

Le Mepris (Contempt, France/Italy, 1963)

Director: Jean-Luc Godard

Screenplay: Alberto Moravia and Jean-Luc Godard (uncredited)

Music: Georges Delarue

Producers: Carlo Ponti, Georges de Beauregard and Joseph Levine

Cinematographer: Raoul Coutard

Cast: Brigitte Bardot, Michel Piccoli, Jack Palance, Fritz Lang

Jean-Luc Godard has one of the most varied filmographies. Starting as a critic on *Cahiers du Cinema* he made his first film, *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960), as a homage to Hollywood. Although *Le Mepris* was made only three years later, it was his fifth feature and the closest he got to being able to make a Hollywood movie.

Le Mepris could have been a movie in the Hollywood style: it had two of the biggest French stars of the day, Michel Piccoli and Brigitte Bardot; the well known American actor Jack Palance; was based a novel of the respected writer Alberto Moravia; and had a shooting budget of over \$1m. However, Godard was already rethinking the way he made movies and *Le Mepris* became a film about the movie industry as well as the portrayal of a disintegrating marriage.

The film was backed by three big producers: American Joseph Levine; the Italian Carlo Ponti; and the French Georges de Beauregard. Levine insisted upon a nude scene with Bardot as a way of making the film commercially attractive. Godard obliged but made the scene self-reflexive. Bardot's character, Camille, asks her husband what parts of her body he likes and the scene was filmed using a variety of colour filters, as well as ordinary light, which draws attention to the artifice of what we're seeing. The audience is not going to be allowed to enjoy the sight of Bardot's body in a straightforward manner. Godard used a similar technique in *British Sounds* (1969) in which a shot of a woman's crotch is held in close-up for a few minutes.

Le Mepris's self reflexivity is evident from the title sequence, in which a camera tracks across the screen before turning to face the audience. The narrative continues the theme. It concerns the conflict between art and commerce, a schism that Godard himself was struggling with. The story focuses on the filming of a version of Homer's *Odyssey* directed by Fritz Lang (playing himself, a director who, it has been argued, compromised his art when he moved to Hollywood). In contrast to Lang, the venal producer Jeremy Prokosch (Palance), keeps insisting on more 'sex' and less art. Godard plays Lang's assistant.

The faltering marriage of Paul and Camille is dramatised in a long scene in their apartment where the camera tracks restlessly so door-frames and rooms divide the couple (there's a similarly long scene between a couple in *A bout de souffle*). The interpreter, who translates for Palance, further emphasises the difficulties of communication and parallels Pauls and Camille's mutual incomprehension as their marriage deteriorates. Their lack of communication is paralleled by the different desires of the filmmakers:

[the film is] a relentless examination of the politics of film production, the compromises one must make (and must *not* make) in order to realize one's dream, and the gap of communication between the self and others in both personal and professional relationships. (Dixon, 1997, p. 48)

Le Mepris was made just as Godard was developing into a more pedagogical filmmaker. Within a few years his didactic style would predominate (though, to an extent, he reverted to more conventionally arthouse cinema with *Slow Motion* (*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, 1979) as post-'68 filmmaking became suspicious of entertainment. In *Le Mepris*, however, there is much emotional pleasure to be had from the sumptuous cinematography and Georges Delarue's score.

Bibliography

Wheeler Winston Dixon (1997) *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (State of New York University Press: Albany)

See also

4.4 Brechtian cinema: *Tout va Bien*

5.7 The French New Wave (*nouvelle vague*)