

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Week End 1967

Jean Luc Godard (1930- )

### STORY

**Setting.** Like fellow 'new wave' directors elsewhere in the European sixties—innovators like Fassbinder, Bergman, and Fellini—Godard devotes early stages of his cinema work to close examination of social problems, and in fact does so with a conceptual directness unparalleled in those other directors. (Godard is the one who brings onto the screen, and puts into consideration for the narration, lengthy texts like tracts on class warfare by Engels, passages from Frantz Fanon, or legal documents regarding the regulation of sex-workers in the city of Paris.) As with these other directors, and like a visionary of Herzog's stripe (in *Heart of Glass*), Godard eventually moves from social analysis to wider ranging reaches of imagination and vision. Thus Godard will offer us analytical films like *The little Soldier*, *Masculine-Feminine*, or *Vivre sa vie*, in the early sixties, but will prove his directionality by the later, more extravagantly ambitious, films that follow at the end of the decade. That is where a film like *Week End*(1967) comes in.

**Portrait.** A basic narrative provides the spine for the chilling world material that makes up this film. We open onto two figures in semi to complete darkness, the one a 'lover' and psychiatrist, attending in monosyllables to the orgy-narration being given him by his lover, a lady who has been through (or fantasized) an extraordinary sexual orgy, in which the private parts of men, and women, have been licensed to join, rejoin, and to rise and fall with the ablutions pouring from a good bottle of whiskey. This depth sexuality readies us for the trip narrative—Roland and Corinne, middle class Parisians—which is to use up a nightmarish week end, and to take us places in sexuality, which press the limits of interpersonal relations even to cannibalism, arguably the most ingestive sexuality available to us.

**Movement.** From this introduction we segue into what there is of a plot, for which there are inevitably a couple of characters, though in another sense the world the plot traverses is the whole story. Roland and Corinne undertake a road trip across the Ile de France, hoping to visit Corinne's mother, in the small town of Oinville, a quite distant suburb of the vast region of Paris. Their plan is to murder Mom and to get their hands on her insurance, a plan amply clarifying the personal traits they bring to this week end trip. Having accomplished this goal, and having made private plans to kill one another, they are captured by a band of guerilla warriors, who are hanging out in the woods near the capital, and treated both to violence and to violent political propaganda. That propaganda, we know from the Godard whose public commitments are by this time familiar, is the burden of the last third of the film. One might say, though, that what Godard wants most to conceptualize is what he puts before us in the neighborhood of Roland and Corinne, and especially along the highway the couple drive on their week-end trip.

**Highway.** Outside their condo, as they prepare to leave for their week end, Roland backs up his car into the front bumper of a neighbor's vehicle, and dents it. The furious neighbor, toting a pistol, rushes out and starts firing, and though our couple makes it to the highway, we get the idea; a dog eat dog struggle for material possessions and property, of which the automobile is the most obvious symbol, is where the real life of our western society takes place. This intro is simply an onramp onto the packed weekend highway, along which cars are not only lined up bumper to bumper, but are scattered and burning hulks deposited by the side of the road. It is characteristic of our narcissist couple that they by pass all the human misery that has collected on one side of the highway. A single camera shot follows the procession of virtually stalled cars: 'at some point we realize that the subject of the shot is not the traffic jam but the fact that the shot is so extended.' After a considerable time we come on the cause of the crazy jam; a fatal car crash which has left corpses scattered along the highway, and which police, in their vehicles, are trying to put under control.

**Politics.** To this point Godard remarked that 'politics is a traveling shot,' which can mean that the wreckage of our moment in history is encapsulated by the havoc that lines the highway. More than havoc. Scenes of hilarity and archaic memory are dispersed thickly through the traffic jam: cages transporting jungle animals, cars carrying passengers who are playing ball, one car to another, until the jam becomes so thick that our two protagonists have to abandon their car, and start cross country toward the next stage of their journey. They transect scenes from other movies, meet historical figures, get casually raped, even come upon an impressive pianist, sitting at a grand piano in a barnyard, and adding a Mozart sonata to the improbable mix of fragments of our time. (Even the camera crew, of the film itself, is gathered among the farm animals attending the concert.)

