Desire and Ownership in *Le Mépris* and *Diva*

By Jimmy Weaver for *The Seventh Art*

“Cinema,” writes Andre Bazin, “sets before our gaze a world in harmony with our desires.” This epigrammatic, falsely attributed quote, which opens Jean-Luc Godard’s film, *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963), lies at the heart of the film’s sumptuous visual style and the director’s meditation on the tension between the classical ideal and the modern real, tensions which also underlie the relationships in the film and its exploration of the problematic nature of the cinematic product. The film, however, also explicitly invokes Bertolt Brecht—once by name in dialogue—and implicitly in its opening sequence in which Godard narrates the names of those involved in creating a new version of Homer’s *Odyssey* as the audience watches the actress walk through the set trailed by the boom man. Here, Godard stages Brecht’s *verfrumdungeffekt*, or alienation effect, by “laying bare the device” of the production’s trappings. Never mind the relationship of the ideal to the real – the original to its variant – the real itself is staged, these opening credits tell viewers, and spectators should be aware of all contrivances lest they surrender their own powers of judgment. In Jean-Jacques Beineix’s *Diva* (1981), the concern is not how the real is staged, but whether there is any such thing as the real. Cynthia Hawkins, the internationally famous opera singer refuses to allow her performances to be taped. She does not believe that such reproductions will be authentic, but instead that something will be lost – what Walter Benjamin would have termed the auratic. Her concern, like that of re-writing Homer for mass entertainment, is an issue of authenticity and of translation. As each film grapples with these questions of artistic reproduction, they move in different directions. Godard offers the spectator an experience of modernist aesthetic closure; Beineix leaves the viewer with a sense of postmodern irresolvability.
Before exploring the differences in these cinematic treatments of desire and ownership, it is worth noting some of the commonalities between the films. Godard’s film, his only big-budget international co-production, both pays homage to that form, and to the tradition of quality European melodrama, while also subtly injecting it with modernist flourishes and themes. *Le Mépris*’ mannered style, with its expressive *mise-en-scènes*, ornate soundtrack, and symbolic use of colour, can be seen, Guy Austin argues in *Contemporary French Cinema*, as an inspiration for the filmmakers of the 1980’s *cinema du look* movement.¹ Godard’s film consciously mixes “high” and “low” cultural references and gleefully alludes to other filmic and generic conventions. This makes it an interesting companion to Jean-Jacques Beineix’s *Diva* which is also noted for its stunning visual style, as well as its recycling of genre conventions. *Diva* employs the tropes of a crime thriller, but connects the crime to questions about the reproducibility of art that new technologies have engendered. More interestingly, the film’s style consciously employs the aesthetics of the advertising image – a phenomenon that has fueled the desire for these reproducible cultural products. In other words, the film is “compelled to address the [industrial] issues of which it is a product.”² In sum, Godard’s modernist text nevertheless anticipated some of the significant postmodern issues and techniques: the relationship of the gaze and desire; the commodification of desire; the distinction between modernist citation and postmodern appropriation and pastiche; the death of the author; the flattening of high and low cultural distinctions – with which Beineix’s film plays.

*The Sixties: Bardot, Godard, New Waves, Old Guards*

By 1963, Jean-Luc Godard’s name was bound up with the rapidly blossoming French New Wave. It must have come as a surprise to both cinéastes and industry insiders, who already had a stereotyped image of Godard’s style, when he embarked on an expensive, star-studded, international co-production. *Le Mépris*, a relatively early work in Godard’s expansive oeuvre, was and remains “the film that came closest to the prevailing models of the time from both an artistic and an industrial point of view.”

3 Financed by French, Italian, and American production companies, filmed in the famed Cinécittà studios and on location in Capri, and starring Michel Piccoli, Jack Palance, and the hugely popular Brigitte Bardot, *Le Mépris* initially seems worlds apart from Godard’s early work, *Breathless* (1960).

