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## From *Il disprezzo* to *Le Mépris* Multilingualism and Code-switching in Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris*

Adapted from a monolingual text, *Il disprezzo* (1954), a novel by Alberto Moravia, *Le Mépris*, which is regarded nowadays as one of Godard's major achievements, combines four different languages (French, German, English, and Italian). Undoubtedly, the international cast that Godard could afford on that special occasion enabled him to devise such a combination. This fact, though, does not explain his intentions. Not only did he want his actors to speak their own language, but he also had each of them, at times, switch from one language to another. In other terms, the dialogues use both multilingualism (several different languages are involved, according to the actors'/characters' nationalities) and code-switching (as a process of shifting from one linguistic code to another in one character's lines, sometimes in the same sentence). These two main features have not drawn enough attention among the numerous articles that *Le Mépris*'s complexities have inspired. Whenever critics (several of them will be mentioned here) deal with them, they do not dwell upon the matter. Yet these features play a major part in meaning-making, and any endeavor to get rid of them would jeopardize the film's structure and ruin its effect (Alain Bergala notes that an Italian version of *Le Mépris* tried to bring the dialogues back to their monolingual origin, as all actors were dubbed in Italian, including the translator figure Francesca, "who then absurdly repeated in the same language what other characters said").<sup>1</sup> What does this major part consist in? Notably, the different uses of languages in the film implied some cultural and political values or ideas that a contemporary viewer is not always aware of. What are they and does *Le Mépris* convey them through multilingualism and code-switching without questioning them? Eventually, the process that turned a monolingual text, *Il disprezzo*, into a multilingual film dialogue shed a fresh and valuable light on the original novel. Given the fact that Godard's famous film has introduced many spectators to Moravia's novel, multilingualism and code-switching surely have a significant impact on the way its readers apprehend it nowadays. What light do they cast on it?

<sup>1</sup> Alain BERGALA: *Godard au travail, les années 60*, Paris, édition Cahiers du cinéma, 2006, 179.

*Representing Babel*

In her article “‘Répète un peu pour voir’: Jean-Luc Godard et la catégorie de la répétition,” Sylvie Aymé writes: “*Tel est Le Mépris, la tragédie de la méprise après l’effondrement de Babel qui génère, outre le conflit des interprétations à propos de l’Odyssée, le babil sans espoir, compulsif et crispé d’un couple.*”<sup>2</sup> We will argue that multilingualism bears witness to a collapse that occurred after the opening scene and affects every protagonist (not only Paul and Camille). In the Edenic opening scene, communication between the two lovers ran smoothly in a monolingual conversation. Multilingualism occurs as soon as action involves people from the cinema world, “picture people,” in what used to be a temple of film making industry: Cinecittà. At first, in the screening room sequence, it does not look like a barrier. Watching the *Odyssey*’s rushes, the American producer (Jerry Prokosch), the German director (Fritz Lang) and the French scriptwriter (Paul Javal) seem to enjoy the same poetical mood. Prokosch himself becomes lyrical: “Oh Gods! I like gods. I like them very much...”<sup>3</sup> When Fritz Lang, playing his own part, quotes Dante’s *Inferno* first in German (“*O meine Bruder wenn ihr nach hundert tausend...*”), then in French and asks Paul whether he knows it, Paul takes over and quotes the following line in French: “*Déjà la mort contemplant les étoiles. Et notre joie se métamorphosait vite en pleurs...*”<sup>4</sup> Godard harnesses here and in other sequences the music of four different languages combined together. But that this music means psychological harmony and understanding between characters is an illusion spectators can’t labor under for a very long time. Clearly, Dante’s poetical quotation in German stands as a dismissible answer to the producer, who just said he had “a theory about the *Odyssey*.”<sup>5</sup> Later in the projection hall, Lang switches in the middle of a sentence from English to French, a language Prokosch doesn’t understand, to make a comment on the producer’s use of his cheque book: “Some years ago, several years ago, *les Hitlériens utilisaient le revolver au lieu du carnet de chèque.*”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in the “Silver cine” sequence, Lang replies in French to Jerry’s question “What do you think of [Paul],” as if he hasn’t heard it, in order to dismiss the producer’s narrow-minded views on *The Odyssey* and to set a discussion on a loftier philosophical ground.<sup>7</sup> In these occurrences, Fritz Lang, as a character, is actually speaking to those who can understand him, to the (ideal) spectator, but primarily to Paul. They both are men of culture, European, humanistic culture. Nevertheless, multilingualism doesn’t

