

# From French Revolutions to Gaullist Weekends: The Films of Jean-Luc Godard and the Discontent of May '68

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Jean-Luc Godard's filmmaking career completed its first phase after the events of May 1968, when millions of laborers and students went on general strike and shut down France. Young people revolting on the streets brought into question every aspect of conventional life just as the filmmaker had been questioning the very notion of cinema for the better part of a decade. May '68 would have occurred without Godard, and the director would have been at the forefront of any film conversation had the events never occurred, but there is much to be said about the effects one had on the other. The argument to be made is that Godard, as a celluloid essayist and philosopher,

and the French people came to mirror one another by the time events were hinting at a massive revolt. Godard's works provided audiences with snapshots of society in the years leading up to May '68. Examples of this include capturing an aloofness found amongst French youth coming of age during the post-war boom in *Breathless*, introducing us to angst-ridden would-be intellectuals in *Masculin Féminin*, and then allowing us a peek into the world of a Maoist cell comprised of frustrated students who believe the only way to bring about change is through terroristic action in *La Chinoise*. This essay paves parallel roads between Godard's work and the events of May '68.

## The Post-War Recovery, Breathless, and Godard's Early Career

At the end of World War II, European countries, including France, saw their economies in shambles. By 1947, however, many western European countries began to witness a period of growth that would persist well into the 1960s. This was in no small part due to the Marshall Plan, the American initiative to oversee the rebuilding of European economies, of which France received a large portion of the funds. Every year from 1960 until the early 1970s saw France's gross domestic product rise by an average of six percent (Lieberthal). It seemed as if capitalism and post-war economic cooperation was going to work.

This post-war comfort in France also saw the birth of what Francois Truffaut, a Cahiers du Cinema (Notebooks on Cinema) critic alongside Godard, and later a major figure in the French New Wave (or Nouvelle Vague), described as the cinema du papa, or grandfather's cinema. There was a certain bourgeois tradition to be followed by filmmakers in France in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one that included "the formulaic repetition of genres" incapable of "attracting new audiences into the cinemas" (Nowell-Smith 146). The pre-Nouvelle Vague French cinema saw filmmakers shooting in studios with elaborate sets, complicated technologies, authoritarian producers who almost always had the last say, and high production values (Kline 3). The Cahiers, which also included Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, and Jacques Doniol Valcro-ze among its ranks, would radically alter the film scene in Europe in the late 1950s. After spending the better part of a decade criticizing most conventional western cinema, Truffaut and Godard delivered their respective feature-length debuts in 1959 and 1960. *Les quatre cents coups* (The 400 Blows) debuted at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival and found universal acclaim, much to the chagrin of those in attendance who wanted to see the young Truffaut fail due to his reputation as a fierce and unrelenting critic (Kline 5). Godard's *A bout de souffle*, or *Breathless*, blazed its way into the cultural zeitgeist the following year, beginning a dialogue whose synthesis was to be the uprisings of May '68.

Godard and his crew, it could be argued, sowed the seeds of discontent that would define nearly every forthcoming Nouvelle Vague film from 1960-1967. This was accomplished, in part, due to a nuanced approach that presented a new relation between the visual aspects of film and the attitudes embodied by its protagonists. One could read *Breathless*' Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul

Belmondo), the gun-toting, Humphrey Bogart-idolizing gangster, as a representation of how the youth in France felt at the time. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith explains in *Making Waves: New Cinemas of the 1960s*, the term Nouvelle Vague was originally used by journalist Françoise Giroud for an investigation into the attitudes of 18 to 30-year-old French citizens in 1957 (143). This generation is best summed up by Jean Seberg's character of Patricia Franchini when she notes "I don't know if I'm unhappy because I'm not free, or if I'm not free because I'm unhappy." Generation Giroud, as I will refer to them, had no existential conflict with an obvious villain to fight like the Third Reich in the Second World War. The Algerian War for Independence, a conflict widely discussed amongst the French citizenry, was an ambiguous colonialist conflict that saw France attempting to grasp onto a fading old world. Jean Collet, in *Jean-Luc Godard: An Investigation into His Films and Philosophy*, articulates the sort of ennui a generation feels when they are "born into a world too full, too complete" when he states the fathers of Giroud's generation had destroyed and rebuilt the world, leaving the youth with nothing (5). Michel and Patricia were left to aimlessly wander the Champs-Élysées with "everything to consume and nothing to conquer" (Collet 5). Poiccard serves as a nihilistic antithesis, and arguable victim, to these conditions as he lives his short life as freely as possible, resulting in his violent death in a Paris backstreet. In his last moments, he reveals to Patricia, and his generation at large, just exactly how he feels by muttering "C'est vraiment degueulasse," popularly translated to: "Makes me want to puke."

*Le Petit Soldat*, Godard's highly political sophomore film, finds its protagonist Bruno Forestier confronting similar disenchantment with early-60s France. He muses whether "the time for action has passed" and whether "the time for reflection has come." Forestier echoes Danish proto-existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard's influential essay "The Present Age," in which he states that the age of passion, found in the time of the French Revolution, has glossed over the present. Citizens, faced with a society with a democratized press and certain social liberties, find solace in the act of reflecting over their own lives and the great issues of their time. Commitment no longer finds itself necessary in an environment in which forming opinions is more than enough (Dreyfus 1). These sentiments of disillusionment displayed by the characters in Godard's early films, essentially the young people of the day, turn into anger in his later projects.

