Kevin Windhauser

English 286: Intro to Film Studies

18 October 2012

Godard Introduces Lacan to Marx: Surplus Desire and Surplus Production in Le Mépris

It is fitting that Jean-Luc Godard’s citation of Andre Bazin in the opening credits of Le Mépris is in fact a (perhaps deliberate) misquotation.[[1]](#endnote-1) Godard’s malapropism during the opening credits, which avers that “cinema substitutes for the real world one that accords more closely with our desires,” prefigures exactly the Lacanian difficulty which permeates the film. Throughout Le Mépris, Godard displays the inability of both Paul and Camille to “name one’s desire in the presence of the other” following Paul’s unintentional yet disastrous offering of Camille to brash American film producer Jeremy Prokosch, the incident which sets in motion their conflict throughout the film, and thus their inability to bring their desire into tangible existence through language. As a result of this inability, Paul and Camille find themselves prey to a listlessness which they do not entirely understand, and their attempts to reanimate desire within personal discourse inevitably fail, succeeding only in producing ever more surplus desire.

In his first expansive, high-budget film, however, Godard does not limit himself to a single theoretical approach. In addition to a display of surplus desire, Le Mépris displays the disastrous psychological effects of surplus economic production, effects which are ruthlessly and inexorably intertwined with Paul’s and Camille’s inability to articulate their erotic desires. Indeed, throughout Le Mépris Godard complicates Paul and Camille’s erotic difficulties by deploying economic concerns which further prevent them from actualizing their desires in language. This manifests itself most visibly in Paul, who struggles with economic concerns which force him to abandon his chosen career as a playwright in exchange for screenwriting, something he feels he has done out of desire for Camille. Thus, Lacan and Marx are inseparable companions in a comprehensive reading of Le Mépris, a film which presents both language and economics as forces which prevent the articulation and actualization of human desire.

Le Mépris’ opening scenes foreground the importance of both Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis throughout the film. The introductory shot is essentially non-diegetic; as Godard mumbles the opening credits (which are not displayed visually), a low-angle shot from a stationary camera depicts the filming of a woman walking. As an on-screen camera, which is tracking the woman, reaches the end of its track, it turns towards the stationary off-screen camera and gazes down upon the viewer. Godard accompanies this movement with the aforementioned mis-citation of Bazin: “cinema substitutes for the real world one that accords more closely with our desires.” In the context of this opening shot, Godard’s statement takes on decidedly economic and psychoanalytic meaning. In one sense, Godard points out the interpellative power of film as an agent of ideology; film, which Godard’s opening shot portrays as a mechanical, industrialized affair, serves often to reinforce an ideological capitalist world view which, for an interpellated subject, becomes the basis for his or her own desires. The positioning of the off-screen camera at a low angle corroborates this interpretation; the singular viewer looks up to the downward gazing on-screen camera, giving it a position of power and authority. In another sense, Godard’s shot typifies the Lacanian gaze. As the gaze makes one uncomfortable by forcing an acknowledgement of one’s position as a visible object, so Godard’s on-screen camera forces the viewer to understand that he or she does not gain the privilege of looking at a film without accepting its reciprocal gaze in turn. In less than two minutes of screen-time, Godard manages to both expose the economic capital integral to the filmmaking process and to thrust his viewer into psychological engagement with his film.

The second scene in the opening sequence features a naked Camille in bed with Paul, playfully interrogating him on his desire for her physical body. Although Godard himself was resistant to include this scene, doing so only after pressure from his producers, it serves a valuable purpose in the film’s Lacanian narrative; the scene represents the only depiction of Camille and Paul as capable of using language to actualize and name their desire for one another, an ability which will of course be lost after Paul’s fatal error shortly thereafter.

