Scott Durham

It “goes without saying,” as Roland Barthes long ago observed, that what is denounced as jargon is the language—and, more specifically, the theory—of the Other. To characterize a piece of critical writing as “jargon-ridden” is not merely to describe the discourse of the other as meaningless (as one might argue etymologically, with reference to its original meaning, which described the warbling of birds). Of course, such a characterization is, at bottom, almost never merely a description, but an accusation, which does not aim so much to remark upon a lack of conceptual coherence or clarity in the language of a writer, as to charge the writer him or herself (to use the term once applied by the redoubtable Sorbonne professor Raymond Picard to Barthes’s now classic work *On Racine*) of a “fraud”—an attempt to deceive or mystify by the use of words pretending to be more significant than they are. Such an accusation establishes a moral distance between the accuser and the accused, not only in the sense that the accuser claims to unmask the deception of the other’s language, but also in the sense that this accusation implies a community of pure and meaningful speech that the accuser is defending from its corruption or subversion by the group (be it composed of Marxists or deconstructionists, feminist theorists or postcolonial critics) which, by its use of the academic equivalent of a Masonic code comprehensible only to its adherents, calls the authority and unity of that community into question.

The dismissal of the other’s language as “jargon” has the undeniable advantage of allowing the speaker to dispense with a specific critique of the other’s theoretical concepts and, indeed, with anything resembling an argument. Rather than engage the accused by making the case for the superiority of an alternative set of critical terms, the accuser wraps his or her refusal (or, perhaps, incapacity) to engage the arguments of the adversary in a cloak of moral superiority. This refusal to be drawn into debate may be delivered in a tone of righteous indignation at the threat to civilization represented by the accused critic’s subversion of cultural norms or, alternatively, in one of ironic superiority to the supposed ugliness of the accused’s language: both are descendants of the petit-bourgeois anti-intellectual mockery which was once directed, not at “high theory,” but at “modern art.”

This is not, of course, to say, that jargon cannot be the object of a rigorous critique. In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Theodor Adorno elaborates just such a critique of the pervasive cultural authority in postwar Germany of a degraded Heideggerian language, that “Wurlitzer organ of the spirit” through which even the most instrumental practice can be dressed up as an existential “commitment” and the most bureaucratized of “encounters” can be imbued with the mystique of the auristic. But Adorno does the real work of unmasking what he sees as the underlying ideological function of this language, never refusing to read the jargon in question nor merely dismissing it as meaningless. On the contrary, his critique turns on the disparity between the overcharged metaphysical meanings evoked by existential jargon (meanings which are, if anything,
too painstakingly unpacked by Adorno in his book) and the historical and cultural situation in which its archaic pieties are mobilized.

What Adorno calls “the jargon of authenticity,” with its implicit claim to be grounded in an authentic experience beyond the reach of the market and instrumental reason, seems to promise an alternative to the “degraded” experience of capitalist modernity. But, Adorno argues, because the proponents of the jargon lay claim to an immediate experience of authenticity without challenging the social and institutional forms—mass production, bureaucratic rationality, the culture industry and, least acknowledged of all, “unfree labor” (17)—of which it is the inevitable by-product, this promise of a true existence becomes, objectively, a lie. Indeed, as Adorno notes, the jargon’s repetition of slogans suggesting a rootedness in artisanal or rural origins which no longer exist except to be touted as rarities “on that market for which what is rare has exchange value” (44) is “surprisingly similar to the habitual practices of advertising” (43), especially to the marketing of those products represented as authentically artisanal, down-home, or (in more recent years) indigenous. Both advertising and the priestly language of the jargon, Adorno argues, “exploit the happiness promised by that which had to pass on to the shadows” (44). Taken together, they are the high and low-cultural extremes of a moment of linguistic inflation in which, as the “authentic” experience promised by existential language recedes into the historical past, the volume of the accompanying mood music of authenticity has, by way of compensation, had to be turned up. In this context, the language of authenticity reveals itself to be, not so much a critique of the modern, as “a waste product of the modern that it attacks” (45).

