

# BETWEEN MARXISM AND POSTMOD- ERNISM:

'Cultural Revolution' and the Sino-Soviet Split as Entertainment in Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967)

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## 1. Introduction

### Film/Intellectual History/Popular Geopolitics

Jean-Luc Godard's much debated, often maligned and occasionally revered *La Chinoise* (1967) functions – at least in retrospect – as a sublime reflection on the history of political theory and the history of art – to say nothing of the history of so called 'political art'. Indeed, few works in the history of cinema can be said to have reflected so clearly the shifting intellectual trends of the time as well as the stylistic 'revolution' which was simultaneously emerging through various new experimental forms of visual representation (Conceptualism, Pop Art, *Nouveau réalisme*, etc).

The film revolves around a handful of central characters (Veronique, Guillaume, Yvonne, Henri, Kirilov, and Omar) who make up the members of a group of radicalised students under the influence of the Maoist politics increasingly gaining ground at the suburban University of Nanterre. They spend the summer in a Paris apartment owned by Veronique's parents where they quote from Chairman Mao's Little Red Book and give each other lectures on Marxism-Leninism whilst drinking Pepsi Cola, painting, doing aerobics, and playing with toy guns. The film's climax sees the group plan to assassinate the Soviet Minister of Culture on a scheduled visit to Paris that summer.

This article seeks to draw on the idea of films as cultural artefacts which can represent 'political theory', and which can also serve as the reflection of a particular historical 'moment' (Shapiro, 2020) whilst, at the same time, conceptualising a 'popular geopolitics' (Dodds, 2007) for a mass audience. It will be suggested that Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film, *La Chinoise*, compellingly (if comically) captures the evolution of Marxist theory in the West as well as its ostensible practice in the East through its fascination with, and treatment of, the 'Cultural Revolution' (1966–1976) in Maoist China and through its provocative posing of grand theoretical questions (on utopia, on violence, on human agency) through radical cinematic techniques involving a subversive use of language, colour, and sound.

Of course, as with most early (pre-1968) Godard films, many have commented on the film and its significant cultural influence. Subsequent biographers of the director have confusingly viewed the film as both 'unorthodox' (MacCabe, 2003, p. 197) and "alarmingly naïve" (Dixon, 1997, p. 81), acknowledging how it both embraced the absurd and farcical in its treatment of the characters of the young students (Dixon, 1997; Morrey, 2005) but also – along with *Week-end* (1967) – simultaneously marked "a radical ideological

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turn" (Brody, p. 301) for the director. The film has also been recognised for its perceived 'prophecy' of the events to come the following year (Dixon, 1997; Brody, 2008) in May 1968.

Godard's attitude at the time can be discerned from the press release for the film in which the director bombastically proclaimed:

Fifty years after the October Revolution, the American industry rules cinema the world over. There is nothing much to add to this statement of fact. Except that on our own modest level we too should provoke two or three Vietnams in the bosom of the vast Hollywood-Cinecittà-Mosfilm-Pinewood-etc. empire, and, both economically and aesthetically, struggling on two fronts as it were, create cinemas which are national, free, brotherly, comradely, and bonded in friendship. (Milne, 1986, p. 243)

This statement is particularly revealing as it contains many of the essential themes which seemed to fascinate Godard during this period. Firstly, the declared interest in 'revolution' – specifically with reference to the 'Cultural Revolution' (1966 – 1976) in the People's Republic of China (PRC) – which was garnering considerable influence among Western intellectuals and students at the time. Secondly, the spectre of violence which ultimately hovers over all debates of this kind and which was particularly prescient at the time with the ongoing war in Vietnam and, in retrospect, with both the student riots of May 1968 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in the same year. Certainly, in retrospect, the film seemed rather prophetic, especially with respect to the events of May '68, which Godard's film would appear to have predicted with some accuracy. Indeed, in many ways, *La Chinoise* serves as a discussion of violence and the limits of revolutionary thought, especially when framed within the context of the developed world as Colin MacCabe (2003, p. 198) has already pointed out. Finally, the reference to the creation of "cinemas which are national, free, brotherly, comradely, and bonded in friendship" (Milne, p. 243) reminds us of the language of solidarity common to left-wing discourse at the time, as well as the type of description one may associate with subsequent developments in so-called 'postcolonial theory' and the spike in interest in the 'third world' which emerged in the late 1960s alongside the gradual process of decolonisation.

