

Is the Visual Essentially Pornographic?: The Politics of the Body in Godard's *Le Mepris* and *Weekend*

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Ours is a cinematic age, an age whose culture, as Michel de Certeau lucidly asserts, “is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey. It is a sort of epic of the eye.”¹ In this predominantly visual age, film plays a leading part in shaping our conception of art. How this came to be is a hundred-year-old story that began during one of the crucial periods of technological development. Cinema spread throughout Europe and was fascinating enough to be called “kino-eye” by Dziga Vertov, that which “undermines the hegemony of the eye and transcends it,”² by Jean-Louis Comolli and the mnemonic suspension or the “shock” that will inevitably “change the reaction of the masses towards art” by Walter Benjamin.³ Benjamin revisits this theme three years later when he compares cinema’s rapid tempo and its audiovisual fragmentation to the shocking rapidity of modern life as reflected in Baudelaire’s poetry:

Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into a crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. Circumscribing the experience of the shock, he calls his man ‘a kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness.’ . . . Thus technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complete kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in a film.⁴

As a technological reproduction of the visual, film stood out as an emblem of modernity, rapidly embracing all the aspects stressed by the project of modern art: the apprenticeship of the eye through capturing the fleeting moment, the decentralization of the image and the subsequent change in visual perspectivalism, the emphasis on strong impressions and spatiotemporal fragmentations, abruptness and mobility.

Film was caught in a middle of a number of categories. As a new technology, film was not different from other technologies like the railroad, the telegraph, and photography. As a new cultural display, film was more like the billboard, the shop window, and the wax museum. As a new social space, film was like the boulevard, the arcade, and the shopping center. But with commercial success and the emergence of large-scale corporations and the film industry, film began to occupy a distinct cultural and social space. It was not until the late fifties and sixties that the instability of the borders between high and low-art became apparent, or to put it somewhat differently, that film began to trouble the terrain between art and commodity production. This in turn gave rise to new philosophies questioning the “dialectical opposition” between film aesthetics and mass culture.

Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” and Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s project in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* are examples of this trend. Not only philosophers, but a number of filmmakers, especially those of the

French New Wave, began to critique the lapse of cinema into the dialectic of culture industry. Among them is Jean-Luc Godard.

Godard seems to have used every trick in the book of modernism to restore film to its artistic stature as the ‘seventh art’: achronology, playful montage, simultaneity, discontinuity, the absence of inner monologue, of narrative dialogue, contradictions, disruptions, and a general indifference to the physical description of characters; in short, conventions that deny mimesis and foreground art. With his ingenious talent, Godard has come to occupy a key position in contemporary culture. While I agree with Robin Wood that “one cannot yet solve the problems [his] films raise,” I still think that we should “at least try to keep them open and attempt to clarify them.”⁵

In this essay, I will attempt to investigate Godard’s ironic depiction of the pornographic shot, its connection to consumer culture, and its commodification of “visual pleasure.”⁶ More specifically, I seek to analyze the dynamics of what might be called “the false pornographic promise” in two of Godard’s Films, *Le Mepris* (1963) and *Weekend* (1967). I shall try to answer the following questions: how does meaning come to a Godardian shot? Where does it end? And if it ends, what lies beyond? My goal is to transform Godard’s films into a language that might help understand the notion of film as a mechanical art in light of the most revolutionary of social and artistic movements in French cinema. While Godard’s idea of film art could not be studied fully without reference to his famous declaration of the “death of cinema”⁷ as a resistance to the ideology of cultural industry, I will focus only on the *politics of the body* in two scenes from both films: from *Le Mepris*, the post-credit long take of Camille Javal (Brigitte Bardot) and Paul Javal (Michel Piccoli), where Camille, lying in bed with Paul, is asking Paul to admire her naked body; and from *Weekend*, the long “orgy scene” in which Corrine (Mireille Darc) is describing a sexual orgy to a friend.

Godard’s insistence on denying his viewers any form of visual pleasure or pornographic consummation is rooted in the

political. In fact, the human body and the body politic are inseparable in Godard's cinema. The Sixties in France was a period of deep political and social unrest. Perhaps more than any other filmmaker, Godard participated politically and culturally in this turmoil.⁸ In terms of its film industry, France has always been defined in relation to Hollywood. In the Fifties, French cinema witnessed a rapid shift towards visual consumerism. It could be argued that the sum of a 1000 films viewed by Godard and his *Cahiers du Cinema* in the *Cinémathèque* on an annual basis was not really a marginal activity, but a reflection of the new visual tendencies in the French society. Aided by his gifted cinematographer, Raoul Coutard, Godard was able to establish a sharp critique of mainstream French and American cinemas.⁹

Though there is always some plot in a Godardian film, Godard tends to convey his critique mainly through style. *Le Mepris* and *Weekend* share an intricate relationship of sound and image highlighting Godard's mockery of consumer society through reference to pornography in such a manner that reflects his own struggle to redefine film as art in the age of its "technical reproducibility" (to borrow Benjamin's title). In the two shots I have chosen, Godard resorts to what is usually referred to as "estrangement techniques," which began with *A Bout de Souffle* (1959), an explosive success that is considered the film that brought Godard to fame. The film was admired not because of Belmondo's mimicking of Bogart or Patricia's selling of the *New York Tribune*, but because of Godard's risky and playful use of "jump cuts" as a major editing device, announcing his limited acceptance of mainstream Hollywood cinema.¹⁰ This defiance of conventional techniques became increasingly evident as the narrative becomes more and more impoverished, until it is reduced to a diminishing point in *Weekend*, while the relationship between sound and image grows deeper and deeper.

