to interpret the fundamental lack of this signifier as a kind of symbolic loss in his film.

Even though Rue Garrel is the genuine name of a Parisian street (i.e., streets are often named after a particular person), the director may not be entirely satisfied with this signifier. What Garrel radically refused was a “new frame of mind” to (re)interpret \textit{this lack as lack}. In other words, he seemed to stubbornly fixate on his own “perverse mentality” of treating this lack as loss. The continual usage of the signifier Rue Garrel as an umbrella category—that is, the structure of disappointment—to contain the two years “‘68” and “‘69” indicates that the filmmaker refused to turn the page of this trauma. While solitude is an inevitable result of his strange insistence, Garrel’s radical refusal to admit “loss” as “lack” may not lead to an abysmal void. Quite the contrary, it takes flight toward something even more radical and extreme. As Žižek added: “The paradox, of course, is that this deceitful translation of lack into loss enables us to assert our possession of the object; what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss.”\textsuperscript{825}

However, I do not simply agree that melancholia as such is entirely equivalent to psychic perversion. While the neoliberalist resignation of politics is highly prominent today, Garrel’s insistence on the revolutionary aspirations of the 1960s cannot simply be reduced to a certain psychic illness and perversity that confuses “lack” with “loss.” Rather, this “misinterpretation” is much more profound, as it is a sort of faithfulness to the absolute past and to some kinds of “precious moments”—the notion of “before the revolution”—that have already lost their symbolic efficiency today. Several years ago, Garrel has openly

\textsuperscript{824} Ibid., 659–660.
\textsuperscript{825} Ibid.
renounced Bertolucci for his sheer turn-taking from leftist cinema to Hollywood industry. Garrel even said that when a director has chosen to turn to the other side, one would find difficult to turn back.\(^{826}\)

At the textual level of *Les amants*, Lilie abandons her revolutionary zeal in France for America, and this “betrayal” as such is perhaps ultimately a symbolic disguise to shield off the more primordial horror of the symbolic order of post-1968 French society as a whole. That is to say, her traveling to America is not simply a renegacy but is also a necessary act that goes beyond the predominant revolutionary pessimism of European politics and art, whereas François’s suicide represents the aftermath of ’68. Lilie’s “silence” is much more radical as it is coupled with an act to continue to live—to live otherwise and otherworldly. Her “silent” retreat to America not only traumatizes François but also radically traumatizes and refuses the male-dominated renegacy in French intelligentsia during the 1970s as Lilie resurrects a new European soul in another country. Because of her radical refusal to communicate, Lilie fails to assimilate into American culture. In fact, after landing in America, Lilie refuses to conform to the various norms and clichés in American art circles, according to her letter to François. Lilie seldom talks to other conspicuous artists in America, which merely repeats the solitary scenario that she has encountered in France. Similar to her subversive involvement in certain underground French movements, Lilie attaches herself to the anarchist circle in America, performing the “same” form of radical and uncompromising silence in response to the two seemingly different symbolic enterprises of France and the U.S. after the watershed year of 1968. That is why Žižek has suggested that “[m]ourning is a kind of betrayal, the second killing of the (lost) object, while the melancholic subject remains faithful to the lost object, refusing to renounce his or her attachment to it.”\(^{827}\) Here, melancholic “perversion” can be conceived as a certain “irregular” fidelity to something that has been simultaneously “lost” and “still existing.”

\(^{826}\) Thierry Jousse, 34.

An Angelic Moment, Diabolical Resignation, and the Transcendence-to-Come

Interestingly, Garrel’s melancholic insistence on the 1960s was not just limited to a sheer recuperation of Bertolucci’s works but also was dedicated to specific images of Jean Eustache. According to Garrel, the opening shot of *Les amants* is a precisely made “carbon-copy” of Jean Eustache’s opening shot in his film *La Maman et la Putain*. What makes this shot so special is that it is not a traditional establishing shot that links the environment and the characters for diegetic purposes but, rather, is a shot of an empty staircase that conveys a certain religious sentiment of the Resurrection of Christ. During the 1970s, both Eustache and Garrel were considered the lyrical continuation of French *auteur* cinema after the watershed year of 1968. They were, of course, close friends, and Eustache’s suicide in the 1980s shocked the entire French intellectual scene. It is widely known that his death was somewhat related to the emergence of the video industry in the 1980s, which would presumably trigger the “death of cinema” as was constantly pronounced by various influential filmmakers, such as Jean-Luc Godard. In Garrel’s frame of mind, Eustache’s suicide was thereby approximated to a kind of “Christian martyrdom” that was purely dedicated to safeguarding the “purity” of modern art.  

