

<http://cinemasparagus.blogspot.com/2010/05/jean-luc-godard-speaks-with-daniel-cohn.html> Writings by Craig Keller

[Jean-Luc Godard Speaks with Daniel Cohn-Bendit: A Smile That Dismisses the Universe](#)

Craig Keller's English translation of the conversation between Jean-Luc Godard and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the cover story of the latest issue of **Télérama**, no. 3148 and dated 13 May 2010, follows. The original French text can be accessed at the **Télérama** site [here](#). The photography that accompanies the piece, reproduced below, is by Patrick Swirc for **Télérama**.

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Every March 22nd, Dany the Green [ex-Dany le Rouge. —CK] and the hermit of Rolle think about one another. What brings them together? A mutual respect, and **Le Vent d'est**, a "leftist spaghetti-western" by JLG, which the two shot together forty years ago. So what do two personalities, so different from each other, have to talk about when they pick up the thread of their dialogue? Europe, ecology, and cinema, of course. But also: Palestine, llamas, Bulgarians... and **Film Socialisme**, the latest work by JLG, presented in Un certain regard on Monday the 17th. Below, an audio extract of this discussion between the hellion and the filmmaker.

[The audio excerpt can be downloaded [here](#).]

"More popular than the Pope, and just a little less so than The Beatles," François Truffaut said about him in 1967. That year, Jean-Luc Godard was going vaguely "Mao" with **La Chinoise**. One year later, he was upstaged by a wry young anarchist who launched his "appeal of March 22nd" from Nanterre; Daniel Cohn-Bendit was in rehearsal for his month of May. *Le joli* month unfolding, and the anarchist denied residence, our two accomplices went off to Italy to shoot **Le Vent d'est**, a "leftist spaghetti-western" forgotten today. [Not by me, nor by tens of thousands of others, nor by JPG. —CK] Forty years have gone by: Jean-Luc and Daniel "are well-known, are recognized, have gone off the radar..."

Off the radar? Dozens of films down the road for one of them — and a euro-eco-liberal-libertarian turn for the other — here we learn that every March 22nd [in commemoration of the "Mouvement du 22 Mars," when Cohn-Bendit — who was a German national — et al occupied the administrative building at the Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense. — CK] they stop a bit to think about one another. And therefore, on the occasion of the release of **Film Socialisme**, Jean-Luc Godard, from his Rolle retreat, on the shores of Lake Geneva, wanted to discuss Europe, in Strasbourg, with Friend Dany.

Europe is at the heart of **Film Socialisme**, which takes us along on a sea-cruise across the Mediterranean with pleasure-seekers who have known war and its affairs. "Poor Europe!" says an African woman, as she leans against the rail of the deck. "I don't want to die without having seen Europe happy once again," echoes a young Russian girl. Both sufficiently enigmatic to instill within Dany the desire to seek out Jean-Luc, but on the shores of Lake Geneva. JLG, 79 years old, with a devilish twinkle in the eye, greets us with a nasty surprise: he's getting ready to sell off the den where he's worked for forty years. Silence — no more filming? Dany, out of sorts about the film's title ("**Socialisme**," "**Cinéma Socialisme**"...), tried for two hours and forty minutes to get to the bottom of this story. Extracts:

CINEMA IS DEAD

COHN-BENDIT: These screens, this equipment, these videos, these books... you're really gonna get rid of everything?

GODARD: But it's not getting rid of things — it's all just a bygone era. Anne-Marie [Miéville] did it before I did. It's over — you can barely create anything. The cinema is a small society that was formed a hundred years ago, in which there were all these human connections, money relationships, relationships having to do with women — and that's gone. The history of the cinema isn't one of films, just like how the history of painting isn't one of canvases. The cinema barely existed. I personally attempted to turn it into something else. But these days, I'm on my last legs.

COHN-BENDIT: That's not true — there's an incredible energy in your film. What amazed me is that you portray so many different layers — you're on the Mediterranean, and then you show social strata...

GODARD: The production went very smoothly. But afterward, you stumble into distribution, circulation, and it's a whole other story. I wanted to distribute my film across the same amount of time that the production took — meaning across four years...

COHN-BENDIT: You put four years into this?