By 1963, Godard was already disillusioned by American and French film industry. After all, *Le Mepris* is a film about filmmaking, picturing both a critical moment in French cinema and a moment of criticism of the variant cultures at work in the

film industry. This Godardian double-entendre makes *Le Mepris* a film that not only represents history, but a film that oddly becomes the object of history as well (the trajectory of French cinema). On this premise, one could argue that Godard's later work, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, (1989) is not "the first time a filmmaker dares to evaluate the history of art," as Bellour contends.¹¹ It is a process that began long before, perhaps tracing back to *Le Mepris* or to *A Bout de Souffle*.

In *Le Mepris*, Godard's negative opinion of certain trends in American cinema is quite obvious, and not just in his scathing satire of a Hollywood-style producer who stares flirtatiously at a production-room footage of a naked actress playing a mermaid and who asks Paul not restrict himself to rewriting the sex scenes of *The Odyssey*, but to add more of his own. Godard's contempt is particularly seen in the grammar of the film's post-credit scene, a pornographic scene that Godard renders completely desexualized. Briefly, the plot of *Le Mepris* revolves around the playwright Paul, who accepts a screenwriting job, adapting Homer's *Odyssey* for film, from the whorish American film producer Jeremy Prokosch (Jack Palance).

Gradually, the incompatibility between Paul and his wife Camille emerges in the form of contempt as she watches his care and jealousy for her diminish, even as the American producer makes overt and flagrant advances towards her. Prokosch wants a rewrite of the *Odyssey* in which Penelope is unfaithful to her husband, complete with topless mermaids and scopophilic scenes. Finally, the conjugal relationship between Paul and Camille disintegrates completely (a common theme is Godard) and Camille decides to leave with Prokosch. In the end, Camille and Prokosch die in a car crash.

The following is a decoupage of the first scene of Camille and Paul together in bed:



Image: Camille and Paul lying in bed; Camille naked; Paul in his pajamas, yawning. (Camera Movement: Medium Close-up, static)

CAMILLE (to Paul): Maybe... *(Music)* Can you see my feet in the mirror?

PAUL: Yes

Paul leans against his elbow with left hand on chin, looking Camille in the face, then at a mirror off-screen

C: Do you think they are pretty?

P: Yes, very

C: And my ankles, do you like them?

P: Yes

C: And my knees too?

P: Yes. I love your knees.

C: And my thighs?

P: Too

Camille faces Paul, lowering her head as if to allow him to have a clear view of her back in the mirror. (Camera moving slightly to the right)

C: Can you see my backside in the mirror?

P: Yes

C: Do you think I have a pretty backside?

P: Very pretty

Paul strokes Camille's hair. Tries to kiss Camille.

C: And my hair, do you like it?

P: Yes

Paul lays his hand on Camille's shoulders. Camille's naked back revealed in frame. (Camera moves left screening Camille's naked buttocks, then towards Camille's shoulders)

C: And my breasts, are they the prettiest part of me?

P: I don't know. The rest is pretty too.

C: And my shoulders, do you like them?

P: Yes

(Close-up on the right side of Camille's face)

C: And my face?

P: Too

C: All of it, my mouth, my eyes, my nose, my ears?

P: Yes, all.

C: Then you love me totally?

(Close-up of Paul looking down)

P: Totally, tenderly, tragically

(Close-up of Camille's hand on her face, looking down)

C: I love you that way too, Paul.

This long take of Camille's naked body reveals a tripartite structure, made up of Camille, Paul, and Camille's reflection in the mirror. From this set Godard establishes, both to the audience and to Paul, Camille's body as a double object of the male gaze. Camille's body becomes the mediator that enables the whole conversation between husband and wife to go on. Her body also becomes a double mediator; both Paul and the audience can see it only through the visibility afforded by the film as a medium of representation and by the mirror, in Paul's case, as a medium of reflection. Her husband's gaze at the mirror subjectivizes Camille's body, and inversely, Camille's gaze upon Paul transforms him into an object, even if the subject of their conversation is Camille's body. Paradoxically, it is by means of this alienating structure that the minimal togetherness of wife and husband reveals itself.

That *Le Mepris* will later include images of sculpture has already been anticipated in this shot. Jean-Louis Leutrat is the first to refer to this connection between the statues of Greek gods and Camille's body, "where the nudity of her body" is contrasted with "the red and blue filters and the 'natural' lighting that emphasizes the yellow color," so that they all constitute "a three-

color mode quite close to the actual ancient statuary.”¹² Ironically, Camille’s naked body, which Godard’s camera carves in a Michelangelo-like fashion (beginning with toes, then sculpting everything else) could be an image of death, foreshadowing Camille’s tragic end.

