Passionate Amateurs
Ridout, Nicholas

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The theatre is about to open. Someone is speaking across the end of the opening titles: “Un film en train de se faire.”¹ As the titles give way to the film they authorize—“Visa de contrôle numéro 32862”—the lights, if you like, come up on a forestage, a kind of balcony or terrace, it seems, upon which a young man holding a book is pacing, reading aloud from his book, in front of a set of three windows, all behind shutters that look like they have recently been painted a casual but meaningful red. He does not seem to be addressing anyone in particular, either within the frame or beyond it. Nor is he speaking to camera. This reading, speaking, thinking person is observing a theatrical convention instead—one that might authorize the reading aloud of the letter or, perhaps more appropriately, the setting down of observations in “my tables”²—for this fretful intellectual-as-actor makes notes, too, as he reads. Quoting, thus, the behavior of the stage, this actor also quotes his text, of course: “La classe ouvrière française ne fera pas son unité et ne montera pas sur les barricades pour obtenir douze pour cent d’augmentation des salaires.”³ The author cited here is André Gorz, who would later come to bid farewell to the working class⁴ altogether, but who was at this moment—this is 1967—one of the most prominent intellectuals articulating revolutionary demands on their behalf in France, in the pages of Sartre’s journal Les Temps Modernes, as well as in his own books, including Le socialisme difficile,⁵ from which this opening text for Jean-Luc Godard’s film La chinoise is taken.⁶

Throughout this most theatrical of films (as I shall hope to show that it is) its characters will address one another, in lectures and performances as well as in conversations, and they will speak to camera in response to more or less inaudible questions posed to them from the film’s invisible director, but they will also declaim, as it were, into the air, making their speech itself (very often speech citing other speech or writing) the stuff of the film. “Nous sommes le discours des autres,”⁷ as Guillaume and Véronique will shortly announce, to no one in particular. “Words, words, words.”⁸ Or, as they say in the movies, “Action.”
Speech and Action

The commonplace that “actions speak louder than words” is normally taken to mean that the truth about a person may more readily be inferred from what they do than from what they say. Various associated more- or less-commonplaces, such as the claim that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” or the accusation that someone may be “all mouth and no trousers,” point similarly to the idea that what counts is action, while speech may be discounted. This cluster of attitudes can also shade into a posture of anti-intellectualism, particularly in political contexts where direct action assumes the aura of revolutionary virtue, while reading, writing, and speaking are regarded as markers of indecision, weakness, and, in some versions of the prejudice against words, class privilege.

The idea that actions might speak louder than words has been perhaps nowhere more politically charged than it was during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, from which the protagonists of Godard’s film take their inspiration. It is an idea that calls into question the relations between theory and practice, between workers and intellectuals, relations that had already become central to political debate on the French left by 1967 and that would be a predominant theme in retrospective analyses of the thought and action of May ’68. It is also, of course, an idea that bears directly on the questions of work, leisure, and professionalism explored in the preceding chapter, as well as on the idea of the passionate amateur itself.

In La chinoise, there are thousands upon thousands of words—spoken, printed, quoted, scrawled, painted, flashed on screen—and perhaps only one action, and a singularly unconvincing and bungled one at that. In both speech and action, then, it resembles Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya. In La chinoise a neophyte intellectual and self-appointed representative of “the workers” attempts the assassination of a visiting Russian apparatchik (the “intellectual” minister of culture of a “worker’s state”). In Uncle Vanya a frustrated intellectual who “might have been a Schopenhauer, a Dostoevsky,” had he not been condemned to work for “a beggar’s wage,” attempts the assassination of a visiting Russian apparatchik (the “intellectual” Professor Serebryakov). Both would-be perpetrators of action—Véronique Supervieille and Ivan Voinitsky—turn out, on the face of it at least, to have been much better at speech than they are at action. Their bungled shootings might perhaps be taken as comic hints as to the inadequacy of action or, at least, as pointing to some kind of discrepancy between what can be said and what is to be done. That is, unless the commonplace, as many commonplaces do, conceals within itself evidence of
some secret measure of untruth; unless speech is action, theory is practical and the intellectual is indeed a worker.

For Hannah Arendt speech and action are the conjoined modes in which humans (or “man” in Arendt’s own text) reveal themselves to one another: “Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’”\(^\text{12}\) One cannot do without the other because without speech (to claim, announce) action would lack an “actor,” without whom it would merely be the function of “performing robots.” One model for such an actor might be the hero of a dramatic narrative, whose identity is disclosed to an audience by way of speech that claims responsibility for action, who names (and eventually perhaps, immortalizes) himself, as it were, by means of the enunciation of his own deeds: “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”\(^\text{13}\) Thus actions only speak louder than words when there is speech to go with them. Arendt’s conjunction of speech and action is significant here, not for the conjunction alone, but for the role it plays in her conception of politics. This is of particular relevance, not simply for this chapter but for the book as a whole, as we have already seen (see chap. 1), because it is perhaps the clearest and most influential twentieth-century articulation of an old Greek idea: that politics is for those who are free from the burden of work. First of all, the space of politics is constituted through the speech and action of its participants and nothing else. “The polis, properly speaking,” argues Arendt, “is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose.”\(^\text{14}\) Second, this space is only fleetingly inhabited, and many “men” are excluded from it: “This space does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them—like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity, like the laborer or craftsman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world—do not live in it.”\(^\text{15}\) Objections to this position (which might rightly be described as an antidemocratic ideological stance adopted primarily by representatives of the Greek aristocracy\(^\text{16}\)) might focus on its explicit exclusion of “workers” from political activity, especially, as we shall see, in the context of 1967 and after, where the formation of a political alliance between students and workers, based on genuine class solidarity rather than assumed class difference, was a real political possibility.
In the suspension of work (the fleeting habitat of a summer vacation) that enfolds the action of Godard’s *La chinoise* (just as it does the action of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*), speech and action constitute for the film’s characters their very own brief “polis” in the form of a fictional Marxist-Leninist cell, which they name “Aden-Arabie.” The hunch of this chapter is that *La chinoise* is an experiment in the possibilities of theatricality as a mode of being political situated somewhere between Arendt’s categories of work and action, a zone, that is to say, in which “actors,” uncertain of their place in an emergent new economic order (what will come to be known as post-Fordism), take advantage of the statutory summer holiday to talk themselves into becoming passionate amateurs.

