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Metz' Grande Syntagmatique and Tout Va Bien -- notes

1. We would have to concede that much of Tout Va Bien does not fit, in a mechanical sense, the categories which Metz provides. At the level of meaning, the film argues the impossibility of autonomy and the necessity for placing one action in the context of all the other actions, and this denial of autonomy is reflected in the form. Thus our acceptance of the concept of autonomous shots or segments is, in some ways, a compromise. Godard frequently breaks down the autonomy of one shot by establishing a sound-track link with the next shot. This also operates between segments. It's worth noting that Metz assumes a coincidence of sound and image, or at least a logical connection. We have indicated on the shot break-down where there is a sound-track link, but it should be emphasised that it is a central device, and subverts some of what we say in the analysis.
2. The Grande Syntagmatique is concerned with temporal categories relating to narrative. It assumes a single narrator. In Tout Va Bien, however, it becomes essential to distinguish between narrative levels and points of view. There are at least three 'subjects'; a) the film, which tells of the difficulties of separating one narrative from the historical context, b) Montand and Fonda, who tell of the difficulties of establishing a relationship outside the historical context, and c) the historical context, which tells itself, filtered, presumably through the consciousness of Godard. This being so, it becomes necessary to attach importance not only to the temporal arrangement of the film, but also to indicate, when referring to subjectivity, who it is that is being subjective. Thus in extract 2 we make the distinction between subjective and objective parallel syntagms, in an attempt to account for what seems to us to be a shift from Montand's subjective recollections, to History/Godard's apparent objectivity.
3. Related to the above is the difficulty, at points, of distinguishing between inserts on the one hand and syntagms with autonomous structures of their own. There is a tendency for the apparent insert to take over the narrative. This is most apparent in extract 2, shots 18-42, and here we have offered alternative readings - one which adheres to Metz, and the other which seems to us to give a better account of the sequence. This difficulty again relates to the impossibility of structural autonomy, which in turn relates to the impossibility of autonomy in an ideological sense. The identity of ideology and structure.
4. Given these difficulties and reservations, the Grande Syntagmatique turned out to be a very useful tool. Apart from the discipline of 'close-reading' which it imposes, it also provides a measure of regularity against which the irregularities of Godard's film can be placed. Rather than feeling that Metz was only applicable to orthodox narrative, we suspected that in the face of orthodoxy the syntagmatic analysis could become mechanical - placing square shapes into square boxes. In the attempt to fit the irregular shapes of Tout Va Bien into the square boxes which Metz offers, we found ourselves led to a fuller consideration of the narrative, formal and ideological function of the irregularities, and to a consideration of modifications which might be made in Metz's categories.
5. We suspect that much of the value of syntagmatic analysis of this sort lies in the process rather than in the product. It would be interesting to know if our analysis clarifies the film for someone else. Properly, this analysis should form a part, perhaps the base, of a total study of the film which would interrelate structure, mise-en-scene, content, ideology etc.

TOUT VA BIEN: Synopsis

1. Voices - over: making movies costs money.
2. Cheques for items of production costs.
3. Voices - over: need for stars and a story line: a love story.
4. Montand and Fonda near a riverbank: inventory of what they love about each other.
5. Voice - over: he and she will have problems.
6. Montand and Fonda domestic row.
7. Voice - over: where are the characters' situated?
8. Map of France; country; city; houses; Montand and Fonda.
9. Voice - over: situation of characters' still too vague; shots of workers; peasants; lower and upper middle class.
10. Individual examples.
11. Voice - over: add something extra.
12. Shots of: Trade Union meeting; farmers' demonstration: C.R.S. beating up people.
13. Montand looks at Remington commercial in viewing theatre.
14. Fonda broadcasts about the press for American Broadcasting System; voice - over offers different view of press.
15. Factory occupation.
16. Striker justifies actions to fellow worker.
17. Strikers rip up files in Administration offices.
18. Montand and Fonda arrive to interview the boss; strikers amused at new roles and contemptuous of boss.
19. Lateral track right and back. Cross-section of boss' office and workers below Worker's song on the soundtrack.
20. Boss' interview/address: social engineering, technocratic view of consumer society and worker-management relations.
21. Shop Steward's interview/address: unofficial strike can damage negotiations between workers and management - serves management only. Information about changing pattern of organization of plant and the market in French food industry. Accepts that industrial problems are political problems.
22. Strikers' claims of urgent need for direct action set against Steward's assertion of extremism and over simplifying of issues.
- 23/24. Interviews/addresses by old and young striker inter-cut: both disillusioned with the conventional Left.
25. Lateral track of cross-section of offices. Voice-over song 'Hang the boss'.
26. Boss' office: Montand and Boss dispute. Montand for the strikers. Fonda comments only on the intensity of his involvement.
27. Administration office: (a) women strikers have to make special domestic arrangements to stay on in occupied factory overnight; (b) boss rings for permission to piss.
28. Boss forced to use workers' toilet and beat the clock; forced to piss out of his own office window.
29. Lateral track of cross-section. Evening. Little activity amongst the strikers.

