Guilty By Association: Joe Levine, European Cinema and the Culture Clash of Le Mépris

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In the late 1950s, Joseph E. Levine achieved national prominence in the US due to the phenomenal success of *Hercules* (1958) and its sequel, *Hercules Unchained* (1959), two low-budget peplum films he had imported from Italy. The Italian cinema also provided Levine with his first nationwide arthouse success, *Two Women* (1960), for which Sophia Loren won the 1961 Academy Award for Best Actress.

The early 1960s saw Levine develop close relationships with Italian filmmakers, not only as an importer and promoter, but also as a producer, helping to spearhead a significant movement in both Italian and American film production; as Mira Liehm tells us, "Italo-American collaboration became an important part of the Italian cinematic scene in the early sixties. The thoroughly organized and prearranged Hollywood way of filmmaking merged with Italian craftsmanship, improvisation, and reliance on chance" (Liehm, 1984: 182). But the relationship was not always a cosy one, being often fraught with difficulties and resentments.

The first part of this essay will contextualise Levine and his emerging role as a powerful figure in European cinema in the 1960s, whilst also examining the increasingly troubled relationship between Italian and American filmmakers; the disenchantment of Italian filmmakers with their American collaborators is what provides the context to, and the basis of the subject of, *Le Mépris* (aka *Contempt*, 1963), which is discussed in the second section.

Critically derided on its initial release, *Le Mépris* has since been reclaimed as a forgotten masterpiece, thanks to a 1997 re-mastering job and re-release. Much of the film's reputation, for cinephiles at least, rests on Godard's supposedly incisive critique of creeping Americanisation, although I would argue that this is the weakest aspect of the movie as it collapses under Godard's self-righteousness; as John Ralston Saul's unnamed source remarked of the James Joyce classic, "There's a lot of fly food in *Ulysses* and it was put there for the flies" (Saul, 1993: 560), so the same observation could be made of *Le Mépris*.

Though Levine is largely forgotten now, Godardians know well who he is. The character of Prokosch in *Le Mépris*, the philistine American producer played by Jack Palance, is widely believed to be a lampoon of Levine. When considering Levine, therefore, *Le Mépris* is an extremely important film with which to engage. Levine's association with this film, as well as his association with the character of Prokosch, have impacted on his posthumous reputation substantially. As noted by James Verniere, among many others, "Palance's producer is a stab in the back of *Contempt*'s legendary vulgarian producer Joseph E. Levine" (Verniere, 1997).

Much of the myth surrounding *Le Mépris* is based around assumptions that ascribe lurid intentionality to the "tacky American producer Joseph E. Levine" (Howe, 1997), and Godard's supposed outflanking of him. "American tycoon Joseph E. Levine", ran one article in *The Observer*, "wanted a sexy art-house production. Godard … deliberately shot Bardot's nude scenes unerotically and sent up Levine as the ignorant Hollywood mogul played by Jack Palance" ("Godard Only Knows," 2000). Again and again in writing concerning this film, a cultural gulf is implied between Godard and Levine, with Godard always associated with art, and Levine associated with the unsavoury. It should also be noted that, in the film itself, Prokosch is explicitly connected to Levine when he is called to the telephone to take a call from Levine, supposedly ringing from New York.

So important is the extra-textual mythology surrounding *Le Mépris*, so deep are its roots, that it has almost become a viewing strategy: "For those not in the know," runs one listings article, "Palance's performance as a loathsome producer (based not so loosely on the film's actual producer, Joseph E. Levine) is a delight" (Camp, 1997). Perhaps more worryingly, the mythology surrounding *Le Mépris* has found its way into scholarship regarding the film, often without being questioned.

Gore Vidal once opined, "It is curious … how entirely the idea of the working producer has vanished. He is no longer remembered except as the butt of familiar stories: fragile artist treated cruelly by insensitive cigar smoking producer" (Vidal, 1993 [1976]: 1173). *Le Mépris* had three producers, Georges de Beauregard, Carlo Ponti and Levine, yet it is Levine who is most often the butt of the not unfamiliar stories circulating within and without *Le Mépris*. In this essay I aim to unscramble fact from fiction and assess whether or not Godard was justified in making such an angry polemic directed at Levine, and what, if anything, Levine is guilty of.