In retrospect at least, it seems fair to recognise that *La Chinoise* offers a prescient reflection on the contemporaneous development of events at the

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time. Moreover, in terms of the 'geopolitical imagination', the growing interest in the 'third world', as mentioned above, marked by intellectuals on the left in Paris in the wake of the colonial wars in Algeria, Vietnam and Cuba, is on clear display in the film's very title. Whilst the growing interest in China amongst French intellectuals at the time – represented by everyone from Jean-Paul Sartre to Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes – seems to have been extremely significant, put in the most simplistic terms, following the death of Stalin and the revelations about the repression under his command in 1956 as well as the events which saw the brutal crushing of the Hungarian uprising at the hand of the Soviet Union (USSR) (also in 1956), China seemed to offer new hope for 'revolution'. In retrospect, this, of course, rings completely naïve – given the brutal violence of the period – but the power and influence of Maoism on late 1960s French intellectual life should not be overlooked. Indeed, as Richard Wolin (2010) has pointed out:

within a brief span of time, nearly the entire Parisian intelligentsia became intoxicated with and fascinated by Maoism. Among writers, artists, and intellectuals, Maoism had become radical chic – the political fashion du jour. (p. 203)

Secondly, the film in many ways can be seen to represent the contemporaneous shifts in Marxist theory itself as it reflects debates taking place within orthodox Marxism at the time. The late 1960s marked a period of flux for Marxist theory as many other radical currents of thought (situationist, anarchist, Maoist, poststructuralist, etc.) were developing either alongside or *within* the Marxist tradition. The Western world was simultaneously witnessing the unbridled expansion of an urban consumer society (automobiles, supermarkets, fashion) and the violent excesses of the ongoing process of decolonisation (Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba). It was into this dynamic socio-political context that *La Chinoise* was released in the late summer of 1967.

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## 2. Postmodernism and the Crisis of Marxism

### 2.1. Postmodernism

That the origins of 'postmodernism' can be observed in the late 1960s or early-to-mid 1970s is a relatively common point of consensus shared by a range of scholars on the subject (Jameson, 1991, 1998; Anderson, 1998; Harvey, 1990; Callinicos, 1990; Connor, 1991; Butler, 2002). Yet the concept of 'postmodernism' is as problematic as it is ambiguous and potentially all-encompassing. By the 1990s (at the height of its popularity as a concept), the term was being used to describe new forms in everything from architecture to cinema and from philosophy to literature; yet, despite the plurality of meaning behind the term (indeed 'plurality' is central to almost all theorisations of the concept), there is considerable consensus around many of its central tenets.

Although the term has lost some of its intellectual potency in the current era, it is, as its prefix hints, generally understood to represent a reaction to, or complete rejection of, 'modernism' – the movement in philosophy and the arts which characterised many of the ground-breaking ideas and various avant-gardes of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a rejection of the latter, then, postmodernism accordingly embraces the ambiguous, questions 'truth', and is marked by a profound scepticism towards any concepts of universality, which it inevitably views as 'totalising' and ontologically flawed (for ideas about 'truth' and 'progress' inhabit so much of the modernist movement).

The concept of the 'postmodern' and many of its associated symptoms are generally understood to have evolved out of the work of French thinkers Jean-François Lyotard (1979/1984) and Jean Baudrillard (1983) – the latter taking considerable inspiration from the earlier work of Guy Debord (1967/2012) – in which an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1979) and a distrust of representing 'reality' were respectively developed. As a result, the postmodern is marked by an intense self-reflexivity, constantly conscious of its own inability to properly 'represent' anything at all. As Linda Hutcheon (2002) has put it:

In general terms, [postmodernism] takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining content. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said.... Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. (p.1)