30. Boss' office: boss indignant about his treatment by the strikers. Fonda and Montand don't comment.
31. (a) girl voice - over tells of content of fellow girl worker's interview with Fonda; (b) girl speaks for herself: a radical song/poem.
32. Next day; boss' office. He exercises; Fonda works on script for her broadcast on the occupation.
33. Workers paint over the walls and discuss the progress of the occupation.
34. Montand talks to female strikers; Fonda talks to male strikers.
- 35/36. Intercut with above: women's work conditions described and shown with Fonda in them; men's work conditions described and the monotony are emphasised.
37. Strikers worried that their outline of their work is substantially what the C.G.T. (the official Union) would say.
38. Young worker recapitulates the events of the occupation. What they've omitted in their account is their elation at being responsible for their own actions.
39. Shot of factory from outside. Voice-over news broadcast reports the end of the occupation.
40. Montand at work supervises girl-dancers for a commercial. Voice-over reports on Vietnam.
41. Montand interview/address: a film-maker who occasionally makes commercials; became politicised in May 1968 and stopped making art movies; plans a political film about France 1972.
42. Girl dancers shot partly through view-finder.
43. Fonda at work: interview/address: explains how she got into broadcasting. Now occasioned by the occupation undergoing a crisis of confidence about her ability to communicate.
44. Fonda abandons the recording of her broadcast.
45. Fonda and Montand at home: respective work scenes inter-cut with row developing over Montand's attempt to get her to shake off her depression. Fonda angry and confused at being forced to accommodate to Montand's definition and determination of their relationship.
46. Today. Montand overlooks construction work as photographs are taken. Reflects on his response to the occupation and his difference from the strikers although they shared in common the experiences of May 1968. Sees himself as a liberal.
- 47/49 Reconstructions/flashbacks(?) to May 1968.
47. Confrontation of workers/students with C.R.S. Discuss whether to follow Communist Party instructions and run or confront C.R.S.
48. Gilles a victim of the confrontations. Voice-over speaks of him as a martyr. Slogans relate France 1968 to France 1972.
49. Round-up (of largely students?) by C.R.S.
50. Today. Montand on the phone refuses to go to Lille with Fonda - prefers to work.
51. Fonda at service station - on her way to Lille?
52. Lateral tracks right and left in supermarket/hypermarket(?).
 - (a) people buying goods
 - (b) Fonda voice-over wants to give up her job
 - (c) Communist Party member sells pamphlets
 - (d) voice-over describes market as 'grand theatre'

- (e) radicals run in; challenge Communist Party member to develop his case
- (f) people urged on by radicals to load up with free good
- (g) confrontation with C.R.S.

53. Today. {a} Montand in cafe - Fonda approaches
 {b} Fonda in cafe - Montand approaches
 {c} voices-over talk about characters at the end of the film - beginning to think of themselves in historical terms.

54. Lateral track left: wall; road; open waste land; wall etc.
Voices - over urge thinking in historical terms, followed by optimistic pop song: 'The sun is shining over France'.