Adapted from an Alberto Moravia novel, which Godard described as a roman de gare (a pulpy, cheap novel), *Le Mépris* centers around the dissolving marriage between Paul Javal (Piccoli), a failed playwright turned scriptwriter, and his beautiful wife Camille (Bardot). Paul is summoned by the stereotypically crass American producer Jerry Prokosch (Palance) to write new scenes for his ambitious film adaption of Homer’s *Odyssey*, which the renowned director Fritz Lang will helm. Prokosch’s wandering eye is immediately drawn to the comely Camille, and Paul makes no effort to thwart the producer’s advances. Paul could arguably be viewed as pimping his wife since he insists that Camille travel with Prokosch to the producer’s lavish estate and himself arrives belatedly. Camille’s relationship with Paul, seemingly already strained from the start, becomes even more distant and tense. During an extended sequence in their minimally decorated apartment, the couple exchange emotional blows and Camille announces her contempt for Paul. The situation worsens when they travel to Capri. Paul has dithered so long about “selling out” or retaining his artistic integrity that the matter is de facto settled: he cannot write.

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Camille eventually runs off with Prokosch. The two abruptly die in a car crash, and Paul is left with Lang to finish the film.

The troubled relationship between the classical and the modern is evidenced by the relationships of the film’s two couples: Paul and Camille and Odysseus and Penelope. Prokosch, attempting to psychologically interpret the ancient couple during a screening of Lang’s rushes, posits that Homer’s epic is “the story of a man who loves his wife, who doesn’t love him.” Paul will reaffirm Prokosch’s interpretation during a fight he has with Camille in Capri. The sagacious Lang rejects this view, pointing out that Odysseus was not “a modern neurotic, he was a simple, wily, fearless man.” Lang, who shoots vacant-eyed, massive sculptures of Ulysses, Penelope, and Poisedon, hews to a more mythic understanding of the eternal antagonisms between man and nature and within human relationships. Modernists from Joyce to Eliot have also appropriated these myths to reflect on universals such as unmet desire, disordered human relationships, fertility and impotence, betrayal and loss. In his struggle to connect the classical past to the modern present, Lang views the “modern as something that fed of a classical past it could never quite digest.”

Godard and his fellow Cahiers du Cinema critics adhered to a Baudelaireian notion of the “relativity of classicism,” where the classic and the modern co-exist and are forever engaged in a dialectical exchange.

Although Prokosch has only profit-driven ideas about the direction of the adaptation, Lang and Paul, who can discuss Dante together, see some possibility of the film they are producing as a “serious meditation on the Western canon,” and certainly Le Mepris as a whole can be described as a deeply meta-reflexive meditation on the significant literary and cultural

expressions of the human journey and its personal trails- themes shared by Homer and Dante. In concert with Lang’s view, Godard's film affirms that the artistic medium is capacious enough to hold contradictions in balance, just as it can satisfactorily explore even the most elusive or inexplicable of themes, such as the source of sudden contempt or the unexplained loss of love. The modernist faith that the genius, whether novelist or auteur, can create the form which will be adequate to the subject it wishes to convey is the central tenant of modernism and the reason why it finds aesthetic resolution and offers a clear sense of ending. However undecided or unfinished human transactions may be, the artistic form gives aesthetic closure, as evidenced by Godard's demand (in the role of Lang's assistant) for silence as Lang resumes his filming. In this final shot, the camera tilts upward and shows only the blue waters of the Mediterranean. All subjects “human and narrative” are left behind, which creates, in the words of Frank Kermode, “an iconic composition” that provides discursive closure.

The story of a profiteering producer’s ultimately futile plan to find a screenwriter to fix a film that in the end, because of the unrelated, concurrent issue of unresolved domestic unhappiness, will remain in the hands of the original director to finish as he sees fit is only the sketch of a frame of a story. It is clear that Le Mepris follows the path of ironic resolution discernible in other modernist texts. But within the frame, it is possible to examine further a historical materialist discourse that refuses over-identification and sympathy with plot elements through distancing effects produced both by foregrounding the mechanics of production but also through the story and actors, who narrativize and embody the tensions between classical and emerging modern cinema. The obvious encounter between the classic and the modern in Le Mépris is the filmic adaptation of Homer’s ancient poem, which fuels the plot. Palance, Lang, Paige, p.4

