

Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*: A close reading.

The 'traffic jam' sequence from Weekend. Identify those elements in the extract that could be considered Brechtian and discuss their implications for meaning. In particular discuss in what sense you think the Brechtian effects here are a direct assault on the classic Hollywood realist style.

Godard's use of Brechtian effects in *Weekend* is ostensibly a direct assault on the classic Hollywood realist style. The Hollywood studio system of filmmaking was dominant before 1959. Key players in the system were large companies like Warner Brothers, Paramount and MGM. Studios tended to employ all their staff on contracts and allocate them to different films in the production pipeline. Stars, directors and writers to designers, technicians and editors had limited choice over which film they worked on. Profits were ploughed back into the production of more films because every stage from production to showing them in cinemas was run by the production company. Classical Hollywood Narrative evolved as unwritten film principle. Camera set-ups and sound to editing and narrative structure were all part of the Hollywood way of filmmaking. From the birth of cinema in 1895 to the mid 1930s, when sound was fully established, these conventions grew and young filmmakers learnt their trade from working in junior positions on films. Filmmaking was a fast paced business because everyone followed the same principles.

Cinema had slumped to a low culture status due to its mass of film production in a short space of time. Profit was the name of the game, not art. It was made for a mass audience and was nothing more than mass entertainment. In France, after the Second World War, things slowly changed. The Cahiers du Cinema group formed around the Cinematheque Francaise in Paris where a wide variety of films were screened. Cahiers du Cinema proceeded to become the most highly acclaimed film criticism magazine the film world has ever witnessed. The Cahiers clique included Andre Bazin, Francois Truffaut, Claude Charbrol, Jacque Rivette and Eric Rohmer. Jean-Luc Godard was the most well known of this group. These young writers of cinema wrote critically about Hollywood genres of cinema, such as the western and the gangster movie, as no one before them. The Cahiers writers

theoretically analysed the form of films that had only ever been considered as commercial, popular entertainment.

1967 the era known as the sixties was approaching its European climax and Godard released *Weekend* to illustrate cinema as a political tool while stating many complex political ideas of his own. Social unrest prevailed and political protest was paramount. In an age when greed and belligerence have overtaken the Western world at large, people like Corinne and Roland hardly stand out from the crowd (Sterritt, 1999, p. 93).

Bertolt Brecht is hugely influential within drama, acting and stage production method ideas, Brecht is less familiar for his writing on film, but they are of profound importance. Brecht's film theory, referred to as Brechtian, concentrates on his earlier ideas about stage productions. Mainly his theory of epic theatre. Brechtian effects strive to alienate the audience from the film's narrative. Godard presents *Weekend* to us while maintaining a strict Brechtian distance.

In the 'traffic jam' sequence obscure placement of zoo animals in cages along the road act as tools to activate the audiences minds as to question why these misplaced animals are there and open up their minds to question the content of the film as a whole. The follow on scene to the 'traffic jam' includes sounds of a car crash but we do not get to see it. Godard is denying our human appetite for visual pleasure or visual closure and is a direct assault on Classical Hollywood Narrative.

Pointless reminders of the hour and day pop up throughout the film as well as vague indications of Godard's underlying agenda for a scene. These act to spotlight the structure of the film and give breaks to the narrative. A visual assault on the Hollywood Narrative structure and alienating the audience, Brecht style. The title of the film is flashed up on to the screen frequently through the film to obviously remind the audience they are watching a

film. Perhaps without these frequent reminders that it is fictional, the topics covered and the images seen would be too powerful and thought too immoral to be exhibited.

The dizzying 360-degree shot of the farmyard while the Bechstein Piano is played seems to be surplus to the narrative requirements but not useless in Godard's quest to be Brechtian. The piano company name 'Bechstein' is even a hint to Godard's aim due to its similarity to the theory Brechtian. Historical characters are brought back to life in *Weekend*. Emily Bronte as she philosophies down the country lanes, Ringo Star as he plays drums in the Hippy woodland and Napoleon as he rants while walking in rural fields. These characters seem to be highly misplaced within the *Weekend* world but are of course only Brechtian intruders.