**WHAT HAPPENS**

Here’s what happens. Five young people have moved into the Paris apartment of Véronique’s bourgeois relatives (“Ils ont des usines ou quoi”17) for the summer and formed themselves into a Marxist-Leninist cell. Véronique, a student of philosophy at the newly created University of Paris-Nanterre, appears to be the leader of the group. Her boyfriend, Guillaume, is an actor. Yvonne is a young woman from the countryside who seems to belong to the group by way of her relationship with Henri. Henri has trained and worked as a chemist (and it is he whom we see first, speaking, on the balcony). Serge Kirilov is a painter, his name a reminder that the film is very loosely derived from Dostoevsky’s novel *The Possessed*. During the course of the film members of the group educate one another in the theories of Marxism-Leninism, taking Mao’s *Little Red Book*, of which the apartment has hundreds of identical copies, as their primary text. Prompted by Véronique, the group votes to carry out an act of political violence. Henri, who had voted against this suggestion, is expelled from the group. Serge agrees to commit suicide and leave a note claiming responsibility for the assassination of the visiting Soviet minister of culture, but it is Véronique herself who attempts the action and then bungles it by misreading her target’s room number from a register and shooting someone else by mistake. As the “cell” breaks up, Guillaume pursues his search for a true socialist theatre, and Véronique’s cousins return to find, to their annoyance, that their apartment has been redecorated in Godardian primary colours and Maoist slogans.

As James S. Williams notes in a recent essay on the film, *La chinoise* has been generally considered a uniquely prescient film forecasting the events
of May ‘68.” On its release it met critical hostility from both of the main French Maoist political publications, the *Cahiers Marxistes-Leninistes* and *Nouvelle Humanité*, with the latter describing the film as a “fascist provocation” and both claiming that it misrepresented the nature of their political struggle. Much subsequent critical reaction has, quite naturally, viewed the film in the light of May ‘68 (and, of course, Godard’s subsequent artistic trajectory in the Dziga Vertov Group), with Pauline Kael, in an assessment that is used to blurb the Optimum DVD release of the film, describing it, somewhat bafflingly, as being “like a speed-freak’s anticipatory vision of the political horrors to come.” The twenty-first-century viewer might therefore enjoy something of the same historical relation to the film as that of the contemporary spectator at a production of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*: looking back in order to look ahead, with the 1917 revolutions and the events of May ‘68 asserting themselves simultaneously as the tangible futures of the represented presents and as the non-inevitable sequels to the fictional events. But Godard does not really predict or anticipate. On the one hand, the intellectual experiment of thinking Maoism in relation to late-1960s France was well under way at the time the film was being made: inasmuch as Godard is engaging with a historical reality, he is filming an immediate present, in which both Anne Wiazemsky and his future collaborator in the Dziga Vertov Group, Jean-Paul Gorin, are actively involved at Nanterre. On the other, there is nothing whatsoever in Godard’s film to suggest the activism on the streets that would characterize May ‘68. That Nanterre should have come retrospectively to be seen as the catalyst for the events of May ‘68 may lend a fortuitous sense of pertinence to Godard’s film, but it does not make Godard in any way prescient. Nor yet does it make the film an anticipation of “political horrors,” by which one can only assume Pauline Kael is referring to the political violence that followed ‘68, in actions undertaken by groups such as the Red Army Fraction, the Red Brigades, and the Weather Underground. While the question of the role of violence in political struggle is engaged in the latter part of the film—most extensively in the long dialogue between Wiazemsky’s Véronique and the philosopher Francis Jeanson—the argument in favor of violence, as James S. Williams notes, “never translated itself into reality in France.” Nor does it even begin to resemble reality in Godard’s film.

For, although the conversation about violence between Véronique and Jeanson stands out in relation to the rest of the film for its “reality effect”—it’s shot in a “real” train rather than the stagey location of the apartment, and sound and vision are edited unobtrusively in accordance with tacit
realist conventions—the scene of the bungled assassination, even if it is at odds with the overtly theatrical conventions of much of the film, suggests a daydream as much as reality, perhaps most strongly because of its complete absence of consequences. Véronique arrives at the building in which her target, Soviet minister of culture Sholokov, is supposedly located, in a car driven by an apparent collaborator who has never appeared in the film before. It is as though we are suddenly in some entirely other film. The building has the appearance of an office but seems to function rather like a hotel (perhaps a symptomatic architectural conflation of work and leisure that reveals incidentally both superficial and structural characteristics of the hotel itself). A single receptionist or clerk sits at a table in the foyer. An automatically controlled sliding gate allows the car to be driven into the forecourt. We watch from outside, through the vertical bars of the gate and the glass wall of the foyer, as Véronique enters the building and speaks to the receptionist so that she can obtain the minister’s room number by reading it from a register on the table. As Véronique disappears momentarily from view through a door inside the foyer, a cartoon frame shows a man being blown up (“AAAAH!”). The next shot is of Véronique’s colleague sitting in the car smoking and Véronique herself getting into the car, to report that she has done the deed, only to realize—“merde, merde, arrête”22—that in reading the room number upside down she has shot the wrong man. Her return to the building through a previously unnoticed door is accompanied by much maneuvering of the get-away car, the sliding of the gate, and, in response to the movements of the car, the opening and closing of automatic glass doors, as well as some very self-conscious “waiting” behavior on the part of the driver, before Véronique appears on a balcony and makes an ambiguous signal that could mean either that she has accomplished the assassination or that she has not.

No bodies, no blood, no “red,”23 no gunshots, even. The episode is barely spoken of again, and there is no sign of any police response. The receptionist, like the rest of the film, acts as though nothing has happened. While the preceding scene—the conversation with Jeanson—is presented as anchored in a “real world,” not least of course by the device of using a “real” person in conversation with an actor, and nearly the whole of the rest of the film has until this point been contained within the aesthetically coherent and thus similarly anchored setting of the apartment, this scene feels curiously implausible and fictional. That the Soviet minister of culture, who may or may not have been assassinated in this fiction, bears the name of the author of the novel And Quiet Flows the Don, who had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1965, rather than that of the
actual minister of culture, and that in an earlier conversation members of the cell were unsure whether he was called Sholokov or Shokolov (chocolate, anybody?), only add to the sense of fiction within fiction. As far as we can tell, the receptionist appears to have been right. Nothing happened. In several reasonably convincing accounts of this film, including an extensive conversation between Godard himself and a group of writers from *Cahiers du cinéma*, the dialogue on violence between Véronique and Jeanson is taken to be the moral or intellectual crux of the film, as a scene in which it apparently matters who the audience concludes has had the better of the argument (most interpretations favor Jeanson, although Godard, in this interview, says that he thinks Véronique prevailed). In light of the metafictional character of the “violence” that follows, it bears recalling that the “reality effect” of the dialogue scene disguises, at least to some extent, the nature of the conversation and, indeed, the scene: namely, that it is a scene and a conversation that takes place between a real person and a fictional character. It might be naïve, then, to suppose that, following such a conversation, a fictional character could go out and commit a real action, rather than perpetrating a further fiction. Perhaps, here, actions simply don’t speak louder than words.

