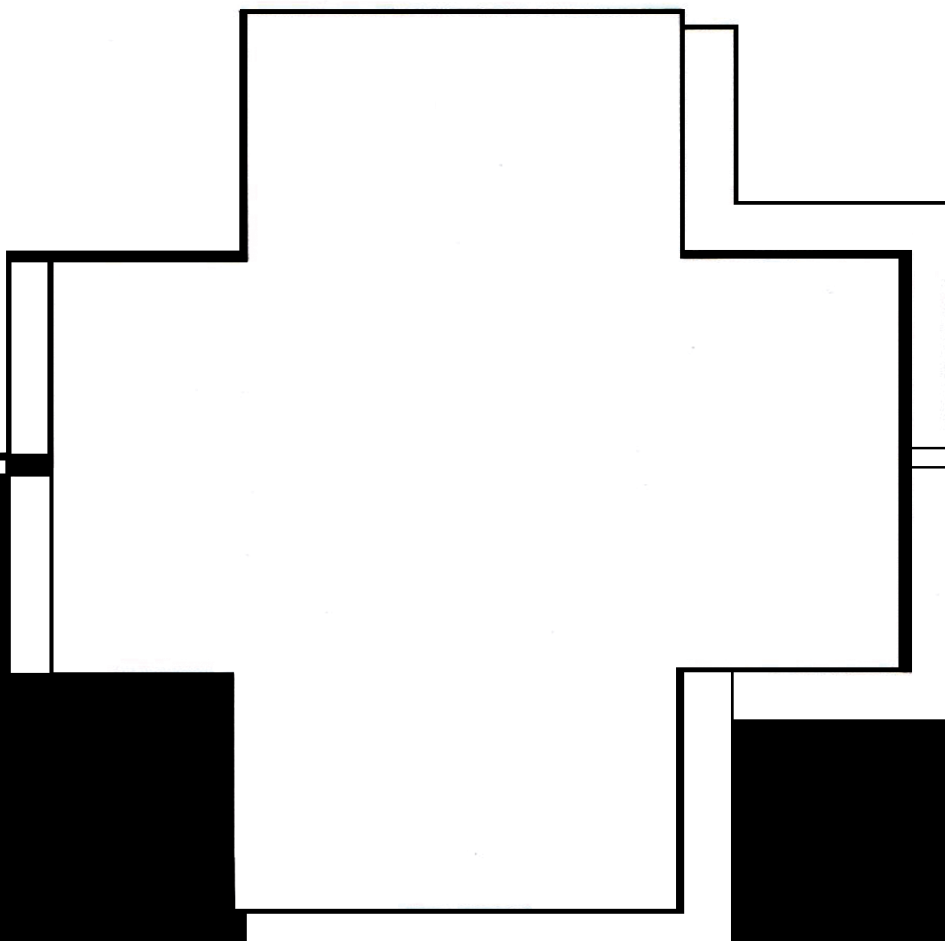


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1

Sympathy for the Dialectic

Godard's *One Plus One* and the Battle of the Brows

This essay is primarily concerned with the Rolling Stones' appearance in Jean-Luc Godard's 1968 film, *One Plus One*. And yet, it is tempting to begin with a brief discussion not of the Stones, but the Beatles, and in particular, the cover art of their 1967 album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (see fig. 1).

The cover art, co-designed by British pop artists Peter Blake and Jann Haworth, is a collage—a prominent form of modern art—but also, in a sense, a bibliography.¹ This is not to say that the Beatles cite all of the figures represented on the cover of the album, but their presence seems to indicate what is at stake in *Sgt. Pepper's*, much like



