

Fall 2002

# From Jean-Paul Belmondo to Stan Brakhage: Romanticism and Intertextuality in Irma Vep and Les Mierables

Walter C. Metz

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [wmetz@siu.edu](mailto:wmetz@siu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cp\\_articles](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cp_articles)

---

## Recommended Citation

Metz, Walter C. "From Jean-Paul Belmondo to Stan Brakhage: Romanticism and Intertextuality in Irma Vep and Les Mierables." *Film Criticism* 27, No. 1 (Fall 2002): 66-83.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Cinema and Photography at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

**From Jean-Paul Belmondo to Stan Brakhage: Romanticism and Intertextuality in *Irma Vep* and *Les Misérables***

**By Walter Metz**

**Published in: *Film Criticism*. 27.1 [Fall 2002]. 66-83.**

About halfway through *Irma Vep* (1996), Olivier Assayas' self-reflexive film about remaking *Les Vampires* (Louis Feuillade, 1915), a reporter interviews Maggie Cheung, the Hong Kong action star chosen to play the title character. The reporter asks a series of leading questions which point to his firm belief that the anti-commercial, pretentious personal *écriture* of the French New Wave has caused the ruination of French cinema.

Ms. Cheung begins the interview discussing working with Jackie Chan. The reporter loves discussing the Hong Kong action cinema, enthusing about the "choreography of extreme violence" in the work of John Woo, whom he calls a "genius." After ignoring Maggie's comment that Woo is "too masculine" for her tastes, the reporter sidles into his critique: "And... uh... what do you think of... eh... French cinema?" When Maggie says that not many French films come to Hong Kong, the reporter spews out his own opinions: "It's a boring cinema. It's typical of French cinema. You know?... Only to please yourself, not for the public. It's only for the... intellectuals, you know? For the elite. Public. Real public like strong director like... I don't know... Schwarzenegger or Jean-Claude Van Damme." Ignoring the fact that these are action film *stars*, not directors, Ms. Cheung sticks up for the art cinema, and a diverse set of films to please different publics. The reporter will have nothing of this, continuing to critique the New Wave films of Maggie's current director, René Vidal, a Francois Truffaut stand-in: "No. René Vidal is the past. It's old cinema. Public doesn't want this film. No success. It's, you know, State money. Friends giving money to friends to make

a film that nobody sees. Only for the intellectuals... But now, it's over, it's finished. I hope." Maggie continues to fight back, but Assayas gives the reporter the last word:

"You don't think the intellectual film killed the industry of the cinema?"

The remainder of the film becomes a referendum on the validity of the reporter's millennially pessimistic questioning of the health of French cinema, through a focus on the cinema of Francois Truffaut. Jean-Pierre Leaud, the actor who as a young boy played Antoine Doinel in Truffaut's seminal New Wave film, *The 400 Blows* (1959), now a middle-aged adult, plays the fictional director, Rene Vidal, who is given the task of updating the most famous and characteristically French of the 1910's serials. Whereas Leaud-as-Doinel was a figure of anti-establishment rebellion in *The 400 Blows*, in *Irma Vep*, Leaud-as-Vidal, an allegorical stand-in for Truffaut had he lived into the 1990's—Leaud had already played such a directorial stand-in for Truffaut in *Day for Night* (1973)—is a mere shell of his former self, now unable to complete the impossible film project that lays before him.

As a fin-de-siècle meditation on the state of French cinema, *Irma Vep* poses a vexing question: How *could* Vidal possibly tackle the foundational text of popular French cinema, Feuillade's epic serial? *Irma Vep* concludes with Vidal's solution, which is at once both profoundly radical and nihilistically hollow. Having been fired from the production, Vidal edits the footage that has already been shot. Vidal's cut of the film, which also ends *Irma Vep* itself, remakes *Les Vampires* not in the classical style of Feuillade or the modernist style of Truffaut, but instead in the style of the *American* avant-garde film maker, Stan Brakhage. In particular, like Brakhage's *Reflections on Black* (1955), Vidal's version of *Les Vampires* interrogates the very nature of cinema

itself by marking the film stock to produce characters with carved out eyes and beams of scratches emanating from their ocular cavities.

