

## Document Citation

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# Greece 2

Jean-Luc Godard and the corporate entity formerly known as "Walt Disney" have done more than anyone else to chart the parameters of the post-cinema universe. It's natural, then, that when contemplating the origins of Western civilization, they would peer into the pre-Judeo-Christian mist of ancient Greece and see the pagan religion of . . . movies.

*Contempt*, Godard's 1963 stab at a "commercial" feature, self-reflexively imagines *The Odyssey* as a similarly failed attempt to challenge the gods and make a film; *Hercules*, Disney's latest blockbuster, is no less self-referential in taking Greek mythology as a metaphor for marketing a star. *Contempt*—which, after 30 years withdrawn from circulation, returns to the Ithaca of art-house distribution—is a mournful ode to Hollywood hegemony. *Hercules*, opening at 'plexes throughout the universe on the same day, is nearly as damning in demonstrating that hegemony.

Equally allegorical, both movies feature caricatured Hollywood types as their villains. But while *Contempt* recalls a time when the now quaint term *sellout* was some sort of epithet, *Hercules* cheerfully obliterates the memory that said time ever existed.

As spectacles of antiquity, *Contempt* and *Hercules* are idiosyncratic versions of the grandiose and tawdry sword-and-sandal genre the French call the *peplum* (a term derived from the Greek word for the flowing dress worn so fetchingly by Hercules's animated innamorata). Enjoying a golden age from the late '40s through the early '60s, the *peplum* was, in effect, Europe's last indigenous form of mass-audience movie. Indeed, both of *Contempt*'s producers were *peplum* masters—Carlo Ponti produced the Kirk Douglas *Ulysses* and Joseph E. Levine made his fortune by importing the Steve Reeves *Hercules* to America.

Many *peplums* were international co-productions, filmed in Rome with French or British money and American actors. So, too, *Contempt*—an international co-pro, adapted (with surprising fidelity) from Alberto Moravia's bestseller, shot (at Cinecittà) in Technicolor and CinemaScope, and starring Jack Palance and Brigitte Bardot. Godard had become briefly bankable when the aging sex kitten let it be known she wanted this movie-crazed hipster to direct her next picture.

At once a movie of outrageous formalism (bold colors, abstract chunks of sound) and documentary verisimilitude (cast speaking an undubbed mixture of French, English, Italian, and German), *Contempt* is the story of a French writer (Michel Piccoli) who takes a job from an American producer (Palance) and, as a result, loses his wife

*Contempt*  
Written and directed by  
Jean-Luc Godard  
From the novel *Il Disprezzo* by  
Alberto Moravia  
A Strand Releasing/Rialto Pictures  
re-release  
Opens June 27

*Hercules*  
Directed by John Musker and  
Ron Clements  
A Walt Disney Pictures release  
BY J. HOBERMAN

melancholy: "Only yesterday there were kings here." Beloved by *Cahiers* for his portrayal of a star in revolt in *The Big Knife*, Palance plays the producer as if reprising his Attila the Hun in the Hollywood *peplum*, *Sign of the Pagan*. (His big, brutally energetic and self-important child is said to be modeled after Joe Levine, although the type may be immortal—it's no stretch to imagine him producing *Con Air* or running Miramax.)

have imagined. With Hermes envisioned as *Late Show* bandleader Paul Shaffer and the Muses an r&b gospel chorus out of *Bubblin' Brown Sugar*, Mount Olympus is a delightfully celeb-stocked Vegas lounge while, tie-ins be damned, the Underworld is compared to McDonald's—five billion souls served so far.

The favorite character of Italian *peplums*, Hercules here sports a Kirk Douglas chin cleft and a credo cribbed from a box of Wheaties: "I'm on my way—I can go the distance." Hunkules, as the Muses dub him, is coached to the superstardom that will be celebrated in Michael Bolton's strident finale by the bouncy, bulbous-nosed satyr—voice supplied by Danny De Vito—and vamped by a slinky vixen named Meg (short for Megara), modeled on screwball wise-girls like Jean Arthur or Barbara Stanwyck.