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Such “self-contradictory” content and “commitment to duplicity” (ibid.) is clearly visible in *La Chinoise* through the film’s simultaneous promotion *and* critique of a radical politics – typified by the film’s remarkable train journey sequence in which Veronique (Anne Wiazemsky) and her lecturer (and real-life philosopher) Francis Jeanson discuss the problem of political violence. As the audience, we may oscillate between feeling sympathy for the characters – or at least recognising some sincerity in Godard’s choice of subject-matter – whilst, at the same time, subjecting them to complete ridicule as we watch them quote Marx whilst performing aerobics on the balcony. For *La Chinoise* is somehow Godard at his most revolutionary *and* farcical, as we are presented with discussions on class struggle and political terrorism all set to the soundtrack of a pop song about Chairman Mao and interspersed with images of comic strips and absurd pantomime set-pieces involving toy guns and cheap, multi-coloured sunglasses. These are the fundamental contradictions which make the film such an interesting object of analysis and which illustrate its undeniable embodiment of a postmodern philosophy, or, rather, *anti-philosophy*.

In addition to this (un)ambiguous ‘duplicity’, however, the postmodern is often understood to be most notable for its unprecedented merging of the formerly disparate fields of ‘culture’ and ‘economics’. Indeed, to quote Fredric Jameson’s (1991) crude formulation, postmodernism is the “cultural logic of late capitalism” which suffers from a ‘crisis in historicity’ (p. 25) – an inability to authentically represent the past – as well as “an allergy to depth” (Eagleton, 2004, p. 191), which plays (around) with the purely ‘superficial’ in an endless game of imitation or ‘pastiche’ (Jameson, 1991).

Visually, this aspect of the postmodern – a playful emphasis on the superficial appearance of things – is perhaps best captured by the emergence of both *nouveau réalisme* in France and by Pop Art in the US and elsewhere in the 1960s. Pop Art, in particular, has become synonymous with understandings of postmodernism – given its interest in imitation, the surface of things, and its complicity with consumer society – and this relationship has been convincingly sketched out (Harrison, 2001). Its overlap with the colourful composition of Godard’s films of this period (1965 – 1967), however, is beyond doubt. Indeed, it has been said that *La Chinoise* “makes revolution glamorous, a pop event” (Dixon, 1997, p. 83), for despite the film’s radical political content, *La Chinoise* ultimately embodies a pop-kitsch form more reminiscent of Lichtenstein than Lenin. In fact, interestingly, one Franco-Greek film critic (Katsahnias, 1990, p. 118, as cited in, Morrey, 2005, p. 55) once remarked that, in retrospect, the film should perhaps best be considered as “a comedy about the relationship between

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fashion and ideology". Here we are reminded of the curious interconnection between fashion and politics which also seems to capture in some way an aspect of the *folie* of 'the Sixties' and which was subsequently immortalised in Tom Wolfe's (1970) humorous coinage of the term 'radical chic'.

## 2.2. The Crisis of Marxism

Returning for a moment to the origins of postmodernism, however, and in particular to the political or ideological context of its conception, we can recognise that considerable critical consensus identifies postmodernism as having emerged out of, or in direct reaction to, Marxist theory, particularly the tradition of so-called 'Western Marxism' (Anderson, 1979). As Terry Eagleton (2004) has so eloquently described:

The crisis of Marxism did not begin with the crumbling of the Berlin Wall. It could be felt at the very heart of the political radicalism of the late 60s and early 70s. Not only that, but it was to a large extent the driving force behind the cascade of provocative new ideas. When Lyotard rejected what he called grand narratives, he first used the term to mean, simply, Marxism. (p. 38)

Something akin to this ostensible paradox is what drives the interest of my research in general and in this paper in particular; that is, how to make sense of the counterintuitive observation that the 'postmodern' – with all its conservative implications which can still be felt today – could have emerged at the very same moment as the revolutionary spirit which typified the late 1960s in France and elsewhere.

Indeed, that postmodernism emerged out of a 'crisis of Marxism' is implicit, if not wholly explicit, in the work of several important theorists (Jameson, 1991, 1998; Anderson, 1998; Harvey, 1990; Callinicos, 1990; Norris, 1990; Connor, 1991, McRobbie, 1994), and it is from this point of departure that our discussion of Godard's *La Chinoise* stems. For the film was not only produced and released at the very moment of postmodernism's theorised conception, but focuses precisely on the decomposition of Marxist theory itself, thus serving as an excellent object through which to (re)conceptualise this historical 'moment' (Shapiro, 2020) and its visual representation.