Vidal's solution serves to re-invigorate French national cinema through the most unlikely of candidates, the American avant-garde of the 1960's. Such international intertextuality in reverse--it was French Surrealism which, via Maya Deren, influenced 1950's-era Brakhage--casts the historicization of French cinema in its first century in an intriguing new light. On the one hand, the reporter's argument has some merit: the French modernist cinema in the wake of the New Wave failed to capture the public's imagination as it became either too obtusely personal-- Jean-Luc Godard's *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* (1991), for instance—or was co-opted by the commercial imperatives of the International Art Cinema: for example, Jean-Jacques Beineix' *Betty Blue* (1986). Yet, the reporter's belief in the commercial cinema as represented by Hong Kong action heroine Maggie Cheung is also presented as deeply problematic. When the reporter asks her about the films of René Vidal, she is not able to respond with any intelligent analysis, as these films never played in Hong Kong, and the preview copies she was sent came without subtitles. Her only inarticulate response is that the images looked "interesting," and even this facile comment is cribbed from another character to whom she had previously spoken. Thus, the commercially viable yet profoundly artistic nature of Feuillade's mise-en-scene is represented as something forever lost in an epoch of cinema in which such artistry has been co-opted by the mindless violence of Hollywood and Hong Kong action films.

It is in response to this impasse--artistic pretentiousness versus commercial hollowness--that Vidal-as-Assayas inserts the work of Stan Brakhage. Given the ways in

which Hollywood-as-American-cinema clearly threatens the very existence of French cinema within the terms of the global economy, this breaking of the hermetic seal of French film culture via an American avant-garde film maker (who also desperately resisted Hollywood) offers hope for the future of international cinema on its own terms. These terms involve a resistance to the borders of nationalism while at the same time producing an artistically valuable product that is also commercially viable.

This engagement with *Irma Vep* opens up an intriguing avenue of analysis. Is Assayas' film alone in its re-thinking of the legacy of the French New Wave for the viability—both commercial and artistic—of 1990's French cinema? This essay proposes that *Irma Vep* shares in common this feature with Claude Lelouch's *Les Misérables* (1995). In Lelouch's film version of the canonical French Romantic novel, Jean-Paul Belmondo, the star of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1959), plays Jean Valjean, the novel's hero. In this way, *Les Misérables* and *Irma Vep* revisit the birth of contemporary French cinema in the guise of the two benchmark films of the French New Wave, by its two most famous directors. This paper studies these two 1990s French films that use stars from the French New Wave legacy in order to respond to the crisis in French cinema at the millennium, a crisis that revolves around the modernist techniques of the New Wave not being able to compete commercially against the Hollywood juggernaut. *Les Misérables* and *Irma Vep* are able to re-contextualize the stars Léaud and Belmondo, responding productively to changes in French cinema since their New Wave heyday.

Beyond this similarity in the use of French New Wave film stars, the two films attempt this project of re-invention via very different filmic styles. *Les Misérables* employs what I'll call an emotionally-driven Romanticism which works to construct

Belmondo as a loveable character, while *Irma Vep* uses a post-modern irony to expose the collapse of French cinema under the weight of its New Wave past via the nervous breakdown of the character played by Léaud.

### **The Neglected Tradition of Romanticism in Film History**

While not in the traditional, post-colonialist sense of the phrase, Jean Valjean has nonetheless become a “border subject” in recent film adaptations of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. Steve Carr’s analysis of Valjean as a transnational figure ripe for representations of Holocaust victimization is one pressing example. Beyond Carr’s analysis, in Claude Lelouch’s 1995 adaptation, the character of Valjean (played by an aged Jean-Paul Belmondo) exists on the border between a number of narrative and subjectivity positions. First, the character that Belmondo plays as the film begins turns out not to be Jean Valjean at all. Even though we see him living through events that we know Valjean experiences in Hugo’s novel, this character is one Henri Fortin *pere*. When he dies trying to escape from prison, we know that we are in for quite an assault on the traditional telling of the *Les Misérables* plot.

