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Jean-Luc Godard and Roy Lichtenstein:
Originality, Reflexivity, and the Re-Presented Image

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Jean-Luc Godard's incorporation of paintings, comic strip images, and print advertisements in two of his seminal 1960's 'collage' films, *Pierrot le fou* (1965) and *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (*Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, 1967), prompts a number of intriguing questions concerning the re-presentation and re-contextualization of pre-existing (in this case, mechanically reproduced) images in film and the plastic arts. At the heart of Godard's cinematic practice, such visual quotation is also a defining feature of the early-to-mid 1960's work of the most prominent American Pop art painters, including Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and James Rosenquist. Among them it was Lichtenstein who turned the use of recycled images into a rigorous and consistent aesthetic, as part of a self-reflexive exploration/critique of artistic originality, the creative authorship of representational images, and the notion of art as personal expression – all issues of equal and perennial concern in Godard's reflexive cinema.

In *Pierrot le fou*, an arresting comic image appears in the context of a complex montage sequence juxtaposing text, 'low' popular art and 'high' art. Having witnessed the slapstick parody of Marianne (Anna Karina) and Ferdinand (Jean-Paul Belmondo) knocking out a petrol station attendant and then driving off without paying, the camera tilts up to the station's large road sign - "TOTAL" – spelled out, like the names of Godard and his two leads in the film's opening titles, in red capital letters. This image cues the combined voice-over of Marianne and Ferdinand on the soundtrack that glosses their unfolding story, "*Total: it was an adventure film...*", and the next shot is a comic image in which a close-up view of a woman's face (recalling the film's many extended close-ups of Karina) occupies the left foreground, and on the right, a fragment of the muscular, red-clothed torso of a comic book superhero strains in the midst of some heroic action. This is followed by "*It was a love story….*" and a corresponding close-up to the heads of a man and woman in a post-cubist Picasso painting (*The Lovers* 1923). Here, as throughout the film, insert shots of visual art serve as an associational counterpoint to

both the live-action images and the voice-over/dialogue. The selection and framing, or re-framing, of the comic book style image in this sequence, and of a similar one in *2 ou 3 choses…*[1] suggests that either Godard was directly inspired by Lichtenstein's example, or perhaps more interestingly, that the two independently shared the same pictorial instincts in choosing and re-presenting comic images. Whereas images of well-known paintings had been a fixture of Godard's cinema since his earliest pre-*À bout de souffle* (*Breathless* 1960) shorts,[2] by the mid-sixties they increasingly shared the screen with anonymous comic images and commercial art. Why this turn to popular imagery? A partial explanation is provided in the voice-over of *2 ou 3 choses…*, a film synthesizing *Pierrot's* audio-visual collage style with that of essayistic documentary, where Godard speaks of "*an increasing interaction between language and image*" and suggests that "*living in society today is like living in a vast comic strip.*"

Images of Images

Lichtenstein's art operates at the intersection of language and image, form and content, and indirectly, through the vehicle of the comic/cartoon image format, cinema and painting. Frequently described as the most formally concerned of the post-Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg American Pop painters, Lichtenstein's work is often seen as a stylistic (if not strictly chronological) bridge between Abstract Expressionism, with its colour fields and overlapping forms providing textural and represented depths, and the extreme two-dimensionality of Warhol's silk-screen paintings, with which it shares pronounced black outlines, a lucid mechanical sheen, and an overriding fascination with the iconic image.

In a 1968 review of Lichtenstein's paintings Albert Boim traces the evolution of the modern sequential comic strip, one separated into individual panels, discovering that it appeared only in the last decades of the 19th century, roughly parallel to the birth of cinema (203). Although the main point of interaction between comics and cinema is the animation film, live-action film storyboards are often done in a comic strip-type form. The sequential comic strip or book is, in fact, the closest still, paper art equivalent to live-action cinema, owing to the images' dynamic interaction with a fixed and uniform frame,