GODARD: Yes; I told them: it's going to take four years to make it — actually, no, I didn't tell them that. And I wanted to distribute it like this: you take a boy and a girl, or two or three small groups, you give them video copies, you drop them out of an airplane by parachute, they have a map of France, they don't know where they're going to land, and you let them sort things out, go into cafés, show it a few hundred times... Then you look at what's happening — they get the lay of the land, they find out what people think about the film. In the second year, you show it in a few screening rooms at small festivals. Afterwards, you no longer need to release it — you'll have recouped everything, especially since the producers have put in so little — 300,000 euros — but this will have taken four years. In lieu of that, it's being distributed into a world for which it wasn't produced...

COHN-BENDIT: But the film's going to Cannes?

GODARD: "They" sent it to Cannes.

COHN-BENDIT: You're not going? In Berlin, everyone was waiting for you the entire night — you were supposed to receive the Prix du film européen.

GODARD: But I said no.

COHN-BENDIT: They said you said yes.

GODARD: But I never said yes.

COHN-BENDIT: I knew that you wouldn't show up, and I wrote them telling them so. Wenders put together a beautiful text...

GODARD: But I responded to him, to Wim — to tell him I wasn't coming. That's all there was to it. There was a strong feeling, with Anne-Marie, that there's no more need for a big to-do. How do you drum up a small audience, so as to earn a living? Before '68, my audience in Paris was 100,000 people.

COHN-BENDIT: For *A bout de souffle* — way more than that!

GODARD: But ten years after *A bout de souffle*, it was a lot lower. It was always fixed at 100,000 tickets sold, because this was the same number of people who attended the burial of Pierre Overney. [footnote: "Maoist militant killed by a Renault security guard on February 25th, 1972."]. We told ourselves: we'll always find them, the audience. The problem is, that there's no longer 100,000 in Paris — there's that many in the entire world. At most you can reach 10% of them. I try to do something, but I can no longer get caught up in everything, URSSAF [*Unions de Recouvrement des Cotisations de Sécurité Sociale et d'Allocations*

Familiales, or "the Organizations for the payment of social security and family benefit contributions"], the royalty payments..

COHN-BENDIT: You don't want to, or you're no longer able?

GODARD: I'm no longer able.

COHN-BENDIT: Because you've had enough?

GODARD: No, because the rules have changed. There was a screening of *Film Socialisme* this past March 22nd. You weren't there.

COHN-BENDIT: You should have let me know...

GODARD: Well, we wrote you, but it got lost in the shuffle. You were in the middle of arguing with Cécile Duflot [*national secretary of the Green Party in France*]. I spoke with Anne-Marie about this yesterday — I told her: I'm a little worried to see Dany. I don't know why he really wants to see me. We see one another from time to time. It was always me who went to see you, from the time of Nanterre on...

WE REALLY LIKED ONE ANOTHER

COHN-BENDIT: In this film of yours, *Socialisme*...

GODARD: No — *Film Socialisme*.

COHN-BENDIT: Sorry — *Film Socialisme*. There's a phrase: "*The individual is inside of the other, and the other is inside of the individual, and these are three individuals...*" In 1969, I remember you made a drawing for Anne Wiazemsky, with a kangaroo; you were inside of its pocket, and you wrote that same phrase underneath the drawing. So, to hear it once again in this film, it's very moving, because for me you're representing a continuity...

GODARD: You for me as well — this is why I was worried about seeing you again. When I saw you for the first time, in 1966 or 1967, you weren't well-known, I was somewhat well-known, this was the era of the university in Nanterre, of Strasbourg situationists' text *De la misère en milieu étudiant* [*On Misery in the Student Milieu*], and I was preparing *La Chinoise*. The second time I saw you, it was February 20th, 1968, at the second demonstration for Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque, on rue de Courcelles; you got together with us because you had an interest, you saw that there was a movement. The foundational elements of May '68 were the workers' movements in Caen and Redon, and the children of Langlois. Well anyway, you were there...

COHN-BENDIT: I was impressed by the kid, the one from *Les Quatre cents coups*, Jean-Pierre Léaud, who gave a grandiose speech in front of the Cinémathèque: he recited a text, and we thought it was 1789. Then there was our Italian adventure, *Le Vent d'est*. As I was thrown out of France, I was crazy about doing anything at all based around a collective idea.

