Godard as Seen through the Eyes of *Numéro Deux* and *Weekend*

“Photography is truth. And cinema is truth 24 times a second”, Jean-Luc Godard

Jean-Luc Godard is one of the driving forces behind the French Nouvelle Vague. He is a revolutionary filmmaker and a philosopher. He begins his directing career with films that, while groundbreaking, still bare a similarity to convention. Later he begins to focus less on story telling and more on politics, eventually leaving anything resembling traditional film behind. His first love is language; he is constantly seeking to create a language through film. He is, perhaps, the artist to come closest to the ideal that Alexandre Astruc proposes in his famous manifesto, *La camera-stylo*. Astruc hopes that cinema will break away, “from the image for it’s own sake”(18). In a Godard film, every image serves to add meaning to the dialogue. Astruc also calls for a, “form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel”(18). Godard’s unique style and concepts clearly demonstrate this highly personal method of self-expression.

If anyone in film can be called an author, it is Godard. He writes his own scripts and has a uniformity to stylistic choices and distinctive themes that is present in almost all of his films. Beginning with *À Bout de Souffle*, and continuing through his entire career, he writes the screenplay and directs. Sometimes he is even in charge of editing and cinematography with films such as *Vladimir et Rosa* or *Sauve Qui Peut (la Vie)*. Every one of his films bare his unique stamp. Though he is one of the nouvelle vague critics to pioneer the concept of authorship in film, he later tries to distance himself from the idea of authorship. He does make a sincere attempt to relieve himself of authorial responsibility, but it cannot be seen as successful simply because any film he has directed
is immediately recognizably Godard and his stylistic elements are very unique. Perhaps the Dziga Vertov Group doesn’t believe in authorship, but when one views La Gai Savoir, it is immediately obvious that it is a product of Godard.

Godard’s films can be arranged into five different periods. The first is the Nouvelle Vague period, which begins with À Bout de Souffle and ends with Weekend. Next comes Godard’s “radical” period where his second wife, Anne Wiazemsky, introduces him to the Maoist underground in Paris. This period includes films such as Le Gai Savior and Un Film Comme les Autres that bring politics to the foreground of his work. In May of 1968, Godard co-founded the Dziga Vertov Group whose goal is to make “political films politically.” This collaboration results in films such as British Sounds and Vent d’Est, which are produced with an extremely small budget and don’t go through the usual channels of distribution and exhibition. As a result, these films are rarely seen outside activist and student circles. This period ends with Tout va Bien, the Dziga Vertov Group’s attempt to reach a mass audience. Soon after, he meets Anne-Marie Mievelle and they form a partnership, which results in films like Ici et Ailleurs and Numero Deux. They work together for almost ten years and then Godard moves away from radical political films. His final period begins with Nouvelle Vague, and includes most recently, Eloge de l'Amour.

This essay will focus on two films; Weekend, the transitional film between his first period and his “radical” period, and Numero Deux, his most important work from his video period with Anne-Marie Mievelle. Both films have major differences, but they are both clearly from the mind of Godard and share some characteristics present in all of his films, including elements such as sound, music, camera movement, and narrative treatment. In this essay, I will go through each of these aspects of film and show how Godard treats them in both Weekend and Numero Deux.
Brechtian Influences

One of Godard’s most notable influences is the work of Bertolt Brecht. Like Brecht, Godard constantly seeks to break the “illusion of reality”. His characters sometimes speak as if they are quoting, such as the scene in *Numero Deux* where the grandmother makes the bed and talks about her household duties. Individuals often come to represent a mass movement such as the rape scene in *Weekend*. Roland, representing first-world nations of substantial economic means, stands idly by as Corrine, representing third-world nations, is raped by a tramp (Sterritt 114). His films are episodic in structure. *Weekend* works this way, but has the narrative as a connecting thread. *Numero Deux* is strung together more tenuously and is, therefore, even more episodic. In the middle of *Weekend*, reflexive touches are added in the dialogue when Corrine and Roland suddenly start commenting on the fact that they’re inside a movie and they don’t like how it’s turning out. Various scenes in *Numero Deux* show Godard standing amid his video production equipment. It even goes so far as to show us the majority of the film through the eyes of two televisions. Above all, he hopes the viewer will watch in a more detached state. Instead of trying to absorb us in the lives of some interesting individuals, he uses these devices to create the Verfremdungseffekt (alienation effect) (Bordwell, Thompson 562). As Godard says, “I don’t think you should feel about a film. You should feel about a woman, not a movie. You can’t kiss a movie”(www.brainyquote.com). With films posing so many different political and social questions, an objective view is absolutely necessary.

