I, Anna Alich, hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Arts

in:

Art History

It is entitled:

Alienation in "Tout va bien (1972)

This work and its defense approved by:

Chair: Kimberly Paice, PhD

Michael Carrasco, PhD

Steve Gebhardt

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Alienation in Jean-Luc Godard's
*Tout Va Bien*
(1972)

A thesis presented to
the Art History Faculty
of the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning
University of Cincinnati
in candidacy for the degree of
Master of Arts in Art History

Anna Alich
May 2007

Advisor: Dr. Kimberly Paice
Abstract

Jean-Luc Godard’s (b. 1930) *Tout va bien* (1972) cannot be considered a successful political film because of its alienated methods of film production. In chapter one I examine the first part of Godard’s film career (1952-1967) the *Nouvelle Vague* years. Influenced by the events of May 1968, Godard at the end of this period renounced his films as bourgeois only to announce a new method of making films that would reflect the *au courant* French Maoist politics. In chapter two I discuss Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group’s last film *Tout va bien*. This film displays a marked difference in style from Godard’s earlier films, yet does not display a clear understanding of how to make a political film of this measure without alienating the audience. In contrast to this film, I contrast Guy Debord’s (1931-1994) contemporaneous film *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973). As a filmmaker Debord successfully dealt with alienation in film. A study of Godard’s filmmaking with the Dziga Vertov Group can dispel the idea of paradox in his oeuvre of film.
Acknowledgements

Nobody said writing a thesis would be easy. It would have been less so without all the help and guidance of so many different people. I was lucky for the genuine interest the topic of Jean-Luc Godard’s films received, therefore I greatly benefited from a multiplicity of minds and approaches to the subject. I could not even begin to thank everyone for his or her part on the subject of French film that now has shaped my understanding of it. To start there was my introductory class on francophone film taught by Ibraham Amadou during my time as an undergraduate French student. Without this class, I would never have developed an interest in film and been given the perspective that it is a facet of our cultural existence. I would like to thank my committee members for the advice they were able to give me: Kim Paice for giving me the inspiration for my subject, her continual enthusiasm, for a better understanding of the English language, and for being a great person; Michael Carrasco for his anthropological reflections on the importance of images in all cultures; and, Steve Gebhardt whose own practice of making documentary film brought a perspective a scholar could not.

I would also like to thank the library staff at the University of Cincinnati, mostly Langsam Library and at the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning, for all of their assistance in acquiring resources. I would also like to extend this thanks to the library system in the state of Ohio for its efficiency at such a large scale. The volume of materials available is absolutely amazing.
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Introduction

The career of French-Swiss filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard (b. 1930) spans fifty years, beginning with *Opération 'Béton'* (Operation Concrete, 1954) to his latest *Vrai faux passeport* (True False Passport, 2006). Many consider him the most influential film director ever. His cinema style ranges widely from love stories that reflect a youthful *joie de vivre* (À Bout de souffle, Breathless, 1960)) to apocalyptic trips to the countryside (*Week-end*, 1967) to a history of cinema told through the images of cinema (*Histoire(s) du cinema*, 1989-1998). I, however, will focus on the Godard’s work with the Dziga Vertov Group (1968-1972), a short period in his career in which he made several militant or political films amidst the upheavals of the 1960s. Each confronted such issues as ideology and class struggle.

For Godard, the most compelling and influential event of the period was the general strike of May 1968 in France, a month-long series of student and worker revolts against the government and its institutions. The events inspired Godard to renounce his previous “bourgeois” filmmaking style as banal. Breaking away from traditional film, he responded by forming a collective of filmmakers called the Dziga Vertov Group, whose intent was to make politically informed films in lieu of the revolutionary spirit of May 1968. They named themselves after the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov (a.k.a. Denis Kaufman, 1896-1954), for his innovative use of montage in documentary, as exemplified in the films *Chelovek s kino-apparatom* (Man with the Movie Camera, 1929) and *Tri pesni o Lenine* (Three Songs about Lenin, 1934).

One way the group distanced the filmmaking process from the popular cinema industry was the use of 16mm film, instead of the conventional 35mm format. Another was to break with
traditional methods of storytelling, for example by disrupting narrative with Brecht’s alienation effect. Their body of work includes: *Un film comme les autres (A Film like Any Other*, 1968), *British Sounds* (a.k.a. *See You at Mao*) and *Pravda* (1969), *Le Vent d’est (Wind from the East)*, *Lotte in Italia* (*Struggle in Italy*), the unfinished *Jusqu’a la victoire (Until Victory*, 1969), and *Vladimir et Rosa* (1971). In addition to improvising traditional the structure of film, these films offered an openly oblique view of Maoist analyses of the political situation in various countries, including the United Kingdom, Czechoslovakia, Jordan, Italy, and the United States. This potentially volatile collusion of politics and theory, however, seriously lacked an audience. Save for small groups of committed militants or obscure theoreticians, most audiences (his earlier devotees) found the combination of didactic themes and tedious film sequences disagreeable. To appeal to a wider audience Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, his major collaborator of the Dziga Vertov Group, made a last film, *Tout va bien (It’s all Good*, 1972) to revise their revolutionary tactics. However, something was different.

*Tout va bien*’s purpose was to consider the class struggle in France four years from 1968, to address the role of intellectuals in the revolution, and to perform an analysis of the group’s previous works. Prior to this film, the group had neglected to invoke the political unrest in France, their only inspiration. *Tout va bien* is a feature-length color film about a bourgeois couple that encounters workers on strike in a sausage factory. The famous actors Yves Montand, who plays an ex-New Wave film director who makes television commercials, and Jane Fonda, who plays an American journalist who specializes on leftist groups in France. In many instances mirroring the lives of the directors, they are contemporary members of the bourgeoisie discontent
with their current situations, with their jobs and each other since the student and worker revolts in Paris.

In my study, I will argue that *Tout va bien* does not function as a political film, despite the aims of Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group. Because this film is representative of all the w, with its intentions of reaching a larger audience, only to make a film that uses alienated means to combat alienation.\(^1\) My approach will involve a Marxist analysis of the social history surrounding the Dziga Vertov Group and the film itself. I will also offer a comparison with a contemporary French film that more successfully engages revolutionary cinematic devices without alienating. This film will be Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973).

Godard’s introduction to film occurred while he was attending the University of Sorbonne in Paris, where he received a certificate in ethnology in 1950. He began work as a film critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, a French film magazine founded in 1951 by film critic André Bazin, which continues to be published today. It was there that Godard, with other critics for the magazine, would formulate ideas related to cinema that would revolutionize what he, and most notably François Truffaut (1932-1984), considered was the stale and realistic, yet popular style of French cinema of the 1940s and 1950s. Godard later applied these ideas in his films, in what would be called the *Nouvelle Vague* (New Wave) style. An engagement with social and political upheavals of the era, and radical experiments with editing, visual style, and narrative, all contributed to the sense of a general break with traditional cinema.

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\(^1\) Alienation here refers to Karl Marx’s theory in which the individual within the context of industrial production has no control over their life and work. A direct relationship is not formed between the worker and what is produced. A rupture exists separating the worker from their work and therefore their lives.
**Literature review**

While critics and scholars devote much attention to Godard’s career, there is scant attention given to his work with the Dziga Vertov Group. James Monaco and Michel Marie limit their scholarship to Godard’s New Wave period. Marie wrote *The French New Wave: An Artistic School* (1997) in response to Monaco’s *The New Wave: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette* (1976) to correct what he considered dehistoricized readings of the New Wave aesthetic. In recent years, museums such as the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Tate Modern in London have published exhibition catalogues with previously unavailable documents and new articles celebrating Godard’s works from different perspectives and disciplines, which are crucial to my research. I also relied on major interviews with Godard, featured in such publications as David Sterritt’s *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews* (1998) and Michael Goodwin and Greil Marcus’s *Double Feature: Movie and Politics* (1972).

