

"Window Shopping"? -- Aesthetics of the Spectacular and *Cinéma du Look*

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They characterised capitalism as the society of the spectacle: a realm in which everything is removed from real experience and becomes an inverted representation of itself. The spectacle circumscribes reality and any experience or discourse which arises within it becomes spectacularised. Ordinary gestures and the activities of daily life are packaged as glamorous and seductive; commodities come complete with preordained roles and lifestyles; and even dissent and critique are commodified and sold to those who experience and produce them. (Plant, 1990: 154)

Cinéma du Look, initiated by Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva* (1981), marks in French cinema a break with the traditions of the *Nouvelle Vague* and the Auteur cinema. *Cinéma du Look* directors, Beineix, Luc Besson and Leo Carax have been heavily criticised for effacing content and depth in their films in favour of an aesthetic of the surface and depthlessness. The genre has been extensively attacked and blamed for celebrating and propagating consumer fetishism and commodity capitalism. These critical positions can be aligned with Guy Debord's theorisation of the spectacle, in that *Cinéma du Look* is criticised for its adherence to and promotion of the values of the society of the spectacle which Debord critiques. In this framework of thought, the spectacle consists of various specialised aesthetic mediations, spectacular aesthetics, which have the sole purpose of perpetuating relations of power, masked (or rather performed) as the power of the commodity and its image. Guy Debord argues in his late Situationist essay *Society of the Spectacle* that contemporary society expresses itself through the structure and phenomenon of the spectacle as a form of empty mediation, the degree zero of commodity culture and its absolute disappearance into the abyss of mediation, so that nothing remains except the "surface and nothing but the surface" (Debord, 1987). Similarly, *Cinéma du Look* has been criticised for promoting advertising and MTV videos, media of the superficial, under the guise of art.

This essay will argue that, on the contrary, *Cinéma du Look* indeed adopts the discourse of the spectacle but in order to subvert and undermine it -- fighting the spectacle with its very own weapons. Through the Situationist practice of *detournement* (the re-directing of meaning through juxtapositions, insertions and diversions of signs), *Cinéma du Look* turns back capitalist ideology onto itself, and re-turns aesthetics, co-opted by capitalism for advertising purposes, to the realm of art. Far from conforming to the characteristics of the spectacle as identified by the Situationists, *Cinéma du Look* continues and develops the Situationist tradition of critique of the spectacle. This reading suggests that *Cinéma du Look* follows the implications of Debord and Gil Wolman's remark that the advertising industry is one of the most fruitful to detourn, whilst cinema is the most obvious realm in which "*detournement* can attain its greatest efficacy, and undoubtedly, for those concerned with this aspect, its greatest beauty." (Debord, 1989: 12) This essay explores and closely analyses two films of the genre, *Diva* and *Les Amants du Pont Neuf* (1991), in order to argue that, far from expressing its co-option of film art, *Cinéma du Look* continues a tradition of cultural and political critique

which has origins in Dada and Surrealism, and finds its most recent expression in the Situationist critique of commodity capitalism.

Celebrating the Commodity?

"Wherever there is independent representation the spectacle asserts itself."
(Debord, 1987: 18)

Ferdinand Cuel states, commenting on *Diva*, "You think you are watching a film; you are just window-shopping", referring to the film specifically and to the genre generally as conforming to the empty mediations of signs in consumer capitalism most familiar in advertising (Cuel, 1981: 76). To describe the experience of watching *Diva* in such terms is to emphasise the emptiness of the transactions invited by the film -- no object is purchased by watching, no desire fulfilled. The general preference of *Cinéma du Look*, in this argument, seems to be for the image over the characters and the plot -- characters are described as superficial or two-dimensional, plot as conventional and predictable, implying "an acceptance of surface... in the play and circulation of images" (Powrie, 1997: 82). The films' spectacular aesthetics derive from "advertising's need to highlight its product" and are "in line with advertising practice which uses juxtapositions to renew the product it is promoting" (Powrie, 1997: 82), thereby erasing or failing to address any social or political concerns, leaving the viewer with "The image and nothing but the image" (Toubiana, 1991: 47).

Beineix's application of advertising discourse is not, as critics have argued, mere conformity to commodity culture and fetishism (Hayward, 1993: 233). His films, along with the *Cinéma du Look* genre as a whole, express a struggle to reclaim a particular iconography which has been co-opted and absorbed into the discourse of the spectacle.