Jacques Aumont described *Le Mépris* as "a giant *J'accuse ...!* which portrays [producers] as dealers of death" (Aumont, 1990: 176), and that is an accurate assessment. Given the anger in the film and the fact that Levine's Embassy Pictures provided most of the funding, one cannot help being reminded of a (possibly apocryphal) story which sees Ford Madox Ford advising a friend on how to deal with the famously temperamental Wyndham Lewis; "If Wyndham Lewis asks you to lend him a hundred pounds," Ford counselled, "don't do it. He'll never forgive you!"

Given de Beauregard's announcement prior to the film's production that the film was to feature "the sharp, personalized filmmaking concepts of Godard … wedded to important box-office values" (Lev, 1993: 83), an examination of the evidence seems to suggest that it was Godard who sabotaged Levine's project, not vice-versa.

A Farewell to Spears and Sandals

In 1961, MGM distributed *The Wonders of Aladdin*, which Levine produced, alongside Massimo Patrizi. Upon its release Eugene Archer poured scorn on the picture and, notably, its producer:

> Who would have thought, when Italian neo-realism was in full crescendo, that Vittorio de Sica, the dour director of *The Bicycle Thief* [1948], and Aldo Fabrizi, the tragic priest of *Open City* [1945], would one day be playing second fiddle in one of the hackneyed costume fantasies from the dubbing

> chambers of Joseph E. Levine? …Signor de Sica, as a genie with invisible feet, dangles awkwardly in outer space, looking for all the world as if Mr. Levine had hung him out to dry. (Archer, 1961)

The implication here is that Levine has somehow led astray two of the more respectable figures of Italian cinema, enticing them into his "dubbing chambers." Archer contextualises this action by emphasising the roles de Sica and Fabrizi had played in the influential and well regarded Italian cinematic school of neo-realism, highlighting films made thirteen and sixteen years previously. Of course, Archer is entitled to disapprove of the involvement of such influential figures in Levine's Christmas offering, but his attempt to reify de Sica and Fabrizi into icons was, even in 1961, unconvincing. A cursory glance at the dozens of films that made up both actors' filmographies demonstrates that neither actor limited himself exclusively to critically acceptable fare, yet it is their involvement with the ground-breaking Neo-realist classics of the 1940s that allows Archer to imbue them with fallacious totemic qualities.

Levine is similarly misrepresented. Here Levine is not only a purveyor of "hackneyed costume fantasies" he is also somebody who has hung de Sica "out to dry", helplessly suspended following an implied fall from grace facilitated by the warden of the "dubbing chambers". No mention is made of the most notable connection between Levine and de Sica at this time, that being Levine's Embassy had imported and distributed de Sica's *Two Women*, a film that was very highly regarded on its release and one which would secure an Academy Award for its star, Sophia Loren. In the *New York Times*'s glowing review of *Two Women* (Crowther, 1961), Levine's role in bringing the film to the US goes unremarked; this is notable as its author, Bosley Crowther, was a prominent and vocal critic of Levine until his retirement from the *Times* in 1968.

Archer's association of Levine with "hackneyed costume fantasies" is also notable as such an association ran contrary to Embassy's stated policy at the time. In November 1961 *Variety* ran an item that informed readers that Levine was "Going Arty." The item quoted Levine as saying, "I'm going heavy on the art-type stuff. The market is saturated with spears and sandals and I've had it" ("Levine Going Arty," 1961). This is an interesting comment due to its emphasis on pragmatism. Levine presents his move into the art market as being motivated by the exhaustion of the peplum genre -- economic capital rather than cultural capital providing the inspiration.

Peter Lev has written that the "commercial setbacks" associated with the French New Wave and Italian cinema of the early 1960s led to "American companies … supporting English-language art films and reducing their investments in French and Italian language films." Lev goes on to note that Levine -- "an opportunistic producer-distributor" -- was probably the first to make the switch, which came in around 1963 with *Le Mépris*, and films such as *The Empty Canvas* (1963) and *The Tenth Victim* (1965) (Lev, 1993: 46). However, the industrial conditions that saw Levine investing in a project such as *Le Mépris* were rather more complex than a sudden "switch" that occurred in the early 1960s; and Lev's labelling of Levine as "opportunistic" is rather misleading. It is true that Levine was versatile enough to capitalise on emerging cultural and industrial mores, but one should remember that in his investments in European productions in the 1960s, Levine was capitalising on conditions he himself helped to create.

