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'Contempt': Now More Relevant Than Ever

LOS ANGELES TIMES

By KENNETH TURAN
TIMES FILM CRITIC

It's one thing for a film to retain every bit of its worth after more than 30 years, but more impressive is the ability to be increasingly relevant and moving with the passage of time. Such is the case with Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 "Contempt."

Perhaps how thin the cinematic gruel has become over the past decades is what makes us appreciate the thematic strengths of this work. And there's also the cool beauty of Raoul Coutard's wide-screen cinematography, unmistakable in the new print struck for this two-week revival at the Nuart in West Los Angeles.

Or maybe it's the impression made by the film's unlikely polyglot cast, which includes a gorgeous Brigitte Bardot at the height of her stardom, Michel Piccoli at the beginning of his, Jack Palance at his most magnetic and the great Fritz Lang playing himself near the end of a long directing career.

Most important, however, is the unexpected and potent connection between director and material. For perhaps the only time in his career, Godard, the gifted *provocateur* of the French New Wave who could take film apart and put it together any way he pleased, made a picture based on conventional material, a novel by the Italian Alberto Moravia.

What resulted is, along with "Breathless," as memorable a film as Godard ever made, a kind of "where love has gone" meditation on the crumbling of two kinds of passion, one romantic, the other cinematic.

"Contempt" was partially financed by American mogul Joseph E. Levine, and one of the intriguing ways this film folds back on itself is that Godard is said to have modeled Palance's crass American producer Jerry Prokosch on Levine himself.

More than that, it was Levine and producer Carlo Ponti's horror at the lack of nude shots of sex symbol Bardot in the film's rough cut that led to "Contempt's" celebrated opening, where an unclothed Camille (Bardot) lounges on the bed with husband Paul (Piccoli) as he tells her he loves her "totally, tenderly, tragically." What the producers didn't bargain for was that Godard shot the sequence with the distancing device of alternating red and blue filters, giving the producers what he wanted in the guise of giving in.



Strand Releasing

Brigitte Bardot and Jack Palance have a fateful encounter in Jean-Luc Godard's "Contempt."

Paul is a novelist-turned-screenwriter whom Prokosch wants to hire to add some sex scenes to an adaptation of Homer's "Odyssey" that Lang is directing. Will Lang be willing to work with him, Paul wonders. "He will direct whatever is written," Prokosch says, and he means it.

Perhaps because he is the film's unapologetic dark force, Palance's Prokosch completely holds our attention. His portrait of the producer as a pompous, predatory ignoramus always quoting from a tiny book of maxims (an interesting counterpoint to Rod Steiger's monster executive in Palance's earlier "The Big Knife") is stunning. Whether he's tossing film cans around a screening room or saying, "Whenever I hear the word 'culture,' I bring out my check-book," he epitomizes the industry's worst tendencies, both then and now.

For it is one of this film's sad tasks to recognize that the sophisticated art of movie-making (epitomized by the cultured, multilingual Lang) is crumbling like the

decrepit studio Prokosch has set up shop in. Though Godard's own work contributed in a very different way to the death of classical filmmaking, "Contempt" always reflects the director's sense of loss.

What gives this film its special poignancy, however, is its exploration of romantic loss, of a relationship that starts to unravel not just when Camille meets Prokosch in his red sports car but when Paul starts to work for the producer. For Camille alone can sense, almost instinctively, what a threat the man is to anything that aspires to lasting value. Paul either doesn't notice, or pretends not to, until it is too late.

All this comes to a head in a half-hour scene between husband and wife in their new, partially furnished apartment. It's a devastating sequence as we see, for no apparent reason yet for any number of intangible ones, a relationship disintegrate in front of our eyes. In its vision of small disputes getting painfully but inevitably out of hand, it's as emotionally telling as anything in Godard's body of work.

There is, in this focus on personal and artistic relationships gone sour, a sense of quiet tragedy hovering over "Contempt," a mood heightened by Georges Delerue's lush and moody score. Melancholy and sensual, "Contempt" is the one Godard film it's impossible to mistake for any other, and the director, perhaps sensing this, puckishly cast himself as Lang's officious assistant director. It's a nod to greatness that, 30-plus years later, the film itself returns in kind.

■ **Unrated.** Times guidelines: nudity, language, complex adult themes, including issues of sexual fidelity.

'Contempt'

Jack Palance..... Jerry Prokosch
Brigitte Bardot..... Camille
Michel Piccoli..... Paul
Fritz Lang..... Fritz Lang
Jean-Luc Godard..... The Assistant Director
Director/screenplay Jean-Luc Godard. Based on the novel "Il Disprezzo" by Alberto Moravia. Producers Georges de Beauregard, Carlo Ponti. Photography Raoul Coutard. Music Georges Delerue.

■ **Through July 17 at the Nuart, 11272 Santa Monica Blvd., West Los Angeles, (310) 478-6379.**