For Adorno, this jargon is thus primarily defined, not morally, as a “fraud,” but historically, by the disparity between a language of authenticity, truth and rootedness on the one hand, and the non-existence, in its specific historical conjuncture, of its pre-modern referent on the other. But this disparity does not concern only the relationship of philosophical language to what is outside it. It is immanent to philosophical language itself, which has, both in its social function and in its form, become merely one more cultural product alongside those that its high-minded content only seems to denounce.

In this historical situation, a philosophy of authenticity could only remain true to itself by transforming itself into something else: social and ideological critique. Any such critique worthy of the name would, however, have to reflect upon its own assimilation to the cultural practices and linguistic forms of the “inauthentic” existence from which it seeks to distance itself. And, in doing so, those thinkers who traffic in authenticity would be bound to call into question, and ultimately to dissolve, the very aura that endows their language with authority.

One might think that the intensity of these polemics concerning jargon in literary criticism and philosophy is, in part at least, attributable to the fact that both are so deeply concerned with language as such. In this light, the hollow resonance of the “jargons” of philosophical and critical thought would appear, not merely as a matter of shoddy scholarly practice or intellectual pretentiousness, but as the symptom of a more general degradation both of language as a privileged object of thought and, with the decline of its supreme form of expression, of the authority of critical thought itself. But it is, unexpectedly, in a film (one roughly contemporaneous with *The Jargon of Authenticity*), that the uncertain authority of critical and philosophical language in
relation to the everyday experience of which it speaks finds one of its most striking expressions. For, without making any claims of direct influence, Godard’s *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967) may usefully be read as extending the logic of Adorno’s historical critique of jargon to an analysis of the place of critical thought in general in an emerging postmodernity.

The reflections of Heidegger himself on language are, curiously enough, alluded to in *Two or Three Things*: “Mama,” asks Christophe, “what is language?” to which Juliette replies: “Language is the house in which man dwells.” But by having his heroine cite Heidegger’s notion of language as the “house of being” in the context of the shabby public housing project “inhabited” as much by consumer products and their images as by Juliette and her family, Godard foregrounds the same historical disparity identified by Adorno. He obliges us to reconsider how the authentic relationship to being so central to Heidegger’s thought might find a place in the fallen language of advertising and mass culture which suffuses every aspect of Godard’s Paris.

As in Adorno, this is in part a matter of reflecting on the implausibility of the promise of authentic experience in what one hesitates to call, to use Husserl’s term, the “lifeworld” of postmodernity. This implausibility is underscored visually by Godard’s juxtaposition of the uninhabitable space of a postmodern Paris under construction with voice-overs in which Juliette speaks lyrically of her vague memory of something like the experience evoked in Baudelaire’s *Correspondances*. Juliette is still haunted by the memory or dream of a landscape (“paysage”) that looks back at us like another face (“visage”) in a movement of mutual recognition and identification. In this aspect, the heroine of *Two or Three Things* can be said to offer, like *Contempt* (1963), a last nostalgic look backward at modernist nostalgia for authentic experience.

But it is also a matter of thinking the new “being” of language itself, which, no less than the images of the new consumer culture, flows indiscriminately among social spheres that, in the earlier moment of modernity, would have remained separate from one another: thus the language of Heidegger appears alongside the promotional language of Madame Express without any need being felt to mediate between formerly distinct spheres of language and thought, just as the bellicose pronouncements of Lyndon Johnson regarding Vietnam (as parodied by Jules Pfeiffer) circulate in the same logosphere as both the advertisements for detergents (which appear here as another aspect of American global dominance) and the philosophical reflections of the dishwashing Juliette herself on the nature of time (which might be seen, if not as a nascent site of resistance to the dominant forms of thought and life, at least as the beginning of a process of reflection and critique.)