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<sup>2</sup> Sylvie AYMÉ: “‘Répète un peu pour voir’: Jean-Luc Godard et la catégorie de la répétition”. In: Marc CERISUELO (ed.), *Jean-Luc Godard: au delà de l’image*, Paris, *Études cinématographiques*, N°194/202, 1993. 63–134. 92.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc GODARD: *Le Mépris* [script], Paris, L’Avant-Scène cinéma, N°412–413 (mai/juin 1992), 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 66.

symbolize their spiritual complicity. As Raphaëlle J. Burns argues, Paul “reciting the closing lines of Dante’s verse in his own language (“*notre première joie se métamorphose en pleurs*”) can see only “closure”<sup>8</sup> (James Wilkes adds: “melancholy”<sup>9</sup>), whereas Lang’s quotation in German typically struck a more open and optimistic key: “... *Zögert nicht den Weg der Sonne folgend/die unbewobnten Welten zu ergründen.*”<sup>10</sup>

As for the sentimental theme, Godard uses multilingualism in an interesting way to underline the rift between two native French speakers. After letting his wife Camille go in Prokosch’s car (a watershed in the couple’s relationship), Paul walks to the producer’s villa, arrives very late and is asked by him: “What happened to you, Paul?” Then Paul looks at his wife and says: “*Qu’est-ce qu’il dit?*”<sup>11</sup> So, Camille’s crucial but unspoken interrogation (how could you let me go with him?) finds its way indirectly, at that moment, through a language Paul strives to understand. His inability to understand these English words emphasizes the fact that he doesn’t manage to guess the true meaning of what she doesn’t say or what she expresses with non-verbal codes like looks, gestures and face expressions. Symmetrically, later in the film, one may believe that Paul has a glimpse of what is happening to his couple when he understands on the spot Jerry’s English words “So I was right!”<sup>12</sup> and shouts like in a flash of intuition: “*À propos de quoi?*” Nevertheless, on the way to the truth that he will never quite reach, the despised husband keeps stumbling among words he can’t get a grip on, foreign to him even when they are spoken in his own language.

Francesca, Prokosch’s secretary, translator and major figure of multilingualism and code-switching here, plays an important part in highlighting psychological barriers. Paradoxically, the interpreter, who masters four languages, stands here as a Babelian figure. Yet, she tries her best to connect these very different people with each other. Several times, she goes beyond the limits of translation in order to make her employer understandable and acceptable to others. For instance, when he gets excited seeing a naked woman (supposed to be a mermaid) on screen, he whispers to Lang’s ear with a dirty smile: “Fritz, that’s wonderful for you and me, but you do not think the public is going to understand that?” Francesca’s translation omits to render the sexual hint of the sentence: “*C’est de l’art, mais est-ce que le public comprendra?*”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, during the very tense argument about Lang’s theory on *The Odyssey*, she not only confirms that Jerry disagrees with it, she explains quite cleverly

<sup>8</sup> Raphaëlle J. BURNS: “Experimenting with Cinema in Godard’s *Le Mépris*: The Past and the Present Between Possibility and Impossibility”. In COLIN MACCABE – LAURA MULVEY (ed.), *Godard’s Contempt*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. 190–199. 196.

<sup>9</sup> JAMES WILKES: “*O gods...* Hidden Homeric Deities in Godard’s *Le Mépris*”. In MACCABE – MULVEY: *op. cit.* 42–51. 48.

<sup>10</sup> GODARD: *op. cit.* 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

and develops his point of view, although he does not express it.<sup>14</sup> And clearly, she mitigates his rudeness when he says about Lang “I am not gonna lose my shirt for him”<sup>15</sup> (commented more than translated through Francesca’s words: “*Il va très mal!*”) or when she mistranslates his disdainful hand sign towards Camille, who asked him whether M. Lang will stay with them in his villa near Capri, with these three words: “*Où il voudra!*”<sup>16</sup> Such mistranslations are part of the “noise,” as William Viney puts it, constantly present in the “transmission of meaning” that *Le Mépris* “stages.”<sup>17</sup> Viney adds: “This noise works at the level of translation, through the figure of Francesca, and it works through the Hollywood system, in the conflicts of interpretation we witness throughout the film.”<sup>18</sup> One should go further on that track and make a rather different point: embodied in Francesca, charming and caring as she may be, the translating activity looks like a dirty job of submission, betrayal and pointless attempts. From this point of view, we may regard her silence at the end of the film, as a sign of failure. When Paul is leaving Capri, he tells her that Camille and Jerry died in the car crash. She passes by him without a glance or even a word. This attitude could mean that she is too shocked by this piece of news to start a conversation in any language. But if we think that misunderstandings, differences of thoughts and mental representations led the whole tragedy to its end, we understand that, eventually, the mediating figure can only keep silent and go away with downcast eyes.