Most useful among monographic studies on Godard is Wheeler Winston Dixon’s *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (1997), which covers all of Godard’s works up until 1995, and David Sterritt’s *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible* (1999), which offers an introductory overview of Godard's work as a filmmaker, critic, and video artist. Dixon argues that Godard’s work properly functions best within the context of a collaborative enterprise, and devotes an entire chapter to Godard’s films with the Dziga Vertov Group. However, both texts lack an in-depth analysis of specific films.

Most useful for this study are Steve Cannon’s essay “‘When You’re Not a Worker Yourself…’: Godard, the Dziga Vertov Group and the Audience” (2000), and the writings of the
Situationist International. Both are useful as guides, but are only starting points for the reassessment of Tout Va Bien, which I offer in this study.

Chapter descriptions

In the first chapter I examine the catalyst in Godard’s approach to filmmaking that prompted him to denounce his Nouvelle Vague films as bourgeois to form the Dziga Vertov Group. By offering the history of the Nouvelle Vague movement and its impact on cinema, an assessment of the profound and abrupt change in Godard’s films will be demystified. I will also give a brief history of the May 1968 revolts and its influence in the formation of the Dziga Vertov Group.

In the second chapter I look at Tout Va Bien as a synthetic work that brings together concerns and practices in works by the members of the Dziga Vertov Group. They were intellectual filmmakers, who themselves did not actively participate in the general strike, but wanted to convey and embody the political uprisings through a revolutionary form. However, I will argue that they were unsuccessful in reaching their goals of revolutionary filmmaking because they did not break with the conventional film structure narrative.

Finally, in the third chapter I offer an analysis of Guy Debord’s (1931-1994) film The Society of the Spectacle (1973) as an example of cinema that is revolutionary. I argue that Debord successfully made a dialectical film that transformed the relationship of images by manipulating the structure of the film. His film allowed the viewer to take what they learned and apply it to their everyday lives. Debord’s technique consisted of disrupting the connectivity of images
through montage, a technique he called détournement. I compare it to Tout Va Bien’s form arguing for its ineffectiveness. In conclusion, this study of Tout Va Bien will provide an in-depth examination of the events that inspired Godard to reevaluate his cinematic language with the Dziga Vertov Group. I will contend that the Dziga Vertov Group misappropriated Marxist political technique, possibly that of Debord’s.
Chapter 1

From Radical to Revolutionary:
Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group

Audience: M. Godard, are you concerned more with making movies or with making social commentary?
Jean-Luc Godard: I see no difference between the two.²

In the 1950s and 1960s French culture experienced many changes as it advanced out of the devastations of World War II. France experienced the decolonization of its territories, in which the colonizers along with the colonized traveled to France in search of economic opportunities. The large influx of people further damaged the fragile economy, to which aid was negotiated with the United States to alleviate the strain. Many groups on the political left and right feared the consequences of a culture influenced by America.³ These fears related to the practice of Taylorism, the application of scientific methods to the problem of obtaining maximum efficiency in industrial production. They also related Fordism, “an ultra-modern form of working methods—such as is offered by the most advanced American variety, the industry of Henry Ford,”⁴ of France’s economic production. American influence also led to anxiety about the

seductive but corrosive cultural values that accompanied this kind of modernization. Political
groups sought to defend France’s identity from the American cultural invasion was expressed
through mass-produced imports such as films and cars, and cultural characteristics, such as ones
associated with progressive women in the United States. Consequently, French film directors
found it difficult to portray France’s own rapidly changing culture.

Jean-Luc Godard (b. 1930) made a name for himself as a radical Nouvelle Vague (New
Wave) director breaking from established French cinematic traditions by depicting a France that
was affected by war and global influences. He was also one of the first film critics to direct films.
He regarded this move within the film industry as a natural and continual progression from his
career as a critic:

Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is
subsumed. I think of myself as an essayist, producing essays in the novel
form, or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them.

Many critics and audiences disliked his work, believing the “critical dimension” of his films to be
overly didactic, while others such as Gilles Deleuze regarded it as one of the highest exercises in
thought. The Nouvelle Vague style, which was prominent from the late-1950s into the mid-
1960s, which used technologies such as montage and lightweight cameras, which allowed them to
portray urban environments realistically. By 1968, Godard denounced this style as bourgeois and
claimed that it had no social relevance in a time of such political, economical, and social

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5 Forbes and Kelly, 140.
6 Jean-Luc Godard, Godard on Godard, eds. Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (New York, NY: The
7 Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 40.
8 Michael Goodwin and Greil Marcus, Double Feature: Movies and Politics (New York, NY:
Outerbridge and Lazard, Inc., 1972), 42.
turmoil. In this chapter I will briefly discuss the development of the *Nouvelle Vague* and the events that eventually would cause Godard to dismiss it for a more revolutionary approach.

**Godard’s Discovery of Cinema**

To date, Godard has not yet publicly discussed his early biography in great detail. It is known that he enjoyed a comfortable and cultured childhood. Born to Swiss parents, his father was a physician and his mother belonged to a wealthy family of bankers. Financially able, his family fled France to escape the perils of World War II and returned to his father’s homeland, Switzerland. Later as a young adult, Godard returned to Paris to study anthropology at the University of Sorbonne. However, lacking the temperament for academia, Godard dropped out of school, found cinema, and began to work as a film critic for several major publications.

Cinema is taken seriously in France, and in the 1950s there were many publications devoted to it. Godard worked first for *La Gazette du cinéma* from 1950-1952, and the weekly newspaper *Art* from 1957-1959. He then went on to establish himself at the highly influential *Cahiers du cinéma*, a magazine founded in 1951 by film critic André Bazin (1918-1958). *Cahiers* critic and filmmaker Luc Moullet (b. 1937), in 1959, wrote an article for the magazine that outlined and commented on Godard’s career as a critic. Moullet remarked that Godard’s articles to date were “generally whimsical and mediocre, accurate at times and mostly incomprehensible,” and “Godard himself did not think them very important since he almost

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always signed them with a pseudonym, e.g., Hans Lucas.”¹¹ I believe this lack of seriousness also characterizes Godard’s cinematic works from this period, which I will discuss shortly.

Godard and the other young film enthusiasts from Cahiers, François Truffaut (1932-1984), Jacques Rivette (b. 1928), Claude Chabrol (b. 1930), and Éric Rohmer (b. 1920), acquired a love for film at the Cinémathèque Française, in Paris. Originally founded in 1936 by Henri Langlois (1914-1977),¹² the Cinémathèque was a significant venue and it held a large collection of movies. As an archivist, Langlois collected a tremendous variety of work, films and objects related to cinema including: silent, Danish, Swedish, and Hollywood films; set design plans, the head from Psycho (1960), and dresses of Marilyn Monroe. Langlois became notable as the first advocate of film preservation with a collection of nearly 60,000 reels of film. For him, the Cinémathèque’s collection was also a sure way to influence future filmmakers, and therefore held frequent screenings.

The Cinémathèque enjoyed its greatest influence in postwar Paris, and contributed to the notion of defining the cinéphile, or someone who is obsessed with film. Langlois, a self-described cinéphile, believed that films were facets of life, a reflection of history and culture.¹³ He preferred collecting films to making them, because for him filmmakers were slaves to what they captured on camera.¹⁴ He discovered that he could inculcate his audiences with his love of film by screening films according to associations of common themes. A typical night usually consisted of three films that related to one another either by director or by concept. I believe this viewing

¹¹ Moullet, 26.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Ibid.
process may have influenced Godard’s film critiques as he attempted to thread together a theory of film that he did not yet understand.

From this new movie theatre experience, a fanaticism developed out of the desire to see every film the cinema screened. By placing emphasis on certain director’s œuvres, Langlois demonstrated that their artistic vision realized itself from one film to the next. The self-appointed “father” of the Nouvelle Vague, Langlois impressed many of his beliefs upon the young directors associated with the movement—perhaps chiefly his view that the author is the creator in the development of their politique des auteurs, which I will explain further in this chapter.