In fact, Lelouch’s *Les Misérables* is itself a border subject, as it complicates our theories of film adaptation by interrogating the boundary between the “faithful” and “unfaithful” adaptation. On the one hand, the film treats the Hugo source with deep reverence. The film retains the epic scope of Hugo’s masterpiece, updating the personal and political story of early nineteenth century France to instead detail France in the early twentieth century (in fact, the original French title of the film is *Les Misérables du vingtième siècle*), culminating in the Second World War. In her study of Mathieu

Kassovitz' *Metisse* (1993), Dina Sherzer links *Les Misérables* to a set of other films which update their sources to grapple with twentieth century French history: "Kassovitz, like many contemporary directors such as Kurys in *Coup de foudre* (1983), Belmont in *Rouge Baiser* (1989), and Lelouch in *Les Misérables* (1995), makes a point of giving historical depth to his film, reminding spectators of traumatic events linked to the Holocaust" (157).

For this reason, Lelouch's film must at some level be defined as thoroughly unfaithful to the novel. The film effectively deconstructs the novel by lulling us into an interpretive complacency as we begin to map the film's characters onto those of the novel, but then pulling the rug out from under us by turning in a new, unexpected direction, as when Henri Fortin *père* dies escaping from prison, or when the Holocaust subplot is introduced.

The film in fact theorizes its own adaptational project. While in prison, Fortin *père* meets a character named Tour Eiffel (because he is in prison for cheating Mr. Eiffel out the money earmarked for one floor of his tower). Because Fortin is illiterate, Eiffel agrees to help him write a love letter to his wife. Fortin dictates the words, "Je t'aime" ("I love you") over and over to Eiffel. Eiffel chastises Fortin, arguing that the love letter must be more complex than this, since his wife will want to re-read the letter many times. Fortin insists on not changing his letter, and they send it off as is, a multi-page string of "Je t'aime's." In the next scene, we see the wife, who is also illiterate, having her parish priest read the letter to her. The priest begins, "Je t'aime," and continues for a few refrains. He looks through the letter, and informs her that "Je t'aime" is all the letter says, over and over again. The priest asks her if she wants him to continue. She answers

affirmatively and enthusiastically, yet with a tinge of confusion at the priest's query. As the priest finishes the many pages worth of "Je t'aime's" the wife quickly asks him to re-read the letter immediately. Thus, Fortin's vision of narrative wins out over Eiffel's, as does Lelouch's model of film adaptation, as this, of course, represents an allegory for the very project of Lelouch's *Les Misérables* itself: to retell *Les Misérables* for the umpteenth time is as valid a project as any other, and indeed a desirable one.

Lelouch's project is to re-tell this very simple story of a man, Valjean, who is hounded for his entire life by another man, Javert. However, the film argues for the necessity of this project, since the story of *Les Misérables* has had such a profound relevance for generation after generation of readers and spectators. Like Eiffel, academic criticism might be inclined to greet this seemingly redundant re-telling of a sentimentalist text with suspicion. However, my project is to argue for the sentimental complexity that Lelouch's *Les Misérables* draws out of Hugo's Romantic source, elements similar to that encapsulation of love that cause Mrs. Fortin to desire so desperately to hear her husband's redundant letter re-read to her time and time again.

All of which returns us to the film's positioning of its many Jean Valjeans as emotional points of identification for us as spectators. Shortly after we see Henri Fortin *pere* die, we begin to gain confidence that Henri Fortin *fils* (also played by Jean-Paul Belmondo) is the Jean Valjean that we have been waiting for. However, our desire for a faithful adaptation is once again frustrated. Instead, we are presented with a plot that has Fortin *fils* discovering the ways in which his life is similar, but not identical, to that of the fictional Valjean. The film serves up a character who exists on a meta-fictional border, caught between fiction and reality: Fortin, a fictional character, reads about how his



“real” experiences are similar to those of another fictional character. The film thus representationally models for us the important influences that textuality can have on the living of our lives.

Fortin learns about the similarities between his life and that of Valjean in a most unconventional manner. Himself illiterate, he is introduced to Hugo’s novel when a Jewish family he is attempting to sneak into Switzerland, to flee Nazi-occupied France, reads it to him. The film again addresses its own adaptational project: Ziman, a character of the 1940s, argues for the relevance of the nineteenth century *Les Misérables* for his own contemporary moment, a discussion which extends to the film’s justification of its significance for a 1990s audience.