Thus, multilingualism and code-switching take a substantial part in building a metaphorical Babel that starts collapsing early in the course of the narrative. The linguistic barrier symbolizes a psychological rift: even when some characters seem to understand each other for a while, the way they use French or English reminds us that they do not really live in the same world, highlighting their isolation. Instead of filling the gap, code-switching and, above all, translating emphasize its size.

### *Associating Cultural Schemes and Values to Languages*

Depiction of multilingualism and code-switching practices convey ideas about each of the four languages involved. If we look closely at the ways they are used here, it is worth noticing that they are associated with some specific values.

Unsurprisingly, Italian, the host country language in a way, belongs to the setting; a beautiful setting, like the rocks and blue sea near Capri,<sup>19</sup> but waning

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 67.

<sup>17</sup> William VINEY: “‘Not necessarily in that order’: *Contempt*, Adaptation and the Metacinematic”. In MACCABE – MULVEY: *op. cit.* 148–156. 155.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> See Ludovic CORTADE: *Le Mépris*: “Landscapes as Tragedy”, in Tom CONLEY – T. Jefferson KLINE (ed.): *A Companion to Jean-Luc Godard*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. 156–170.

too: the deserted Cinecittà seems to echo Louis Lumière's famous statement about doomed commercial prospects of cinema, which is written in the background of the projection hall, below the screen, and in Italian ("Il cinema é un invenzione senza avvenire"). Moreover, Italian is more or less restricted to utilitarian functions. On the shooting set, after Lang and his assistant (Godard himself) give the starting signal, operators and technicians add small words such as "Silenzio," "Motore," "Avanti," "Carrello."<sup>20</sup> Prokosch utters a short instruction in Italian to the petrol station assistant<sup>21</sup> and elsewhere foreign characters seem to know nothing of their hosts' language but conventional and courtesy words ("Bongiorno," "ciao," "prego").<sup>22</sup> Besides, it is a meaningful fact that the only Italian protagonist of the film works as a full-time secretary devoted to her employer and even acting as a go-between when she translates his love invitation to Camille (shall we really consider, then, that this go-between position enables her to see anew, to escape from the restricted view, narrowed by contempt, the other characters have on life, as Raphaëlle J. Burns argues?).<sup>23</sup> Thus, may Godard be aware of it or not, Dante's tongue gives the impression that it is a kind of indigenous language in a colonial context. The great poet himself is quoted in German or French in the screening room sequence.

Obviously, French language owes its special status in the film to its French Swiss director as well as its main actors (Bardot and Piccoli) and to the fact that its original version is supposed to be understood by French speakers. But two other conclusions may be drawn from the way American and German characters use it.

Firstly, according to an old cliché still vivified by some American movies, French is the language of love and courtship. Apart from one small exception, the only attempts Prokosch makes to switch from English to French occur when he tries to speak gently to Camille: just before the car crash, at the petrol station, he asks her with a little flower in hand and a rather moving clumsiness: "*Camille, qu'est-ce que tu penses de moi?*"<sup>24</sup> And in a more delusive manner, earlier on, he urged her to sit beside him in his car, switching in the twinkling of an eye from a harsh "Get in!" to a sweeter "*S'il vous plait.*" So, in those lines, Godard asserts traditional ideas associated with his native language and at the same time questions them or at least mocks them by the irony of the context in which Prokosch speaks French.

Secondly, this language appears here to be the medium of critical spirit. We previously said that Lang didn't make his sarcastic remark on Jerry's assertion about "the word *culture*" in English, which he could have done. It may be added now that he chooses French here as he does when, soon afterwards and reciting Hölderlin's

<sup>20</sup> GODARD: *op. cit.* 86.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 83.