The attempt to equate Camille’s body with that of a statue marks the death of her erotic nudity, also a Godardian metaphor for the death of voyeuristic cinema. This death is achieved stylistically as well. The slow tracking camera of Camille’s naked body follows the same pace as the statues of the gods. Godard acknowledges in his description of the film’s “Personnages” that “*Camille est très belle, elle ressemble un peu à l’Eve du tableau de Piero della Francesca. Il faudrait que ses cheveux soient bruns, ou châtain foncé, comme ceux de Carmen*”¹³ (Camille is so beautiful, she looks a little bit like the Eve of Piero della Francesco’s painting. Her hair had to be brown, deep chestnut brown, like Carmen’s.).

If it is the mirror’s task to say a number of things about a woman, Camille-like Catherine’s frenetic wine-list enumeration in Truffaut’s *Jime et Jules*—also ‘wine-lists’ the parts of her body to Paul, asking him to look at her in the mirror to tell her which he likes most: her breasts or nipples. It is important to know that the mirror is placed off screen, like most of the events of this film. This means that while we as audience get to see Camille’s body, Paul can only see it in the forbidden space of the image. This pregnant moment of female objectification through a mirror is a striking one, reflecting Camille’s desire for self-awareness. Camille finds pleasure in seeing herself outside herself, which is also a moment of the split in her subject; namely, she recognizes herself *recognized* by Paul. She also inverts the role of vision. Usually one can see in the mirror how one really looks in the eyes of others. Here Camille sees through the eyes of her husband how she looks in the mirror. In this inversion, Paul becomes Camille’s mirror, her virtual ‘Other.’ The split in Camille’s subject creates a perpetual division in her self. But what Godard gets both Paul and the audience to ‘remember’ when looking at Camille’s naked body is that we are faced with an apparently real but completely

inverted replica of Brigitte Bardot floating before our eyes in the virtual space of the image/mirror.¹⁴ This emphasizes the counter-culture idea that the mass production of the sexual automatically achieves its repression.

Godard's de-auratization of Brigitte Bardot's naked body, his debunking of its essential commerciality, reveals her to us, like any film star of the Adorno and Horkheimer type, not as an image of a woman "with whom one is meant to fall in love," but who appears before our very eyes as a copy of herself.¹⁵ Bardot's replica is a separate entity, yet it remains inseparable from her 'other' real self, simply because if she were not there, her image would cease to appear. Finally, because the 'gaze' is essentially male, Camille puts herself in an object position of two male onlookers, Paul and the audience. From the beginning to the end of *Le Mepris*, Camille lives in this perpetual state of objectification and "looked-at-ness," carrying her mirror with her, inside her wherever she goes.

In this shot, Godard defines the frame of this long take, controlling the scopophilic dimension of the female body and creating a space—indeed a fracture—between a commercial, market-oriented Hollywood cinema and a more ideal state of film that works to make the image exist for its own sake at the expense of fleeting consumption. At the same time, the body metaphor informs the beginning and the limit of cinema, whose history is brilliantly linked in this scene with the history of vision itself.

The same metaphors of the politics of the body and the lure of pornography that appeared in *Le Mepris* persist in *Weekend*, though through different stylistic techniques.¹⁶ On a general note, Godard attempts in *Weekend* to counter the belief that cinema should be realist or mimetic. The film tries to capture the experience of modernism in its totality. *Weekend* critiques a fragmentary and iconoclastic culture, yet becomes itself fragmentary and iconoclastic. This intellectual amassing of contradictions in one film achieves what Fredric Jameson refers to as a "depthlessness" of representation by often mimicking a form of commodity. This becomes clear in the famous traffic

shot that Godard uses to make a point about human savageness by exaggerating the offensively violent effects of car accidents in a single highway ride. This shot sinks deep in French consciousness, and the human mutilation it treats functions as a metonymy for not only the debasement of the human body, but more generally, for the decadent values in French society as well.

A famous scene in *Weekend* echoes the bedroom scene in *Le Mepris* by playing again on one of the strongest statements on the current critique of vision in cultural industry uttered by Fredric Jameson: “The visual is *essentially* pornographic,” by which he means that every image “has its end in rapt, mindless fascination.” To Jameson, “pornographic films are thus only the potentiation of films in general.”¹⁷ Against this vision, Jameson advances a Marxist proposition: only good, solid essentially political history can rescue us from this case of pornography, and this is close to what Godard pursues in his films. In *Le Mepris*, Godard historicizes the erotic and in *Weekend* he politicizes it. Again in *Weekend*, instead of the common Hollywood-model expectation of an erotic scene we have a quasi-erotic scene of an almost naked woman describing a threesome, a play on what Adorno and Horkheimer refer to as the film’s false “promise” of visual pleasure. But since every tracking shot is, as Godard says, a moral choice, visual pleasure is always a plateau for something else. Pornography in Godard is obscured by a clever use of what could be called the “*ob.scene*,” in the etymological sense of the word; that is, the obfuscation and the obstruction of the pornographic the moment it is being offered on the screen.