Also, Lev makes problematic use of the term "art." Even in 1961 the use of such a term was being debated, notably by Philip K. Scheuer, in reference to the Levine import, *Where the Hot Wind Blows!* (1959). The film, made by notable director Jules Dassin, was based on a well-regarded novel by a notable author, *The Law* by Roger Valliand, and featured prominent European stars, Marcello Mastroianni, Yves Montand and, perhaps more importantly, the Italian Gina Lollobrigida, one of a number of European beauties that won the hearts of US audiences in the arthouses and beyond in the 1950s and 1960s. For Scheuer, this list of ingredients made the film a "perfect example" of a new breed of "hybrid film."

"For the theatreman as well as the distributor," wrote Scheuer, "such a film may pose a vexing corollary problem: Is it 'art-house' or is it 'commercial'? Are there, indeed, any longer 'two' audiences?" (Scheuer). For Levine, the answer to Scheuer's final query would have been a hopeful "no", as he sought to imbue the film with a mass appeal to make it profitable beyond the arthouse circuit. Having changed the title from the rather jejune *The Law* to something racier, Levine opened the film widely with a blockbuster campaign, with advertising that sought to capitalize on the exploitable aspects of the film -- its storyline, which concerned sex, power and ritual humiliation in a sweaty village in Southern Italy; and, of course, the film's sexually appealing star, Gina Lollobrigida, one of a group of Italian actresses known collectively as *maggiorata fisica* (buxom beauties), whose physical characteristics had a noted appeal to the American market (Celli and Cottino-Jones, 2007: 81).

In the early 1960s the prestige project with commercial potential was high on the Levine agenda. The triumvirate of the noted director, European beauty and respectable source novel that Levine had sought to capitalise on in *Where the Hot Wind Blows!* brought great success the following year with the Embassy-distributed *Two Women*, which was directed by de Sica, starred Sophia Loren and was based on a novel by Alberto Moravia. These ingredients would also serve as the base for *Le Mépris*, with Jean-Luc Godard, Brigitte Bardot and Moravia's *A Ghost at Noon* forming the triad.

Levine also sought to capitalise on the pedigree of European directors by importing multi-director portmanteau films such as *Love at Twenty* (1962), *Seven Capital Sins* (1962) and *Boccaccio 70* (1962), the latter prompting the observation that "With *Boccaccio 70* Joseph E. Levine has found a just about perfect synthesis of art and commerce", from the *Hollywood Reporter* ("*Boccaccio 70* Review", 1962). Also at this time, Levine sought to capitalise on the reputation of Ingmar Bergman by buying the rights to two of his old movies, *The Devil's Wanton* (aka *Prison*, 1949) and *Night is my Future* (aka *Music in Darkness*, 1948), which he released in 1962 and 1963 respectively, cheekily branding them "vintage Bergmans" (O'Neil, 1962: 81).

Despite his successes, however, Levine was looking to move beyond the mere importing of European films and had his eye on taking a greater role in their production, as reported by *Variety* in February 1961:

> [Joe Levine is] finding difficulty in purchasing pictures outright for reasonable amounts, [and so] is concentrating on entering into various co-production deals which would provide a continuous flow of product over the next several years. Unable to uncover ready made films which he can tailor to his exploitation technique, he aims to increase the production values of his films

> and feels that the only way to do this is to actively participate in the making of them. (Feldman, 1961)

At the time of this report Levine was producing *The Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1962). Upon reporting the news that Levine had bought an "art film" in early 1961, *Time* magazine sought to reassure any potentially worried readers, remarking that "some of [Levine's] admirers fear that he is going to give up the drum and take up the lute. But with *Sodom and Gomorrah* now shooting in Morocco, Joe seems in no danger" ("Joe Unchained", 1961). But this film was to be Levine's peplum swansong and more than likely the reason he later said that he had "had it with spears and sandals."

Levine pulled out of this project during filming, yet retained an exec-producer credit, and the production was fraught with problems and resentments. Producer Geoffrey Lombardo, assistant director Sergio Leone, and Levine all fell out with director Robert Aldrich. According to Christopher Frayling, Lombardo felt that Aldrich was "out of control", whilst Leone felt that Aldrich "did everything he possibly could to demolish [Lombardo] financially" (Frayling, 2000: 114-5); indeed, the film, along with the financial failure of *The Leopard* (1963) helped cause the collapse of Lombardo's Titanus Films. For Frayling:

> The longer term legacy of the whole debacle was to confirm certain sections of the Italian film community in their deep cynicism about mercenary American film-makers abroad. As Lombardo put it at the time: 'They treated us with a certain disdain, as if we were underdogs, from a lower caste. When Italian film culture started to show signs of life, they did all they could to kill it stone dead' … 'Economic conditions,' Leone remembered, 'made it virtually impossible to shoot a film in Italy.' The sound stages at Cinecitta, he added, were like deserts, surrounded by unemployed technicians and extras. (Frayling, 2000: 115-6)

It was against this backdrop of decline and acrimony that Godard would set *Le Mépris*, with much of the initial action taking place in the ghost town of Cinecitta. The foregrounding of the deserted studios allowed Godard to capitalise on existing resentments and prejudices, and point the finger of blame at the opportunistic American producer.

The Culture Clash of *Le Mépris*

Le Mépris is, on the one hand, the story of the breakdown of a marriage, the tale of Paul Javal (Michel Piccoli), a screenwriter who is unable to understand why his beautiful wife, Camille (Brigitte Bardot), has suddenly been overcome by feelings of contempt for him. On the other hand it is a political film; set against the backdrop of the Italian film industry, the film explores the themes of art versus commerce, ignorance versus culture, independence versus hegemony, Europe-versus-America, director-versus-producer. The film addresses these themes with the broadest of brushes.

Le Mépris adapts Alberto Moravia's 1955 novel, *A Ghost at Noon*. The novel tells the story of a screenwriter, Riccardo Moltini, who is hired to script an adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey* for a mediocre German director, Rhinegold, and a commercially minded Italian producer named Batista. Largely an interior monologue, the sensitive Moltini is forced throughout the novel to confront not only his wife's increasingly contemptuous attitude toward him, but also his own failures as he compromises his literary ambitions for money.

To research *A Ghost at Noon*, Moravia spent time observing the making of *Ulysses* (1954), precisely the kind of Italian super-spectacular envisaged by the producer Batista in the novel. Interestingly, the character of Moltini remarks that the German director is "certainly not in the same class as the Pabsts and Langs" (Moravia, 1976: 66). This is notable due to the fact that not only does Fritz Lang play the director in *Le Mépris*, but also for the fact that the original script for *Ulysses* had been written by G. W. Pabst. Having sold the script to Dino De Laurentiis, Pabst was hired to direct but, according to William MacAdams, once Kirk Douglas was cast in the lead role, Paramount came on board and tussles began over the script. Pabst was fired and replaced by Mario Camerini, whilst the script was reworked by Hugh Gray and that most Hollywood of Hollywood scribes, Ben Hecht (MacAdams, 1990: 260).

The novel, then, can be seen as a protest against the dilution of art and cinematic culture. Indeed, Moravia was consistently vocal about what he felt was the compromising of the Italian film industry by external forces, from his critique of peplum films in *A Ghost at Noon* to his criticism of the trend toward spaghetti westerns in the mid 1960s. (Frayling, 2000: 118)

Godard was fairly dismissive of the source novel for his film:

> Moravia's novel is a nice vulgar read for a train journey, full of classical, old fashioned sentiments in spite of the modernity of the situations. But it is with this kind of novel that you can often make the best films. I have stuck to the main theme, simply altering a few details, on the principle that something filmed is automatically different from something written, and therefore original. (Narboni and Milne, 1972: 200-1)

Here Godard distances himself from the source novel in order to emphasise the originality of his own work, thereby appearing to maintain his integrity as auteur. Colin MacCabe has noted that the film is a "genuine reworking of Moravia's fiction" and indeed it is, but MacCabe's claim that the film is "never 'faithful' in the tradition of the much loathed 'cinéma de qualité'" is revealing in the context of Godard's above claim (McCabe, 2004: 160). Godard's comments can easily be read as an expression of his anxieties as to how he would be perceived for making an adaptation of a work by one of Italy's best-regarded novelists and his need to explicitly put his own stamp of authenticity on a high budget, American funded project, in a pre-release interview (notably in *Cahiers du Cinéma*), rather than allowing the film to speak for itself.