**Nouvelle Vague (New Wave)**

*Nouvelle Vague* scholar, Michel Marie, argues in *The French New Wave: An Artistic School* that the style of the *Nouvelle Vague* developed from the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*,

which was influenced by Langlois’s Cinémathèque. However, those individuals who were considered *Nouvelle Vague* directors never claimed to belong to a unified school of directors. The term *Nouvelle Vague* was first used in a series of articles written by Françoise Giroud for the weekly news magazine *L’Express* in 1957. It originally referred to the youth generation after World War II, and not to the directors. Marie believes this origin of the term is significant.

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16 Marie, 71.
because it characterizes the “thematic role played by the new youthful generation” and with the emergence of a sociological examination of culture.\footnote{Marie, 1.}

The purported *Nouvelle Vague* belonged to a burgeoning era in French film history. The young directors’ relationship with film was different from that of their predecessors with cinematic technical advances such as new filming equipment that permitted the director to leave the studio. This set the stage for more cost effective films, without the elaborate sets from the prewar era. These new innovations in filming devices produced a new look that is unique to the *Nouvelle Vague* that derived from a series of technical and strategic choices:

1. The auteur director is also the scenarist or cinematographer for the film;

2. The director allows for improvisation within the script during filming;

3. Shooting on stage sets is no longer desired and we begin to see natural locations;

4. A small crew of a few people is used;

5. Sound is recorded along with the visuals without relying much on post-synchronization;

6. The director depends on less light, using faster film that requires less light, resulting in a grainy quality;

7. Non-professional actors are preferred allowing for a more natural portrayal of the character;

8. If the director has access to professional actors, he will use those who are less experienced.\footnote{Ibid., 71.}

Marie believes these choices provide the foundation of the *Nouvelle Vague* aesthetic and “provide for a greater sense of flexibility aimed at erasing the borders between professional and...
amateur cinema, and those between fiction, and documentary, or investigative films.”

Thus these Cahiers critics-turned-film-directors formulated an idea of what cinema should be after Langlois’s own unrealized notion of what cinema could be. But first to gain acknowledgement as serious makers of film, they had to contend with the existing canon of films.

Lasting from the end of the stock market crash in 1929 until the outbreak of WWII, the golden age of film in France started with the advent of sound technology in 1927. Some of the most successful films from this period were Jean Renoir’s La grande illusion (Grand Illusion, 1937) and Marcel Carné’s Le Jour se lève (Daybreak, 1939). French cinema of the 1930s attempted to reflect all aspects of French society through the major artistic current, poetic realism. This cinematic style was a creative effort to reconstruct commonly accepted representations of life through the perspective of an artistic medium. Theatrical stage sets were used to compensate for the lack of mobility of the filming equipment. Through these constructions the director conveyed objectively his or her own outlook on life, while remaining true to the subject. The limitations of an artificial reality contributed to the look of poetic realism producing a semblance of fantasy, one that erased a sense of the everyday within film. Godard, however, embraced the everyday, the ordinary in his films. The use of lightweight cameras allowed him to move filming outside the studio. Godard’s scenes of people and actors in the street and in moving vehicles are indebted to this innovation in camera devices.

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19 Marie, 71.
21 Lanzoni, 57.
In the late 1940s, American films began to be shown in Parisian movie theatres. Their presence was, in part, the result of an agreement between France and the United States to aid in rebuilding France after World War II. The majority leaders in the National Assembly, the PCF (French Communist Party) led negotiations with the United States seeking a loan to cover the rebuilding costs, but the two countries did not easily reach an agreement. The United States was suspicious of a communist government in France, as they were everywhere else, and feared a communist coup of the French state. An agreement was finally settled upon, in which France would receive a loan from the United States in which one of the constituents was a fifty per cent share of the French film market. The Nouvelle Vague directors embraced this invasion of Hollywood films and American culture, while those affiliated with the PCF did not.

Truffaut became the voice of the Nouvelle Vague, as he was the most out-spoken. He was more daring in his written critiques for Cahiers du cinéma than the other, younger critics he was often associated with. His article, “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema,” (1954) created the foundation for his idea of politique des auteurs, or the auteur theory, and for other fundamental aesthetic positions the Nouvelle Vague directors would later take. In this article, Truffaut reproaches popular French directors for perfunctory films that claimed to represent a “Tradition of Quality,” without holding to a proper standard. Truffaut names ten or twelve directors who “force the admiration of the foreign press with their ambition, twice in one year defending France at Cannes and Venice. Since 1946, they quite regularly run off with medals, and Lion d’or, and

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24 http://jdelpias.club.fr/truffaut/unecertainetendance.html
large prizes.” He also claimed that after the war many films relied too heavily on the original script or book. Truffaut asserted that a film’s source material should not be overt, but should only serve as inspiration for the director’s final creation. According to Marie:

there is only one author of a film and that is the director. All creative paternity is denied the scriptwriter, who does nothing more than supply the raw material to the auteur. However, this policy is subjective in that not every director may be considered an auteur, there are no œuvres there are only auteurs.

Thus the director's vision becomes visible and can be attributed only to him, no matter the source material.

Marie states that the editors of Cahiers du cinéma expressed several reservations about publishing this article because the “the polemical tone was quite vicious from such a young critic; he attacked directors who were well respected by the majority of film critics at the time, and even by some at Cahiers.” These acts of defiance against the current state of cinema earned Truffaut and the other critic-directors the label “young Turks” from Cahiers editor and film critic Bazin for what he discerned as a radical view of cinema.

Godard took the idea that the director becomes auteur of his borrowed narrative material the furthest. Marie asserts that with him, the classical notion of a script gradually loses any meaning as the film obscures the source. Godard used narrative material from his several sources, his personal life and from borrowed texts usually intellectual. Obscuring their origins by inserting the plot into a different context he would create something that was his, a veritable


Marie, 41.

Ibid., 33.

Ibid., 41.

Ibid., 74.
collage. For example in his 1967 film, *Weekend*, Godard borrows several characters and dialogue from external sources, like Tom Thumb from fairytale lore and whole scenes from French novelist and critic Georges Bataille’s *The Story of the Eye*. To further blur the origins of his hodge-podge sources sounds originate either from random noises (i.e. honking vehicles, peripheral conversations) or from the soundtrack. The importance of dialogue is thereby displaced and emphasis moves to the visual image. Critic Gilles Deleuze finds this to be a major innovation in film. He believes it shows:

> a camera-consciousness, which is no longer defined by the movements it is able to make, but by the mental connections it is able to make. And it becomes questioning, responding, objecting, provoking, theorizing, hypothesizing, experimenting, in accordance with the open list of logical conjunctions (‘or’, ‘therefore’, ‘if’, ‘because’, ‘actually’, ‘although...’)\(^{30}\)

Godard’s works become an intellectual pursuit with its focus moving outside the film.

Despite the unconventional representation of the cinema form, French cinema scholar Colin Crisp observed that the *Nouvelle Vague* formed out of a need to regenerate the classical cinema; it was “not a displacement but rather a logical outcome and continuation of it.”\(^{31}\)

However for Godard, this continuation of the cinematic past was not enough. As he became associated with French Maoism (Marxist-Leninist) methods of thinking he aspired to revolutionize his film approach even further than before.

\(^{30}\) Deleuze, 23.

\(^{31}\) Crisp, 417.
According to Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Weekend* is “the beginning of the end” of his *Nouvelle Vague* films. This film connotes the start of a new approach to filmmaking.\(^{32}\) Godard explained his intent to break with the legacy of the past,

> It was the cinema which made us—or me, at least—want to make films. I knew nothing of life except through the cinema, and my first efforts were ‘film de cinéphile,’ the work of a film-enthusiast. I mean that I didn’t see things in relation to the world, to life or history, but in relation to the cinema. Now I am growing away from that. \(^{33}\)

Godard further clarified the origin of his intent in an interview with Michael Goodwin, who asked, “If you could draw a line, and say before this point your films were bourgeois, and after they are revolutionary, where would that line be?” Godard responded:

> Stage by stage, little by little, Nam, the third world struggle, all that—and the way I worked on technique, fighting against the conservative bourgeois technique and using the progressive but still bourgeois technique…and then there were the May-June events in France. By then, I was really ripe for change. \(^{34}\)

The May-June events in France, also called the events of May 1968, were the catalyst that allowed Godard to realize this change from bourgeois to revolutionary.