There are three aspects of this new situation of language which, it seems to me, are related, without being reducible to, the relationship of what some might call jargon to the problem of social and cultural critique. First, the relationships among the various languages that coexist within a given space (for example, Juliette’s apartment) are not primarily relations of communication or translation. To ask Madame Express what she means when she says a pair of stockings “render indecent dresses decent” would, as Dennis Dutton might say, be “beside the point.” This is not because of an intent on the part of the speakers to mystify or intimidate (although some of them may, of course, be
doing this as well), but because each linguistic fragment cited here (whether it is drawn from advertising and American militarism, or from philosophy and high culture) appears primarily as an element of a sociolect which marks it as belonging to a distinct social praxis or subsystem, each of which has its own distinct logic and imperatives.

One of the things that marks this film as postmodern is, however, precisely the fact that the languages corresponding to these practices coexist within the same space, as they are no longer segregated into the opposing spheres presupposed by so many of the cultural strategies characteristic of modernity. Juliette’s apartment, for example, is no longer a private domestic interior that might be opposed to the public worlds of the market and the state, but a point of intersection through which flow multiple languages and images associated with the most distant domains of social praxis (most famously, of course, those associated with the war in Vietnam). Indeed, it is the language one speaks (rather than the place from which one speaks) that is the most immediate indicator of the practice in which one finds oneself, as when Gérard moves from the language of the brothel (“Only seven minutes more”) to that of story-time (“…We’re going to read a little story….”), thus performing the almost instantaneous transformation of the brothel into the daycare center it had, in fact, also been all along. The movement between languages in this context is not defined by communication or translation, but by code switching between coexisting but non-communicating sociolects—a situation for which “language” might seem a less appropriate term than Foucault’s “discourse”, which is defined by the series of its pragmatic relations and effects, and which is not grounded in a pre-existing meaningful totality, except insofar as the latter appears as the strategic effect of local interventions and relations.

And yet there is a common substance that allows all of these dispersed discourses to coexist without communicating: namely, their existence as commodities, which is what permits all of these mutually unintelligible codes to circulate alongside one another in the first place. Godard’s central figure of universal prostitution does not, after all, concern only people, but also the objects and cultural artifacts that, as the voice-over observes, often “exist more than persons.” This is, as we have already suggested, most strikingly the case with critical language itself, which appears only insofar as it has been mediated by a cultural market that endows it with a value and a function that are not in any sense subordinated to the intention of its author. This is foregrounded in Godard’s ambiguous use of cultural commodities as titles in the film. When we see, early in the film, a close-up of the cover of Raymond Aron’s *18 Lessons on Industrial Society*, it is not entirely clear to what extent this title is meant to describe this section of the film, or perhaps even the film as a whole, and to what extent it remains one object among others in Juliette’s world, a paperback representative of the mass marketing of high cultural goods to the masses. But, of course, this ambiguity is not primarily a meaning “intended” by Godard. Godard is only underscoring an objective (but generally tactfully unmentioned) aspect of any high-cultural product—including the very film in which it appears, which is at once a commentary on commodification and a commodity itself. Any attempt at philosophical or critical reflection about social life—and, in this, Godard’s problems echo the broader concerns of the Adorno of *Negative Dialectics*—will thus have to take its starting point from the fact that the very tools with which we think have in some sense been contaminated by those processes that it is their task to critique or interpret. Nowhere is this truer than when critical thought confronts its own
commodified image—the double which is both the objectified social existence of that thought as a commodity and the embodiment of the very form against which, if it is to remain critical thought, it must persist in thinking.

All language in *Two or Three Things* is thus doubly condemned to function as a jargon: it is spoken, first, as the local code or sociolect of the practice or subsystem to which it belongs (which is not immediately translatable into the others), and, second, as an element of what is perhaps still more opaque to a viewer or reader focused on the intrinsic meaning of a cultural document or work of art such as, the language of commodities. In this historical conjuncture—which is the moment of postmodernity generally—no language can lay claim to the authority of an authentic language outside of or beyond jargon. On the contrary, we are surrounded by all of these dead or artificial languages that are indiscriminately recopied in *Two or Three Things* by the resurrected figures of Flaubert’s Bouvard and Pécuchet, who, in their staging, *avant la lettre*, of Jameson’s notion (ultimately derived from Adorno’s analysis of modern music) of postmodern style as pastiche, perhaps offer, in this regard, the most authentic expression of the reality of postmodern experience.