**Figure #5a: Ziman reads Hugo to Fortin in Lelouch’s *Les Misérables***

And yet, the film does not do so in a simplistic way. Instead, the film treats the novel as a kind of dream that only the cinema can deliver. For, as Fortin begins to imagine himself as Valjean, we see the Lelouch film present another famous moment from *Les Misérables*--Valjean stealing the bishop’s silverware and candlesticks--with its star, Jean-Paul Belmondo, finally as Jean Valjean himself. Furthermore, the point of this story in Hugo’s *Les Misérables*--the priest demonstrates the necessity of acts which put one’s concern for others over and above one’s concern for self--is replicated by Lelouch’s film at a different narrative level. Fortin decides to help the Jewish family escape the Nazis, putting his own life in jeopardy. However, the film’s narrational and structural practices render this connection complexly: the cut from the story of the priest and the candlesticks to Ziman reading *Les Misérables* itself interrupts Hugo’s moral lesson, but continues the story of Fortin learning this moral lesson in his experience

aiding the Jewish family fleeing the Nazis. The two levels of the story thus work to collapse the significance of the plot of *Les Misérables* onto simultaneous historical moments, and do so with structural virtuosity.

The excitement of learning about Valjean's world proves addictive to Fortin: he soon begins devouring all of the *Les Misérables* texts he can get his hands on, including comic books, and most importantly of all, film adaptations. As Fortin grows, we see him watching the various film adaptations of *Les Misérables*, from silent shorts to features to studio-system sound films. Thus, "Valjean" in Lelouch's *Les Misérables* is a specifically trans-mediated characterological phenomenon, existing across the borders between high and low, literate and illiterate, cultural locations.

In fact, Lelouch's film offers a general investigation, beyond merely the character of Fortin/Valjean, of border subjectivities and cultural dislocations. Of particular importance for considering the legacy of the French New Wave on 1990s French cinema is the way Lelouch's *Les Misérables* interrogates the border between modernism and romanticism as French cultural and cinematic traditions. My first example of the film's interrogation of Fortin's border subjectivity--his existence in meta-fictional tension between fictional character and experiential body--could be a definition of modernist textuality. As in the plays of Luigi Pirandello, the Valjean-Fortin tension articulates the modernist self-awareness of the text in relation to its cultural traditions. However, Lelouch's *Les Misérables* is not, or at least not exclusively, a modernist text. If anything, via Victor Hugo's source text and via its director's reputation for sentimentalism and populist eroticism (via films like 1966's *A Man and a Woman*), Lelouch's version would seem to have more to do with romanticism than modernism. It is this tension--a cultural

dislocation between the two very different cultural traditions of romanticism and modernism--that my paper investigates through a reading of Lelouch's film.

Criticism of post-war French cinema has traditionally privileged the modernism of the New Wave movement. Deriving from film studies' 1970s roots in ideological criticism, modernist aesthetic and thematic practices came to define exclusively the features of a politicized counter-cinema. Within this critical context, French post-war films that did not fit the modernist paradigm gradually receded from critical consciousness. For example, the early 1960s New Wave films of Jean-Luc Godard are still much discussed by film scholars, while one would be hard pressed to find a mere mention of the vastly more commercially popular Claude Lelouch film, *A Man and a Woman* in the academic literature. However, in the eyes of many contemporary viewers of French cinema, these 1960s films (both Godard's as well as Lelouch's) were not understood via modernist tenets, but instead through their sensual components.

By casting Jean-Paul Belmondo (most famous for his roles in early modernist Godard films such as 1959's *Breathless*) in the three central roles of his *Les Misérables* adaptation—Fortin pere, Fortin fils, and Valjean--Lelouch begins the work of deconstructing this binary opposition between the modernist and the romantic, the politically contestatory and the baldly sentimental.

For example, Lelouch's film begins *in medias res*, with the emotional highpoint of Hugo's novel, the scene in which Valjean screams after the chimney sweep. In Hugo's source text, the event occurs at a turning point in Valjean's life: he realizes he must not take his anger at the world out on innocent people. Shortly before, Valjean had stolen a coin from the chimney sweep, and refused to give it back to him, threatening to

beat him up rather than do so. As the chimney sweep runs away in fear, Valjean realizes that he must change his violent behavior. From this moment on, Valjean commits himself to a life of sacrifice for the betterment of humanity. However, Lelouch's film denies us this explanation, demanding of us an awareness of the significance of the moment without narrative explanation.

