

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Le petit soldat. (The Little Soldier)** 1960

Jean-Luc Godard. 1930-

### STORY

**Politics.** *Le petit soldat* is a film about a French photojournalist who has deserted his native country for Switzerland, in order to avoid conscription during the Algerian War of Independence, which came to a close in 1962. In other words, it is a political film about a man who has done what he could to avoid political turmoil.

**Trapped.** However, in Switzerland he is entrapped by a pro-French anti-Algerian clique, which brings heavy pressure on him to fight for the continued French occupation of Algeria. The pressure brought by this group intensifies when they suspect him of being a double agent, in fact working for the Algerian Revolution. He, the photojournalist, is himself not political—the main reason why he abandoned his own country—but having been unable to dissociate himself entirely from France, he finds himself under heavy pressure to prove his loyalty to his own land, and to do so, as his French managers assure him, by killing a prominent member of the Algerian Revolutionary Movement. Bruno is to drive his car alongside the Algerian's vehicle, and to shoot him from window to window, then escape at high speed, in his vehicle which carries the plates of another nation.

**Hassle.** Bruno—his name is Bruno Forestier—is extremely reluctant to carry out the killing demanded by his own nationals. Like many of his countrymen, during the Algerian War, Bruno is ambivalent about the French position in Algeria, essentially a long standing colonial occupation—going back to the early nineteenth century; he feels the same reluctance many Americans felt, during the same 1960's, about the Yankee incursion into Viet Nam, a former French colony. Bruno is also not an activist or a friend of killing, with the result that he keeps letting obstacles prevent him from driving beside the vehicle whose driver he is to kill.

**Complications.** Two different complications coincide, as Bruno is pursuing his exile existence in Switzerland. The first is that the Algerian Liberation Forces become more concerned by Bruno's role, and decide to extract information from him, phone numbers and addresses of fellow French allies working for the French government. The other complication is a love affair which riveted Bruno, early in his Swiss residence, to a lovely French speaking Russian girl, with whom Bruno's experience of the political will ultimately prove to conceal fatal consequences.

**Torture.** Algerian Liberation Front operatives capture Bruno with the intention of extracting crucial information under torture. (The painful scenes that follow, at this point, caused the French Government—itsself under international condemnation for torture—to ban the present movie, which was completed in 1960 but not released until 1963.) Though Bruno will survive the torture it will haunt the audience; bathroom scenes in which electrodes are attached the head of the water-immersed victim, etc.; scenes we think of today in terms of waterboarding.

**Romance.** Bruno's love affair with Veronica—who in 'real life' was soon to become his wife—is both romantic and testy, for under its surface lies the unmistakable evidence that the two are on opposite political sides. As it turns out, Veronica is working with the Algerian Liberation Front, because she believes in the justness of their cause. In the end, and in effect, this is the end of the film, she is discovered by the French authorities working in Switzerland, found to be a secret agent for Algeria, and tortured to death, In an effort to wring political secrets from her.

## THEMES

**Love** Bruno's friend, Jacques, bets him fifty dollars he can't resist falling in love with Veronica, if the two of them go out on a date. Jacques wins the bet, because Bruno goes out with Veronica, and then can't get her out of his mind. He falls in love with her, and as they get to know each other he incessantly photographs her—remember he is a photojournalist, and for him the hot presence of the world, second by second, is best understood and depicted by the camera—while incorporating love talk and seduction into the anxious chitter chatter about photography.

**Fear.** Bruno is afraid to carry out the killing that his undercover boss, in Switzerland, requires of him. Is this fear, or political reluctance, or simply the force of circumstances, the cars that keep intervening between Bruno and his target? Bruno admits that he has killed before, and yet in the present circumstances he is politically ambiguous and hasn't the necessary passion. Is this fear? Hard to say. Remember that Bruno was quite fearless—or is it numbed or dumbed?—when he was being tortured.

**Cruelty** The thirteen minute portrayal of torture, in a hotel bathroom, is ample to prove the cruelty of the Arabs who were holding Bruno hostage. Water boarding, water soaked hoods, electric devices generating sporadic shocks: all these techniques—which were indiscriminately employed by both the Algerians and the French, and concerning which the latter were extremely sensitive—are boldly shown in the film.

