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**COLONIZING A COLONIZER: REPRESSION, MYTH AND MIMESIS
IN MARCEL CARNÉ'S *LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS***

Abstract:

This paper uncovers a colonial unconscious in Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1943–45) as it interrogates post-structuralist theories on myth, mythologies, love and mimesis, including writings by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. The paper argues that in *Les Enfants du Paradis* Marcel Carné startles his viewers with the most cinematic mode possible of a theatrical drama set in the Parisian Vaudeville of the 1840s, mixing myth with political connotations to a maximum degree, thus creating film language that works on multiple levels of signification simultaneously. Shot and produced during World War II and the infamous Vichy occupation of France, it is not farfetched to assume that *Les Enfants du Paradis* includes political allegories. But the film is more than just the sum of its political allusions, embodying a desire for decolonization as France disengages from World War II and involves itself deeper and deeper into the messy business of colonial violence in North Africa.

Keywords:

Colonialism, *Les Enfants du Paradis*, Marcel Carné, WWII History, Vichy Regime, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Mythologies, Myth, Mimesis, Repression, Narcissus, Echo, Colonial Unconscious

“The scene illustrates but the idea, not any actual action, in a hymen (out of which flows Dream), tainted with vice yet sacred, between desire and fulfillment, perpetration and remembrance: here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, under the false appearance of a present. That is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror: he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction.”

(Mallarmé: Mimique)

Through a Barthesian probing for imbricate significations in Marcel Carné’s *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1943–45), this paper raises the following question: does history have any material reality outside language? If so, how do we decipher language to arrive at this history? In a remarkable work on film language and its relationship to history, Mark Ferro asks a difficult question about the historical reality of which film could indeed be the image. To agree that there is a different reality that films say without saying is to enter, inevitably into a mode of interpretation where the work of art stands for something else other than itself. What semantic tools do we need in order to detect this historical unconscious in film language? This ‘dig’ into history from non-familiar sources matters, especially when this history is intentionally silenced, or smoothed out in cleaner and official versions. Looking for alternative versions of history or finding history in unfamiliar texts and celluloid matters, and it matters in the full semantic potentiality of the word “matter” itself, both as an indispensable element of our thought and a concrete materiality that forms and informs the production of historical knowledge. History is 1492, The Reformation, the American Revolution, 1948, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. History is also the Scramble to Africa, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and Apartheid. In today’s academic world, however, history has acquired a different materiality and became a discourse of selectivity and ideological biases, one whose very writing is often dictated by the politics of the present. Fredric Jameson has repeatedly reminded us of the aporiac nature of history, namely, that it cannot be reduced to text yet is only made available to us through text. History is text, then, plain and simple, an incomplete act of language, incomplete because history is more than just language and because language itself—as a communicative system of visual, acoustic, or written signs—will always be lacking the evidentiary ‘referent’ to support the veracity of the (hi)stories we tell. What then gets emphasized, glorified, celebrated when we write or film history, be it with a pen or a camera stylo à la Alexandre Astruc, whether consciously or not, and what remains left out, entombed and silenced?

In *Les Enfants du Paradis* Carné startles his viewers with the most cinematic mode possible of a theatrical drama set in the Parisian Vaudeville of the 1840s. It is one that navigates between the shores of primary narrative, myth, and political connotations, without stopping off at any single one. Despite the alluring biblical title, Carné’s is not a Christian allegory, but rather a cinematic tour de

force filled with strong mythological elements at work in the character delineation. These mythologies seem to work on multiple levels of signification where a higher semiological system of "myth" à la Roland Barthes allows for a deeper exploration of various layers of meaning. This paper investigates those imbrications in light of the historical quandary which witnessed the production and release of *Les Enfants du Paradis*, a film that for many viewers still has a canonical position as one of the most exquisite achievements of France's film industry.

Shot and produced during World War II and the infamous Vichy occupation of France, it is not farfetched to assume that the film includes political allegories. Some could see Garance as France, or a vision of France insisting on claiming herself to herself as long as she is "occupied" by various tempters; the Count could be the quintessential Bazinian type of a corrupt nobility, perhaps even the Nazi Regime in its vicious attempt to lock Garance for years; Baptiste and Frederick could reasonably be seen to symbolize the good old Paris which Walter Benjamin glorifies as "the capital of the nineteenth century," with all its artistic grandeurs and its Golden Age of the Theater. As to Lacenaire, it might just suffice to see him as an anarchist turned freedom fighter, whose long criminal record is redeemed when he murders the Count at the bathhouse, regardless of what such an exploitive character stands for.

French cultural and literary thought post WWII investigated different meanings of myth. But in order not to confuse structuralist and poststructuralist definitions of "myth" as a signifying process in language, the approach to "myth" in this paper will employ both its original form and Barthes' reference to it in terms of ideology. First, myth in its original form is "myth" in an essential conceptual basis as a classical human construction and a pattern of an already consumed narrative that belongs to a long shadowed past. In this regard, the Ovidian myth of Narcissus and Echo appear to govern the thematic and stylistic contours of Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis*, and to work strongly on every self/self and self/other relationship that the film narrative and visual style allow us to capture. This mythic element manifests itself in the Narcissus-like collision among characters, a collision between selfish desires and the inaccessibility of their fulfillment. At heart, Narcissus's myth embodies self-reflection and the exclusion of other (Narcissus), as well as the inability to communicate or reciprocate (Echo). Self-love does not mean simply the love of the self, but what Jean-Luc Nancy described as "the love of one's own excellence in so far as it is one's own... no longer a possession. It is the love of the self as property.... It does not designate the object possessed, but the subject in the object."¹

Secondly, when the sign in film language becomes a signifier of something else, then we arrive at a richer mythical system of signification, what Barthes refers to as "a special condition of language." For instance, the function of the "mirror" and the "mime" in Carné's film achieve this condition quite abundantly in that they become signs and as well as signifiers in the convoluted rectangle of relationships

between Baptiste, Garance, Frederick, and Natalie. Thematically, each of these characters seems to reflect the Ovidian mini tragedy of Narcissus and Echo. More importantly, through this undercurrent level of representing the myth of Narcissus and Echo, the characters enter into a symbolic realm of signification. Thus, in the Natalie–Baptiste–Frederick–Garance square of unrequited love, every character’s relationship to the other puts into question each character’s relationship to itself and each character’s relationship to the society it represents. Interestingly enough, what we also have in these remarkably knotted relationships is a rotation of role-playing in which each character plays Narcissus at a certain point and Echo at another, each character is peculiarly capable of victimizing one character and of falling victim to the other. We see this reflected more clearly in the Natalie–Baptiste–Garance triangle.

Written in 1957, Barthes’s *Mythologies* is primarily regarded as a critique of mass culture, “by treating collective representations as sign systems” to “account in detail for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature”². According to Barthes, realist art takes for granted the apparent connections between signifier and signified, and constructs reality based on such an innocent precept³. Following the Saussurian pattern of structuralism, Barthes undertakes to introduce a second-order semiological system (myth) as a means to re-read contemporary cultural signs in order to demystify the ‘representational’ quality of ‘signs.’⁴ Briefly put, this theory works on two levels; first, the well-known Saussurian triad of ‘signifier/concept (tree),’ ‘signified/*image acoustique*’ and their offspring the ‘sign’; this is the level of “language.” Secondly, we have the level of ‘myth’ which, is “constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it.” This level then takes the already constituted ‘sign’ of the first-order semiological level (language), empties the “raw material” (M114) of the first ‘sign’ and uses this very ‘sign’ as a new signifier and as a “final term which will become the first term of the greater system which it builds and of which it is a part”(M115). In this parasitic operation the second-order level of semiology feeds on the first one and departs it so that it (the new sign/signification) might become open to the “total term or global sign”(M115). In Carné’s film, the “mirror” and the “mime” pass through this process from language to myth, acquiring, so to speak, different connotations in the symbolic “mythic” than in their first meaning in language.

A major obstacle in Barthes’ approach, however, would be the risk of reduction. It is true that in structural approaches the individual is downplayed in favor of the group and the fundamental awareness of the collective character of human existence. Barthes’s *Mythologies* is not an exception to this reductionist trend. The book conceives of ideology as a system of ideas, and in his particular case as the product of a ruling class which forms the reality of society. This gap between bourgeois and proletariat which brought about the middle emergent and ambitious group is highlighted in Barthes’s structuralist concept of myth. Given this collective outlook, it might not be fair to apply Barthes to Carné or subject the latter to the

essentialism of the former. However, *Les Enfants du Paradis* is still exemplary because to some extent it acknowledges or perhaps entertains the possibility of this kind of reading. The film consciously confirms the celebration of popular culture in a Vichy occupied France (1940–1944) and works at the same time as a majestic poem on the follies of love. To Barthes, it is myth which takes over the ideas embodied in high culture and makes them familiar:

It is therefore by penetrating the intermediate classes that the bourgeois ideology can most surely lose its name. Petit-Bourgeois norms are the residue of bourgeois culture, they are bourgeois truth which have become degraded, impoverished, commercialized, slightly archaic, or shall we say, out of date? ... By spreading its representations over the whole of catalogue of collective images for petit-bourgeois use, the bourgeois countenances the illusory lack of differentiation between social classes.⁵

The “mirror” as a visual signifier plays an important semiological role in the technical and thematic structuration of *Les Enfants du Paradis*, moving from mere denotation to deeper layers of connotation that reach Barthes’s mythic level. In the early shots of the movie, Garance’s body is revealed to the audience (the scopophilic onlookers of le Boulevard du Crime as well as the cinema viewers) as frustration, as that which reveals less than what it promises. This visual inaccessibility of the body is an extreme version of what the Ovidian Narcissus experiences in the limpid pool. After the seductive shouting of “l’aboyeur” for people to come in and behold “la pure vérité” of Garance which will make them “penserez le jour, reverrez la nuit,” a group of men enter to find a beautiful young woman sitting in a bath tub, covered with water to her shoulders, and holding a mirror in her right hand at which she is looking pensively.

Carné’s camera repeatedly emphasizes the symbiosis of Garance and her image. She is always defined in relationship to a mirror. In the film, she plays the part that Derrida in a different context would refer to as the “imaginary being” to every one of the four characters in love with her. Edward Baron Turk rightly defines her as “less a woman than a fetish or icon.”⁶ She appears in the first-semiological level of the film’s narrative as a target of love. Let us take a closer look at the shift of the “mirror” from a linguistic to a mythical sign and from its simple denotative value to more complex and thematically intricate connotations throughout the film.



Garance's mirror could quite possibly be considered an "alibi of Art,"⁷ as Barthes puts it, exactly like other filmic props including feathers, fur, and gloves that accompany the professional dancing behind which a striptease hides. But Garance's self-self relationship has more thematic significance than being just a tool to hide her shyness. The mirror in a first level of the semiological system establishes a separation between self and other. It also stresses the theme of inaccessibility of 'being' in the Heideggerian sense. In a different context, Jacques Derrida relates the signification of the mirror to that of the pantomime and to theater, which in the film reflects what Baptiste does as an artists:

And the mirror, too, reverses its dreamlike function: while once it bespoke the painful inaccessibility of being, now it serves to play a being that is inaccessible but nonetheless real, an imaginary being. Out of here and now, objectified in the flesh that is both opaque and contingent, theater and pantomime claim to rediscover the transcendence of the greater yonder... the theatrical world's existence is solely mental: under that heading one can only gain access to it by detaching oneself from the everyday world, through the dreamed –of crossing of an interval.⁸

To extend the Derridean argument we could say that the mirror to Garance is what the mime represents to Baptiste. However, this argument might lead us to the tempting conclusion that miming is some sort of a mirror, or to use a quote from Hamlet, that the function of art is "to hold the mirror up to nature" [my italics]. But this could be a hurried argument and a quick dismissal of their essential differences for one important reason. What Carné's camera does to this shot of Garance in the bath-tub is a reversal if not a disruption of the verbal message of the "spectacle voluptueux, audacieux, et troublant" in the sense that it unveils to viewer the naked truth not of Garance's body, but of her attitude throughout the film. In his insightful study *Les Enfants du Paradis*, Jill Forbes links Garance's character to the materiality and emptiness of her own mirror:

The mirror emphasizes her solipsism and explains why, as a character, she is strangely lifeless, a montage of iconic images, memories of women culled from repertoire of American and European cinema. She is depicted from the outset, as a distant and self-absorbed 'moon-goddess' and she becomes progressively colder as the film advances.⁹

But Forbes limits her argument to one fixed idea of the ambiguity of gender relations, seeing Baptiste as playing a female role and Garance as wearing the pants. To see Carné as presenting a reversed gender pattern is to step on a precarious ground, because this reversal is not maintained throughout the film. It

is true that Garance is more positive in her relations with the others, but mere audacity and positivity are not actually gender-specific features. Garance still keeps her sexuality and her feminine charm intact, so much that they become her major 'weapons of man destruction' in the film.

Another instance of the "mirror" functioning as a mythic sign in Carné's film takes place in the shot sequence of Garance and Lacenaire in the Count's Paris house. After her return from Baptiste's show, and in fact after her six or seven years of absence, Garance meets with Lacenaire before the mirrored wall in the upstairs foyer. She looks at her reflection in the mirror but could only see Lacenaire, and when he looks at the mirror, he could only see her.

This image inversion implies parallelism. If there is any narrative necessity for this particular mirror image in the movie, it is to allow us to delve deep into more than



mere surface reflections by presenting Garance and Lacenaire as resembling each other: both are profiteering figures that live on the wealth of others. Rather than being used as a simple sign of reflection in the first level of linguistic signification, the mirror in Carné's film surpasses even its possible cinematic function as a technical device that extends the space of the shot by revealing objects and people that would otherwise be invisible, and acts mythically as a thematic signifier that penetrates the psychology of characters to show their internal similarities.

Carné repeats the same device in the following shot, where the count is seated in the left foreground of the shot while Garance facing the mirror to his right. Although the count sits with his back to her, he is facing the camera, and although she sits with her back to him, we can see her facial features reflected on her bedroom mirror, so that we can only see them through the mirror. The shot oscillates between two mirror figures, and the mirror reinforces the split in their marriage. This mirror mediation in character representation implies artificiality and incompatibility between husband and wife. They both appear distant in their proximity, and what Carné's subtle camera seems to be alluding to here is the emotional void in their life, a void made visible by the interference of mirror as a symbol of their conjugal divide.

Carné's most inventive directorial device in the film is the use of the 'narrative shot'. This happens in his theatrical treatment of Lacenaire's murder of the Count. Because Carné's camera is an emulation of a stage action, it is important to be reminded that in theater, even in the most tragic of Greek plays, any act of violence is never seen by the audience, but usually narrated by another character;

often a messenger. Carné substitutes the horrific violence of Lacenaire's murder with the eyes of Lacenaire's accessory, Avril, acting as our mirror on the event. The result is even more startling. Lacenaire is never shown committing the act of murder, but there is no elliptical shot or a discrete camera, a la Renoir, projected on an external object while the Count's voice is crying in agony¹⁰. What we have instead is transference of camera focus on the doorway where Avril is standing, denying the immediacy of the horrific shot, yet recounting it in the mediatory camera/eye of Avril, and we are positioned in such a way as to look at Avril's eyes full of panic while he is looking at the crime scene. Camera rests on Avril while the murder



remains off-screen. Successfully, Avril's eyes narrate the panic to us by acting as our only mirror for the off-screen event that is taking place. Of course, Carné here, like all playwrights, seems to invite our imagination.

Like Balzac's Sarrasine, which Barthes codifies analytically in *S/Z*, the mime sequence offers itself to the viewers on a number of levels in the same way as the film contains them. In fact, miming is

not entirely mimesis. There is mimesis only when there is activity, or a plot. The mime does not actually imitate an event; a mime imitates or ridicules the logical expectation of things, and therefore he does not reduplicate reality. In Ovid's myth, the problem with Narcissus is that this degree of self is absent. Narcissus becomes a victim of mimesis, so is Baptiste whose art is not a surprise. But mime is an imitation of the logical structure of the image. In other words, mime is mimesis as creative, as an act of constructive imagination. Myth in Aristotelian terms is the mimetic instrument par excellence, because it has a powerful identificatory force.

Yet, mime is also an art of silence. Baptiste's practice of this silence not only complicates mimesis, but it produces a different level of signification: if there were neither communication nor imitation in mime, Baptiste's art would represent a sense of loss and solitude coupled with a lack of communication that had become a dominant social norm. Perhaps this could be an underlying message in the film. A more artistic connotation would relate mime to film history, namely, the era of silent film and the ability of camera to function in the absence of voice.

In that way we could see mime as an experience of the poverty of words or a nostalgic celebration of the film's soundless era. In the mime performance, speech and voice seem more like a sin. We remember how the director was outrageously shocked when Natalie called Baptiste's name on the stage the moment she thought he was distracted from his mime scene by reflecting sadly on his own personal situation.

Moreover, mime allows art to enter a completely internal dimension that has neither time nor locus. In guarding silence, mime gives silence a voice. One of those rich moments takes place in the mime scene in which Garance enacts the moon-goddess and Baptiste is her desperate worshipper. His silence becomes a voice, an echo of the entire film narrative. The mime sketch shows us more than just a poor creature begging for the love of a goddess. It plays on the theme of 'crying for the moon', but we know for a fact that his moon-goddess is more into the mundane than the derelict lover could ever imagine. We cannot help but remember how Baptiste was first presented to the crowd by his father:

Vous voyez ici la honte d'une famille d'artistes, le désespoir d'un père illustre, la racine de ses cheveux gris... Mais quand je did mon fils, fort heureusement j'exagère. Une nuit que la lune était pleine, il est tombé, c'est tout! Sa mère l'a trouvé dans un seau d'eau... Cette nuit-là j'étais en voyage...et je suis revenu trop tard.¹¹

This first speech of him thus relates Baptiste to the moon, to a shiny night of a full moon. In terms of appearance, Carné's setting for Baptiste helps characterize this moonlike quality about him. He appears in relationship to the color white all the time. He wears white clothes and his theatrical cosmetics are excessively white. This whiteness isolates him from the rest of the characters in the film, and makes him look more of a mysterious, indeed, a mythical figure for us. Thematically as well, Baptiste's connection to the moon makes of him a naïve dreamer who believes that the realization of dream in the real world is not far from impossible.

The mime sequences of the movie intermingle powerfully with the real world of the film, invoking echoes and reflection. Claire Blakeway sees these artistic sequences as mirrors of the actors' actual lives:



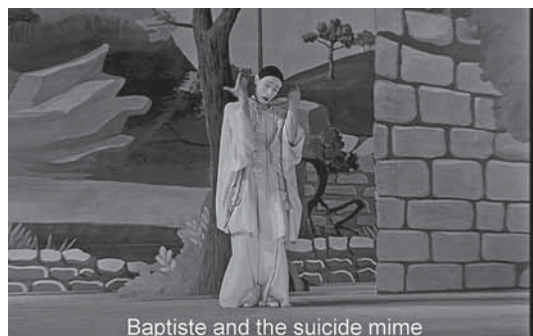
The mimes are a dumb-show, a means of commenting ironically on what is happening in the film", and that "Baptiste's love for Garance is reaffirmed through art in the Pierrot's love for the statue of the moon-goddess. Garance and Frédéric's physical attraction is mirrored, in the same time, by the Harlequin's successful wooing of the statue.¹²

However, the mime sketch shows more than just a poor creature praying to a Goddess, and indeed more than a Pygmalion figure beseeching Aphrodite to give life to a statue of his own hands. The mime sequence shows Pierrot/Baptiste in desperate love with the statue, vainly attempting to win her favor and to communicate his silent gestures to a merciless Venus-like creature staring into the distance with sealed marble lips.



But the poignancy does not just stop there; unlike Byron's lady, Columbine/Garance is not "*La Belle Dame sans Merci*," or maybe she is, depending on how "*sans merci*" is read. Soon enough,

she succumbs to the sweet-talking and bouquet-of-flowers carrier Harlequin/Frédéric, and goes off with him, thus recounting the events that took place the night before at Madame Hermine's lodging house. Confronted with his own inadequacy as lover, Pierrot/Baptiste loses any desire to live and decides to hang himself. At first, he cancels his own image out by drawing an emphatic X with white chalk on the mirror. He realizes that his love and his life/art are not taken seriously, even the suicide rope is used by Natalie in a comic trope to hang her laundry. Unaware, Natalie saves his life, or what is left of it, and the sketch foreshadows their marriage. It is not far fetching to see Baptiste's marriage to Natalie is already a variation on the theme of suicide.



Baptiste and the suicide mime

The mime sketch functions both as an act of memory and a harbinger of future events in the narrative texture of the film. If there is any significance of this overlap between art and life, it would stem from the roots of 'poetic realism,' from the slogan "as in art, so it is in life." But this is the first level of semiological order, the simple level that assumes an innocent connection between the signifier and the signified. But does the mime sequence go further than that to achieve a metalanguage¹³, so to speak? In other words, what is the nature of the role of art in

relation to life? If the mime both reflects and predicts the external life of the actors, which imitates which now, life art, or art life? Or does the entire of mimesis fail altogether because its logic of precedence fails in the reciprocity between art and life? Here is a sketchy charting of the mime in relation to the system of signification:

1. Signifier: Playful world of mime/art	2. Signified: Actual world of Actors/film
3. Sign: Art reflects life and life reflects art I SIGNIFIER Art reflects life and life reflects art	 II SIGNIFIED Art = life
III SIGN The Unmaking of mimesis	

To suggest that both art and life are two communicating vessels of the same ideology is to say that art is not separable from life and that life is amazingly artistic. Mime in Carné is already framed as art within art (film). Carné seems to be playing the Shakespearean game of Hamlet, where art reflects on itself, as Shakespeare's Hamlet does when he tells the first Player to re-act his father's murder and "to suit the action to the word, the word to the action," and "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (II.17–22), as if to make us forget or, more ironically, remind us the fictionality of the whole tragedy. If mimesis fails and art (mime/film art) is no longer a replica of reality, then one is left with the strong impression that film art is not just product of culture as much as it is in fat culture—producing in its own terms.

The perennial themes in the Narcissus myth and *Les Enfants du Paradis* begin to take shape when we reflect on the kind of beauty that Garance has, and see how it is possible that she can attract all these opposite poles. Carné does not fail to remind the viewer that Garance's beauty is nothing other than a great lie, a pure creation of each of those lovers' deluded minds. However, it is this lie that each one of them attempts to render true. "The mirror," as Derrida says, "constitutes the sensible field of illusion; it calls us toward it, makes us glide toward a mirage. No longer an obstacle, transparency has now become an instrument: the god it points to is within ourselves."¹⁴ Beauty in the early shots of the movie is thus established as external and evident, one that nobody could ignore. What Baptiste experiences with Natalie is a kind of a negative pride, or hubris. But what does beauty do to the narrative of the film and myth?

It is obvious that Garance's beauty incites everyone's desire, but Garance's/Narcissus's pride deflects it. Natalie/Echo has her own thought, but speech does not fit it. Baptiste plays Narcissus to Natalie, and becomes himself Echo to Garance/

Narcissus. Like Echo in the myth, Natalie has no subjectivity; Ovid's Echo cannot say what she intends to say; she cannot create a love object; she cannot reach the heart of Narcissus/Baptiste; even after marrying Baptiste and fostering their marriage with a child, Natalie is always unable to turn Baptiste's head away from Garance.

If Garance stands as the unyielding object of everyone's desire, this could ideologically define her in relation to a mode of reluctance and resistance. As many critics tend to see her, Garance could possibly epitomize France during the years of its disequilibrium and its feverish attempts to resituate herself in the time of German occupation. But does Baptiste as a Narcissus figure ever have self-recognition? He sure seems to have a problem; he thinks he is different, and acts this difference everywhere, the pub he goes to, the art he performs, the quality of love he has for Garance. He does not really seem to have a self. Like Narcissus in the myth, Baptiste is trying to bring the image and the voice he hears together. For Echo, there is the possibility for reciprocity, which Natalie tries to achieve through marriage. But if the image is the other of the self, is it possible that Baptiste, who has been tragically in love with Garance, loves the image of himself in Garance? If like Narcissus in the myth, Baptiste falls in love with his image in Garance, it is because he is oblivious to an otherness in himself which cannot be seen. This image of himself is always already silent, or dead. Therefore it cannot respond. In this case Garance becomes the transference of Narcissus's face reflected on the water. Baptiste's love of Garance's image disincarnates the real Garance. Their conversation in Garance's chamber after Garance had simply enveloped herself in an Indian –like cover reveals their oppositional attitudes towards life and love. Their dialogue is worth quoting in full:

Garance (souriante)-Jolie costume n'est-ce pas... on se croirait aux Indes!

*Baptiste (la regardant ébloui)-Comme vous êtes belle...(puis s'approche de la porte)
Mai il faut que je vous laisse dormir, Garance...*

Garance-Je n'ai pas tellement sommeil (elle s'asseyait le lit)

...

Baptiste (s'approchant)-Je vous aime, moi, Garance!

*Garance-Je vous en prie, Baptiste, ne soyez pas si grave...(elle rit) vous me glacez.
(Se levant et s'approchant de lui) Il ne faut pas m'en vouloir si je ne suis pas, enfin,
comme vous rêvez...il faut me comprendre... Je suis simple, tellement simple...(tout
près de lui baissant la voix) Oui...je suis comme je suis...j'aime plaire à qui me
plaît, c'est tout...(avec un sourire très tendre) et quand j'ai envie de dire oui, je ne
sais pas dire non.*

Soudain elle souffle la lampe et la chambre est simplement éclairée par la lune.

Garance-J'aime mieux la lumière de la lune...et vous?

Baptiste-La lune,bien sûr, la lune...(éclatant d'un triste rire) c'est mon pays, la lune!¹⁵

Baptiste's relationship with Garance is thus one of idealization as well as idolization. Baptiste is obviously not in love with the flesh-and-blood Garance he sees before him; he is rather in love with her image: "je vous aime, **moi**," where "moi" has the double entendre of confirming self-love at the same time it professes love for another being.

At the opposite side of the square of lovers stands Frederic, perhaps introduced as an extreme inversion of the dreamy Baptiste. Frederic is everything that Baptiste is not: down to earth, sensual, profiteering, inconstant. His mind does not seek to transcend the physical beauty of Garance to the metaphysics of the soul. Nor is he serious in his romantic conquest of any woman. His love is that of the flesh without a mirror, that is why he manages in his second chance meeting with Garance to accept the gift that Baptiste coyly refuses. Garance's third lover, Lacenaire, is first introduced to us as the pompous egotistic charmer of Garance. Early in the movie, Garance is the one who seeks him out. Lacenaire represents neither the heart nor the body, but rather the mind. He is a cynical misanthrope, unexpected, and a conceited mediocre comedy writer who seeks Garance's aid in the end to help him sell his pieces. He is also the "criminal dandy", a figure which resonates for the character of Joel Cairo in John Huston's adaptation of Dashiell Hammet's *Maltese Falcon* (1941). Garance's final lover is le Comte Edouard de Montray. What he loves in Garance is her class instinct. He feels that she is a misplaced lady and that it is his duty to save her from the squalor of her undeserved life. His is a possessive kind of love. He seeks to buy Garance as a person buys an attractive piece of art in a gallery.

Of all the four lovers, perhaps with the exception of the dandy Lacenaire, Baptiste is the only lover who fails to notice the vigorous sexuality that Garance stands for; his love to her is so sacred and so Platonic that he cannot make love to her even when she solicits him openly and offers herself naked to him. Baptiste in *Les Enfants du Paradis* is the poet lover who confuses dream with reality, until in the end he consummates his love to Garance in a moment of long-awaited and dreamed-of passion when it is too late for both of them to reunite permanently. We remember how he is first introduced in the film by his father and by other characters as well. After the first visual encounter between Baptiste and Garance, she comments: "Moi, je trouve surtout qu'il a deux beaux yeux."¹⁶ In an immediate support of this verbal remark, Carne's camera takes a close up of Baptiste's face and reveals his eyes to us so that we could see that Baptiste does have beautiful eyes hidden under the make up of mime, eyes that are at the same time deep and grave like all dreamers, and innocent like all children.



The question now is which comes first: does the non-relational confrontation with the image Baptiste sees in Garance make possible the relation with her, or is it through Garance that he encounters his own misery? Whatever the claims may be, in looking at an other outside himself (Garance), Baptiste is not narcissistic. Ovid's Narcissus himself was not a narcissist before the discovery that it is himself that he is looking at, at least not in the sense it is understood in common speech. It is not because he loves himself that Baptiste cannot love Natalie, but rather it is because he does not recognize that the image he loves in Garance is his own.

The tragedy of Baptiste/Narcissus, whose anagnōrisis is the recognition of an impossible reciprocity (he never gets to love Echo/Natalie back nor gets (his own image of) Garance to love him back) could just as easily be read as a tale about the operations of ideology. Ideology in its crude sense could be defined as the unconscious beliefs and assumptions which at once structure representations and mask contradictions in the service of an illusory wholeness or coherence. As Stephen Heath puts it, perhaps on a hint from Althusser, "what is held in ideology, what it forms, is the unity of the real relations and the imaginary relations between men and women and the real conditions of their existence."¹⁷ If ideology, in Stephen Heath's Althusserian view of it, is the intervention that takes place when the real and the imaginary relationships begin to interact, and if it always reflects "a particular socio-historical moment", where if any do we locate the stamp of ideology in *Les Enfants du Paradis*? In other words, what does the film attempt to offer ideologically? An answer to this question would be found in the difference between two concepts of mythical thought: myth as tautology (meaning exactly what it says), and myth as allegory (meaning something else different from what it says). The difference between the Narcissus myth's relationship to ideology in Ovid and that of the sort of pop cultural milieu Carné is alluding to in the film is its self-consciousness about its own operations. Ovid makes pride and self-love the subject matter of his mini-tragedy. We can see such a marker of ideology in Narcissus and Echo through Ovid's paradoxical paralleling of two disjunctive terms that try to unite: voice and image, self and other, time and space, life and death. In its entirety, Ovid's myth is a tragedy of the echo that problematizes the dialogue of the self and the other and the impossibility of giving substance to the image and hence the futility of reciprocation.

However, this is not what Carné does with his protagonist. By preferring a connotative implicit level of treating myth to denotative explicitness, Carné is not reading ideology when looking at the outlines of the Narcissus story. In fact, to Carné the whole account of the Narcissus myth remains a possibility or a critical choice. Therefore, the Narcissus story is supposedly not there. The classical myth is already repressed under the narrative of the film. On an unconscious level, Carné might have invoked this subtle narcissistic undercurrent as a model of a personal or collective psychology.

Nevertheless, there is more in Narcissus than an auto or homosexual love of the same. The myth/narrative also offers a trajectory of artistic development through Baptiste's mime and its relation to theater, highlighting a strong relationship between the screen and voyeurs. The oft-debated argument that cinema is regressive in relation to theater because it works in the absence of spectatorship and because it deprives the audience of the opportunity to protest or interact instantaneously with acting, is one of the film's main caveats. Such a "tremendous shattering of tradition," as Walter Benjamin remarked in 1936, just a few years prior to the making of *Les Enfants du Paradis*, brings to mind the question of the 'quality' of the 'subject' of art in the age of its mass-reproducibility. In other words, technology/cinema has changed our perspective of art, and has put us face to face with questions that no serious thinker could avoid: the value of the work of art in relation to the subject and the question of mimesis, of the relationship between art and life. How is the subject defined in cinema? *Les Enfants du Paradis* brings this issue to the fore. Most of the time, we as film viewers are inside the Funambules Theater, or, as in the beginning of the film, the *Funambules* are on the street attracting audience. Most of the time, we are watching other audience watching a theatrical performance. These numerous shots are extremely self-reflective. From this act of watching "the act of watching," one gets the sense that the viewer as a subject is framed and narrated as well.

A great deal of Carné's ideology in *Les Enfants du Paradis* also has to do with vision. It is true that Carné's tactful use of front lighting, deep space, and mise en scène helped create a theatrical environment simple enough to match the 19th century conventional techniques of staging. Carné also makes use of long medium shots in order to suture his viewers and make them feel they are part of the theater audience. He also carefully avoids techniques that emphasize thematic specificity, such as quick cutting, oblique camera angles and complex camera movements. Still, this obvious respect for the form and appearance of theater could not make a screen theater out of the film. Whether Carné was conscious of it or not, cinematization is inevitable. The camera penetrates the theater and goes beyond the stage and the main part of the film takes place entre les coulisses des Funambules. The stage itself becomes engulfed in the overall drama of the camera, and we could not fail to get the impression that the film includes the stage only to exclude it. To take this as a general statement, not only has film completely changed the role of acting, but it has also transformed and redefined the actor-viewer relationship in a post-auratic era. Many critics articulate this difference between the stage and the screen in terms of the spatio-temporal dimensions. According to Mary Doane, for example, "the screen is the space where the image is deployed while the theater as a whole is the place of the deployment of the sound. Yet the screen is given precedence over the acoustical space of the theater."¹⁸ To invoke Benjamin simile, cinematic spectatorship functioned as an 'explosive' that freed the spectator from the 'prison-world' of the 19th century's architectural and theatrical space. As Benjamin lucidly

puts it, “film burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of the second”.¹⁹ Examples of these visual distractions of Carné’s camera are multiple throughout the film (e.g. the duel shots that take place in a secluded, natural and foggy atmosphere that is entirely different from the general ambiance of the film and that could be seen to be nostalgically taking us back to the impressionist cinema). Moreover, these scenes could be regarded as the cinema’s advantage over the theater, its ability to manipulate natural scenery and external locations, with the subtle implication that such a use of external space can be far more solid and realistic in appearance than that of the theater.

There is perhaps one last vestige of parallelism in the Ovidian myth that is tacitly underscored in Carné’s movie. Echo is forced towards death when desire is not reciprocated. Myth says desires have to be reciprocated and tragedies happen when desire are not unfulfilled or are gratified at a dear cost. Echo wants another like itself, but not itself. Narcissus wants another identical to himself. Sexual union does not occur in Ovid’s myth. The myth ends with idealizing the impossibility of satisfaction. In *Les Enfants du Paradis* this non-consummation is shown in the closing long take, with Baptiste hopelessly oscillating between whom he has but cannot love (Natalie) and whom he loves but cannot have (Garance). In Ovid, what survives in Echo is consciousness and a disembodied voice, and what survives Narcissus is a substitution, a flower.

Les Enfants du Paradis, what we end up with an image of disembodiment when Garance is lost in the large body of crowds, while Baptiste is aimlessly and dejectedly searching for her. In the film, the flower does not survive, but in an excellent reverse action triggers their relation, acting as the sparkle of love between Baptiste and Garance. The irony is that the end of Ovid’s myth of self-love, which culminates in Narcissus’s metamorphosis into a flower, is itself the beginning of Carné’s film of unrequited versions of love. Baptiste is thrown a flower by Garance. The flower becomes a metonymy of Garance who is named “comme la fleur,” as she always likes to say. Garance’s name carries the narcissistic germ of the Ovidian myth and becomes a trope for self-reflection. The name “Garance” is the French term for the madder plant, whose root gives a red dye, almost making of *Les Enfants du Paradis* a long flashback of Narcissus’s myth. This structure of circularity which denies closure and consummation is reflected aesthetically in the opening and closing shots of the film.

Yet circularity in itself is not a perfect form but a grim condition that keeps reminding us of the finitude and insipid repetition of all things. This is what the ending does to Baptiste; he is caught forever in a vicious circle that he may or may not have chosen, but one in which he must remain. Baptiste’s circle resembles to a great extent in Narcissus’s pool. The film’s closing shot brings us back to the question of the subject as it suggests the necessity of self-assessment. In a grandiose outlook, the French WWII public are invited to reflect on their own situation. In every way, *Les Enfants du Paradis* has offered codes or signifiers that can be made to express the

dominant values of a given historical period. What it does to the myth of Narcissus (in addition to its primary signification) is a careful albeit subtle reappropriation to suit the social milieu of mid-century France, whose center cannot hold as the country struggled to control its colonies in North Africa while being itself occupied by Germany. Ideologically, *Les Enfants du Paradis* subjects itself to this limpid pool of Narcissus, creating an opportunity for self-reflection that not only allows France to meditate upon its policies and the development of its socio-cultural practices, but also reflect upon its own self-image during one of the hardest times in French history. Perhaps this is the myth inherent in the myth of *Les Enfants du Paradis*.

Notes:

¹ J. L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, P. Connor (ed.), trans. P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland, and S. Fynsk, Minnesota 1991, 94–5.

² R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. A. Lavers, New York 1972, 9.

³ A difference has to be established here between literary realism and poetic realism as a cinematic technique. As a literary movement, Realism, having appeared in France with the 1848 Revolution, has its first representative in the French painter Gustave Courbet. In 1855, Courbet set the word “Du Réalisme” over the gate of the exhibition of his rejected paintings. The trend shifted to literature from painting. Champfleury applied Courbet’s realistic ideas in his writings. His first story *Chien-Callou* is, so to speak, the manifesto of realism in literature in which he pays special attention to exact documentation. From that time on, Realism came to be seen as the kind of art that places truth-telling at its core, implying thereby a certain directness and unadorned simplicity. Other realistic features include an authentic detailed reportage of the physical minutes of everyday life and a dispassionate scientific and photographic representation of life as it really is. Literary critics then began to speak of literature’s duty to “be true to life.” This reiterated emphasis on the truth became the central motif of all realists. Contrary to literary realism, *poetic realism* did not appear as an amelioration of a given genre, or as a movement. It is a more particular conception of realism, but it shares certain thematic features with the 19th century novel. *Poetic realism* is a style of film production, although there is still what could be called a narrative of *poetic realism* in works like Marcel Aymé’s *La Rue Sans Nom* “Street without a Name”. *Poetic realism* concerns itself more with the community of crime, with the sub-city, and the other side of town, with the anti-aesthetic and the alienation of the working class and the monstrosity of the machine age, as in *Le Jour se Lève* and with ill-fated lovers, focusing on characters that exist on the margin of society. Films representing this style are mostly bleak, usually based on the one chance of love that is blown away, and often end unhappily with the tragic death of the protagonist. Carné’s *Les Enfants du Paradis* shares with these films the bitterness of life’s disappointment and the nostalgia for a sense of community.

⁴ Later on in his writings, however, Barthes does not take Saussure for granted, rather he tries to modify the Saussurian methodology by introducing new perspectives. Works like *On Racine*, *The Empire of Signs*, *The Pleasure of the Text*, and *S/Z* reflect this move in Barthes’s semiological development.

⁵ R. Barthes, *Op. cit.*, 140–41.

⁶ E. B. Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema*, Cambridge 1989, 316.

⁷ For a more elaborate discussion of the relationship between art, nudity, and vision, see Barthes’s short essay on “Striptease” in R. Barthes, *Op. cit.*, 84–7.

⁸ J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson, Chicago 1981, 232.

⁹ J. Forbes, *Les Enfants du Paradis*, London 1997, 60.

¹⁰ A good example of a discrete shot could be seen in Renoir's adaptation of Maupassant's short story, "A Day in the Countryside", where Rodolphe and Henriette are about to make love in the lake scene while Renoir, who could have dwelt more on their physical contact in a Hollywood-like cliché shot, elected not to compromise the camera by spoiling the whole effect of their secret love affair. Instead, what we get is a high shot of natural soundings and of nightingale singing on a tree. For elaboration, read S. Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)", *Critical Inquiry*, 8–9, Autumn 1980. 121–40.

¹¹ J. P. de Monza, *Les Enfants du Paradis: Le Scénario Originale de Jacques Prévert*, Harvé Droin 1999, 62.

¹² C. Blakeway, Jacques Prévert: Popular French Theatre and Cinema, London 1990, 169.

¹³ Barthes's definition of myth in *Mythologies* is closely connected to what is now known as ideology, which would later constitute one among six codes of Barthes's more developed schema in S/Z, namely the "cultural code". However, this code is not entirely new and could be trace itself back to Claude Lévi Strauss's definition of myth. In "The Structuralist Study of Myth," Lévi-Strauss argues that "myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of aesthetic play, or as the basis of ritual." See: C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. C. Jacobson and B. Grundfest Schoepf, New York 1963, 207. This tendency towards mythic reinterpretation is important in this context. The elasticity of the mythic pattern in general could provide a good study of cultural changes in societies. Lévi-Strauss also says: "if a given mythology confers prominence on a certain figure, let us say an evil grandmother, it will be claimed that in such a society grandmothers are actually evil and that mythology reflects the social structure and the social relations." in: C. Lévi-Strauss, *Op. cit.*, 207 (my italics).

¹⁴ J. Derrida, *Op. cit.*, 233.

¹⁵ J. P. de Monza, *Op. cit.*, 88–89 (my emphasis).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁷ S. Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, Bloomington 1981, 5.

¹⁸ M. A. Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space", *Yale French Studies*, 1980, 38. Also read J. L. Comolli, "Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field", in: *Movies and Methods*, Vol. II, Berkeley 1985, 39–55. Comolli stresses the ubiquity, mobility, and transcendence of camera in relation to the human eye, and alludes to the fact that cinema combines space and time in a way that no other form of art has done before.

¹⁹ W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in: *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, New York 1969, 236. As footnoted by Susan Buck-Morss in her essay: "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Art work Essay Reconsidered", *October*, a more literally acceptable translation of Benjamin's title is "The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility (*Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*)".

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**KOLONIZACIJA KOLONIZATORA: REPRESIJA, MIT I MIMESIS U
FILMU *LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS* MARSELA KARNEA**

Apstrakt:

Rad otkriva kolonijalno nesvesno u filmu *Deca raja* (*Les Enfants du Paradis*, 1943–45) Marsela Karnea (*Marcel Carné*) kroz ispitivanje post-strukturalističkih teorija o mitu, mitologijama, ljubavi i mimezisu, uključujući pisanja Rolana Barta, Žaka Deride i Žan-Luka Nansija. U tekstu se iznosi tvrdnja da Marsel Karne u filmu *Deca raja* izaziva strah kod posmatrača koristeći filmski metod koji je najbliži pozorišnoj drami smeštenoj u pariski vodvilj 1840-ih godina, mešajući mit sa političkim konotacijama do najvišeg stepena, tako stvarajući filmski jezik koji istovremeno funkcioniše na nekoliko nivoa signifikacije. Budući da je snimljen i produciran tokom Drugog svetskog rata i neslavne višijevske okupacije Francuske, može se pretpostaviti da film uključuje političke alegorije. Ipak, film je više nego suma sopstvenih političkih iluzija; on otelotvoruje želju za dekolonizacijom u trenutku kada se Francuska isključuje iz Drugog svetskog rata i aktivnije uključuje u sprovođenje kolonijalnog nasilja u Severnoj Africi.

Ključne reči:

kolonijalizam, Les Enfants du Paradis, Marsel Karne, Drugi svetski rat, Višijeovski režim, Rolan Bart, Žak Derida, Žan-Luk Nansi, Mitologije, mit, mimezis, reprecija, Narcis, echo, kolonijalno nesvesno