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'Bien': Godard Comes Full Circle

By MICHAEL A. WHITE

Tout Va Bien, written and directed by Jean-Pierre Gorin with the assistance of Jean-Luc Godard, is a refreshing shot in the tired Left arm. It may not leave you breathless, but the screen evidence proves that Godard still knows two or three things about movies; what's more, he's putting his knowledge to better use than he did in his post-**Weekend**, pre-motorcycle accident period (shades of Zimmerman).

Of the film, the co-authors have said: "In our opinion, (it) is a serious step towards materialist fiction film-making for a large audience." Obvious contradictions abound. And rightly so, for **Bien** is, on one level, about the contradictions involved in political film-making; on another level, it is a partisan critique of the Left apparatus; and, on the most interesting, personal level, it is Godard's own self-examination of his career as film-maker. The beauty (though flawed) of **Bien** lies in Godard's successful formal syntheses, and the stylistic purity by which they are achieved.

The fiction is basic but not simple. He (Yves Montand) is a former New Wave scriptwriter and film director; lately, he has decided to make commercials in place of "art" films. She (Jane Fonda) is an American radio correspondent "who no longer corresponds to anything." He follows Her on an assignment—a few workers in a sausage factory have gone on strike and are holding the Boss (Vittorio Caprioli) captive. He and She are also held; the strike ends and they are released. He and She discuss what the strike experience means for them.

The film begins with a humorous, materialist critique of conventional (bourgeois) film-making. He and She exchange empty platitudes reminiscent of the Bardot-Picoli bed scene in **Contempt**: He: "I love...your breasts, your legs, your ass...." She: "Ah, you love me totally?" Then a quick fit of melodrama is thrown in: She calls Him a male chauvinist pig. So much for bourgeois narrative.

Godard then throws off the conventional film habits with his characteristic flourish (i.e., a cut) and concentrates on bringing the contradictions of bourgeois society to the surface.

The strike scenes—which serve to analyze the contradictions in the Left—contain some of Godard's funniest moments. It is good to see that he still has a sense of humor. (And anyone involved in last year's abortive campus coup d'etat cannot help but appreciate the scenes' painful accuracies.) These scenes also reveal that Godard's eye for composition is as sharp as ever.

Whether or not one believes that Godard was successful in his intellectual (political) syntheses will probably depend as much on one's own political fetishes as on critical logic. Hence, I will not dwell on the matter. On the other hand, **Bien** is an **almost** unqualified success in its formal syntheses. The one long track shot in the supermarket (symbolically called "Crossroads") is, as they say, worth the price of admission.

The one dominant note in all of Godard's works has been the sharpening and purification of style in search of the ultimate equivalent of Brechtian distance. I think he has found it in the parallel track, and perfected it in **Bien**. It doesn't pay to over-theorize in these matters, but a consideration of the technique should throw light upon—if not Godard's achievements—at least his intentions.

Godard's track is strictly linear and the subject of the track—whether an action or object(s)—is limited to one plane. The plane that the camera covers (the screen plane, in a sense) is kept parallel to the subject plane. Thus, the screen becomes a distortion-free window through which we view a staged reality. (Godard constantly reminds us that it is staged.) This is not, strictly speaking, realism; it is, for lack of a better term, Brechtianism—didacticism shorn of its moral-emotional (distorting) wool.

The three long tracks in **Bien** constitute the clearest and purest instances of this distancing that can be found in Godard's ouevre. These tracks represent the maturation of Godard's genius for manipulating the by-play between an audience's unconscious involvement and its self-conscious awareness of the camera's presence: just as we get too interested (emotionally) in the action, the camera reasserts itself and we fall back to a more critical distance, only to be seduced into

He and She find themselves prisoners at the Salumi sausage factory where she has gone to interview the manager on the problems facing management today. They are caught when the Maoists usurp a nice, genial, one-hour work-stoppage, planned by the conservatively Communist C.G.T., and turn it into a leaderless rampage. The sit-in describes the workers' frustrations in mostly comic actions. The plant manager is locked in his office and not allowed to go to the bathroom. The personnel files are destroyed. One woman striker argues with her husband over the telephone: "You'll have to heat it yourself . . . *You* stayed at *your* factory during *your* strike. . . ." Another woman paints her nails. Occasionally they revive themselves with a revolutionary song.