More importantly, the film demands of us knowledge as to who Belmondo is, and why he is important to French cinema. For Belmondo is a giant of French film history, but rarely seen in recent years (at least in the United States). Lelouch gives Belmondo a tour-de-force moment with which to perform his cinematic reintroduction.

While the credits are still rolling, we cut to the first image of the film, a close-up of Belmondo's face as he cries. He mutters, "Forgive me, Lord." He reflects that "I didn't want to be such a bastard." His face fills the entire right half of the widescreen image, leaving space on the left of the image for the credits. For another minute, without a cut, he continues to cry, looking down at the ground in disgust. He begins screaming after the recently departed chimney sweep repeatedly, pausing between shouts to cry and reflect more. When it becomes clear that the chimney sweep will not return, he issues his plea for absolution: "Please forgive me." A cut to aristocratic French celebrating the last 10 seconds of the nineteenth century ends this close-up, which has lasted the better part of two minutes.

**Figure #5b: Jean-Paul Belmondo's face in close-up in Lelouch's *Les Misérables***

The significance of the close-up has, of course, been the subject of much film theory, from Bela Balazs's canonical work to the contemporary cognitive film theorists. Most recently, for example, Carl Plantinga has mounted a cognitive assault on

psychoanalysis in his essay, “The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film.”

Rejecting the broad theories of spectatorship which have haunted film studies for the past few decades, Plantinga speaks of the close-up via “character engagement” instead of identification: “Engagement allows for empathy and antipathy, sympathy and indifference, and certainly implies no melding of minds or identities” (244).

Following social science psychology research, Plantinga uses a study of the close-up to investigate how cinema produces emotional effects in the minds of audience members. For example, the facial feedback hypothesis, which argues the one who mimics a facial expression actually catches the emotions of the one mimicked, a process referred to as “emotional contagion,” offers a new way for studying film spectatorship.

When applied to the cinema, such psychological research allows for the close-up to be seen as a system for building allegiance to the character through close-ups that last too long to merely serve the function of delivering narrative information. To make his point about psychoanalysis, Plantinga chooses to analyze the end of *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), in which Stella watches her daughter’s wedding in an extended close-up, barricaded outside of the aristocratic home from which she has banished herself for the good of her daughter’s rising class position.

The ending of *Stella Dallas*, as well as the endings of *Blade Runner* (in which Roy Batty dies in an extended close-up) and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (in which George M. Cohan sings one of his own songs to a patriotic American who has forgotten him), are what Plantinga calls “scenes of empathy,” delivered by such extended close-ups that transcend their narrative functions. Plantinga argues that these scenes of empathy occur at the ends of films because the film has needed its entire running time to build the

audience's empathy for that character.

The opening of *Les Misérables* is clearly an example of Plantinga's scene of suffering: it is an extended close-up whose emotional impact clearly transcends its narrative significance. However, unlike Plantinga's assumption that such a scene should end the film, the close-up on Belmondo *begins* *Les Misérables*. Here we see the shortcoming of the cognitive, scientific approach to film aesthetics. What Plantinga's cognitive approach has not accounted for are all of historical and cultural ways in which a filmic device like the close-up might be deployed by cinema practitioners.

Lelouch's use of the close-up to begin *Les Misérables* can be explained intertextually (itself a psychoanalytic concept, as defined by Julia Kristeva). For the emotional potential of the human face is on display here, but not via our affective engagement with the character Jean Valjean as built over the course of a two hour film, but instead intertextually via the force of Victor Hugo's familiar plot, but most importantly for my argument here, via the now aged face of Jean-Paul Belmondo, the familiar star of the French New Wave.

Unlike Belmondo's appearance as a film noir-influenced wise-guy in the films of Jean-Luc Godard, Lelouch's use of Belmondo's face is relentless in its refusal to explain its diegetic or metatextual significance. What *is* privileged is the romantic, sentimental nature of the moment: Valjean's tearful transformation and Belmondo's much-desired reappearance. The emotional impact of the moment overwhelms the disorienting or distanciation construction of the imagery (elements which would be associated with cinematic modernism).

