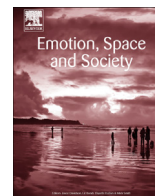




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Touching the Virgin. On the politics of intimacy in Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary*[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper is guided by a conviction common to Godard and Merleau-Ponty: namely, that the special power of art is its ability to show up for us the invisible, what was previously unseen, and thereby to shape intimately, to transform, our own perceptions of the world. Art can thereby bring us into a more intimate contact with reality. With reference especially to Godard's film *Hail Mary*, the paper argues that Godard distinguishes between two ways of approaching the human body: on the one hand, it can be approached as prostituted thing – which has the effect of developing in the prostituted person a kind of absence to herself and to others, a dispossession of herself and an anesthesia to her own and others' affective life. On the other hand, the human body can be approached as sacredly human – in which case we will touch that body very differently, expressing our presence to its embodied divinity precisely by withdrawing our touch and leaving space for its own desires. It is proposed that Godard's filmmaking aims at precisely this kind of withdrawal and letting be, and that thereby he awakens his viewers to, makes them more intimate with, the sacred in the human.

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1. Introduction

This text proposes an existential reading of Jean-Luc Godard's film *Hail Mary* (1985).¹ Beginning with a description of the filmmaker's relation to the philosophical thinking of his time, it goes on to describe the way he represents the (female) body in different films of the 1980s. The inquiry into the question of the body in Godard highlights two phenomena opposed to each other according to their existential relevance: prostitution and desire. Prostitution is described by Godard as a state of insensitivity; this can be opposed to Mary's attitude in teaching Joseph to respect and love her own desire. This claim is founded on a close analysis of a key scene in *Hail Mary* where Joseph is allowed to touch Mary, albeit through a peculiar gesture, by removing his hand. Such a gesture is not only significant in the perspective of a discourse on love, but it also has deep political implications. Indeed the use of a figure from

the Christian tradition, allows for a renewed understanding of the political implication of Godard's cinema: Godard develops, through his films, our capacity for perception, in particular our capacity to perceive the power relations between people. The theological dimension of *Hail Mary* stems from the awareness of the failure of perception and thus the need for redemption. The redemption in question is, however, not the familiar Christian notion of redemption, but, as Godard states in his *Historie(s) of cinema*, the "redemption of the real". Mary, the Virgin, is in this respect a central figure, since she teaches Joseph (and the spectator) to see and touch in a manner that displays faith and confidence in the presence of the world and the readiness to accept the freedom of the other. We thus become witness to the root of a political cinema, from the intimacy of Mary's room to the great catastrophes of the last Century.

2. Godard as an existential philosopher

Godard often claimed, and still does, that his cinema is an activity of thinking. The cinematographic method used to do this thinking is editing (montage), i.e. bringing together images to create conjunctions and disjunctions in order to let the sense of the real appear. Godard's relation to philosophy is perhaps best expressed in this passage from an interview with the film critic Youssef Ishaghpour:

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When I was in high school, concerning existentialism [...], I remember this sentence: 'For existentialism, existence precedes the essence, whereas before, essence preceded existence'; therein, something was understood, something felt, an image arose ... I'd say, the book is essence, films are existence (Godard and Ishaghpour, 2000, 41)²

This philosophical vocation attributed to cinema by Godard echoes the philosophical relevance of cinema as Merleau-Ponty situates it in his lectures at the Collège de France. There, he explains that some non-philosophical practices, including cinema, give rise to philosophical problems more poignantly than academic philosophy itself. Without going into the details of this argument, I simply want to point out that Godard's emphasis on cinema as a means of thinking existence establishes him as one of the most prominent philosophic-artists, among others such as Proust, Cézanne and Klee. The link to Merleau-Ponty is furthermore confirmed by Godard scholars such as Raymond Bellour and Michael Witt. The latter claims that a large part of Godard's work is a reworking of the principle that cinema is about "making visible the links and relations between things and people instead of explaining them" (Witt, 1999, 116–117), a principle drawn directly from Merleau-Ponty's (1945) essay on cinema. In a famous passage from this essay, Merleau-Ponty explains that the appearance of things would be disrupted if we could see *as things* the interval between things (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 61). This could involve inverting figure and ground, and thus letting things appear in a new way, on a new ground, or it could amount to making the ground *as such* visible, which would mean letting the invisible be seen. The role of the artist according to Merleau-Ponty is precisely to make images that disrupt our relation to the world in order to enlarge and transform our ordinary perception. Godard very closely follows (or exemplifies) this ideal of the artist's role, as evident both in the way he describes his work in interviews and statements,³ and in the works themselves.

