

Why Is *Contempt* So Important?

Contempt is so important because it gives people a great reason to [argue passionately](#) on whether the film is a masterpiece of art, or a failed experiment. If you actually compare the plot of *Contempt* to the plot of *The Odyssey*, of course *Contempt* falls short. You weren't supposed to do that. But if you put away such notions and embrace *Contempt* on purely filmic terms, it succeeds on many levels. First, the film packs a huge punch. It is able to harness the power of many weighty, historical things, like *The Odyssey*, like Fritz Lang himself, like the big machine that is a Technicolor camera. Like Jack Palance in all his monstrosity, and Brigitte Bardot, who is, at the very least, the epitome of cinematic female beauty. Like the words-cannot-describe the natural beauty of Capri. And other things. It should come as no surprise given all these highly charged ingredients that the film has its detractors. It's too manipulative, too arrogant, lacking a solid narrative structure. Here is something from [an essay I grabbed](#) where a guy pits his love for *Contempt* against Rosenbaum's dismissal:

"In his essay on the film, Rosenbaum, while considering it a masterpiece, argues that Godard fails as a storyteller. He complains that Godard cuts to flashbacks and fantasies, elides the soundtrack at certain points, makes cultural allusions that distract from the narrative, has Paul pick up a gun only [never to use it again](#),⁶ has Lang directing a film that "simply looks awful," and introduces Camille as a "former typist" when Brigitte Bardot is "[the unlikeliest 'former typist' imaginable](#)."⁸ Surely, though, this critique is misleading. It measures *Le Mépris* as if Godard was merely a conventional director making a conventional linear film. But Godard's films, as Sontag once argued, "destroyed" cinema and created their own purpose and structure, and so it is only sensible that they be measured by different criteria."

Ok okay. You all have a point! More:

"If *Le Mépris* lacks a formal rigor, if its attenuated sequence of events only suggests a story, it is because Godard has created a different type of film. "A story," Sontag argued, "in the traditional sense – something that's already taken place – is replaced by a segmented situation in which the suppression of certain explicative connections between scenes creates the impression of an action continually beginning anew, unfolding in the present tense."

And the very thing that is unfolding is a great emotional tragedy, told with the utmost tenderness and beauty. Godard disregards cause and effect

and psychological explanation not only because these tools are too conventional, but also because he understands what Cubists, Modernists, and other abstract artists understand: that life itself is a sum of fragmented parts, of memories, flashbacks, wishful fantasies, of past and present and things to come. In *Le Mépris*, the reasons for Camille's growing contempt for Paul are never fully explained. Certainly, there are events that set their marital breakdown in motion: Paul's condescension to take a hack screenwriting job diminishes his stature in Camille's eyes, although his willingness to let Prokosch make passes at her hurts her the most. But when Paul asks Camille why her feelings have changed, all she says is: "I don't know. All I know is that I don't love you anymore." The dynamics of the relationship are given in impressions that create a sum larger than its parts; they suggest that reality and people change, that love and passion ebb and flow and sometimes die without a single cause, that mistrust and boredom and dishonesty exact heavy tolls, and that people too often fail to see themselves and others properly. The film presents all of this as a sincere lament. Camille says in a voice-over: "We used to live in a cloud of unawareness, in delicious complicity. Things happened with sudden, wild, enchanted recklessness. I'd end up in Paul's arms, hardly aware of what had happened." And then Paul in voice-over says: "The recklessness was now absent in Camille, and thus in me."

I agree. Why is a cubist approach to filmmaking any less valid than it is in painting? Surely the answer is not already settled? But here is what I see as Rosenbaum's most valid criticism.

"Godard disregards cause and effect and psychological explanation not only because these tools are too conventional..."

Exactly. I do think psychological plausibility is important. If it's good enough for Bergman, it should be good enough for Godard. We cannot ignore Rosenbaum's point about Bardot not being a believable typist. This is huge. *Contempt* may invoke all the tragic emotion it wants to for many thematic and aesthetic reasons. And I have no objection to the abstract organizational scheme. But there are times throughout the film where both credulity, as well as my tolerance for being manipulated, is strained ever so slightly. For example, how in the world did these two ever get together in the first place? I want to know.

"We used to live in a cloud of unawareness, in delicious complicity."