This romantic constitution of the facial close-up can be read in direct contrast to

Belmondo's introduction in Godard's New Wave modernist masterpiece, *Breathless* (1959). The opening shot of this film features Belmondo as Michel Poiccard, his face covered by a newspaper, the page facing us featuring an ad for women's lingerie. He states punkishly, "If you have to, you have to." He begins lowering the newspaper. At the point we are about to be able to focus on his face, Godard jump cuts to a medium close-up of Michel smoking a cigarette and looking upward, beyond the camera. He makes a gesture with his hand, wiping his lips with his fingers (a gesture that will also end the film, as he lies dying, shot because of his involvement with Patricia, the film's femme fatale). The film cuts away from this close-up, thus delivering narrative information, but denying the affective potential of the close-up as described by Plantinga.

Shortly thereafter, the film returns to its use of the close-up to display Belmondo's face. As he is driving in the countryside to retrieve his stolen money, Michel turns to face the camera and delivers his nihilistic philosophy to us: "If you don't like the sea, and don't care for the mountains, and don't like the big city either, go hang yourself!" Immediately afterwards, he continues his misanthropy, focusing it in a misogynistic direction, deciding not to pick up two girls hitchhiking because he thinks one of them is ugly.

In this sequence from *Breathless*, we have yet another tour-de-force acting moment, yet its function is to explore the distanced, alienated nature of Belmondo's character. Michel's look into the camera is one of scorn for humanity, developing an ironic tone. Such a modernist thematic of alienation is what is emphasized by the New Wave techniques. Belmondo's direct address into the camera thus ironically serves to demonstrate his alienation from others, despite the rupture of the classical diegesis that

allows him direct contact with the spectators in the audience. In *Les Misérables*, on the other hand, Belmondo's emotional state establishes an immediate connection to the audience, one that is deeply felt and significant, without the alienation of the modernist cinematic apparatus. Furthermore, its extended reliance on close-up reveals Valjean's human connectedness, not his disjointed disassociation from the rest of humanity. The point of this extended contrast between Belmondo's faces in *Les Misérables* and *Breathless* is not to reject Plantinga's cognitivism—it is indeed progress over monolithic psychoanalysis—but instead to hybridize it to close textual and intertextual analysis, the dearth of which harms cognitivist film theory as much as it does psychoanalytic film theory.

### **What's Brakhage Got to Do With It?**

In contrast to *Les Misérables*' redemptive use of Belmondo, Olivier Assayas' *Irma Vep* employs a post-modern, deeply ironic style to re-introduce its star of the French New Wave cinema, Jean-Pierre Léaud. The film attempts to re-invent French cinema through references to populist international texts, not merely one canonical nineteenth century French novel, as in the case of *Les Misérables*. *Irma Vep* instead employs a polyglot international film style in constructing its critique of the deification of the New Wave within the French cinematic tradition.

Unlike Lelouch, Assayas has direct contacts with Hollywood cinema. Early in his career, he worked as an intern on 1978's Hollywood blockbuster, *Superman*, an action film using Hollywood special effects and big-star stunt casting to create its event status. *Irma Vep* also features a hip rock score, including its end title song, "Bonnie and Clyde,"



a reference to the 1967 Hollywood Renaissance film of the same name. The film stars Hong Kong action cinema star, Maggie Cheung, thus embracing an international form of cinematic populism, as well as a more conventional Hollywood form. When Ms. Cheung is shown the leather suit she is to wear as Irma Vep, the costumers explain it to her via a photo from *People Magazine* of Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman from *Batman Returns* (1992).

However, *Irma Vep* also makes gestures toward revisiting many of the thematic concerns of the French New Wave. Assayas' film, for example, employs multiple languages, as does Godard's *Contempt* (1963). *Contempt* relies on multiple languages to express a Tower of Babel cynicism, most famously in the screening room scene in which Fritz Lang quotes Brecht in the German to an American producer, a French screenwriter, and an Italian translator. *Irma Vep* employs a similar polyglot theme in the interview scene, wherein the reporter speaks French to his camera operator, English to Maggie Cheung, who in turn of course speaks Chinese as her native tongue.