Fig. 1

(and perhaps no less cheekily than) T.S. Eliot's "Notes" to *The Waste Land*. While Eliot's collage marries the Western literary canon with ancient religious texts, in a distinctly postwar move, the Beatles dissolve the binary between high and low culture, the avant-garde and the popular. In *The Myth of Popular Culture: From Dante to Dylan*, Perry Meisel argues that this binary is, among other things, a di-

rect response to the emergence of new media technologies immediately prior to the turn of the century, and is thus central to twentieth-century critiques of art and culture. Eliot was aware of this, and one of the most noticeable

things about his "Notes" is their self-conscious appeal to the highbrow, an inauguration of high modernism in reaction to the media of the masses, from which literature, of course, must not be excluded. *Sgt. Pepper's* is one significant moment in an ongoing "Battle of the Brows," to use Meisel's phrase, on par with Andy Warhol's 32 *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) (37).² But if the Beatles, like Warhol, fail to explicitly address the political significance of this battle and its possible conclu-

sions, Godard takes these as his focus. Though the revolution may not in fact be televised, Godard concludes, it will most certainly be filmed.³

2. Meisel refers to Warhol as "postmodernism's chief avatar," finding in his silkscreen paintings of cultural figures such as Marilyn Monroe (1962-1964) and Geronimo (1986) "the locus classicus for the deconstruction of 'mass production,'" and the summary disruption of "every distinction there is, especially the difference between high and low" (71).

3. Though, Colin MacCabe notes, the first five post-'68 films

1. The cover was photographed by Michael Cooper, and art-directed by Robert Fraser.

But if the Beatles, like Warhol, fail to explicitly address the political significance of this battle and its possible conclusions, Godard takes these as his focus. Though the revolution may not in fact be televised, Godard concludes, it will most certainly be filmed.

In the following pages I argue that *One Plus One* is Godard's first attempt at making a truly dialectical film, an attempt that is ultimately thwarted by producer Iain Quarrier's final cut of the film, distributed under the title *Sympathy for the Devil*. In using the term "dialectic," I refer on the one hand to Hegel's three stages of dialectical movement: a thesis, an antithesis which negates the thesis, and a synthesis, which resolves the tension between the thesis and antithesis. Though Hegel never used these terms himself to describe the triadic nature of the dialectic, they are used extensively by Marx, for whom they constitute the basis of materialist philosophy.⁴ This Marxist revision of Hegel's dialectic, as Godard seems to understand it, describes dialectical movement as an ongoing negation of negation that is not rooted in mind, as it is for Hegel, but in material reality. Class struggle is thus central to Marx's philosophy of dialectical materialism, which holds that nothing is final or absolute, revising the Hegelian dialectic as a form of critique that is necessarily revolutionary. Marx formulates this revolutionary dialectic in Volume I of *Capital* as follows:

The capitalist mode of appropriation, which springs from the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labour of its proprietor. But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation. It does not re-establish private property, but it does indeed establish individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era: namely co-operation and the possession in common of the land and the means of production produced by labour itself. (929)

were made for a television audience (see MacCabe 216).

4. See especially Chapter 2 ("The Metaphysics of Political Economy") of Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, trans. H. Quelch (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1995) 112-92.

In the Postface to the Second Edition of *Capital*, Marx attributes the revolutionary essence of dialectical materialism to its regard of "every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion," therefore grasping "its transient aspect" (103).

I want to argue that it is this fluid theory of history to which Godard attempts to give cinematic expression in *One Plus One*, but by editing Godard's film such that its dialectic is formally resolved, Quarrier provides a solution to the mathematical expression *One Plus One* that is left unsolved in Godard's original title and cut of the film. In becoming *Sympathy for the Devil*, the film loses its revolutionary potential. It is not only the form of *One Plus One* that is dialectical, but its content as well: namely, popular culture circa 1968. The tension between revolution and rock-and-roll explored by Godard in *One Plus One* is replaced with a false equivalency in *Sympathy for the Devil* that undermines not only Godard's vision of political cinema, but a conception of popular culture as inherently dialectical. Before turning to an analysis of Godard's film, then, I would like to briefly discuss Meisel's conception of the "Battle of the Brows," a dialectical reading of popular culture which *One Plus One* can be seen to anticipate.

