



Directed by Jean-Luc Godard
 Written by Jean-Luc Godard
 based on Alberto Moravia's novel *Il Disprezzo*
 Produced by George de Beauregard, Carlo Ponti and Joseph E. Levine
 Original music by Georges Delerue
 Cinematography by Raoul Coutard
 Edited by Agnès Guillemot and Lila Lakshamanan

Brigitte Bardot...Camille Javal
 Michel Piccoli...Paul Javal
 Jack Palance...Jeremy Prokolsch
 Giorgia Moll...Francesca Vanini
 Friz Lang...himself
 Raoul Coutard...Cameraman
 Jean-Luc Godard...Lang's Assistant Director
 Linda Veras...Siren

March 27, 2007: XIV:10
 CONTEMPT/LE MÉPRIS (102 minutes) 1963



Jean-Luc Godard (3 December 1930, Paris, France)

from the *British Film Institute website*: "Jean-Luc Godard was born into a wealthy Swiss family in France in 1930. His parents sent him to live in Switzerland when the war broke out, but in the late 40's he returned to Paris to study ethnology at the Sorbonne. He became acquainted with Claude Chabrol, Francois Truffaut, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette, forming part of a group of passionate young film-makers devoted to exploring new possibilities in cinema. They were the leading lights of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, where they published their radical views on film. Godard's obsession with cinema beyond all else led to alienation from his family who cut off his allowance. Like the small time crooks he was to feature in his films, he supported himself by petty theft. He was desperate to put his theories into practice so he took a job working on a Swiss dam and used it as an opportunity to film a documentary on the

project. The construction firm bought the film, an early indicator of Godard's more recent success working on corporate video commissions. *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*) (1959) was his first feature, based on an idea by Truffaut. Made on a shoe-string budget with Chabrol as artistic supervisor, it was spontaneous, vibrant and groundbreakingly original. Suddenly the typical B-feature crime plot was reborn, with startling cinematic techniques, hand-held camerawork and natural lighting. References to Sam Fuller and Humphrey Bogart and quotations from Faulkner, Aragon and Apollinaire mixed up pop and literary allusions in a dazzling jigsaw of hip cultural awareness. It was a revelation and made Jean-Paul Belmondo a star. It was to be Godard's only box office hit. By the early 60's Jean-Luc Godard was probably the most discussed director in the world. He made an enormous impact on the future direction of cinema, influencing film-makers as diverse as Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, Jim Jarmusch, Wim Wenders, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino and Wong Kar-Wai. As the 60's progressed, Godard became less and less accessible, both in his personal life and his work. After making *Week-end* (1967), which features a ten-minute tracking shot of a hideous traffic jam, Godard abandoned his increasingly antagonistic relationships with film industry colleagues (his mutual disaffection with Truffaut, for example, is well documented). He left Paris for Switzerland, which has

been his home for the last 20 years. Fascinated with developments in new media, he has experimented with video, making several on commission for clients including Channel 4, France Telecom and UNICEF. Amongst his 'revolutionary films for revolutionary people' is his highly regarded eight-hour history of cinema, recently edited into a 90-minute version...Godard's reputation for being a bitter and reclusive figure clearly does not go unnoticed, but is not observed without humour, as a recent anecdote in the *New Yorker* illustrates. He told Richard Brody that he and his partner (the filmmaker Anne-Marie Mieville) had clipped a cartoon from the paper which exemplifies their situation: a unicorn in a suit is sitting at a desk and talking on the phone with a caption reading "These rumours of my non-existence are making it very difficult for me to obtain financing." Some of his other films are *Vrai faux passeport* (2006), *Notre Musique* (2004), *Moments choisis des histoire(s) du cinema* (2004), *Liberté et patrie* (2004), *Éloge de l'amour/In Praise of Love* (2001), *Meeting Woody Allen* (1986), *Sauve qui peut (la vie)/Every Man for Himself* (1979), *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968), *La Chinoise* (1967), *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle/Two or Three Things I know About Her* (1967), *Masculin, féminin* (1966), *Pierrot le fou* (1965), *Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* (1965), *Bande à part/Band of Outsiders* (1964), *Le Mépris/Contempt* (1963), *Les Carabiniers* (1963) and *Une femme est une femme/A Woman is a Woman* (1961). Some of his most quoted lines: "I don't think you should FEEL about a movie. You should feel about a woman. You can't kiss a movie." "Tracking shots are a question of morality." [on Los Angeles] "It's a big garage." "All you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun." "There is no point in having sharp images when you've fuzzy ideas." "It's funny how things make sense when they're finished." A web site with many good Godard links: www.geocities.com/glen_norton/essays.html.