The story in the novel takes place over a year or so; in the film it is one day. The novel's Italian producer and screenwriter become American (Jeremiah Prokosch played by Jack Palance) and French, respectively; the director Rhinegold remains German but is no longer mediocre, becoming Fritz Lang, played by Fritz Lang. Godard also introduces the new character of a translator, Francesca, played by Georgia Moll. For MacCabe, this means that *Le Mépris*:

> is one of the few real examples of European cinema: four of the great European languages -- English, French, German and Italian -- circulate freely on the set of a production of a Greek story transposed with Roman names. This crucial change from Moravia's novel (in which although the director is German, the story is entirely in Italian) was Godard's. (McCabe, 2004: 160)

This is an idealised view of both the film and Godard: Godard wanted the roles of Paul and Camille to go to Frank Sinatra and Kim Novak, thereby making the film more American dominated; meanwhile Carlo Ponti wanted those roles to be played by Marcello Mastroianni and his wife Sophia Loren, thereby retaining the novel's Italian dominance. According to Godard, he and Ponti "remained at an impasse" until Brigitte Bardot came on board. Her presence made the project more enticing to Levine, who stumped up a good deal of the budget (Baby, 1972: 37). It is, therefore, Levine, not Godard, who is responsible for the film's cosmopolitan flavour.

The four great European languages do not, as is claimed, "circulate freely"; only Lang and Francesca are multi-lingual -- hence the inclusion of Francesca, a character who emphasises the film's theme of miscommunication. Also, the film does not look European; as Peter Lev has noted, making films in colour and widescreen was a fairly widespread practice in the US, but comparatively rare in the European cinema (Lev, 1993: 83). It was Embassy's money that allowed for Raoul Coutard's celebrated photography, prompted, as was the casting of Bardot, by Levine's eye, trained on the worldwide box office.

The film's Europeanness is most obviously compromised by the fact that not only is one of the main characters American, but also an American archetype. By 1963, the orgreish, philistine and heartless American producer had become a pop culture cliché, appearing in films such as *The Big Knife* (1955) and *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952). Perhaps "Euro-centric" would be a better adjective; the inclusion of an American archetype compromises the film's Europeanness but the lampooning of Prokosch adds to the Euro-centricity of the project.

One of the most significant ways in which Godard remoulded the politics of *A Ghost at Noon* was to opt for a more strident approach in his depiction of the producer, offering a less nuanced view. For Moravia's Moltini:

> Batista … was the kind of man whom his collaborators and dependents, as soon as his back was turned, referred to with charming names such as 'the brute', 'the big ape', the great beast', 'the gorilla'. I cannot say that these epithets were undeserved … [but] … these nicknames erred, in my opinion, in not taking into account one of Batista's highly important qualities -- I mean his most unusual artfulness, not to say subtlety, which was always present, though concealed under an apparent brutishness. (Moravia, 1976: 66)

Godard's Prokosch, however, is an irretrievable idiot; a boorish, philistine, vulgar buffoon who believes himself to be a Nietzschean superman when he is, in fact, a moron. "I like Gods," he tells Lang. "I know exactly how they feel … exactly." Godard, clearly in attack mode, has not only producers in his sights but also, specifically, the producers of this particular film and, more specifically, Levine.

Clearly there was a gulf of understanding between Levine and Godard; as Godard said:

> When I was discussing *Le Mépris* with Joseph Levine, I learned little by little that the words did not mean the same thing to him as they did to me. He is not a bad man; but I am not either. When we say 'picture', it doesn't mean the same thing at all. (Feinstein, 1964: 9)

Once production began, Godard encountered a whole host of other problems. *Le Mépris* was a fairly big budget production, this meant that the producers required a detailed script and strict shooting schedule; the Italian crew were highly unionised with regulated breaks and working hours; Jack Palance required detailed direction and Brigitte Bardot's star status brought with it more complications and demands. Godard was used to none of this and tensions and aggravations pervaded the making of the film. But it was the relationship with Levine that rankled most, as Raoul Coutard explains:

> Since the Americans were involved we had to follow a set work schedule. We had to send a daily telex to Levine to assure him that things were going as planned. That really upset Godard since he couldn't do exactly as he wanted. (Coutard)

Such interference and lack of understanding of Godard's methods, and the subsequent irritation caused to Godard finds its way onto the screen in the form of a rebuff in Godard's merciless lampooning of Prokosch.

If one is to take, as many do, the character of Prokosch to be a cinematic representation of Levine, then it should be noted that characterising Levine as a stereotypical interfering producer doesn't really fit. As a producer Levine had an extraordinary capacity for trust and delegation, and on *Le Mépris* he was a working producer, not merely a financier -- someone, then, with whom the director would expect to be in regular contact.