Beineix states:

Advertising has never invented anything except what artists have invented... It appropriated the Beautiful which the cinema of the New Wave had rejected, which makes certain ignorant critics say that beautiful equals advertising. It kidnapped colour, which the cinema no longer violated, so preoccupied was it with being true to life, which makes certain cretinous critics say that colour equals advertising. (Powrie, 1997: 115)

Beineix refers to advertising as the "appropriation of the beautiful", the "kidnapping of colour" -- as a medium which never has been creative, but exists through violently appropriating and kidnapping artistic production, thereby disempowering art as a revolutionary medium -- a perspective shared with Situationism, as Mustapha Khayati comments, "power creates nothing, it recuperates" (Khayati, 1989: 173). Beineix's argument has roots in the Situationist assertion, in Sadie Plant's words, that: "The use of revolutionary propaganda to advertise such commodities as beer... or commercial services... are amongst the most blatant examples of this process." (Plant, 1996: 157) The spectacle assimilates artistic aesthetics in order to disempower and commodify the revolutionary potential of art through transforming it into a commercial discourse such as advertising. At the same time, art's revolutionary connotations are used to perpetuate the spectacle as revolutionary. The spectacle, as Beineix suggests, does not have any original or creative source but is parasitic upon sources that are pre-existent, including art.

However, the process of emptying revolutionary discourse of meaning was also evident from the beginning of the Socialist government in France in 1981 -- which coincided historically with Beineix's *Diva*. The government tried to pursue a centre-left position, thereby catering for the evolving Americanisation (globalisation) of France as well as Socialist policies. The Socialist government under Mitterand became increasingly centrist: "[It was] elected in 1981 on a platform of social reforms, but soon becoming indistinguishable from the right-wing government which preceded it." (Powrie, 1997: 83) The dangers of such a turn were that the term "Socialist" ceased to signify a socially or politically engaged position, but became emptied out of its meaning and was replaced by a domain of the commodity and its hierarchical superiority over and above the social. Plant describes this process: "Words forged by revolutionary critique are like partisans' weapons: abandoned on the battlefield, they fall into the hands of the counterrevolution and like prisoners of war are subjected to forced labour." (Plant, 1996: 173) In spectacular society, political reality and political positions cease to exist in any traditional sense and are instead replaced by and rendered as pure performance and banality, devoid of any social significance. As George Steiner notes in discussing a different political context, words and their meanings are easily appropriated:

In the idiom of fascism and communism, 'peace', 'freedom', 'progress', 'popular will' are as prominent as in the language of representative democracy. But they have their fiercely disparate meanings. The words of the adversary are appropriated and hurled against him. When antithetical meanings are forced upon the same word (Orwell's Newspeak), when the conceptual reach and valuation of a word can be altered by political decree, language loses credibility. (Steiner, 1975: 34)

A Socialist government whose policies serve business rather than society, through decisions like privatisation (a major contemporary topic in England), not only damages the social, but also corrupts and undermines (or rather empties out) the meaning of the word "socialist". The word, then, does not signify responsibility for the social any longer, but becomes something "New" -- an appropriation by commodity capitalism, which can be filled with new meanings. By extension, the application of revolutionary artistic material for consumer capitalist propaganda corrupts and tames the subversive forces of art in order to return them in a recycled way, promoting the "revolutionary" force of the commodity -- the commodity attaches to itself the emptied aura of the work of art. Of course, this practice of consumer capitalism is nothing "original" but has been appropriated from the revolutionary practice of Comte de Lautréamont, Surrealism and Situationism, namely *detournement*, in which signs are juxtaposed, fragmented and newly arranged in order to create new contents. Spectacular aesthetics like the juxtaposition of high and popular culture in painting, music and texts (or genres) essentially derive from Dadaist, Surrealist and Situationist expressions of and critiques of modernity. Debord states in his account of *detournement*:

Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations. The discoveries of modern poetry regarding the analogical structure of images demonstrate that when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed... Anything can be used. (Debord, 1956: 9)

Cinéma du Look takes Debord's assertion as a manifesto and produces a feast for the eyes in which juxtapositions are wildly displayed -- dramatic fire-works explode over desolate cityscapes (*Les Amants du Pont Neuf*, *Subway*, 1985; *Leon*, 1994); Rolls Royce wrecks