Brigitte Bardot (28 September 1934, Paris) *from Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia*: "This blond siren trumpeted one of the first blasts of the sexual revolution by baring her beauteous body in then-husband Roger Vadim's *...And God Created Woman* (1956). She came to personify a kind of 'French naughtiness' and frank sexuality to more straitlaced-and censorshipbound-Americans. She worked with Jean-Luc Godard, most memorably as the female lead in his international coproduction *Contempt* (1963), in which her character went by Bardot's own real name, Camille. By the 1960s she was able to poke fun at her own sexy image, teamed with French beauty Jeanne Moreau in Louis Malle's lighthearted *Viva Maria!* (1965), and playing herself, the object of young Billy Mumy's affection in the Hollywood concoction *Dear Brigitte* (1965). Bardot retired from films in 1974 and has become a champion of animal rights; every couple of years or so she makes news with some kind of bizarre action or pronouncement, usually related to her pet cause. Her son Nicholas Charrier is also an actor."

Fritz Lang (5 December 1890, Vienna, Austria—2 August 1976, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles) directed 47 films, from *Halbblut (Half-caste)* in 1919 to *Die Tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse (The Thousand Eye of Dr. Mabuse)* in 1960. Some of the others were *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956), *The Big Heat* (1953), *Clash by Night* (1952), *Rancho Notorious* (1952), *Cloak and Dagger* (1946), *Scarlet Street* (1945). *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *Western Union* (1941), *The Return of Frank James* (1940), *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse (The Crimes of Dr. Mabuse, Dr. Mabuse's Testament, The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse, 1933)*, *M* (1931), *Metropolis* (1927), *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler (Dr. Mabuse, King of Crime, Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler, Inferno 1922)* and *Harakiri (Madame Butterfly)* (1919). He appears in a number of interesting interview films, among them Jean-Luc Godard's *Cinéma de notre temps: Le dinosaure et le bébé, dialogue en huit parties entre Fritz Lang et Jean-Luc Godard* (1967). The BFI site has the 1962 National Film Theatre interview with Lang on line at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/lang/interview.html>. Michael Grost's excellent critical bio of him is on line at <http://members.aol.com/MG4273/lang.htm>. There's a good

deal of Lang material on line at the British Film Institute web site: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/lang/>.

from Great Film Directors A Critical Anthology. Ed. Leo Braudy and Morris Dickstein. Oxford Press NY 1978 "Jean-Luc Godard"

In the early 1960s he made several highly personal imitations of genre films, including a spy thriller (*Le Petit soldat*, 1960), a musical (*Une Femme est une femme*, 1961), an absurdist war movie (*Les Carabiniers*, 1963), a gangster movie (*Band of Outsiders*, 1964), and a science-fiction film (*Alphaville*, 1965). Increasingly these films detach themselves from narrative cinema and use plot as the ground for an associative collage of scenes and images. Like Bresson, Godard pares away the psychological concerns that films have inherited from novels and plays. Like Antonioni, he gives relentless attention to the glossy surfaces of modern life in a way that heightens the solitude of his characters, letting them dangle in an environment that lacks the consolations of intimacy and personal affect.