<sup>22</sup> Apart from "prego," "Strano" is the only Italian word F. Lang utters, repeating the answer Francesca gave to his question: "*Comment dit-on étrange en italien?*" (*ibid.* 27). The context suggests he mainly does it out of politeness.

<sup>23</sup> BURNS: *op. cit.* 195.

<sup>24</sup> GODARD: *op. cit.* 83.

verses to Francesca, he comments on them: “*Vous voyez la rédaction du dernier vers contredit les deux autres, ce n’est plus la présence de dieu, c’est l’absence de dieu qui rassure l’homme. C’est très étrange, mais vrai.*”<sup>25</sup> One could object that this last choice simply hints at the origin of Lang’s comment (which derives from a chapter of *L’espace littéraire* by Maurice Blanchot).<sup>26</sup> But this kind of justification would not explain why, on the other hand, in the “Silver Cine” sequence, the German director develops Hegel’s concept of epic’s objectivity in French!<sup>27</sup> And all throughout the film, the two men of culture use this language to exchange their views on literature, art, film industry or techniques<sup>28</sup> and even on the modern way of life, so that we are to think it is definitely the medium of intellectual discussions. Godard’s representation of French culture (which could be confirmed then by the major role played by French intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre but also by the fact that, in the early sixties, many of them criticized mass culture or “*culture industrielle*”<sup>29</sup>) makes his native language suited to question moral, religious and aesthetic principles driving the occidental world of his time.

Prokosch’s American English (spoken by the Hollywood actor Jack Palance) is not only linked here to money and business, but, on a larger scope, asserts itself as the medium of power: capitalistic power (using Francesca’s back as a desk, Jerry gives order in a rough way to Paul: “Stay right there”<sup>30</sup>), male power exerted against women (saying about an Italian girl: “If she agrees to take her clothes off”<sup>31</sup>), gods’ power over human beings. We should not forget that Godard’s editing closely associates Prokosch with Poseidon.<sup>32</sup> Gods, or what stands as gods in modern society, do not speak Greek anymore. They do not speak German either, and casting Fritz Lang as a director allows Godard to let his spectators hear the voice of an historic anti-nazi figure (Paul’s anecdote on his exile from Germany stresses the fact<sup>33</sup>) and listen to his sweet German poetical inflexions, instead of the usual Hitlerian shouting. New gods lead the world through American English language. But this association with power may not look as bad as it sounds, because the American character of the film, as Walter Stabb argues, is more subtly characterized

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>26</sup> See Olivier H. HARRIS: “Pure Cinéma? Blanchot, Godard, *Le Mépris*”. In MACCABE – MULVEY: *op. cit.* 96–106.

<sup>27</sup> GODARD: *op. cit.* 66.

<sup>28</sup> Lang on cinémascope: “*Ce n’est pas fait pour les hommes, c’est fait pour les serpents, pour les enterrements*” (*ibid.* 26).

<sup>29</sup> For instance, Pierre FOUGEYROLLAS and Gilbert COHEN-SÉAT: *L’Action sur l’homme: cinéma et télévision*, Paris, Denoël, 1961. See Jean-Pierre ESQUENAZI: *Godard et la société française des années 1960*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> GODARD: *op. cit.* 27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 66.

<sup>32</sup> James WILKIES even finds Prokosch a prophetic gift like Chalcas in the *Iliad* (WILKIES: *op. cit.* 47).

<sup>33</sup> Even if, actually, the “real” Lang did not leave Nazi Germany in such a rush, according to Klaus KREIMER (*Une histoire du cinéma allemand: la UFA*, Paris, Flammarion, 1994.120).

than it is usually believed. First of all, he is a man of action, often filmed by Godard like a like a sword-and-sandal films' hero, in a rather positive way, like a "classical hero". And, as Stabb put it, "his dynamism operates as catalyst in forcing the resolution to Camille and Paul's unhappy relationship and in pushing onwards the production of *The Odyssey*."<sup>34</sup> This feature particularly stands out when we compare him with Paul, an irresolute character. Secondly, Stabb reminds us that Godard didn't despise money in cinema or complain about producers' demands ("For him the commercially minded problem posed by Prokosch became an opportunity not a constraint, a typical response in Godard's film making"; and Palance, an ex-boxer and a western movie actor, is a kind of "challenge" Godard "thrives on"<sup>35</sup>). This can mitigate, at least from some spectator's point of view, the negative value associated with this language of power.