The following decoupage shows that the scene consists of one long shot interrupted by an inter-title with camera zooming in and out, and slowly moving right and left:



Image: Friend seated in the foreground beyond a desk. Background light from a curtain making him appear in silhouette. Lights a cigarette. (Camera: Medium close-up zooming out at right angle to include Corrine whose right arm and head slowly begin to appear in far right end of frame)

Corrine begins relaying an orgy encounter between Paul, his wife Monique and her.

Corrine on the right side of frame appears in her underwear sitting on the desk, occupying the foreground and relegating friend to a middle ground. Right side of her body faces friend but is neither looking at friend nor camera.

Loud music begins, almost drowning out her voice. She continues while background music plays. Corrine continues her monologue with music still loud. Friend asks a question.

(Camera zooms in with right angle on Corrine's face, which appears dim and shadowed due to low-key background lighting)

Music and Corrine's voice overlapping.

Inter-title in blue letters: ANAL / Y S E

Music continues more softly than before.

Upper-left side of Corrine's face, hands reaching up to stroke her hair, covering her face. (Camera zooms out with a left angle to include Corrine's friend in the frame)

Corrine's voice interrupted by friend's question with music still soft.

(Medium close-up. Corrine's friend in center frame)

Music stops.

Corrine adjusts her body by moving her head right to face friend while talking to him. (Corrine's back is facing camera)

Corrine continues.

(Close-up of friend smoking and looking at Corrine off screen)

Corrine continues.

(Camera zooms out to include Corrine in frame)

Corrine continues talking, interrupted by a question.

(Corrine just off-center) She lowers her hands while talking and looks towards the left side of screen, obscuring the friend's face.

Loud music resumes, drowns out Corrine's voice. Corrine continues describing the orgy. Loud music continues to obscure her voice.

(Close-up of Corrine's face. Camera zooms out to include Corrine and friend) Corrine presses her finger against her friend's forehead.

Corrine continues recounting the orgy; tells friend how she sticks her finger in Monique's buttocks. Music resumes. Corrine asks about cigarettes. Conversation stops but music continues.

Corrine leaves to get an American cigarette. *(Close-up of Corrine's friend lighting another cigarette)*

Corrine back into frame, sits on the opposite side of the desk with her face towards the right side of screen, her body leaning more towards the center of frame, totally obscuring the her friend in the middle ground.

Corrine comes back and carries on her conversation.

CORRINE: Paul asked to change position with Monique.

(Close-up of Corrine's back. Camera zooms out to medium-close up of Corrine and friend)

Music resumes while friend asks Corinne to come and excite him more.

END OF SCENE

This (ob)scene does not have a total expressive value in itself. Like the long take of Camille, the orgy scene has neither 'orgy' nor 'scene' and demands to be juxtaposed and compared to the American commercial film industry that makes of nudity a marketable form of commodification, and that in turn renders cinema itself a cheap instrument of cultural industry. The orgy (ob)scene of *Weekend*, however, could also be compared with a later scene in the film, when we actually see the eggs broken and trickling down Corrine's butt, but this time it is vision without voyeurism, and the whole scene appears to be devoid of the erotic urge that initiated it. In addition to the eggs there is, this time, a fish that acts as a phallic replacement. The film's ending, which oddly mirrors Godard's idea of "la Fin du Cinéma," leaves us not

only with the impression that reality is wilder than Corrine's imagination, but also with the disappointment that "reality" itself defies representation.¹⁸ Even more, we are left with the fact that cinema as art should always be regarded as a perceptual system that does not necessarily have to mirror a so-called "reality" (which might be Godard's desperate message).

Godard uses these particular scenes allegorically to designate his position as a filmmaker, and to remind his viewers that cinema is itself an instrument of cultural industry. However Adorno and Horkheimer denounce it since it "perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises...; the promise, which is all the scene consists of, is itself illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached."¹⁹ So if the secret of aesthetic sublimation lies in representation, film as an instrument of cultural industry does not and cannot sublimate; it can only repress. By repeatedly exposing the objects of desire—the naked *derriere* of Bardot and the sensual talk of Corrine in her underwear—*Contempt* and *Weekend* appear to promise stimulation and consummation but end up confusing the pornographic expectations of their audience.

In calling attention to the artificiality and constructedness of pornography, Godard announces the death of scopophilic cinema, not by being anti-erotic, but by controlling the machinery of eroticism. The two scenes work successfully to reverse the symbolic dynamic of classical Hollywood cinema by reducing the voyeuristic pleasure promised by the two bodies of the two female stars. One becomes a mere mirror, the other a drowned voice. This axiom of the resistance of the visible is an act of murdering the pleasure of cinematic viewing, perhaps to save it from decaying to mere consumerism. It is necessary here to evoke the Orphic myth Godard speaks of where the work of negativity and the destruction of the image: the turn back of Orpheus (Godard) becomes more vital to the survival of Eurydice (cinema as art) than the temporary commodification exercised upon it by mainstream Hollywood.