Godard's use of Brechtian alienation effects, including direct political harangues and interviews with real people, re-introduces modernism into the cinema for the first time since the surrealists of the 1920s. It was this self-consciousness about the film process that had the most dramatic impact on younger filmmakers in the sixties. By the time of *Made in USA* and *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (both 1966), his sound track had become as much a collage of disparate materials as his imagery.

Godard is especially daring in his treatment of ideas. Instead of integrating them dramatically, he offers us chunks of abstraction in the form of monologues, propagandistic speeches, interviews, or philosophical arguments—the cinematic equivalent of a politics of direct action. In his episode in *Far from Vietnam* (1967) Godard contributed a film essay, a lucid and brilliant personal meditation with only the barest visual accompaniment, mainly Godard himself behind his camera. In *La Chinoise* (1967), a prescient anticipation of the French upheaval of May 1968, Godard

orchestrated an astonishing cacophony of talk, talk, talk. In many other films, however, his intellectuality proved more elusive, disjointed, and ungainly.

After political events of 1968, which heightened and transformed his commitment to radicalism, Godard completed few feature films, devoting himself instead to collective and political projects of an agitational nature. But between 1950 and 1968 he was a true filmmaker, however tedious and infuriating his experiments sometimes became. His eye for apt images never deserted him, even in the most puzzling contexts, and his ear for lucid texts and ingenious, intuitive juxtapositions can always startle us. His originality lay in his disjunctive style, which stood as a major challenge to the whole tradition of narrative cinema. As with Bresson, however, his best films were those that made concessions to personal experience and became affecting stories almost in spite of themselves. These include *Breathless*, *My Life to Live* (1962), *Contempt* (1963), *Band of Outsiders*, *Pierrot le fou* (1965), *Masculine-Feminine* (1966), and *Weekend* (1967), as well as his brief return to commercial filmmaking in *Tout va bien* (1972).

“Godard” Susan Sontag

The relation to models offered by literature illuminates a major part of the history of cinema. Film, both protected and patronized by virtue of its dual status as mass entertainment and as art form, remains the last bastion of the values of the nineteenth-century novel and theater—even to many of the same people who have found accessible and pleasurable such post-novels as *Ulysses*, *Between the Acts*, *The Unnamable*, *Naked Lunch*, and *Pale Fire* and the corrosively de-dramatized dramas of Beckett, Pinter, and the Happenings. Thus, the standard criticism leveled against Godard is that his plots are undramatic, arbitrary, often simply incoherent; and that his films generally are emotionally cold, static except for a busy surface of senseless movements, top-heavy with undramatized ideas, unnecessarily obscure.

At the Cannes Film Festival Godard entered into debate with Georges Franju, one of France’s most talented and idiosyncratic senior directors. “But surely, Monsieur Godard,” the exasperated Franju is reported to have said at one point, “you do at least acknowledge the necessity of having a beginning, a middle and end in your films.” “Certainly,” Godard replied, “But not necessarily in that order.”

“I don’t really like telling a story,” Godard has written, somewhat simplifying the matter. “I prefer to use a tapestry, a background on which I can embroider my own ideas. But I generally do need a story. A conventional one serves as well, perhaps even best.” Thus Godard has ruthlessly described the novel on which his brilliant *Contempt* was based, Moravia’s *Ghost at Noon*, as “a nice novel for a train journey, full of old-fashioned sentiments. But it is with this kind of novel that one can make the best films.”



Although *Contempt* stays close to Moravia’s story, Godard’s films usually show few traces of their literary origins.

Godard proposes a new conception of point of view, thereby staking out the possibility of making films in the first person. By this, I don’t mean simply that his films are subjective or personal, like those of many other directors, particularly in the cinematic avant-garde and underground, but something stricter and more original—namely the way in which Godard, especially in his recent films, has built up a narrative presence, that of the film-maker who is the central *structural* element in the cinematic narrative. This first-person film-maker isn’t an actual character within the film. That is, he isn’t to be seen on the screen. . . though he is to be heard from time to time and one is increasingly aware of his presence just off-camera. But neither is this off-screen persona a lucid, authorial intelligence, like the detached observer-figure of many novels cast in the first person. The ultimate first person in Godard’s movies, his particular view of the filmmaker, is the person responsible for the film who yet stands outside it as a mind beset by more complex, fluctuating concerns than any film can represent or incarnate. The most profound drama of a Godard film arises from the clash between this restless, wider consciousness of the director and the determinate, limited argument of the particular film he’s engaged in making. Therefore each film is, simultaneously, a creative activity and a destructive one.