So multilingualism and code-switching contribute to sketch in *Le Mépris* a certain cultural and economic map of the Sixties' western world. This map borrows from conventional types, but apart from the Italian ones maybe, it either questions them or puts them at a distance and in a new light. It must be added that the film draws a picture of a hierarchy between languages we would find difficult to come across in current cinema production. French, especially, doesn't play any longer the part Godard highlighted in his film. Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, which plays with the same four languages,<sup>36</sup> epitomizes such an evolution, even if we could object that its action took place a long time ago, during the Second World War. There, French clearly appears as the language of defeated people, who desperately have to understand German and English intruders and who switch (sometimes improbably) from their native language to theirs in order to please or serve them. Paying tribute to his idol Godard, Tarantino names one of his French characters "Francesca". And she is still a female translator, but in an even more depreciating mode than the original Francesca, since she is a French "collabo", Goebbel's mistress, translating her German master's words into French. Other evidence than Tarantino's film can be mentioned. According to film analyst Stephen Follows, "in 2003, 16% of [North American] movies featured at least some spoken French, whereas in 2017 it had fallen to just 6%" and, in the same range of movies, "romance is more a feature of films with Italian than those with French."<sup>37</sup> But other data and studies would be needed to establish that, from this point of view, *Le Mépris* belongs to a remote past. Related to its semantic structures, the political and cultural ideas

<sup>34</sup> Walter STABB: "Producing Prokosch: Godard, Levine, Palance, Minelli and a lament to lost Hollywood". In MACCABE -MULVEY: *op. cit.* 179-189.184.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Nolwenn MINGANT points out that "Foreign languages are increasingly part of today's Hollywood film ... the presence of three or four languages other than English is not rare (*Ocean's Twelve*, *Rush Hour*, *Syriana*, *Babel*)". N. MINGANT: "Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*: a blueprint for dubbing translators? (2010) in *Meta*, n°55(4), 712-731. DOI: 10.7202/045687ar (accessed: February 09, 2024).

<sup>37</sup> Stephen FOLLOWS: Film data and education, [stephenfollows.com/languages-most-commonly-used-in-movies/](http://stephenfollows.com/languages-most-commonly-used-in-movies/) (accessed 9 February 2024).



it associates with each language add to the characterization of the protagonists. Besides, multilingualism and code-switching make it clearer that Godard's film is about a power struggle, a complex struggle not only between different individuals but between different cultures.

### *Casting a Valuable Light on Il Disprezzo*

Now, what does this all mean for *Il disprezzo*'s reception? Which of the novel's features stand out through this kind of "cinematic filter", as we may call it?

Firstly, the fact that the film characters speak four different languages, switch from one to the other, as well as Fritz Lang does, without being translated at all or without being properly translated (and a part of the meaning comes, as we noticed, from a discrepancy between words and their rendering) adds for the unprepared spectator to the large amount of literary or filmic quotations in their conversation and to the complicated debate on *The Odyssey*. All of which could make him believe that *Il disprezzo* is a kind of avant-garde intellectual novel. Not so much wrongly. *Avant-garde* is certainly not a word one would use about Moravia's work. *Le Mépris* itself is less so than other Godard opuses. But watching it with its complexities makes us recall that *Il disprezzo* is the story of an intellectual type of character, since Ricardo sees himself as a serious writer (who joined, though reluctantly and for wrong reasons, the Italian Communist Party<sup>38</sup>) and since his thought and narrative keep feeding on literary reminiscences (not only from *The Odyssey* or Dante's *Inferno* but from Orpheus and Petrarch's sonnets<sup>39</sup>). *Le Mépris* shows it to us in its own way and by stressing the part that modern languages and movie culture play in contemporary intellectual life.

Secondly, this cinematic filter contributes to shape the way one regards Moravia's characters, especially if one discovers the novel after watching the film.

Surely, the wife played by Bardot has got something of the instinctive, unintellectual Emilia, the character Ricardo depicts in the novel.<sup>40</sup> We may laugh at the way Camille tries to make herself understood when she says to Jerry on the phone, with a broad French accent: "We talk of you". But the funny and rather casual summary of *The Odyssey* she gives in the same sequence ("l'histoire du type qui voyage"<sup>41</sup>) could mean that her bad English is more to be ascribed to carelessness than to ignorance or stupidity. She does understand English (better maybe than

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<sup>38</sup> See Alberto MORAVIA, *Il Disprezzo*, Firenze – Milano, Bompiani, 2017, end of chapter 3.