Similar to his cinematic mentor Jean-Luc Godard, Garrel constantly invoked religious and messianic themes and metaphors in his works ever since his debut *Marie pour mémoire* (*Memory for Mary*) in 1967. According to Sally Shafto, Garrel’s obsession with artistic purity precisely coincided with his interests in Christian (Calvinist) asceticism and martyrdom. Thematically speaking, Christianity and artistic purity are two interrelated leitmotifs that recur in all of Garrel’s works. Ever since his first feature *Marie pour mémoire*, Garrel constantly invoked a “messianic” figure to redeem the loss of utopian hope or the fading of revolutionary aspirations among the young French bohemians in a repressive bourgeois society. The title of his next film, *Le révélateur* (*The

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828 Garrel and Lescure, 89. In this respect, Ehrenstein summarized: “Garrel is in a sense wildly behind the times—finally ‘caught up’ as it were with an ‘art’ cinema that is no longer viable.” Ehrenstein, 81.

829 Sally Shafto, “Artist as Christ/Artist as God-the-Father: Religion in the Cinema of Philippe Garrel and Jean-Luc Godard.” *Film History* 14, no. 2 (2002): 147. In addition, admiration for Godard has been a constant in Garrel’s career: “I saw all Godard’s films, I was crazy about them…. In fact, those were the only films I saw.” See Comolli, Narboni and Rivette, 47.
Revealer) (1968), was based in part on the biblical Book of Revelations and, at the end of the film, a five-year-old boy reminiscent of Jesus leaves his parents to accomplish his Christ-like mission and plan for salvation. Garrel’s Les amants, as James Williams has suggested, presents an altar to the cult of art and aesthetic transfiguration, as evidenced by the religious ceremony conducted by Antoine as he burns opium while being surrounded by poets, sculptors, and other European artists, like various angels and apostles.  

At the same time, Garrel was an atheist and historical materialist. He was also extremely content to believe that there was nothing religiously Beyond as an afterlife. In Garrel’s Le lit de la vierge (The Virgin’s Bed) (1969), Pierre Clémenti plays the role of Christ who is reluctant to assume his “earthly” duty. Gilles Deleuze, who appreciated Garrel’s aesthetics very much, argued that his work “provides himself with a genuine liturgy of bodies, because he restores them to a secret ceremony whose only characters are now Mary, Joseph, and the child, or their equivalents…. This is hardly a pious cinema, even though it is a cinema of revelation.” All these religious implications or the holiness pertaining to his films, as Gilles Deleuze has suggested, are merely empty postures and elusive placeholders. The figure of the “child” or “Messiah” that is constantly invoked in his pictures is missing at some point. Or to a certain extent, the child even transfigures himself into someone else. In the first shot of Les amants, the emphasis of Garrel’s camera is obviously not the staircase itself, which represents the passage of “ascendance,” but rather a group of faceless, impassionate, and vampire-like youngsters who are slowly walking up the stairs to the upper room to take opium and discuss revolutionary politics. That is why Garrel admitted that he personally preferred the “beautifully black” anarchist flag to the rather stereotypical and optimistic red communist color.

