



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 Véras (*the siren*)

Raoul Coutard (*cameraman*)

France/Italy 1963

103 mins

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Sans Soleil Wed 1 Feb 20:40; Fri 17 Feb 18:00

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Stalker Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

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Psycho Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

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Wanda Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

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Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

Ordet (The Word) Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

The 400 Blows (Les quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)

Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

Barry Lyndon Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

Some Like It Hot Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

The Third Man Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

Killer of Sheep Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

Mirror (Zerkalo) Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

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The Apartment Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

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