Factory sequence - Synopsis 3I-39

shot break-down

- I. track left to right and back from outer office to stairs
2. cut to interview group - M.S. - Fonda and girls - V.O. link
3. cut to Radical Song - C.U. - girl speaking, Fonda facing out.
4. cut to no.2 set-up - interview
5. cut to no.3 set-up - song
6. cut to factory external - M.S. - with banner
7. cut to bosses office - M.S. - exercises
8. cut to outer office - M.S. - painting
9. cut to factory external - L.S. - no banner
10. cut to outer office - longer than 8. - painting (2)
- II. cut to black-out - Montand V.O.
12. cut to doorway of office - M.S.
13. cut to black-out - Fonda V.O.
14. cut to girl (singer) profile - C.U. - face left
15. cut to man (black sweater) profile - C.U. - face right
16. cut to Fonda profile - C.U. - face left
17. cut to factory - M.S. - Fonda and hangers - girl V.O.
18. cut to worker (old) in office - C.U.
19. cut to factory, Montand pushing meat left to right - V.O. link
20. cut to Montand in office - C.U.
21. cut to Fonda filling bags in factory - M.S.
22. cut to worker's group in office - M.S.
23. cut to Montand in factory, tipping out meat
24. cut to girl worker (singer) in office - C.U.
25. cut to Fonda on assembly line - M.S.
26. cut to Montand sawing meat - M.S.
27. cut to workers group with Montand and Fonda eating in outer office - L.S.
28. cut to Fonda and hangers - ref. 17
29. cut to Montand sawing meat - ref. 26
30. cut to Fonda filling bags - ref. 21
31. cut to Montand pushing meat - ref. 19
32. cut to worker (black sweater) profile in office - C.U.
33. cut to boss shaving - C.U. - V.O. link - flashback without reference
34. cut to Fonda writing, Montand looking out - C.U.
35. cut to CGT gorillas coming up stairs - L.S. - flashback
36. cut to workers' toilets - flashback
37. cut to Fonda writing, Montand looking out - C.U. - ref. 34
38. cut to worker (black sweater) profile - C.U. - ref. 32
39. cut to Fonda and Montand - V.O. link
40. cut to factory external - L.S. - ref. 9 (same set-up, different shot) - news V.O.

Domestic sequence - Montand, on construction site, recollecting Mai 1968;
synopsis 45- 49

shot break-down

1. domestic interior - M.S. - Fonda enters to Montand and sits
2. temporal overlap cut to Fonda sitting - Fonda C.U.
3. cut to Fonda and Montand - M.S. -- same set-up as 1.
4. cut to Fonda - C.U.
5. cut to film studio - flashback
6. cut to broadcast studio - flashback
7. cut to Fonda - C.U. - as 4.
8. cut to Fonda - E.C.U.
9. cut to photograph of cock in woman's hand
10. cut to Fonda - E.C.U. - as 8.
11. cut to film studio - flashback
12. cut to Fonda - C.U. - holds up cock photograph
13. cut to broadcast studio - flashback
14. cut to Fonda - E.C.U. - as 8.
15. cut to Montand's back - C.U. - rises, leaves frame, revealing Fonda
16. temporal overlap cut of Montand rising - M.S. - as 1 - maid enters and leaves
17. cut to title - Aujourd'hui (I)
18. cut to construction site - L.S. - Montand enters - V.O. intro to 19
19. cut to backs of students and arrival of C.R.S. - D.F. - Montand V.O.
20. cut to confrontation of students/C.R.S. - C.U. - sound-track link, but no visible source
21. cut to student/C.R.S as 19 but lower angle - D.F. - C.R.S pursue students - sound-track break from 20
22. cut to Montand on construction site - D.F. - sound-track link
23. cut to motorway - people running/ man (newspaper) - D.F. - people running L-R
24. cut to man with newspaper - TP - truck moves into frame L-R - Montand V.O.
25. cut to Montand on construction site - D.F. - no movement - V.O. and sound-track link from 24 and gunfire sound-track link to 26
26. cut to 2 students attacking C.R.S man - D.F. - radical song music over sound-track
27. cut to other side of students/C.R.S. man - D.F. - other C.R.S arrive - song V.O.
28. cut to students/C.R.S. man and others arriving - TP
29. cut to Montand on construction site - D.F. - no movement - sound-track link from gunfire of 28 - Montand V.O.
30. cut to body of Gilles in water - L.S. - sound-track break - cut into gunshot - female V.O. - poem?
31. cut to crowd - C.U. - V.O. link
32. cut to crowd - C.U. - V.O. link
33. cut to crowd - C.U. - V.O. link
34. cut to Montand at construction site - D.F. - no movement - same shot (?) as 25 - V.O. link
35. cut to title - Mai 68 - Lutte - V.O. link - sound-track leading to 40
36. cut to title - Lutte - V.O. link - sound-track
37. cut to title - De - V.O. link - sound-track
38. cut to title - Classe - no V.O. - sound-track
39. cut to title - 1968 France 1972 - sound-track
40. cut to C.R.S lining road - buses explode - students enter frame R-L - L.S.
41. temporal overlap cut to C.R.S. - burning buses - students enter R-L - M.S. - male and female V.O.
42. temporal overlap cut to C.R.S - burning buses - students enter R-L - as 40 - continued to entry of car - male and female V.O.