It is interesting to note that, although some of Godard's films have been

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considered examples of a 'postmodern' cinema (Butler, 2012, p. 123; Morrey, 2005, p. 172 – 186; Jameson, 1998, p. 1), it is almost always the director's later work (post-1980?) which is regarded in such light and rarely, if ever, his earlier (pre-1968) work. The latter, instead, is usually viewed as somehow *modernist* in character, perhaps due to its association with the French New Wave and the politics of the *auteur*, something which Fredric Jameson (2007) has himself associated with modernism in his own writing on cinema. This is yet another reason then, if any more were needed, to revisit a film like *La Chinoise*, which almost seems to find itself *sandwiched* between the 'modern' and the 'postmodern', as it were, both in terms of its historicisation but also its content and form. That the film can then also be seen to reflect the evolution of art and ideas in its own content (discussions of Marxism, commentary of events in PRC) and form (colour, composition, and narrative structure) demands that the film be (re)examined further.

### **3. 1967: A 'Cultural Revolution' in China and within the 'European Left'?**

#### **3.1. 'Cultural Revolution' in the PRC**

The so-called 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' – now understood to be one of the most tragic and deadliest episodes in 20<sup>th</sup> century history – had begun in the PRC under the command of Chairman Mao in 1966 and although exact details of events were not always crystal clear outside the country, by the following year, the 'Cultural Revolution' was the talk of many the world over. Nowhere was it more of a talking point than on the Left Bank in Paris and on the suburban campus of the University of Nanterre. And, as Wolin (2010) has interestingly argued:

it seemed that the less information the students possessed concerning the People's Republic and the greater China's geographic and cultural remove from Europe, the more leeway they had to project their own utopian hopes and dreams. (p. 125)

This observation helps us to make sense of the phenomenon of 'Maoism' in parts of the developed world, where it was often perceived as something quite

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different from what it was in China, as Julia Lovell (2019) has also documented with considerable detail. Like the characters in Godard's film, then, the students and young radicals of the time were as much using their own imaginations as they were drawing on the facts of events in the PRC. 'Maoism' and the 'Cultural Revolution' became symbolic vessels into which they could pour their own abstract utopianism and disappointment with the USSR. Although the characters are seen listening to 'Radio Peking' throughout the film in an apartment filled with hundreds of copies of Chairman Mao's Little Red Book, and although the walls of the apartment are filled with images of the 'Great Helmsman' and newspaper cut-outs of reports concerning events in the PRC, the group's activities are clearly far removed from any reality of the Cultural Revolution in China.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that, according to Chinese historian, Yang Jisheng (2021), it was precisely in August 1967 – the exact moment in which *La Chinoise* was released in cinemas in France – that Mao "lost control" of the Cultural Revolution and this, in turn, led him "to abandon some of [its] staunchest supporters" (2021, p. xxi) as ongoing events began to take an unpredictable and unmanageable turn for the authorities in Beijing. So, by the time the film was to be viewed in France, and in other parts of Europe, Mao's own policies in the PRC were already moving in unexpected directions. What would the film's protagonists, who hurled accusations of 'revisionism' at anyone who dared question their own perceived 'Maoism', have made of this 'revision' from within Mao's government itself? The answer, of course, is that it does not matter because few see the characters in the film as sincere despite their declarations to the contrary – Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud): "sincerity is needed as well as violence!" Indeed, for Wolin (2010), the Maoist "intoxication" drifting through France at the time was as much a question of being 'fashionable' as anything deeply political, and Godard's *La Chinoise* was merely "an alternately whimsical and propagandistic attempt to fathom the wave of Sinophilia cresting in Paris that year" (p. 114).