**WHAT REALLY HAPPENS: THEATRE**

“I guess I didn’t make it clear enough that the characters aren’t members of a real Marxist Leninist cell,” says Godard in his interview with *Cahiers*. Perhaps not, but not, it would seem to a twenty-first-century spectator, for want of trying. At the time of its initial reception several factors may have contributed to obscure what looks today like a pervasive and unmistakeable theatricality. In spite of the fact that the film was first shown publicly as part of the Avignon Festival of 1967, in a screening in the Cour d’Honneur at the Palais des Papes (the theatre festival’s most prestigious location), critical reception appears to have been shaped by a combination of factors that have directed attention away from its concern with theatre. There is, of course, the film’s self-evident topicality and the fact that it was clearly derived from Godard’s own developing association with students at Nanterre in general and the radical left organizations taking shape there. There is also the apparent trajectory of Godard’s work at the time: *Masculin-féminin* (1966) and, especially, *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (released earlier in 1967) could be taken to indicate an increasing interest on Godard’s part in the politics of the student generation and the social
and political state of Paris, France, and indeed the world under capitalism. His participation in the making of *Loin de Viêtnam* (1967), a film commentary on the war in Vietnam, along with directors such as Marker, Resnais, and Varda, traditionally associated with the political left, in distinction to Godard and his familiar *Cahiers* associates, would have contributed further to the perception that Godard himself was increasingly politicized. Clearly this was not entirely a misperception. Despite Godard’s later claim that he had never read Marx, after 1967 he devoted himself almost completely to the exploration of what it might mean to “make films politically,” first under his own name, then with Jean-Pierre Gorin and others as the Dziga Vertov Group, and then again with Gorin as codirector—from *Un Film Comme les Autres* (1968) to *Letter to Jane* (1972)—and subsequently in video and television projects with Anne-Marie Miéville—from *Ici et Ailleurs* (1974) to *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* (1978), before his so-called return to commercial film production with *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (1979). As critical responses to this growing body of work sought to establish the kind of narrative that might make sense of a filmmaker’s “career,” it is perhaps inevitable that the “political” content of *La chinoise* should have attracted more attention than its formal theatricality, as it took its place in the critical narrative as a key precursor to the Dziga Vertov work. However, this emphasis to some extent misses the point of Godard’s own conception of what it means to “make films politically”: for Godard, at least when he articulated this distinction, the political is not a question of content, but rather a matter of how and why a film is composed. While the question of why would seem to drive much of the Dziga Vertov Group work, in that it appears motivated by a sense of historical urgency and by a desire to develop a meaningful purpose for the filmmaker, in *La chinoise* it is more a matter of how. How, that is, the ostensibly “political” content of the film is shaped, or produced, even, by the formal choices made in its composition. So, having earlier offered a brief account of “what happens” in *La chinoise*, I now present a brief account of “how it happens,” which will highlight—in keeping with the analysis already offered of the “fictional assassination”—the theatre that constitutes, I will suggest, the actual politics of the film, in which there is clearly “no real Marxist Leninist cell.”

That it is a question of theatre is because it is also a holiday. The film takes place in the summer vacation (between the end of classes and their resumption). As Véronique reports at the end of the film—in words and in a manner that can only corroborate the idea that there has been no assassination—“Avec l’été qui finissait pour moi c’était la rentrée des
The film ends with the bourgeois “cousins” returning to their apartment and preparing to make good whatever damage has been done by its summer residents: in this the narrative resembles that of Ben Jon-son’s *The Alchemist,* in which homeowner Lovewit returns from a so-journ in the country at the end of the play to expel the fraudster Subtle and his coconspirators, making for a conclusion that is both comic and conservative, in Jonson and perhaps, too, in Godard. It also begins and ends with “curtains,” in the form of the red-painted shutters in front of which Henri delivers his opening text and through which the cousins and Véronique make their exit from view in the final shot of the film. Between the opening and the closing of the “curtains,” then, a theatrical holiday—a suspension in the time of work, not unlike that imposed upon the estate in *Uncle Vanya* through the visit of the Professor and his wife. But, as the discussion of work and leisure in the preceding chapter has shown, one person’s holiday is always someone else’s work. In *Uncle Vanya,* although Vanya himself condemns the visit of the Professor and his wife for having forced him to suspend his labor, it is simultaneously clear that, however great the disruption, Sonya has been working throughout. In *La chinoise* a similar presentation of gendered labor is in play: while the bourgeois bo-hemians like Véronique and Guillaume develop their political sensibili-ties, it is Yvonne who brings them tea, cleans their windows, and polishes their shoes.

Godard’s use of the holiday as the frame for cinematic narrative in *La chinoise* is not new, and it will return, too. In *Pierrot le fou* (1965) Bel-mondo and Karina take off together, abandoning Paris for a romantic-picaresque holiday-adventure in the Midi, escaping their daily worlds of advertising and babysitting for beaches, a parrot, boats, and, eventually, torture and death (a holiday gone wrong). *La chinoise* is a holiday-adventure of a different kind, but both seem linked to a highly specific French appreciation of the *vacances payés.* It was as a result of widespread labor unrest in the period between the election of 1936 and the eventual formation of the Front Populaire government that employers were obliged, by law, to permit their employees two weeks paid holiday a year. The same legislation also effectively installed the weekend as part of the structure of everyday work-leisure life. Godard’s second film of 1967, *Weekend,* combines elements of both *Pierrot le fou* and *La chinoise,* presenting the weekend itself as a Fordist nightmare—almost literally in the form of its famous tracking shot of a traffic jam of Parisians in exodus—as well as the precursor to an extended season in hell, as its bourgeois pro-tagonists murder a parent to secure an inheritance before falling into the
hands of the cannibalistic Front de Libération Seine et Oise. The Front Populaire government may be said to have inaugurated Fordism in France in legislation that resembled, in its social and economic effects, the innovation of the “five-dollar day” by the Ford Motor Company in the United States in 1914: setting in place a system in which the workers’ wages enabled them to consume enough in their leisure time to provide capital with the profits needed for its continued expansion. If these films contain an intuition that there is a crisis taking shape around the relationships between work and leisure or production and consumption in France at the end of the 1960s, perhaps Godard is indeed “prescient”: what he sees, though, is not so much the immediate future of May ’68, but rather the longer underlying process in which a Fordist accommodation between labor and capital is coming apart and will eventually give way to what is now widely understood as a post-Fordist regime. But post-Fordism still lies in the future, for France and for this chapter. For now we are still in the summer holiday of 1967, and there is theatre to be made.