5. Syntagmatic analysis

a. Factory sequence - synopsis 3I-9

- 1) shots I-5: Autonomous segment - scene (6) - shots 3 & 5, non-diegetic inserts. By Metz' definition (he compares it to a scene in the theatre) its not entirely clear that a scene can have inserts, but it seems essential here. Important to recognise that inserts are non-diegetic (metaphorical and that this is indicated by the fact that not only is the group re-positioned, but both Fonda and the girl are looking out-front -- i.e. it has no relation to a 'real' action.
- 2) shot 6: Autonomous shot)
3) shot 7: Autonomous shot) - but there is sound-track link of bells. Shot of factory may be a device to indicate a break from previous segment, and the bells seem to signify 'next morning'.
- 4) shots 8-10: Autonomous segment - episodic sequence - shot 9, displaced diegetic insert. Depends on the temporal arrangement which you think it has.
- 5) shots II-13: Autonomous segment - scene - shot 12, subjective insert. Tricky since the diegesis seems to be contained in the two black-outs, and there seems to be an overlap between them. The insert illustrates the voice-over, and it would seem to be subjective from the point of view of Fonda and Montand.
- 6) shots 14-39: Autonomous segment - scene - shots 17, 19, 21, 23, (25,26), (28-31), non-diegetic inserts. (Brackets indicate a single insert.) shots 33, 35, 36, subjective inserts with worker as subject. Despite the number of inserts, the scene and the sound-track are continuous. The inserts of Fonda and Montand working in the factory are non-diegetic, since they do not relate to a 'real' action, and (28-31), though apparently flashback, remain non-diegetic since they fulfill the same function in both cases - the point being that workers can only show the same thing as the unions; its what they do that's different. Shots 33,35,36 have worker as subject, since it is his point of view that is being shown.
- 7) shot 40 Autonomous shot. Some confusion about this since the sound-track of the news broadcast carries over into the following segment of the film studio. There is however a distinct break between the news items. Also this was the last shot of our section and it was difficult to relate it to the whole of the next segment

b. Domestic sequence/Montand on construction site recollecting Mai 68 - synopsis 45-49

- I) shots I-16: Autonomous segment - scene (6) - shots 5,6,II,I3, subjective inserts - shot 9, displaced diegetic (explanatory? "like a visiting card"?). The quarrel is in continuous time, with 5,6,II,I3 being flashbacks. The term 'subjective insert' is here somewhat unsatisfactory, since they are being used here objectively, to 'objectify' an argument. There may be a need for a category 'illustrative insert'. Shot 9 seems at first to be non-diegetic, but since we later see the actual photograph, it must be displaced diegetic - a 'real' event shown out of sequence. Worth noting also the temporal overlap cuts in shots 2 & 16. Metz has no way of coping with these.