and the presence of a sequential narrative complete with its own 'montage' effects that are spatial as well temporal (linear). As a critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma* Godard recognized this, arguing that "the decoupage of comic strips is aesthetically years ahead of film decoupage. Within each strip, the change of shot is done with an inventive boldness that is missing now from French cinema" (qtd.in Roud 67). The three ways in which text is conventionally presented in modern comic strips also have cinematic analogs. Occurring outside of the diegetic space of the image's represented content and frequently establishing locations and events, the boxed text that often appears in the corner of the comic strip frame functions like a film's voice-over narration, bridging gaps in space and time and maintaining a level of story continuity. The comic's 'thought bubbles' or 'balloons,' on the other hand, work as interior voice-overs expressing subjective perspectives on the action, with 'speech bubbles' providing dialogue.

Lichtenstein's typical artistic procedure is well-documented. He would first select a comic strip image - scenes of love and war being the most common owing, according to the artist, to their immediate drama - and hand 'copy' it (Coplans 200). In the process he modified the original in two ways: the image is removed from its linear sequence and its size is magnified. Most significantly, although many viewers assume his work to be a case of simple one to one reproduction, Lichtenstein would alter the original composition for dramatic effect and formal unity, allowing the isolated image to function more powerfully on its own. In the footsteps of Mondrian, he often simplified the comic image through the addition of more pronounced black outlines and solid blocks of primary colour: invariably red, blue, and yellow. Like a film still, in Lichtenstein's paintings the comic image retains visual traces of its original narrative import, often supplemented by Lichtenstein's preservation of the original comic's text. At the same time, however, thus isolated and abstracted, its full discursive sense is denied or suspended, and like Jasper John's paintings of targets and flags and Warhol's soup cans, Lichtenstein's image-paintings function as wholly presentational symbols.

In comparison with Lichtenstein's method, the representation of pre-existing, two-dimensional images in Godard's 1960's films is the result of a wholly *inverse* process. The first-order non-cinematic image – whether a painting, comic image, or advertisement - is inserted into the film's linear sequence and rendered discursive in so

far as it is provided with a particular narrative and expressive context, a before and after. Since what the camera actually films in many of these cases is not the original painting or even paper image, but a photograph or print reproduction of it, by the time the image appears on the screen it is a copy of a copy (of a copy). Godard does not visually reference Pop art directly in his 1960's films. Yet, viewed in relation to the roughly simultaneous upheaval Pop - or "common image" art, as it was for a short time branded - was causing in the Anglo-American art world, and its filtering back into popular culture through the very means of mass re-production that the Pop painters sought to emulate, the mimetic *mise-èn-abyme* of Godard's cinematic appropriation of comics and advertisements cannot help but be seen, at least in retrospect, as both an ironic critique of Pop and a statement of artistic solidarity.

Godard's cinematic re-contextualization of pre-existing images on film and Lichtenstein's de-contextualization and abstraction of them on canvas, both implicitly reject a Romantic notion of artistic originality as creation *ex nihilo*; the idea that the artistic image results from a direct perceptual experience of the visual world as mediated only by the creative imagination of the artist is replaced by the selective re-use of widely accessible, second-hand imagery as 'found' material to be creatively manipulated or arranged. Within this context, by doing opposite things with image and narrative Godard's and Lichtenstein's practices are a reflexive comment on the possibility of the other, shedding light on the aesthetic and conceptual tensions inherent in the work of each.

Surface and Subject

As pertains to the discrete film and painted image, apart from its juxtaposition with others, there are a number of formal affinities between Godard's 1960's film style and Lichtenstein's art. Godard favors full-frontal compositions in medium or close shot. When filming dialogue in close-up, for instance, he frequently avoids the traditional three-quarters profile shot common in classical 'continuity-style' filmmaking - as well as traditional portraiture - which both cues represented depth and prevents the actor from looking directly at the camera, there-by preserving the imaginary 'fourth wall' of the

screen. Instead, Godard's actors often face each other and/or the camera/viewer directly (often without an accompanying reverse angle perspective as part of a shot/reverse-shot sequence), or, less frequently, at a complete right angle to the camera, in full-profile. In his portraits, Warhol, undoubtedly under the spell of trends in glamour photography, also avoids three-quarters profiles, favoring full-frontal depictions. Similarly, many of Lichtenstein's stock heroes and heroines face the viewer squarely, while others are captured in full-profile; as in Godard's cinema, the effect, in both cases, is a flattening of the image. Godard has explained his preference for this sort of framing in terms of an affinity for the frontal orientation of early modernist painting.[3] But in his case, like that of Lichtenstein and Warhol, this choice also reflects the burgeoning influence of television aesthetics and the confrontational 'talking head,' detached from a body and pushed flat against a studio background, from which no representational art in the 1950's and 60's was immune.