Oh, well [that settles that](#)¹⁰ then. Regarding Camille's motivations, my practical interpretation is that she does (develop enough contempt to make her) fall out of love with Paul. But when? Does the film adequately answer this central question? Godard certainly invites us to believe we are witnessing the process unfold. Is it when she protests against going in the car with Prokosch? Because she's already felt an attraction to him and is trying to resist it? Or was the marriage already well over by then? When Paul arrives at the villa with bumbling excuses, it's definitely over. Surely?

And for Paul's part, did he tell her to go because he is insecure and wants to test her faithfulness? Or because he is bored and wants to titillate himself with such games? Or because he is simply trying to be rational, even if that's not what she really wants. "Odysseus told her to accept the gifts because he didn't want to cause a scandal." Paul's motivation is as interesting as it is ambiguous. But look, people just don't divorce because of a cab ride. The fact that he flirts with the assistant while simultaneously being jealous of his wife, allows us to feel less sympathy for him as a person. But it may all be academic for Camille if she has already made up her mind long before. Philip Lopate's (Criterion liner) essay explains a stepwise devolution from the taxi-cab pimping, through the apartment scene, and all the way up to Capri. This interpretation would have to ascribe face-value consequence to the words and actions of the pivotal apartment scene. Did Camille cultivate her contempt for Paul [in that scene](#)?¹¹ Perhaps, but my reading is that one cannot say precisely when she had made up her mind (and that it could have already taken place before the film started). Did she kiss Prokosch because Paul sent her off on the boat with him (just like the car ride scene)? Or was it going to happen anyway? Or had it already happened before, back at Prokosch's villa? Probably not, but we cannot know for sure. It does seem clear, though, that Paul begins the film with contempt for her (and perhaps just as much for himself, for the world even)? This is important because it provides a basis for Camille having already begun to dislike Paul, perhaps in response, before the film starts. "You move around too much. You keep waking me." (From the very start of the film.)

Camille and Paul's subsequent arguments still work in this framework. She [doesn't want to admit](#)¹³ she no longer loves him for the same reasons anyone wouldn't admit that (until they had to). All the contempt and ill-treatment of Camille at the hands of Paul that follows is as much an example of how they had gotten to that point (in some untold prelude) rather than truly consequential. The present commenting on the past. No amount of arguing or pacing or retracing can change their destiny.

But here is the opening for fair critical objection. On the one hand, the events of the story are not necessarily sufficient (the overly choreographed and compressed marital dissolution) or psychologically believable ([Bardot as typist?](#)).¹⁵ Yet Godard does seem to offer all of this up as straightforward cause-and-effect. We can't help but want to interpret each moment as a critical when, of course, the reality (would be) much more unclear or unknowable. And so it boils down to whether you believe Godard expects us to take the story at face value, in which case, the film is a narrative lie and perhaps even annoying. Or are we supposed to simply absorb the drama as a sort of "greatest hits" of Paul and Camille's painful interactions. I suspect your reaction to the film will likely depend on your disposition toward Godard, and the opposite sex in general, as much as anything else.

Now the fact that Godard presents his story amidst the backdrop of real Greek tragedy certainly opens him up to comparisons. Is his story as powerful as the above-average Greek myth (supposing you could equilibrate for differences in medium, book versus film, and historical context, Greek/not-Greek)? Of course not. But are the truths true, the emotions believable, the arguments and the pain—catharsis? Are these things conveyed? I would certainly say *Contempt* has contempt nailed. But what about the fact that Godard may have fudged a little in his rather expeditious use of various mythological and philosophical texts? It seems clear Godard is willing to simply borrow the gravitas through the insertion of Homer and Lang (film history gravitas). Take away that and Raul Coutard's Cinemascope and Bardot, and you're pretty much left with an Eric Rohmer film in Capri. I would argue that to the extent that this bothers you, it bothers you. But hey, such film tactics are absolutely fair game. And if you don't mind and are happy to enjoy Godard's brand of chicanery, then that's fine too.

One can debate whether or not Paul is a tragic figure in the epic sense of Odysseus, Oedipus, Hamlet. His tragic flaw, if there is a definable one, is that he's an asshole, and he let's his ego and insecurities get the best of him. In other words, he's pretty much like the rest of us. If he has an epiphany, it will have to come after the film is ended. In Greek tragedy, Paul would have realized his error and changed his ways, only just in time to actually witness the crash.