Brecht was partial to denying audiences identifying with the characters entirely. Godard makes use of this technique in *Weekend* in the following ways. Sound is overlapped on speech within the film. In the 'traffic jam' sequence the car beeps mute any dialogue between Corrine and Roland with other people on the road. In Hollywood films you would always be able to hear what main characters in action sequences like this are saying. Mainstream audiences require closure and to have narrative plots strongly pointed out for them. Earlier in the film when Corrine is talking to her shrink about an orgy, that she may or may not have taken part in, non-diegetic music plays over the most sexual parts of the dialogue. Without subtitles you would find it really hard to hear what was being said. Corrine is also in silhouette. Godard denies the audience the pleasure of hearing all the bits they want to or see Corrine in her underwear clearly. Thus highlighting the film making techniques rather than how Hollywood strives to make effects and film making techniques invisible. *Weekend* is for sure a direct assault on Classical Hollywood Narrative due to effects like this being utilised.

Godard chooses to shoot the scene in the farmyard that follows on from 'traffic jam' through the windscreen of their car while Corrine and Roland talk. This makes it hard to see their faces or understand their speech. An effect Brecht would adore as it diminishes the

audience/character relationship. Close up shots are minimal, if any, in *Weekend* and this effect strives to do the same. Most of the action is filmed in long shot. Andre Bazin, a fellow Cahiers, would have approved of Godard showing all the action and letting the audience decide what is most important and demands more viewing attention.

Also in this scene the farmer, who has crashed into a posh couples sports car, seems to jump out of character for a while with a backdrop of billboards (that foreground the oppressive state of large companies on society) to share a joke with the audience. Or is he just a bystander to the crash? If so, why is he laughing? Godard showing how he himself laughs at the bourgeoisie? Probably.

Brecht, and later Godard, wanted an active audience who would recognise a film as a film, not a mere mirror to the world in which they live. Brecht believed in opening the doors to films being viewed not just for entertainment but for people to read deeper, past the characters and storyline, to any political or ideological or even philosophical messages conveyed within the art of film.

In *Weekend*, Godard makes use of his captive audience to make reference to issues surrounding Africans welfare and racism through his 'Black brother, Arab brother' side stories told by the men who give Corrine and Roland a lift to Oinville. The face of the man talking is not shown, just the face of the other one while the voice of the storyteller is heard. Thus disconnecting the audience from the character so they can actually listen to what is being said by this character, not what they are wearing or how good looking they are.

The trees that are shown intermittently throughout the long pan serve to break the action into scenes and thus giving this scene some form of structure visually. Since all the action takes place on the roadway, the action seems stretched and flattened into a two dimensional spectacle, as shallow as the society that has allowed everyday life to degenerate so badly (Sterritt, 1999).

Pre-Weekend, Godard had already used cars as pungent abstract objects within his films. From *Breathless* where cars suggest the dream of liberation via speed, flexibility and elusiveness to *My Life to Live* where cars play a more sombre role. Just after the 'Exterminating Angel' scene we see cars instead of animals in the fields. Yet in the next shot Corrine, Roland and the hitchhiker-highjacker couple are running through sheep. Continuity editing is played with to disorient the audience and add to the obscure effects Godard uses too much. Within the Weekend 'traffic jam' sequence sound plays a mostly annoying part by filling the air with horn honks that are so loud and persistent that they lose any potential meaning. The sound that overpowers our eardrums makes up for the flatness of the image.

Godard creates a microcosm of society during the long pan shot used throughout the 'traffic jam' sequence. Every day life is signified. Recreation is shown through the card playing and the chess match. Personal hygiene is highlighted as we see a man walk away from urinating on a tree. Ball tossing and sailboat rigging are shown to connote sporting activities and culture via book reading. Even though this may seem like a very realistic shot because the camera is just showing what is going on along the road and not zooming in on any one particular occurrence, it is actually distancing the audience from the text and making them work a lot harder than they may think.

Godard is without question a film making smart aleck. Weekend mostly views like an exciting piece of experimental and innovative cinema but at others the Brechtian techniques seem pointless and just become boring, thinking mainly of the farmyard piano recital sequence. Brechtian methods can be wonderful tools or a noose for a director to hang themselves with. Weekend mostly fits the former but Godard should watch for that noose!