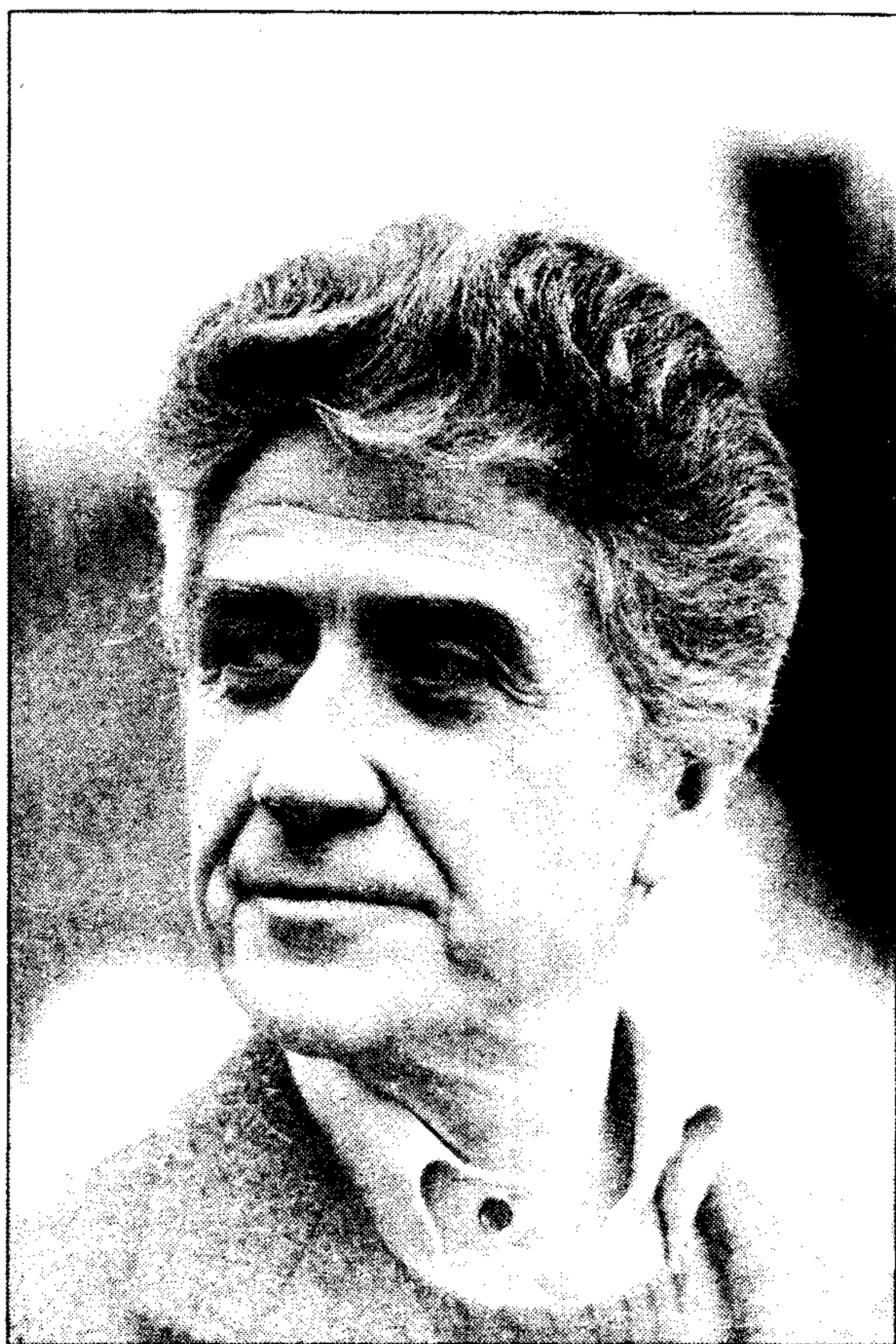


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Godard's "Sauve Qui Peut": like a piece of music



Resnais's 'Mon Oncle d'Amerique': a funny movie



Fuller's "The Big Red One": a modest genre film

Waiting for Godard, Resnais, and Fuller

By Andrew Sarris

CANNES—The film festival began in the rain and is ending in the rain, but the sun came out a few days this week, both meteorologically and cinematically. All in all, it was well worth waiting for Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Samuel Fuller, and Federico Fellini, among others. Not everyone would agree. Indeed, many people have violently disagree with my opinion on just about everything. Unfortunately, the people who disagree with me seem to disagree with each other as well, and there is, consequently, no Mr. and Mrs. Consensus to whom the wishy-washy journalist can turn for an "objective" opinion. American audiences may have to wait months before they can figure out what really happened at Cannes. Meanwhile, everything written from here has to be taken with more than the customary grain of salt. The festival itself is now hopelessly fragmented, not only between the moles (the John Gillett-led cinemaddicts) and the moths (the Rex Reed-led socializers), but also among different species and generations of moles and moths.