As we have seen, Levine had recently had his fingers burned by an "out of control" director on *The Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah*, so it is highly likely that he would not be willing to repeat that experience. To my knowledge, the communications between Godard and Levine on this project have not been preserved so it is impossible to say whether Godard was right to consider them upsetting. However, at roughly the same time, Levine was acting as executive producer on *Zulu* (1964, directed by Cy Endfield), and some of the communications for that film have been preserved. Such communications are illuminating in this context as there are many similarities between the two projects -- both were projects shooting in foreign lands whilst Levine was in the US (though he did visit the *Zulu* set), both directors were shooting in lands unfamiliar to them, both directors were made to comply with American production procedures and both directors were famously prickly.

Levine's concerns during the shooting of *Zulu* were with budget, scheduling, the running time of the completed film, and the use (or lack thereof) of the second unit. His views were expressed forcefully but not impolitely; he demanded that the issues and concerns raised be dealt with as a matter of urgency before offering his "kindest personal regards to you and your families" (Levine, 1963).

There was, however, a significant difference between the *Zulu* shoot and the *Le Mépris* shoot in that Stanley Baker, *Zulu*'s producer and star, had an extraordinary knack of writing diplomatic letters that would placate Levine:

> I can only tell you Joe that Cy and myself are not out to prove anything to the world through *Zulu* but have the same interests in it as you do, that is to make a good picture of the right length that people will pay to go and see and therefore provide profit to us all. (Baker, 1963)

Apparently, Godard possessed no such facility and the quotation from Coutard suggests that Godard resented the need for correspondence. As we have seen, a good deal of writing about *Le Mépris* makes much of Levine's peplum pedigree and infers that he was somewhat out of his depth in dealing with the European art film, but if one is to suggest that Levine didn't understand Godard and his methods it seems to be just as true to suggest that Godard didn't understand Levine and *his* methods, and so was also out of his depth on a big budget production. He also saw fit to put his side of the vendetta on film.

Prokosch's methods are, throughout the film, explicitly associated with Nazism; and not as a humorous allusion to a "little Hitler" but very specifically. The comparisons to Nazism are given a ring of authenticity as they are spoken by Fritz Lang, who fled Germany in 1933 rather than head Goebbels's propaganda machine; this occurrence is referred to in the film, bringing the response from Prokosch, "This is not 1933, this is 1963 and he will direct what was written." Later, when Prokosch utters the line, "Whenever I hear the word 'culture' I reach for my chequebook," Lang responds,

"Some years ago … some terrible years ago, the Nazis used to take out a pistol instead of a chequebook."

To be sure, Levine's persistent demands for status updates may well have been irritating, but such a po-faced comparison with the monsters of Nazism is both extreme and unconvincing; not to mention clumsy, given Levine's Jewishness.

In a series of smug, elitist gestures, Godard uses Prokosch's outsider status and lack of learning against him. Prokosch is unable to communicate with the other characters without the aid of a translator, while Lang on the other hand is able to speak at least three languages fluently; Prokosch reads inappropriate quotations from a little book he carries whereas the cultured Europeans quote Dante and Hölderlin at length and discuss the finer points; Prokosch displays brutish, unfocused energy, while Lang exudes sagacious serenity; Lang is regarded by the other Europeans with respectful awe, while Lang regards Prokosch with a superior, resigned, impotent disdain.

The casting is significant also: Jack Palance was most famous at the time for his role as the murderous, bullying bad guy in *Shane* (1953) who comes to help take over the town. Godard's casting of Lang, also, can be seen as witty and self-reflexive or as an homage, but Godard's placement of one of cinema's acknowledged greats into this milieu as a culturally legitimate artefact and henpecked victim should also be seen as self-serving moral high-grounding.

In short, Lang is a ringer and Prokosch might as well have horns. To be sure, Levine may have needed some mollycoddling, and his constant demands for updates may have been tiresome, but the petulance of Godard's cinematic rebuttal is quite startling. For Wheeler Winston Dixon, Lang represents "the moral centre of *Le Mépris*" (Dixon, 1997: 47), but I would have to disagree. Godard's parading of Lang and the co-opting of his reputation is a calculated attempt to score ideological points. The producer behaves like a Nazi and the director is anti-Nazi: whose side would you be on?