As numerous commentators have noted, one of the stylistic hallmarks of Godard's collaborations with his regular cinematographer Raoul Coutard is the generalized two-dimensional or graphic appearance of the film image, often achieved through a combination of the camera's horizontal tracking movement, the perpendicular framing of the shot, and an overall 'flat' lighting that minimizes any expressively sculpting shadows. [4] In what can be viewed as a reflexive, anti-realist gesture, Godard and Coutard tend to leave the viewer's eye on the screen's surface, rather than allowing it to penetrate into an illusionist depth, as in many Hollywood and Italian neo-realist films utilizing deep-focus cinematography. The most immediately apparent stylistic feature tying together the otherwise quite disparate works of the first generation of American Pop painters was a similarly reflexive attempt to alleviate any semblance of illusionist depth associated with an aesthetic of immersion, that is, with a notion of a painting as a window into some imagined world. This is achieved not only through frontal framing and treating figure, the human body when it appears, as a two a dimensional abstraction, but by eliminating most natural shading in favor of unnatural outline and avoiding the 'realistic' integration of depicted forms with their visual ground, upon which all traditional perspective techniques are founded (Coplans 200). Of course, in Lichtenstein's case, many of these graphic

features are already present in the original comic image, but his modifications push them further, almost to the point of abstraction.

Pop art's rejection of represented depth finds a corollary in its choice of subject matter, and it is reflected, in particular, in the denial of landscape as a subject for painting. Like Godard's cinema up until the 1980's, Pop art is very much a product of the urban-life world and when natural forms are depicted they appear as if man-made. Landscape in Godard's sixties films occupies a similarly marginal position, and yet he questions his own disavowal of it by ultimately dissolving the fictional reality of both *Le Mepris* (1965) and *Pierrot le Fou* into highly Romantic natural imagery. In both of these films it is only when the camera is turned onto the ocean and sky at their conclusions that the viewer has any sense of unlimited horizon and its accompanying freedom – a vision, as Marianne's posthumous voice-over in *Pierrot* says, of "*eternity*" as the "*sun run away with the sea*." But in a pessimistic reversal which brings him closer to the central motifs of Pop painting (even if it is couched in a direct satire at odds with Pop's seemingly earnest embrace of the ostensibly banal), in the last images of *2 ou 3 choses…,* rather than the camera panning away from the characters and their finite worlds out into infinite space and light, a fade out from Juliette, the film's main protagonist, is followed by a downward angled shot of a patch of scrubby grass on which garishly packaged household products are artificially arranged in neat rows (recalling Warhol's Brillo Box installations dating from 1963.) In this near parody of Pop art's turning to mass-produced, mass-marketed goods as a source of artistic inspiration, they are ironically cast as the modern visual landscape.

Colour and Commerce

In *Pierrot le fou* and *2 ou 3 choses…* Godard shares Lichtenstein's colour palette, emphasizing strong, to the point of unnatural, primary colours, chiefly heavily saturated red, yellows, and blues, used for stylistic and meta-critical effect most notably in the famous party and night-driving sequences in *Pierrot* and, more cartoon-ishly, in the film's final scenes. The colours of Mondrian, they are also those favored in advertising. Although the Fauvists, Matisse, and Picasso, all played with the anti-realist use of colour

in a figurative context, and both Lichtenstein and Godard cite all of these painters' works as influencing their own approach to colour, Lichtenstein has said that advertising was a main inspiration in this respect (Coplans 198-9). Like all of the major Pop painters, Lichtenstein was intrigued by the idea that in an art work not only could a naturally green object become yellow or red, but that, in a modern context, such an obvious abstraction from the real is paradoxically less perceptible, almost invisible, owing to the habitual conditioning of advertising. [5]