Nevertheless, the shift in revolutionary rhetoric of the students did also reflect very real, ongoing transformations within domestic French politics at the time, as the French Communist Party (PCF) had started to appear increasingly hard-line and Stalinist in its approach following its refusal to criticise events in Hungary in 1956 and by following the Moscow line ever more closely regardless of evolving events. As Veronique says in the film, "it's the fault of the PCF, that's why we must seek our ideal thousands of kilometres away in Beijing" and this reflects considerable sentiment at the time. One prominent

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intellectual figure – perhaps along with Jean-Paul Sartre – who embodied this new conflict between orthodox Marxism-Leninism (as per Moscow) and its new 'revolutionary' formulation (in Beijing) was Louis Althusser, who is mentioned throughout *La Chinoise*. Althusser remained loyal to the PCF throughout this period but had some sympathies for Maoism (Wolin, 2010, p. 121). Indeed, Colin MacCabe (2003) has argued that "it is certainly difficult, if not impossible, to imagine Godard's engagement with Maoism without Althusser" (p. 197) and the reference to him in the film would seem to bear this out, despite the ambiguity with which the subject matter is treated by Godard. However, and somewhat paradoxically, Althusser is an important figure here because he represents the other struggle – as opposed to the one moving away from orthodox Marxism – to resist the whole range of emerging 'unorthodox' variations of Marxist theory being ushered in, which, in addition to the evolving spectre of 'Maoism', proposed subjecting Marx's work to a 'cultural' critique which placed greater emphasis on an analysis of culture and on a 'critique of everyday life' (Lefebvre, 1948/2014; Vaneigem, 1967/2003). Thus, as Wolin (2010) has also suggested, an *image* of the Cultural Revolution in the PRC merged with synchronous developments in French cultural theory in Europe to create a 'cultural revolution' of an altogether different kind.

### 3.2. 'Cultural Revolution' within the European Left

In a previous film, *Made in USA* (1967), released in the same year as *La Chinoise*, Godard had made use of a slogan "gauche, année zero" – Left, year zero – which presumably enquired into the possibility for a transformation in the politics of the French/Western European Left. Similarly, in *La Chinoise*, we see Guillaume preparing for a lecture by writing "les perspectives de la gauche européenne" – perspectives for the European Left – in chalk on the blackboard in the room where the students hold their classes. Was 1967, then, the year in which politics could 'return to zero'?

In retrospect, a striking array of theoretical texts which would come to have a significant influence on postmodern philosophy was published in France in 1967, including Roland Barthes's *Death of the Author* (1967/1978), Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/2012), and Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967/2016), to name only the most significant. Within such a context, it is perhaps unsurprising that Godard continued with his own experiments, in a similar vein to some of the work cited above, by making

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use of radical cinematic techniques in *La Chinoise* which called into question the 'truth' of an image (Guillaume: "I am an actor ... it's not because of the camera ... I'm sincere") and the limits of language (Guillaume and Veronique: "we are the words of others"), in addition to the film's overtly political subject-matter. At one point in the film, as Henri (Michel Semeniako) reads the words "it's the image of the impotence of the European Left", we are faced with a portrait of René Descartes which has been partially coloured in with red and blue crayon – just like most of the other portraits shown throughout the film (of Marx, Castro, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, etc.) – which reminds us of the critique of the Enlightenment which would come to exemplify so much of the postmodern scepticism developed over subsequent decades.

For the 'Maoist' students, then, the pursuit of orthodoxy (in Marxism, in Enlightenment values, etc.) had led to political impasse and impotence for those on the Left. For Eagleton (2004), such "political impotence and disenchantment" (p. 31) is precisely what helped to lay the groundwork for a transition to "culture as political struggle" (p. 26), in which "politics became increasingly a matter of image, icon, style and spectacle" (Eagleton, 2016, p. 147). Yet at the very same time, "culture was also a way for the civilised, humanistic left to distance itself from the crass philistinism of actually existing socialism" (Eagleton, 2004, p. 39).

If this were not already clear enough, we are again reminded of this historic "cultural turn" (Jameson, 1998) during the film's memorable train journey sequence, in which the real-life philosopher Francis Jeanson, Veronique's professor in the film, declares that he intends to pursue "cultural action" as he moves away from the French capital and into the countryside. Quite what this 'cultural action' will be, however, remains unclear and when asked by Veronique to elaborate, he ambiguously mentions something about theatre and acting which, in turn, also reminds us of Guillaume's reference throughout the film to the construction of a "socialist theatre" – an equally vague concept which, of course, never transpires.