As the actions describe the frustrations, typical Godardian monologues define them—some are broadly funny, some pious and just a little foolish. All, however, are photographed with that particular Godard eye for finding beauty in the most banal shapes and colors. If red and yellow were the predominant colors of "Weekend," dusky blues, and greens and beiges of the sort Braque used, are the colors of "Tout Va Bien."

To the extent that Godard has any interest in allowing us emotional involvement with He and She (Him and Her?), "Tout Va Bien" is both moving and witty, but these are qualities that slip through in just three or four scenes.

In two sequences, one shot at a TV studio and another at a Paris construction site, Montand, talking directly to the camera, describes the weariness with which he came to direct his fiction films and how he finally preferred to make commercials, which allow him to participate in the system without hypocrisy.

When, at last, he was offered his chance to direct a David Goodis novel he'd always cherished (a rather nasty reference to Truffaut's "bourgeois" adaptation of Goodis's "Shoot The Piano Player"), he says he no longer cared. It's not necessary that you believe the character (characters in Godard have always been slightly implausible and unreal in any conventional way), you believe the passions expressed, you believe Montand, and you believe the world in which Godard, at the beginning, has so carefully set his film, a world, he has told us, in which "farmers are farming, workers are working and the middle classes are middle classing."

Miss Fonda has some equally fine moments near the end when, after She and He have been freed from the sausage factory, they sit having breakfast in their flat, the liberated She now furious with He who, though politically aware, remains impossibly chauvinistic where she's concerned. When we last see He and She, each is, says the narrator, rethinking himself in historic terms.

"Tout Va Bien" looks a lot like the earlier Godard films (the opening of the breakfast scene mentioned above is taken directly from "Vivre Sa Vie), and it talks the committed radical line of the most recent films. Though it does both with great style and a surprising amount of humor, it's neither the look of the film nor its politics that I find most fascinating about Godard at this point. Rather it's his courageous and quite mad persistence in trying to evolve a film form to match the intensity of his political and social concerns. In the last five years he's tried to do without everything except, perhaps, film itself. He got rid of the narrative, actors-as-performers, and anything resembling emotional suspense—all techniques of the bourgeois cinema that, he thinks, have helped enslave the capitalist world. The results have been films that have bored almost everybody, most especially the masses that he would politicize.

"Tout Va Bien," with a few graceful if minor concessions to conventional cinema form, shows Godard getting ever closer to a new kind of film that makes most other politically and socially concerned movies seem like sentimental garbage.

Take, for example, "Save The Tiger," the new Jack Lemmon film directed by John G. Avildsen and written by Steve Shagan, about the decline and fall of a Los Angeles garment manufacturer played by Lemmon. I've no doubt that Avildsen, Shagan and Lemmon are very concerned about the moral breakdown of a system that supposedly allows a once-nice guy (Lemmon) to juggle books, to pimp for clients and to employ arsonists in order to continue his existence in a rotten world. Yet their method (realistic, full of attempts to engage our sympathies, and full of references to simpler, more decent times past) is to bathe real horrors in the kind of self-pity that precludes meaningful action. When we go to see movies like "Save the Tiger," we're invited to watch the spectacle of decadence. We aren't—heaven knows—asked to do anything. We aren't even asked to think very much, just to feel sorry for a poor slob who made it big and feels lousy about all the rotten things he has to do to stay on top.

This is the kind of cinema that Godard sneers at, rightly, I think. And although I find his politics as muddled and self-indulgent in their way as the sentimentality of "Save The Tiger," I admire Godard's willingness to use his talent so extravagantly, so recklessly, in the pursuit of a goal that may forever elude him. "Tout Va Bien" is a film of true political importance, whether you believe its politics or not.