

***La Chinoise* and Aesthetic Dissensuality¹**

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abstract

Jean Luc-Godard and Jacques Ranciere are two of the most important intellectuals of their time— the first is a filmmaker whose films are considered to be some of the best French Cinema has produced, the latter is a philosopher whose works continue to immensely influence the intellectual current of the world. While it can be said that their lives did not intersect, their respective oeuvres are not totally different from each other, in fact, Ranciere in his works on Cinema has continuously referenced the films of Godard in explaining his theoretical concepts, and Godard for his part, although he never mentioned any awareness of it, seemingly molds his aesthetics after Ranciere's views on art. Keeping this in mind, this paper will endeavor to present a concrete link between the works of these two sui-generis thinkers; in particular, the researcher will attempt to read one of Godard's most little known films, *La Chinoise*, using one of Ranciere's most famous theoretical concepts: dissensus. *Dissensus* is the necessary break/gap in the sensible order and could be seen in works of art. Hence, *dissensus* is primarily a concept that operates in the aesthetic order, a tick of the aesthetic regime—the researcher wishes to uncover the *dissensuality/jies* in Godard's *La Chinoise*.

keywords:

Ranciere, Dissensus, Aesthetic Order, Godard, Partition of the Sensible

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Guillaume: “Tenderness”
 Veronique: “A bit of despair”
 —from *La Chinoise* a film by Jean-Luc Godard

I. A Choice of Film and Theory

Admittedly, I am not a film critic, someone whose dreams consist of shifting camera shots, the crisp sound of rolling film, Buñuel sitting in a chair with Lacan hovering behind him; someone who has memorized the lines of Toshiro Mifune in Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* or the lyrical dialogues between the characters in Kiarostami’s films. If you ask him a thing or two about a particular auteur or film, he would reply readily, almost by rote, words that are too foreign and unfamiliar even if they were enunciated in your own language: French New Wave, Italian Realist Cinema, American Noir. I am not a film critic, I am but a casual fan who knows only the basics of film.

But as it were, my choice of Godard and his film *La Chinoise* as my object of study is not a mere coincidence, a product of naiveté or even ignorance, if you will—known for introducing new techniques into the art of filmmaking, Godard’s name has been a fixture in international film festivals and theoretical critiques—*La Chinoise* (translation: The Chinese), his little known film produced during his early days as a filmmaker is about, among a lot of things, a band of Maoist ideologues converging in an apartment at the heart of Paris, conducting discussion groups and laying out plans on how they could propagate their ideas, this at a time when the leading theoretical line of the revolutionary party, PCF, was Marxism-Leninism (in alliance with the Soviet Union which Chairman Mao considered to be revisionist), this highlights one interesting thing in the dynamics of the proletarian struggle in France: For Maoists in Paris in the mid to late 1960’s, the enemy was not so much capitalism and its repressive logic as the Marxist Leninist Party whose logic of repression, it seems, was no different than that of capitalism. *La Chinoise* may be Godard’s most personal and political film.

Another admission, as someone who considers himself part of the left, or at least, as someone who thinks in a dialectical

manner, I have my own biases and these biases, which in this case I would like to call my *politics*, would necessarily play out in every decision I make—part of it, of course, is the choice of subject for my study. Hence, this paper.

In this critique, I will treat the film as a text and utilize multiple theoretical concepts appropriated from several theoreticians in reading it, I will use symptomatic reading, the proposed mode of textual interpretation by Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey, and attempt to fuse it with Jacques Ranciere's *dissensus*.² The first method (symptomatic reading), was used by Althusser in reading the works of Karl Marx, which Pierre Macherey further developed to make it a more viable and potent mode of understanding texts—symptomatic reading is the application of psychoanalysis in textual interpretation, that is, you must fundamentally assume that the text has an unconscious which you as a critic have to expose and uncover; the latter concept (*dissensus*) is a discursive concept that was first introduced by Ranciere in his book *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, I would like to read this concept as an appropriation and reformulation of Althusser's *epistemological break* the only difference is that the Althusserian break, (another term for the epistemological break), refers to the dialectical shift from one particular trajectory of thinking into another while *dissensus* is the necessary break/gap in the sensible order and could be seen in works of art.³ Hence, *dissensus* is primarily a concept that operates in the aesthetic order, a tick of the aesthetic regime. This act of theorizing *dissensus* or *aesthetic dissensus* is in keeping with Ranciere's project of explaining the logic of the sensible order of both *politics* or *police order*