<sup>39</sup> Ricardo comments on one of Petrarch's sonnets in chapter 14 (MORAVIA: *op. cit.* 202-203). His evocation of his journey into "La Grotta Rosa" (chapter 22) after Emilia left him hints more at Orpheus searching Eurydice in the Underworld than at *Odysseus'* similar episode.

<sup>40</sup> "Emilia non aveva ricevuto una buona educazione: aveva frequentato soltanto le prime scuole elementari e qualche anno delle magistrali; poi aveva lasciato gli studi..." (MORAVIA: *op. cit.* 155).

<sup>41</sup> GODARD: *op. cit.* 59.



Paul). At the end of the “Silver Cine’s” debate on Homer, Prokosch asks her: “Why don’t you say something?”<sup>42</sup> Her answer (or her thought) at that moment (“*Je me tais parce que je n’ai rien à dire*”) suggests that *Il disprezzo*’s feminine protagonist should be regarded as more complex than expected.<sup>43</sup> On one hand, she means she is stupid or, at least, unable to talk about art and literature; on the other hand, her quick response to Jerry’s English question proves she is smarter than others may think,<sup>44</sup> which echoes Emilia’s surprising moments of brightness Ricardo mentioned in his narrative.<sup>45</sup> Only, the film indicates her brightness in a less disdainful manner (Ricardo links them to her closer acquaintance with nature and to simple people’s commonsense). Fritz Lang’s polyglotism contributes to cast a positive light on the German director figure, as if Godard had only selected one of Rheingold’s features in the novel and had magnified it. Indeed, in the pages where he is introduced by the narrator as a decent – but not first class – German director, Rheingold is said to bear a physical resemblance to Goethe.<sup>46</sup> From this detail Godard seems to derive his entire conception of a humanistic kind of artist, whose universal spirit (like Goethe’s) is displayed in his ability to speak French and Italian, as well as German, and to explain Hegel’s theory on epics in a foreign language.<sup>47</sup> Lang’s polyglotism completes the conception that led Godard to transfer this classical theory (which Rheingold regarded as idealistic and out-of-date) from the scriptwriter (Ricardo cherishes it in the novel) to the director<sup>48</sup> and, meanwhile, Rheingold’s earthly psychological point of view (which Ricardo regarded as realistic but inferior) on *The Odyssey* to the producer (Prokosch).<sup>49</sup> So here *Il disprezzo*’s readers tend to forget Rheingold’s mean side. And the perspective Godard adopts in *Le Mépris* definitely favors the director’s point of view.

Making a Babel of Ricardo’s world, the film obviously exacerbates the psychological barrier between the protagonists of the novel. In this regard, there is one

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 67.

<sup>43</sup> Another factor of complexity comes from the way Godard plays with the image Bardot’s former roles shaped in the spectator’s mind. See what Steven UNGAR writes about the casting: “As with Bardot, the casting of Palance confirmed that the character of the boorish producer drew on and worked against his previous roles in order to generate a dramatic tension unavailable to the novelist” (S. UNGAR: “Totally, Tenderly, Tragically...and in Color: Another look at Godard’s *Le Mépris*”. In CONLEY – T. Jefferson KLINE: *op. cit.* 149).

<sup>44</sup> Symbolically, in the same sequence, Bardot-Camille perfectly catches a hint that Godard drops in F. Lang’s line about Bertold Brecht: “*La ballade du pauvre B.B.*”

<sup>45</sup> « ... riusciva talvolta a formulare riflessioni e apprezzamenti assai acuti » (MORAVIA: *op. cit.* 155).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 127.

<sup>47</sup> On the opposite, in *Inglourious Basterds*, Colonel Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz)’s linguistic virtuosity (he fluently speaks the same four languages) is associated with force and violence. It is as much a power of evil as Fritz Lang’s same polyglotism is a sign of enlightenment.

<sup>48</sup> Ricardo thinks that Homer made *The Odyssey* with characters looking like the nature whose antic simplicity they shared (MORAVIA: *op. cit.* 185).