Stylistically, Godard achieves this effect through editing. In fact, Godard's manner of editing results in "alienation," which becomes the governing technical device of the two scenes. This anti-cathartic view of art was first introduced by Bertolt Brecht, who insisted on keeping the spectator at a distance from the work of art in order to be able to reflect critically on what (s)he sees. This act of distancing the viewer, what Brecht calls *Verfremdungseffekt* or "alienation, or estrangement effect," changes the spectator from a mere passive recipient and an idle consumer of film material to an active participant in the dynamic process of producing meaning.²⁰

The influence of Brecht is also clearly discernible in the portrayal of characters. The actors of *Le Mepris* and *Weekend* are not given the chance to 'live' their characters. Mireille Darc and Jean Yanne, Brigitte Bardot and Michel Piccoli alienate rather than impersonate their characters. They 'quote' or demonstrate their characters' behaviors instead of identifying with them. Godard adopted the Brechtian notion that if actors remain outside the characters' feelings, the audience might keep their distance from them as well. In this sense Godard's cinema challenges the mimetic property of cinema and the conventional resemblance between acting and reality.

It is easy to observe a parallel between image and sound in the decoupage of the two scenes from *Le Mepris* and *The Weekend*. This parallel, however, is always interrupted by Godard's use of "discontinuity editing," a new aesthetic of film making that willfully distorts smooth narrative development to the extent that style draws attention to itself at the expense of the plot. Since Godard never viewed cinema as a craft, but as an art, he excelled in using techniques like jump cuts, quick cuts, long takes, violent ellipsis, 360-degree panning, and the lack of establishing shots. Discontinuity editing is a major signatory tool in Godard's cinema.²¹ From 1963 to 1967 discontinuity editing underwent certain modifications. During that time, discontinuity seemed to be used for innovative purposes, constituting a whole new signature of the New Wave as a break away from the idea of

totality to fragmentation and disintegration. In the two scenes from *Le Mepris* and *Weekend*, the pleasure principle is incomplete. Things are not what they seem to be. Paul does not always rise to look at Camille's body. Almost half the time his head is lowered and his eyes are downcast to the extent that we are not really sure if 'contempt' begins with her or with him. The nakedness of Camille's body is almost dead due to the effect of the toneless and passionless conversation between them. Therefore, the fantasy of the full subject necessary to the scopophilic scene cannot take hold. Likewise, in the orgy scene, we are not sure if Corrine's narrative really took place or if it is just a promiscuous wish, the language of her unconscious. Moreover, in *Le Mepris* discontinuity takes the form of assemblage and of collage. Godard parallels Odysseus's return to Penelope with the marital relationship between Paul and Camille, and compares Hollywood directors to demi-gods who have driven cinema to an abysmal situation, by comparing Poseidon, Odysseus's ruthless enemy, to Prokosch. In *Weekend*, the whole film is built on disjunctive synthesis. Godard turns everything he encounters into a scrap heap of baffling fragments that obscure the boundaries between text and image so that the very idea of "film," together with the elements of narrative and style, is massacred and fragmented. The film begins with the same "deceptive precision" of spatiotemporal relations only to gradually dispense with them altogether on the road to Oinville. As in *Le Mepris* a motive of mutual conjugal disintegration is stated in the very first sequence, so that in the course of the action destruction can get to work. This theme of marital contempt, however, surpasses the protagonists who soon become the worthless objects of general violence: the quantity of organized amusement the film promises changes to a quality of disorganized cruelty. The enjoyment of the violence suffered by the characters even turns into violence against the spectator.²²

The only visual interruption in the orgy scene is that of blue inter-title:

Anal YSE

The word “ANALYSE” brings to mind two meanings. Denotatively, *ANALYSE* parallels Corrine’s verbal account of the anal orgy. More significantly, the word also invokes Marx’s famous “Analysis” of the capitalistic modes of production in *Das Kapital*. In his “Analysis,” Marx represents the basic conditions of capitalism in such a way that his own work gains “prognostic value.” The analysis Marx undertakes against capitalism is not mere theory but a concrete mode of political practice, a necessary moment of political intervention against capitalism. Godard, like Marx, does not simply analyze a preexisting cinematic tradition. He represents the pornographic in *Weekend* in such a way as to bring about a revolution to the aesthetic realm of cinema. Like Marx’s critique of capitalism, Godard’s orgy scene is not a direct condemnation of social malaise but a political practice, a representation of a kind of cinema that promises a revolutionary result. If we push this logic to its limits, it becomes clear that the revolutionary introduction of a broken narrative and an apparently playful style into cinema marks not just the only possible but also, in a certain sense, the only proper mode of politically artistic intervention against the invasive emergence of a foreign (American) ideology in French society.

If to the general public “culture” has always played a part in taming the revolutionary and barbaric instincts of man, Godard manages to subvert this notion. By turning cinema—already a product of industrial culture—against itself and making films that defiantly challenge the mainstream, Godard collapses the ideology of cultural industry altogether. He simply refuses to see the art of cinema as a type of product that exists only to be sold. Nor is he convinced of the paradox that a film has to achieve a blockbuster success in order to pass as art. To Godard cinema becomes art and nothing else: *l’art pour l’art*, cinema for its own sake, skillful yet simple.²³ Even when he began to show an interest in Maoism in

his films, he was not, to use his own words, “making political films politically.”²⁴ A film that satisfies the viewer’s voyeuristic pleasure becomes a consumer commodity, an excellent example of cultural industry, and thus fails to be art at all. Therefore, a film’s object to Godard is not to satisfy but to overpower the consumer. Hence he had to use the human body, reveal its pornographic potential, and destroy it in the process in order to restore art to film. This sacrifice necessitates that Godard, like Orpheu, has to attack the image in order to save it.