So Henri steps off the balcony, through one of the three windows, and into the apartment, where Véronique and Guillaume will very soon and almost casually name the cell, once again adopting the “speech of others.” Their choice, “Aden-Arabie,” suggested by Guillaume, refers explicitly to a short novel of that name, written in 1931 by a school friend of Jean-Paul Sartre’s, Paul Nizan. The novel depicts its narrator’s disgust at the conditions of life in 1920s Paris, his flight to Aden, and his politicized return to Paris. It had been republished in France in 1960 with a substantial foreword by Sartre. In having the cell named after a novel, rather than after a “real” revolutionary figure, and presenting this decision as a casual act of playfulness, the not-“real” condition of the “cell” seems to be accentuated. Of course the name carries an additional contemporary resonance, to which Godard could have chosen to allude more explicitly had he wanted the cell to be understood as “real”: in 1967 Aden was the center of an armed uprising by leftist and nationalist Yemenis, which would result, in November 1967, in the hasty withdrawal of British troops and the establishment of the People’s Republic of South Yemen. The affiliation with Nizan, in a way that overshadows a relationship with a contemporary revolution, becomes part of the citational playfulness of the cell’s formation.

While there may be a kind of “reality effect” associated with the casting of Anne Wiazemsky as Véronique (even though she had previously appeared, as an actor, in Bresson’s *Au hasard Balthasar*, she was studying at Nanterre), the figure of Guillaume, by contrast, is already embedded in
citational networks that only enhance his theatrical character. First, as Guillaume Meister he is Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, hero of the Romantic Bildungsroman Willhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, a young man who leaves his comfortable bourgeois life for a journey, through the theatre, to self-realization. Second, he is played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, the instantly recognizable poster boy for nouvelle vague cinema, teenage star of François Truffaut’s Les quatre cents coups, who had recently taken a central role in Godard’s Masculin-féminin. Inasmuch as Léaud is “real,” he is real as an actor. As he explains in his interview within the film: “Je suis un acteur [. . . ] je suis sincère.”31 The sincerity of the film, then, might be understood to reside in its confession of theatre and, indeed, in its insistence upon theatre as one of the courses of “action” that its central characters might choose to take. The search for a “théatre socialiste veritable”32 is sustained throughout by Guillaume and includes readings from Althusser’s essay on Strehler’s production of Bertolazzi’s *El Nost Milan*33 and a presentation using a blackboard from which the names of celebrated playwrights are erased one by one to leave just “Brecht” still visible.

Guillaume’s sense of theatre seems to infect the cell more generally, most notably when his lecture about the Vietnam War turns into a performance in which Serge (Lex de Bruijn), wearing a plastic tiger mask, stands in for President Johnson, as Yvonne (Juliet Berto), made up to look stereotypically Vietnamese, is first harassed by toy US warplanes and calls out desperately for the Soviet prime minister to help her (“Au secours, M. Kosygin!”) and then turns a toy radio into a toy machine gun that she fires repeatedly from behind a defensive shelter composed of Little Red Books.

For Manny Farber, this sequence introduces an unwelcome “amateur” and theatrical element into the film; he describes the “playacting” as “rawly, offensively puerile” and claims that “the use of amateurs who play their ineptness to death is a deliberate, effectively gutsy move, but it can make your skin crawl.”34 For me, the escalation of theatricality within the film at this point is consistent with the strange “deanchoring” effect achieved both by the dreamlike assassination and by the most uncinematic practice of declaiming into thin air with which the film begins. This is because it is entirely unclear (and purposefully so, I think) who is doing the play-acting here: Yvonne and Serge or Berto and de Bruijn? To explore this ambiguity a little, it is worth comparing this sequence with a similar one in Pierrot le fou, in which Marianne (Anna Karina) and Ferdinand (Jean-Paul Belmondo) play out little puppet-theatre-style scenes of the war in Vietnam as a way of earning money to finance their adventure. Here it is clear that it is Marianne and Ferdinand who are performing. But
in *La chinoise* there is no diegetic clue as to whether what we are seeing is a scene staged by Berto and de Bruijn for the camera or by Yvonne and Serge for the presumed spectators in the apartment. The actors and the characters come apart, at least slightly and momentarily, from one another, in an experience of uncertainty far more familiar from the theatre than it is in the cinema.

Guillaume’s search for a “théatre socialiste veritable” extends past the end of the “assassination” narrative and the apparent dissolution of the cell, into the concluding scenes of the film, in which are shown brief snapshots of what appears to be an attempt to approach “théatre année zero” (via an installation with women behind Plexiglass and some take-culture-to-the-people activity involving an attempt to console a lovesick woman with doorstep Racine). That the film is interested in showing this, while on the other hand it abandons the narrative of the “assassination” as if it never took place (which, of course, it didn’t), further suggests that it is at least as interested in the questions of theatre as it is in the supposedly political questions it appears to address (such as the role of the working class in class struggle). The balance of real and not-real in the actions pursued by the other characters also tends toward the not-real, or at least the representational. By the end of the film Yvonne seems to have entered the “real” world (she is last seen selling copies of *Nouvelle Humanité*, which suggests either a need to earn money or a genuine engagement with the Maoist left, or both), and Henri plans to find himself a “real” job and perhaps join the “normal” Communist Party (the very “revisionists” who beat him up early in the film). Kirilov chooses suicide (which might, perhaps, like Vanya’s bungled shooting, be seen as a “theatrical” gesture). Véronique’s “action” is even more ambivalent.

Indeed, it is by no means entirely fanciful to understand Véronique’s action as theatrical too, on two levels. First, her conception of political violence, as outlined in her dialogue with Jeanson, is demonstrative: she imagines actions of the kind that would come to be known as “propaganda” warfare in the 1970s, where targets are symbolic (such as the Louvre) and actions effectively performative rather than instrumental (they accomplish their purpose by way of their intervention in a system of representation rather than by weakening a material enemy). Second, her leadership of the cell, including its installation for the holiday in her cousins’ apartment, her role in its naming, and the literal-minded but somehow oddly playful sincerity with which she seems to infuse its activities in the apartment all suggest an interest in the observation of forms and conventions that, coupled with the decoration of the apartment (in colors,
images, and texts), might more readily suggest the work of mise en scène than that of political militancy. Like Guillaume’s explicit interest in theatre, Véronique’s influence over the group’s mise en scène of itself is pervasive, with her playful sincerity becoming a predominant tone. Renata Adler characterizes this tone in terms of a look: “the look of these young who are so caught up in the vocabulary of the class struggle of a class to which they do not belong—the look of hurt and intelligence and gentleness quite at odds with what they are saying.”