## The Children of Marx & Coca-Cola, the Aden Arabie Cell, and May '68

In 1966's *Masculin Féminin*, Godard introduced us to Paul, an ex-army recruit played by Jean-Pierre Leaud, and Madeline, a young woman yearning to be a pop-star played by Chantal Goya. The film's two protagonists represent disparate ends of the societal spectrum found amongst French youth at the time: those riding the wave of pop culture and those whose burgeoning class consciousness had taken them hostage. Paul and Madeline are essentially the "children of Marx and Coca-Cola," a term coined by Godard that was first used in the film. Its usage paints a portrait of a culturally savvy, youthful generation who retains an understanding of the era they live in, an era whose backdrop was the war in Vietnam, the Cold War, and countless social movements.

At one point in the film, upon their meeting one another, Madeline asks Paul if his military service was "fun." His response is as follows: "...twenty-four hours a day to unbridled authority, 16 months of struggle a young Frenchman must endure to win relative freedom from authority...it can become a life of submission, because the military and industrial complex coexist well, as the logics of money and order." This film, sees Godard taking a stance against what western society had to offer French youth—a life rife with service, military or otherwise, to an oppressive capitalist system. Anger was building among youth who felt they had no other choice but a life of subservience to the world their parents built.

In March of 1967, just over a year before the events of May 1968 would rock western society, Godard presented the world with his most radical film to date, *La Chinoise*. The film is set in Paris and follows five young Maoists who aim to put their theory into practice to bring the world closer to resembling a Marxist-Leninist commune. Collet argues that the five characters the film follows "represent five different strata of society" (138). We are introduced to Veronique (Anne Wiazemsky), a philosophy student at Nanterre; Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Leaud), an aspiring actor who aims to consolidate the teachings of Mao Tse-Tung with his passion for theatre; Henri, a scientist; Kirilov, who, as a painter, draws political slogans in the apartment the youth share; and Yvonne, a part-time prostitute. The film, and the increasingly radical political sentiments found within France, were in part inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, found

Chairman Mao desperately trying to avoid a turn to soviet-style communism (Lieberthal). Providing Chinese youth with revolutionary experience would serve as one of the pillars for his ends. Mao's radical sentiments ring very strongly among this group of Parisians, as they believe that assassinations and kidnappings will further their cause. The group decide that they will name their collective The Aden-Arabie Cell, a reference to the novel of the same name by Paul Nizan, a prominent 20th century French philosopher (Collet 140).

One might find it prophetic that the bourgeois couple Godard follows in *Weekend* are presented with the question: "Are you in a film or in reality?" Roland, played by Jean Yanne, claims he and his partner Corinne, played by Mireille Darc, are in a film and is subsequently accused of lying. The film's release came just six months before the events of May '68, with Godard portraying the stagnation of western civilization in the form of a black comedy. In one particularly memorable scene, Roland and Corinne find themselves in a seemingly endless traffic jam in the French countryside, the modern machines stuck in traffic as they attempt to cross over into a postmodern world. It's a scene that lasts nearly 12 minutes and encapsulates the pause in societal norms that France would experience during the events of May '68; both the film and the muffed revolution were a retort to an increasingly globalized and capitalist world. Godard used shots of overturned cars in the countryside as representative of a disillusionment with modern society, which had been hinted at as early as 1960. His message became, not only more overt, but radical as well. If one can picture May '68 as a powerful, albeit brief, fire in the history of social upheavals, then the clashes between students and police in the lead-up to the strike can be labelled as the volatile fuel at the source of it.

A Godardian scene would erupt in the first couple of weeks of May, with students and police violently clashing in the Latin Quarter of Paris. The clashes resulted in the arrests of hundreds of students and an almost daily increase in public sympathy (Wolin). Seeing students and professors on the streets would inspire nine million workers to go on strike, prompting President Charles de Gaulle to make plans to militarily defend Paris from a revolutionary takeover. Though this takeover would never come to fruition, de Gaulle was forced to call new elections in June. De Gaulle, in a premeditated political move, correctly assumed that

a desire for stability amongst the French people would ensure his victory (Wolin).

The fatally inquisitive and rebellious youth of Godard's films, representative of widely held sentiments among actual French youth, became increasingly radical throughout the 1960s. Events the world over including, but not limited to, American involvement in the Vietnam War, the assassination of Malcolm X, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Civil Rights movement, and the formation of the Black Panthers, created a dire situation that threatened the stability afforded to the west after the end of World War II.

### **Dziga Vertov and Final Reflections**

As Donato Totaro explains in his article "May 1968 and After: Cinema in France and Beyond, Part 1," Godard made a conscious decision after the events of May '68 to turn away from what he deemed "bourgeois filmmaking" (5). Godard, alongside activist Jean-Pierre Gorin, founded the Dziga Vertov Group in 1968. The group's name was a direct reference to the father of surrealist Soviet filmmaking Dziga Vertov, best known for his kino-glaz theory which states that the camera "is an instrument, much like the human eye" (Lieberthal). The group would go on to release a total of nine films from 1968-1973, with only one of them, *Tout va Bien*, ever screening in mainstream theatres (Totaro 6). This period of Godard's films is defined by a strong desire to "make political films politically" (Totaro 6), with the use of montage becoming integral to the group's output and his decision to not have his name placed on any project.

I can only imagine, with much envy, how one must have felt watching *La Chinoise* or *Weekend* in the immediate aftermath of May '68. The anger and wit found in nearly all of Godard's films in his first career arc (1960-1967) spilled onto French streets and occupied the universities, "reality set about aping a Godard film" (Collet 1). What then does it say about the work of an artist when their work only becomes more prescient over time? Some of the most influential philosophers of the last several hundred years, such as Karl Marx and Søren Kierkegaard, developed criticisms that helped shaped political and postmodern thought, their words ringing with truths that become increasingly deafening by the day. The same will be true with Jean-Luc Godard, a man whose work can only be understood backwards but forces us all to continue to live forward.

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