Executed from designs by Gerald Scarfe by the team responsible for *Aladdin*, *Hercules* is a genuinely funny and inventive animated cartoon. It's also confident enough to encompass its own critique. After killing a computer-generated Hydra, Hercules's success includes the Hercules Store, Hercul-Ade, Air-Herc, et al. "I'm the most famous

hero in all Greece—I'm an action figure," he cries at the climax of a scene that seems less satire than social realism. (The morning of the pagan celebration consecrating midtown Manhattan to Disney's latest creation, I received a mail-order catalogue selling limited-edition Hercules coins, lithographs, watch-and-figurine chotchkes, and musical snow globes, as well as more plebeian swim-suits, bike shorts, T-shirts, and toys.)

"How cute—a couple of rodents looking for a theme park," Meg riffs on seeing Hades's little helpers in cartoon-character disguise. Hades himself (modeled on and given voice by James Woods) is a sarcastic showbiz hustler with a flame of blue hair and a motor-mouthed shpritz filled with Yiddishisms. An unmistakable Hollywood agent, plotting a "hostile takeover" of Olympus, this devil suggests Michael Eisner's paranoid fantasy of Michael Ovitz's palace revolt. **V**



A spaced-out Odyssey: Bardot and Palance in *Contempt*

(Bardot). The plot is distilled to anecdote in the sun-smacked Mediterranean light and further fractured by the surging melancholy of Georges Delerue's musical theme, not to mention the inserts of Bardot skinny-dipping demanded by Godard's producers. At one point the movie is interrupted by the message that "Joe Levine is calling from New York." *Contempt* begins with a charged quote from Godard's mentor André Bazin—"Cinema replaces the world with one that conforms to our desires"—followed by a close-up of Brigitte Bardot's world-famous *derrière*.

Moravia's novel was translated as *A Ghost at Noon*, and Godard's movie has the quality of a daylight haunting; an empty studio is populated by a collection of movie apparitions. The tawny nexus of desire (and token of male exchange), Bardot is never other than a platonic image of herself—although she sometimes wears the wig that Godard's then muse Anna Karina wore in *Vivre sa vie*. Piccoli, whose stingy-brim fedora, rolled up shirt-sleeves, and loosened tie suggest a refugee from the set of *Some Came Running* (Godard wanted Sinatra), has been hired to rewrite the *peplum* Odyssey being shot by a philosophically world-weary Fritz Lang (who "actually plays himself," *The New York Times* noted with surprise).

Given to big pronouncements quoted from a tiny book of wisdom, producer Palance enters the deserted Cinecittà lot in a mood of fatuous

Thanks to Lang's ill-starred production, the Olympians preside over the modern story. "I like gods, I know exactly how they feel," Palance declares in the midst of trashing the master's rushes. (A famous quotation from Louis Lumière is inscribed beneath the projection-room screen: "The cinema is an invention without a future.") Afterward, Palance coaxes an unwilling Bardot to ride in the red Alfa Romeo that serves as the story's *deus ex machina*. Later, back home and betoga'd in towels, Bardot and Piccoli pace and squabble through a half-furnished apartment—enacting the disintegration of their marriage in the stunning, half-hour tour de force that provides the movie with its centerpiece.

Godard called *Contempt* the "story of castaways of the western world, survivors of the shipwreck of modernity." Thirty-odd years later, it seems like an elegy for European art cinema, at once tragic and serene. If *Contempt* is a myth about the baleful effect of the movie god on the lives of two mortals, it is also the story of Godard's victory over a similar seduction. Lashed to the mast of irascible genius, he heard the song of the sirens and lived to tell the tale.

**B**ack in Lotusland, *Hercules* consecrates the triumphant merger of Broadway brass and animated pizzazz. The movie's infectious vulgarity (not to mention its gold-fuchsia-turquoise color scheme) trumps anything *Contempt*'s producer might



*Hercules*—the triumphant merger of Broadway brass and animated pizzazz