**The Events of May 1968 and the Dziga Vertov Group**

The events of May 1968 in France were a month-long series of student, worker revolts that protested the conservative Gaullist government and its institutions. These protests led to the greatest general strike in European history, involving nine million workers and losing 15,000,000

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\(^{33}\) Sterritt, 4.

\(^{34}\) Goodwin and Marcus, 43.
working days.\textsuperscript{35} For Paris alone, the number of demonstrators ranged from 171,000 to more than half a million.\textsuperscript{36} An assortment of expressions have been used to describe the events, such as “crisis,” “strike,” “revolt,” “revolution,” “(student) commune,” “chienlit/dog’s breakfast”\textsuperscript{37} because they represented a different experience to everyone involved. However, the events were not entirely successful, but as French sociologist Alain Touraine stated:

> It did destroy the illusion of a society united through growth and prosperity; it replaced the mirage of social rationality and the common good with a picture of society’s struggles and contradictions. In the midst of a crisis of social change, it reinvented the class struggle.\textsuperscript{38}

Likewise, these events affected the French film industry by initiating a sense of social responsibility and its engagement with the public.

> In response, Godard himself formed a collective called the Dziga Vertov Group, which aimed to make films in a manner that kept alive the revolution in themes and non-commercial means of production. The Dziga Vertov Group included Godard, Gérard Maritn, Nathalie Billard, Armoand Marco, as listed on the group’s ‘manifesto.’\textsuperscript{39} However, others did participate such as Jean-Henri Roger and Paul Burron, but especially Jean-Pierre Gorin with whom Godard would co-direct Tout va bien (1972), a film that revisits the events of May 1968 after four years. They named themselves after the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov, for his innovative use of

\textsuperscript{35} Reader, 1.
\textsuperscript{36} Sylvia Harvey, May ’68 and Film Culture (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 5.
\textsuperscript{37} Le Petit Robert defines chienlit as a masquerade, grotesque disguise, disorder. “La réforme, oui; la chienlit, non,” attributed to Charles de Gaulle in May 1968.
\textsuperscript{39} Steve Cannon, “When you’re not a worker yourself…”: Godard, the Dziga Vertov Group and the Audience.” In 100 Years of European Cinema: Entertainment or Ideology?, eds. Diana Holmes and Alison Smith. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, 100-108.
montage in documentary-style films, “whose notion of *Kino-Pravda* (Cine-Truth) is seen to offer a correct analytical approach to the image but also a commitment to film ‘in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat.’”

The Dziga Vertov Group’s use of 16mm film, instead of the conventional 35mm format or creation of works for television, exemplified their distancing from the popular cinema industry. Their films held an openly oblique view of their Maoist (Marxist-Leninist) analysis of the political situation in various countries, including the United Kingdom, Czechoslovakia, Jordan, Italy, and the United States. I will point out what Steve Cannon also does, that the choice of the group to emulate the style of Vertov indicated documentary over fiction, the truth versus falsehood. However, their last film *Tout va bien* does not follow this agenda. First, a production company gave major funding, and second, the film relies heavily on a fictional narrative.

In the next chapter I will argue that the group’s last film *Tout va bien* cannot be called a political film in the sense that was intended by Godard because he used alienated means to combat alienation. Instead, Godard made a self-reflexive film that concerned his ideological awakening to the struggle of the working class. For which another French militant group, the Situationists, had criticized him.

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40 Cannon, 102.
41 Ibid.
Chapter Two

*Tout va bien* (1972) as Symbolic Narrative

I think an idea is a theoretical weapon and a film is a theoretical rifle.

Jean-Luc Godard

As capitalism’s ever-intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own impoverishment, and eventually puts them in the position of having either having to reject it in its totality or do nothing at all, the revolutionary organization must learn that it can no longer *combat alienation with alienated forms*.


Godard: *le plus con des suisses pro-chinois!* (the most idioditic of pro-Chinese Swiss!)

Spray-painted on the walls of the Sorbonne during the student uprisings.

The aim of *Tout va bien* (*Everything’s All Right* (US), *Just Great* (UK), 1972) was to continue the legacy of May 1968 revolts. So as not to forget its impact on ideology and the French class struggle. Told from the perspectives of Jean-Luc Godard (b. 1930) and collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin (b. 1943), it performs a critique of the group’s films as well as on those of Godard’s previous “iconoclastic” New Wave films, as discussed in Chapter One. While many scholars tend only to mention briefly this period because of its supposed incongruency with the
rest of his films there are others, such as Steve Cannon, who believe that the Dziga Vertov Group’s films need to be reassessed with a Marxist analysis of the means of the film’s production. I, however, believe there to be factors other than production that keep Tout va bien from truly being a revolutionary study of May 1968. In this chapter I will argue that it is the structure of the film and its paradoxical dependence on narrative and the use of Brechtian theatre devices, generate an unresolved and confusing story. The group was successful in making a narcissistic film that did not successfully combat alienation under capitalism, as Godard purported to be the aim of the film, because it only obscures the impoverishment of worker’s lives. In spite of innovative filmic devices, such as Bertolt Brecht’s alienation effect, the medium of the film is not used in a revolutionary fashion in either how the cinematic image is presented to the viewer or through the plot. Tout va bien succeeds in portraying alienation seductively, instead of combating it.

**Synopsis: Tout va bien**

*Tout va bien* is a feature length film that stars two big-name actors, French Yves Montand (1921-1991) (Lui) and American Jane Fonda (b. 1937) (Elle). Both play characters that work in media and are from bourgeois backgrounds. Lui is a washed up Nouvelle Vague screenwriter who makes television commercials and Elle is an American journalist who reports on French culture and politics for the American Broadcasting Service. It is both a love story and a historical account in which they play a married couple whose relationship is in crisis in the aftermath of May 1968.

42 It is widely considered the worst part of his career, however it must be noted that many of these films have remained unseen as they have never been distributed.
43 Cannon, 107.
Since the student and worker revolts in Paris, the characters Lui and Elle have both become discontent with their current situations, with their jobs and with each other.

The film opens with typical Godardian bold capital letters in French national colors: blue, white, and red that read “Mai 1968.” The voices of a female and male narrator begin to speak:

*Narrator One:* I want to make a film.

*Narrator Two:* You need money for that.

To demonstrate the importance of funding the screen then shifts to a close-up view of a hand that repeatedly signs a bank check then rips it off for each person on the film’s payroll, for example: script, sound, editing, grips, special effects, benefits, etc. The narrator interjects,

*N1:* If you use big stars you get money.

*N2:* So we’ll use big stars.

*N1:* How will we get big stars?

The answer to this question is a story, a love story.

Next, the scene cuts to the couple strolling along a riverbank asking each other

*Elle:* Do you love me?

*Lui:* Yes. I love your eyes, your mouth. (He continues naming other parts of her body which please him).

*Elle:* Then you love me completely.

This dialogue strongly references a scene from Godard’s *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963), in which Brigitte Bardot lays nude upon a bed and seeks reaffirmation of her husband’s love for her by asking the same questions. Again the narrators speak, disrupting the couple’s conversation to say that they will be called Lui and Elle. They then pause and look into the camera. The next time the
narrators speak, they contextualize the story geographically and historically. A map of France signifies the story’s location as it fills the frame.

After the establishment of the scene and characters, the narrators add intrigue to the story by locating the source of crisis in French class struggles: “There are farmers who farm, workers who work, and the bourgeois who…bourgeois.” That is to say when the divided classes are thrown together problems arise, especially when one of them is in control. Scenes of crisis, such as Elle and Lui fighting, demonstrations in the street, police beating a girl, interrupt other scenes of daily life. These scenes do not fit comfortably into the narrative.