Perhaps the most celebrated scene in *Le Mépris* is the opening, post-credit, sequence, a scene that, for many, represents the real battleground between Godard and Levine. The scene is one long take; Paul, in vest and shorts, is lying back on a bed, propped up by his elbow. Camille

lies beside him on her stomach, entirely naked, questioning Paul about whom parts of her body appeal to him as the camera pans slowly down to her toes and back.

Much is made of Levine's request for extra nude scenes of Bardot yet it is difficult to find a reliable source and the tale seems to have become part and parcel of cinematic legend and remains unquestioned. Phillip Lopate's claim that "Carlo Ponti and Joseph E. Levine (the distributor of *Hercules* and other schlock) … were upset that the rough cut was so chaste. Not a single nude scene with BB -- not even a sexy costume!" (Lopate) is both unsourced and demonstrably untrue, given the amount of flesh displayed by Bardot throughout the film. Similarly unsourced is Colin MacCabe's claim that:

> Joe Levine saw the Bardot vehicle in which he had invested and discovered to his complete consternation that, despite the fact that this was a film of adultery, and sexual betrayal, there was no shot of Bardot nude. But Bardot *was* nudity -- that was what Levine had paid for and that was what he was going to get. (MacCabe, 2004: 153)

Peter Lev quotes Levine as complaining that, "Well, you haven't got enough ass in it" (Lev, 1993: 88), but suggests in the footnotes that the quotation -- provided by Jean-Pierre Goren -- is "hearsay" (Lev, 1993: 136). Raoul Coutard has also spoken of "the Americans" being "furious … they wanted to see Bardot's bottom" (Coutard) but it is unlikely Levine would have discussed this matter with Coutard, and the nude scene in question was not shot by him but by Alain Legrand. Indeed, as with much of the mythology associated with Godard, all roads lead back to Godard; it was most likely he who popularised this particular tale.

This is not to say that Levine didn't demand a nude scene to open the film, but his concerns may not have been as prurient as decades-old Chinese whispers suggest. Opening scenes were important to Levine. John Baxter has written of Levine's displeasure at first viewing the silent opening sequence of *8½* (1963) (Baxter, 1993: 192-3); and the minutes of a script meeting for *Harlow* (1965) reveal Levine pushing for an overdose sequence to open the film in order to "use [the] shock value of opening the audience's eyes at this time … I like to open a picture with a blow" ("Minutes," 1965). But possibilities that Levine had concerns regarding the film's structure, coherence and aesthetic qualities rarely find their way into work on *Le Mépris*.

Colin MacCabe, however, notes that the scene -- along with other (flashback) inserts of a fully clothed Bardot -- was demanded by Levine in order to provide a "psychological explanation" for Camille's behaviour. He also concedes that *Le Mépris* "would be a much less beautiful and moving film without the long opening scene … It provide[s] perhaps the most beautiful portrait of Europe's most photographed woman and a hint of married bliss which will turn to catastrophe in the course of the film." He thereby takes a grudgingly positive view of Levine's intervention. But he also stresses the view that Levine was looking for a "pornographic charge" (MacCabe, 2004: 154-5), an assumption tantamount to accusing Levine of thought-crime.

Most other commentators view the scene as an example of Godard outflanking his producer, yet this is done by ascribing lurid intentionality to Levine, building on the well worn caricature of the sleazy, mercenary American producer, as well as the polarised art-versus-commerce, director-versus-producer debates that provide the film's main themes. For Jacques Aumont:

> Godard clearly cannot bear the idea that, in the conflict that always pits the producer against the director, he should fail to get the upper hand, or at least have the last word. The famous second shot of *Le Mépris* is a fine example of the art of how to have the last word: at the insistence of Levine … Godard added a long take of the sexy star, but what might have been a fetishistic reification of a body in box office terms is instead an affectionate, almost awestruck moment of contemplation. (Aumont, 1990: 176)

This is unconvincing, not least because it seeks to legitimate the reductive debate of Godard's film, and the traditional integrity hierarchy, by referencing "the conflict that *always* pits the producer against the director". Moreover, the suggestion that a paying public would be greater enticed by "fetishistic reification" than an "awestruck moment of contemplation" is an unprovable assumption. The scene is universally praised by academics and cinephiles alike -- why would the box office punter be disappointed?