Language: A Mode of Artistic Expression

*Numero Deux* represents the height of Godard’s use of language in film. He and his characters constantly speak in metaphors capable of multiple meanings. The “factory” represents many things during the film such as the home, the body, and women. Sandrine describes herself as a factory when she says, “I manufacture tenderness. I know how to cook. I know how to do Nicholas’s homework. I know how to suck a cock.” *Weekend* features intertitles that contain many double-entendres such as the scene where Corrine
recounts the orgy. While she is telling us the details, most of which center around the anus, we see the words “Anal Yze”. Godard is analyzing who dominates sexually: Corrine or her lover. And of course there is the obvious pun formed from the anal orgy. Other intertitles offer commentary on the film as it is playing or provide ultimately useless temporal landmarks ranging from the bizarre, “SU ND AY”, to the specific as can be seen in *Alphaville*. Both films feature long speeches delivered in different ways. There is a scene in *Weekend* where a black man and an Arab man take turns speaking for each other. We hear one speak from off camera while the other is featured in a close-up shot eating a sandwich. In *Numero Deux*, we see characters doing household chores while we hear their words from inside their head. Some of his colleagues, such as François Truffaut, later accused him being ostentatious, but it cannot be denied that Godard’s use of language in his films fulfills its purpose - to raise questions for debate. Godard says, “I realized that people were criticizing me with the excuse that I was lecturing others, whereas I was looking more to start a discussion” (Godard 16).

*Weekend* seems to be more explicitly political and less complex where language is concerned, while *Numero Deux* deals mostly with the family unit and uses an endless maze of metaphors and wordplay. In the lengthy beginning scene where Godard stands in his production studio, he says, “And about 300,00 kilometers from here the Vietcong already thought about Saigon.” As Harun Farocki points out in *Speaking about Godard*, “The mistake is telling: 300,000 kilometers per second is the speed of light. Godard is sayings that Vietnam is light years away from this film” (144). Thus, even the most innocuous sentence can, if decoded correctly, unload a whole new meaning.

**Sound and Music**

Godard always makes interesting use of sound in his films. Both *Weekend* and *Numero Deux* feature ambient sounds of nature throughout. While *Weekend* takes place outdoors and we expect the nature sounds, *Numero Deux* remains almost exclusively indoors. The sounds of chirping birds and rustling leaves give us the idea of an open
window furthering the idea that, while we are dealing with a family, it is analogous to society in the outside world.

Music is treated very differently in both films. *Weekend* has a few scenes featuring a soundtrack such as the early scene where Corrine describes the orgy or later when she and Roland are sitting on the hillside resting. However, the music sometimes intrudes at odd times. We may expect sweeping strings during a romantic embrace, but to have sudden heavy music while all the action in the film has come to a pause is very strange. *Weekend* features some diegetic music from a pianist in a barnyard, but *Numero Deux* uses only diegetic music. The first time is early in the film where Sandrine turns on a record and dances with her daughter. The rest of the music comes when various characters put on a set of headphones. When Sandrine turns on the music to dance, we know from the dialogue that it is a record, but when the characters are listening to the headphones, we never see what it is connected to. Furthermore, the music starts and stops sporadically, as if there was someone off-screen turning it on and off. These films both do not make extensive use of music, but that is not to say that Godard never used music in his films. In *Le Mépris*, Georges Delerue’s haunting theme returns again and again and in *Je Vous Salue Marie*, Godard fills each scene with an overpowering soundtrack of classical and baroque music.

**The Death of the Narrative**

By the time Godard makes *Weekend*, the concept of a traditional narrative is almost completely obliterated from his films. By the time we reach *Numero Deux*, the narrative is completely gone and will not resurface until Godard’s final period. *Weekend* has a basic plot, but it mostly acts as a framework for political messages. The story involves a couple, Roland and Corrine who are each having affairs and scheming to kill each other. Corrine’s father is near death and will be leaving Corrine a large sum of money, as long as he doesn’t change his will at the last minute. The couple must travel to visit the father to ensure that he doesn’t write Corrine out of the will, thus they set out on a weekend trip, which turns into an apocalypse of western society. The movie details their trip, the people they encounter, and
various digressions such as the barnyard piano scene, which doesn’t do anything to advance the narrative. While there isn’t much of a narrative, there is still a trace. *Numero Deux* features no “story” or plot. We are presented with many scenes in which three generations of a proletariat family living in a housing district recite monologues or have conversations. While some of the scenes depicted are discussed in other scenes, they are largely linked by themes and ideas, namely *l’usine* and *la merde* (factory and shit).

