

# FILM

AN INTRODUCTION

# ART

FOURTH EDITION

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up somewhat like Jake. Perhaps too the professor, who helped him "to see," enabled him to present Jake with a mixture of detachment and sympathy.

As a cinema student, Scorsese was well aware of ambiguous European films like *Day of Wrath* and *Last Year at Marienbad*, so it is not surprising that his own work invites differing interpretations. The film's ending places *Raging Bull* in a tradition of Hollywood films (such as *Citizen Kane*) which avoid complete closure and opt for a degree of ambiguity, a denial of either/or answers. Such ambiguity can render the film's ideology equivocal, generating contrasting and even conflicting implicit meanings.

### ■ TOUT VA BIEN

1972. Coproduction of Anouchka Films, Vicco Films (France), and Empire Films (Italy). Directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin. Script by Godard and Gorin. Photographed by Armand Marco. Edited by Kennout Pelletier and Claudine Merlin. With Yves Montand, Jane Fonda, Yves Caprioi, Elizabeth Chauvin, Castel Costi, Anne Wiazemsky.

If *Meet Me in St. Louis* uncritically affirms the value of family life and *Raging Bull* offers an ambivalent critique of violence in American society, *Tout va bien* strongly attacks certain features of the state of French society in 1972. We shall use it as an example of how a film may present an ideological viewpoint explicitly and drastically opposed to that of most viewers.

*Tout va bien* (which can be translated "Everything's just great") takes as its subject matter the repercussions of political agitation of May 1968. The events had begun in March with university students protesting American involvement in Vietnam and current university policies. Violent protests escalated in May, with workers' and teachers' unions supporting the students. A series of strikes, occupations, and demonstrations resulted. When a new general election was promised, many strikers went back to work, although pockets of resistance remained. In June, a student named Gilles Tautin was killed in a skirmish with police, and *Tout va bien* refers specifically to this event. Eventually, in late June, De Gaulle was reelected president.

The events of May 1968 had lingering effects on left-wing politics and the arts in France. Many artists, including Godard, became more radical. Before 1968 he had made films with leftist subjects, like *La Chinoise*, *Weekend*, and *Le Gai Savoir*. But he had always worked within the commercial production system. In 1968 many groups were trying to create alternative production practices, primarily cooperatives. Godard and his colleague, Jean-Pierre Gorin, formed a small cooperative, the Dziga-Vertov Group. (The group was named after the director of *Man with a Movie Camera*. Political events in 1968 France had led to a renewed interest in the works of the Soviet filmmakers.) The Dziga-Vertov Group made a number of films between 1968 and 1971, often short works shot on 16mm, without stars or narratives. Formally experimental and politically critical, these films failed to reach a wide audience. By going outside the commercial production system, the Dziga-Vertov Group was also cut off from distribution, except on a small scale to film societies, student and worker groups,

and other interested audiences. *Tout va bien* was a return to the conventions of commercial narrative filmmaking, but it also examined the political contradictions of leftists having to work within the very economic system that they are trying to change.

For this examination, Godard and Gorin took as their model one of the major Marxist artists of our century, the playwright Bertold Brecht. Brecht, too, had worked within the commercial theater and cinema in Germany and Hollywood, and he had written extensively on this subject. In fact, one of the main characters in *Tout va bien*, Jacques, refers at one point to Brecht's preface to his play, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. There Brecht argues that each art form is controlled not by the artists but by larger social institutions. In a capitalist society, Brecht asserts, an artist may believe he or she is using the art form for personal expression, but he or she is actually producing artistic merchandise of a kind acceptable to the society. According to Brecht, there is no way to work outside this socially controlled situation, yet one can chip away at it from within, by introducing innovations into one's works. Brecht's own approach, he said, was accomplished through the "radical separation of the elements"; the words, music, and staging of his opera *Mahagonny* were not fused into a unified whole but kept rough and disunified—separate—to prevent the audience from being wholly absorbed in the illusionary aspects of the action. The audience would still be presented a story and characters but would simultaneously be aware of how the work's formal system was put together.

This approach suited Godard and Gorin's purposes because of its differences from that of the classical Hollywood cinema. There all the elements function in such a unified way to support the narration of story events that the audience is not encouraged to analyze *how* the film's form works. *Tout va bien*, however, seeks to lead its audience to analyze both the political subject matter and the conventions of narrative filmmaking.