Also, I have to admit Godard's reinvention of the Odysseus myth is actually pretty interesting. I normally bristle (if I can't eschew) modern retellings, but this one grabbed me by the upper arm and stomach and still hasn't let go. At the start of the film Prokosch offers his "theory about the Odyssey" that Penelope was unfaithful. This becomes the prophecy which Paul himself will cause to be true. Godard's work is so insightful because it is exactly this kind of male insecurity, which is as old as

Homer and will always cause men to doubt Penelope. And it is this very doubt which seems to fuel Paul's contempt for Camille (and in turn the reverse). So whether you want to call it a tragedy, or just a good unlove story, it's very much a cautionary tale. If you too suspect all females, you will side with Paul. If not then not. If you [can't make up your mind](#),¹⁶ you'll be forced to write an essay.

And suppose the film does make you go back and reread the Homer. And suppose the plot of *Contempt* falls even further after you do. Then more power to Homer, and aren't you better off too for having read it? And what film made you go and do that? Yeah? Yeah? Are you listening Tim? Look. *Contempt* [may be flawed](#),¹⁷ but damn if it isn't powerful.

A Detailed Thought About the Ending

The *Chinatown* meets *The Graduate* (I'm joking) ending, which seems out of nowhere (to non-classics majors) actually makes perfect sense. I believe Godard kills her because she took away Paul's bullets. As a woman and human being, she has every right to leave Paul for Prokosch. But in taking the bullets, she prevents him from being able to make a choice about whether to kill Prokosch or perhaps even her. This would be sensible in modern life, but is a no-go in a tragedy. She betrays her own line, "It's your choice, not mine." She talks the talk, but then doesn't actually walk the walk. It'd be like if Odysseus arrived back in Ithaca and Penelope...

Could this have anything to do with the reason why Francesca, the translator, is so helpful in finding and giving the gun back to him? Does she want to facilitate his revenge? Does she have a stake in Paul killing either Prokosch or Camille? I actually don't think she cares (any more than Prokosch). I think she's just trying to maintain the tragedy—to give it a chance to unfold as any good Greek would have it. And then remember how Francesca closes the gate? Like closing the cage and locking in the combatants in the coliseum. It happened. Watch the film.

Also, think about your own reaction, as an audience. You too want to see Paul at least have to decide either to kill Prokosch or Camille. Don't you? And Godard, smartly, denies us that. This is why Spike Jonze had to give us Meryl Streep some forty years later snorting green drugs and getting naked—as a get even. I asked my friend why Francesca gave him the gun. She said, "You think you can read that much into it?" I think I said something like, "Sure, why not?" I wish I had said something like:

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

Quoting an essay I read:

"Pascal Aubier told me 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," Anna Karina.)

Still, it can't be denied that in the end Camille does betray Paul with the vile virile Jerry Prokosch. It has been Prokosch's thesis all along that Homer's Penelope was faithless. Lang rejects this theory as anachronistic sensationalism. Godard, you might say, builds the strongest possible case for Camille through the first two acts, but in Act III this Penelope proves faithless.

Even in Capri, when the game is up, Paul demands one last time: "Why do you have contempt for me?" She answers: "That I'll never tell you, even if I were dying." To this he responds, with his old intellectual vanity, that he knows already. By this point, the reason is truly unimportant. She will never tell him, not because it is such a secret, but because she has already moved beyond dissection of emotions to action: she is leaving him."

Ok, but she already has told him, over and over again. I think it's difficult for people in this kind of quagmire to sever ties once and for all. Relationships like this one have to go through multiple cycles (of what we actually witness in the film) before they finally split. And sometimes they never split until one person finds something better, or unless they literally explode, like in Buñuel's *TOOOD* or Fassbinder's *Marriage of Maria Braun*, or wreck their car. But again, I do not say Camille was wrong to want to leave Paul. I simply suggest the reason she is killed is because of her attempting to outsmart Greek tragedy. Being unfaithful is fine, but taking away the bullets—now that really is cheating.