Richard Neupert has noted that Godard has often benefited from generous interpretations of his work:

> When Godard took money from Carlo Ponti to make *A Married Woman* (1964) or *Le Mépris* he was said to parody the studio system, but when Chabrol shot *À Double Tour* (1959), a colour, international co-production, his importance for the New Wave was over. (Neupert, 2002: 129)

I would suggest that this has more than a little to do with Godard's carefully constructed public image as a rebel. As I have noted, Godard saw fit to pre-empt criticism and be seen by readers of *Cahiers du Cinéma* to distance himself from the cinéma de qualité. Subsequent weeks would see Godard play up the anarchist aspects of his public image in the international press, often with Levine and *Le Mépris* in his sights. With his publicity machine seemingly in overdrive, Godard railed publicly against Levine for not submitting *Le Mépris* to the Venice Film Festival (*Variety* 14 August 1963), criticised the wastefulness of the American film industry (with specific reference to *Le Mépris*) ("Very Little Left For Production," 1963) and praised himself for making *Le Mépris* dub-proof ("Plot To Rub Out Dub," 1963). Curiously, all of these stories found their way into *Variety* in the week before the New York premier of the Godard directed *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962).

In the US, *Le Mépris* was a critical and commercial failure. Many reviews were infused with an irritated, knowing weariness, displaying a soggy disdain for both Bardot's body and Godard. *The New Republic* declared sarcastically, "Those interested in Brigitte Bardot's behind in CinemaScope and in Color will find ample rewards in *Contempt*" (*New Republic*, 1965), whereas the *Motion Picture Herald* claimed that "aside from the spectacle of Miss Bardot seen nude from the rear and often there is little of commercial or artistic value" (*Motion Picture Herald*, 1964).

Most of the critics' ire, however, was directed at Godard. *The New Yorker* spoke of his "stunning self-indulgence" (*New Yorker*, 1964); *Time* described the film as "doodling disguised as art" (*Time*, 1965); whilst *The New Republic* railed against the film's now celebrated middle segment, calling it "an archetype of arrant egotism and bankrupt imagination in a director" (*New Republic*, 1965). Nonetheless, a little over a year later, Godard overlooked the film's hostile critical reception and blamed its failure on Levine: "*Le*

Mépris … was very badly produced by a distributor because he had no idea what sort of product he was turning out" (Narboni and Milne, 1972: 209).

Levine, however, had all but disowned the film. The marketing materials were lacklustre and the usual round of interviews befitting such a big budget, starry production did not materialise. In fact, Levine rarely mentioned the film and when he did so it was usually in response to another's praise for it. In 1965 Levine donated seven films to New York's Museum of Modern Art, and *Le Mépris* was not among them. When asked about the film by a representative of the museum Levine responded:

> "He's [Godard] what's wrong with the French film industry."
> "Well, he might be a little difficult."
> "Difficult? He's crazy. His efforts are studies to show his contempt for people. That's why he called the movie *Contempt*. That's why I didn't give it to you" (Lipsyte)

Levine certainly had a point. *Le Mépris* is universally recognised as being a film that, at least in part, expresses Godard's contempt for Levine; and whilst this may not necessarily translate to contempt for the wider public, offering an audience a film that is effectively a contribution to a personal, private vendetta demonstrates conceitedness bordering on narcissism.

Conclusion

When asked about a lecture he had given at Dartmouth College, Levine told Calvin Tomkins that the assembled audience had questioned him about *Le Mépris*:

> I told them it was the worst film we ever made -- maybe the worst film *anybody* ever made. We lost a million bucks on that lousy film because the *great* director Jean-Luc Godard refused to follow the script … He never even answered our cables" (Tomkins, 1966: 55-136; emphasis in original).

Nowhere else has Levine spoken with such venom about a film with which he was involved. There are three main bones of contention; script following and cable answering didn't really fit into the Godard way of filmmaking, but there is still the overarching question of the "million bucks." Godard was a director for hire; he was never meant to have an entirely free hand. Levine had paid for something and got something else, so his anger is understandable.

If it is perhaps crass or unseemly to talk about the financial aspects of art, then one can look at things another way. Placed in terms of class, Levine hailed from the grinding poverty of Boston's West End, and it was the company he built who provided the money that was squandered by a privileged "bad boy" who, as Coutard said, "couldn't do exactly as he wanted."

Whatever one's qualitative opinion of *Le Mépris*, there is little doubt that writing about this film has always tended to be generous to Godard to the detriment of Levine; and the circumstantial evidence used to bolster this view invariably invokes the stereotype of the American producer along with the myth of the auteur. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this film, its meaning, contexts and the attendant political struggles, I would suggest that the time has come to take Levine out of the firing line.

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