Meisel's stated polemical target in *The Myth of Popular Culture* is the claim of Theodor Adorno in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* that popular culture is not dialectical. The "Battle of the Brows," for Meisel, describes a history of critical approaches to the distinction between the high and the low which culminates in Bob Dylan, in comparison to whom no "single cultural figure since Shakespeare, except perhaps for Freud, is as 'dialectical' . . . Dylan is all dialectic" (9). Meisel attempts to read Adorno dialectically, or "against himself" (45), in order to show that Adorno's evaluation of jazz as "the false liquidation of art" (132) in opposition to the dialectics of "higher music" in "relation to its historical form" (Meisel 26) reveals a dialectical conception of popular music which in fact contradicts Adorno's thesis. Meisel writes:

Adorno's description of dialectic is stirring—classical music "catches fire on those forms, melts them down, makes them vanish and return in vanishing." So, even by Adorno's own description, does jazz. If the history of jazz is anything, it is "dialectical." Far from using its "types as empty" . . . jazz and its musical heirs take the "forms" that enable them as their very subject. This includes the classical time signatures from which they depart. They "return in vanishing." (50)⁵

5. Additionally, Meisel points out, even "the distinction between

For Meisel, jazz is necessarily dialectical as an American art form in that America has suffered from an anxiety of British influence from its very beginnings. Dylan, “Bluesman and Anglophile . . . brings rock to its classic phase by becoming wholly transatlantic—by becoming literary as well as musical, ‘high,’ as it were, as well as ‘low’” (Meisel 173). The dialectic is resolved, Meisel argues, when Dylan upsets the expectations of folk purists at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, donning an electric guitar, and thus crossing “the Atlantic of the Middle Passage with the Atlantic of the Grand Tour” (173). American culture, then, has always been engaged in dialectics of tradition, race, class, and gender, whose completion Meisel locates in rock and roll—a “stringent aestheticism” initiated by John Keats, of all people (132). Meisel arrives at this conclusion by noting the irony of the British Invasion allowing “American music to address its ‘popularity’ at its source—not at its African American origin, but as with any American cultural enterprise, at its British origin” (144). While Meisel stops short at declaring rock and roll as an end of history (he goes on to acknowledge the later significance of reggae and hip hop, among other phenomena, to contemporary popular culture), his dialectic finds resolution in a synthesis of transatlantic exchange.

Godard, a Frenchman directing a film about British rock stars and African-American revolutionaries, outright refuses the completion of the dialectic, envisioning the revolution as an international movement. The conflicts between various media and the categories of high and low, in particular, have been central themes in Godard’s work since Michel Poiccard’s (Jean-Paul Belmondo) mimicry of Humphrey Bogart in 1960’s *À bout de souffle*, Godard’s first feature. But his insistent unwillingness to accept synthesis or resolution results in *One Plus One*’s most notorious extra-textual moment. Colin MacCabe reports that the shoot “was marked by constant rows” between Godard and Quarrier (212).⁶ This quarrelling between director and producer became particularly heated over the decision whether to include in the final cut the full rendition of “Sympathy for the Devil,” the track which the Stones variously de- and re-construct in the scenes of the film shot in the London studio where the band recorded

‘form’ and ‘material’ in any kind of music is misleading, since music has no semantic plane that it signifies, only a series of ‘formal’ ones. The ‘vulgarity’ that Adorno assigns to ‘popular music’ is unfounded. What is vulgar is the analysis and the presupposition” (50).

6. In addition to producing the film, Quarrier appears onscreen, emphatically reading from the pages of *Mein Kampf* in a pornographic bookstore.



Fig. 2

its 1968 LP, *Beggars Banquet*. Godard’s cut of the film, MacCabe notes, does not contain a complete version of the song, “which leaves the film intentionally incomplete, inviting the audience to add *One Plus One* for themselves” (212). In a move all too befitting of the producer’s role, Quarrier misunderstood or at the very least disagreed with Godard’s vision and recut the film such that it ends with a full take of the song, retitling his edit *Sympathy for the Devil*. “At the opening night of the London Film Festival,” MacCabe writes, “Godard disowned the producer’s cut and invited the audience to see his own version of the film being projected outside. As he was leaving the cinema, he punched his producer” (212). Andrew Sarris adds that Godard, holding a check to cover the cost of renting the theatre, interrupted Quarrier as he presented the film, instructing the audience to recoup their admittance fee and donate it to the Eldridge Cleaver fund, calling those who refused “bourgeois fascists” (52).