The “upper room” has a long-standing Christian implication of the last supper among the twelve apostles before Christ’s crucifixion. It was this last meal

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830 James S. Williams, “Performing the Revolution,” 284.
831 Garrel and Lescure, 40.
832 Deleuze, Cinema 2, 198.
833 Ibid., 199.
834 Ehrenstein, 79.
that memorialized the whole divine project of Jesus Christ who descended to the world as a humble man. Yet the notion of “holy communion” among the French youngsters is indeed a strongly profane ritual. In the “sacramental” gathering among the young revolutionaries, the holy bread and blood is substituted by opium and LSD, while there is a sample of a human skull on the table with their opium, representing a defiant gesture toward the “holy altar” of their worship. In this respect, the supposedly “religious sacredness” of the ritualistic ceremony is radically profaned, if not “poisoned,” by Garrel’s atheistic cinematic rendering. If there is an escape route out of this human solitude and trauma experienced by the lost generation of 1968, it can only be in the mundane and secular way they heal this psychic wound—with drugs and communal living. Badiou has suggested that Garrel’s use of drugs as “something quite different from an adjuvant, a dependency or a pleasure” was what he called “the dragged conception of existence.” Badiou added: “Drugs are a metaphysics: a metaphysics of the de-linking. It is what renders inactive—temporarily—any link, and artificially produces a truly unshackled enjoyment. One is ‘high as a kite,’ outside any connection.”

However, Garrel’s representation of the self-confined use of drugs and communal sharing among the young French artists as a way to stay outside of the French restorative order may not be able to “transcend” all the remnants of religious metaphysics. Without truly problematizing the notion of “transcendence” itself, this earthly escapism can only breed a new secular spirituality in overt individualism and materialism that falls under capitalist reappropriations and facilitates the restoration of the status quo. During one conversation, Antoine and a young artist talk about the structural homology between Christianity and militancy. According to Antoine, the owner of the apartment and the provider of free opium, the missions between a priest and a Maoist militant bear very little differences, whether it is reciting The Holy Bible or the Little Red Book, both of which preach the same universal truth. Yet Antoine does not explain what this “universality” is. Nor does he clarify the linkage

836 Ibid.
between Jesus and Mao in relation to the revolutionary believers. Instead, he seems to have a contradictory attitude toward the revolutionary masses that are intimately tied to these events. On the one hand, Antoine recognizes the sheer self-agency of the masses in that they may not need a universal handbook to teach their insurrections, nor do they need a universal prescription. On the other hand, Antoine laments that these kinds of “revolutionary missions” carried out by the masses are always doomed to failure, mainly because of the inherent disobedience or defiance of the masses against the general revolutionary principle and doctrine. Despite these ambivalent views, Antoine believes that it is still possible insofar as he is also willing to wait for a kind of “messianic moment” to reign upon the world again. However, he does not say whether this “redemptive moment” will eventually produce an absolutely cruel judgment or an excessive benevolence and forgiveness of the various revolutionary failures and ruin that happen repetitively in the secular world.

These two ambiguities of Antoine’s—revolution and redemption—ultimately catalyze his political resignation as evinced in Les amants. Fearing the increasing police interventions after May ’68 and the objective restraints posed by the pessimistic post-1968 political climate, Antoine is the first to decide to leave France for Morocco (which was once a French protectorate) to commence a new life there. As a result, the bohemian commune residing in his apartment is forced to disintegrate and drift apart. What is symptomatic about Antoine’s retreat is not simply a kind of personal resignation from his own revolutionary Cause, but even more problematic is that he “irresponsibly” resigns and gives up his role (his “earthly duty”?) as a sheltering host and a provider of free drugs to the young dystopian artists. His decision to leave thereby compels the group to return to the sheer cruelty and harshness of reality, especially considering that French society had become increasingly repressive in 1969.

As one critic has suggested, “this decision marks the end of this community, contributes to the dispersion of its members, like the bursting of an
ecosystem of one planet imploding by itself.”

The sustaining communitarian lifestyle after 1968, even if it was in the most narcissistic sense, was pronounced dead. Traumatically shocked, one of the young artists went mad after learning of Antoine’s cruel decision to leave. The cruelty of his leaving is not simply because he personally regressed back to the predominant order (in fact, revolutionary renegacy became quite a social norm in the 1970s); rather, the true cruelty of his retreat is his abandonment of his original role of offering a temporary shelter to a number of defeated revolutionaries and downcast artists. This retreat thus murdered the revolutionary dream for the already traumatized young revolutionaries for a second time. Their alternative way of living had to cease once again. In this respect, the predominating social order was doubly reinforced. There was simply no way out except for a necessary descent to the old hierarchy.