Notes

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 21.

² Jean Louis Comolli, “Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field,” in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Nichols, vol. II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 52.

³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 234. At the end of his 1936 polemical essay, Benjamin makes a distinction between the aestheticization of politics under fascism, which culminates in the aestheticized spectacle of war (Marinetti) and the politicization of art. Benjamin situates this distinction in the context of a perceptual revolution brought about by the then new visual technology of photography and film, distinguishing two consequences: the destruction of the aura of distinctive art objects through technical reproducibility; and second, in particular, film’s replacement of the old critical model of aesthetic perception with the hurried distracted consumption of fragmented images which produce “shock effects” in spectators.

⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 175.

⁵ Robin Wood, “Godard and Weekend,” in *Weekend/Wind from the East: Two Films by Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 5.

⁶ In her short essay on Godard's cinema, co-written with Colin McCabe, Laura Mulvey describes Godard's cinema as one that "raise[s] problems for those who have followed the logic of feminist arguments." Mulvey and McCabe use two examples, from two periods, to prove their point. They conclude that even though Godard "makes an important attempt to depict women 'inside,'" there is still "a crucial flaw in the [Godard's] analysis because, although it shows up in the close relation between sexuality and the economic system, it finally reproduces the question between woman and sexuality which, at another level, it displaces." See Laura Mulvey, "Images of Women and Sexuality: Some Films by J.L. Godard," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), 49-62. Working on two different examples, this paper problematizes Mulvey's and McCabe's argument, extends the possibilities of analyzing Godard's films, especially through style, and explores the nexus between his films and pornography by demonstrating the need to reflect on the larger context of his cinematic message.

⁷ The phrase, "La fin du Cinéma" is stressed in the two films. In *Le Mepris*, the phrase appears early in the film and is uttered by the interpreter, Francesca Vinani/ Georgia Moll, in her French-English-French interpretation of the conversation between Paul and the American producer Jeremy Prokosch/ Jack Palance. In *Weekend*, the phrase appears again as a title in the end of the film, "Fin...Fin du Cinéma." A number of critics and filmmakers have referred to the question of the death of cinema in Godard. Some mentioned it *en passant*; for instance, in an interview with Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, Truffaut lays hands on this definitive signature of Godard's films, his modernism and his pessimism:

In a dozen films Godard has never made any allusion to the past, even in his dialogue. Think about that: not a single Godard character has talked about their parents or childhood-extraordinary. He is intensely a modern person...But nearly all films which imitate Godard are indefensible because they miss the essential thing...his despair. (Francois Truffaut: 'Evolution of the New Wave': Truffaut in interview with Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni ("Entretien avec Francois Truffaut," *Cahiers du cinéma* 190, May 1967.)

Others managed to mark out the notion of death in Godard, but stopped short when it came to an in-depth analysis of representative

films. In two short chapters of his book on Godard, "Filming Death at Work," and "Poetry Never Ceases Dying," Jean Collet argues that Godard's cinema "is the only art which, in Cocteau's words 'films death at work.' Cinema is interesting because it captures both life and the mortal aspect of life." (Jean Collet, *Jean-Luc Godard: An Investigation into his Films and Philosophy*, tr. Ciba Vaughan (New York: Crown Publishers, 1970), 35. To Collet, Godard could have been influenced by Renoir, to whom art ceases to be art without putting to death or sacrifice. Renoir once said, "art has need of a little, and perhaps a lot of suffering...and also of blood" (Collet, *An Investigation*, 75). Basing his argument on Cocteau's phrase in *The Testament of Orpheus*, Collet describes Godard as an expert of "phoenixology," as one whose cinema is "continually in the throes of death, more pure and more true." (Collet, *An Investigation*, 75). In a more recent study of Godard's image and filmmaking, Raymond Bellour dwells on the theme of death in Godard's later works in TV and Video. In trying to bring Godard's technique of filmmaking to a totality, Bellour comes up with four important modalities that characterize the relationship between text and image: a very visible and established book circuit; fragmented quotations; words and phrases, in which the screen is treated as a writing table; and finally voices. To Bellour, Godard's extraordinary paradox is that he has "a mad, documentary passion, in the name of a never-ending desire for the present, for absolute presence, and for the coincidence of time," which makes him all the time aim at "an eternal present." Bellour believes that the death of the image in Godard is not due to "madness" as much as to a "surrender to all the clashes that have driven the image to the edge of disappearance in our world," and to the fact that Godard "has appropriated for himself all the obstacles that in our world threaten to immobilize all images" in Raymond Bellour, "(Not) Just An Other Filmmaker," in *Jean-Luc Godard: Son + Image 1974-1991*, eds. Raymond Bellour and Marylea Bandy (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 224. Godard himself acknowledges that cinema to him is a present that is made past, or a present that is better saved as past, the same way Orpheus in the famous myth destroys the presence/present of Eurydice in order to save her: "Poor moi, le cinéma c'est Eurydice. Eurydice dit à Orphée: "Ne te retournes pas." Et Orphée se retourne. Orphée c'est la littérature qui fait mourir Eurydice. Et le reste de sa vie, il fait du pognon en publiant un livre sur la mort d'Eurydice."