² Ranciere explains *dissensus* as “a conflict between sense and sense” that is, he treats it as a gap in the sensible order—a necessary gap that resists conceptual determination: “Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or ‘bodies’ This is the way in which *dissensus* can be said to reside at the heart of politics, since at the bottom the latter itself consists in an activity that redraws the frame within which common objects are determined.” Jacques Ranciere, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010) 139.

³ The best example of this epistemological break would be Althusser's own study on the works of Karl Marx, he divided the oeuvre of Marx into two parts that of the young Marx and the older Marx. The young Marx's works are relatively more metaphysical and idealist, (the Hegelian Marx) and the older Marx's works are characterized by heavy emphasis on historical-materialism (the Feuerbachian Marx).

and the *aesthetic regime of art*; in a book published much earlier entitled *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Ranciere introduced his most well-known concept in his intervention into the loci of politics and artistic production: *le partage du sensible* translated as the *distribution of the sensible* or *the partition of the sensible* which is understood as the operative logic of the sensible order, the sensible being another loose appropriation of an Althusserian concept, *ideology*, the only difference is the absence of the body in the Althusserian version while in the Rancierian counterpart, the body takes the central role: the *sensible* is what is seen, or felt by the body vis-a-vis ideology which is invisible but always already present, residing in the unconscious (both concepts interpellates the onlookers as subject)⁴. For Ranciere, politics and aesthetics are effective conduits in the propagation of the sensible/ideology but like a Deleuzian machine, these conduits are prone to breakage which results to the cessation of the partition/distribution of the sensible and it has to be mentioned that this breakage of the conduit/machine is not isolated as it happens often and is indeed one of the primary characteristics of the modern regime of art and the police order.

II. The Break

This part of the essay is titled *The Break* as indeed, the concept of “the break” recurs multiple times in the film. Godard’s *La Chinoise* came out in 1967, one year before the now famous student revolt in France, a Marxist uprising of factory workers and petty-bourgeoisie that was led by students and intellectuals based in different universities, its eventual failure prompted immediate theoretical intervention and explanation from various philosophers and is still being discussed until now, Alain Badiou, one of the leading French intellectuals mentions in one of his recent books, *The Communist Hypothesis*, that in spite of almost half a century after the student revolt, *we are still contemporaries of 1968*⁵. Meaning, we can still feel the repercussions of the events that happened then. The

⁴ I have always maintained, in my reading of Ranciere, that although he has long departed from Structural Marxism, whose head figure was Louis Althusser, because of its “rigidities” (Ranciere has even written a book about it entitled “*Althusser’s Lesson*”), he still remains an Althusserian, albeit unconsciously the evidence is his appropriation of Althusserian concepts, and how, at times, he employs Althusserian methods of interpretation.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010), 41.

year is an important historical juncture in the development of the intellectual tradition not only in France but the world as a whole; some of the leading theories today were directly or indirectly products of the 1968 student revolt in France, Post-structuralism, Postmodernism even Neo-Marxism. Here is Terry Eagleton in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*: “Post-structuralism was a product of the blend of euphoria and disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe, which was 1968.”⁶ *La Chinoise*, in more ways than one, anticipated this historical moment, this *break* that influenced and continues to influence past and future historical moments.

Additionally, and this is on an auteurial level, *La Chinoise* is generally considered to be the film that signified the epistemological break in Godard’s artistic practice. Godard started his career as a film critic but was quickly dissatisfied with the type of films produced by the French filmmakers of his time, in fact he viewed these films as generally “bourgeois.” A reader of Marxist Philosophy, Godard’s first films until *La Chinoise* were critiques of capitalist excesses and the social order that prevails in capitalist societies, his films are considered political. These films that we are talking about were produced during his *ideological* phase, but after *La Chinoise* and not incidentally, after the 1968 student revolt in France, his films took a paradigmatic turn, his films became more existential and metaphysical, although his films did not lose their politics entirely, and to lose one’s politics is impossible anyway. Interestingly, there would be occasions in his latter films when, just like the intellectuals of his time, he would look at the events that occurred in France in 1968 with a “doomed sense of nostalgia,” an example is in the film *In Praise of Love* which was released in 2001, the narrator, a man, says “I was born three years before 1968” meaning, he does not have any memories of the events that transpired in 1968 but he, recognizes their importance – and we could even say that he recalls those memories that he never had in the first place.⁷