The story finally begins when Elle and Lui visit a sausage factory to interview the manager on the workers’ strikes to find that the factory had actually been taken over by striking workers. Resembling a theatre stage, the factory is presented to the viewer in cross-section à la children’s dollhouse, in which we can see concurrently the activities in each room. The strikers take Elle and Lui hostage and hold them with their boss in his office for two days. On her release, Elle interviews the boss, workers, and union leaders. Each group is at odds with one another. This scene is important for the development of the characters as well as the message of the film. This is also when the couple realizes that have been ignoring life. They must rethink their careers as a mediocre journalist and as an ex-new wave screenwriter who now makes commercials for razors. However, there are no easy answers. Each knows that they must confront life differently, but are not sure how.

The cinematography seems to be somewhat lacking. It consists of long tedious also lends to the rather dull. Unlike Godard’s New Wave films, Tout va bien utilizes simple camera shots and not much movement to create a minimal film. His earlier films were more dynamic and
complex and can be contributed to his cinematographer Raoul Coutard (b.1924). However shot using a 16mm camera, Tout va bien’s directors used two camera moves—the lateral tracking shot and the stationary shot. Gorin likens the film’s over-all effect to that shot using a super-eight camera, “like making a home movie for a quarter of a million dollars.” He states that while planning each of the scenes they thought in terms of shapes and surfaces and the relationships between them.\(^{44}\) The camera shots emphasis the acting. Visually, the film is striking. Shot in Eastmancolor, the colors are bold and vivid. At all times the image is in focus, which creates a flatness and heaviness to the whole frame that works to feature the characters acting. For film scholar Yoseta Loshitzky, the aesthetic choices made by the Dziga Vertov Group synthesize into:

an attempt to revolutionize the language of cinema. The notions of class struggle and dialectical materialism determined the films’ mode of production, form, and content; above all they demanded a new relationship be created between film and the spectator, the image and the sound, and the content and the form of the films themselves.\(^{45}\)

However, to assess whether Tout va bien succeeded in politicizing these aesthetic choices is different than actually having a political method.

**Godard and the Situationist International**

At the time of its release Tout va bien’s reception was polarized. Many have praised Godard’s films as iconoclastic and avant-garde, as well as cooptive and overly didactic. Contemporaneous film critics such as Thomas Kavanagh and James Roy MacBean praised the

\(^{45}\) Loshitzky, 29.
Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group for its commitment to dialectical, radical filmmaking. For MacBean, *Tout va bien* is “an ironic comment on the self-satisfied optimism of bourgeois society” as it “throws out a challenge to each spectator to confront the reality of class struggle and to take a stand in it.” Likewise, Kavanagh defends the film from radical and bourgeois critiques alike, which he feels “threaten to obliterate a subtle series of continuities and ruptures essential to understanding the limits and implications of Godard’s politicized aesthetics.”

Recently, scholars like Yoseta Loshitzky still claim: “Godard’s break with the past was complete during these years.” While these critics sought to secure Godard’s autonomous position as radical filmmaker, others such as the Situationist International sought to threaten his newfound status with the Dziga Vertov Group by exposing his flawed approach to counter-cinema.

Marxist-Leninist or Maoist ideas were the main influences in Godard and The Dziga Vertov Group’s politics during the late 1960s. According to Belden Fields, French Maoism—or “antihierarchical Maoism”—that was popular during the 1960s. It raised basic questions about the power of the state and its control over its citizens. Mao’s ideas that translated into “a form of elitism in which mass-mobilization would take place under the auspices of declassed intellectual elites, inspiring passive masses with a revolutionary creed which in no sense could be conceived as

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47 MacBean, 30-34. This was done to ensure a non-cult following from his former art-house film fans. This film is about the ideological class struggle were intended for the “actively committed Marxist-Leninist or Maoist militant, for whom the films of the Dziga Vertov Group are made.
48 Thomas M. Kavanagh, “Godard-Gorin’s ‘TOUT VA BIEN,’” *Diacritics* III, no. 2 (Spring 1974), 42.
49 Loshitzky, 27.
simply “reflecting” the “objective economic conditions” of their respective circumstances. By this model Godard holds an exclusive position above and beyond those for who is work is for with his authority relegated through the narrative structure of the film.

The Situationist International was an artists’ group whose aim was to revolutionize daily life to save it from boredom and banality. The collective was the result of an alliance between three already-existing artists’ groups, Asger Jorn’s (b. Asger Oluf Jørgensen 1914-1973) Imaginist Bauhaus, Guy Debord’s (b. 1931-1994) Lettrist International, and Ralph Rumney’s (1934-2002) London Psychological Association that took place on July 28, 1957 in Cosio d’Arroscia, Italy. The group based their principles on Debord’s *Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action* (1957). Versed in Marxist thought and influenced by Dada and Surrealism, this manifesto-like essay called for an organization of like-minded artists to combat “the crisis of modern culture [that] has led to total ideological decomposition” and to extract a positive value which may still be left within culture by constructing situations. The creation of situations embraced the artistic practices of poetry, painting, film, and essays to revolutionize life. They were in favor of the upheaval of social relations under capitalism because they believed them to be the creation of falsehood and lies created by a detached sense of reality that prevented people from truly living their lives.

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50 Gregor and Chang, 321-322.  
It is difficult to assess exactly how Godard became aware of Debord’s films. There is both circumstantial evidence that exists from René Viénet, a later member of the Situationists, and also direct evidence from Godard that he was familiar with their writings. It was the Situationists whose ideas had an immense influence on the May 1968 revolt. As Greil Marcus points out, “they did not cause the events, but they would not have happened without them.”

The Situationist idea of creating situations was a major influence in the storming of the Sorbonne that allowed the students to break the current repressive social order that they associated with the state under the government of Charles de Gaulle (in office 1959-1969). Even if Godard was not directly aware of the Situationists, the student revolts inspired by them was an event that he did experience. However, it was not the students that inspired him to rethink his approach to cinema. Rather, it is likely generated from the insults he received were from revolutionaries who crossed his path.

Godard also was subjected to criticism in the Situationists’ journal, *Le Situationiste Internationale* in 1969, a year after the riots ended. They considered Godard a hypocritical sycophant of a filmmaker. It was written in “Cinema and Revolution” that:

The cinema has no more been an “art of lying” than has any of the rest of art, which was dead in its totality long before Godard, who has not even been a modern artist, that is, who has not even been capable of the slightest personal originality. This Maoist liar is thus winding up his bluff by trying to arouse admiration for his brilliant discovery of a noncinema cinema, while denouncing a sort of inevitable falsehood in which he has participated, but no more so than have many others. Godard was in fact immediately outmoded by the May 1968 revolt, which caused him to be recognized as a spectacular manufacturer.

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54 Greil Marcus on the Situationist International’s influence on the student movements in France.
of a superficial, pseudocritical, cooptive art rummaged out of the trashcans of the past. At that point Godard’s career as a filmmaker was essentially over.\footnote{Situationist International, “Cinema and Revolution,” 1969. \url{http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/12.cinema.htm}, accessed 4/10/2007.}

The Situationists viewed Godard’s films as blatantly stolen from those of Debord’s.

Keith Sanborn describes the similarity between one of Godard’s \textit{Nouvelle Vague} films and Debord’s second film “On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time” (1957). The similarities are:

- a compendium of metacinematic tropes exceeding those often assumed to have originated with the French New Wave: the inclusion of slates as a distancing device, critical interventions in the form of intertitles, visual breakdowns of still photographs, self-reflexive voice-over critique, the blurring of the line between documentary and fiction, clear leader with voice-over and black leader with silence, the cutting of TV commercials and newsreels against staged sequences, the creation of a critical urban psycho-geography, the deliberate inclusion of bad takes, and so on.\footnote{Keith Sanborn, “Return of the Suppressed,” \textit{Artforum} 44, v. 6 (February 2006), 188.}

For the Situationists, cinema held a powerful tool for educative propaganda, to which I will elaborate on in chapter three while discussing his film in greater detail. They acknowledged that there existed several forms of radical cinema, however, most could be dismissed because of their faddish “variety of reformist politics. The only historically justified tactic is extremist innovation,”\footnote{Ibid.} to which Godard could not claim. The following sections of this chapter will address the misappropriation of cinematic form within \textit{Tout va bien}. 