Godard's own anti-realist experimentation with colour in *Pierrot*, also explicitly linked to advertising and popular imagery, is an amplification of that begun in *Une femme et une femme* (1961), which contains a remarkable sequence in which a succession of differently coloured lights are projected onto Anna's (Anna Karina's) face, giving it a neon-lit appearance as she performs her strip-tease/musical number, transforming Karina, in true Pop fashion, from a flesh and blood person to a kind of graphic icon. This is picked up on two years later in the famous post-titles sequence-shot in *Le Mépris* (1963), Godard's self-reflexive film-about-film, where wall-to-wall yellow and blue light bathes and partly obscures Brigette Bardot's nude body. By way of this apparently arbitrary and fictionally unaccounted for – but quite beautiful – visual abstraction, Godard famously thumbed his nose at the film's actual producers who wanted clear, transparent shots of Bardot's body in order to sell the film on that basis. (Warhol would also project coloured light on his actors, arguably to lesser effect, in *The Chelsea Girls* [1966].)

Thus alongside, or in place of, its potential for original creative expression, colour in both Godard and Lichtenstein's works functions as a commentary on its more conventional/clichéd uses, be it in mass market advertising, Hollywood film, or where the two converge. Although Godard is not completely set against an expressive use of colour, as many of his later films demonstrate, his colour films from the sixties certainly appear to be in general accord with Lichtenstein and Warhol's anti-expressionist rejection of colour "used to convey specific emotional content" (Waldman 212).

Art and Reflexivity

In terms of a wider self-reflexivity, Lichtenstein's paintings are always, on one level, about the act of their production; often this takes the form of ironic, tongue-in-cheek visual comment. Alluding to the Ben-Day dots making up the printed comics he borrows from - a standard mass printing technique - Lichtenstein often paints in red and blue dots 'over' his painted images. Thus an originally constitutive property becomes a detached symbolic one, rather than creating the image they are added in as a rhetorical afterthought. Here a reflexive gesture works as a signature of style. But, as is often the case in Godard's films, in a number of Lichtenstein's paintings, self-reflexivity is not just a function of formal presentation but also subject/content. *Image Duplicator* (1963), a close-up view of the helmeted face of a mad scientist/comic-book villain who threateningly boasts of his "image duplicator" machine, works on two levels. It is Lichtenstein's comic self-portrait, with the artist's identity pictured not traditionally through his physical appearance, but by linguistic reference to the stylistic practice for which he was already famous. Not merely self-parody, however, it is also an allusion to Pop art's practice of aesthetic self-effacement through use of the common image - be it the labels of soup cans, flags, or comics - a practice which provided the less-than-secret 'weapon' most frequently turned against it by hostile critics who branded the Pop painters, Lichtenstein in particular, as makers of 'non-art.'

Both Godard and Lichtenstein engage with the history and current state of their mediums via inclusion of, and reference to, well-known art images. In a long series of paintings beginning in 1962, Lichtenstein moved away from comic book models and instead recast iconic Picasso and Cezanne paintings in the same color block style. As in *Pierrot,* with its inclusion of paintings and drawings by Renoir, Picasso, and Van Gogh, such replication is a reflection on the cultural availability of these works through mechanical reproduction. The specific choice of these artists, and not others, however, at the same time mirrors more individual concerns intimately bound to Godard's and Lichtenstein's unique creative practices and personalities, and they are most revealing in this light. Lichtenstein, for instance, said that he reproduced Cezanne's works owing to the post-impressionist's famous rejection of outline, Mondrian's for re-instating it, and Picasso's for their pure iconic value (Coplans 200-1). In interviews, Godard elaborates on his fondness for the impressionist and post-impressionist painting that frequently appears

in his films by drawing parallels between the anti-illusionist aspect of these artistic movements and his cinematic ideals.[6] Through their imagistic citation of other art works both Lichtenstein and Godard display an ambivalence towards the visual art tradition they have inherited. As part of a perceived conflict between originality and its impossibility, tradition is something to both flee from and embrace, and the issue is argued out in an aesthetic dialogue built-in to the films and paintings themselves, thereby inviting the viewer into the debate.