Godard: “the cinema is somewhere between art and life.”

from Peter Bogdanovich's Movie of the Week: 52 Classic Films for One Full Year. Ballantine NY 1999

While Brigitte Bardot was at the height of her international superstar fame and success—having been responsible through Roger Vadim's *And God Created Woman* in 1956 for breaking French cinema out of U.S. art houses and into the mainstream and thereby inadvertently also paving the way for the takeover in France of the New Wave filmmakers—she agreed to act in a movie by the most revolutionary of these *nouvelle vague* directors, Jean-Luc Godard, making his first (and pretty much only) “star picture.” Adapted by Godard from Alberto Moravia's novel, *A Ghost at Noon*, the film costarred Jack Palance as a devious Hollywood producer, Michel Piccoli as Bardot's somewhat passive novelist-screenwriter husband, and legendary German pioneer Fritz Lang as a legendary German pioneer named Fritz Lang shooting for Palance an adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*. With Godard appearing briefly as Lang's assistant director, the provocative color and wide-screen result opened in 1963 as *Contempt* (*Le Mépris* in French). For all these artists, the film stands among their finest hours.

In his quirky, idiosyncratic way, Godard achieves all his effects through an artful indirection, a circuitous-seeming but actually Spartan style that relies heavily on his actors' movements, gestures, body language, and intonation far more than words. Bardot is especially good at this—being a true-born movie-star personality as well as an increasingly resourceful actress—and this is one of her most touching performances. What a world of joy and fulfillment Piccoli loses through his self-absorption, his ambition, his blindness to everything his loving Brigitte is signaling. It is the story of her contempt not only for Palance, with whom she will have an affair, but mainly for Piccoli, whom she eventually leaves. This is followed by a swift, shocking denouement.

The film makes no moralizing statements, nor does it nudge you into complicity. Like Otto Preminger, whom he always admired, Godard presents all the facts—often only fleeting moments—and lets the audience decide what happened and why. *Contempt* is a cool, very troubling work, speaking directly to the most difficult war of all, the battle of the sexes, incisively revealing that central difference in how most men and most women think and feel.

The first shot in the picture presents Bardot lying naked on her stomach while talking with and listening to Piccoli: Godard's camera pans slowly over her body, giving the audience exactly what they thought they wanted but without preamble or foreplay, so that it is quite unsettling, overwhelming. Even here, with blatant nudity, Godard works through indirection. By handing us Bardot as we want her, he makes us uneasily question this very assumption; by getting this immediately out of the way, he allows us more easily to see Bardot through the rest of the story as considerably more than a naked body.

At one point, Piccoli—deceptively unmacho in a brilliantly subtle performance—puts on a cowboy hat and wears it in the bathtub; when Brigitte comments on this, Piccoli says he is emulating Dean Martin in *Some Came*

Running. In that movie, Martin not only refuses to remove his cowboy hat, but also plays a largely unregenerate misogynist who only at the end of the picture shows some respect and consideration for a woman: at Shirley MacLaine's funeral he finally takes off his hat. In *Contempt*, therefore, the cowboy hat is not simply a passing homage or inside joke from a cinema-hip director, but rather a revealing insight into this character's submerged lack of understanding of women. Fritz Lang's presence—a superbly shaded portrait of cynicism and sagacity, combined with an innate artistic conscience—is equally significant: the inescapability of fate was Lang's great theme. Godard here links fate irrevocably to character. Lang also brings a strong sense of aged wisdom, the only ray of hope in the entire piece.



from François Truffaut Correspondence 1945-1984. Foreword by Jean-Luc Godard

Why did I quarrel with François? It had nothing to do with Genet or Fassbinder. It was something else. Something which, fortunately, had no name. Something stupid. Infantile. I say fortunately, because everything else was becoming a symbol, the sign of itself, a mortal decoration: Algeria, Vietnam, Hollywood, our friendship, and our love of reality. The sign, but also the death of that sign.