Piccoli, Bardot, and Godard, himself (who play’s Lang’s assistant) all function as quotations of film history made flesh. Each represents a different national, industrial, and historical moment of film production, with Bardot and Piccoli exemplifying the young, popular French cinema, Palance bringing his reputation as a noir/western heavy to his role as Prokosch, and Lang personifying both the eras of German Expressionism and the Hollywood studio system. Thus, one of themes which emerges in Le Mépris is contending with “cultural monuments in whose shadows we lie,” be it the classical narratives of the ancient world or the directors and actors which the Cahiers crowd helped canonize. The film tries to synthesize the classic and the modern through the sequences which show scenes from the classical director Lang’s Odyssey within the confines of the subversive Godard’s film.

Actually filmed by Lang, these scenes are diegetically motivated through the screening of rushes to Prokosch, Paul, and Lang. These scenes of the fictitious Odyssey interrupt ‘Le Mépris’ yet George Deleure’s ornate score, which dominates many passages in Godard’s film, are also present in the fragments of Lang’s film, creating ruptures in the diegesis of the work as a whole. In an analysis of these “film within a film” sequences, semiotician Alain J. Cohen notes that filmic reflexivity produced by the use of stars as signs is enhanced by the intrusion of Lang’s film into Godard’s film.

“Multiple filmic enunciations” is the term that Cohen uses to which signal how Le Mépris’ capacity to feel closed does not, however, shortchange the articulation or exploration of contradictory viewpoints. Indeed, Godard is deeply interested in how an event or text bears multiple interpretations. As Kaja Silvermen observes, “The Odyssey is…irrevocable,

8 Aumont, p.176
9 Paige, p.8
disseminated into a cluster of competing translations.” The film’s fixation on misunderstanding and translation is embodied by Prokosch’s secretary, Francesca (Georgia Moll), who is the only character who is able to communicate with others in their native tongues. Her translations, however, are usually heavily editorialized. Ultimately, Godard pulls the viewer into realizing that it is impossible to uncover the truth about Ulysses and Penelope and far more pertinent to examine what “sort of relationship” we establish with the text “when we ask what it is about.”

In the context of Le Mépris, questions that the Odyssey provokes, such as those about female fidelity and stasis and male adventuring and rootlessness, are pertinent to Camille and Paul’s marriage. Like Penelope, Camille wants a home – part of the difficulty for Paul is that he can only satisfy this desire by taking on a commercial endeavor. Moreover, Camille speaks ambiguously; her body, more than her words, articulates her tenderness for her husband, as Godard shows in the famous scene of marital intimacy, aggressively distorted through the use of yellow, blue, and red filters. But her contempt is evident in the rhyming scene in Capri: she sunbathes in the nude and swims naked out into the ocean, her body no longer for Paul’s eyes only. She has been angered by Paul lying to her mother, by forcing her into the car with Prokosch, by flirting with the secretary, by abandoning his playwrighting in favour of crafting cheap film scripts—though she denies or deflects her anger. Paul’s search for the origins of Camille’s contempt, like Odysseus’ search for Ithaca, is a long, circuitous one. Le Mépris is a film about looking, looking backwards to history and looking through the lens of a camera. But Paul or the viewer’s expectation to find answers by looking at the uncommunicative Camille’s expressions is to “play the game of the enigmatic signifier.”

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12 Bersani, p.18
13 Bersani, p.14
Laplanche’s theories of sexual and psychological development, the enigmatic signifier is a misunderstood sexual/social cue. It is an enigma because it “can only be proposed by someone who does not master the answer.” Camille becomes an enigma to Paul because he does not possess the emotional lexicon to understand her contempt. The enigmatic signifier also points towards issues of translation, a pervasive theme in *Le Mepris*: Paul cannot translate Camille’s subtle actions into an explanation of her despair and contempt. Perhaps, as Dave Kehr argues, her change of heart is “beyond conscious thought.” Or perhaps Paul’s attempt to construct the decline of their romance, taking Camille’s contempt as the endpoint of their relationship, by working through events backwards implies a causality that simply is not there.