Adler also suggests that it is the relationship between politics and theatre that generates this tension or contradiction in their playing: “all the characters seem more or less on the verge of playing themselves—very much preoccupied with another problem at the heart of the new radicalism: the relation between politics and theater.”

The revolutionary attitude here expressed is both literal and ironic, sincere and playing at sincerity. As Véronique acknowledges at the end of the film, in a remark that may be taken to refer to the whole summer vacation and to the “assassination” that did not take place, “Oui, d’accord c’est de la fiction, mais ça m’approchait du réel.”

In short, not only is the film long on words and short on action (all mouth and no trousers), but it seems to insist, again and again and at multiple levels, that the action that it depicts is theatre. The theatre of what Paul de Man, writing on irony in the wake of Friedrich Schlegel, would call “perpetual parabasis,” for its insistence upon negating or confusing its own truth claims in the moment of their utterance. Indeed, it turns out that Henri’s rejection of the group stems not so much from his opposition to its decision to act violently, which, in any case, he says, was “complètement irréal,” but from its confusion of Marxism with theatre, of politics with art, a confusion that he denounces in his interview within the film as “romanticism.” He attributes this “romanticism” to the influence of Guillaume, whom he describes as a fanatic, whose father had worked with Artaud (even if, as Guillaume has revealed in his own interview earlier in the film, he now runs a Club Med, which, he claims, anticipating Giorgio Agamben while reaffirming the inherent industrial character of twentieth-century leisure, resembles a concentration camp).

Henri, perhaps too straightforward to appreciate the kind of irony that interests Paul de Man, sees the theatre perpetrated by the “Aden-Arabie” cell as “merely theatrical,” in the pejorative sense that it is superficial and lacks purchase on the “real” world. But as Guillaume/Léaud has already pointed out, to be an actor is to be sincere. The problem, he explains, as he acts out his story of the journalists who complain that the Chinese mili-
tant who unwraps his bandages while speaking of the wounds he has sustained in the struggle has no wounds on his face to show, is that “ils n’avaient pas compris que c’était du théâtre, du vrai théâtre.” As James S. Williams observes, drawing heavily on Jacques Rancière’s essay on the film, it is in the accumulation of moments of this kind that _La chinoise_ “could be said to reveal itself finally as a meditation on the theatre, as it had always, in fact, promised to be [. . .] an actor, like a political militant, aims to show what cannot be seen.” The point, in both the story of the bandaged militant and in _La chinoise_ more broadly, is that there is not some simple opposition to be made between theatre and politics (or, for that matter, between speech and action), because theatre, made politically (like film), can make visible political possibilities not otherwise available to view. Here, the political possibilities seem to lie more in the mise en scène of a holiday play-revolution than they do in such more obviously political actions such as assassinations. And since neither film nor theatre is capable of carrying out an assassination, might it not make more sense to make the making of either political-in-itself than attempt to make either act outside-itself? The proposition of the film—inasmuch as it has one, and to be fair, it is probably far too playful and ironic truly to sustain such a burden—might then be that there is political value in the formation of a revolutionary cell as an end in itself, rather than as a means toward revolution as such. _La chinoise_ as a “program for a proletarian children’s theatre” for “the children of Marx and Coca-Cola”? If so, then this value must derive from something other than work, for, as we have seen in chapter 2, the theatre proposed by Lacis and Benjamin constitutes an attempt to unravel the logic and the temporality of work under capitalism. The proletarian children’s theater only produces (a performance) as a “prank” or an inadvertent by-product of its activity and bears no relation to the theatre in which performance is the work of an evening’s leisure (“nothing at all in common with that of the modern bourgeoisie”). Likewise the homemade theatre of the cellule Aden-Arabie, whose members are filling the time of Véronique’s holiday from school at Nanterre to make a school of their own, to interrupt the work-time rhythm of the Fordist economy by working on holiday time, and to produce precisely nothing, neither cars nor a new social order. To make of work something other than what it appears to be under capitalism, then, and to do so right now, is the program for Godard’s passionate amateurs. It is a program that arises directly from the conditions of life, work, and study encountered, in what would become their historically iconic form, at Nanterre.
NANTERRE

The Nanterre campus opened in 1964. It had been built to deal with expanding student numbers at the University of Paris, which had led to facilities in the Quartier Latin becoming seriously overcrowded. Henri Lefebvre, who joined the faculty at Nanterre in 1965, wrote of the new facility that “it contains misery, shantytowns, excavations for an express subway line, low-income housing projects for workers, industrial enterprises. This is a desolate and strange landscape. [. . . ] it might be described as a place of damnation.” In its proximity to the shantytowns (bidonvilles) it brought students from relatively privileged backgrounds not only into contact with a mode of French life far removed from their own but also into an encounter with the presence of the Third World within the First (an interpenetration that would come to be characteristic of life in the post-Fordist and globalizing phase of capitalism): “No need to go to Algeria, to Vietnam, to India, to discover the Third World [. . . ] the Third World was living at the gates of the Nanterre Faculty.”

This is what Godard has Véronique describe, in her interview sequence midway through La chinoise, as her encounter with Marxism. Intercut with the well-known drawing of Alice pulling aside a curtain, she speaks of how at first Nanterre had bored her, because it was a factory inside a slum, but that gradually she realized that the same rain fell on her, on the Algerian children, and on the Simca workers; that they are at the train stations at the same time; they are in the same bistros and do more or less the same work. From this experience, she says, she comes to an understanding of three “inequalities” or false divisions in “Gaullist France”: between manual and intellectual labor, between the city and the country, between agriculture and industry. Nanterre is here a “wonderland” behind curtains (a sort of theatre?) in which the emergent transformation of French education at the service of a reorganized capitalism reveals something of what is at stake in that very process: what Véronique takes as an education in Marxist critique, the planners and managers of the transformation will characterize as a step toward a modernization of capitalism—variously understood as the transition to post-Fordism, the end of organized capitalism (Lash and Urry), the emergence of neocapitalism (Lefebvre), of neoliberalism (Harvey), and of neomanagement (Boltanski and Chiapello). It is Lefebvre who names the Nanterre contribution to this project:

The buildings and the environment reflect the real nature of the intended project. It is an enterprise designed to produce mediocre
intellectuals and “junior executives” for the management of this society [neocapitalist society], and transmit a body of specialized knowledge determined and limited by the social division of la-
bour.47

Here Lefebvre is articulating a critique that coincides, unsurprisingly, with the analysis offered just a few years earlier by five students at Lefebvre’s previous institution, the University of Strasbourg, in a now famous pamphlet entitled De la misère de la vie étudiante, in which Lefebvre himself is briefly mentioned, alongside Althusser and other prominent “stars in the vacuous heaven” of the contemporary professoriat. The student’s predicament is to be in “rehearsal” for a social and cultural role for which neocapitalism has no place:

By the logic of modern capitalism, most students can only become mere petits cadres (with the same function in neo-capitalism as the skilled worker had in the nineteenth-century economy). The stu-
dent really knows how miserable will be that golden future which is supposed to make up for the shameful poverty of the present.48

They inhabit an increasingly precarious social position in which the class privilege of which a university education forms part comes into conflict with the reality that their university education may not lead directly to the kinds of élite social positions it might once have done. This tension is also experienced within the day-to-day operations of the university itself. The expansion of the university and its transformation from a site of scholarly privilege into the edu-factory49 entails the introduction of new kinds of teaching, in terms of both method and matter. This means that students drawn into protest within the university—against both scholastic arcana and associated hierarchies, as well as against infantilizing social conditions—become active agents for the development of a “moderniz-
ing” view of the function of the university. They thus become the structural engineers of their own subjugation to the emerging logic of the edufactory. Such an analysis, both inspired and directly informed by thought developed within the Internationale Situationniste, prefigures to a sub-
stantial extent subsequent critical accounts of what was to take place in May ’68.

Danielle Rancière and Jacques Rancière, in their coauthored contribu-
tion to a special issue of the journal Révoltes logiques devoted to a theoretical and historical consideration of May ’68, argue that the transformation of the university was a contradictory process. Before ’68, “life was cut off
from the School,” and while there is no place for “tender feelings for the old forms of oppression,” the opening up of “School” to “life” (including the introduction of Althusser, psychoanalysis, semiology, and Foucault to the curriculum, alongside more “modern” modes of teaching and assessment) has led, they argue, to the subjugation of university teaching and research to powerful external forces (of cultural production and consumption):

Pendant que les militants de la Gauche prolétarienne proclaamaient la révolte contre le savoir bourgeois et l'autorité académique, c'est un nouveau type de savoir qui se mettait en place dans la dissemination des universités et dans la spécialisation des filières, un système moderne de développement des forces productive théoriques qui socialisait le pouvoir des professeurs. Le système des unités de valeur, du contrôle continu et des mini-mémoires marquait l'entrée de l'apprentissage universitaire dans l'âge de la rationalisation tayloriste. A l'artisanat du cours magistral et de l'examen annuel succédait une demande de production continue aussi bien pour les enseignés que pour les enseignants, déterminant un besoin d'aide extérieure.\(^{50}\)

To cast this development in terms familiar from the last chapter, the French university system had been an institution characterized by strong residual elements of a pre-Fordist conception of the relationship between education and work (that is to say, a relationship in which the relationship is neither necessary nor self-evident), in which the ideology of the disinterested professional could be nurtured in isolation from the demands of the factory and the market. It is now on the way to becoming something very different: it is no longer to be a mechanism by which a distinction between the professional and the worker is inscribed and sustained, precisely because the production system of “neocapitalism” has no particular use for such distinctions. The contradictory nature of this development may be considered from two perspectives. On the one hand it involves students studying Althusser but being encouraged to instrumentalize such study toward the demands of the very ideological state apparatuses that Althusser depicts. On the other it opens up possibilities for new kinds of class solidarity and alliances—between the traditional proletariat of the car factory and the partially proletarianized young bourgeoisie of the edu-factory. Of course it was precisely such an alliance that momentarily raised the possibility of revolution in France in 1968,
and it is toward the dissolution of the supposed distinction between worker and intellectual that much of Jacques Rancière’s subsequent writing has been directed. In the last chapter the passionate amateur turned out to be the figure under which the professional went to work at the beginning of the Fordist phase of capitalism; here in post-Fordist or neocapitalism the passionate amateur has no profession to pursue any longer and must instead invent for herself new modes of living and working, either within or against the logics of capitalist production. This is the predicament and the possibility that Godard’s La chinoise presents.

The authors of De la misère de la vie étudiante take a largely pessimistic view of the situation in the French universities before ’68, emphasizing predicament rather than possibility but noting, as it were, the possibility of possibility in light of the actions of students at Berkeley, of whom they write:

From the start they have seen their revolt against the university hierarchy as a revolt against the whole hierarchical system, the dictatorship of the economy and the State. Their refusal to become an integrated part of the commodity economy, to put their specialized studies to their obvious and inevitable use, is a revolutionary gesture. It puts in doubt that whole system of production which alienates activity and its products from their creators.51

It is precisely this possibility that the events of May ’68 were to instantiate. For Kristin Ross, in an analysis that builds on that offered by Danielle Rancière and Jacques Rancière in the piece already cited, and in subsequent writings by Jacques Rancière, the significance of the events of May ’68 lay in their being a “revolt against function”;52 not just against the increasing specialization of both work and study but against the very idea of work itself. In the present context such tendencies take shape in the idea that the passionate amateur of late Fordism is in flight from social location and that this flight might be achieved by way of theatre, a nonlocation where there is scope for pretending to be, and perhaps actually becoming, someone else and in the process moving beyond given identities of class or occupation.

For Jacques Rancière, this “refusal of work” is not a new phenomenon, however. Indeed, in Rancière’s own work on nineteenth-century labor, leisure, and education, he identifies in the French working class an attitude that resembles a recalcitrance regarding wage labor very similar to that which E. P. Thompson records in the English working class’s resis-
tance to the very process that “made” them into the working class. Rancière identifies the theatre-going habits and aspirations to make theatre among the nineteenth-century Parisian working class as an important instance of this resistance to work and to social location. He suggests that workers attending *goguettes* attend as spectators who frequently entertain the fantasy of becoming performers themselves and then devote work time to teaching themselves music and versification with this aim in mind. For Rancière, this movement of working-class people into a cultural sphere supposedly beyond that to which their formal education had prepared them “was perhaps more of a danger to the prevailing ideological order than a worker who performed revolutionary songs,” on the basis that it destabilized deeply held notions of class identity and behavior (or, in Rancière’s more recent terminology, disrupted the distribution of the sensible), producing “fissures” in which “a minority might see a line of escape from work which had become unbearable, but also from the language and behaviour of the workshop, in a word from the unbearable role of the worker-as-such,” because they thereby “develop capacities within themselves which are useless for the improvement of their material lives and which in fact are liable to make them despise material concerns.” The theatre is a particularly fertile location for this dislocation for Rancière, for precisely the same reasons for which Plato feared it: it cultivates “the habit of always being somewhere where there is nothing to do but concern oneself with matters which are not one’s own business.”