If there is a resistance on the part of critical thought in Godard’s films of this period to what Henri Lefebvre was then calling “the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption”—which Godard describes, in less “jargon-laden” terms, as “an enormous comic-strip”—it takes place, not within language itself, but in the interstices between language and image and, above all, in the resistance of the image to language. This privileging of the image is not, of course, attributable to some authentic or aural quality, which would suffuse it with the originary light of truth. For the image as we come upon it in postmodernity is, as in a comic strip, if anything, more commodified and functionalized than the language that attempts to narrate and command it. But Godard seeks out an excess in the image which is irreducible to the functions attributed to it by its associated languages, a potentiality for transformation which is revealed, as Deleuze insists, in the relation “between two images”—in the passage from one image to another which is also the time of a becoming, as in the passage from the images of the French workers’ struggle to those of the Portuguese in *Comment ça va* (1978). In speaking of *Two or Three Things*, Godard remarks that “to describe modern life … is to observe mutations,” but his later works also remind us that, if we are no longer aware of the potential for mutation that surrounds us, it is perhaps because we no longer remember how to describe or observe. We have all become as blind as the newscasters whose inevitable position is in front of images appearing behind them, or like the journalist of *Comment ça va*, who speaks interminably of an image he does not examine and cannot describe. And doesn’t this remain the project of the less overtly political Godard of recent years—to resist the “collapse” of the gaze (*In Praise of Love*, 2001), by creating, as in *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1988–1998), new mutations of the remembered image, which are only then followed by the new histories that are spoken in their wake?

But if we were to follow Godard in this, it would be perverse to denounce any particular school of film criticism in the name of a well-founded language of film history or interpretation which might claim to defend itself against the alien importations of critical or theoretical jargon. For no critical language speaking about cinema can appear as anything but alien, artificial and distant from its referent when confronted with the
radical (but, in its fidelity to the cinema as such, undoubtedly more “authentic”) claim of Godard that the only “true” way of telling the history of cinema is through the means of cinema itself—through a continuing transformation of its archival images which would at once constitute a new memory of film history and offer a critique of cinema as it has historically existed.

Failing this, the critic or philosopher of film has a choice. On the one hand, the language of film criticism can speak with images—that is, offer a description or taxonomy of their immanent effects and potentials for mutation. But wouldn’t this require, as in the case of Deleuze, the invention of new concepts that do not presuppose the representational forms and historical schemas imported from the critical discourses of other fields? And isn’t it precisely the articulation of such new concepts that others are most apt to denounce as jargon? On the other hand, it can also speak (as, indeed, do many films, Godard’s among them) against images—against the postmodern “culture of the image” as it exists, but perhaps also against the “mindless fascination” with images in general that postmodernity has brought to a heretofore unimaginable level of intensity—a fascination which, as Fredric Jameson suggests, is apt to leave us speechless. But in the latter case, are we not also condemned—as Jameson argues in the very sentence for which an uncomprehending Denis Dutton convicts him of “bad writing”—to an inauthentic language which necessarily “[betrays] its object”?12

In either case, the historically authentic choice of the film critic is not between a well-founded or pure language and an impure jargon, but between a plurality of impure and unfounded discourses. And if, as critics and interpreters of contemporary culture, we are thus obliged, paradoxically, to defend the historical “authenticity” of so-called jargon, then perhaps the fault lies neither in our perversity nor in our pretensions, but, precisely, in the historical situation in which we find ourselves as critics—confronting the postmodernity in and against which we must speak.

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Notes

3. In *Criticism and Truth*, Barthes notes the “immediately and apparently instinctively collective character” of the attacks on the “new criticism” (30), which he likens to rites of exclusion.