“On the face of it, her suspicion that Paul had acted as her “pander” by leaving her with his lecherous employer seems patently unjust. Clearly he had told her to get into Prokosch’s two-seat sports car because he did not want to appear foolishly, uxoriously jealous in the producer’s eyes; and we can only assume he is telling the truth when he says his arrival at Prokosch’s house was delayed by a taxi accident. Still, underneath the unfairness of her (implicit) accusation is a legitimate complaint: he would not have acted so cavalierly if he were not also a little bored with her, and willing to take her for granted. Certainly he is not particularly interested in what she has to say about the minutiae of domesticity: the drapes, lunch with her mother. All this he takes in as a tax paid for marrying a beautiful but undereducated younger woman. Her claims to possessing a mind (when she reads aloud from the Fritz Lang interview book in the tub) only irritate him, and he becomes significantly most enraged when [she has the audacity to criticize him](#)⁹ for filching other men’s ideas (after he proposes going to a movie for screenwriting inspiration).”

But, see, Camille really is smart, or at least smart enough. Her comments and actions show her to be. In spite of the superficial premise that she isn't. This is simply psychologically not believable.

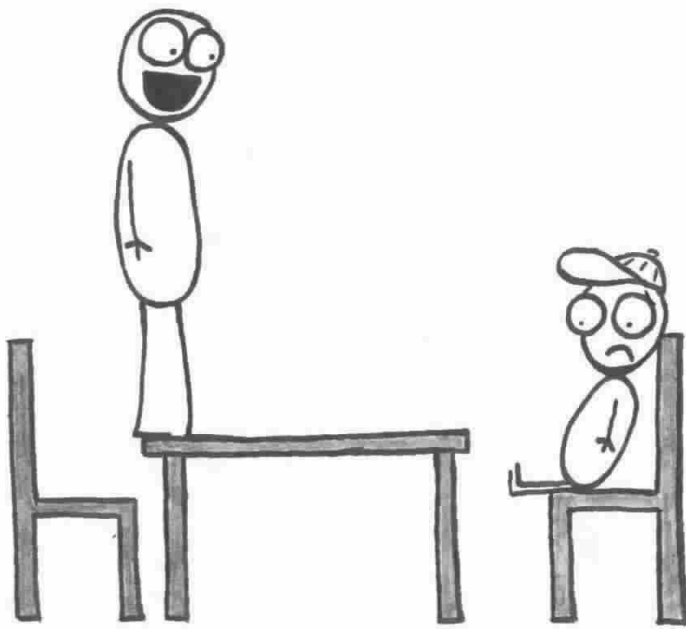
The suggestion that Bardot represents Godard's one-time wife, Ana Karina (black hair) is intriguing. When Camille wears the black hair, she could be the independent filmmaker groupie and Paul (Godard) devotee. Perhaps this is "the how" she and Paul could have ever gotten together in the first place. With her blonde hair, she is the B.B. of Hollywood stature and would stereotypically want to be with the American producer. And what then should we make of Paul's saying he prefers her as a blonde? Is that just Godard taking a playful poke at his ex-wife? I personally don't think the real Paul (Godard) would be happy with either. Should we ask him?

“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). At first she evades with a characteristically feminine defense: “I’ve got a right to change my mind.” 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 though she fully expects to spring back to affection at any moment. She even makes various conciliating moves, assuring him she loves him, but, because of his insecurities, he refuses this comfort. 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. Paul is more interested in having [his worst nightmares](#)¹² confirmed than in rehabilitating the damage.”

Yeah. Shit. Lopate's right. This is how it happens.

Auteur Point about the Conversation over the Table

When Paul and Camille have their talk at the table as the camera swivels back and forth quickly, it is similar to the breakfast conversation in *Alphaville*. The camera plays off the sudden tonal shifts in the conversation, highlighting how quickly emotions can change. But another way to read the scene is to say that every conversation has two layers. The surface layer is expressed visually by the back and forth camera movement and ritual gesturing. But there is a more telling layer underneath. What happens then is not that the inner feelings of the discussants are changing, but more that they are revealed, sometimes suddenly or even in spite of an attempt to keep them hidden. Godard illustrates this dramatic (and very real) phenomenon by first lulling you into a false sense of complacency with the back and forth metronomic over the table. He then suddenly reverses the movement of the camera, which has both spontaneity and a sense of surprise, [which is our surprise](#),¹⁴ at her expected, and unexpected, confession. (Of not loving him, or whatever she said—I forget.) This technique, while hardly subtle, does magnify this essential multiplicity and volatility of real human interaction. And it plays with the question of whether Paul and Camille’s relationship is really changing, or merely being revealed to us, with camera work. Clouzot does something similar in *Diabolique* during the exquisite telephone scene, in which the two women take turns pushing the phone across a table toward one another, each challenging the other to call the police. The final resolution of that scene also involves setting up a pattern for our expectations in order to then break it.