**Message and Topics**

When searching for the meaning of a Godard movie, it is helpful to understand his various periods and his political and artistic views during each. While *À Bout de Souffle*, his first major film, has some elements of women’s liberation, most of his early films until *Weekend*, are not expressly political. When *Weekend* was made, he was beginning his radical phase where he explicates his extreme leftist views. It directly preceded his Maoist films. He deals with various topics including foreign policy, women’s rights, materialism, moral decay in the bourgeoisie, and war; favored topics that appear in most Godard films following *Weekend*. By the time *Numero Deux* was made, he had had his fill of “Left” and “Right” politics and began posing philosophical questions in his films. In *Numero Deux*, Godard claims to be moving away from politics, but questions posed by the film are still political in nature. During his opening comments, he says that, “This is not a film from the right or the left.” A female voice says that it is not a political film, but pornography. Immediately, she counters by says it is not pornography, but politics and then goes on to say that the two may not be disparate ideas. The main questions dealt with in the movie are how the members of the family interact based on age and gender and also as Colin MacCabe shows, “the effects of capitalism on sexual relations and the oppression of the working class on this person, emotional level”(96).
Technical Issues: Camera, editing, lights, video

From a technical standpoint, Godard’s films have undergone some major changes. À Bout de Souffle features handheld camera work and his famous jump cut editing. Weekend features some handheld camera work, but also uses many tracking shots and some completely static shots. His fast paced editing is replaced with very long takes. In what is perhaps the most famous scene in the film, Godard films Corrine and Roland navigating through a tremendous traffic jam with one ten-minute tracking shot. He changes further during this video period when he makes Numero Deux. Video allows Godard to film very inexpensively with a crew of only three people. The small crew is essential because it enables him to ask the actors to do things that they would never agree to if a large crew were present (Silverman 142). The camera is static throughout the film. Godard’s reason is that he simply has no reason to move it. He captures most of the video in close range creating a very intimate space, as would be the case if one were actually inside of a cheap housing apartment. All scenes are done in one take with no traditional editing. However, Godard invents a new style of editing through his presentation. He shows us video on one or two television monitors, which opens up a whole new possible vocabulary of editing. Aside from the interaction between the two monitors, Godard uses rolling superimpositions, direct superimpositions, and vision mixing to effectively layer image on top of image (MacCabe 96). Both films use only natural or diegetic light, something Godard has believed in since the very early films such as Alphaville.

The Role of the Image

Godard may flood his films with enigmatic dialogues and obscure commentary, but this does not diminish the importance of the image in his work. The horrible
automobile accidents of Weekend, or the anal intercourse of Numero Deux are very powerful and complex images intricately tied to the dialogue. Even the films of the Dziga Vertov period, which many film experts place in the “just people sitting around talking about politics and philosophy” stereotype, utilize a broad range of images. A scene in Numero Deux clearly illustrates the depth of Godard’s images. MacCabe describes a scene where Pierre leaves for and returns from work, which is superimposed over a shot of Sandrine sleeping. Pierre is seen in long shot walking in the open outdoors, an image that takes up half of the screen. The rest of the screen shows Sandrine in close up asleep. Her face fills most of the frame before the superimposition and then her head is partially blocked by the shot of Pierre, which creates a claustrophobic feeling echoing what Sandrine must feel everyday that she is stuck in the small apartment. The confined space is evocative of a prison block (96). Harun Faocki offers another possible reading when this shot is repeated later in the film following an argument between Pierre and Sandrine. She faces the camera while the other half of the screen shows Pierre again leaving for work. He is walking away from the camera, which effectively places the two characters with their backs to each other after their fight (Silverman 154).

**Conclusion**

We can see that Weekend and Numero Deux have different styles and methods, but we can also see features that cross all of Godard’s periods. Jean-Luc Godard continues to be an anomalous and inventive filmmaker always seeking to challenge and provoke views; To push us out of our comfort zones so that we might discover something new and wonderful.
Works Cited


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