What held us together as intimately as a kiss. . . what bound us together more intimately than the false kiss in *Notorious* was the screen, and nothing but the screen, It was the wall we had to scale in order to escape from our lives, and there was nothing but that wall, and we invested so much of our innocence in the idea of that wall that it was bound to crumble beneath all the fame and decorations and declarations that lay ahead. We were devoured by Saturn. And if we tore each other apart, little by little, it was for fear of being the first to be eaten alive. The cinema had taught us how to live; but life, like Glenn Ford in *The Big Heat*, was to take its revenge,

These letters, from a young man tormented by the idea that he did not know how to write, demonstrate the victory of what is said over what is not said but seen. The pain that we inflicted, we inflicted through words, words, and

more words, but the pain that we suffered remained of the cinema, therefore silent.

François is perhaps dead. I am perhaps alive. But then, is there a difference?

From a letter from Truffaut to Godard May-June 1973

In Rome, I quarreled with Moravia because he suggested that I film *Le Mépris*; I had gone there with Jeanne to present *Jules et Jim*, your latest film wasn't doing too well and Moravia was hoping to change horses in midstream.

from Jean Luc Godard *The Future(s) of Film Three Interviews 2000/2001*. Verlag Gachnang & Springer Berlin 2002

The two things that were least liked in the 20th century are history and psychoanalysis, the history of everyone and the history of oneself. They are venerated yet loathed. I really like the history of others, I like it too much even; I don't like my own. I am slow to come around to analysis. The relationship between these two types of history is very rarely shown. I am thinking about a text by James Agee, which I had Alain Cuny read aloud but never used, and which can be heard, although very poorly, being read by someone else in *For Ever Mozart*. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee says that what really makes his blood boil is people's misunderstanding of the camera, in the broad sense of the term: a chamber for recording, etc. People think that the camera always films straight on, that they are seeing reality because they are staring at it straight on. Even a philosopher like Lévinas thinks that when you really see someone's face you could never want to kill him. The shot/reverse-shot technique is wrong. The true reverse-shot

must be more or less aligned with the two figures. To hear the other person, you have to place the camera behind him so as not to his face and hear him through the person who is listening. You find that in Welles: people move a lot, there are a lot of shadows, a lot of shots that are moving from the first frame, even in films that he didn't edit like *The Lady from Shanghai*.

Today's cinema is a script-oriented cinema. Since Gutenberg, the text has triumphed. There was a long struggle, marriage or liaison between painting and text. Then the text carried the day. Film is the last art in the pictorial tradition. People talk a lot about images but there is only the text nowadays.

I've never understood why *Contempt* is so well liked. Commercially, it's a film that has made a lot for those who own the rights. It's always high on people's lists. I think it's simply because it comes from an American-style novel, with a basic story that is not my own. It's a film that has a number of weaknesses.

...even professional video is less sensitive than 35mm. There is something tactile in the photographic image that doesn't exist in video. The phenomenon of the cave is no more. Digital technology was not invented for production but for distribution. Many more things can be kept in a much smaller space because you're dealing with numbers and they can be compressed. In digital technology, everybody likes it. But part of the image is lost. For the sake of distribution, quality and precision are reduced. They say that the image is of <film quality>, It remains to be seen what quality we're talking about.

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April 10 Sergio Leone, *The Good the Bad and the Ugly/Il Buono, il brutto, il cattivo* 1966

April 17 Robert Altman, *Nashville* 1975

April 24 Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, *Singin' in the Rain* 1952

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and State University of New York at Buffalo
with support from the John R. Oishei Foundation and the Buffalo News