4. Within the academy, such denunciations are apt to be presented as a disinterested defense of clarity in the exchange of ideas, although, especially when they are associated with the right-wing campaign against the “professoriate”, their prosecutorial language tends to mobilize the rhetoric of inquisition. Thus, Denis Dutton, a New Zealand-based American philosophy professor and blogger best known for organizing a “Bad Writing Contest” with “winners” such as Fredric Jameson and Judith Butler, makes an effort, in his oft-cited intervention, to maintain a tone of wry superiority in his denunciation of academic jargon. But his op-ed piece on the topic is nonetheless characteristically entitled “Language Crimes” and published in that refuge for well-reasoned and disinterested philosophical reflection, *The Wall Street Journal*. Thus Dutton’s essay, although written by a member of the very “professoriate” it denounces, like water, finds its own intellectual level in this reservoir of neoconservative reaction. (See Denis Dutton, “Language Crimes: A Lesson in How Not to Write, Courtesy of the Professoriate,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 5, 1999).

Toward the end of “Language Crimes,” Dutton cites an admittedly overwrought (but hardly meaningless) sentence of Butler’s for the crime of what another suspiciously clever theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, might have called symbolic violence. “To ask what this means is to miss the point,” he declares, suggesting that theorists such as Butler use obscurantist language as a cudgel to “[beat] readers into submission....” “Actual communication,” he concludes, “has nothing to do with it.” But this accusation makes it quite explicit that it is the accuser, not those he accuses, who axiomatically excludes the possibility of communication with his adversaries, to the point of explicitly refusing even to consider what they might mean by what they say. This raises the question posed by Barthes in “Blind and Dumb Criticism”: “…If one fears or despises so much the philosophical foundations of a book, and if one demands so insistently the right to understand nothing about them and to say nothing on the subject, why become a critic? To understand, to enlighten, that is your profession, isn’t it?” (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Annette Lavers [New York: Hill and Wang, 1972], 35.)

It is worth noting that Dutton’s “awards” for bad writing are, as Jonathan Culler points out, almost inevitably given to prominent left-wing theorists and never to critics and philosophers favored by the right. (See Jonathan Culler, “Bad Writing and Good Philosophy,” in *Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, edited by Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003], 43-57. Culler takes this “contest” and the Dutton piece as the point of departure for an analysis of denunciations of academic jargon both inside and outside the academy, as well as a discussion of what is at stake in accusations of bad writing generally.) Left-wing critiques of academic jargon, it is also worth adding here, can be similarly moralizing, although (as their criticisms are generally directed at the alleged failings of others on the left who at least nominally share their aims), their emphasis tends to be less on the usurpation or subversion of cultural authority than on the abandonment of the republican virtue of commitment to a democratic public sphere in favor of the alleged indulgences of a symbolic “pseudopolitics.” On this point, see Michael Warner, “Styles of Intellectual Publics” (Culler and Lamb, 106-125), which offers a lucid critique of the simplistic and idealized notion of the public sphere often underlying such arguments—as well as of the real risks of a merely gestural politics—in light of the real relationship between different styles of writing and their actual and potential publics.


7. See note 4.

8. This is, of course, only one way in which, as Guzetti remarks, Godard “signifies … that his film is not exempt from the problems of the society it portrays” (19), but undoubtedly the most crucial aspect, as the following quote from Godard suggests, is the effect of the commodification of culture on the language of critique and communication: “‘The society that produces these apartment complexes,’ he writes, ‘also distributes, in the form of paperback books, a bargain-rate culture that is assimilated in a piecemeal and rather ridiculous fashion by the population. All this takes place in a very loud din of jackhammers, motors, percolators, things crashing together, which, to a certain degree, impede communication.’” (Ci. Guzetti, 19)


12. “The visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object; while the most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess (rather than from the more thankless effort to discipline the viewer.) Pornographic films are thus only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body. On the other hand, we know this today more clearly because our society has begun to offer us the world—now mostly a collection of products of our own making—as just such a body, that you can possess visually, and collect the images of.” Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 1. It is the first sentence of this quote that was cited by Dutton in the Bad Writing Contest for 1997, the results of which may be found at his web site at http://denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm.