



Birth (of the Image) of a Nation: Jean-Luc Godard in Mozambique

Daniel Fairfax

University of Sydney (Australia)
E-mail: dfai7978@mail.usyd.edu.au

Abstract. While Jean-Luc Godard's life and work has received a plethora of critical attention, a relatively uncharted episode occurred in 1977–1978, when, at the behest of the Samora Machel government, the filmmaker worked in Mozambique to assist in the establishment of the country's first television station. Having newly acquired its independence from Portugal, the avowedly Marxist government of Machel embarked on a cultural policy emphasizing the country's autonomy and intending to avoid simply replicating the media landscape of First World countries. Godard, meanwhile, had recently come out of an intense period of militant film practice in the post-1968 period, and was at the time ensconced in producing video and television works, many of which can be seen as models for what a revolutionary television in Mozambique could have looked like. Godard's hiring by the Mozambican government resulted in an extraordinary situation: a radical filmmaker is given responsibility by an anti-colonial regime to construct what Godard had earlier dubbed, with Althusserian overtones, a "televisual state apparatus." The mission also put him into contact and collaboration with Ruy Guerra, a Mozambique-born director who had worked in Brazil's Cinema Novo tradition, and Jean Rouch, whose ethnographic films Godard had greatly admired when a critic, and who was continuing his work in Mozambique at the same time. The fact that he was working with a *tabula rasa*, in the sense that the vast majority of Mozambique's population had never been exposed to film images before, catalyzed a process of frenetic theoretical exploration by Godard, continuing the work on the nature of the image he had done since the unfilmed *Moi Je* script of 1973. Ultimately, however, the project failed. Godard's contract was terminated and he left the country dissatisfied with the images he had produced. No footage remains of Godard's work in the country, but photographs of the country are utilized in a photo-montage essay included in *Cahiers du cinéma's* issue #300 and recollections of the project can be found in the documentary *Kuxa Kanema* and interviews with scholar and video artist Manthia Diawara. The article utilizes these resources in conjunction with archival research to present an overview of this extraordinary yet rarely analyzed experience.

While Godard may rank as one of the most written about filmmakers in the history of the cinema, for a long time there existed a relative paucity of critical attention focussing on his video work of the 1970s, in essence the period between *Here and Elsewhere* (*Ici et Ailleurs*, 1974), his first post-militant work, and his return to commercial outlets of distribution with *Slow Motion* (*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, 1980), and made with Anne-Marie Mièville under the name of their production company Sonimage.

To a certain extent, this is understandable: moving to Grenoble in 1973 precipitated a prolonged period of virtual isolation, in which Godard was cut off from both the mainstream and radical left cinematic milieux. But he was by no means unproductive, with the period 1974–1979 yielding three feature films and two lengthy television series totalling 15 hours of screen time: *Six fois deux: sur et sous la communication* (1976) and *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* (1978). Thankfully, these works have recently garnered the critical and theoretical attention they merit; and yet there is an aspect of this period which still remains largely unknown, even to avid Godardians, and which is probably one of the least documented experiences in the filmmaker's entire career.

But the trip Godard and Mièville made to Mozambique in 1978 was a fascinating episode. At the behest of the government of the newly independent republic, they sought both to participate in the theoretical grounding behind the establishment of the country's new television service, and to use the experience as raw material from which to produce a video project which could have taken the shape, as we will see, of a five-hour television series, or a feature-length work intended for theatrical distribution, and which was to be named either *Nord contre sud* (*North Against South*) or *Naissance (de l'image) d'une nation* (*Birth [of the Image] of a Nation*). Unfortunately, the collaboration with the Mozambican government was terminated, and the resultant video work, which could foreseeably have taken its place in Godard's œuvre on an equal footing to *Six fois deux* or *France/détour*, was never completed.

To the best of my knowledge, no footage exists from Godard's time in Mozambique, or from the projected work, which had reached a relatively advanced stage of development before being abandoned. Similarly, the experience is only cursorily discussed by Godard in subsequent interviews, although he makes mention of it several times in the 1979 Montreal lecture series *Introduction à une véritable histoire du cinéma*, and a theoretical document made in conjunction with the series has been reproduced in MacCabe's *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*. Our main source for what this work could have looked like is, however, a special

edition of *Cahiers du cinéma*, celebrating their 300th issue in May 1979, for which the editorial staff, following an earlier interview with Godard, decided to hand him complete editorial control. The result was a visual essay combining excerpts from texts and photographic montage, and the last half of it (around 60 pages) was taken up by a report-back from the trip (entitled *Le dernier rêve d'un producteur* [*Last Dream of a Producer*]), which combined Godard's own (ostensible) diary notes from his time in Mozambique, accompanied by photographs of the country, its inhabitants, and those who were assigned to the television project.

At the time that the edition of *Cahiers* was released, Godard still fully envisaged making the TV series, and the photo-montage was thus intended as a form of preview or teaser of the upcoming work. It now exists for us, however, as a trace, or phantomic presence, of a work that never was to be, and yet, as I will examine later, the work as it exists at this stage not only contains valuable insight into what the completed video could have been, but also merits being considered in its own right as a kind of film, but made with the tools of photographs and texts. As Godard says in a much earlier interview, from 1962: "I consider myself as an essayist, I make essays in the form of novels or novels in the form of essays: only I film them instead of writing them. If the cinema were to disappear I would move on to television, and if television were to disappear, I would go back to using pencil and paper." (Milne 1986, 171.)

If *Birth of (an Image of) a Nation*, as it exists in its *Cahiers* incarnation, has any precedent in film history, then it would probably be the restoration of Eisenstein's *Bezhin Meadow* (1937) – which consists entirely of stills and the story outline. Their genealogies are very different, with Eisenstein's film having already been completed before being destroyed by Soviet authorities and later recuperated on the basis of production stills, but the relationship between the version we now have access to, and the completed version as it could have existed, is the same: that of the trace.

Before entering a more extensive discussion of Godard's Mozambique adventure, it may be worthwhile to divulge some background information on the country itself. The area's domination by Portugal dates back to the early 16th century, and by the late 20th century approximately 300,000 Portuguese settlers lived in the country, although very little miscegenation between the populations took place. By the 1960s, however, maintenance of a colonial presence was taking a major financial toll on the metropole, then under the military dictatorship of the *Estado Novo* regime, and more than 30% of Portugal's budget was spent on maintaining order in its colonies in Africa and East Timor. In Mozambique the independence group *Frente Libéracion de Moçambique* (Frelimo) had begun guerrilla fighting, taking

inspiration from the successful anti-colonial revolutions elsewhere in Africa. With the overthrow of the *Estado Novo* in Portugal's "Carnation Revolution" in 1975, independence was granted to its colonies, and by this time Frelimo had not only hegemonized the independence movement, but had also taken a much more radical turn under its leader Samora Machel, who was to become the inaugural president. Explicitly identifying itself as a Marxist government, the People's Republic of Mozambique was declared and allied itself with the Soviet Union, with the Portuguese settlers returning *en masse* to the metropole.

It should be stressed that though the Mozambique government identified itself as Marxist, there was no pretence that they could undertake the construction of socialism in the country, which at that stage in its development would have been utopian. As Portuguese settlers had occupied virtually all of the technical and organizational posts in the country, a gaping hole was left which was unable to be filled by Mozambique's indigenous population, until then largely kept in a state of poverty and under-education. To compound matters, in 1977 a civil war began with the South African/Rhodesian organized group Renamo, plunging the country into renewed chaos. Machel's government therefore made the cultural education of the Mozambican population a central priority, although a generalized lack of expertise and resources engendered major limitations to the scope of the scheme. In addition to schooling and literacy programmes, the project of establishing the nation's first television station was made a key goal – and this is where Godard enters the stage.

The government viewed it as desirable for the models of Western television to be avoided. While the mooted television station was to be a centralized, state-controlled apparatus, much like the European model up until the liberalization/privatization of the 1970s–1980s, it was envisaged to have a primarily pedagogical purpose and encourage active popular involvement in production. In 1977, the government thus turned to a number of well-known leftist filmmakers for technical and theoretical collaboration. In addition to Godard, ethnological filmmaker Jean Rouch came to the country, to continue his work in Africa on such films as *Moi, un noir* (1959), as did Ruy Guerra, a major figure in the Brazilian *Cinema Novo* who was actually born in Mozambique. Guerra saw returning to the newly-independent country as a patriotic duty, and became director of the country's *National Film Institute*, a body established along the lines of revolutionary Cuba's film industry. All three were, of course, very different types of filmmakers, and had differing concepts of what the project should entail, which was to lead to a significant amount of friction.

What attracted Godard to the concept was his notion of Mozambique as a country which, when it came to images, was “virgin territory” – film and television were unknown, and photography was extremely rare, so most of the population had simply never seen a mechanically reproduced image. Indeed, one can see echoes of projects such as Medvedkin’s “cine-train” in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, filming remote villages and immediately projecting the resultant films to the intrigued peasants. This was not, however, Godard’s first venture to the Third World: in 1968 he visited Cuba, and proposed a project there which was turned down by the Cuban government, while in 1970 he and Jean-Pierre Gorin spent extensive periods of time in Jordan with the Palestinian revolutionary movement in order to make a pro-Fatah film called *Jusqu’à la victoire (Until Victory)*, also left unfinished, with footage later used for *Here and Elsewhere*.

Interestingly, at the time of his Mozambique contract, the other main project Godard was working on, which also failed to reach fruition, was a Hollywood studio movie called *The Story*, centring on the Mafia origins of the Las Vegas gambling industry, to be produced by Francis Ford Coppola and, as Godard had hoped, starring Robert de Niro and Diane Keaton. Godard was manifestly aware of the irony of having two contemporaneous projects at diametrically opposite ends of the cultural power spectrum, remarking in an interview: “In California, you have so many images, and in Mozambique, there are none. 80 percent of the population has never seen an image – only nature. It’s like a child opening his eyes and there’s no code, no sense; he’s just looking. In Mozambique, the image is the raw material. But in Hollywood, the images are so sophisticated you can’t even read them anymore. I live in the middle: I’m more influenced by California, but I have a need to go in the other direction because I want to make my own finished products, not someone else’s.” (Sterritt 1998, 94.)

The meagreness of Mozambique’s resources for the task was also perceptible to Godard. Cameraman Carlos Gambo owned the country’s only film camera, and Godard noted that the total equipment available in the country (in terms of recording and editing facilities) was roughly equivalent to what his Sonimage company (essentially himself and Mièville) possessed: “In other words: just over a couple of people for the little Franco-Swiss company, and just under 13 million people for the big Mozambican society. Two or three people on the margins of television, in order to think television together with 13 million people still on the margins of the world.” (Godard 1979, 76.)

A contract between Sonimage and Mozambique was thus signed, to last two years and involve six or seven voyages by Godard to the country. He saw this

project as an opportunity to: “Profit from the audio-visual situation of the country to study television before it exists, before it inundates [...] the entire social and geographic Mozambican corpus. Study the image, the desire for images (the wish to remember, the wish to show this memory, to make a mark on it) [...] Study the production of these desires for images and their distribution via the airwaves (oh sirens!) or cables. Study, for once, production, before distribution comes into the mix. Study the programmes before making a grid out of them, behind which the spectators will be plonked, who will no longer know that that they are behind the television set [...] and not in front of it as they believe.” (Godard 1979, 73–74.)

Gambo, meanwhile, interviewed in the documentary *Kuxa Kanema*, described the essence of the project as: “We filmed and captured the image of a countrywoman, then we showed her the image to see the reaction of this person who couldn’t read or write. This way, we saw who we needed to make television for. For the peasant or for the intellectual? And if it was to be for everyone, how would we do it?” (Brody 2008, 414.)

In the end, by the middle of the first year of the contract, Godard and Mièville already began to have problems with the project, out of the six to seven trips envisaged, only two were made before they renounced returning to the country.

In a lecture reprinted in *The TVideo Politics of Jean-Luc Godard*, African filmmaker and academic Manitha Diawara has given a valuable analysis of the reasons for the project’s failure, and, considering his intimate knowledge of the issues surrounding such a situation, it’s worth quoting him at length: “Many people see Godard as a hero of the liberation of the image and as a creator, an icon of cinema. Initially Guerra welcomed Godard, said ‘this is great let’s work together’ and it started out very well. Later on, however, Guerra felt that Godard was spending too much money on producing and theorising, not actually making his films. [...] With Godard there was too much *mise en scène*, theorising how to position an image in front of a camera, which camera to use, how to do it, etc. It never ended. So again, they were impatient with Godard. Ultimately, the contract was dissolved by the end of the year. There was no bitterness. Godard learned more about cinema: he came to his realisation that in a republic, you can’t make a film. He filmed some of Rouch’s super 8 films, left the equipment in Mozambique and went away.” (Diawara 2003, 105–107.)

And further: “Maybe Godard was not even interested in producing the images as much as he was in trying to define these images, trying to lay the groundwork, preparing the kind of television they should construct given the world situation. This is what he was doing, but what people were expecting (including Godard

himself) was at least some examples of these images: the images we want and need. In some ways for materialists like myself, one can describe this project as a failure because he broke with Guerra and the Mozambican people. In that sense, there was an idea of failure, but for Godard in a way, the project was to provoke thinking about the image and to make people ask themselves, ‘what do we want when we have television?’” (Diawara 2003, 111.)

More broadly, Diawara sees an inherent contradiction between government and creativity: an aesthetically radical filmmaker such as Godard simply could not “function” in an effective manner when tied to a government apparatus, even when run by an avowedly revolutionary regime with which he sympathized. Another likely cause of the project’s failure lay in Godard’s near total unfamiliarity with the country, its history or culture. He could not speak Portuguese, let alone any of Mozambique’s native languages, and simply had no way to interact with the local people in the profound way that his plans required.

Godard did not, however, see there being a particular impediment to the completion of his mooted television series *Birth (of the image) of a Nation*. In *Cahiers* he gave a fascinating précis of the format of the series. Following a “little television team” composed of a producer (a cipher for Godard himself), a television host/photographer (Mièville), a technician and a businessman, the five part series would have the following structure: “Films #1 and #5 will be focussed more particularly on the producer/television host couple, on their reflections far from their home (Film #1) during the shooting [in Mozambique], and then on their feelings upon returning to Europe (Film #5). The producer and the television host will be played by an actor and an actress. Films #2, #3 and #4 will be sketches, travelling diaries, thoughts, drawings, impressions, which express, in Film #2, the perspective of the producer, in Film #3 that of the businessman, and in Film #4 that of the television host/photographer. Film #2 (producer) will essentially be made of video interviews with those who still have never seen any images (the majority of the Mozambican population). Film #3 will be made of documents in Super 8 and 16mm, often projected analytically, like an amateur film made by a businessman for his family. Film #4 will above all be made of photos, mainly black and white ones, expressing the perspective of the photographer.” (Godard 1979, 77.)

Probably the most interesting aspects of this scheme are the inventiveness involved in attempting to salvage a project which had yielded only a small proportion of the images that had been initially foreseen, and the range of image formats envisaged by Godard: video, Super 8 and 16mm film, stills, drawings and documents are all proposed to be utilized.

Godard also proposed a range of distribution formats, with the five television episodes accompanied by cinema screenings showing episodes #1 and #5 back-to-back, which, given projected episode lengths of 50 minutes to an hour, would have made for a feature length release. Delivery of the series was expected by December 1979. However, along with the Hollywood project (which unsurprisingly was unable to attract the participation of De Niro and Keaton), it was abandoned in favour of a comeback in the French cinema with *Slow Motion*, which precipitated the end of Sonimage's television work.

The rest of this paper will be devoted to looking at the "Report on Voyage No. 2A of the Sonimage Company in Mozambique," an "Annex" of *Last Dream of a Producer* which comprises the last 50 of its 60 pages, and relates, in the form of a diary/photo-essay, Godard's impressions of the trip he and Mièville made between August 24 and September 4, 1978.

The first important thing to note is the form, and in particular the combination of text and image. This particular form of juxtaposing the written word with images has been a hallmark of Godard's œuvre since at least *Le Gai Savoir* (1969), and has been central to *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-98) among other later works. In particular, a hierarchy elevating either text or image to an authoritative status is absent in Godard's practice. The image does not serve to illustrate what the text is saying, nor does the text function as a caption, elucidating the context of what the image is presenting, but rather, text and image exist in constant tension to each other, in what Jacques Rancière has called a "sentence-image." (Rancière 2007, 45.) The images themselves have been criticized by Richard Brody for being "no more revealing than souvenir snapshots," (Brody 2008, 414) but I personally found them to have a strong resonance, with some attaining a rare lyrical power.

Secondly, the diary form of the texts lends the work a very confessional tone, and Godard often conveys a distinctly self-critical attitude to his involvement in the project, highlighting his self-perceived inadequacy in dealing with potential collaborators, let alone subjects. For instance, in a taut, telegraphic style, he writes: "Wednesday, August 30, 1978: Attempt to shoot video at the market. Not very productive. Material not sophisticated enough to record the beauty of the colours. Too cumbersome to film 'on the run'. And this young girl probably finds the so-called white 'sorcerer' ridiculous as he pointlessly gets himself worked up." (Godard 1979, 103.) [Fig. 1.]

In the end, three themes come out clearly from the diary, which manifest themselves at different points in the work.

The first is Godard's idea that the practical questions surrounding the establishment of an audio-visual culture had immediate theoretical and political ramifications. Mozambicans are shown peering at or fiddling with the various pieces of equipment required to run a television station, and fundamental problems such as training people to fix the equipment when it breaks down are raised. For Godard, the very fact that, for instance, the sound recording equipment is manufactured by Sony means that imperialist dominance over Mozambique's image production is already implanted – true independence is still a long way off, even, or especially, on a cultural level. Such choices have deep ramifications, as Godard later states: "Pal or Secam. France or Germany. Senegal or South Africa. Production first or broadcasting first. An image of me for others, or an image of others for me." (Godard 1979, 105.)

This associative thought process continues throughout the piece, as another extract demonstrates: "The signal. Traces. Illness, health, beauty. Formation, creation of forms, information. Memories. What goes well and what goes bad. How it goes well. How it goes bad. Inspection and diagnosis. Vague thoughts and clear images." (Godard 1979, 85.) [Fig. 2.]

An additional theme is demonstrated with the above image, accompanied by the caption "Always 2 for 1 image." The concept of "One dividing into two" was a Maoist precept positing the infinite process of division within the dialectical conception of the universe (and was thus counter-posed to "Two goes into one" which saw the universe as undergoing a process of unification). It was taken up with gusto by Godard during his Maoist period, but even after his militancy waned, the notion still left numerous fertile traces in his later video work. In episode 5B of *Six fois deux*, for example, he objects to the mathematician René Thom in an interview for adhering to a version of the "Two goes into one" theory. Here it is clear that the "Two" that are required to make an image are the European, endowed with technical knowledge (i.e. cultural capital), and the African, who is to be instilled with this knowledge. Even with the best intentions, therefore, the cultural hegemony of the European cannot simply be wished away, as is shown by the following photo of a project meeting at the Electronic Centre, attended by "everyone", and exclusively composed of Europeans. [Fig. 3.]

Indeed, Godard himself acknowledged this fact with this photo of the shooting of an athletics event, accompanied by the text: "An image not to be seen any more. The white 'Bwana.' The specialist." (Godard 1979, 95.) [Fig. 4.]

The concept of an image made by two is shared by his collaboration efforts through the 1970s, first with Jean-Pierre Gorin, and subsequently with Mièville,

and his summation of the experience is: "Power of images. Abuse of power, Always be two to watch an image, and split the difference between the two. Image as proof. Image as justice, as the result of an accord." (Godard 1979, 125.)

The third "theme" dominates the end of the sequence and concerns the children of Mozambique. Godard's interest in children and their relationship with the image was already central to his work *France/détour*, and here the images of Mozambican children encountered by chance constitute one of the highlights of the work. Godard describes his experience thus: "En route to the village where the comrades with the Super 8 stock are going to project their film. Stop on the banks of the Limpopo River. Children. A Polaroid colour instamatic. The first image. Of men. And of women." (Godard 1979, 119.)

We then are shown a young Mozambican being schooled in the techniques of camera operation and TV presentation, as clear parallels are made between the youthfulness of the Mozambican population, and its "newborn" status as a nation, having only just won independence. One image in particular strongly recalls the opening credits of *France/détour*. [Figs. 5–6.]

Last Dream of a Producer ends with the following catechism: "Who is responsible for oppression remaining? We are. Who is responsible for oppression disappearing? We are." (Godard 1979, 127.) This is juxtaposed with perhaps the most enigmatic yet strangely moving image of the entire work: a young Mozambican child, cast half in shadow, looks, entranced, towards his right. [Fig. 7.]