\footnote{Ibid.}
Production and Collectivity

To retain any sense of credibility, Godard formed a collective of revolutionary filmmakers in which the artist’s role was intended to be anonymous. Their main focus was “an attempt to distribute films differently…for us the most important thing was to apply ourselves to the tasks of production before those of distribution.”59 In his essay “When you’re not a worker yourself…,” Steve Cannon takes issue with this statement by questioning Godard’s approach. Other militant filmmaking collectives who formed at this time attempted to establish a relationship with the audience, by screening then discussing the film at hand,60 while the Dziga Vertov Group chose not to acknowledge their audience. The fact that the production of their films occurred outside France, further excluded the intended audience. They left out the working-class militancy, which would have been active “in periods of intense struggle, such as May 1968 when large numbers of workers might potentially be broken of reformist ideas.”61 Godard’s answer to this exclusion was, “when you’re not a worker yourself, it seems too difficult to me.”62 Therefore, Cannon posits that Tout va bien is “the product of a double defeat, and is an attempt to learn from those defeats.”63

In the films attempts to address those who participated in the May movement and a much wider audience in general, Cannon comes to the conclusion that Tout va bien is not successful for several reasons. The biggest being that “the central flaw in [Godard’s] approach is

59 Cannon, 103.
60 Sylvia Harvey, May ’68 and Film Culture (London: British Film Institute, 1978); and Cannon, 103.
61 Cannon, 105.
62 Ibid., 101.
63 Ibid., 105.
the specific lack of any notion of intellectuals playing a role within a revolutionary, working-class 
*party* that ultimately leaves him stranded in the same position he felt occupied in 1967, despite 
the sophisticated self-help routine with which *Tout va bien* concludes, of ‘thinking yourself 
historically.’”\(^{64}\)

One way *Tout va bien* attempted to resolve the inability to connect with an audience, was 
to seek financial backing from American production company, Paramount Pictures, and increase 
the film’s distribution. However, it stipulated that they use big name stars in the film. Loshitzky 
indicates to be a “product of either a political/commercial compromise or a new conscious 
political strategy, adopted by Godard and Gorin. This strategy was adopted in order to win a 
larger audience.”\(^{65}\) However, they were careful in their choice of actors. Despite their spectacular 
names, Jane Fonda and Yves Montand were known for their involvement in leftist politics. 
Fonda was known for her involvement in protesting the Vietnam War, and Montand had stared in 
several leftist films.

Admittedly, the choice of famous actors was a compromise that allowed Godard and 
Gorin to reach a larger audience, but it was also one that contradicted their aims. New modes of 
production were not being created, the film simply works within the conventional Hollywood 
structure in which famous actors act to get paid. The opening title sequence, in which a series of 
checks are written to each crewmember, attempts to resolve the conflicting elements of the intent 
and the reality of the means of production. It was almost as if they believed their audience would 
buy the negation of the process merely because they draw attention to it. I believe Godard and

\(^{64}\) Cannon, 107.  
\(^{65}\) Loshitzky, 34.
Gorin’s focus on the fundamentals of production led them to neglect other areas of filmmaking that are central to making a film that radically breaks with his “bourgeois” style. Yet, one of their major flaws is the conventional use of a narrative structure.

Form: Narrative Structure

Godard sought to abolish narrative from his films while with the Dziga Vertov Group, he proclaimed, “No more narrative! Materialist dialectical fiction!” In the act of historicizing, history becomes a narrative that frames history with a parameter. According to Walter Benjamin’s (1882-1940) essay “On the Concept of History” (1940), the act of historicizing is like falling into a trap. History becomes a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end that presents the individual’s perspective or part in the story. The “total” history is never heard because it is impossible to include the opposing points of view. This history becomes the final word.

Many years later Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson stated, “Only Marxism offers a philosophically coherent and ideologically compelling resolution to the dilemma of historicism.” The narrative model “is denounced by the poststructuralists [because] it is a system of allegorical interpretation in which the data of one narrative line are radically impoverished by their rewriting according to the paradigm of another narrative, which is taken as the former’s master code or Ur-
narrative and proposed as the ultimate hidden or unconscious meaning of the first one.”

Because *Tout va bien* implemented a conventional narrative told from the perspective of the directors, it became an aggregate for didactical discourse.

Greatly influenced by the French Marxist theoretician Louis Althusser (1918-1990), Godard related his ideas to the function of ideology in the state apparatuses, controlled by the bourgeois, and the state’s subsequent control over the working classes, which Althusser formulated in “The Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (1970).” Althusser theorized that the whole of the political class struggle revolves around the state power, and it is the state which keeps the classes divided. To end the state’s power, the proletariat must seize it and replace it with a proletariat state that would work to produce a new radical process that would eventually destroy the idea of a state.

However, according to Jameson, Althusser’s concepts perceived society and its culture as a totalizing whole, which “expresses’ some unified inner truth—a world-view or a period style or a set of structural categories which marks the whole length and breath of the ‘period’ in question.” Jameson finds a tendency within Althusser’s periodicizing structure that encourages the tradition narrative form. This causes history to be seen in as a linear story, as the “succession of periods, stages, or moments” that place each moment into a historical reading that contains a

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69 Jameson, 22.
70 Loshitzky, 25.
72 Jameson, 27.
subject with an underlying meaning.\textsuperscript{73} It is a history told through the perspective of an author. Althusser’s model validates Godard and Gorin’s insertion of their individual histories within the history of class struggle, despite their bourgeois position, and as Cannon asserts their exclusion of the worker as an audience

**Content: Brechtian Film**

One of the last lines in *Tout va bien* is the question “how can we live history.”\textsuperscript{74} One of the solutions that Godard and Gorin raise is the participation of the audience with historical cinema. The appropriation of Brechtian theatre devices ensures a didactical response to the actors’ monologues, which are directed to the audience.

Marxist German playwright Bertolt Brecht’s beliefs that the theatre was a political tool that held the potential to educate and promote social awareness through a rejection of illusionism. For his Epic theatre, Brecht developed several plot-disrupting techniques that captivated the audience with monologues directed at the audience and songs that disrupted the Aristotelian structure and interrupted the passive nature that traditionally accompanied watching a play. Participation from the audience was a necessary element to complete the act of pedagogy that also functioned as a form of entertainment.\textsuperscript{75} For Brecht, “the stage of a realistic theatre must be peopled by live, three-dimensional, self-contradictory people, with all their passions,

\textsuperscript{73} Jameson, 28.
\textsuperscript{74} This comes from *Tout va bien*.
unconsidered utterances and actions.” It was meant to be a dialectical tool that engaged the audience even as they left the theatre.

Contemporaneous to Brecht, Russian film directors such as Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) and Dziga Vertov also embraced a realistic style in which the self-referentiality of the film emphasized the presence of the screen to dissuade audience passivity. However, the political and historical context of Brecht’s theatre and Russian film differ in that Brecht’s theatre worked against the dominant ideology while the Russians worked within the dominant ideology. Like Brecht, Godard sought to work against the dominant bourgeois ideology of his time. Most notably, Godard assimilated Brecht’s techniques, the Verfremdungseffekt (German: alienation or distancing effect), the use of songs, and references to past works to make didactic significations. The alienation effect occurs several times through out Tout va bien—when Fonda’s character conducts interviews at the sausage factory, each time the person being interviewed looks into the camera.

During her visit, Fonda character interviews a representative from each conflicting side: the boss, a member of the CGT (General Confederation of Labor), and a female worker. The audience perceives these interviews from the perspective of the Fonda as she questions them. The worker’s gaze meets the audiences giving the effect that it is they who address the audience, when really according to the narrative the worker speaks to the reporter. Later in the film, Fonda and Montand face the camera in similar manner to those she previously interviewed. However this time, the person with whom she communicates is unknown. I believe the subtle difference

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76 Jameson, 193.
77 Walsh, 10-12.
between the dialogue of those in the factory and the bourgeois couple involves the facts the couple’s words are privileged over the others. The interviews with the people in the factory are mediated by the questions of Fonda to become distanced from the viewer. This use of Brecht’s distancing effect which functions in a didactic way instead of the intended dialectical privileges the views of the directors. This skewed viewpoint hinders the audience, the subject of the “didactic lesson,” from identifying with the character in the way Brecht intended. Also the way he presents the worker as spectacularized is a factor. This too is the problem with Fonda and Montand’s character in the film. They are familiar and spectacular. Therefore, they cannot combat alienation, as experienced through the worker-figure. Likewise, the worker-figure becomes a seductive character, one that the audience can romanticize about being in their place. I think this is a major area in which Godard grossly overestimated his audience. It is clear that this film was for a viewer like him. Does the worker’s presence attempt to say that everything is okay for someone in his position, but it is not quite clear what his intention is.