<sup>49</sup> Like Rheingold in the novel, Prokosch objects to the scriptwriter that the classical reading of *The Odyssey* is idealistic (See GODARD: *op. cit.* 78).

emblematic example among all the changes Godard made in the narrative. As mentioned before, when Paul arrives late at the director's home in Rome, he is asked by him: "What happened to you?" In *Il disprezzo*, Emilia directly asks Ricardo that kind of question in his language.<sup>50</sup> So, compared to the novel here, the film doubly separates the scriptwriter from his wife's conscience: firstly, because it gives her question to someone else and secondly, because it puts that question in words her husband doesn't manage to get. Doing so, it simply underlines Ricardo's inability to understand what his wife is feeling, what she thinks of the way he left her on her own with another man. This obviously was one of the key issues of *Il disprezzo*. When, in the last chapters, Ricardo get the answers to those questions, he starts dreaming of a kind of utopia whose description seems to relate to a pre-Babelian world, a world, as he puts it, "in which money did not count and in which language had retained its integrity."<sup>51</sup> Godard chooses to show how much Ricardo was right to state that this world "in fact did not exist."<sup>52</sup>

And finally, Babelian features affect the reader's interpretation of the way cinema and its world are regarded in the novel. In chapter 8, Ricardo complains about the intricacies of film production and in chapter 5 about the distance between what he writes and what the directors make of it. He describes his job like a frustrating collective process wherein talks and verbal exchanges of all kinds interfere too much. None of those complaints remains in the film; at least none remains in an explicit way. But one should not forget here that *Le Mépris* includes some transnational filming sessions of *The Odyssey* directed by Fritz Lang. These sequences, and especially the last one, draw a mixed picture of the seventh art's world. On one hand, spectators hear from the shooting set an impressive and pleasant symphony composed of different verbal tunes. After all, cinema is a cosmopolitan world and therefore a fascinating one. On the other hand, this combination seems to vindicate Ricardo's dislike of the film industry (the very dislike on which Moravia dwelt). Indeed, in the last sequence, Fritz Lang is asked whether he is ready, and it takes some time from the moment he says "yes" until the filming actually starts; for, in the interval, the director's instruction has to find its way through at least three different languages: "Kamera", says Lang; "Moteur", says his assistant (Godard); "Motore", repeats the Italian translator; "Partito", "Clap" etc.,<sup>53</sup> and there it eventually goes... Isn't that string of words a metaphor for film making as a complex, heavy and slow machine (at least big productions like the one Battista produces in the novel or even the one Godard is directing here on both levels of the *mise en abyme*, since no other film he has made before looked more like a Hollywood production than this one)? And eventually, does not it give credit to Ricardo's preference for a more straightforward way of cre-

<sup>50</sup> MORAVIA: *op. cit.* 60. ("Emilia [...], con tono lamentoso, quasi struggente, mi domanda dove sia stato tutto quel tempo")

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 266 ("nel quale il denaro non contava e il linguaggio era rimasto integro").

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* ("que non esisteva").

<sup>53</sup> GODARD: *op. cit.* 86.

ating: writing books (such as the one we are supposed to read or maybe, in the film, the one we see Paul typewriting at home in a very casual way before the argument scene with Camille<sup>54</sup>)? Thus, *Le Mépris* partly illustrates through code-switching and multilingualism (*vs* monolingualism) an artistic conception set out in Moravia's novel. But meanwhile, doing so, it cannot help reinforcing the glamor of film making, as well as, in some other ways, it contributes to nourish the "Mythe Bardot."

The two linguistic features surveyed here tend sometimes to imply ideas that were explicit in *Il disprezzo* and, sometimes, on the contrary, to put in a prominent position some meanings that were hardly noticeable in the novel or simply suggested there. They can partake of a more general reinterpretation process, like the flattering light cast on the film director's character.

