



### ***Letter to Jane* :**

#### **Ironic Image**

“Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.”<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes’s ironic observation is useful in approaching a discussion of *Letter to Jane* (1972). The film, by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, addresses the medium of photography, which is often overshadowed by photographic subject matter. From formalist and sociological perspectives, Godard and Gorin refer to the characteristics of photography, its relationship to its subject, and the consequences of this relationship. Barthes’s book *Camera Lucida* aids in the discussion of each point, as well as Susan Sontag’s book *On Photography*. These critical commentaries verbalize the implicit content of *Letter to Jane*, demanding a reevaluation of the obvious.

Irony is the key to the construction of *Letter to Jane*, guiding the viewer through a stark reevaluation of photography. Although *Letter to Jane* is a celluloid piece, projected in normal, cinematic fashion, it is not a film at all. On the contrary, *Letter to Jane* is a series of disparate photographs transferred to celluloid with a vocal track that isolates itself from the images by criticizing them. Godard and Gorin reject traditional elements of *mise-en-scène* in favor of Brecht’s alienation effects and crude Eisensteinian montage. Still photos are slid across each other by hand, creating a jarring effect. Conflicting images of celebrities are flashed onscreen to arouse the consideration of their resultant, synthesized meanings. Through this failure to meet the criteria of cinematic *mise-en-scène*, *Letter to Jane* forces the viewer to reject it as a film and to scrutinize it from a new perspective, that of the still photograph.

Roland Barthes comments on a possible reason for this juxtaposition of medium and expectation: “In front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to a continuous voracity; a host of other qualities, but no *pensiveness*.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, reflective reevaluation is the goal of the “film’s” clever strategy. By singling out one photograph of activist actress Jane Fonda in North Vietnam, Godard and Gorin instruct the viewer to consider the medium of photography, not film. And by providing blank black frames of film between images, Godard and Gorin make this reflective consideration possible. These artists strike a final ironic chord through the construction of *Letter to Jane*. Accompanying the photograph of Fonda is the question, “What part does the intellectual play in the revolution?”<sup>3</sup> Godard, at one point, concludes that the intellectual, to be an intellectual revolutionary, must cease to be an intellectual.<sup>4</sup> *Letter to Jane*, in order to be a film about photography, must cease to be a film.

*Letter to Jane* works on many different levels or, rather, layers. There is the layer of formal conflict already mentioned. Under that lies the relationship between the photograph and its subject. In *Letter to Jane*, the photograph is from the French newspaper *L’Express*, and the subject is the actress Jane Fonda. Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, discusses the qualities of a photograph with relation to its subject. The “studium” of a photograph, according to Barthes, is “a form of education or, rather, “the cultural framework of the photograph.”<sup>5</sup> In *Letter to Jane*, the studium of the photograph is the reaction of a celebrated cultural figure to a military crisis: Jane Fonda in North Vietnam. The

“punctum,” however, is “the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow . . . disturbing the studium.”<sup>6</sup> The punctum in the photograph involves Jane Fonda and the tension her expression and positioning create with the rest of the photograph. This tension, or punctum, seems to be the result of an unusual focus on the actress and the insincerity of her “expression of an expression,”<sup>7</sup> as stated by Godard.

With regard to the rest of the film, Barthes and Sontag offer alternative conclusions. “Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes,” Barthes writes; “I transform myself in advance into an image<sup>8</sup> . . . a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.”<sup>9</sup> This confession redirects the criticism of actors such as Fonda, dispersing it over humanity in general. Sontag continues the point by describing photography in its own context. “What makes something interesting is that it can be seen to be like, or analogous to, something else. Images of real things are interlayered with images of images.”<sup>10</sup> Godard and Gorin support this point, perhaps unconsciously, with images of potato farmers in Brittany posing in front of their discarded produce and North Vietnamese actresses posing with Jane Fonda. The legacy of photographs and “being photographed” seems to be a common element unifying many cultures, and not only a condemnation of actors. From this common stance, Barthes rallies behind Fonda’s cause, that is, her effort to achieve sincerity. “The ‘private life’ is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object. It is my *political* right to be a subject which I must protect.”<sup>11</sup>

Caught up in the various layers of *Letter to Jane* is another element that characterizes both the consequences of photography and the act of addressing it. Godard and Gorin call this element “detour.” This “detour” quality of photography refers to the consequences of having a physical representation of reality. Barthes writes, “four image-repertoires intersect [in the photo]. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.”<sup>12</sup> “Reality . . . is defined as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny.”<sup>13</sup> Photographs, therefore, serve to circumvent the “real” in order to get to the “represented.” Godard and Gorin conclude that “[the spectator] will be a producer at the same time as he is a consumer. And we will be consumers at the same time we are producers.”<sup>14</sup> The darker side of this “detour” is that the subjects of photography, like Jane Fonda, are victimized as representations. We are all victims as well as exploiters in this system of reality and representation.

Working on different levels, *Letter to Jane* achieves a paradoxical success. Formally, the film accomplishes its address to photography through the undermining of cinematic tradition. Even within this radical treatment, Godard and Gorin manage to convey a weighty moral: “Reality is not understood simply . . . because we comprehend it now not primarily through our own eyes and ears but through technological media which change reality as they transmit it.”<sup>15</sup>

*John Ewing*

French Civilization 339  
Prof. Dina Sherzer  
University of Texas at Austin  
1988

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinema–Editions de l’Etoile, 1985), 350.

<sup>4</sup> James Monaco, *New Wave: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), 250.

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Monaco, *New Wave*, 249.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 175.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Barthes, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 156.

<sup>14</sup> Monaco, 246.

<sup>15</sup> Monaco, 250.