In the 1960s and 1970s, especially in terms of the political avant-garde, Garrel was not alone in invoking Christ to combat the repressive forces of an increasingly rearmed state machinery. There was a renewed interest in Christianity in Western cultures, even after the traditional customs gradually lost their stronghold. Inspired by the representations of Christ with long hair, “Jesus” became a symbol of a modern-day hippie rebelling against authority and the older generation. In this sense, Garrel seemed to be in synch with most of his rebellious peers. However, at the same time, Garrel also acknowledged the very necessity of ascetic purity in the realm of artistic revolution. Garrel commented: “It is difficult to push someone in art. It is like pushing someone in the church of Saint Paul: one is obliged to adopt a certain asceticism.”

In this same vein, the current of “New Philosophy” in French intelligentsia around the mid-1970s, especially the writings of Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, who were also former Maoist members of the Gauche prolétarianne (Proletarian Left – GP) during ’68, precisely echoed the importance of the ascetic

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838 Pierre Clémenti, the main actor in many of Garrel’s works, said: “When I met Philippe, … [I] told him: ‘Let’s do a film about the return of Christ.’ He made The Virgin’s Bed, which is definitely a film about death. If Jesus returned, he would be helpless before our world.” See Garrel and Lescure, 96.

and spiritual approach in the landscape of revolutionary struggles. What they advocated in the 1970s was a kind of “angelic revolt” that merged “Christian ideas,” “Lacanianism,” and “Maoism” in response to the various political disillusionments that resurfaced in the few years after May ’68. Compared to their fellow New Philosophers, such as André Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Lévy, Lardreau and Jambet’s idea of “revolutionary angelism” was probably the most radical and uncompromising one that still deserves some merit in today’s context of rigid political and moral binarism. Obviously, this form of spiritual politics risked challenges from all sides, particularly considering their notion of an “Angel” was ontologically lacking and even largely imaginary in nature. Despite drawing strong criticisms, Badiou recalled: “[U]nlke so many of their old comrades who infamously lent their hand, Lardreau and Jambet refuse to falsify the force and the novelty of the Cultural Revolution, May ’68, the team of ‘Maoists from La Cause du peuple,’ and do not deal in their oblivion.”

What is considered persistently problematic in their writing is that Lardreau and Jambet seem to strictly oppose two kinds of revolutionary logic—“ideological revolt” and “cultural revolution,” according to their own terminology. Under their rather eclectic division, the Angel always aligns with the “cultural revolution,” while mastery and dominations necessarily come from the “ideological revolt.” In their view, the failure of proletarian struggles had much to do with the regressive mass obedience to the logic of mastery. For example, they claimed that the French Maoists themselves could not help falling back to the hands of the ideological Master because as a revolt, they were somewhat entrapped by the seizure of political power. Regarding the “cultural revolution,” Lardreau claimed that it could somehow bypass the very tyranny of

841 For instance, Alain Badiou criticized that “[w]hat Lardreau and Jambet, as decided Linbiaoists, call ‘cultural revolution’ is the absolute and imaginary irruption of the outside-world, the definitive eradication of egoism … it means ‘breaking the history of the world into two.’ It is the ideologism of the remaking of oneself, fascist in its sectarian ambition of absolute purity, of absolute simplicity, of starting anew from scratch.” See Ibid., 213.
842 Lardreau wrote: “In the end, Rebellion turns back entirely into Obedience. The sorry end to which monasticism leads the Rebel is such that, kneeling to his own bloodless shade, he recites the merits of submission. (As for the Rebel himself, one must imagine that he has already set out again elsewhere, and that, leaving this history through which he passed in all his fury, he has returned to his own history, where he does not cease to foment cultural revolution.)” See Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, *L’Ange: Pour une cynégétique du semblant* [The Angel: For a Hunting of Semblance] (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1976), 134.
mastery precisely because it had “no material base” other than sheer oppression at its core.  

The Angel, as defined by Lardreau and Jambet, is neither a divine symbol nor an icon. Rather, it is a rigorously intangible principle of rebellion. In other words, it is a “necessary illusion,” modeled on the Maoist notion of the “mass-line” held out to the intellectuals in crisis leaning toward “another world.” Jambet wrote: “Here, it is only the requirement that intellectuals should not delude themselves on the question of ethics. The masses don’t need the Angel, for what they already are this Angel. The Angel is a necessary illusion, whose purpose is to point out to those who speak rebellion’s conditions of possibility.”  

In their mindset, the Angel is necessarily ahistorical because it does not correspond to a single history. Lardreau wrote: “Lin Piao is not our real subject here … our subject is not China, nor Mao, nor even the Great Cultural Revolution, but of how all of these appeared to us as a new gospel, as an annunciation of the Angel.”  

Lardreau and Jambet also highlighted the proximity between the angelic “cultural revolution” and the Hegelian notion of the “beautiful soul”: “The soul of the cultural revolution is the ‘beautiful soul’ of Hegel as described by Lacan; it assumes what it knows to be madness in the eyes of this world, for it knows that this madness is the wisdom of the other world, and that it really [is] this world that is mad.” Elsewhere, Lardreau wrote that “[t]he Angel of realization will be the will to bring every world back to the chaos that is its truth, to bring every community back to its essential dispersal, to dissolve every tie [lien], beginning with that tie by which a body is a body.”

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843 Ibid., 92.
844 Ibid., 79.
845 See Ibid., 83.
846 Ibid., 88. Lardreau wrote: “The typical hero of the Cultural Revolution is the ‘white-haired girl,’ who lives in the mountains, outside the laws of man, returning to nature, to animality, a beast among the beasts, fighting against the elements, standing up to wind and rain, to tigers and wolves—or to God, which ultimately amounts to the same time, for she finally passes for a white-haired goddess. Morality would like this spirit to become a human being again in the new society. But I do not like this ending.” See Ibid., 87–88.
847 Guy Lardreau, “The Problem of Great Politics in the Light of Obvious Deficient Modes of Subjectivation,” trans. Peter Hallward. Aneglaki 8, no. 2 (August 2003): 92. [italics in the original]. Jambet also concluded that, following the Pascalian idea, one must wager before it reaches its true liberating dimension of the Angel as such. It is not simply because the Angel is absent today; it was always there. But to wager is to keep sticking to the belief that there is still another present, another temporality possible. “To endure according to the terms of a series, even a unique one, to capture oneself in a historical series, even though eternal, is to wager, and to wager is nothing
Similar to the film philosophy of Garrel, Lardreau and Jambet were also greatly fascinated with the ascetic beauty of the Angel in their pursuit of genuine revolutionary passage. To Rebel for them was to refuse both sex and work: “We must do the exact opposite of what the discourse of liberation calls for. We must completely separate sex from rebellion.” Yet it was rather inappropriate to speculate that the Angel is purely a transcendental entity because the Angel is bestowed with a material body. However, this material body has existed since right before the very formation of the secular world, and the angelic body as such is just a body; it is indifferent to sex and seduction. Lardreau and Jambet added:

We must emphasize however that our Angel … is endowed with a body, the ethereal, luminous, spiritual body granted it by the early Church Fathers…. The Angel is not zero sex, nor an indefinite number of sexes…. If the old debate over the sex of the Angel was never resolved, it was because it was irrelevant; we cannot say either the Angel has or does not have a sex. Sex has nothing to do with the Angel. The two philosophers also wrote: “The Angel must arrive. And for him to arrive, invisible as he is, he has to have been visible in his works, he has to have announced in history, and history must have, not two objects of desire … but two desires…. But the Angel is anonymous or polynonymous. We pronounce it only through negative metaphors.”

Ironically, the idea that the Angel is indifferent to the seductive lure of power is perhaps just hypothetical. Like the rest of the New Philosophers who oscillated between both the Right and the Left, Lardreau and Jambet, nonetheless, flirted with the existing power of the French neoliberalist state and gradually rejected the leftist tendencies in the mid-1970s. As Jambet said in 1976: “The Angel is beyond love and hate, but we are not the Angel…. Now I don’t mind giving mind a speech to the Right.”

more than to link oneself up to one history against the other, says the rebel, against nothing, says the master.” See Lardreau and Jambet, 57–58.

848 Ibid., 34.
849 Ibid., 36.
850 Ibid.
851 Julian Bourg, From Revolution to Ethics, 276–288.
sheer “spiritual” dimension of the New Philosophy inevitably falls back and
descends to the hands of the state operation and its conservative ideology. The
very “spiritual warfare” wagered by Lardreau and Jambet may have ultimately
served as a guardian angel to safeguard the political status quo. In the same
vein, as Alberto Toscano summarized, the sheer epistemological deadlock of
“spiritual politics” precisely lies in the fact that Lardreau and Jambet
idiosyncratically combined “purity of principle and impurity of strategy.”

With regard to Les Amants, however, I argue that the beautiful soul of the
Angel may have already arrived. This arrival may have actually come in the very
first shot of the film—the establishing shot of an empty staircase, which signifies
a kind of “generic transcendence.” This shot is perhaps not so much about the
desacralization of transcendence by a group of “impassionate” and “unnamed”
young artists. Instead, the shot of the staircase is probably far more radical than
one assumes. As Delorme has suggested, the “staircase” in Les amants is an “ideal
space of passage between different worlds.” This staircase is not only radically
negative but also is an enabling space and passage to invite a further
“transcendence” and “arrival” of the coming individuals. The true significance of
the empty staircase here is that not only does it help link the upper opium room
and the various young revolutionaries that follow, but also its true profundity is
that the presence of the staircase indicates its lack of self-evidence in fully
embodying the notion of “angelic transcendence.” Although one may find that the
political passion typical of the 1960s has long been exhausted today, one can still
find many similar reminders in today’s capitalist culture that designate a good
passage in which to keep faithfully reactivating those unrealized revolutionary
potentials of the world in the sixties beyond the various ideological and moral
boundaries carefully established by the predominant global order.

\[^{853}\text{However, Roger and Compagnon argued that their shift to the right was rather logical for the fact that they have always been defended by theology: the angel sits on the right-hand side of the dominical throne, on the right hand of God. See Philippe Roger and Antoine Compagnon, “An Ange passé,” [An Angel Past]. Tel Quel 67 (Fall 1976): 78.}\]
\[^{855}\text{Delorme, “Les justes (68 et après),” 13.}\]
CONCLUSION
FROM “CHINESE CENTURY” TO “CHINESE REINSCRIPTION” AND BACK

Concerning the so-called “Chinese century” today, there are basically two types of positive views prominently circulating in the West. For opportunistic economists, China’s rapidly growing economy, following a few decades of post-revolutionary reform, offers a new synergy in consumption and labor markets. Many Western political economists believe that the persistent economic ascent of China can exactly help rejuvenate global capitalism, which has already recorded a significant decline particularly after the unexpected happenings of the worldwide financial tsunami in 2008. On the other hand, a lot of social commentators are also convinced that contemporary China has eventually overcome and exorcised its own trauma after a centennial of colonial humiliations. The “rise of China” also means that China is now capable of catching up with its Western capitalist counterparts and developing its own brand of “cultural soft power” (e.g., the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics and global Confucianization) on the world stage. The Chinese century is now perceived as the ideal opportunity to advance a new type of East-West “collaborative” world order.

However, this thesis has shown that both of the aforementioned Western perceptions of China do not truly acknowledge Chinese revolutionary potentials. These perceptions, which are predominantly a capitalist self-refashioning procedure, have long been implicated ever since the aftermath of French May ’68. The seemingly polite gesture to respectfully recognize the economical and cultural contributions of China in the global economy today precisely renders both genuine and antagonistic Chinese characters invisible and obsolete. As this thesis has demonstrated, this kind of Western recognition of “Chinese contributions” is indeed highly devoid of the political singularity of the latter. As the so-called “contributions” are mainly measured in capitalistic terms, the increasing Chinese involvement on the world stage will not unsettle, but paradoxically will reassert, the symbolic predominance of the existing Euro-American paradigm.
Interestingly, such a generic dimension of “China” can also be perceived as a radical theoretical method to help problematize the Eurocentric subject. Recently, there has been an intellectual trend in American literary circles to “empty” the contents of “China” as a provocative response to the long-standing supremacy of Western knowledge. “Sinography,” which was originally referred to as a special medical apparatus that radiographs hidden sinuses and inner swellings of the human body, is now borrowed with new poetic license in cross-cultural literary analysis. As a rather loose theoretical umbrella, sinography here is borrowed by Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao as a “profound” and “liberating” metaphor for contemporary intervention in the field of Chinese studies. The sinographical usage of a generic “China” seeks to achieve two goals—a radical liberation from both Eurocentric and Sinocentric tendencies. Hayot and his colleagues recently claimed that “sinography would be to sinology (a debated discipline in its own right) as historiography is to history. A reflection on the conditions, assumptions, and logic of a set of disciplinary and cultural practices.” Since Western theory always needs a certain symbolic ground to help justify its own universality, the appropriation of an “emptied China,” thanks to its voided presence, may in turn render the same verification gesture rather impossible.

