



BIF SCREEN CLASSICS

Le Mépris

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

‘Death,’ says Fritz Lang in *Le Mépris*, ‘is not a conclusion.’ Not, at least, in the way it was for Michel Poiccard or Nana, for Ulysse and Michelange, even for Bruno Forestier, who was left to learn not to be bitter. Here, for the first time in his work, Godard proceeds beyond the image of the actuality of death – of Camille and Jeremy Prokosch spreadeagled in their car under the monstrous trailer that has crossed their path – to contemplate that eternity of peace and oblivion which was later claimed as their own by the voices of Pierrot and Marianne, united in death and murmuring ‘It has been found again...’ as the camera gently scanned a glittering, empty sea.

In many ways, and in spite of its fidelity to Moravia’s novel, *Le Mépris* might be seen as a trial run for the romantic agony of *Pierrot le fou*. Where the love of Pierrot for Marianne – one stage further along the road to human shipwreck – started out as ‘begotten by Despair/upon Impossibility’, the love of Paul for Camille is brought by circumstance to give birth to this same despair and this same impossibility. For they talk, they discuss, they rationalise their feelings for each other; but reason is the bane of the modern world, what has separated man from nature, and it is no accident that the last sound to be heard in the film is Godard’s voice crying ‘Silence!’

Essentially, *Le Mépris* is simplicity itself: a moment of doubt born when Prokosch invites Camille to accompany him in his car and Paul says ‘Go ahead’. Initially, Camille may have suspected that Paul expected her to be nice to Prokosch in order to consolidate his position with his producer, but her sulkiness is chiefly a reprisal against her husband for taking her fidelity too much for granted. Only when Paul begins to reason, to explore, to justify – in that long, serpentine sequence, occupying nearly a third of the film, which records the death of a love affair as two people dress for dinner – does the idea take root and spread like a canker through their lives. Like the man in Camille’s story who can’t stop thinking of asses once he is told that thinking about an ass will prevent his magic carpet from flying, Paul cannot stop thinking of the probability of Camille’s infidelity once he has admitted the possibility by sending her off in Prokosch’s car.

The complexity of the film comes from the resonances provided by the film-within-the-film, and also what one might call the film-outside-the-film. Paul, who likes to smoke cigars and wear his hat in the bath because Dean Martin did in *Some Came Running*, has been described by Godard as a ‘character from *Marienbad* who tries to play the role of a character from *Rio Bravo*.’ The Dean Martin reference, in other words, is not just a throwaway gag, but an attempt to show how Paul assumes the externals of a man of action, but underneath remains the introvert tied up in a web of words and illusions. The man of action, on the analogy with *The Odyssey* which runs through the film, would have left Camille in Rome, gone off to his adventure in Capri – whether to write the script because he was interested or whether he just wanted the money – and then returned to find his patient Penelope waiting for him.

Similarly, Lang, Bardot and Palance all contribute to this film-outside-the-film, bringing to it the echoes of their readymade personalities, which are then made to run against the grain of the roles they are required to play. Bardot, for instance, is viewed throughout in her sex kitten persona, and even has her naked back and thighs caressed lovingly by the camera as in the good old Vadim days; yet contrary to appearances and her husband's fears, she incarnates the spirit of marital fidelity as faithfully as Homer's Penelope. Palance, playing the crass Hollywood producer with his own gleefully inimitable panache, yet brings to the part a curious sympathy since his performance is the other side of the coin to his victim of just such a producer in *The Big Knife*. And Lang, in effect playing himself and representing the artist and artistic integrity – with a specific reference to his refusal to play ball with the Nazis in 1933 – in fact offers an object lesson in compromise, accepting everything Prokosch decrees with a small, bitter smile. One notices that in the four-way Bressonian play of eyes which dominates the film as Paul stares at his companions in search of illumination, Camille's eyes are downcast, guarding the secret she refuses to reveal; Prokosch's are fixed on the sun in adoration of the gods he identifies with, but also perhaps – why not? after all, the great Hollywood tyrants did produce great films – in quest of some mysterious vision; but Lang's move from person to person, wry, compassionate and uncommitted.