Lichtenstein's engagement with earlier art often goes beyond direct replication, and is more oblique to those not 'in the know,' in this respect recalling Godard's more exclusive *cinéphile* references in *À Bout de souffle* and other films, whose recognition depends on knowledge of the Parisian film-culture of the time. From 1965 on, Lichtenstein produced paintings, sculptures, and mixed-media works that exclusively depict swirling, dripping brush strokes. Making up, so to speak, for the conventional painterly attribute his works most conspicuously lack, Lichtenstein instead here offers them as a subject. Like the Ben-Day dots mentioned earlier, these works represent that which normally does the representing. (A rough cinematic analog might be Godard filming the camera at beginning of *Le Mepris* or speaking directly to the viewer in his own voice in *2 ou 3 choses....*) Implicitly, Lichtenstein's cartoonish swirls of colour refer to the drippy action painting of Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists, that older movement which, like rebellious sons, the Pop painters set themselves in complete opposition to, while in the same breath acknowledging their influence and – damning with faint praise - their aesthetic significance. Turning an authorial and stylistic 'signifier' into the 'signified' (to invoke the semiotic terminology of the day according to which both Godard's and Lichtenstein's work was received by theorists and critics), Lichtenstein brush-stroke works, with all of their art-referential connotations, overturn traditional notions of artistic originality, intentionality, and expressiveness.

Sharing the stylistic and reflexive traits which have been noted, Godard and Lichtenstein's 1960's works (self-) critically respond to the challenges of producing representational images in a then already image-saturated culture. Of course this shared impulse took on widely divergent concrete forms and whereas Godard's filmmaking was, and still is, marked by ceaseless stylistic experiment, evolution, and revision over more

than forty years, Lichtenstein's work, for most of this same period up until his death in 1997, is remarkable in that it adheres to the same basic presentational formula of his early-60's paintings. As one would expect, many of the substantial differences between their approaches stem from basic formal and phenomenological conditions of their respective media. Others could be elaborated upon with reference to a modernist/post-modernist distinction – or some other theoretical dichotomy - cutting across artistic forms, or in terms of the particular historical influences, cultural contexts, and capabilities informing their distinctive artistic projects. In lieu of further investigation, one could say, in a somewhat loaded formulation, that Godard begins in cinema from the point at which Lichtenstein arrives in painting.

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[1] In *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* a close-up shot of the alienated Juliette is followed by a mysterious comic strip image depicting a night scene with a woman's mournful face in close-up view and a Roll Royce car behind her.

[2] Picasso prints appear as full frame shots in Godard's 1959 short *Charlotte et Véronique, ou Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick*,

3 Godard says that the frontal framing of *Vivre sa Vive*, for instance, was influenced by the perpendicular, frontally centered compositions of Matisse and Braque. See Tom Milne's "Jean-Luc Godard and Vivre sa Vie," *Sight and Sound* vol.36, no.1, Winter 1966: 9-12, reprinted in *Jean-Luc Godard Interviews*, David Sterrit ed., Jackson: University of Mississippi Press: 1998.

4 For a more detailed analysis of Godard's visual style in this respect, as well as Coutard's own original contributions to it, see David Sterrit's *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999 and Nestor Almendros *A Man with a Camera* Rachel P. Bellash, trans. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984.

5 Warhol brought a similar notion to bear on his serial portraits, in which the face and body of his celebrity subjects (and sometimes himself) are de-personalized by being cast in highly unnatural colour(s), something which also alludes to the commonplace airbrushing of fashion photographs to cover up 'undesirable' bodily flaws.

6 See, for instance, Gavin Smith's "Jean-Luc Godard," *Film Comment*, March-April 1996: 31-32, 35-41, reprinted in *Jean-Luc Godard Interviews*, David Sterrit ed., Jackson: University of Mississippi Press: 1998.