>and finally, you and the rest of the boys need to give up on
>insisting bardot is not a believable "former typist". come on.
>i don't even know how to argue with this point. you boys are
>just silly. yeah, the idea might produce a few chuckles in the
>audience, but it's not a point worth laboring. really. in the real
>world, there are things such as unattractive and grossly
>overweight (not "curvy") prostitutes as there are stunningly
>attractive programmers.

After the screening, when Prokosch says, “What do you think?” and Fritz Lang says, “of the girl or of him?” Here Lang stands in for us, the audience, and he is basically asking, “With which character do you most identify, sympathize, despise?” I suppose some viewers might say neither, or both. I think it’s great when he says, “Why don’t you say something?” and she says, “I have nothing to say.” This is the whole point. Does she really not have anything to say? Or does she just not want to say it? It’s a perfect line because the entire unlove story revolves around what she is thinking, and we not only don’t know what she’s thinking, but we don’t even know if *she* knows what she’s thinking. It’s brilliant.

Criticisms I Have Heard of the Film

1. not impressed w/ the visual style – not that beautiful

Everyone's entitled to their opinion. You could also not be impressed with Poussin's 'The holy family on the steps' but I've got twenty million says you're wrong.

2. not impressed w/ tone – too overbearing/overpowering

Everyone's entitled to their opinion. Yours is wrong.

3. can't identify w/ characters

Whatever.

4. Too self-indulgent, too referential both to film and the Greeks.
I hate Greeks.

You probably also hated Eliot's *Wasteland*, I presume?

5. overly dramatic, overly intense, pretentious

I hate when people make these statements without justification as if there is something inherently wrong with being dramatic, intense, or pretentious. It's merely a question of whether it works or not.

6. The Greek statues were corny looking pieces of junk, and he spends way too much time staring at them.

Some have criticized the corny-looking Greek statues. They were corny looking compared to the best Greek art. But that's on purpose. The periodic tracking shots of them are meant to allow one to reflect on the film as it relates to *The Odyssey* (or whatever themes you discern) as well as one's own life. It's important they not be fine Greek statues, because one isn't supposed to look at them and think, "God damn, that's a great bust" or "is that a Michelangelo?" One isn't supposed to stare AT them, but through them, while the wheels turn (in your heart first—then more in your head later). I think it's rare (although Wong Kar-Wai among other great "pausers" do it all

the time) to be able to do this meditation-thinking *during* the primary viewing experience, rather than simply having the entire plot thrust upon oneself en bloc, ravishment by ravishment, allowing reflection only after it's all over. Which would just be entertainment.

Perhaps the most clearly articulated argument against the film would come from Tolstoy:

“As to the fourth method—that of interesting—it also is frequently confounded with art. One often hears it said, not only of a poem, a novel, or a picture, but even of a musical work, that it is interesting. What does this mean? To speak of an interesting work of art means either that we receive from a work of art information new to us, or that the work is not fully intelligible and that little by little, and with effort, we arrive at its meaning and experience a certain pleasure in this process of guessing it. In neither case has the interest anything in common with artistic impression. Art aims at infecting people with feeling experienced by the artist. But the mental effort necessary to enable the spectator, listener, or reader to assimilate the new information contained in the work, or to guess the puzzles propounded, by distracting him hinders the infection. And therefore the interestingness of a work not only has nothing to do with its excellence as a work of art, but rather hinders than assists artistic impression.”

Lang says *The Odyssey* is great because it cannot be broken down and deconstructed, but simply “is what it is,” take it or leave it. But this film obviously can be interpreted and dissected all day. Hardly a take it or leave it proposition. Thus, if you believe Tolstoy and Lang, then by definition this film is not great art. But damn what a glorious failure it is. See, eight pages later and I still can't decide!