Such vitriol was by no means uncommon for Godard during this, his “revolutionary period,” which begins with his declaration of the “end of cinema” in the closing credits of 1967’s *Week-end* (see fig. 2), an announcement which serves as the break between the earlier, narrative period of Godard’s career as a pioneer of the *Nouvelle Vague*, through his work with Jean-Pierre Gorin in the Dziga Vertov Group in the 1970s. And yet, in later interviews, Godard refers to *One Plus One* as his “last bourgeois film” (qtd. in Totaro); as such, many critics have considered it part of a “transitional” trilogy along with *Week-end* and *La Chinoise* (1967) (Totaro).⁷ Though I by no means intend

7. See, for instance, MacCabe 213; Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012) 68; Steve Cannon, “‘When you’re not a worker yourself . . .’: Godard, the Dziga Vertov Group and the audience,” *100 Years of European Cinema: Entertainment or Ideology*, eds. Diana Holmes and Alison Smith (Manchester:

to take Godard at his word, the ways in which *One Plus One* presents itself as a non-bourgeois film and, in Quarrier's cut, fails in its attempt to do so serve as an accurate metonym for the fallout of 1960s revolutionary fervour.

One Plus One—Godard's first English-language film, shot entirely in London—is itself a battle of the brows, or as Friedrich Kittler would have it, a war fought between “different media, information technologies, data flows” (xli). The film was shot in the summer of 1968, just weeks after the political upheavals in France, and simultaneous with the subsequent fading away of widespread revolutionary sentiments amongst students and workers, despite various radical aftershocks. As MacCabe tells it, Godard came to London that summer with plans to cast John Lennon in a Leon Trotsky biopic. The project fell through after two meetings with Godard left the Beatles “suspicious”: “The Rolling Stones,” MacCabe writes, “proved more amenable” (211). In his 2010 autobiography, Keith Richards notes that the Stones were no less suspicious: bemoaning the film in retrospect, he remembers Godard looking like a “French bank clerk” (252), a misfit even in a crowd of misfits:

Where the hell did he think he was going? He had no plan at all except to get out of France and score a bit of the London scene . . . I mean, why, of all people, would Jean-Luc Godard be interested in a minor hippie revolution in England and try to translate it into something else? I think somebody slipped him some acid and he went into that phony year of ideological overdrive. (252)

Godard's supposed squareness notwithstanding, “a minor hippie revolution in England” is only one part of the film's focus, and only if one is willing to grant the Stones revolutionary status.⁸ Formally, the film is composed of ten episodes, each approximately ten minutes long. While Godard does cut between four different diegetic spaces—the Stones' recording studio, a Black Panther-occupied junkyard, a pornographic bookshop, and the adventures of Eve Democracy (played by Anne Wiazemsky, Godard's then-wife) as she spray-paints the streets of London—within each scene there are no cuts. Rather, the film is composed mostly of long takes, each of which is marked by what Brian Henderson describes as “a long, slow tracking shot that moves purely laterally—usually in one direction only

. . . sometimes doubling back . . . over a scene that does not itself move, or strictly speaking, that does not move in any relation to the camera's movement” (2). This is a technique Godard first uses at length in *Week-end*, and which Henderson identifies as Godard's “non-bourgeois camera style” (2).⁹ Tracking relentlessly, refusing to rest on any single, fixed point, this dialectical movement of the camera is most prominent in the studio sequences, as Godard frames each of the Stones one at a time, allowing the viewer to add one plus one (Mick, plus Keith, plus Brian, plus Bill, plus Charlie) as they themselves add one plus one (guitar, bass, drums, vocals, etc.). Camerawork aside, the film's internal competition between various media—literature, music, and film itself—reveals that the dialectics of *One Plus One* and with them, Godard seems to be saying, the dialectics of revolution, are dependent upon the dialectical nature of the forms of popular culture that, together, make up the film.