And if 'culture' and 'everyday life' were moving to the forefront of political debate during this period, then Godard's focus on the ostensibly banal day-to-day lives of the characters in *La Chinoise* would itself also seem to reflect this interest. Despite the absurdist combination of having characters recite Marx and Engels whilst stumbling around an apartment in dressing gowns and painting barefoot – the film's focus on 'youth', that subsection of society so accentuated during the 1960s – is significant. And, after all, these were very much part of that paradoxical generation; the "children of Marx and Coca-Cola" which Godard had alluded to in his earlier film *Masculin, Féminin* (1966).

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## 4. Colouring the Geopolitical Imagination: The Sino-Soviet Split as Entertainment

### 4.1. The Sino-Soviet Split as Entertainment

For Klaus Dodds (2007), 'popular geopolitics' is how "geopolitical representations and practices find expression ... in a host of media including television, music, cartoons, the internet, and radio" (p. 145). And just as Dodds (p. 151) argues that Hollywood depictions of the PRC and the USSR during the Cold War were particularly significant due to the general ignorance of US citizens about these places, Godard's depiction of these same two global powers (and the emerging conflict between them) in *La Chinoise* also cannot be overlooked. These representations are important given that few French citizens would have had any interaction at all with the PRC at the time.

"I don't trust the Russians so much" says Yvonne (Juliet Berto) at the beginning of the film as she likens the USSR to the United States for its opposition to Mao's China. This absurdly reductionist take on the complexity of Sino-Soviet relations during the Cold War is fleshed out in slightly more detail later in the film when Guillaume arrogantly informs us that "there are two types of Communism", one which President Johnson fights in Vietnam and the other "in Europe" which he does not. Guillaume explains that while Johnson "signs agreements with Moscow, invites Hungarian swimmers to Los Angeles" and "Czech violinists to play with the Boston Symphony Orchestra", he "destroy[s] the factories in Hanoi". His thesis, however serious we are supposed to take it, is that the Soviet Union has softened its application of Marxism-Leninism and thus became "revisionist" while China has continued down the 'true' revolutionary path as shown by Chinese support for North Vietnam during that period of the Vietnam War (the USSR would later play a more significant role in the conflict). Whilst such analysis seems simplistic, it does reflect the imbalance of power relations between the USSR and the PRC in terms of their respective involvement in the Vietnam War and their mutual suspicion during much of the Cold War following the Sino-Soviet Split (1956 – 1966).

Yet, despite the zealous rhetoric of the film's characters, any *realist* understanding of International Relations would, of course, argue quite convincingly that the breakdown in relations between the USSR and the PRC at the time could be attributed to the inevitable divergence of national interests in pure geopolitical terms, rather than to any complex ideological or theoretical incompatibility (Radchenko, 2010). This, of course, may have been

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lost on audiences at the time, when most discussions of this nature would have focused on the adoption of nuanced yet divergent ideological positions. Yet, again, as with the 'Cultural Revolution' itself, what was important was the way in which events were interpreted rather than a purely factual account of the events themselves. Thus, the very real material events in the East marked by the souring of relations between the USSR and the PRC translates, in *La Chinoise*, into plot gags and rhetorical exchanges between characters interspersed with toy guns and images of comic strips. American power is encapsulated by model aircraft and a small plastic tank – which the characters periodically attack with their Little Red Books – and in one especially absurd scene we see Guillaume give an account of each of the world's superpowers by putting on sunglasses correspondingly coloured to that respective nation's flag. Humorous in retrospect, but far from an authentic analysis of the complex geopolitics of the Cold War, as we would expect.

## 4.2. Colouring the Revolution A Pop(ular) Geopolitics?

One of the most striking features of Godard's films during this period (1963 – 1967) is his radical use of colour or, more specifically, his radical use of primary colours, as has been discussed elsewhere (Gardner, 2019). *La Chinoise* is no exception as we are exposed to a deluge of primary colours almost immediately in the form of the apartment's artificial *mise-en-scène* (red and blue lampshades, bookshelves filled with red books, red curtains on white walls) as well as through the fashionable costumes of the characters (Henri's yellow jumper, Veronique's blue overalls, Yvonne's red shirt and blue cap, etc.). This approach has been described as "anti-realism" (Morrey, 2005, p. 56) and following Brecht – who Godard references extensively throughout the film – the characters in *La Chinoise* can seem, at times, much more like mere props in a 'situation' than genuinely human characters with whom we could feel some form of empathy or understanding. This, of course, is a typical provocation by Godard, but such an approach may also remind us of the "duplicity" (Hutcheon, 2001, p. 1) of the postmodern as we are unsure of how exactly to interpret *La Chinoise*, as outlined above. Regardless of how we are supposed to treat the *content*, however, the colourful *form* of *La Chinoise* and its representation of 'everyday life' reminds us again of Pop Art and its close association with postmodernism (Harrison, 2001) as mentioned earlier. Indeed, Godard's use