Despite the apparently straightforward, linear nature of *Le Mépris*’s story, “the wholesale destruction of an apparently traditional screenplay, the misuse of stars, and a stylistic impertinence” demarcates Godard’s film from other big-budget co-productions, such as Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *Cleopatra*, also from 1963. The idiosyncratic nature of Godard’s epic melodrama is evident right from the opening title sequence, as indicated earlier. This foregrounding of the mechanics of filmmaking, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit note, “threatens the visual impunity we generally enjoy in looking at films” which Godard mentions in his ‘Bazin’ quote. Godard’s narration, which proclaims *Le Mépris* to be “a story of this [cinematic] world” which is in accordance with our desires, has a double implication lost to non-Francophone audiences. The dual meaning of ‘l’histoire,’ which can be translated as either ‘story’ or as ‘history,’ makes it ambiguous to whether *Le Mépris* will be a projection of or a

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15 Dave Kehr., ”Gods in the Details: Godard’s Contempt,” *Film Comment*, 33.5 (Fall, 1997), 18-24. p.22
16 Aumont, p.175
17 Bersani, p.7
reflection on the cinematic world and its conventions. As both a director and a Cahiers du Cinema critic, Godard engaged in both these tasks. Godard, along with his Cahiers cohorts, argued for a new notion of film as “a discursive system of signs” while embedding “filmmaking in a profoundly historical, materialist conception of its function.” Hence his sympathy lies with the “B.B.” who is more significant to him than his buxom star… that is to say, it lies with Bertolt Brecht, not Bridget Bardot.

The Eighties: Diva's Search for the Object Without Origins

Bertolt Brecht was, in retrospect, like Godard: a pivotal figure in the transition between modernist faith in art’s creative capacity to represent and the postmodernism cynicism about originality, authenticity, and representability. Beineix’s Diva, like Godard's Le Mepris, dramatizes the search for origins and the intersection of the artistic and the commercial, yet uses different styles to reach opposing conclusions. Deemed to be the first entry in the cinema du look movement of the 1980's, a series of French films noted for their virtuoso cinematography and youthful, alienated, characters, Diva's plot initially seems to be about the search for a tape containing a performance by a renowned opera diva who refuses to have her voice recorded. Jules, a young mailman and the film's bumbling protagonist, secretly tapes Cynthia Hawkins out of his voracious love for her singing. Jules unknowingly and unwittingly comes into the possession of another tape, however, which contains evidence that could topple a powerful Parisian crime lord. Jules attempts to outrun the gangsters, record executives, and policemen who are pursuing the tapes with the assistance of Alba, a young student he befriends at a record store, and her older boyfriend, a benevolent music bootlegger.

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18 Bersani p.8
The plot of *Diva*, like *Le Mepris*, relies on a sub-plot: in Godard’s film, Camille’s contempt is only vaguely connected to Paul’s decision to work for Prokash, but becomes an engine for the film’s tragic ending. Her contempt, artistically juxtaposed to conversations about Ulysses’s unhappiness, threads the events together conceptually and produces a counter-point on the topics of ambition, desire, and loss. In *Diva*, the causal connection between Jules gaining possession of two tapes—the contraband recording he produced, and the witness tape slipped into his bag—is very slight: it’s simply because he has a mailbag. Making Jules a mailman allows Beineix to demonstrate that in the context of the 1980's "it is the circulation of information rather than its production which motivates both narrative and social organization." Beineix replaces causality with contiguity – an incidental proximity between two things. The two tapes and the stories behind them will never be synthesized into a coherent narrative, but instead a fragmented, heterogeneous one that presents the narrative strands concurrently, not co-terminally. Jules will return his tape to the betrayed diva and the police will bring down the crime boss, but while these events intersect in Jules' life, one event does not influence the other.