In the first place, the viewer of Godard's film is confronted with the Stones in the studio, recording “Sympathy for the Devil.” As Richards notes, it was only by chance that the Stones happened to be working on that song while Godard was filming (see Richards 253). This contingency, though, is significant for a number of reasons. “Sympathy for the Devil” is the first cut on *Beggars Banquet*, but it is not the most explicitly political song on the record. That would be “Street Fighting Man,” which was released as the album's first single on August 31st, 1968, just a couple of days after the riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Mick Jagger wrote the song in response to the arrest of Tariq Ali at an anti-war

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Manchester UP 2000) 102; and Neil Archer, *The French Road Movie: Space, Mobility, Identity* (New York: Berghahn, 2013) 7.

8. MacCabe notes that there are no accounts of Godard using drugs during this period (see MacCabe 211).

9. Given the film's structure as a whole, this leads Donato Totaro to identify a close structural resemblance between *One Plus One* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948).

rally at the US embassy in London that March (see Janovitz 140), and the song's opening lyric certainly evokes the spirit of revolution: "Everywhere I hear the sound of marching charging feet, boy, / 'Cause summer's here and the time is right for fighting in the street, boy" ("Street Fighting Man"). The content of "Sympathy for the Devil" is revolutionary, too—Lucifer did stick "around in St. Petersburg" when he "saw it was time for a change," killing "the Czar and his ministers," after all—however, it is the song's form that is truly dialectical.

According to Richards, "Sympathy for the Devil" transformed "after many takes from a Dylanesque, rather turgid folk song into a rocking samba—from a turkey into a hit—by a shift of rhythm, all recorded in stages by Jean-Luc. The voice of [producer] Jimmy Miller can be heard on the film, complaining, 'Where's the groove?' on the earlier takes" (252). If the Dylanesque folk song is, as Meisel argues, a dialectic between the English lyrical ballad and the African American blues tradition, then the song's transition into a samba—a Brazilian genre which, like blues, has its roots in West African slave traditions—ought to be considered an analogously dialectical movement, recorded within Godard's film (see Meisel 173). After the film's first episode ends, the second begins in a junkyard on the Thames, where a group of black militants have stockpiled guns and ammunition used off-screen to murder three young white women dressed in white gowns closely resembling the poet shirts that Jagger and Richards, longhaired and svelte, wear at various points in the studio sessions. The militants are not mere brutes; they are intellectuals: the audience sees them read, record, and rewrite seminal texts of Black Power literature. Interestingly enough, the reading of the first of these texts, LeRoi Jones's *Blues People* begins, "What has been called 'classic blues' was the result of more diverse sociological and musical influences" (81), leading Jones to argue that the history of black assimilation in the United States is interwoven with and inseparable from the history of black music.¹⁰ Godard's viewer, then, is exposed to a negation of Meisel's version of Dylan's dialectic: the African-American militants read and write literature as the white English aesthetes play and record blues music.

This conflict between different media and traditions of high and low only becomes more complex as the film progresses. No one medium is uninterrupted by another. The sound of the Stones' strumming and drumming is al-

lowed to bleed over into other scenes not set in the studio, which frees the sound of the music from the images of its recording and, in effect, puts them in competition with one another.¹¹ All of the film's sequences are interrupted by a disembodied narrator, Sean Lynch, who reads from the pages of a non-existent novel as the voice of literature with a capital "L"—a novel whose words, for the most part, have no immediate connection to the images that appear onscreen. Godard, throughout the film, cuts to another scene before Eve Democracy is allowed to finish spray-painting her various urban canvases, leaving her graffiti incomplete. In the film's final scene, Godard exposes *One Plus One* as film *qua* film: the director douses Eve Democracy herself with a bucket of red paint—or fake blood, perhaps—causing her to collapse on a crane, upon which is mounted a film camera: in Godard's version, presumably, a camera which is still filming. Implicit in Godard's film is the argument that the revolutionary activities captured by his camera mean nothing if they are not presented with a revolutionary aesthetic. Form and content, medium and message, must all unite for the dialectic to remain unresolved and for revolution to be possible.