No viewer can catch more than a small fraction of the movies being screened every day around the clock, and the most determined pursuer of la dolce vita can attend only a small fraction of the social events endlessly on tap. The result is that many people—and I blush to admit that there are journalists among them—talk authoritatively about pictures they haven't seen, and knowingly about parties they haven't attended. All one has to do to bluff about the movies is to sit in any cafe near the Palais and eavesdrop on the conversations. One can even read the local reviews, though these tend to be generous to a fault. If one wants to bluff about parties, all one has to do is to read Peter Noble's very bright column in *Screen International*, served at breakfast with one's coffee and croissants.

I could not start out on my often tedious rounds each morning without Peter's column reassuring me that I had not missed anything earth-shattering the night before. The giddy parochialism that seizes Cannes at this time of the year is reflected in two of the most noteworthy "jokes" passed on by Noble in his column. The jest of May 18 dealt with a linguistic development "heard at the Carlton bar: Two entrepreneurs talking. 'Morris, we've finally identified the money' . . . 'Yes, Melvin, but it's not on board yet!'" The

one of May 20 dealt with warped political awareness: "Heard on the terrace at Felix by UK's Terry Pritchard: 'Any news about the release of the American hostages?' . . . Reply: 'Release? I didn't even know they had a distributor yet.'"

No Godard film since *Pierrot le fou* has excited me as much as *Sauve qui peut* (*La Vie*). Though his feeling for narrative has still not progressed from A to B and his disdain for psychological consistency and sociological probability is as outrageously apparent as ever, his zest for cinema is

appropriate expression of Godard's unusual stylistic mannerisms of freezing and fragmenting movements in the familiar manner of both archaic projection and avant-garde demystification of the persistence of vision.

Godard makes affectionate reference to the Marguerite Duras of *Le Camion*, and he allows us to see on a blackboard the parallel dialectics of video and cinema, Cain and Abel! Godard reminds us again and again of many of his films, but he provides something new as well, a mellower tone and a genuinely funny wry-

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undiminished. *Sauve qui peut* is perhaps more like a piece of music than a movie. Every image is suffused with such elegant and exquisite insights into what makes the medium interact with its material that the total effect is intoxicating. Godard once wrote that the late Nicholas Ray was *cinema*. Perhaps the same can be said of Godard today. I would not care to debate Godard's "ideas" or speculate on his knowledge of the world and its people, though he is undoubtedly wiser and more reflective than many of his detractors imagine, and no great art can reflect entirely the triumph of intuition over intellect.

Is Godard's cinema, then, great art? I would argue that it is, without challenging Wilfrid Sheed's gibe that Godard had the talent of a fifth-rate Albanian novelist. Even a 10th-rate Albanian novelist could come up with a better plot than the one that he picked upon in *Sauve qui peut*. Two women and a man. Their paths cross in a series of apparently arbitrary episodes. Isabelle Huppert plays a stylized hooker named Elizabeth Riviere. Jacques Dutronc plays a filmmaker called Paul Godard. Nathalie Baye plays Godard's mistress and colleague, and is named Denise Rimbaud. As I recall after only one viewing, there are four chapters: *L'Imaginaire*, Denise's story; *La Peur*, Paul's story; *Le Commerce*, Elizabeth's story; and, finally, *La Musique*, the final ordering of all the elements.

What is the film about? It is what Godard now feels after his 50th birthday from moment to moment. The American title for the film is *Slow Motion*, though *Instant Replay* might be a more ap-

ness about his own grotesque contradictions. As a result, he will probably now be caught in a crossfire between the ideologues, who have already accused him in Cannes of going soft, and the philistines, who have already accused him in print of being a cinematic prostitute. For my part, I now identify with him more closely than at any time since *Une Femme est une femme* back in 1961. Somewhere on the screen he has captured the subtle reality of what it is to be a thinking, feeling being in these ridiculously convulsive times. I do not think that he has gone soft, but rather that he has gone deep. In the end, the Godard character may or may not be dying. A little joke prolongs the uncertainty. We pass some musicians, and somehow come through the other side from cinema to *verite*. Godard is an artist on film once more, and he makes his "instant replays" seem as apt and prophetic for the '80s as his jump-cuts proved to be in *Breathless* for the '60s.

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(though it makes him resemble Godard himself).

Piccoli's bath towel suggests a Roman toga. The monocled Lang, a walking emblem of cinema's golden age, invokes Dietrich and run-ins with Goebbels. The Villa Malaparte is both temple and prison.

Meanwhile, the Cinemascope camera observes all; approaching on a dolly in the opening shot, it tilts down and toward us like a one-eyed Polyphemus.

What makes "Contempt" a singular viewing experience today, even more than in 1964, is the way it stimulates an audience's intelligence as well as its senses.

Complex and dense, it unapologetically accommodates discussions about Homer, Dante and German Romantic poetry, meditations on the fate of cinema and the role of the gods in modern life, the creative process, the deployment of Cinemascope. (Lang sneers that it is only good for showing "snakes and funerals," but the background-hungry beauty of cinematographer Raoul Coutard's compositions belies this.)