These *breaks* mentioned earlier, of course, are important in analyzing the *breaks*, or the *aesthetic dissensualities*, in the film, as these *breaks* that constitute the milieu around which the film was formed are themselves important in shaping the film. In the beginning of

⁶Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*(Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).

⁷ Jean-Luc Godard, *In Praise of Love*. Blu-Ray, 2001.

the paper, I expressed my intent to read *La Chinoise* in terms of dissensus, that is, I will utilize symptomatic reading in order to see the *aesthetic dissensuality* in the film, how *sense* and *sense* are broken. The main reason why I decided to use Ranciere's *dissensus* in analyzing the film is this— as necessarily a product of the modern regime of art, the film (and all films for that matter) like all forms of art produced within this specific temporal and theoretical locus, contain within itself a kernel of *dissensuality* that we can see through symptomatic reading but more than that, *La Chinoise* as a an aesthetic statement and a film conscious of its political role, and for a work of art which has a defined ideological and political stance, to read it in terms of *dissensus* would be a type of a paradox—or at least some would believe that it is impossible. In the succeeding part of this essay, I will attempt to show the effectuality of a Rancierian critique on *La Chinoise*.

III. Aesthetic Dissensuality

This is how the film begins, we hear the voice of a man muttering these words to himself: “*The French working class won't politically unite nor go to barricades just for a 12% rise in wages. In the foreseeable future there will be no capitalist crisis great enough for the workers to fight for their vital interests.*”⁸ The man, then, is revealed to be very young, perhaps in his teenage years or in his early twenties. In a rather disturbed manner, he is pacing back and forth, while holding a pen and a book, he appears to be memorizing certain passages from the book which he is holding, suddenly as if jolted by an invisible force, he decides to close the book and we hear a silent thud. He then goes in inside an apartment building. His voice fades out. The importance of the scene is not lost to us—here, the apartment is shown, this is the group's point of convergence, meaning, it is the most important locus/space in the film as this is where meetings and discussion groups occur, this is where the exchanges between characters happen and hence, it is the site of most of the *break* or the *dissensualities*.

After the first scene, the second scene is an equally profound and important one: Guillaume and Veronique, two of the main characters, talking with each other, “*what is a word?*” Veronique asks, to which Guillaume replies, “*a word is what is left unsaid*” their

⁸ Jean-Luc Godard, *La Chinoise*. Blu-Ray, 1967.

faces are not shown. We only see their hands, doing gestures, moving toward and away from each other. I get a hint of psychoanalytical thought from this exchange, and that is not impossible as I believe Godard and Lacan moved pretty much within the same social circles, and if not, they most probably knew each other and were familiar with each other's works. Moving on, we can glean from the exchange that the word, as a Alain Vanier, a Lacanian theoretician said, is the murder of the thing, and hence, it is necessary for the thing to vanish in order for the word to exist (the word displaces the thing)—and hence, the word must be left unsaid to preserve the things existence. At the end of their talk, they said in unison “*we are the words of others*” which, as Maoist ideologues, means that they represent the oppressed classes, that they speak for them—and which is also one of the earliest manifestations of *dissensuality* in the film as *dissensus* is the blurring and erasure of distinctions, hence to claim to be the sole/totalizing voice that represents all the voices, is that rift that we are looking for between *sense* and *sense*.