Yet in Quarrier's version of the film, the dialectic is resolved: the final cut of "Sympathy for the Devil" plays in the background, to completion, and the frame freezes on Eve's corpse, posed in pieta (see fig. 3). The composition of the frame simultaneously evokes two famous paintings of the French Revolution: Eugène Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830) fig. 4) and Jacques-Louis David's

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10. By the time of Godard's film, Jones was already going by the name of Amiri Baraka, by which he is most well known today.

11. The separation of sound and image here is quite literal as Godard did not mic the studio himself, but rather used Jimmy Miller's tapes of the sessions as the soundtrack for the Stones' segments of the film.

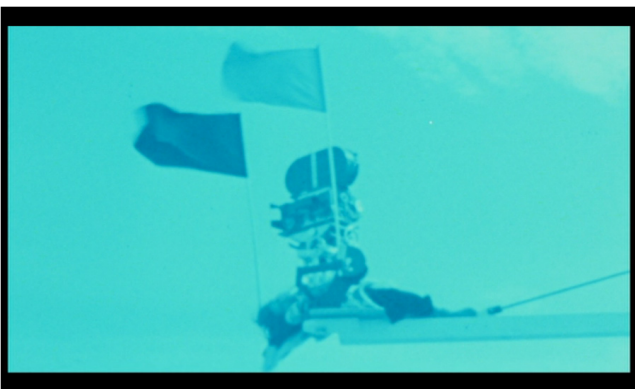


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

La Mort de Marat (1793) (fig. 5).¹² The freeze frame and the final cut of the song—not to mention Quarrier’s title for the film, *Sympathy for the Devil*—disallow the possibility that *One Plus One* can exist as a film in progress, as Godard insists as his intended goal in *La Chinoise*, bringing the film to an end, and with it, the dialectic and the revolutions of 1968.

What is the revolutionary potential of media, the dialectic of their competition? This is the question that Godard’s film provokes and Quarrier’s cut undermines. In his reading of Godard’s *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988), Richard Neer quotes a passage from Godard’s 1965 science fiction film, *Alphaville*: “Once we know the number 1, we believe we know the number 2, because 1 plus 1 makes 2. But we have forgotten that firstly we have to know the meaning of ‘plus’” (135). In this respect, it is no coincidence that Eve Democracy’s graffiti is, despite Quarrier’s edits, left incomplete and therefore dialectical: Godard’s title for the film, Sarris notes, originates as “a slogan that French students wrote on the wall of the Sorbonne during the revolt of May, 1968, while the producers felt that the title *Sympathy for the Devil* would have more familiarity

to patrons” (52). Neer concludes from his reading that the key to Godard’s “radical” montage — and with it, his

conception of history—is not in the juxtaposition (i.e. the “plus,” the addition), but in the counting: one plus one makes one plus one, not two (171). In closing then, I will offer three *ones*, a dialectic escaping the confines of Godard’s film.

One: *Beggars Banquet*’s original album cover (fig. 6)—at one and the same time graffiti, Eve Democracy’s art, and a collage—like *Sgt. Pepper’s* and, in effect *One Plus One*, which when considered only visually, as a series of images, is montage, but as a competition between media which flattens all frequencies, collage. It is, admittedly, somewhat more salacious on both counts. Both Decca Records in England and London Records in the US (itself a dialectic?) rejected the cover design, but the Stones refused to change it, delaying the release of the record by several months (Schinder 217).¹³