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of colour and 'collage' in some of his earlier films has been, quite logically, discussed in relation to Roy Lichtenstein (Yacavone, 2005) in particular.

Yet, one can identify a particularly interesting sub-genre of Pop Art in the work of US artist Martha Rosler (b.1943) and the Icelandic artist Erró (b. 1932), whose works ironically juxtapose images of brutal violence and/or political propaganda from the Third World alongside the shiny domestic kitchens and bathrooms of the First. Such works share much with the *décor* of Godard's *La Chinoise* and, thus, beg a similar question. If one is to think critically about such provocative imagery, one must entertain the idea that although such works clearly aimed to engage with a radical politics and/or a critique of the perceived progress of advanced industrial capitalism in the Western World – by reminding their audience of the violence which underpins the material prosperity, exemplified by the suburban homes of Paris or Los Angeles – they also, inevitably, cheapen or banalise the very same imagery by removing it from its original context.

The image of members of the Vietcong superimposed onto the wall of a suburban American bedroom (Erró, b. 1968), for example, is a provocative and radical gesture, but it necessarily reduces the farmer to just that: an image. Similarly, the large red and yellow poster of Chairman Mao which adorns the kitchen of the apartment in *La Chinoise* – and which stands alongside the bottles of *Heineken* and *Ajax* reminiscent of the work of Andy Warhol or Tom Wesselmann – is reduced to much the same: striking imagery which blurs several disparate themes into one single collage void of any critical capacity. A 'pastiche', in the words of Jameson (1991; 1998), torn from its original context in an act of abstract violence. For Baudrillard (1983), and more negatively, Debord (1967/2012), given that any image is already so far removed from reality, such a juxtaposition merely functions as pure deception (spectacle) and serves only to mystify and satisfy the (critical-intellectual-political?) consumer or 'spectator'. And so rather than being presented with one coherent whole, we are exposed, instead, – in the spirit of the postmodern – to "a furious polyphony of decontextualised voices." (Connor, 1991, p.176).

BETWEEN  
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AND  
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## 5. Conclusion. Towards a Revolutionary Décor or a Décor of Revolution?

To conclude, the historical 'moment' in which *La Chinoise* was released was a period marked by great flux, an era of significant political and social turmoil and was, in many ways, defined by a crisis of ideology. There can be few richer examples of a film which encapsulates this dynamic historical 'moment' as clearly as *La Chinoise*. The film brilliantly manages to capture the decomposition of orthodox Marxism in 'the West' whilst simultaneously depicting the cataclysmic events of the 'Cultural Revolution' in 'the East'. Along the way, the film also reflects ground-breaking transformations in the visual arts whilst providing an albeit inaccurate portrayal of the geopolitical tensions between the PRC and the USSR. For all these reasons, I make the claim that the film – in both its content *and* form – is somehow caught 'between Marxism and Postmodernism'. Indeed, one might be tempted to argue that *La Chinoise* fluctuates between the 'death of the author' (Barthes) and the death of Stalin. Some pertinent questions which we may want to ask, however, remain unanswered. Does the representation of 'theory' only lead to more theories of representation? Did a (popular) representation of 'cultural revolution' – so in vogue amongst Western intellectuals at the time – further its cause or did it merely reduce the imagery, and thus the ideas, of this 'revolution' to one of the ordinary and banal, more trivial junk for the consumer scrapheap? Did Godard's cinema of the period – exemplified by *La Chinoise* – create a revolutionary *décor* or did it merely provide an empty *décor* for an idea of 'revolution'? The most interesting thing, of course, is that Godard was probably conscious of such potential contradictions at the time, and this is likely why he chose to turn away from 'mainstream' cinema altogether just a few months later.

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