This constitutes, argues Rancière, “a spontaneous movement of deprofessionalisation [. . . ] abolishing the distance between specialist knowledge and amateur culture.” *La chinoise*—with its playful-serious autodidacts (or passionate amateurs) making theatre with apparent disregard for “material concerns”—looks like a revival of such practice in a new historical conjunction.

The revolt of 1968, as understood by Rancière, Rancière, and Ross, is more than a resistance to the terms under which labor is sold, then; it is a renewed expression of a fundamental objection to the very fact of wage labor, on the one hand, and to the agonizing distribution of the sensible that it imposes upon human life under capitalism:

What if the hazards of selling one’s labor power day after day, which elevated the worker above the domestic who had sold it once and for all and thereby alienated his life, was the very source and wellspring of an unremitting anguish associated not with working conditions and pay but with the very necessity of working itself?
It is this sentiment that also lies behind Godard’s citation of André Gorz at the very start of La chinoise: no revolution is going to be staged for the sake of pay rises or better working conditions. Revolution, or something resembling it, will only take place by way of a far more radical conflict, which Gorz himself was later to identify as characterizing the moment of ’68 and the most energetic socialist movements of the 1970s. Gorz describes this tendency as a “refusal of work,” which gave rise, in turn, in the early 1970s, in all the major capitalist economies of the West, to a “crisis of governability.” Nowhere was this crisis more evident than in Italy, where, as Gorz writes, it took

the form of industrial action radically different from the customary strikes: rejection of imposed work-rhythms; rejection of wage differentials; refusal to kow-tow to bullying foremen; self-ordained reductions in the pace of work; lengthy occupations in which bosses or trade-union leaders were held against their will; refusal to delegate negotiating power to the legal representatives of the workforce; refusal to compromise over grassroots demand; and, quite simply, refusal to work.59

As we shall see in the next chapter, some of the most influential current theorizations of the changing nature of work in “neocapitalism,” or under post-Fordism, may be traced to this “refusal to work” in Italy in the 1970s: the thought of Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and Maurizio Lazzarato, to name just three of the writers most commonly associated with the theorization of “immaterial labor,” was shaped by the politics of this moment. While the next chapter will deal with the predicament of the passionate amateur as immaterial laborer in the first decade of the twenty-first century, this one moves toward its concluding stages by identifying Godard’s passionate amateurs as predecessors of today’s precarious collectives and individuals and theatre as a way of holding in tension the only seeming contradictions between action and speech, work and play.

NOT NOT WORKING (A STRUGGLE ON TWO FRONTS)

Although it is only Yvonne who works in La chinoise, work is what everyone talks about, perhaps partly in order not to be doing it. Although, of course, with each character in turn giving an interview to camera that is largely devoted to the topic of work, the not-work in which they participate here visibly becomes a kind of work: the work of the making of this
film “en train de se faire.” Only Henri, who imagines that he will return to the “normal” Communist Party once he has found himself a job—either in Besançon or in East Germany—seems to see his future in terms of work. For the others, work—whether it be the political work of the organized party or the wage labor of Fordism (and the two of course go hand in hand, with the latter being a key location for the formation of the former)—is no longer central to their conception of life. This, rather than the pseudo-dispute over the place of (theatrical) violence in the political struggle, is the real distinction between Henri and the rest of the cell. Not between work and nonwork, however, because the making of the film and its fictional analogue in Guillaume’s socialist theatre instead constitutes a kind of not-not work. To make a film; to make theatre; to educate oneself; to make revolution is no longer work but nor is it not work. Here then is another way of describing the position of the amateur within capitalism, in terms that suggest a particular relationship with theatre (the realm of the not-not). The amateur does for pleasure (or some other personal or collective purpose) something that others do for wages. One cannot practice, as an amateur, something for which there is no corresponding professional or “work” version. To be an amateur, then, is to not-not work. The Aden-Arabie cell is thus composed of amateur revolutionaries, a new social category emerging in the context of the decline of Fordism and the concomitant decline in the organizational forms of professional politics (most particularly the trade unions and the communist parties). Inasmuch as such amateurs—lovers of the not-not—might seek to come together, to make common cause, to act collectively, they might be understood as seeking to do so as what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a “communauté désoeuvrée” or inoperative community. Nancy, writing some time after the historical moment of La chinoise (which might be understood, after the fact, as at least the beginning of the end for a certain kind of communism) but before the more widely publicized “collapse” of 1989, claims that

there is [. . .] no form of communist opposition—or let us say rather “communitarian opposition,” in order to emphasise that the word should not be restricted in this context to strictly political references—that has not been or is not still profoundly subjugated to the goal of a human community, that is, to the goal of achieving a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as their work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence as community. An absolute immanence of man to man—a humanism—and of community to community—a communism—obstinately
subtends, whatever be their merits or strengths, all forms of oppositional communism, all leftist and ultraleftist models, and all models based on the workers’ council.  

If Nancy’s critique of community is not to be neutralized as a call for an abandonment of political action in favor of a melancholy reflection upon the conditions of subjectivity, it might best be taken as a challenge to animate alternate forms of politicized sociality, such as for example the school—a kind of transient collective circumscribed in both place and time, through which one passes rather than making one’s lifework there—or even a kind of theatre company. To hold the analysis within the moment of *La chinoise*, however, is to suggest that the cellule Aden-Arabie is precisely not a community nor yet a revolutionary movement, but rather a temporary association formed with its dissolution preordained (by the end of the vacation and the return of the cousins) whose purpose is not to make a “project” but to engage temporarily in an action composed mainly of speech, to produce a way of being in conversation (at school) with one another but not fully to orient this conversation toward a concrete common goal or to subsume its potentiality to the working out or working up of action. Or, to take this a step further, it seeks to avoid the collapse of the field of aesthetic play wholly into the work of either capitalism or community or revolutionary struggle. So, at precisely the moment at which a political alliance between artists/intellectuals and workers seems to become possible and even necessary, *La chinoise* seems to articulate the idea that such an alliance should not involve the subsumption of one to the other. It insists, rather, that there is a struggle to be conducted on two fronts, a phrase Godard takes from Mao himself:

> Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically. Therefore, we oppose both works of art with a wrong political viewpoint and the tendency toward the “posters and slogan style” which is correct in political viewpoint but lacking in artistic power. On questions of literature and art we must carry on a struggle on two fronts.