**Propaganda.** The film, quite properly, has no end, and yet the two propaganda inserts, which thicken the 'end' of the crazy journey of Roland and Corinne, leave the most explicit possible evidence of Godard's own views. Two garbage workers, one Maghrebian, one from sub-Saharan Africa, declaim against the corruption and brutality of the West, adding to it an extensive read from the text of Engels on the class struggle. In the future, for Godard as cinematographer, lies a period of ten years during which this director will associate himself with the group Dziga-Vertov, creators of militant political cinema. His rupture with art cinema is complete after *Weekend*.

## THEMES

**Cataclysm.** The wreckage scattered over the highway, the total cynicism of the main characters' personal life, the ultimate turn into a savage cannibalism: all these developments connote a fundamental breakdown of the elements of society.

**Sexuality.** From Corinne's initial disclosure about her recent orgy, to casual rapes on the highway, the film treats sexual longing as the battleground of lustful violence.

**Class.** One attractive woman, bereft of her handsome beloved, complains to the truck driver, who is whistling the *Internationale*, that he has killed her lover, simply because the guy is classy—well dressed and handsome. The threat of class warfare hangs over the film.

**Cannibalism.** By the film's end, after Corinne and Roland have been captured by the urban guerillas, and Corinne has sold out to them, she discovers that the meat she is eating is hunks of flesh from her dead husband.

## CHARACTERS

**Corinne** is the wife of Roland; together they constitute the married pair that makes its way across the Ile de France to visit Corinne's mother. Corinne is hot for sex, recounts the most intimate possible details of her love erotics, and ends up with a cooked piece of her husband between her teeth.

**Roland** is Corinne's husband. He is the driver of the car that makes the long week end journey, and he is ultimately the bloodied victim of a guerilla group, that serves him up, cooked, to Corinne.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### CORINNE (Open)

Corinne is the main character, though we see little of her. From the start of the film she is recounting—to a psychoanalyst, her lover—a recent orgy she has either had or imagined. She then heads out onto the highway, to a rendez vous with her mother—whose inheritance she wants to capture. (She has in the meantime assured us of her infidelity, by the calls she makes to her boyfriend.) In the final scene, having sold out to the urban guerillas, she gnaws on a piece of her dead husband.

**Parallels.** One might say that T. S. Eliot's long poem, *The Wasteland*, and James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake* both deal with the wreckage of society: either by the loss of faith or by language's loss of the power to complete its propositions. In this sense these works prepare us for understanding the mindset of Corinne, the woman who flings caution to the wind. Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) helps us understand the wild variety of attitudes possible to the liberated woman. Perhaps we can even retrace our steps to Euripides's *Medea*, to find a literary parallel to the daring, cruelty, and wildness of Corinne.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Confessional.** The film opens on Corinne's sordid confession of a sexual orgy in which she has recently taken part.

**Indifferent.** Corinne, like her husband, is indifferent to the many suffering motorists whom she passes, as she rides down the unencumbered lane past the drivers who have been stalled, then in many cases destroyed, in an endless car jam.

**Treacherous.** As the couple near their destination, Corinne takes the opportunity to sell out to the urban guerillas who have captured her and her husband. Why should we expect her to feel fidelity to her partner in bestiality?

**Primitive.** In the final shot Corinne looks up from the chunk of meat—her husband's cooked flesh—she is eating, and says she will take a little more in a short while.

### **Discussion questions.**

As Roland and Corinne near their destination they come into a world peopled with literary characters, other films, magic animals, in short an upside down world. What is Godard's purpose in including these passages?

Our own time is troubled by the sense that our society is coming part, fifty years after Godard's film. What, about the society of America and Western Europe in the first twenty years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was foreseen by Godard's film?