Jean-Luc Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard Par Jean-Luc Godard* (Cahiers du Cinéma: Éditions de L'Étoile, 1985), 415.

⁸ Louis-Jean Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, tr. Sarah Wykes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) in his book, Calvet lists Godard among the cultural figures who revolted against the displacement of Henri Langlois:

In addition, just before the events of May '68 proper had begun, he (Barthes) had taken a strong stand in defence of Henri Langlois, the director of the Cinémathèque, the French National Film Theatre, whom André Marlaux had to sack. On 14 February 1968, despite the lack of physical courage, he (Barthes) had taken part in a demonstration in front of the Palais de Chaillot along with other celebrities such as *Jean-Luc Godard*, Francois Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Michel Piccoli, Jean Paul Belmondo, Simone Signoret and Jean Marais (168).

⁹ Godard's dissatisfaction, or his "despair," to borrow Truffaut's word, with the existing forms of cinema emerged in the aftermath of two major events: politically, the war in Vietnam was coming to dominate the international scene, augmenting European disappointment in the US; culturally, the exotic legacy of American films was affected in the process, and many French critics started to reconsider the *Flaneur* produced by Hollywood films. It was not easy for the French audience to read and listen to the reality of American practices in Vietnam and to still have a high esteem for American movies, a fact Godard refers to in *Masculine Feminine* 1966. These two factors—the US's attempt to interfere in the domestic integrity of Vietnam and the US's cultural invasion of French cinema—were for Godard two faces of one coin. Add to this the domestic failure of the *Cinema du Papa*, Godard increasingly felt the need to vehemently denounce the daemonization of cultural industry and the consumer society created by Hollywood in France. The ground was then furnished for a New Wave to emerge as an urgently needed different model of cinema that might create a different film audience with more artistic tastes. Both *Le Mepris* and *Weekend* are products of this tension.

¹⁰ Though not the New Wave's first film, *A Bout de Souffle* has established itself as a counter-culture film. Godard insists that the success of the film was a "misunderstanding." Its style and narrative offer an opposition to mainstream conventional cinema; in terms of style, "the shooting on go," the hand-held camera, the long takes of

Paris streets and car rides, the deviation from continuity editing (jump cuts); spontaneous dialogue, the absence of an establishing shot in the opening scene of the movie; the post-synch sound; on the level of narrative, unclear goals and motives (the stealing of the car, the shooting of the cup; less oriented characters (Michel wanting Patricia to go to Italy; unachieved goals; character complexities (Patricia is a jungle of contradictions who could be a femme fatale, or paradoxically a naïve American college student in her junior years. We don't know whether she is pregnant or not, or why she betrays him in the end; the inclusion of extraneous material that does not push the plot forward (the interview scene, and many academic references, Faulkner, Mozart, Dylan Thomas).

¹¹ Bellour, 220.

¹² Jean-Louis Leutrat, "The Declension," *Jean-Luc Godard: Son + Image 1974-1991*, eds. Raymond Bellour and Mary lea Bandy (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 29. Leutrat also touches on the connection between sculptor and camera movement in Godard:

In a talk he gave in Paris on April 26, 1988, to FEMIS, Godard declared, on the subject of editing and mixing: "At this point, there is a set of things that are closer, I don't know to architecture, or to an art that I have never really understood, and that I am only just beginning to understand, which is sculpture. There are sculptors who start off from the wing of the nose and sculpt everything from there. Michelangelo, apparently, began with the toes, and then did everything else. Others proceed more by successive approaches, that's more what I do" (29).

¹³ Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard Par Jean-Luc Godard*, 242.

¹⁴ In an interesting study on the notion of "stardom" in French Cinema, Ginette Vincendeau relates the rise of Brigitte Bardot as a French film star in the fifties to the rise of "youth consumer power." The constant depiction of Bardot "dressing, undressing, unbuttoning, emphasizing both her clothes and her body," and different shots of her "neck and bosom, waist, hips and legs" make of Bardot an epitome of French cinematic eroticism. See Ginette Vincendeau, "Brigitte Bardot: The Old and the New: What Bardot meant to 1950's France," *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (London: Continuum, 2000), 82-109.

¹⁵ Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1944], tr. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), 140.