(*Diva*) counterpoint Rembrandts (*Les Amants du Pont Neuf*); Tosca (*Diva*) accompanies pop music (*Subway*); Martini, Coca Cola and Gitanes are part of the mise en scene happily mixing with Zen, opera and caviar (*Diva*); femmes lethals (*Nikita*, 1989; *Betty Blue*, 1986) encounter Lolitas (*Leon*), prostitutes (*Diva*) and lovers (*Les Amants du Pont Neuf*); glamorous backdrops of flashy colours (*Leon*) clash with blue periods (*Betty Blue*, *The Big Blue*, 1988) and romantic seascapes (*Diva*); Bambi goes along with the Smurfs (*Diva*); cities are labyrinths; the metro becomes a habitable and inhabited space (*Subway*). Throughout these films, the iconographies of contemporary consumer capitalism are juxtaposed with older, "significant" signs in a visual semiotic of excess, surface, display -- a culture of disaster *de luxe*. Through juxtaposing these elements, the signifiers of consumer capitalism and advertising are emptied out of meaning and reset, turned back, into an artistic context, refuelling the revolutionary connotations of art through the very practice found in, because co-opted by, advertising. Through this, *Cinéma du Look* films re-introduce a potent weapon against the spectacle, namely itself. Far from trying to "argue" from the outside against the spectacle, these films, being in the midst of the spectacle, understand it as creating situations, which enable them to reveal themselves to be representational "enemies within".

In this context Powrie's primary assertion above, on *Cinéma du Look*'s application of juxtapositions deriving from advertising practice to renew products, reveals how far the spectacle is taken as origin -- how far juxtaposition is rather associated with advertising than with art. This is also Beineix's recognition. He argues that certain critics say that beauty and colour equals advertising. Beineix's comment reveals the power of the spectacle -- the films are only understood by these critics as expressing support for (or at least neutral reflections of) commodity capitalism. This critical reception of *Cinéma du Look* as conforming to the spectacle of consumer capitalism, shows that the power of the spectacle works in terms of assimilating an entire artistic system and tradition, and turning it into a discourse of the commodity. This suggests the fallibility of criticism in relation to the spectacle, as Plant comments: "[T]he values, practices and conceptualisations with which criticism operates are predetermined by the dominant organisation of social and discursive relations" (Plant, 1996: 168). To misrecognise the spectacular of *Cinéma du Look* as originating in Debord's diagnosis of the spectacle is to indirectly prove the power of the spectacle to penetrate criticism, to erase history and position itself at the beginning as origin and centre, as Plant states: "placing it in the petrified ahistoricism of the spectacle" (Plant, 1996: 168). *Cinéma du Look*, through inaugurating these critical responses, points out the extent to which criticism itself is actually structured into the spectacle, so that even critical voices and artistic productions are not any longer dissociated from the spectacle but conform to and unconsciously support the "petrification of revolutionary theory into ideology" (Khayati, 1989: 173).

One of the characters, Cynthia, comments in *Diva* that "Business has to adapt to art and not art to business." This statement seems paradigmatic for *Diva* and *Cinéma du Look*. Beineix suggests through this character that he makes films which are art, not advertising. The subversion of and opposition to the spectacle, established at the level of the aesthetics of the film, are also manifest at further levels of mise en scène, characters and plot. These will be explored and discussed in the next sections which present two films, *Diva* and *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*.

Diva

Typical of the *Cinéma du Look* genre, as discussed above, and considered critically to be the first example of the genre, *Diva's* spectacular aesthetics are created through the absolute emphasis on the *mise en scène*, which prefers artificially constructed spaces, like the opera house, hotel rooms and lofts which are either cluttered with objects or highlight objects through situating them in big, empty spaces, generously displaying various brand names. The aesthetics of *Diva* consciously use advertising images and codes, a mixture of pop and high culture. The film shows the "primacy of the image itself, the commitment to the consumption of images and to the world's transformation into visual commodities, into a celebration of the scopophilic libido." (Jameson, 1992: 60) It is also, however, a celebration of art as the site of this libido.

Diva explores the aesthetics of the spectacular through its visual preoccupation with appearance, with doubles and copies, with forms of representation like cassette recordings and advertising images. These themes are present from the very first scene onwards. Jules, a postman, attends a recital by Cynthia Hawkins, an opera diva. He illegally tapes the concert, producing a copy, because of his love for her voice. Behind Jules sit two Japanese criminals who later on will chase this copy in order to mass-produce it, thus illegally reproducing Cynthia's voice as a marketable commodity. Their eyes are hidden by sunglasses, which in this opening scene mirror Cynthia's performance.

In *Diva*, the plot of an opera film is doubled by a plot which is a pastiche of the French *polar* or thriller. *Nadja*, a former prostitute (whose name connotes André Breton's *Nadja* (1928)) is on the run from a further pair of criminals called Le Curé and L'Antaille. Before she is murdered, she manages to slip a cassette recording into Jules' postbag. This recording identifies the police inspector Saporta as the head of a prostitution ring in Paris. Jules is therefore chased by two parties in pursuit of recordings he has in his possession. He receives help from his new acquaintances, Alba and her boyfriend, "a post-industrial, media jet-set style" Gorodish (Jameson, 1992: 59). "Alba" means white, which stands in contrast to the character's race -- Vietnamese. More importantly still Alba, is also the place in Italy where the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (a grouping closely linked to the Lettrist International) conference was held in May 1956. Many at this conference went on to become significant figures in the Situationist movement.

As Fredric Jameson argues, the characters of Jules and Gorodish form a political allegory. The "old," cluttered space Jules inhabits contrasts with Gorodish's postmodern setting of big empty spaces marked by neon blue colour, and the old, crumbling urban space of Paris fuses with the new hyper-modern space of the spectacle. These two opposing spaces, Jameson suggests, conform to the ideological terms set forth by the Right. However, *Diva* resolves this opposition through introducing an alliance and collaboration between the two parties which is mediated "by the theme of technological reproduction on the one hand (the tape itself, the electronic machinery) and by a range of third world women figures [Cynthia, Alba, Nadja and black prostitutes]" (Jameson, 1992: 59). Jameson's reading of the film as postmodernist settles on its intrinsic uncertainty, its offering of "solutions" which seem to be "a curious mixture of old and new", meanings which are undecidably "regressive or conservative... or historically original", a reading which perhaps paves the way for subsequent critical interpretations noted above (Jameson, 1992: 62).

In *Cinéma du Look* characters are placed in hostile spaces, which are dominated by commodities. The characters are alienated, sexual relationships are not shown (unless in terms of *amour fou* and a sexuality which is penetrated by madness as in *Betty Blue* or

sickness as in *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*), they are divorced from any past or future and devoid of social contact, living in an eternal present of the commodity. However, *Cinéma du Look* offers in the environment's hostility a starting point for the creation of social relationships -- turning weakness to strength. The characters in these films have to find their way through a social silence, through spaces which conform to the Situationist discussion of "lonely crowds": "The economic system [is] founded on isolation... all the goods selected by the spectacular system are also its weapons for a constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of 'lonely crowds'." (Debord, 1987: 28)

Whilst critics refer to the characters as "superficial caricatures," these characters quite contrarily represent the damage done to people by the spectacle. The lonely crowds in this scenario are no longer comprised of specific classes but cut across classes and cultures -- Gorodish, Jules, Alba and the Diva -- all of them seem to share in the same circumstances of isolation. Plant states that "Although specific to class society, alienation appears to bear all the attributes of an inevitable and all-pervasive human condition." (Plant, 1996: 154) The fusion between Jules and Gorodish, or between Michele (the middle-class woman) and Alex (the beggar) in *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*, results in the recognition of the all-pervasive, alienating power of the spectacle. The films' solution is to transform the isolation; to turn, to *detourne*, the spectacle's production of "lonely crowds" back on itself, producing an even more powerful revolutionary source of cross-classed bonding.

Throughout these films the question is asked: How can I establish meaningful relationships in a world where meaning ceases to exist and is replaced by empty mediation, and more accurately in a circumstance where the word "social" is emptied out of signification? *Cinéma du Look* puts forth (in Jameson's Althusserian phrase) "imaginary resolutions of real contradictions" (Jameson, 1992: 59). One of these solutions lies in art and artistic mediation as communication: opera in *Diva*, painting in *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*, literature in *Betty Blue*, and pop music in *Subway* serve the purpose of uniting people, bringing people together and creating a social dimension to the contexts that characters inhabit.

Spectacular Misrecognitions

Cynthia: Motorcycle?

Jules: No, mobilette.

Cynthia: Pilot?

Jules: No, postman.

Through this narrative a whole range of misrecognitions of the image as the only truth or reality are spun, revealing that "looking" alone -- in ironic contrast, perhaps, to the name of the genre that *Diva* inaugurates -- is misleading, that vision, which the spectacle finds to be "the privileged human sense" according to Debord, cannot be trusted. This is expressed through a number of specular mirrorings of the environment in chrome and water as well as in misunderstandings between the characters. For example, Jules enquires of the design on Alba's skirt, "The opera house?" -- which is countered by Alba's reply, "No, my arse"; Alba asks for a bendy straw and gets from Jules a petrol feed pipe.

The ever-occurring theme of misrecognition, of representation being the only reality which exists, is further elaborated in the scene where we first see Alba stealing a record (another recording) by hiding it in her portfolio of photographs. When, with Jules looking on, the shopkeeper suspiciously asks to see the contents of the folder, the only things he looks at are the naked photos of Alba, who then says: "Can I get dressed now?" (Later in the film, one of Jules' recordings -- the tape of Nadja's voice -- is revealed to contain an image, a reversal of this early scene.) In these scenes *Diva* asserts that the visual, the realm of the spectacle cannot be trusted. The film carefully outlines the distinctions between being and appearance:

Jules: She is beautiful, proud, sensual! A woman.

Cynthia: You think -- I could be all those things at once?

Jules: It's a role...

Cynthia: You meant Tosca not me.

Identity is one of the realms of spectacular misrecognitions in these films. Every instance fails to pin down identity as something credible out of the visible, revealing the visible, at the level of ideological formations, as corrupt and corrupted by power structures. This also inaugurates in the final instance the plot of Saporta, a police inspector who turns out to be the leader of the prostitution ring. These themes are further elaborated in a number of scenes where identity cards are employed but are shown to be meaningless and misleading. They are as Gorodish says "Idiot's Delight": Le Curè's ID-card is fake, Mortier's ID card is shown in the subway chase scene but is misread, and replied to by an old soldier's service ID. This set of events contrasts with the identities of the film's marginal figures, like the prostitutes who do not have names or whose name, as in the case of Nadja's surname, is constantly misspelled without this ever being recognised: Kalonsky, Whoojinsky. Here the signifier of identity shifts from the visible to the heard -- names are spoken but exist only as variable signifiers in written form (which is why cassette recordings figure authenticity and truth in the film -- Jules is a postman who finds himself embroiled in a post-literate intrigue of stolen voices, a kind of "Purloined Voice"). Motivated signifiers, like identity cards, are revealed, in *Diva*, to be potentially arbitrary in their signification, while arbitrary signifiers like the petrol pipe take on motivations in their investment with particular significatory functions. The film exploits the flexibility of the relationships between signifiers and signifieds in order to demonstrate how meanings can be detached and re-attached, diverted and redirected, producing new significations, just as Situationist thought insisted that meanings could be transformed through strategies of *detournement*.

The aesthetics of the spectacular in artistic terms is juxtaposed with a hierarchical social order whose domain is this aesthetics. As Powrie notes about the criminals Le Curè and L'Antillais who aid the police inspector, "They make comments on the desirability of order, comments which spectators cannot help but perceive as anything other than ironic... since order/disorder is precisely the structure on which the polar is predicated; but it is normally the order of bourgeois law." (Powrie, 1997: 112)

The order mediated by the spectacle is revealed as absolute disorder, through Saporta's double role, his "language of contradiction" or his Orwellian Doublespeak. It is Saporta who embodies how far the prevailing ruling class relies on the power of the image to assert its own version of power structures. In terms of appearance, he is the police inspector, but this

appearance conceals his role as the owner of the prostitution ring. He asserts the importance of the image in a world where he represents the social order of the spectacle which is decisive and illusionary; when he finally possesses Nadja's tape recording he reveals that it is not the recording which is important but the image, the photo inside: "Testimonies must always be signed, even on magnetic band. Here is the signature." In opposition to Jules and Gorodish, Saporta speaks the language of the spectacle as visual omnipotence. However, this photo is also the reassertion and prevalence of a culture which is geared around looking and which gives provenance to the picture, the image as signature, the signature of the visible (as Jameson might call it) as that which speaks the truth -- connoting originality and reference in the act of a reproductive force.

Over-reliance on visual appearance is also the downfall of the criminals in *Diva*. Visual appearance is closely linked to consumer capitalist myths about the commodity. One of these is the myth of the uniqueness of a product (Debord, 1987: 3). The myth of spectacular uniqueness is most clearly subverted in the film through Gorodish's vintage Citroen with which he tricks Saporta, who wants Nadja's tape, and the criminals of the recording industry, who want the bootleg of Cynthia's recital. The car seems to be unique, a signifier of nostalgic authenticity. Suddenly it is revealed that the car is one of a pair, paralleling all the other pairs and doubles that structure the film (two pairs of criminals, two tapes, two useless cops, two black women, etc.). The doubled car, when it explodes with the Japanese criminals seated in it, represents the fate of those, in *Diva*, who represent commodification in mass production -- the criminals who want to copy Cynthia's voice are destroyed in the copy of the seemingly unique car. Similarly, Saporta dies through over reliance on his eyes, by an optical trick played by Gorodish, who "despatches villains by sheer optical, perceptual, 'representational' trickery, so that it is their own traditional habits of space that destroy them." (Jameson, 1992: 56)

Diva and Advertising

"What the Spectacle Offers as Eternal..." (Debord, 1987: 71)

Diva extensively uses a visual discourse similar to that of advertising. Powrie describes the aim of advertising strategies as giving commodities the "strangeness of novelty" (Powrie, 1997: 28). According to Debord, the commodity has to perpetuate its own myth of omnipotence and omnipresence (Debord, 1987: 71). In order to carry this connotation (it exists by itself) it has to appear not only new and unique, but also divorced from any notion of human labour -- untouched and virginal. This effacement of the mode of production is most evident in advertising. However, cinematic illusion and verisimilitude are established partially through the erasure of cinematic technology, so for example the spectacular, show-like character of a given film is revealed if a microphone accidentally appears in the filmic image.

Diva reveals and analyses the commodity's myth of the erasure of the mode of human production. The production of labour is foregrounded by subtle insertions of cleaners and servants into the spectacular space of the Diva, which no longer appears as something given, divorced from its productive force. One such scene is Alba's preparation of Jules' breakfast in the lighthouse. "Preparation" per se is misleading, because the actual gist is that the breakfast seems ready prepared by itself. It suggests any advert for coffee or margarine: crowned with a soft warm sunrise, steaming hot coffee in a nostalgic pot, and an exotic woman. No traces of labour are shown, no bread crumbs, no dirty tools, so that the aesthetics, of course spectacular

in character, connote beauty and cleanliness, as Saporta the police inspector likes to say: "Clean!" -- a stereotypical advertising cliché. However, at the end of the scene the camera pans down, along the leg of the table to the floor and focuses in on a coffee stain. This "insertion", diversion, the "stain of the real" in Zizekian terms, this trace of human labour and production disrupts the cleanliness of the image through reintroducing labour into its equation. The camera pans down, dragging down the myth of the commodity's omnipotent and god-like character to the earth of human mortality.

A further "insertion" can be found in the close up of the oversized nude on Jules' floor. It is reminiscent of American 1960s kitsch nostalgic advertising. Here again the gloss and cleanliness, the ideal of the image, is ruptured by a cigarette end which lies on the image -- by a relic of human waste and presence. The traces of labour, of production and of mortality are reintroduced -- similar to the flies in *Vanitas* paintings, smashing the spectacle's myth, constructed by advertising, of eternity -- reminiscent of Gorodish's comment: "Finally disorder". The film deconstructs through these devices the spectacle's spectacular aesthetics, the mythic notion of an independent beauty and life of the commodity -- the commodity as ideal -- divorced from human production and human waste. The film does not miss subverting the discourse of the commodity through asserting its unreliability in the definition of identity and through the application of "insertions", which dismantle the commodity's signifiers of novelty and uniqueness, revealing them as fake.

Les Amants du Pont Neuf

Ten years after *Diva* and after the start of the Socialist Government in France, Leo Carax made *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*. The film overtly exploits notions of the spectacle and expresses a critical relationship to mainstream French society which is explicitly identified as one dominated by spectacular effects.

The film focuses on homelessness. Michele, a former art student from a high middle-class background, who is going blind, finds shelter on Paris's *Pont Neuf*, which is closed for repair works, sharing the bridge with the homeless Alex and his self-acclaimed landlord and drug provider Hans. Michele and Alex enter into a spiral of *amour fou*, which is endangered by a chance to heal Michele's illness, her memories of her past lover and Alex's clinginess. The characters stand in ironic contrast with the backdrop of the luxurious Parisian celebrations of the Bicentenary of the Revolution which is represented through the spectacular aesthetics produced by a dramatic display of the cityscape, through fireworks, explosions and excess -- a paradigmatic example of the spectacle's ability to assimilate and nullify political revolution.

Spectacle, Homelessness and Personal History

Alex: Nobody can teach me to forget!

The spectacle in this film is criticised and exposed through the establishment of dichotomies on one level, and the deconstruction of these on another level. On the first level the film establishes the homeless in contrast to society, the celebrating crowd in conventional, capitalist ideological relations, forming oppositions of homeless/society (of the spectacle -- as the society is positioned in the field of the celebration, whilst the homeless are excluded from it), absence/presence, ahistory/history, marked by the celebration. However, on a second level, the film *detournes* these dichotomies in order to show that society and history are absent in and through the spectacle, stating that the homeless consist of nobody other than

society in the spectacle. Rather than pointing out the differences between the two poles of each opposition, Carax states the horrific similarities, pointing to us, as those who are homeless and divorced from history, as one of the scarce dialogues in the film states:

Michele: So you weren't always like this?

Hans: No. I earned a living, I paid rent, I wasn't unattractive.

However, the film goes further and, through inverting these oppositions asserts the struggle of the homeless, as a struggle for history, art and love -- a struggle against the lethargy and apathy of the spectacle.

The film establishes the homeless as those who are absent from society, who are ghosts and ghouls haunting the Parisian streets by night, being removed by the police like "litter" and "shit" -- as Alex says: "The whole town has gone to bed. We can go for a walk." The field of the homeless at this level seems to be the field of the Other. However, on closer examination, the representation of society problematises this clear-cut opposition. The primary sign of the social, the crowd, is missing. People outside of the homeless community are represented as fragmented synecdoches, reduced and condensed to hands and feet. In one of the rare moments where the celebrating crowd is actually shown, the filmic image is out of focus, is shaken, fractured by jump cuts and frenzied movement as if the camera is out of control. A single man is shown at the height of the celebration -- he is crouching on a chair, alone, drunk and asleep, his environment littered with the fancy colours of red, white and blue confetti, papersnakes, rosettes and other decorations. Society here is represented as an "implied" society, a metonymically constituted crowd which only exists on the level of the spectacle, on the level of the luscious fire-works and light games. *Les Amants du Pont Neuf* deconstructs society as absent, as a fragmented ghost that is haunting the homeless. The people who constitute "society" are those who are homeless, to such an extent that they cease to exist at the level of the real and are reconstituted and reconstructed as a site of the spectacle. In this last move the spectacle of the celebration has replaced the crowds -- a celebration in which the images consume the real event of the revolution, conforming to the spectacle's refusal "within history of history itself" (Debord, 1987: 145).

Ahistoric Spectacles

Michele: They finished repairs -- it's safe now.

The Pont Neuf is as much the shelter of the three main characters as a historical site -- a historical site as shelter. In this role, the bridge fulfils an allegorical function, an allegory of history. The bridge's architecture is demolished -- old lanterns and cobblestones are lying scattered on the road -- symbolic of the historical condition which it represents. However, the bridge is closed off to the public (a sign in English states "Dangerous") until it is reconstructed. Read in allegorical terms, the bridge stands for a history which is inaccessible to contemporary society. The sign, allegorically read, already warns from history and connotes the process of "renovating" and renewing history. Michele informs Alex, three years after the repairs were done that "the bridge is safe now", to be ironically contradicted by their reunion on the newly reconstructed bridge through being nearly run over by cars in the busy traffic -- reminiscent of the Situationist statement: "Keeping traffic moving is the opposite of allowing people to meet." (Kotanyi and Vaneigem, 1998: 25)

History is also the realm of the characters who, in relation to the celebration, are divorced from any past. In *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*, the characters' struggle becomes also a struggle for personal history, a history that is inarticulable. Michele repeatedly tries to assert: "One day I tell you about me," "I have to tell you something about me you don't know" -- promises which are never fulfilled. However, the struggle for personal history and memory manifests itself in this film in *gravure*, as much in writing as in painting and drawing. Michele's past can only be sketchily outlined through letters, scraps of her diary and her drawings. When Alex asks Michele how she painted him, she answers: "From memory". Similarly the last desire Michele has regarding her ex-boyfriend is to be able to paint him a last time -- painting, or more importantly *gravure* becomes here the only way of ensuring, memory and history. This is especially evident in the beaten, damaged and destroyed bodies of the homeless -- tattoos, the wounds and marks of fights and rough living become the engraved memorabilia of the people's past in contrast with the impossibility of articulating historical experience. Alex inflicts cuts on himself and shoots his finger off while asserting that "Nobody can teach me to forget" -- as if every other form of memory and history would be otherwise in danger of being corrupted by the spectacle, in which words and their meanings become emptied of their supposed historical significance. The homeless in this film try to resist the spectacle "as the present social organisation of the paralysis of history and memory" (Debord, 1987: 158).

The history being celebrated, in contrast to the bridge's symbolic meanings and the desperate attempts by characters to memorise personal pasts, is characterised by the empty display of glamour, corresponding to Paris's name as the *Ville lumière* -- an illumination which, however, blinds Michele. The celebration represents the epoch of the spectacle:

The epoch which displays its time to itself as essentially the sudden return of multiple festivities is also an epoch without festivals... The moment of a community's participation in the luxurious expenditure of life is impossible for the society without community or luxury (Debord, 1987: 154).

Les Amants du Pont Neuf and the Aesthetics of the Spectacular

Hans: Look around -- there is no place for love.

The film's application of spectacular aesthetics expresses the power of the commodity which propagates itself as more real and important than human existence. Hans' assertion in *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*: "Look around -- there is no place for love" is accompanied by a background of the cityscape which is highlighted by two buildings bearing the written signs "Conforama" and "Samaritain". This statement expresses the overriding capacity of a spectacular aesthetics in a consumer culture: "Look around" refers to the visual sense, as Debord stated the major channel for the spectacle. "There is no place for love" refers to a space which is already cluttered and crowded with commodities and the excesses of consumer capitalism which have found their places in the *Ville lumière*, the city of revolution. The homeless in this film seem to be marginalised and squeezed out by the spectacular backdrop which has taken their places, their homes, reminiscent of Debord's comment: "The spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere." (Debord, 1987: 30) The spectacle is so powerful as to replace and supplant the place of love and the desired object; Debord argues that the spectacle "places itself as the desired object." (Debord, 1987: 69) The film's *mise en scène* shows the cityscape as being dominated by the "Conforama" sign. The word is a condensation of "conform" and "-rama", the Latin word for "view",

combined with each other to mean "conforming through view". This may be taken as the leitmotif of a society blinded by the spectacle (blindness being an ironically common motif in cinema du look -- Michele fights against going blind; Betty Blue in *Betty Blue* pokes her eye out; the supposedly blind beggar in *Diva* shouts "I don't believe my eyes" when he sees the bundle of money). The "look" is blinded by objects rather than love and humanity -- as Debord states: "The spectacle does not sing the praise of men and their weapons, but of commodities and their passions", and this is explicitly demonstrated by the celebration being divorced from the actual heroes of the revolution and instead replaced by a spectacle (Debord, 1987: 66). Whilst the film tears down the spectacular at the level of a consumer capitalist critique, it re-establishes it at the level of art, which attains existential importance for the characters -- the only way out of the spectacular as spectacle is to find and to reinvest the spectacular, and through it human expression, as artistic.

The struggle for love is also a struggle for art, in Michele's case expressed through a struggle for sight. Art is endangered in a number of films of the genre: like writing in *Betty Blue*, opera in *Diva* and pop-music in *Subway*. Art attains the character of being a niche of self-expression and self-exploration. Hans fulfils the characteristics of the mythological figure of a key-keeper -- before he was homeless, he used to be a guard, a keeper for various places to which he still possesses the keys. Hans is omniscient, a God-like character, as he has the power to penetrate all social spaces as a caretaker: "I was a caretaker. In factories, block of flats, cemeteries." However, the only key he uses is the one to the museum, to art, in order to fulfil Michele's last wish -- before going blind -- to see a painting. In the light of the character of Hans being acted by a German theatre director, it might be argued that Carax sees the role of the film director as the key to art in a world dominated by commerce (Thompson, 1992: 8).

The painting Michele looks at is a self-portrait by Rembrandt which directly addresses the spectator, connoting (quite apart from the conventional authority of Dutch art) that art is a source of self definition, but also defines and explores others: Michele wants to paint others as a means of defining herself. Art, in its spectacular expression in *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*, is the source of life and love. Michele embraces Hans, after having looked at the painting, and their heartbeats can be heard -- a kind of genuine love is experienced, a rare occurrence in *Cinéma du Look*.

Conclusion

Cinéma du Look has been extensively criticised for propagating consumer capitalism as a desirable condition. As has been shown in this essay, this criticism misrecognises *Cinéma du Look* which, contrarily to the critics' assertions, adheres to elements of the wider Situationist project of *detournement* -- thereby offering a subtle way of undermining and subverting the spectacle in and through art. *Cinéma du Look* responds in direct and indirect ways to its contemporary political contexts, critiquing these contexts and the ideological issues they posit by seeking to offer imaginary solutions to real problems. Among these problems the issue of the emptying out of meaning looms large, in relation to the appropriation of revolutionary discourses by the spectacle, and the implications of this appropriation for the rhetorical and political effectiveness of a Socialist agenda. *Cinéma du Look* responds to this appropriation by appropriating for itself the ideology of the spectacle. Whilst the spectacle in all its volume and size is established on one level, it is continually detoured through juxtapositions, insertions and diversions. These displace the spectacle into a new, artistic context, demonstrating that the Surrealist "fortuitous encounter, between an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table" is invested with contemporary significance. Endless diversions

twist and turn the spectacular until its pathetic truth is revealed -- thereby re-opening the flow of the subversive power of art. *Diva* and *Les Amants du Pont Neuf* tear the spectacle apart, and reclaim colour, beauty and spectacular aesthetics for the artistic field, thereby demonstrating Debord's assertion that "power's own thought is becoming in our hands a weapon against power." (Khayati, 1989: 171)

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