- 2) shot I7: Autonomous title shot - Aujourd'hui (I)
Metz has no way of coping with this, but it seems worth distinguishing it from the series of titles in shots 35-9.
- 3a) shots I8-42: Autonomous segment - parallel syntagm (2)
Strictly speaking, if one applies temporal criteria, this must be an autonomous segment, since it all develops out of Montand's reflections on the construction site, with the various strands being woven together in parallel montage. This however does not account for the shift from Montand's V.O. to the male and female narrator's V.O. . The following break-down into four segments is offered as an alternative.
- 3b) shots I8-29: Autonomous segment - subjective parallel syntagm with three motifs -
a) Montand reflecting; b) C.R.S. and leftists; c) man with newspaper. (b & c may be identical but some distinction seems useful.)
The term subjective parallel syntagm is used to indicate that the three motifs are joined by the subjectivity of Montand recollecting events of Mai. It is to distinguish it from the next segment in which Montand occupies a more objective place in the montage. This segment takes us to the point at which the narrator's V.O. takes over from Montand's
Within b) (shots I9-2I, 26-8), shot 20 is a non-diegetic insert, signifying a metaphorical confrontation between C.R.S and leftists rather than one which actually takes place.
The interweaving of V.O. and sound-track is very intricate, with the truck noises of shot 24 carrying over into 25, and the gun-shots of 26 being heard first in 25.
- 3c) shots 30-34: Autonomous segment - objective parallel syntagm with two motifs -
a) Gilles (shots 30-3); b) Montand at construction site.
The distinction is that from Montand looking at history, we move to history looking at Montand. The female V.O. reading what seems to be a poem carries over into shot 34, which is an almost still shot identical to shot 25. Again form and content coalesce, and Montand is placed, objectively, in the historical context.
- 3d) shots 35-39: Autonomous title segment - see shot I7
- 3e) shots 40-42: Autonomous segment - overlapping syntagm
Again Metz cannot cope. This is, in the temporal sense, a conclusion to the b) motif of segment 3b. The distinction is again that it is presented by the V.O. of both the male and female narrators. As there is no way of indicating a temporal overlap cut in the Grande Syntagmatique, so there is no way of classifying these three shots, which although they overlap in time, also carry on the narrative from shot to shot. We have adopted the category of overlapping syntagm to account for this fairly frequent Godard device.

Conclusion

Our general conclusion would be that Metz' Grande Syntagmaticue was by no means useless in the examination of Tout Va Bien, and even that some syntagmatic analysis of a more available film would reveal as much. While strict application of temporal criteria might obliterate some of our categorization, the attempt to come to grips with the temporal arrangement revealed very clearly the layering of time and the layering of narrative, and the complex interweaving of both. We had to be clear, for instance, that the overall structure was analogous to a parallel syntagm, and that the temporal categorization of the separate segments depended on which motif was in operation. (Thus extract I, Autonomous segment 5, becomes a scene in the linking narration which is placed in the time of making the film.) Such an examination of the temporal structure, foregrounded the fact that the film was, at a very important level, about making a film, a theme which the rest of the film tends to conceal.

More important, perhaps, was the difficulty of trying to establish the autonomy of shots and segments. This difficulty revealed that Godard's formal approach was directed very much towards breaking down autonomy between elements of the film. Most important in this respect was the linking of segments by sound-track, but also important, and rising directly out of syntagmatic analysis, were the number of parallel syntagms, subjective inserts which referred back to earlier syntagms, and displaced diegetic inserts which referred both backwards and forwards. Two other devices which achieved something of the same effect, we have called the temporal overlap cut and the overlapping syntagm, and while these are not found in Metz, they would seem to be useful categories in dealing with Godard's films.

The importance of this breakdown of autonomy on the formal level is that it is reflected precisely on the level of content. Examination of the structure would suggest that the central theme of the film is 'contextualisation', the placing of one event in the context of all the others, the denial of individual autonomy. The autonomy of the problems of the relationship between Fond and Montand is denied on the content level, and this denial is pervasively continued throughout the formal level. Thus an interpretation of the film, and an examination of its ideology arises directly out of the syntagmatic analysis.

Metz, then, provides a useful way into the film, a base for a total examination. It seems to us that he may be most useful when his strict categories are transcended, forcing the examination out of a potentially mechanical fitting of parts into places, into an understanding of precisely how and why the rules are broken, and the effect of breaking them.