¹⁶ *Weekend* had a revolutionary effect similar to that of the following events of May 1968. Journals such as *Positif*, *Tel Quel*, and *Cahiers du Cinéma* argued that, like the church and education, the commercial cinema was an “ideological state apparatus”, and that, in order to challenge dominant institutions and ideologies, a new, progressive counter-cinema must be created. This notion is based in part on Althusser’s notion of “interpellation,” which regards art and culture and indeed the individual himself as mere reproductions of existing dominant ideologies. The way cinema helps infiltrate that interpellation is via mimetic realism and cathartic identification. As a consequence, both *Cinétique* and *Tel Quel* proceeded to advocate a development of anti-realist and self-reflexive form of cinema. *Cahiers du Cinéma* on the other hand initially took a more ‘culturalist’ line on the progressive potential of mainstream cinema, arguing that many areas of popular cinema undercut stream cinema or critiqued dominant cinema. However, in 1969, against the context of continued radicalization of Parisian film culture, Cahiers shifted its position and started to advocate the development of a more modernist counter-cinema. A crucial influence on this change of policy was Jean-Louis Comolli and Narboni’s 1969 essay ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,’ which argued for the classification of film production into those films which “allow ideology a free unhampered passage...(and films) which attempt to make it turn back on and reflect itself, intercept it and make it visible by revealing its mechanisms.” For more details read Ian Aitken, “From Political Modernism to Postmodernism,” *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 132-159.

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.

¹⁸ After the filming of *Weekend*, Godard is reported to have asked his production crew to look for work elsewhere. Read Richard Brody, “An Exile in Paradise,” *The New Yorker* (November 20, 2000), 64.

¹⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 139.

²⁰ The keystone of Brecht’s theory is that of *Verfremdungseffekt*, the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh: “A representation that alienates is one

artifice, and thus be always disrupted from an empathetic identification with the characters and events within the play. Moreover, the various thematic and stylistic threads of the play are often left unresolved, forcing the spectator to play more active roles in settling the dilemmas posed by the drama. To Godard, this is the moment of the birth of intellectual cinema. Godard sought to base his cinematic technique on *Verfremdungseffekt* in order to make the spectator more politically, artistically, and critically aware.

²¹ For more on Godard's use of "discontinuity editing," see "Interview with Jean Luc-Godard,"

Godard on Godard, tr. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo, 1972), 171-196. See also Dudley Andrew's discussion of Godard's style in "Breathless: Old as New," *Breathless*, ed. Dudley Andrew (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1995), 3-24.

²² This shattering of cinematic tradition does not stop there. In late films like *Everyman for Himself*, *Prenon Carmen*, *Hail Mary*, and *Detective*, Godard does not renounce his passion for exploring the limits of cinematic representation, to the extent that the intellectual dimension of his militancy extends to condemn not just the degeneration of culture, but also that of the cinema that represents that culture. If so, *Weekend* is a scathing criticism of a dying French bourgeois society. The remarkable dialogue between Jean-Pierre L  uad and Juliet Berto in *Le Gai Savoir* (1968) satirizes the mainstream ideology of cinematic image and the representation of truth, demanding a more politically honest cinema.

²³ In fact, Godard shares many features with the Avant-Garde cinema: an opposition to an established consumer culture; the need to shock the bourgeoisie, the insistence that the function of art is not to represent reality faithfully, but rather to challenge that banal premise and go beyond reality to penetrate the surface of the visible and to be able to discern the invisible. However, the characterization of Godard's cinema as radically anti-realist and *avant-gardist* is problematic. Like all New Wave directors, Godard wanted to develop an appropriate balance between foregrounding and illusionism, but he did not reject the use of realism. Godard also insisted on using popular, as well as modernist forms in his films, rather than adopting an entirely deconstructionist aesthetic. It would therefore be a hasty judgment to think of Godard's films or of the New Wave as just a later echo of the Avant-Garde cinema. While this is not the place to discuss these differences, a few

caveats are worth mentioning in passing: Godard's cinema is not completely non-narrative. Even when his films do not follow a goal-oriented protagonist or build up causal narrative sequences, the films, esoteric and Joycian as their plots might be, still tell us a story. Moreover, while we could still find a compelling comparison between paintings like L'éger's "The City" (1919) or "The Mechanical Element" (1924) with a film like *Ballet Mécanique*, with their expression of the energy and fragmentation of city experience, or of chaotic street signs, stairs, or their fascination with abstract machine parts interacting together, it cannot be claimed that Godard and the New Wave directors reject storytelling and rational, orderly thought altogether as away of representing life, or that they are after another sort of reality similar to the surrealists or the avant-gardists, namely, that of the unconscious or the use of dream logic as a principle of organizing art work, or the juxtaposition of unlike things, the non-sequitur. In surrealist cinema, as Bunuel puts it, "nothing symbolizes anything." This would mean that the concern with the psychological unconscious in a film like *Un Chien Andalou* is quite different from the consideration of subjective, psychological and emotional experience in a film such as Resnais's *Hiroshima Mom Amor*, or Godard's *Weekend*. In his 1975 essay, "The Two Avant-Gardes," Peter Wollen distinguishes between an aestheticized modernism, under which impressionism, the *cinéma pur*, and various abstract films were categorized, and what he considers to be a more valuable *avant-gardism*, which includes the works of Vertov, dada, surrealism, Brecht and Godard. This critical tendency towards reductionism and totalization risks the lapse into a compromised form of modernism that hides and silences significant points of differences between the two, to the extent that impressionism, As Noël Burch has argued, has been "misunderstood" and "scorned." Burch, quoted in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939*. Vol.2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 281. See also Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant Gardes," reprinted in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982).

²⁴ Michael Goodwin and Greil Marcus, "An Interview with Jean -Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin" in *Double Feature: Movies and Politics* (New York: Outerbridge & Lazard, 1972), 59.