Because this approach is so different from the conventions of the films most of us are used to watching, we may have little in our filmgoing experience to prepare us to understand the form of *Tout va bien*. At first it may be difficult to watch and enjoy. (This is true of other Godard films as well, whether made with the Dziga-Vertov Group or not.) Part of the difficulty arises from our own assumptions that standard viewing habits constitute the only way to watch films. Thus an understanding and enjoyment of *Tout va bien* involves a willingness on the part of the spectator to learn and practice new viewing skills. These skills may lead to a new understanding of the film's ideological purpose as well.

Like Brecht in his operas, Godard and Gorin use principles of separation to create the overall form of *Tout va bien*. We can find three such principles at work in the film's form and style: *interruption*, *contradiction*, and *refraction*. These guide the stylistic devices as well as the overall formal organization. Let us look first at these principles of separation on a local level.

In a classical film, the cause-effect chain of narrative smoothly links scene to scene, and each event is thoroughly motivated. An interruption in the cause-effect series might confuse us as to how one event relates to others. Yet this is exactly how *Tout va bien* treats many scenes from the very beginning. We hear a man's and woman's voices talking about making

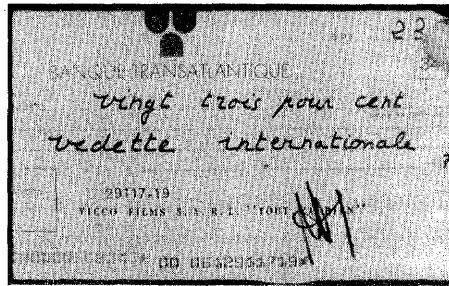


Fig. 10.122

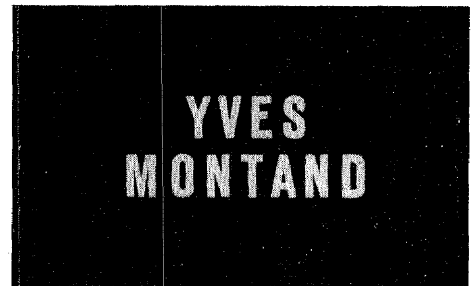


Fig. 10.123



Fig. 10.124



Fig. 10.125

a film, and a hand writes checks to cover the expenses of the film (as for an “international star” in Fig. 10.122). But credit titles with the stars’ names (Fig. 10.123) and shots from the proposed film interrupt this check writing. Thus we see the preparation for the film and bits of the film itself at the same time, and the temporal relationships of the various shots are unclear.

In a later scene during a strike in a meat factory, a female worker explains to the reporter, Susan, the problems women face in their jobs (Fig. 10.124). This situation is interrupted twice by cuts to a shot of another woman facing the camera, reciting a radical song (Fig. 10.125). These two actions are not matched at the cut. They are not different stages of one scene, but alternative actions that interrupt and comment upon each other: In one line of action one worker speaks with quiet pathos, while in the other a second is strong and defiant.

These interruptions are important to the ideological meanings of *Tout va bien*. At another point, Susan tells her lover, Jacques, that she is no longer satisfied with their relationship; they know only each other’s personal lives but need to understand each other’s work as well. This close connection between work and private life is one of the main explicit meanings in *Tout va bien*. As Susan speaks, the scene is interrupted by shots of each of them at work, emphasizing her point. There are many similar moments in the film, and in most cases they function, as in these examples, to undercut the narrative causality and to introduce ideological arguments. In this way, *Tout va bien* combines narrative and rhetorical form in almost equal doses.

A second, related principle of separation of formal and stylistic elements is *contradiction*. One of *Tout va bien*’s most salient stylistic devices is discontinuity editing, and strongly discontinuous cuts create many small-scale spatial and temporal contradictions. In the classical Hollywood film,

discontinuities are undesirable because they distract from a unified narrative. But because *Tout va bien* uses “impossible” matches and juxtapositions we, as viewers, must adjust our expectations and actively notice the construction of time and space. For example, Susan sits down twice at the beginning of her conversation with Jacques, creating a temporal overlap. During the interview with the factory manager, he is pacing, then suddenly seated, then suddenly pacing again in three successive shots. At one point the manager breaks the window in order to urinate, but it is not broken two shots later. Such frequent incompatibilities keep us alert to the film’s editing style.

Other contradictions involve sound-image relationships. At one point Susan is sitting in the manager’s office while we hear a conversation between Jacques and the manager (Fig. 10.126). Soon we hear her voice joining in the conversation, even though her lips are not moving. Is this a case of nonsimultaneous sound—a flashback? We never find out. In other scenes, groups of workers cluster around as one of them speaks, and we cannot pick out the source of the sound. Through both the editing and sound contradictions, we are forced to pay attention to style as well as subject matter. *Tout va bien* and other Godard films thus encourage very active viewing on the part of the spectator. We must analyze the film as we see it, or we will fail to understand and enjoy it.