Moving on, another important scene in the film is when Guillaume, sitting in front of a camera, a lit cigarette in hand, narrates the story of how young Chinese students protested in Moscow during the time of Stalin, and one particular student had bandage wrapped around his face, his appearance attracted the attention of the photographers and the media people. As the student was denouncing Russian revisionism, all eyes were on him. The student removed the bandage, and the people expected to see a mutilated or at least a cut face, but the face did not have even a single scratch. The photographers, feeling duped, were obviously disappointed. But these photographers, Guillaume says, had not understood that way they just saw was “real theater” or the theater of the real. That what happened was both an artistic performance that is replete with symbolisms and an anticipation of a future historical moment, a moment when the cuts would be real and bloody, an act of distributing the sensible. The photographers could not understand the significance of the act because they were looking at it not as an aesthetic event but as a real, an actual historical event—but if we look at it using Rancierian lense, we will see that the act, as already mentioned earlier, is not either an aesthetic statement or an anticipation of the things to come under a revisionist regime but a conflation of both that can only be understood by people who are looking for the necessary gap.

Moving on, I would like to point out another noticeable aspect of the film, the abundance of slogans, which is not odd considering that the film is about a group of Maoist communist ideologues and the use of slogans is part of the practice of communists. For example, at the beginning, one notices these words scribbled on the wall of the apartment, “*Il faut confronter les idées vagues avec des images claires*” which mean “we should replace vague ideas with clear images”. The slogans shown would change from time to time, in another scene we would notice that the slogan on the wall is “*Une minorité à la ligne révolutionnaire correcte n’est plus une minorité*” which means “a minority with the right ideas is not a minority.” The first slogan refers to Marxist praxiology, a combination of theory and its practical application—that the vague ideas (revolution, dictatorship of the proletariat, communism etc.) must be replaced with clear images, that the future historical event must be ushered and actualized. The first slogan is a call for revolutionary practice; the second one refers to the status enjoyed by Maoism in France at that time, it was considered a counterfeit idea as the leading mode of thought among radicals back then was Marxism-Leninism, both prompts mobilization, to clash with the leading grain of thought—both slogans promote resistance—of one sign system going against and trying to displace another sign system resulting to a breakage, a rift. This has been present all throughout the film.

But dissensuality, in the film, is more glaring in the exchanges between the characters, as this is where Godard’s logic of artistic resistance manifests more pronouncedly; and among the many dialogues and exchanges between the characters this is for me the most profound scene in the movie: Guillaume and Veronique sitting at a round table, facing each other, Guillaume is reading words from a book, a novel perhaps, aloud and Veronique just listening intently. Guillaume now pauses and pours down tea into his cup, Veronique now starts to leaf through the pages of a book that has been laying on the table the whole time, Guillaume takes a sip from the cup, and out of nowhere says, “I want to be blind” Veronique asks “why?” Guillaume answers nonchalantly, “To speak to each other better; we would listen carefully” – and what he meant is not lost to us, there is politics even in normal conversations, not the politics that we know of, but politics as in the governing rules of an idea or a thought, the logic that makes them tick so to speak—that sometimes the sight gets in the way of

the message, and hence in order to understand the message fully, we must be blind, we must lose sight, somehow what is understood is not what is meant. Then Guillaume proposed a game, something like word association, one mentions a word or a phrase, the other would answer with the first word or phrase that comes into her mind. Here are the exchanges: Guillaume: On the river bank, Veronique: Green and blue; Guillaume: Tenderness, Veronique: A bit of despair; Guillaume: After tomorrow, Veronique: Maybe; Guillaume: Literary theory, Veronique a film by Nicholas—the conversation goes on until the moment when Guillaume, with an intent voice, said to Veronique, “you know I love you.” What we have just seen is the creation of a rupture, a gap in the symbolic order, *aesthetic dissensuality*—the failure of the distribution of the sensible. The words and phrases do not match on a literal level, the chain of signification gets broken. And if the film is political, does this break from effecting a distribution of the sensible, this break from the supposed ideological function of the film, makes it any less political? I think not. I think that this rupture although halts the ideologizing function, does something on the political level, that is, it presents other possibilities, other facets of politics—that being political could also mean the seeming absence of politics. In the end, the break/gap was sutured when Guillaume pronounced his love for Veronique—they were transported back to the plane of understanding, of coherence.

With all these said, I think that it is not without any irony that the movie ends with a failed assassination attempt, Veronique killing the wrong guy and their group getting disbanded. It is a fitting end to a film that is built on the logic of *aesthetic dissensuality*.

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