

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

CUNY Graduate Center

2010

Review of Contempt

Michael Adams

City University of New York

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/151

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Contempt (Blu-ray)

(LionsGate, 2.16.2010)

Contempt is interesting as an aberration in the career of Jean-Luc Godard and as one of his films focusing most directly on the cinema. To mollify producer Carlo Ponti, Godard agreed to tackle a bigger subject than in his earlier, more intimate films, choosing Alberto Moravia's 1954 novel *A Ghost at Noon* as his source. The joke on Ponti and Joseph E. Levine, the American vulgarian who co-financed the 1963 film, is that *Contempt* deals with the conflicts between a director, a screenwriter, and a know-nothing producer. By examining Godard's love for cinema and his feelings about the fragility of romantic relationships, the director used the one big budget given him in his career to make a film as personal as his other films.

Paul (Michel Piccoli) is a struggling playwright forced to write screenplays to earn a living for himself and his beautiful wife, Camille (Brigitte Bardot). He is called in by Prokosch (Jack Palance), an American producer, to rewrite a film already in production in Rome. Because this is the era of lavish costume epics, Prokosch wants the adaptation of *The Odyssey* to be a spectacle, while the director (Fritz Lang as himself), wants something with more psychological depth. The three men parry back and forth, while Paul seems to be encouraging Camille toward an affair with Prokosch.

Paul is said to have previously worked on *Toto vs. Hercules*, a dig at Levine who made his reputation by turning a dubbed version of the Italian epic *Hercules* into an American hit. The protagonists first assemble outside the Cinecittá studios by a wall covered in movie posters, including ones for Howard Hawks' *Hatari* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, representing the last vestiges of old Hollywood. The casting of Lang, who had directed his final film three years earlier, demonstrates how past masters must stoop to making trash or be cast aside.

The major film reference occurs when the characters attend a screening of Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy*. Both films feature numerous shots of statuary, are partially set in Capri, where location shooting for *The Odyssey* takes place, and depict the slow unraveling of a marriage. Camille feels growing contempt for Paul because he is so indecisive, both about working with Prokosch and about her. She loves him, but he is too passive, willing to let their marriage drift aimlessly. Their relationship is a typical one for Godard, whose women are usually much more perceptive than his men.

The patience of some viewers may be tested during the centerpiece of *Contempt*, as Paul and Camille analyze, or avoid analyzing, their marriage for a half hour in their sparsely furnished apartment. The film is Godard's first in CinemaScope, and he constantly uses the spaces between the characters to comment on their emotional and professional distance. In the apartment scene, instead of using a medium or long shot for the most lengthy of the conversations between the couple, the camera tracks back and forth, as if they are essentially talking to themselves. In an extra, Godard compares

this technique to watching a tennis game. As in tennis, we keep waiting to see which character wins, but neither does.

Contempt is one of the first titles to make the transition from the Criterion Collection to LionsGate. While early results, as with the unstable colors of the Blu-ray for *The Ladykillers*, lead us to expect the worst, the Blu-ray of *Contempt* is gorgeous. The pale blue of the sea around Capri is the most beautiful seascape I've ever seen on film. The use of blues, reds, yellows, and, especially, various shades of orange comments on the tawdriness of the characters' lives. Some might complain that Prokosch's red Alfa Romeo appears more orange than red at times, but such is the nature of the interaction of light and color.

Some of the extras are holdovers from the Criterion edition: *The Dinosaur and the Baby*, a 61-minute 1967 conversation between Godard and Lang, who exerts his imperial presence much more than does the Lang in *Contempt*, and *Conversation with Fritz Lang*, a 14-minute film shot on the *Contempt* set. New extras are an introduction by Godard biographer Colin McCabe, *Contempt . . . Tenderly*, a 30-minute analysis of the film's themes, primarily by Godard expert Alain Bergala, and *Once Upon a Time There was Contempt*, a delightful 52-minute interview with Godard made in 2009 by TCM France.

Given his reputation for occasional surliness, Godard is surprisingly forthcoming and charming. He talks about how *Cahiers du cinema* critics admired Bardot and how much he wanted to work with her. Godard says she seemed bored because she wasn't having an affair with anyone on the set. Godard tries hard to be enigmatic, stuffing a big cigar in his mouth and staring at the camera, but there is a twinkle in his eye despite himself. Only Palance fans may be disappointed in the extras, for he is strangely never mentioned.—Michael Adams