

## The Deification of Homer in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt*

In 1963 French New Wave film director Jean-Luc Godard released *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*), which traces the disintegration of the marriage of the scriptwriter Paul and his wife Camille. Their marriage is strained by Paul's latest project, a script for a film adaptation of the *Odyssey*. Scholarship on the film (e.g. Mussman 1968, Silverman & Farocki 1998) has noted Godard's frequent use allusions to literature. This paper will focus on Godard's use of Homer. Through his depiction of Homer as not only a poet but also a god, Godard explores the relationship between an author and his work.

A central plotline is the disagreement between Paul, the producer Jerry, and the director "Fritz Lang" (who plays himself) about how to interpret the *Odyssey*: each of the three men interpret the poem differently. Lang has begun shooting his version, which the producer Jerry rejects after seeing the initial results. Jerry then commissions Paul to rewrite the script. As they watch the rushes of Lang's version of the council of the gods, the three men discuss Homer. As a bust of Homer fills the screen, Lang muses, "It is not the gods who have created men, but men who have created the gods." Whereas religion dictates that gods created the world and men to inhabit it, Lang believes that men postulated the gods to make sense of their world.

By displaying Homer on the screen, Godard indicates that this statement about the gods applies to Homer as well: as a poet Homer creates, and is created by, Homeric man. Just as man made the gods, it is Homer's creations—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—which have made him who he is; while the poet precedes the poems in chronology, they precede him in renown. Indeed, in Homer Godard finds an author who is not only regarded as nearly divine, but whose very existence has been shrouded in mystery. As the existence of gods lends meaning to the world, the poet is called into existence in order to lend meaning to the poems. However, as the three different interpretations of the *Odyssey* in *Contempt* illustrate, the invocation of the godlike author is not successful in concretizing the meaning of a work. Through the character of Lang and the example of Homer, Godard criticizes the deification of the figure of the author and the subsequent reliance upon authorship in the interpretation of a text.

### Works Cited:

- Mussman, T. 1968. "Notes on *Contempt*." *Jean-Luc Godard: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Mussman. E. P. Dutton. 152-169.
- Silverman, K. & Farocki, H. 1998. "In Search of Homer." *Speaking about Godard*. NYU Press. 31-57.