GODARD: We decided to go to Italy where there were all these leftist militants. We had to make a living — we had money, a nice young Italian producer. We held general assemblies in the morning to decide what to shoot in the afternoon. But nobody cared about the film I was

trying to make, except for you, Dany, who felt somewhat responsible... These days, I say to myself: I've become an unknown, and he's become more than well-known, but I don't know what brings this about. The event of seeing you as a European parliamentarian, I have the impression that you've taken a side, if one might say, or rather, taken by a side. [*"tu me fais l'effet d'être de parti pris si l'on peut dire, ou plutôt pris par le parti."*]

COHN-BENDIT: My wife has been saying to me for two days now: why are you nervous? Our last meeting, in 1996, in Strasbourg, for the preview of your film about Sarajevo, *For Ever Mozart*, didn't go so well...

GODARD: There, it had nothing to do with you — I was in an argument with an actress because she didn't want to speak about the film. Every March 22nd, for a long time, I've sent you a little note. After a while, when you've been carrying a suitcase around for a long time, you just can't carry it anymore. I thought about this again when we had that screening, this past March 22nd. I remembered that, after May '68, when you were expelled from the country, I went to see Deleuze — you were on your way back from his place — we crossed paths on the sidewalk, and I didn't recognize you, because you had a pipe. You said: "It's so I won't be recognized."

EUROPE YEAR ZERO

COHN-BENDIT: To come back to *Cinéma Socialisme* [*sic*], it's a film that touches me. When you say "*the Americans liberated Europe by making it dependent...*"

GODARD: That's Malaparte; that's not me.

COHN-BENDIT: We all left something...

GODARD: The film might provide some ideas. Take Greece — it's what used to be called one of our humanities. And now one can only speak of Greece's debt.

COHN-BENDIT: Whereas we're indebted to Greece...

GODARD: You're right — it's normal enough that the Greeks did nothing for thirty years, since German tourists, who were on a complete rampage, were bringing them money.

COHN-BENDIT: The Swiss were pretty good at this, too...

GODARD: Yes, but the Swiss are very German... I'm kidding. But Greece, you can't talk about it in the way that politicians talk about it. They only draw up reports — they don't put their feet on the ground; they don't do any investigating.

COHN-BENDIT: I don't define myself as a classical politician. I'm from that world, I take part in it, but I've never drawn up a report in my life.

GODARD: This is why I like following your career, because you are to politics what I was to what was called cinema.

COHN-BENDIT: You still are that, in cinema.

GODARD: No, I'm in films, in the fabrication of films.

COHN-BENDIT: Yes, but in our imaginary cinema, in our European culture, in people's minds, you loom very large. A young filmmaker who starts to see your films today, to discuss them — this is a reality!

GODARD: Maybe, maybe... I personally see that there are films, there's television, there's still literature, there's no longer painting, only installations, and that's weak. It's very difficult to talk about it, you start to contradict yourself. I'm often accused of contradicting myself, but it's not for the fun of contradiction.

COHN-BENDIT: It can be fun...

GODARD: Yes, a little fun, but it's to provoke an argument, in the sense intended by the Greeks.

COHN-BENDIT: This is why *Cinéma Socialisme* is interesting, because it provokes arguments.

GODARD: No, it will provoke itself into being forgotten pretty quickly. An interesting contradiction, I still hope. What do you find interesting in this film?

COHN-BENDIT: Several things, starting with the connection that you have to Europe, which is, for you, a great deception.

GODARD: That's how it is! They started out with coal and steel. They might just as well have started out with something else.

COHN-BENDIT: This was for reasons of war, that they said —

GODARD: The war is over! But Truman said: we're going to make peace like we made war. A shrink would tell us he wasn't listening to what he was saying.

COHN-BENDIT: You're taking issue with Europe by saying: I wish it were something else.

GODARD: I would have liked it to be something else! But you can't wish it so. Even in the cinema, you're no big deal, you're five or ten thousand people in France. A film crew, it runs from two to forty. For a few months, it exists. Bachelard says there are two kinds of images: the explicit image, and the implicit image. I try to make an implicit image. It can't be made consciously.

COHN-BENDIT: But what you're doing in *Socialisme*, by posing the problem of Europe, is to speak about the Mediterranean, with stories.

GODARD: I put down five or six places that made me who I am. Africa, Palestine, the Russian revolution, Odessa, Greece, Italy. And Spain to cap it off. Then I added stories in German, as Germany was something important in my life.

THREE CROWNS OF THE SAILOR

COHN-BENDIT: Money keeps coming up in this ocean voyage with these Europeans, these Whites...

GODARD: These pleasure-cruisers...

COHN-BENDIT: It's somewhere between touching and malicious. These pleasure-cruisers on this immense ship, this completely insane society.

GODARD: That wasn't made-up, the world of the *retraités*. The problem with getaways is being spoken about in France at the present moment. Well, if you want getaways like that, like that cruise, go ahead, be my guest!

COHN-BENDIT: Why all these stories about money? This gold from the Komintern?

GODARD: I had coffee with Jacques Tati, when he was in financial ruin. When it came time to pay the check, he left an old gold coin, a doubloon from the time in America of the Incas. I paid for his coffee; he kept his coin. And then I wondered: how did it come about that Tati would have a gold coin like that? And I thought up a plausible scenario: his last producer, Louis Dolivet, produced Orson Welles' *Mr. Arkadin* in Spain, but before that, he was the secretary for Willi Münzenberg...

COHN-BENDIT: Münzenberg, the propaganda-chief for the German Communist Party in the '30s...

GODARD: Louis Dolivet was also involved with the Komintern. After the invasion of France by the Germans, the Komintern transferred the gold from the Spanish bank over to Russia; they loaded it in Barcelona onboard the France Navigation company, which belonged to the French Communist Party. But upon arriving in Odessa, a third of the gold disappeared, and a second third again disappeared before arriving in Moscow... I imagined that the Germans had infiltrated the ship, that they had taken a portion of it — that's how the old French policeman tells it in the film. But the young Russian girl who goes rummaging through the archives figures: the third that's missing, Komintern took it, and the rest wound up in Louis Dolivet's pockets, whose fortune can't be explained otherwise...

FILMING PALESTINE

COHN-BENDIT: You also show that Europe's original sin is Palestine. You put this across with two or three images and a very old photo.

GODARD: That's one of the first photos that we have of Palestine, and it's Elias Sanbar who tells the story: in 1839 Daguerre presented his invention, the daguerréotype, at the Académie des sciences. A swarm of photographers then rushed off to the holy lands, and nowhere else. Probably because there was a desire to see if the words of the Bible were true.

COHN-BENDIT: There are people obsessed with the Jews, and when they're told, like Shlomo Sand, that there are Jews, but that Jewish citizenry is a legal creation of the '40s, they go nuts and don't accept this discussion. And there are others who are obsessed with the Palestinians. The two tell me so much about how things operate. They're looking for the ultimate victim, shoving it in our faces. I for one say: cut it out, I'm not on any one side, let's try and have a discussion... Why this obsession with Palestine in your work?

GODARD: Palestine is like the cinema: it's searching for independence. It took me ten or fifteen years to say to the producer: you've agreed to put out so much money, give it to me, I'm the one who handles it. That's been a real fight, even with Jean-Pierre Rassam, to get control over the film. Just like with my father: you've agreed to give this to me, don't ask me what I'm going to do with it, have faith in me. Nicolas Seydoux, of Gaumont, told me: well look it, the money I'm giving you — are you gonna blow it?

COHN-BENDIT: If someone proposed to you to set off for Israel and Palestine with your new little cameras, would you go?

GODARD: But you don't film that way! Some people do it, they're documentaries, sometimes interesting ones. I watch the discussion programs a lot, like **C dans l'air**, but I do it for practice, to see if I still have the ability to give a comeback.

COHN-BENDIT: Like in tennis, against the wall...

GODARD: Yes. You can't film that way. I'm trying to show things in relation to peace in the Middle East — for example, if she gives me the right to do so, I take a lovely shot from Agnès Varda where we see two trapeze artists, then you hear a girl's voice chanting the Talmud and a girl's voice chanting the Koran. I'm not in power, so I can't do anything else.

FILM SOCIALISME / FILM ÉCOLOGIE

COHN-BENDIT: When I saw the llama in your film, I said to myself: that llama is Jean-Luc!

GODARD: Not at all — that llama lived on the side of a garage; I saw him everyday, and I said to myself: we're going to use him. There was a donkey too. I was able to use a few animals, this world we don't have much conscience towards, that supposedly has no language when in fact it does have one, supposedly no face when in fact it does have one: Levinas was wrong. [footnote in the original: "*The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas developed his reflections on the face in **Ethique et infini** and **Totalité et infini**...*"] In any case, it's plausible, with this llama.

COHN-BENDIT: Like that USSR T-shirt worn by a child?

GODARD: I'd brought that back from Germany a while back. The child probably doesn't know what it is. In a film called **Film Socialisme**, we can still place the symbols of so-called socialism.

COHN-BENDIT: For you, is "socialism" still something that has a meaning?

GODARD: If we're talking about getting to the bottom [*du fond*] of things, the bottom of the sea, of Rousseau, yes. I had first called this film **Socialisme**, but it seemed to have too many connotations. **Film Socialisme** is different: a philosopher wrote a dozen pages to me saying it's wonderful to have seen "film" with "socialism," because this is saying something else, above all it means "hope."

COHN-BENDIT: Myself, I would have put "ecology"...

GODARD: *Film Écologie?*

COHN-BENDIT: Yes, if I get asked for my conception of society, of the bottom of the sea as you say, these days, it would no longer be socialism.

GODARD: Europe and ecology, I like it — and it hurts to see you here, it touches at the core [*au fond*].

COHN-BENDIT: Why hurts? Seeing me in those environments?

GODARD: No, because nothing's able to work out. Whereas making a film, writing a book, one's still able. I stay in my domain, I note that the only ones who wanted to make a European cinema were the Germans in 1933.

COHN-BENDIT: But it doesn't interest you, the idea of creating a space in Europe where the cinema is able to exist? Burning the bridges of American cultural dependence?

GODARD: But it's 150% here! And if you want to make a film with Eurimages, you need tons of paper, and everything is made with lies, with false estimates. My film was declared for 25 million, while it cost 300,000 euros. Why is that?

COHN-BENDIT: These are the lies of the system, just like the Greek lie...

GODARD: ...and Greece goes on lying, and also telling its truth. You don't create a system for European painting, for European music — so why one for cinema? They give aid to cinema, fishing, agriculture, and they don't come around... It has to slow down, to limit itself. I'm not for decline, but for periods of growth and periods of decline.

COHN-BENDIT: I agree completely.

GODARD: When we met for the first time, in Nanterre, we had nothing in common, but we lived in communal situations. We haven't moved away from one another, because there's a fraternal side, although we're poles apart. When I think back to you announcing that you were going to throw a big party when you turned 68!

COHN-BENDIT: Because I'll finally be a '68er! You have to come.

GODARD: I've never been to a nightclub in my life.

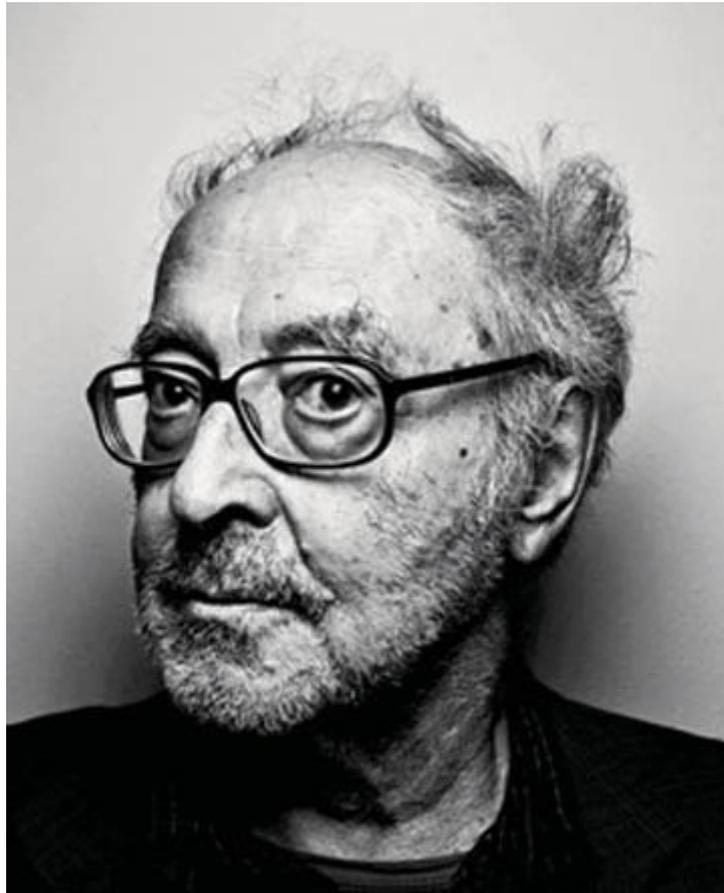
COHN-BENDIT: But that's not what it will be! First we'll show some films...