3. The prostituted body

The question of the ontological status of the body has been one of the key problems in phenomenological philosophy throughout the 20th Century, and still today. The body, on the phenomenological account, is taken not only as an organism, but also as the subject itself. This idea of a bodily subjectivity is introduced by Merleau-Ponty, first in the 40s, then more radically in his later writings published under the title *The Visible and the Invisible*. His key argument is that to be visible and to see are two faces of the same reality. In order to be able to see, I have to be visible. As Merleau-Ponty writes: "My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visibles with it. There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 138).⁴

² "Quand j'étais lycéen, à propos de l'existentialisme [...], je me souviens de cette phrase : «Pour l'existentialisme, l'existence précède l'essence tandis qu'avant, l'essence précédait l'existence», voilà, on comprenait quelque chose, on sentait quelque chose, on avait comme ça une image... je dirais que le livre, c'est l'essence, les films c'est l'existence".

³ Cf. for example his statement in the *Scénario de Je vous salue Marie*, a bonus track on the recently published DVD with *Hail Mary*: "I want to make films where one sees what remains usually unseen".

⁴ The French edition reads: "Mon corps comme chose visible est contenu dans le grand spectacle. Mais mon corps voyant sous-tend ce corps visible et tous les visibles avec lui. Il y a insertion réciproque et entrelacs de l'un dans l'autre." (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, 180). This text, *Le visible et l'invisible*, is henceforth referred to as VI, with pagination of the French edition given first, and English translation second.

I would like to argue that visibility and corporeality are among the central questions in Godard's work as well. The rapprochement of Godard with Merleau-Pontian thinking has not only to do with the conception of cinematographic practice, but also the themes treated in his films. One way of exploring the experience of the body in Godard's work is to look at a situation wherein the body is taken as an object: prostitution. Prostitution is a recurring theme in many of Godard's works, in particular in *Le mépris*, *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, and *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*. It is not only a feminine business: Paul Javal in *Le mépris* is also without a doubt a prostitute, although he does not sell his body directly. *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* presents the life of an ordinary young woman, Juliette Jeanson, played by Marina Vlady, living in a brand new Parisian suburb, prostituting herself occasionally in order to earn enough money to buy the dresses she and her friend think pretty. Godard does not show any violent, erotic or pornographic images of those activities; everything goes on apparently very smoothly. Juliette does not express any particular feeling about her situation, no reflectiveness, no joy, but no particular suffering either. This observation leads to a first statement about prostitution in Godard's works: in general, prostitution is presented in connection with an absence of sensitivity, with a peculiar kind of absence to oneself. Just as in *Le mépris*, wherein Paul Javal's selling himself to the producer Jerry Prokosh goes together with his blindness to his wife Camille's situation and feeling, Juliette Jeanson seems strangely absent from her own life.

This has at least two consequences: the first is a link between the capacity to perceive and the relation to one's body. More precisely prostitution bears with it a certain anesthesia both toward one's own affective life as well as toward others'. The latter is a bit more surprising: we are lead to the idea that prostitution entails a limitation of the perceptive capacities in general. In other words, the prostituted body is offered, but not open; it is offered as a closed being. Its capacity for perception is limited by its objectification, a situation which also prevents intimacy, precisely because intimacy requires an attention toward the other's affective life. This apparent paradox in prostitution is the central question I will try to address in the following pages. We will come to understand that the sacred has to do with the capacity of seeing and that this entails a determinate way of relating to bodies. Since Godard affirms on many occasions, in his films, in interviews, etc., the crucial importance of learning to see in order to understand how to act politically, we might conclude that Godard is more interested in this transcendental meaning of prostitution than in its psychological or sociological significance. The term 'transcendental' is used here in the sense of a condition of possibility of perceiving or knowing something. Speaking of a "transcendental meaning" of prostitution amounts to affirm that this activity does influence the perceptual capacities of the subject. In other words, one shouldn't understand his conception of prostitution as a judgment on the activity, but rather as an assertion of a possible manner of being existentially related to one's own and the other's body. For instance, it doesn't mean that intimacy is in principle impossible with a prostitute, but rather that the activity of prostitution is in essence contrary to intimacy.

If we look at another famous Godard film where prostitution is a central motive – *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, translated into English as *Slow Motion* – the characters are in a state of nearly absolute loneliness. The prostitute Isabelle, played by Isabelle Huppert, had to be, according to what Huppert says in an interview given as a bonus track on the recent DVD published by Gaumont, the "face of suffering". That was the only indication Godard gave the young actress in 1979. This seems paradoxical because, in fact, Isabelle has a rather inexpressive face throughout the film. She does not

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