It is also a film about language, as speakers of English, French, Italian and German fling their words against an interpreter, Francesca (Georgia Moll), in a jai alai of idioms that presciently conveys life in the new global economy. More practically, the polyglot soundtrack was a strategy to prevent the producers from dubbing the film.

"Godard is the first filmmaker to bristle with the effort of digesting all previous cinema and to make cinema itself his subject," wrote critic David Thomson. Certainly "Contempt" is shot through with film-buff references, and it gains veracity and authority from Godard's familiarity with the business of making movies.

But far from being a self-referential piece about films, it moves us because it is essentially the story of a marriage. Godard makes us care about two likable people who love each other but seem determined to throw their happiness away.

Godard is said to have originally wanted Frank Sinatra and Kim Novak for the husband and wife. Some of Novak's musing "Vertigo" quality adheres to Bardot. In her best acting performance, she is utterly convincing as the tentative, demure ex-secretary pulled into a larger world of glamour by her husband.

Despite Godard's claim that he took Bardot as "a package deal," he tampered with the actress' persona in several ways. First he toyed with having her play the entire film in a brunette wig — depriving her of her trademark blondness — but eventually settled for using the dark wig as a significant prop. More crucial was Godard's intuition to suppress the sex kitten of "And God Created Woman" and "Mamzelle Striptease," and to draw on a more modest, prudishly French-bourgeois side of Bardot without diminishing the shock of her beauty.

When she puts on her wig in the apartment scene, she may be trying to get Paul to regard her as more intelligent than he customarily does — to escape the blond bimbo stereotype. (Her foil, Francesca, the dark-haired interpreter, speaks four languages and discusses poetry with Lang.)

At one point Paul asks Camille, "Why are you looking so pensive?" And she answers: "Believe it or not, I'm thinking. Does that surprise you?" The inequalities in their marriage are painfully exposed: He sees himself as the brain and breadwinner, and her as a sexy trophy. Whatever her new-found contemptuous feelings may be, he has from the start made clear his condescension. "Why did I marry a stupid 28-year-old typist?" he blurts out.

Underneath the injustice of her implicit accusation (that Paul had pandered by leaving her alone with his employer) is a legitimate complaint: He would not have acted so cavalierly if he were not also a little bored with her.

Camille says she liked him better when he was writing detective fiction and they were poor, before he fell in with that "film crowd." His screenwriting does put him in a more abasing position, because the profession amounts to a school for humiliation.

More important, she has come to despise his presumption that he can analyze her mind. Not only is this unromantic, suggesting she holds no further mystery, but insultingly reductive. She is outraged at his specula-



Director Jean-Luc Godard: He had a knack for making people feel awkward, and using that to bring out tensions in the script.

tion that she's making peace for reasons of self-interest — to keep the apartment. As the camera tracks between them, pausing at a lamp, Paul guesses that she is angry at him because she has seen him patting Francesca's bottom. Camille shakes her head in an astonished no, then catches herself. She scornfully accepts his demeaning reading of her.

More than anything, the middle section traces the building of a mood. When Paul demands irritably, "What's wrong with you, what's been bothering you all afternoon?," he seems both to want to confront the problem (admirably) and to bully her out of her sullenness (reprehensibly). We see what he doesn't: the experimental, tentative quality of her hostility.

She is "trying on" anger and contempt, not knowing exactly where it will go. Her grudge has a tinge of playacting, as if she fully expects to spring back to affection at any moment. Paul is a man worrying a canker sore. Whenever Camille begins to forgive, to be tender again, he won't accept it: He keeps asking her why she no longer loves him, until the hypothesis becomes a reality.

All through the '60s, Godard was fascinated with the beautiful woman who betrays (Seberg in "Breathless"), withdraws her love (Chantal Goya in "Masculin-Feminine"), runs away (Karina in "Pierrot le Fou") or is faithless (Bardot in "Contempt"). What makes "Contempt" an advance over this masochistic obsession with the femme fatale is that here, Godard shows complete awareness of how much at fault the man may be for the loss of the woman's love.

The film explores the mutual complicities inherent in contempt. Paul responds both ways to his wife's harsh judgment: He agrees with her, out of the intellectual's stock of self-hatred, and he considers her unjust, which leads him to lash out in a fury. He even slaps her — thereby further undercutting her shaky esteem for him.

In any film today, a man slapping a woman would end the scene, but in "Contempt" we keep watching the sequence for 25 more minutes, as the adjustments to that slap are digested.

Pascal Aubier said point-blank, "Godard was on Camille's side." In that sense, "Contempt" can be seen as a form of self-criticism: a male artist analyzing the vanities and self-deceptions of the male ego. (And perhaps, too, an apology — what cinematographer Coutard meant when he called the film Godard's "love letter to his wife," Karina.)

Godardians regard "Contempt" as an anomaly, the master's most orthodox movie. The paradox is that it is also his finest. "Pierrot le Fou" may be more expansive, "Breathless" and "Masculin-Feminine" more inventive, but in "Contempt" Godard was able to strike his deepest human chords.