If it is true that Godard did in fact have access to the writings of the Situationist International, he failed to read their comments on Brecht. The Situationist considered Brecht’s:

> salutary alterations [to be] narrowly limited by his unfortunate respect for culture as defined by the ruling class — that same respect, taught in the newspapers of the workers parties as well as in the primary schools of the bourgeoisie, which leads even the reddest worker districts of Paris always to prefer The Cid over [Brecht’s] Mother Courage.”

Furthermore, I would like to argue that Brecht’s Epic theatre devices did not work dialectically for Godard, and neither did they for Brecht. Andrew E. Doe, in his essay “Brecht’s Lehrstücke: Propaganda Failures,” concludes that Brecht failed as a propagandist:

an unintended synthesis removes Brecht’s work in general from the category of propaganda drama when the term is applied in its most pejorative sense—that is, drama written with the expressed intent of affirming an idea, or system of ideas, and thereby influencing or converting those holding a different view.\textsuperscript{79}

Brecht intended to create a theatre that promoted social awareness in his audiences. But as the bearer of the classical tradition of bourgeois culture he succeeded in creating a didactic theatre. Like Godard, Brecht desired to enlighten the world of capitalist production, yet failed to convince the communist world of his attempts. They both worked within the Marxist tradition of creating socially minded works without leaving aside their individuality.

All of the works discussed above were meant to serve a pedagogical purpose in one way or another. The importance of rejecting the purely didactic, I was expressed succinctly by Michel Foucault:

The intellectual no longer has to play the role of an advisor. The project, tactics and goals to be adopted are a matter for those who do the fighting. What the intellectual can do is to provide the instruments of analysis, and at present this is the historian’s essential role. What’s effectively needed is a ramified, penetrative perception of the present, one that makes it possible to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves by a system of organization dating back over 150 years. In other words, a topological and geological survey of the battlefield—that is the intellectual’s role. But as for saying, “Here is what you must do!,” certainly not.\textsuperscript{80}


For Wheeler Winston Dixon believes the didactic approach is the biggest problem in *Tout va bien*. It is a problem that essentially “dominat[es] the audience, instructing them in a totalitarian manner that left no room for free will.”\(^{81}\) This approach successfully alienates the viewer instead of engaging them. Maureen Kiernan takes this critic one step further when she notes that Godard “seems intent on assaulting the viewer with an over determined text which, finally, cannot be ‘read.’”\(^{82}\) I think one of the biggest failures of *Tout va bien* is this disconnect with the audience in which the film becomes a cultural lesson that you are not quite sure the directors understand.

**Conclusion**

*Tout va bien* is a narcissistic film in which according to Cannon, it becomes “a navel-gazing” introspection into the views of the author. I have argued that Godard and Gorin’s film *Tout va bien* does not warrant status as revolutionary because of its narrative form that frames the story with a single perspective. It is also because the spectacularized characters are not seen for the character they play. For example Jane Fonda is not seen as Elle, American journalist in Paris, she is seen as Jane Fonda anti-Vietnam war advocate. Sanborn refers to Godard’s blatant cooption of the Situationist ideas on the utility of cinema as a revolutionary tool for the transformation of society as the “Godard question.”\(^{83}\) Did he or did he not directly copy them? In chapter three, I will discuss the films made by the Situationist Guy Debord because he did, in fact, create a film

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\(^{81}\) Dixon, 124.

\(^{82}\) Maureen Kiernan, “Making Film Politically: Marxism in Eisenstein and Godard,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 10, Marxism and the Critical Discourse (1990), 111.

\(^{83}\) Sanborn, 184.
that created a dialectical image that “negated the negated” of capitalist imagery to create truly revolutionary counter-cinema.
Chapter 3

Guy Debord’s Dialectical Image

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.

Walter Benjamin,
“On the Concept of History,” 1940.

In chapter two, I discussed Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin’s inability to make Tout va bien in a politically effective manner. For this chapter I would like to discuss Guy Debord’s (1931-1994) The Society of Spectacle (1973) in relation to that of Godard’s Tout bien. I chose Debord not only because he was Godard’s toughest critic, but also because he was a revolutionary filmmaker who successfully made dialectical film, that is a cinematic work that advances the relationship with the viewer’s reality beyond that which the film represents.

In addition to making films, Debord was also a writer, strategist, and art-maker. During his lifetime, journalists and critics referred to him variously as:

mastermind, nihilist, pseudo-philosopher, pope, loner, mentor, hypnotist, self-obsessed fanatic, devil, éminence grise, damned soul, professor of radicalism, guru, mad sadist, cynic, cheap Mephisto, bewitcher, fearsome destabilizer.

In realizing his revolutionary method of filmmaking, Debord broke with conventional cinema techniques because as he said one cannot “combat alienation with alienated means.”

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84 Merrifield, 10.
the idea of the autonomous originality of the avant-garde artist, Debord plagiarized ideas and appropriated images from popular culture to disrupt them and problematize their reception to create new image associations. Unlike the Dziga Vertov Group’s Tout va bien, which works within a conventional framework only to create an irresolvable paradox, Debord was able to create a film that contradicts the contradictions, by using conventional images without the conventional framework, thereby, freeing the viewer of indifference and discrediting the autonomous work of art. I will also explore the difference in experiences that influenced both Debord and Godard’s later engagement with film.

**Guy Debord and the Spectacle**

Guy-Ernest Debord’s formative years were integral in shaping his ideas on the source of societies problems that he would tackle in his later art. His experiences in the times during and after the Second World War greatly varied from Godard’s isolated one as he witnessed the destruction from Switzerland. Like Godard, Debord was born in Paris to a bourgeois family who was ruined by economic crisis. Just a few years later during the German Occupation six year old Debord, with his mother and sister, fled from Paris to the south of France at Pau and Cannes. Similarly, Godard’s family fled the country to Switzerland, both Godard and Debord returned to Paris in the early 1950s to attend school, however both never went. Debord biographer Len Bracken believes this period of political and economic turmoil in Europe to be

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86 It was a crisis caused by the collapse of the American Wall Street Stock Exchange crash of 1929 affected France’s economy a few years later.
87 Bracken, 2-5.
88 Ibid, 12. Godard, too, returned to Paris after spending his childhood in Switzerland to attend university and dropped out.
very influential in Debord’s eventual “war with the institution of art and his war with society.”

The inhabitants of postwar Paris were in near destitution because of high unemployment and food and good shortages. The Americans came to rescue with the Marshall Plan, which gave aid to France’s failing economy, to boost it through industrial production. American products soon found their way into the French economy, goods in the form of televisions, cars, and kitchen appliances. Debord witnessed how these cultural products changed the Paris he knew into a spectacle. In a fight against the decomposition of society, Debord over the years joined several artists’ groups, such as the Lettrist International, a group started in the mid-1940s by Romanian Isidore Isou (b. 1925) and the Situationist international (active 1958-1969), as discussed in chapter two.

Debord’s pursuits during the period after the war differ from Godard’s in that Debord was actively involved in seeking the origins for the changing topography of the city and its people to eliminate it. Godard, however, embraced the new Paris in his films. He included famous French pop stars, like Françoise Hardy and Brigitte Bardot. His characters drove American convertibles and played pinball in cafés. For Debord and other members of the Situationists, they saw these new products of American influence as detrimental to French culture. It was in the arts that Debord saw the revolutionary potential to reverse the adverse effects of the infiltration of another culture. Debord termed the effects as spectacle. In his book The Society of the Spectacle, Debord defines the spectacle not as the cultural products of modernism. The spectacle is the direct reflection of these products on our society. It is not merely advertising, propaganda, or

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89 Bracken, 4.
90 Debord designates the start of the spectacle when television made its way into people’s homes in 1928. It was not until 1953 that the first national broadcast occurred in France.
television. It is a world. The spectacle is something we experience, but fail to perceive: “It is not a collection of images, but a social relationship between people, mediated by images. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.”