This is the text from which Serge is reading aloud in a scene in *La chinoise*, in which Guillaume and Veronique sit opposite each other, absorbed in their work (reading and writing, I mean). There’s a record player on the table beyond them. Serge is walking around the apartment reading from the Mao text. “Fighting on two fronts,” muses Guillaume,
that’s too complicated, and as he speaks the music from the record player cuts in over his voice. “I don’t understand how you can do two things at once, write and listen to music,” he tells Véronique, who, after a while, stops the music and tells Guillaume, “I don’t love you any more. I no longer like your face, eyes, mouth. Nor your sweaters. And you bore me terribly.” “What’s happening. I don’t understand,” says Guillaume. “You will,” promises Véronique and puts on another record. As it plays—it sounds like Schubert this time, in a longing and melancholy register—she tells him again, “I no longer love you.” She elaborates, slowly, sadly, as the Schubert plays: “I hate the way you discuss things you know nothing about.” She seems to be taking Socrates’s view of the actor here, by the way, the actor as the worker who knows no real craft, one who concerns himself with “matters which are not one’s own business.”62 “Do you understand now?” she asks. He says he does. “Je suis vachement triste.” And then she explains: see, he can do two things at once, and he has understood it by doing it, listening to her and to the music. “Music and language.” Véronique has said that she no longer loves him, and she has not said that she no longer loves him. What’s not clear is whether this apparently infelicitous performative—an utterance that supposedly doesn’t work—has worked or not. Or what has worked, exactly. What does Guillaume now understand? He still seems “vachement triste,” and Véronique sounded ever so sincere (just like Guillaume himself, the actor, and especially with the Schubert), and now she’s said it, even if she didn’t mean it, she’s said it, and language may have done its work. In just the same unsettling way, the film’s depiction of the “revolutionaries” throughout is radically ambiguous. They mean it, and they don’t mean it. It’s theatre, and it’s for real. Or it’s not, and it’s not. What I’m suggesting, in highlighting this persistent and theatrical ambiguity at the heart of the film, is that in La chinoise it is now possible to see not some politically confused depiction of nascent revolutionary struggle and its tendencies toward violence, but instead a film that captures a moment in which it was becoming fascinatingly unclear whether revolution (and the liberation of human desire and potential that it ought to entail) would be achieved by means of proper work (in the factories, with 12 percent pay rises, or through the labor of a revolutionary party) or instead by way of an intervention on the aesthetic “front” mounted on the peculiar wager that the nonwork of theatrical work might actually work.

This is a wager that Godard’s work after 1967 suggests he was not inclined to take up. After Weekend, made in the months following production of La chinoise, and in which he (seriously?) announces the “end of
cinema” with this “film thrown on the scrap-heap,” Godard was to turn away from the mode of filmmaking whose potential he seems to have exhausted. As Colin MacCabe argues, in his biography of Godard: La chinoise, pilloried on its release in the autumn of 1967 as wildly unrealistic, has come in retrospect to foreshadow the events of the following year. Even more significantly, 1968 marked Godard’s definitive break with his previous methods of production and ushered in four years of political experimentation with film. The key point here is that the significance of La chinoise lies less in its depiction of the seeds of ’68 than in its near exhaustion of the mode of production and techniques of cinematic representation to which it still, precariously, adheres.

Until 1968 Godard had operated within what I am inclined to call the Fordian-Keynesian economy of French film production, in which subsidies against box office receipts for producers are available and in which “professional” legitimacy is a prerequisite for participation. To some extent Godard and other nouvelle vague directors constituted a reaction against aspects of this system, which they condemned for the conservative tendencies it encouraged: “cinéma de qualité,” which emphasized literary values and historical subject matter to the exclusion, for example, of nearly all contemporary social or political content, was a frequent target for the critics of Cahiers du cinéma. The work of directors such as Truffaut (the selection of whose Les quatre cent coups for the Cannes Film Festival in 1958 is often cited as the breakthrough moment for the nouvelle vague) and subsequently Godard, while made on more modest resources (the production budget for Godard’s first feature, A bout de souffle, was reported as having been about one-third of the normal production budget at the time), nevertheless depended upon the investment of producers and upon distribution through established theatres. However radical in either content or form their work may have been, it was produced and consumed like other cultural commodities—alongside the work of the Hollywood auteurs whom the nouvelle vague lionized (Ford, Hawks, Hitchcock, etc.), as well as that of the “cinéma de qualité” they so vehemently disparaged. And, as Godard was clearly coming to believe by 1967, there were, as a result, limits not only to what could be made and shown within this industrial system but also to who could make and see, and how.

His post-1968 films—first under his own name (Le gai savoir, One Plus One) and subsequently as projects of the Dziga Vertov Group (British Sounds, Pravda, Vent d’Est, Lotte in Italia, Jusque à la victoire, Vladimir and Rosa)—thus constituted an attempt, or a series of attempts, to make cin-
ema differently, to make cinema outside the established structures for “professional” filmmaking within the Fordian-Keynesian economy or, as Godard himself puts it in his 1970 manifesto “What Is To Be Done?”, to “make films politically.” They amount to “a voyage to the other side” comparable to that of Maoist intellectuals in France who immersed themselves in factory labor as part of their political struggle. It is notable, however, that none of these films take the actual political situation in France as their subject matter, addressing instead political struggles in locations such as Britain, Czechoslovakia, Italy, and Palestine: in opting out of the French system of subsidies and theatrical release, Godard and then the Dziga Vertov Group made what we might see as a paradoxical move characteristic of politically engaged artists of the neoliberal or neocapitalist society that is taking shape around them. That is, they make radical socialist cinema that depends for its production upon new entrepreneurial possibilities in a globalizing economy, such as the emergence of independent television and its franchising in the United Kingdom, for example, which created the conditions for the commissioning of British Sounds. But in a further paradox, made apparent by the perspective of the passionate amateur, these films, made “politically,” seem to reinscribe the very suture of work, collectivity, and political action that La chinoise has, as I have argued here, unpicked. The passionate amateur gives way, as the felt urgency of the political situation hails the artist to a seductive new role, that of the “professional” revolutionary, who is no longer not not working. The next chapter restores the paradoxical, in its consideration of the precarious labor of the artist in the more thoroughly developed post-Fordist economy of the early twenty-first century.