Furthermore, *Irma Vep*, like a whole string of late 1960s Godard films, challenges conventional French nationalism. José Murano, the new director hired to replace René Vidal, is a racist who supports the authentic Frenchness of the original Musidora over the Asian Maggie Cheung, thus resonating with the anti-nationalist themes of many French New Wave masterpieces, particularly the anti-colonialist films of Jean-Luc Godard.

**Figure #5c: The racist director in *Irma Vep***

**Figure #5d: Musidora as Irma Vep in *Les Vampires***

Finally, in *Irma Vep*, *Les Vampires* is re-written as a Stan Brakhage film, as interpreted by René Vidal. P. Adams Sitney supports the connection, tracing the

European roots of Brakhage's trance film back, via Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), to a vampirism of identity, most explicitly rendered in Jean Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet* (1931). The Brakhage film that best illustrates this connection is *Reflections on Black*, in which a blind man explores a New York City tenement, discovering men and women in agony because of their inability to communicate their desires to one another. What was a city threatened by an external criminal element for Feuillade becomes in Brakhage's hands a city ruined by human beings' own communicative dysfunction. Using the techniques of what Sitney calls the "trance film," Brakhage carries on the tradition of the French avant-garde Surrealists, who themselves inherited a suspicion of the threatening public space from Feuillade. It is this tradition that *Irma Vep* engages, first by rendering a narrative about the remaking of *Les Vampires*, but then aestheticizing that tradition via the techniques of Stan Brakhage. In *Reflections on Black*, the blind man, the film's entranced character, is vampiric because he uses his second sight to suck the emotional stories out of the tenement dwellers. He achieves this second sight through Brakhage's direct manipulation of the film stock: his eyes are scratched out, such that they appear to be emanating light in the form of great stars.

**Figure #5e: The blind man's scratched-out eyeballs in *Reflections on Black***

Assayas' film documents this appropriation of the vampiric "trance film" via René Vidal's radical solution to his *Les Vampires* remake, an attempt to solve the film's stylistic impasse: he emboldens his failed footage by scratching onto his stock, turning Irma into a late 20<sup>th</sup> century action hero. She now has the power to shoot beams of light out of her eyes. *Irma Vep* ends with this celebration of the avant-garde cinema's ability to energize the contemporary cinema, thus providing Assayas' film a way out of the high

art/popular art impasse theorized by the reporter earlier in the film.

**Figure #5f: Maggie Cheung's scratched-out eyeballs in *Irma Vep***

In “Remaking the Remake: *Irma Vep*,” Paul Sutton suggests a different reading of Vidal’s cut of *Les Vampires*: “[Vidal’s] avant-garde ‘scratch’ film, reminiscent of the Lettrist films of Isidore Isou, productively remakes Feuillade’s ‘original’ as a film that is arguably about spectatorship and the structure of the look in film” (71). Sutton’s reading of the French influence on Assayas’ vision for Vidal’s radical cut is compelling: The only film by Isidore Isou listed on the Internet Movie Database is 1950’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité*. Thus, these Lettrist films clearly pre-date the work of Brakhage. However, as an American critic, I know nothing about Isou’s work, whereas Vidal’s scratch film method screams out at me the technique that is most commonly associated with Brakhage in American film studies. I do not mean to suggest that the Brakhage connection is the one true reading of Vidal’s cut of *Les Vampires*; instead, I argue that Brakhage’s film, concerned as it is with “identity vampirism,” might be another productive way of reading *Irma Vep*.

This method does bear fruit with closer scrutiny of Vidal’s cut. After Irma moves around the space, shooting light rays out of her eyes, hovering around the other men in the Vampires’ gang, Vidal then cuts to Irma outside alone. As the aggressive industrial sounds abate, the soundtrack quiets down, until only a boiling-over teapot is inexplicably heard. Such a sound links back to *Reflections on Black*, whose last trance segment features a stylistic representation of masturbation: the film cuts between a woman’s trembling fingers and a boiling teapot, signifying the repression, and release, of her erotic desire. Vidal’s cut of *Les Vampires* represents a similar triumph over gender constraint.