However, one may curiously ask: is “China” totally equivalent to this “use” of China itself in sinography? Even if “China” is a continuous “thinking process,” it also implies that there are always some epistemological elements, such as the “use” itself, being outside of this “Chinese signifier.” Moreover, it tends to give the impression that the use of “China,” rather than China itself, 856 Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao, “Introduction,” in Sinographies: Writing China, eds. Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), vii. 857 Insofar as this “China” precisely embodies the sheer blind spot inhered in this process of epistemological reflection, Western theorization thus can never fully reach its true universal destination. Through the reinscription of “China” in the East-West comparative paradigm, the verification of universality thereby becomes an endless query of this Western presumption of symbolic verification itself. So Hayot and colleagues wrote: “Sinographies acknowledges the fact that China is written. It attends, however, not to the end result but to the writing process, and to the ways in which that process (style, trope, plot, figure, vocabulary, pidgin, example) does not simply reflect thought but is the stuff of thought itself. ‘China’ is not something one thinks about but something one thinks through; it is a provocation; it realizes itself variously as subject, process, and end of articulate thinking.” Ibid., xi. [my emphasis added]
becomes metaphysically self-evident. In fact, upon closer inspection, this radical method of sinography is in fact more approximated to a poststructuralist derivative than to a truly groundbreaking insight. Already in the 1970s, there were indeed quite a few radical intellectuals in Western Europe who started using the open signifier “China” (e.g., Derrida and Viénet) as a profound agent for catalyzing liberations from the Eurocentric and Sinocentric predicaments. This thesis has discussed all these “Chinese detours” at great length.

Even so, according to Daniel Vukovich, there is an important and lingering question about the structural homology between political economy and intellectual circulation. As this critic suggested, the concurrent rekindling of Western interest in “Chinese knowledge” as new intellectual productions has much to do with the capitalist ideology of China’s economic rise. The idea that the Orient can help liberate Western knowledge is nonetheless an ideological myth, which aligns perfectly with the capitalist mindset of free-market economy at its very fantasmatic core.858 Without addressing this fundamental question, the liberating potential of sinography can easily become one of the new capitalist tools insofar as the increasing intellectual circulation of China’s discourses in the predominant academic field and the Western opportunistic, economical captures of rising China always go hand in hand.

But are all forms of the Western use of “China” always doomed to fail? Not at all. This thesis was precisely designated to continuously reactivate the unfinished dialectical exchanges between the two seemingly incommensurable aspects of cultural productions and intellectual labors that emerged in the world sixties. At first glance, my subject matter, which revisited the legacies of May ’68 and their Maoist connections today, seems to be both a bit “untimely” and “cumbersome.” However, these two discoveries can also be interpreted as the major strength of this dissertation. By reinscribing the heavily forsaken Sino-French cultural and intellectual nexus of the 1960s, this work aimed at “cooling down” the potential overheating of “Chinese fascinations” in the contemporary

West in order to prevent the revolutionary potentials of “China” from being symbolically exhausted and foreclosed. On the other hand, the recurring digressive approach to my writing in this thesis was also strategically employed as a radically alternative “method” in response to the various intellectual innovations of ’68 so as to be able to keep rethinking the different possibilities of cultural resistance within the predominant global capitalist system today against all odds.


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