Critic Roger Ebert noted that in this scene Godard gave his producers “acres of skin but no eroticism.” From a visual perspective, Ebert is largely correct. Godard uses a variety of techniques to obscure the body of Camille and thus to de-eroticize the image, including blue and red filters and an endlessly roaming camera, which does not allow to viewer to settle his or her gaze firmly upon Camille’s body. Despite Godard’s prohibition of voyeuristic access to Camille’s body, however, the scene does feature a distinctly erotic aspect: Camille’s naming of her body parts aloud. By encoding the visual display of her nude body in spoken language, Camille ushers herself into the symbolic order, thereby allowing Paul to share in the erotic linguistic space she has generated. Paul responds to this erotic naming with increasingly eager confirmations assuring Camille that he does indeed take pleasure in the various parts of her body. This exchange highlights not only the erotic nature of the symbolic in the relationship between Paul and Camille, but also their roles as representatives of desire and drive, respectively. Paul and Camille embody the Lacanian distinction between the two; Paul is motivated by a desire to look, and Camille by a desire to be looked at.

If this scene demonstrates the ability of Paul and Camille to express desire through the symbolic order, and thus to maintain a successful relationship, the rest of *Le Mépris* devotes itself to the unraveling of this ability, and the failed attempts by both Paul and Camille to retrieve it. In by far the longest scene of the film, Paul and Camille argue bitterly in their apartment, neither understanding explicitly the reasons for the other’s anger. Godard’s repeated use of non-diegetic inserts and narration make clear this gap between the couple, and make abundantly clear that each is struggling to understand the changed nature of their desire for one another. In a notable insert, Godard exchanges non-diegetic shots of a naked Camille with narration by both Paul and Camille expressing this loss of desire. During a shot of Camille’s lower body laid against blue upholstering, Paul acknowledges that the block is a linguistic one, but he does not understand his need for Camille’s symbolic coding of herself in order to achieve desire: “Even when aroused, could I respond to her with the same frankness as she could to me?”[[2]](#endnote-2) The visual and linguistic juxtaposition is powerful; the Camille visible on-screen is essentially identical to the one seen in the earlier, highly erotic bedroom scene, but this Camille no longer transforms herself into a symbolic entity for Paul’s benefit, and without this assistance he cannot achieve sexual arousal or any intimate desire. Paul fails to realize that his lack of frankness is largely irrelevant; it is the silent Camille which has deprived him of his sexual desire. Camille likewise declares, again in a non-diegetic voiceover, that “everything used to happen effortlessly, in a shared ecstasy.” The effortlessness which Camille desires a return to cannot be visual; surely she may lay eyes on Paul and he on her as easily as they ever have. It is thus the linguistic naming of desire to which Camille so desperately wishes to return. Godard makes clear that Camille expresses a drive, rather than a desire (as Paul has) by placing Camille’s voiceover again over an image of a naked Camille, rather than of a reciprocal image of a naked Paul. Camille likewise suffers from a linguistic block; her body remains visible as it always has, but she cannot provoke desire by assigning its parts a linguistic sign, as she previously was able. All that remains is the visual image of Camille’s body which, without linguistic amplification, remains little more than an empty signifier.

If Godard’s directorial innovations express the psychoanalytic concerns behind Paul and Camille’s argument, the mise-en-scène express the class concerns fundamental to both Paul and Camille’s lives. Throughout the scene Paul wears what might be deemed the uniform of the failed writer; his tie is disheveled, his shirt wrinkled and un-tucked, his pedestrian hat seemingly indistinguishable from his person. Midway through the argument, Paul returns to his typewriter, marooned on a desk covered only by rejected scripts and finished cigarettes. As he struggles to work on an unnamed piece of writing, the clacking of Paul’s typewriter keys (which Godard amplifies greatly) drowns out the voice of Camille. The effect is clear; Paul’s unfulfilling work as a screenwriter generates a personal anxiety which prevents him from communicating with his wife. Camille responds by later in the scene generating her own domestic noise, deliberately dropping a set of dishes in the dining room. Unable to sense the class dynamics behind Paul’s frustration, Camille simply responds with a gesture that is equally fraught with indicators of class, but unable to address Paul’s concerns.