An example of how the spectacle “acts” in the films of Godard, I will take a scene from his *Masculin Feminin* (Masculine Feminine, 1966), in which two friends play pinball. As they stand with their eyes intently fixed upon the moving ball they are not socializing directly, but rather it is through the act of playing the pinball machine that they socialize. The basis of human relationships now diminishes to superficial similarities that exist peripherally to that which is actually lived. *Tout va bien* is itself spectacle. The film represents a fictitious world that inverts the reality of the worker’s plight according to the perception of the directors. Godard and Gorin attempt to portray the workers in a realistic manner, which in reality they could not possibly know and understand.

To abolish the spectacle, it must be forced to a return to a reality of lived experience. Debord acknowledges that one must:

describe [the spectacle] and its formations, its functions and whatever forces may hasten its demise, a few artificial distinctions are called for. To analyze the spectacle means talking its language to some degree—to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology of the society to which the spectacle gives expression. For what the spectacle expresses is the total practice of one particular economic and social formation; it is, so to speak, that formation’s *agenda*. It is also the historical moment by which we happen to be governed.  

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92 Ibid., Thesis 11, 15.
Debord recognized art’s potential to expose the spectacle because art makes people feel things. The only artistic model that has the power to expose the spectacle is one that negates it, and critical theory has the power to do so:

Critical theory must communicate itself in its own language the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in both form and content. It must be an all-inclusive critique, and it must be grounded in history. It is not a “zero degree of writing,” but its reversal. It is not a negation of style, but the style of negation.  

According to Debord this strategy of negation transcends the idea that art for art’s sake should be something aesthetically pleasing, and which the viewer gazes upon the art object to contemplate its beauty. Debord asks in “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” whether “art can cease to be a report on sensations and become a direct organization of higher sensations?” Unlike art that exists solely for the viewer to loose him or herself in, only to forget everything for a moment, Debord’s art is not aesthetically pleasing in the sense that is beautiful, but in the sense that it makes the viewer actually feel something. Debord asserted that the only perceivable way to outmaneuver the spectacle was by combating the autonomous work of art. In the following I will discuss Debord’s cinematic technique and its transformation of images into dialectical film.

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93 Excerpt from the film *The Society of the Spectacle.*
The Dialectical Image in *The Society of the Spectacle*

For the Situationists, the cinema was the newest and most utilizable means of expression.  

Debord made several films, *Howls for Sade* (1952), *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time* (1959), *Critique of Separation* (1961), *The Society of the Spectacle, Refutation of All the Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film* The Society of the Spectacle (1975), and lastly *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1985). Each is notable for its various techniques of refuting conventional cinema. For example, Debord made films that contained no images and ones that contained only found footage.

*The Society of the Spectacle* is a feature-length film essay that is an adaptation of his own work of cultural and political history and theory. He appropriated images from popular culture, newsreels, footage of the May ’68 riots, Hollywood films, ads that look like soft-core porn, and soft-core porn that looks like ads. Then, he used subtitles and intertitles to disrupt the images and problematize their reception. This innovation in film was called détournement, in which they reused found works of art and image from popular culture and placed “détourned” them to create new associations. Paintings, poetry and film could all be détourned. For Godard and Wolman, it is within cinema that détournement attains its greatest effectiveness and, even, its greatest beauty.  

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This film is successful because Debord is able to create a “complex critical apprehension of the relationship between image and text, individual and society”\(^97\) through the technique of détournement. As the various images pass by across the screen, Debord voice reads from the text of his book. It explains the film’s techniques and the desired outcome:

One might still recognize some cinematographic value in this film, if the rhythm were to be maintained; it will not be maintained. Critical theory should communicate itself in its own language. It is the language of contradiction, which should be dialectical in its form as it is in its content. It is critique of the totality and historical critique…This style which contains its own critique should express the domination of present critique over its entire past. Through it, the mode of exposition of dialectical theory attests to the negative spirit which is in it…The meaning of words participates in this. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It clings to an author’s phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, replaces it with the right idea. Détournement is the fluid language of anti-ideology.

The idea for détournement derived from Brecht and Dada. The Situationists admired Brecht’s theatre attempts, in which he cut in pieces of classical theatre to make the theatre more educative. However, they criticized him for respecting bourgeois culture. According to Situationist archivist Ken Knabb:

many radical filmmakers have given lip service to Brecht’s notion of provoking spectators to think and act for themselves rather than sucking them into passive identification with heroes or plots, but Debord is virtually the only one who has actually achieved this goal.\(^98\)

Knabb could be ironically referring to Godard when he mentions the misuse of Brecht. In *Tout va bien*, the way in which the workers interact with the audience Debord speaks from a historical

\(^97\) Sanborn, 189.
position, for Sanborn he “offers a reflection on May ’68 as revolutionary practice and as universal history.”

Debord’s method is like the mechanical image according to Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). In her reiteration of his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Susan Buck-Morris exceeds upon that which is “generally taken to be an affirmation of mass culture and of the new technologies through which it is disseminated” in the final section of the essay and reinterprets the optimistic tone as sound of warning against the aesthetization of political life.

Buck-Morris emphasizes Benjamin’s Marxist response to the politicization of art could:

undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity’s self-preservation, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them.

Benjamin believed that under the capitalist exploitation of film in Western Europe the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations. These spectacles inhibit the viewer from contemplating the image on the screen because no sooner has his eye grasped a scene then it has changed. So that the viewer will utter, “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.”

Debord’s use of détournement in The Society of the Spectacle allows the viewer to contemplate the image. It is not an easy film to watch. It makes the viewer think about the idiocy of war, sex, modernization, and class struggle as each concept is represented in an image that

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99 Sanborn, 186.
100 Susan Buck-Morris, “Aesthetics and Anesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Revisited,” October (Fall 1992), 3. 41
101 Ibid., 5.
102 Benjamin, Section X.
flashes by. The viewer no longer identifies with the images on the screen, but is in dialogue with them.

Conclusion

Benjamin wrote, “The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution.”[103] Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* is a dialectical film that does not present the audience with an agenda, but rather presents a series of concepts for the viewer to piece together. Giorgio Agamben believes the movement of these conflicting images and text is a cut which is mobile itself, charged with dynamic tension. And within this tension there in lies Benjamin’s “dialectical image.”[104] For Agamben the very element of historical experience is obtained by the image, and the images themselves are charged with history. It is a messianic history that must leave chronology behind, but without entering some other world. The dialectic image places contemplation and thought outside the realm of the moving image. If we are to regard history in this manner, it is to believe that the messiah, the revolution, salvation, has already arrived and is already there. Agamben calls Debord’s films a “messianic situation of cinema.”[105]

[103] Benjamin,
[105] Ibid., 320.
Conclusion

Although largely known for his *Nouvelle Vague* films, Godard maintains a film career to this day. It is one that has changed several times. The first occurring when he formed a collective called the Dziga Vertov Group which ultimately was a failure. He would not make another film until 1975. But when he did, it was a return to the conventional format of narrative cinema that he fought to dismantle with his revolutionary project at the end of the 1960s. According to Godard scholar Dixon, *Numéro deux* (1975) characterized the rest of Godard’s career to which he would return to making bourgeois films in an introspective manner. He formed a partnership with Swiss Anne-Marie Miéville (b. 1945), with whom he still works today.

With a focus on *Tout va bien*, a film that marks the middle of Godard’s career, I expanded on a period that is often omitted or when it is discussed the group’s revolutionary project is hardly ever questioned. In Godard’s attempt to enlighten fellow intellectuals by revolutionizing the way people saw films, Godard overlooked the necessity of revolutionizing the cinematic form and instead adhered to a cinematic formula that disrupted the conventional act of watching a film.
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