One: the replacement cover art (fig. 7), chosen in November of 1968, just weeks prior to the release of the Beatles’ self-titled record—their first since *Sgt. Pepper’s*—

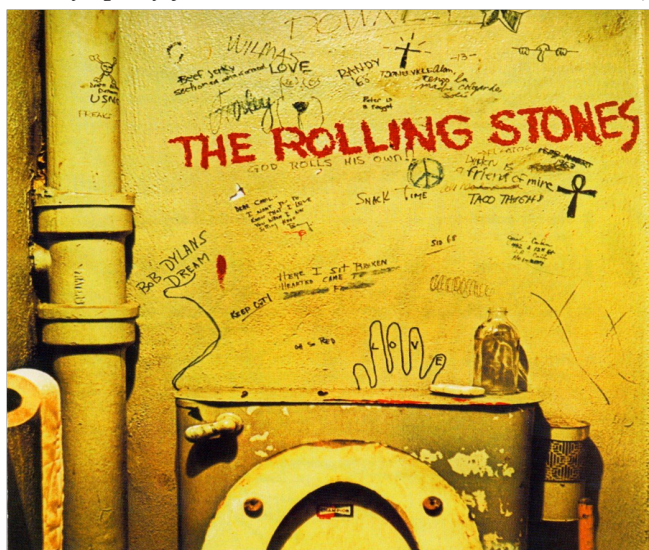


Fig. 6

12. Sarris notes that the use of tinted gels in this frame is rather uncharacteristic of Godard’s cinematographic style (see Sarris 52).

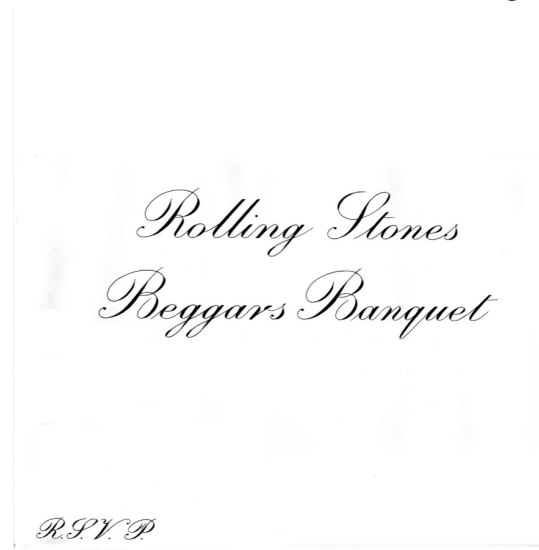


Fig. 7

13. The original *Beggars Banquet* artwork was reinstated with the album’s release on CD in 1984.

better known as *The White Album*, eliciting accusations of plagiarism on the Stones' part.

One: *The White Album*, a double LP (fig. 8)—minimalist to the eye, maximalist to the ear. Where the form and content of *Sgt. Pepper's* enacts a conceit involving a many-membered band of figures live and dead, fictional and real, spreading a gospel of psychedelic oneness and

The BEATLES

Fig 8

transcendent love, *The White Album* presents a blank declaration of unity ("The Beatles") which belies its content: thirty disjointed tracks, performed not by a group, but by four individuals—the record of a band falling apart. No longer the Fab Four, the Beatles of 1968 are John plus Paul plus George plus Ringo, and the musical and political 1960s comes to an end with schism disguised as a united front. Even as Godard, the Marxist, preaches class solidarity, his practice as a filmmaker demands that art must reflect material reality in a way that does not formally render that reality more abstract. It is likely that today we still do not know the meaning of *plus*, despite Godard's best efforts. His career as a filmmaker continues, decades after his revolutionary period, and indeed will never end — as Michel Foucault reminds us, an oeuvre can never be deemed complete (see Foucault 24). If *One Plus One* is thesis, *Sympathy for the Devil* its antithesis, and Marx's theory of history holds true, a non-bourgeois cinema will yet arise — if it hasn't already, if such a thing is in fact possible. The negation will continue to be negated: there is no need to rush toward *two*.

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