Unable to resolve either the psychological or classist gaps between them, Paul and Camille deteriorate further following a trip to Capri to accompany Prokosch on-set. During the trip, Prokosch kisses Camille, whose response is ambiguous. After Paul witnesses the kiss, he announces to Prokosch that he will no longer write his script. It is this scene which most prominently displays the interconnected nature of sexual desire and class concerns in *Le Mépris.* Paul’s desire to defend both his own intellectual freedom and his relationship with Camille is spurred by the same event. Paul is here even able to detect the economic aspect of his deteriorating relationship with Camille: “Why is money so important…even in our relationships with those whom we love?” What remains hidden to Paul, however, is the loss of articulated erotic desire, and thus Camille, unimpressed, simply goes off for a walk.

Camille, however, understands the results of her revocation of symbolic desire, as demonstrated during her final conversation with Paul. When Paul asks to know why Camille despises him so, she refuses the information repeatedly, even after he threatens physical violence against her. Camille firmly understands that Paul’s desire is for Camille’s re-entry into the symbolic, a return to the film’s opening scene, and her refusal to symbolically encode her contempt is the strongest indicator of it which she could provide. What Camille does not entirely grasp, however, are the economic concerns so influential to Paul’s thinking. When Paul asserts that he took the script-writing job solely for Camille’s economic benefit, a claim he has made previously in the film, Camille simply responds “I don’t understand you.” Both Paul and Camille manage to grasp one-half of the psychoanalytic and economic dualities of their relationship, but their failure to understand both results in its inevitable failure, and demonstrates the inseparability of the two concerns throughout the film.

Following their climactic fight, Camille decides to leave Capri with Prokosch, a decision which promptly results in her death in a car accident. Godard presents the car accident in a highly fantastical manner: the setup of the car accident itself seems highly improbable, as do the placement of Prokosch and Camille’s bodies in the vehicle. In addition, Godard’s camera floats above the wreck in broad, high-angle sweeps, detaching the viewer from the reality of the wreckage below. Interposed with shots of the car accident are close-up shots of Camille’s farewell letter to Paul; Camille’s final gift to Paul is an inscription of herself into the symbolic order for Paul’s benefit. Notably, however, Godard cuts away from the letter just prior to revealing the final letters of the final word, “Camille.” In doing so, Godard depicts the final dissolution of Camille and Paul’s relationship; Camille remains present only in a symbolic form which, following her “death,” lacks a referent. Paul understands that the signifier is now an empty one, and thus cannot finish the letter.

After learning of Camille’s death, Paul exchanges a farewell with Fritz Lang, the famed director (playing himself) who is filming *The Odyssey,* the film for which Paul had been composing a script. Freed, in a perverse sense, from both his economic and psychological concerns, Paul seems now relaxed, if not untouched by melancholy. After Paul departs, Lang begins filming the scene of “Ulysses first sight of his homeland.” As an actor stares out into the sea, Godard’s camera pans to a wide view of the open ocean, followed by the closing words “Silencio.” Godard’s final scene reflects Paul’s newfound state following the loss of his wife and the loss of his script; Paul is symbolically open, his desire for both intimate companionship and economic success seemingly at bay. Yet, Paul is likewise confronted by an abyss of nothingness, indicating that the world he foresees, one in which neither erotic nor economic desire plays a significant role, may be in fact little more than an unsustainable emptiness, an Homeric wandering at sea.

One might thus argue that *Le Mépris* ends in the opposite fashion to which it began; with the viewer looking away from the physical world, out into the open sea. In many ways, the opening and closing shots of the film embody the tragic fate of its two primary protagonists; after losing the ability to articulate their desire for one another, both Paul and Camille drift helplessly away from the friendly confines of intimacy into an unfulfilling world which consists largely of commercialization, commodification, and emptiness. Whether the result of a break with the symbolic order and an inability to “name one’s desire in the presence of the other” or of ubiquitous and strenuous concerns about class status and economic security, *Le Mépris* stands as a powerful polemic against the loss of personal intimacy. In Godard’s diegesis, it is the only thing standing between a human being and an unforgiving world.

1. The quote is in fact taken from Michel Mourlet’s book *Sur un art ignoré*. For more, see: Mourlet, Michel. *Sur Un Art Ignoré: La Mise En Scène Comme Langage*. Paris: Ramsay, 2008. Print. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Translations from the French are my own. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)