*Diva's* plot revolves around the fight for physical objects: tapes that conceal non-spatial, recorded ephemera, such as a vocal performance and a verbal confession. Film critic Serge Daney posits that the strength of Beineix's film lay in this "separation between pre-existing commodities (objects and clichés) and what cannot be commodified (the soul, creativity)." Daney would prefer to think of art, it seems, as indexical: it is like the "mark of a footprint that makes its meaning through a direct relationship to its referent." Cynthia's singing is the "footprint" of her vocal genius; any taped reproduction would destroy what she calls "that unique

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moment between the performer and the audience.” Yet the tension between these two categories, according to Jean Baudrillard, is that all objects can be copied and endlessly circulated. This phenomena is denoted in the film by the tapes and Jules, causing the spectator to lose sight of origins as everything becomes a copy. Unlike Le Mepris, where the search for the origins of emotions and narratives means re-examining canonical traditions, what the characters in Diva are searching for always remains a copy of an unattainable original. Beineix, unlike Godard, makes no attempt at grand historical statements in his treatment of desire and ownership; he knew that "the 1980's would not produce any new artistic language," instead work made in the 80's “borrows from all historical periods and recycles material in what has been called postmodernism.”

Thus, it is unsurprising that Marxist cultural critic Frederic Jameson deemed Diva to be the "first French postmodern film" and an index of the country's political and economic situation. Jameson notes that the release of the film coincided with an important historical and political break in French culture: the election of Francois Mitterand and the first left government in thirty-five years. Part of Mitterand's platform emphasized the return to classical French values, values that were encroached upon by American cultural hegemony. Yet Diva, with its doubling of tapes and narrative trajectories coupled with what Omar Calabrese calls the "constructed undecidability" of the film's excessive stylization, upsets the belief espoused by Mitterand that authentic origins can be recovered.

Furthermore, the period during which Mitterand assumed power is also the era that saw the rise of advertising culture and the consumerism it engenders. From 1965 to 1988, average household

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24 Bassan, p.19
26 Powrie, p.23
spending increased by a staggering 114 percent and this rise is paralleled by an increase of 7 billion francs spent on advertising in the 1970's to 58 billion in the 1980's.\textsuperscript{27} The slick, aesthe\textacutemized \textit{mise-en-scène} that gave the \textit{cinema du look} its name, such as Gorodish's minimal loft apartment or Cynthia's opulent hotel room, are "inextricably bound to capitalist modes of production."\textsuperscript{28} French critics, especially those from the \textit{Cahiers du Cinema}, equated the visuals of \textit{du look} films with advertising images and derided Beineix, who began his career directing commercials, for relying too heavily on "previously seen" consumer images. Yet Beineix employs this style in a film whose narrative has already problematized issues of authenticity and origin. The signs and symbols of consumerism in \textit{Diva}, which the \textit{Cahiers} circle detested, are for Jameson, intrusions and acknowledgments of the "world-wide disembodied yet increasingly total system of relationships and networks hidden beneath the appearance of daily life."\textsuperscript{29} Though Jameson notes that \textit{Diva}'s acknowledgement of this system of reproduction and redistribution "drives the postmodern system back into the narrative raw material," the text of the film remains open. Indeed, this complex postmodern system has not disappeared by the end of the film and in turn fuels the frantic searches for the tapes.\textsuperscript{30}

Both \textit{Le Mepris} and \textit{Diva} embody and emplot artistic concerns of their eras while making conscious gestures toward the industrial conditions which produced them. \textit{Le Mepris}, using the stunning Cinemascope photography and star-presence that were tropes of the international co-production of the 1960s, restages the modernist confrontation between the classical and the contemporary. \textit{Diva}, using the gleaming, seductive imagery of advertisements, reflects upon how these meetings between the classical and the modern, and the commercial and the artistic raise

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\textsuperscript{27} Powrie, p.17  \\
\textsuperscript{28} Harris, p.223  \\
\textsuperscript{29} Jameson, p.119  \\
\textsuperscript{30} Jameson, p.119
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questions about the authentic versus the reproduction. Despite their differences, both films are a testament to the ability of the French cinema, even in its most mainstream, populist form, to grapple with changing methods of artistic reproduction.