### *Godard's Playfulness as a Conclusion*

Answering our initial questions led us to deal with meanings that had already been discussed in some other studies focused on the film's other features. It must be so, since our first purpose was to show how multilingualism and code-switching produce or underline such meaning as, for instance, the psychological gap between every character. But, on the way, we found some strange cases of understanding between them despite the linguistic barrier: on some rare and brief occasions when Paul and Camille hear the American producer, they overcome it; and on one occasion, as if he understood what the wife is thinking of her husband's decision to let her go with him in his car, Prokosch happens to articulate in foreign words her unspoken and maybe unconscious question, a crucial one for her sentimental life. These rare cases make the communication process look even more mysterious. As for the political and cultural ideas associated with the various languages involved, it appeared that *Le Mépris* reasserts certain associations and questions some others (when they are not the same ones). Through multilingualism it outlines the central place that people's mental representations enjoyed in *Il disprezzo*'s semantic structures. Yet, it doesn't transpose their oppositions in a simplistic fashion: Jerry Prokosch, confined in his native language, and the polyglot Fritz Lang are driven by different mental representations; but so are Paul and Camille, although they are supposed to speak the same language. The former opposition is not exactly congruent with the latter, because mental representations are not shaped only by languages. And *Le Mépris* reminded its spectators, in the Sixties, that movies play a major part in that shaping process, while it provided them with a more up-to-date understanding of *Il disprezzo*'s characters and themes. But its Babelian multilingualism doesn't only serve to embody a tragic vision of love and human relationships. And codeswitching, with the typical impression of estrangement it

.....  
<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

produces on spectators, also seems to belong to Godard's playful, inventive and liberated cinematic world, as some humoristic examples of Francesca's translation have shown here. To them we could apply what Jonathan Gross writes about filmic and literary references in the film:

*Le Mépris* overlays quotations and references in a way that does not straightforwardly lament the distance from the original. Enjoyment is taken in playing with and mingling these texts. The inevitable failure to reach the 'original', to fully 'retain the sense', frees the film to invoke and transform.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Jonathan GROSS, "In Translation: reconceptualizing 'home' through *Le Mépris* and its source texts". MACCABE–MULVEY: *op. cit.* 168–178, 175.

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### Abstract

*Among the studies focused on Le Mépris, multilingualism and code-switching have not drawn enough attention. This article brings answers to the following questions: what major part do these two features of the film play in the meaning-making? What political and cultural values or ideas does Godard’s film convey through them? And what light do they cast on the novel adapted here? Multilingualism and code-switching play a major part in representing human relationships, as they bear witness here of a Babelian collapse that occurs after the opening scene and affects every protagonist. Each of the four languages spoken conveys some specific ideas often associated with it, so that the film sketches a kind of cultural map of the early 1960’s world. But meanwhile, the way they are used questions some of those associations. Besides, by making a multilingual film from a monolingual text, Godard casts a fresh light on Moravia’s novel Il disprezzo. He underlines some of the characters’ features, the misunderstanding between them, and draws a mixed picture of the “movie world”. Finally, he uses languages in his own inventive and playful way, which mitigates the Babelian darkness of his film.*

**Keywords:** intermediality, film adaptation, multilingualism, J.L. Godard

Az *Il disprezzo* című regénytől A megvetés című filmig.  
Többnyelvűség és kódváltás Jean-Luc Godard filmjében  
Rezümé

A megvetés című filmről készült elemzésekben nem kapott elég figyelmet a többnyelvűség és a kódváltás. Tanulmányom az alábbi kérdésekre kínál választ: milyen jelentésképző szerepet tölt be ez a két sajátossága a filmnek? Milyen politikai és kulturális értékeket és gondolatokat közvetít általuk Godard filmje? És milyen fényt vetnek az adaptáció alapjául szolgáló regényre? A többnyelvűségnek és kódváltásnak nagy szerepe van emberi kapcsolatok ábrázolásában, mert arról a bábeli zűrzavarról tanúskodnak, amely a nyitójelenet után következik és minden főszereplőre hatást gyakorol. Mind a négy nyelv életre hívja azokat a képzettársításokat, amelyeket hozzájuk szoktunk kapcsolni, és így a film egyfajta kulturális térképet rajzol az 1960-as évek elejének világáról. Viszont az, ahogy a rendező ezeket a nyelveket használja, részben meg is kérdőjelezi az ismert képzettársításokat. Ráadásul azáltal, hogy egy egynyelvű szövegből többnyelvű filmet készít, Godard új fényben tünteti fel Moravia *Il disprezzo* című regényét is. Felerősíti néhány szereplő karakterét és a köztük lévő félreértéseket, és vegyes képet fest a "mozi világról". A különböző nyelveket találékony és játékos módon használja, ami enyhíti saját filmjének bábeli zűrzavarát.

**Kulcsszavak:** intermedialitás, filmadaptáció, multilingualizmus, J.L. Godard