GODARD: And after your party, what are you gonna do, hold conferences?

COHN-BENDIT: I'll have contracts drawn up with **L'Equipe**: there'll be enough sporting events to cover in an intelligent manner — we'll go to Brazil together for the World Cup, you'll come with your camera, and we'll pitch it to Arte.

GODARD: No, that's a lot of to-do, and I don't want to be caught up in the thick of it anymore. I have been too often, and to my detriment. Chardin said at the end of his life: painting is an island I approach little by little; right now, I see it very blurry. I'll always make

painting in my own way. Even if it be with a camera-pencil or three photos.



THAT'S NOT ME

GODARD: Levinas never had to look at himself in a mirror — maybe this is why he said that one can't kill when one sees the face of the Other. Myself, when I look into a mirror, for a few years now, I say: that's not me, it's an Other. Now, I see myself behind me. But I have to admit that others see me that way. Most people think: "I am myself and he is himself." There's little chance we might agree, or if we do only superficially; after all, why not, if the superficial works, but people shouldn't complain.

COHN-BENDIT: That comes back often in your work. People are responsible for what is. They don't have the right to complain.

GODARD: They have the courage to live their life, but they don't have the courage to imagine it.

COHN-BENDIT: And you, you have the courage to imagine it but not to live it...

GODARD: Alas, I imagine it all too well.

COHN-BENDIT: But when you make a film like *Cinéma socialiste* [sic], you're living it —

these are three intense years.

GODARD: Yes, like any creation. But I don't understand why old people can't be used for work, there's a lack of interest from the other, whereas they'd benefit.

COHN-BENDIT: You say you want to sell off, or you have sold off, I don't know, all your equipment, your books, your videos...

GODARD: I'd like it to come to an end. I shut down my production company because, although I pay my taxes in France, the State doesn't know too well how to do things. Our accountant's name is Fada, and he is what he is, he's super great, but he has to get paid, and it's too much. I'd rather have a maid than an accountant.

COHN-BENDIT: But when we see your three sets of shelves here, where you have all the film's documentation, these two hundred books accumulated for *Cinéma Socialisme [sic]*, I find it absurd to say: *voilà*, it's all getting disbanded.

GODARD: No, it's had its time.

COHN-BENDIT: But a ton of things have had their time — paintings have had their time, and you still look at them. And that there, that's a painting. Walter Benjamin said: "Es ist eine Kunstwerk an sich," it's a work of art of oneself.

GODARD: Well, someone will buy me and scatter all my stuff.

COHN-BENDIT: But you mustn't let them scatter this work of art.

GODARD: I don't need images... heirlooms.

COHN-BENDIT: This isn't a question of heirlooms. When I was young, I came to Lausanne because Cira was there, the Centre d'archives, d'information et de recherche anarchiste. It was an old Bulgarian woman who kept all these documents about anarchy. Dispersed, it wouldn't have made any sense.

GODARD: Well, long live old Bulgarian women! All I've found is a young Egyptian. I love archaeologists.

COHN-BENDIT: Your book and film collections — they speak. Jean-Luc Godard, these are your films, and these documents. They're speaking!

GODARD: They've spoken to me, and that's fine. But a museum isn't going to get made. It's a half-material, half-intellectual contraption that has functioned with me. We're coming to an end! This is what's allowing me to live another year.

COHN-BENDIT: Did the Egyptian tell you what he wants to do with it?

GODARD: It doesn't interest me. This place will be remodeled into offices; they'll be put up for rent in the month of July. And whoever comes after won't have to pay the security deposit. There's no recovery, in Switzerland.



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On Friday, *The Independent* reported the following:

"The legendary French film director Jean-Luc Godard, whose latest work, *Film Socialisme*, is showing at Cannes this week, has decided to run its subtitles in 'Navajo English' as in old Westerns where the Native Americans spoke in choppy phrases. Because the drama takes place on a cruise ship where no one speaks the same language, Godard has fashioned his subtitles concisely to say the least. If a character is saying, 'Give me your watch,' the subtitle will read 'You, me, watch.' "