Ultimately, however, Lang wins, since Prokosch's death means that he will be able to finish the film his own way: '*Le Mépris* proves,' as Godard said, 'in 149 shots that in the cinema as in life, there is nothing secret, nothing to elucidate; one has only to live – and make films.' But Lang's role doesn't end there, since he is, par excellence, the film-maker of destiny. Not for nothing do the blind, painted statues of Minerva and Neptune detach themselves from his film-within-the-film to brood ominously over the story of Camille and Paul. 'Gods didn't create man,' says Lang, 'Man created Gods.' In the last scene of the film, as Paul goes up to the roof of the villa to say goodbye, having just learned of Camille's death, Lang is preparing to shoot the scene of Ulysses' first sight of his native land. 'Silence!' cries Godard as Lang's assistant; 'Silenzio!' echoes the Italian interpreter; and as Ulysses stands facing out to sea, arms outstretched and edging sideways to keep pace with Lang's tracking camera, our camera follows, outstripping it to gaze calmly out on the blue, empty horizon.

Forgotten is the entire catastrophe Paul foresaw in the breakdown of his marriage, forgotten the tragedy of Camille's death, in this first glimpse of man's native land where eternity is found again. Like Hölderlin, whose enigmatic poem Lang quotes in its two different versions, Godard does not finally say whether it is the presence or the absence of God in this eternity that reassures man. But then, to him, God is a camera. Or used to be.

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1970

LE MÉPRIS (CONTEMPT)

A film by: Jean-Luc Godard
Production Companies: Rome-Paris Films (Paris), Films Concordia (Paris), Compagnia Cinematografica Champion
Producers: Georges de Beauregard, Carlo Ponti
Unit Managers: Philippe Dussart, Carlo Lastricati
Based on the novel by: Alberto Moravia
Director of Photography: Raoul Coutard
Editor: Agnès Guillemot
Filmed in: CinemaScope
Printed in Colour by: GTC
Songs: Georges Delerue
Sound Recording: William Sivel

uncredited
Assistant Director: Charles L. Bitsch
Script Supervisor: Suzanne Schiffman
Screenplay: Jean-Luc Godard
Stills: Jacky Dussart
Editor: Lila Lakshmanan
Costumes: Tanine Autre
Make-up: Odette Berroyer
Italian Version Music: Piero Piccioni
Publicity: Annie Chauvet, Bertrand Tavernier
Press Agent: Christine Brière
Studio: Cinecittà

Cast

Brigitte Bardot (Camille Javal)
Michel Piccoli (Paul Javal)
Jack Palance (Jeremy Prokosh)
Georgia Moll (Francesca Vanini)
Fritz Lang (himself)

uncredited
Jean-Luc Godard (assistant director)
Linda Vèras (the siren)
Raoul Coutard (cameraman)

France/Italy 1963
103 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

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42nd Street
Wed 2 Mar 18:00 (+ intro by Miles Eady, BFI Cinema and Events); Fri 4 Mar 20:40; Mon 14 Mar 20:45
Cabaret
Thu 3 Mar 20:40; Sat 12 Mar 18:15
8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo) Fri 4 Mar 18:00; Mon 7 Mar 20:15; Wed 16 Mar 17:50 (+ intro by Giulia Saccogna, BFI Programme & Research Coordinator)
F for Fake
Fri 4 Mar 20:50; Wed 9 Mar 18:10 (+ Intro by Programmer-At-Large, Geoff Andrew); Wed 16 Mar 21:10
Nashville
Sat 5 Mar 19:45; Wed 9 Mar 14:15; Sun 13 Mar 18:00
Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (The Young Ladies of Rochefort)
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Baadasssss!
Thu 10 Mar 20:40; Sat 12 Mar 18:10

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