In the back-stage moments of *Irma Vep*, Maggie Cheung has undergone a similar encounter with her own sexual repression, via her dealings with the female members of the crew, particularly one costumer who clearly has a crush on her.

**Figure #5g: The teapot boils over at the end of *Reflections on Black***

Furthermore, what was considered unusable footage of her as Irma is now transformed into a visual metaphor for female sexual liberation. Cheung-as-Irma moves around with cat-like precision, while the film's cut isolates her as an object of power and beauty. Thus, such visual and aural imagery creates a linkage between the formalist classicism of Feuillade's *Les Vampires*, also a film about a powerful and sensual woman, and the avant-garde symbolist techniques employed in *Reflections on Black*. In this way, Assayas' *Irma Vep* provides a solution to the Hollywood-New Wave impasse, inventing a cinema that is at once viscerally pleasing and yet capable of tackling the complex representation of human identity struggles.

*Irma Vep* employs a post-modern strategy that allows it at once to be a French film (using the language play of *Contempt*; highlighting mise-en-scene à la Feuillade's *Les Vampires*) yet also a film that transcends these national limitations (using a modernism, Brakhage's, that is not New Wave in orientation; using popular stars from Hong Kong). This produces a cinema that has the potential to be both intelligent and popular. Such a reading of the film stands in stark contrast to Royal S. Brown's analysis in *Cineaste* (1999): "a truly rotten piece of flaccid self-reflection." Just because a film is able to invent a solution to the crisis of anti-intellectual popular cinema does not necessarily mean that an audience will exist for its complexities.

It is with *Irma Vep*'s invocation of Brakhage that we can begin to suggest a

research agenda that might allow us to theorize the commonalities between *Irma Vep*'s and *Les Misérables*' post-modern strategies, which on the surface seem so far apart. In traditional terms, *Irma Vep*'s post-modernism is aggressive and assaultive, whereas *Les Misérables*' is, to use Fredric Jameson's analysis, sentimental and nostalgic. However, Sitney's discussion of Brakhage as a romantic, not a modernist, produces a bridge that transcends these easy distinctions. *Irma Vep* and *Les Misérables* both participate in a romantic attempt to transcend the modernist French New Wave, via their non-traditional uses of their New Wave stars. By relying on Harold Bloom's *Romanticism and Consciousness*, Sitney is able to build a romantic theory of the avant-garde cinema, emphasizing the filmmakers' embrace of the "quest" romance tradition.

Thus, *Reflections on Black* becomes about the blind man's quest for human contact, whereby his trances lead him toward other characters' discovery of their sexual identity, climaxing in the woman's masturbatory experience expressed via the teapot. At a crucial moment in the argument, Sitney quotes Bloom on the relationship between romanticism and modernism: "[E]very fresh attempt of Modernism to go beyond Romanticism ends in the gradual realization of the Romantic's continued priority" (Qtd. in Sitney, 170).

An intertextual approach to *Irma Vep* and *Les Misérables* suggests that, in these two very different films, contemporary French cinema's transcendence over its modernist New Wave roots demonstrates the potential of Bloom's claim. As much as the New Wave attempted a modernist transformation of a classical, romantic tradition, that project produced an impasse that the films of the 1990s I've studied attempt to resolve. That the resolution these films provide involves turning Godard's wise-cracking Jean-Paul

Belmondo into the romantic hero Jean Valjean and *Les Vampires* into a avant-garde trance film, suggests that Bloom's cultural history of Romanticism's dominance is, tragically for film criticism, a vastly ignored tradition.

### **Works Cited**

Bloom, Harold. "The Internalization of the Quest Romance." *Romanticism and Consciousness*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Norton, 1970.

Brown, Royal S. "*Les Vampires* [video review]." *Cineaste*. 24.4 [1999]. 49-50.

Sherzer, Dina. "Comedy and Interracial Relationships: *Romuald et Juliette* (Serreau, 1987) and *Métisse* (Kassovitz, 1993)." *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference*. Ed. Phil Powrie. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*. New York: Oxford UP, 1974.

Sutton, Paul. "Remaking the Remake: *Irma Vep*." *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference*. Ed. Phil Powrie. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.