That this project has left a profound mark on Godard's subsequent work, despite the failure of both the contract to be fulfilled and the television series to be completed, can be shown by the way Godard later utilized the material in a montage sequence lasting roughly two minutes, beginning 26 minutes into Episode 2A (*Une histoire seule*) of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, which incorporated the following images taken from his time in Mozambique: see Figs. 8–10.

The planned work's long-term value can also be testified by the theoretical document drawn up by Godard in response to the situation in which he found himself. Partly reprinted in translated form in MacCabe's 1980 monograph, and described by him as "one of the clearest statements of Godard's thinking on television," (MacCabe 1980, 138) the statement contained a section entitled "Principles of reflection," which we reproduce here. [Fig. 11.]

When asked by MacCabe, in the same book, as to the prospects of founding a radical alternative to the dominant practice of television networks in Third World countries such as Mozambique, Godard taciturnly responded: "There was a chance. A chance. It's over." (1979, 156.) By that point the project's failure had

evidently become apparent to him. And yet we hope to have shown that the experience in Mozambique not only left behind a number of fascinating trace documents – worthy of analysis in their own right – but that it has also informed much of Godard’s subsequent work in video and in the cinema.

References

- Brody, Richard. 2008. *Everything is Cinema: the Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Diawara, Manitha. 2003. Sonimage in Mozambique. In *The TVideo Politics of Jean-Luc Godard*, eds. Gareth James and Florian Zeyfang, 92–121. Berlin: B_Books.
- Godard, Jean-Luc. 1979. Le dernier rêve d’un producteur. *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 300 (May): 70–129.
- Godard, Jean-Luc. 1980. *Introduction à une véritable histoire du cinéma*. Paris: Éditions Albatros.
- MacCabe, Colin. 1980. *Jean-Luc Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*. London: Macmillan.
- Milne, Tom, ed. 1986 [1972]. *Godard on Godard*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2007. *The Future of the Image*. London/New York: Verso.
- Sterrit, David, ed. 1998. *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*. Jackson (US): University of Mississippi Press.

List of Figures

Figures 1–2. Images in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 300.



Figures 3–4. Images in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 300.



Figures 5–6. Image in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 300, the opening credits of *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants*



Figures 7–8. Image in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 300 and in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, Episode 2A



Figures 9–10. *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, Episode 2A

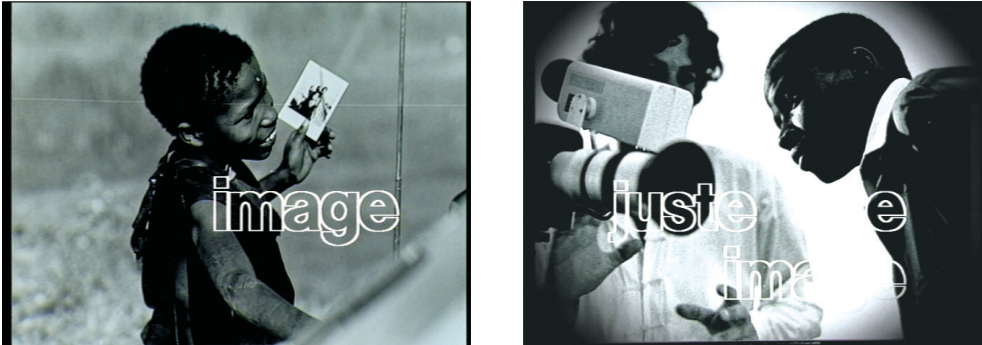
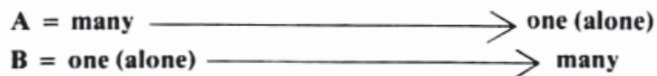


Figure 11. Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics

that's to say:



that's to say:

journey out (aller) $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{from cinema} \\ \text{to TV} \end{array} \right\}$ or $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{from A} \\ \text{to B} \end{array} \right\}$ or $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{from many} \\ \text{to one (alone)} \end{array} \right\}$

return (retour) $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{from TV} \\ \text{to cinema} \end{array} \right\}$ or $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{from B} \\ \text{to A} \end{array} \right\}$ or $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{from one (alone)} \\ \text{to many} \end{array} \right\}$

thus the following schema:



Sonimage is situated at the crossing between the departure and the arrival of information.

Sonimage is a manufacturer of light in the sense of throwing light on a situation to see it clearly or, on the contrary, to draw the veil.