This emphasis on an active viewer carries through in the third principle of separation as well: *refraction*. By this we mean that *Tout va bien* draws our attention to media that stand between the depicted events and our perception of those events. We do not seem to see a series of actually occurring events, as we might in a Hollywood-style film. Rather, by taking the media as part of its subject matter, *Tout va bien* leads us to consider how these media function within society.

The jobs of two central characters explicitly represent the split between word and image. Susan is a radio reporter and broadcaster, while Jacques is a filmmaker forced to make commercials for a living. As we see them doing their work, the scenes underscore the point that the media manipulate the images and sounds we see. In the scene at Jacques’s studio, there is a lengthy shot through a camera viewfinder of dancing women’s legs, and we see technicians arranging the framing, the focus, the camera distance, and the *mise-en-scène*. A parallel shot occurs as Susan attempts to tape record an editorial. As she falters and has to go back, the recordist rewinds the tape with a garbled, speeded-up sound of her voice. These two scenes display for us the same kinds of manipulations which *Tout va bien* itself uses throughout, and which it constantly calls to our attention.

Refraction also occurs in scenes that do not take the media as their explicit subject. When Susan interviews the woman worker, we hear neither of their voices. Instead the scene is narrated in voice-over by one of the other women present; we do not learn which woman, and we cannot place the sound as her report to someone else or as her mental musings. When the workers’ strike ends, we learn the news from a broadcaster’s voice over an exterior shot of the factory. In such ways, Godard and Gorin emphasize the arbitrariness of their film’s narration: It has the potential to be omniscient, since it can use voices and images from anywhere, yet it is also arbitrarily selective, even capricious, about what it tells us.



Fig. 10.126

One final type of refraction comes from the film's concentration on production. Factory production is important in the narrative, and it is compared to filmmaking. Jacques is a film director, but *Tout va bien* goes further and places its plot within a framing device at beginning and end. The two voices that discuss how to go about making a film mention many of the formal conventions we take for granted in classical filmmaking: the necessity of stars, of romance, of conflict, and of an ending. On the screen we see more than one version of the events described. When romance is mentioned, two separate takes show Susan and Jacques walking by a river, with the same action repeated slightly differently. Similarly, at the end we see two possible versions of the couple's meeting at a café: First he waits for her, then she for him.

These three principles of separation—interruption, contradiction, and refraction—are so pervasive in *Tout va bien* that we simply cannot watch it by applying conventions of ordinary film viewing. Some might simply give up and dismiss the film as obscure. But if we accept the film's own terms and seek to find the principles of its form, we will of necessity rethink our view of traditional cinematic conventions.

These same principles of separation underlie the film's overall form as well. *Tout va bien* falls into five major parts, each of which contains a number of related segments:

1. The discussion of making the film, with hypothetical shots. (Everything before the first establishing shot of the factory exterior.)
2. The strike at the factory. (Ends with the radio announcement that the strike is over.)
3. Interview with Jacques and Susan at work; their argument about personal life and work. (Ends as she threatens to leave him.)
4. Rethinking of their positions. (Marked off by titles "Today 1-3"; ends with the long tracking shot in the department store.)
5. Discussion of how to end the film; song.

These five sections of the film are clearly marked off from each other. There is no dialogue hook or other smooth transition to show us immediately how each new section relates to the previous one. Again, we must take a more active role than usual in order to grasp the film's form.

We have seen that the beginning and ending place the narrative in a framing situation where two unseen people discuss how conventional films are financed and created. When the man says he wants to make a film, the woman tells him he needs money, and that means using stars. And, she says, "An actor won't accept a part without a story line . . . usually a love story." This points up the fact that in our society, narrative form is pervasive in theatrical films, and that this usually requires the sort of emphasis on personal and psychological causation typical of Hollywood cinema.

This scene also mentions genre expectations in specifying that the film is "usually a love story." Thus when the stars—Yves Montand and Jane Fonda—appear, we may expect the conventions of a romance. Yet *Tout va bien* carries on its principles of separation by mixing its genre conventions. We do get some of the elements of a popular romance, as when we first see Fonda introduced in a studio, lit with glamorous three-point lighting (Fig.

10.127). Yet, in some scenes, Fonda's and Montand's characters are not treated as the center of the story. Many shots in the factory place them inconspicuously as part of the group, and much of the dialogue is spoken by the factory workers.