**Politics** Politics has a profound place in the present film. Bruno and Veronica enact their commitments, and their ambivalences, in a late fifties, early sixties western world embedded in global change, nationalist power struggles, cries for independence. Bruno himself, like Godard, is fundamentally apolitical, and says of the film: 'politics are talked about in it, but it has no political bias.' And yet politics are more than talked about in the film. They are, you might say, the pervasive element in which you can conclude you are apolitical simply because of the depth of your involvement in the political.

**Photography** The main figure, Bruno, is a photojournalist, who is constantly on the qui vive for scenes or events which betray the instantaneous character of the moment. For Bruno 'photography is truth, and cinema is truth 24 times per second.'

## CHARACTERS

**Bruno** is the photojournalist Frenchman, exile in Switzerland from his home country, France, who falls in love with Veronica, gets tortured by the Algerian Liberation, and survives by the skin of his teeth.

**Veronica** is a native Russian, born in Copenhagen, who speaks fine French and has thrown in her hat with the Algerian Liberation movement. She falls in love with Bruno, but then falls out again. In the end she is tortured and killed by the Algerians.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**BRUNO** (agreeable)

**Bruno** is the main character. He is a French photojournalist, who has exiled himself to Switzerland, to avoid conscription in the French Army. He is not disloyal, to France, nor drawn to Algerian nationalist movements, but is rather an aesthete and globalist, who wishes to testify to the intense historical moment he lives in. In Switzerland he is entrapped by French secret police, for whom he lets himself be employed; and in that role he arouses suspicions of being a double agent. He is assigned the challenge of killing a redoubtable member of the Algerian underground, but is instead captured and tortured by the Algerians. The brightest spot in his life is the beautiful Veronica, with whom he falls in love. She, however, turns out to be working with the Algerians, and gets tortured to death before Bruno can so much as react.

**Parallels.** Bruno, we might say, is an intellectual in the Parisian manner, quick thinking, constantly analyzing his own behavior and that of others, talking (and smoking) as he thinks, and ready for

ideological action. Sartre's short story, 'The Wall,' introduces the character of Pablo, whose decision about whether to betray a comrade and save his own life haunts him—and who thinks on his feet like Bruno. In Andre Malraux' *The Human Condition*, Chen ta Erh the assassin is constantly debating questions of life, death, and torture; he has the daring of Bruno. Thinking in a situation, as Bruno is forced to do under torture, was a necessity for the Auschwitz prisoner, Jean Amery, and he parallels much of Bruno's under torture thinking in his memoir, *At the Mind's Limits* (1966).

### **Illustrative moments**

**Tortured.** For thirteen minutes we follow Bruno Forestier under torture, in the bathroom of the hotel where his Arab captors have sequestered him. Bruno sustains himself by struggling to think of positive scenes, and by trying to distract himself from what is happening to him.

**Homicidal.** Bruno is given the assignment, in Switzerland, to kill one of the leading figures in the Algerian Liberation Movement. He makes a number of efforts to drive his loaner car parallel to that of the Algerian, so that he can shoot the man while driving. But obstacles keep cropping up, and Bruno's jacked up will to kill has to be put back in the box.

**Romantic.** Bruno talks incessant love chatter to Veronica, as he is turning her this way and that for a photo shoot. It is his subtle, seductive strategy for getting inside her mind, and employing her careful vanity for his own ends.

**Dubious.** Bruno's French secret service enforcer, who is checking Bruno out as a double agent, sits quietly with him in a limousine, giving him his assignment for killing the Algerian operative. We closely follow the ins and outs of Bruno's response. He is prepared to comply but when the proposition becomes very tangible he panics. He is doubtful whether his whole adventure, into a political drama which he tells himself he doesn't believe in, is worth it.

### **Discussion questions.**

Is Bruno ideologically committed—pro French or pro Algerian—or is he basically an artist/journalist, and a romantic? ,

What does Bruno do to combat torture? Has he special psychological resources? Is he courageous?

How does Bruno chat up Veronica when they first meet? Is his photo shoot of her chiefly a ploy to get in bed with her?