Moreover, some of the stylistic devices Godard and Gorin employ are traditionally associated with documentary filmmaking rather than narrative romances. We are used to the interview format from documentary films, and in *Tout va bien* there are several long interviews where the characters face into the camera and seem to respond to questions from an offscreen interrogator. (Again, we never learn who this might be.) The union shop steward and factory manager both speak in very long takes, while the workers also speak but in series of shots edited together in discontinuous fashion. Later Susan and Jacques both describe their work to an unidentified questioner. In none of these "interviews" do we ever hear any of the questions, but the characters seem to listen and respond.

The conventions of the documentary are constantly undercut, just as those of the romance are. The exterior shots of the factory show a real location, yet the area inside is highly stylized, with the side of the set cut away like a dollhouse (Fig. 10.128). In the interviews, the actors manifest a wide range of performance styles. The manager's broad gestures create a caricatural portrayal (Fig. 10.129), while Fonda and Montand speak in a quiet, naturalistic way. When we do see documentary-style shots of the factory's operations, we cannot take them as real because we see Jane Fonda and Yves Montand among the workers (Fig. 10.130). Because they are stars, our attention is drawn to the staged nature of the scene.

In these ways, conventions from one genre interrupt those of another. The disparity between the romance on the one hand and the realism of the documentary mode creates a contradiction that weaves through the whole film. And the emphasis on *Tout va bien* as a "film about cinema" makes refraction an overriding principle as well.

The film's pattern of development helps to give an overall unity to a set of elements which are very disunified on the local level. In Parts 1 and 5, the voices reflect on what it means to make a film in the modern French industry. In Part 2, two people who work in the media are confronted with a radical group carrying on a strike in a factory, which leads them to reflect on how their own lives have become ideologically compromised. While both had been active in the political events of May 1968, they have since gotten into jobs that support the established media institutions of the country. They quarrel over this, but by the end seem to be working on solving their problems. As the woman's voice says in Part 5, "We'll simply say that He and She have begun to rethink themselves in historical terms." Thus the film avoids a completely closed ending but suggests a direction for political progress on a personal level.

As a result of the principles of separation we have discussed, rethinking becomes not just the film's subject matter but also a necessary process in watching *Tout va bien*. The narrative line involves the characters rethinking their lives. But, by framing this narrative within a discussion of filmmaking, the film implicitly reflects Godard and Gorin's own rethinking of their roles as filmmakers—how they can use narrative conventions and criticize them at the same time. And beyond even this, the spectator must rethink the



Fig. 10.127



Fig. 10.128



Fig. 10.129



Fig. 10.130

process of watching a film. Thus in making a film with an ideological stance opposed to the contemporary social system of France, the filmmakers do not simply set forth a radical subject matter. They create a radical formal system for their film, one which might suggest not only new *things* to think about but new *ways* of thinking about them.

## APPENDIX: WRITING A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A FILM

The analyses in this chapter all exemplify a sort of writing characteristic of film criticism. It may be useful for us to conclude this part of the book by discussing some general choices and strategies open to the reader who wishes to write a film analysis for a course assignment, a published article, or some related purpose. This appendix does not seek to replace a good composition manual. We simply want to suggest some particular issues that come up in doing film analysis.

### ■ PREPARATION

As with any sort of writing, a film analysis requires that work be done before you sit down to write the piece. First, what sort of writing will the finished product be? Broadly speaking, your analysis will probably be some sort of *argumentative* essay. You will seek to present your opinion about the film and to back that opinion up with an argument. For instance, our analysis of *Stagecoach* (pp. 366–370) argues that Bazin was right to regard it as an example of tightly organized Hollywood classicism. Your planning of the essay will involve shaping your ideas and evidence into a rhetorical form.

Deciding on the film to be analyzed is probably not a great problem. Perhaps something about it attracted you, or you have heard that it is worth examining closely. More difficult is the process of thinking through in some detail what you want to say about the film. What do you find most intriguing or disturbing about the film? What makes the film noteworthy? Does it illustrate some aspect of filmmaking with special clarity? Does it have an unusual effect on the viewer? Do its implicit or symptomatic meanings seem to have particular importance?

Your answer to such questions will furnish the *thesis* of your analysis. The thesis, as in any piece of writing, is the central claim your argument advances. In our analysis of *His Girl Friday*, the thesis is that the film uses classical narrative devices to create an impression of rapid speed. In our discussion of *Man with a Movie Camera*, the thesis is that the film makes the viewer aware of how cinema manipulates the world we see on film.

Typically, your thesis will be a claim about the film's *functions*, its *effects*, or its *meanings* (or some mixture of all three aspects). For instance, we argue that the multiple protagonists in *Hannah and Her Sisters* allow Woody Allen to compare the characters' psychological development while keeping the film largely within the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. In our discussion of *North by Northwest*, we concentrate more on how the film achieves the effects of suspense and surprise. The analysis of