



# The Death of Classical Cinema

Hitchcock, Lang, Minnelli



Joe McElhaney

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Hitchcock, Lang, Minnelli



Joe McElhaney

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*For Emilene*





It would be untrue to say that in those days the palaces of Gabriel struck me as being of greater beauty than, or even of another period from, the neighboring houses. I found more style and should have supposed more antiquity if not in the Palais de l'Industrie at any rate in the Trocadero. Plunged in a restless sleep, my adolescence embraced in one uniform vision the whole of the quarter through which it guided it, and I had never dreamed that there could be an eighteenth-century building in the Rue Royale, just as I should have been astonished to learn that the Porte Saint-Martin and the Porte Saint-Denis, those glories of the age of Louis XIV, were not contemporary with the most recently built tenements in the sordid districts which bore their names.

— Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*

Unlike literature, a more evolved art, for example, where the writer can remain faithful to his style and technique throughout his life, the filmmaker does not enjoy the same freedom. . . . Genius in the realm of films must always strive toward the new. However beautiful it might be, any film that does not further the cinema is not wholly worthy of its name. It must mesh with the sensibilities in its era.

— André Bazin, *The Cinema of Cruelty*

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# Introduction

## Writing the History of Classical Cinema

IN JEAN-LUC GODARD'S *CONTEMPT* (1963), the seventy-three-year-old director Fritz Lang plays a version of himself in an otherwise fictional scenario concerned with the production of a film version of Homer's *The Odyssey* being directed by Lang at Cinecittà studios in Rome. Lang and his producer, Jeremy Prokosch (Jack Palance), attempt to interest the writer Paul Javal (Michel Piccoli) in helping them create a workable screenplay for this project. At one point in the film, Lang tells Javal that he believes the particular power of *The Odyssey* resides in Homer's harmonious relationship with the world in which he creates. "The world of Homer," Lang says, "is a real world. The poet belonged to his own civilization, one that developed in harmony with nature, not in opposition to it. That is precisely the beauty of *The Odyssey*, its faith in reality as it exists . . . in a form that could not be tampered with." These lines were written not by Lang but by Godard and may be taken as Godard's attempt to define the nature of the moment in which his own film is being made—that of the early 1960s, at the height of the influence and creative power of the French New Wave.

An international coproduction packaged by Carlo Ponti and Joseph E. Levine, featuring a major star, Brigitte Bardot, and adapted from a novel by Alberto Moravia, *Contempt* was Godard's single major attempt to enjoy widespread international success and to create a film on a scale that would evoke, however distantly, the world of epic narrative. Within the context of film history up to this point, what such a citation of the epic inevitably suggested was classical cinema, a form which also, one could



argue, developed “in harmony” with civilization for approximately the first fifty years of existence.<sup>1</sup> And although written by Godard, these words are spoken by a filmmaker who, in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s, forged not simply a style but, in the words of Noël Burch, “a series of achievements that match the history of the cinema’s crestline of discovery stage by stage.”<sup>2</sup> Unlike the improvisational Godard, Lang’s cinema depends on a rigorous and inflexible preconception, working within a “form that could not be tampered with.” In the grandiose and overdetermined world of Lang, little is left to chance.

Both Homer and Lang function for *Contempt* as the sites of far-removed and mythical realms, creating epic narratives designed for a wide audience and in worlds markedly different from the one in which Godard himself is now working—or at least that is the implication here. As many commentators on the film have noted, *Contempt* self-consciously draws on the language of this type of filmmaking to the point where the film becomes, as Jacques Aumont has phrased it, “a sort of compendium of classical cinema.”<sup>3</sup> This relationship to classical cinema includes a narrative with an almost classical three-act structure; a fluid, long-take style; romantic musical underscoring; and a use of color and anamorphic widescreen that evokes the world of big-budget spectacle. But *Contempt* reproduces these elements in a very idiosyncratic manner so that the film seems to be, at once, an example of classical cinema and a commentary on it.<sup>4</sup>

As an extension of the element of commentary, *Contempt* cites numerous films and filmmakers whose origins are largely from what has been defined as cinema’s classical period. Javal explains to Prokosch that his conception for *The Odyssey* is one that would revert to the style of D. W. Griffith and Charles Chaplin. In the film, a wall on the back lot of Cinecittà is covered with film posters from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), Roberto Rossellini’s *Vanina Vanini* (1961), and Howard Hawks’s *Hatari!* (1962). Javal unsuccessfully attempts to convince his wife Camille (Bardot) to go to the cinema with him to see Hawks’s *Rio Bravo* (1959) or Nicholas Ray’s *Bigger Than Life* (1956); and while Camille sits in the bathtub reading Luc Moullet’s study of Lang, Javal insists that he keep his hat on indoors in emulation of Dean Martin in Vincente Minnelli’s *Some Came Running* (1958). These citations are not examples of Godard genuflecting to Great Directors of the Past. Instead they function as acts of mourning, an acknowledgement that a way of filming and looking at the world is passing out of existence. The posters on the wall at Cinecittà are not simply displayed but are peeling, fading away.

A year after *Contempt* was made (and most likely taking its cue from the film) Andrew Sarris wrote an essay on Godard in which he argued that the cinema:



Figure I.1. Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963): Michel Piccoli as Paul Javal (left) with Fritz Lang. The backlot at Cinecittà.

may finally be passing out of its classical period, little more than half a century old, after all, and into a period of commentary and abstraction. The classicists from cinema's more instinctive past are either dead—Ophuls, Mizoguchi, Murnau, Griffith, Lubitsch, et al.—or aging—Renoir, Dreyer, Ford, Chaplin, Sternberg, Lang, et al. Even Rossellini and Welles, the great innovators (or conservators?) of the forties, seem to belong to traditions which have largely spent their force.”<sup>5</sup>

Within *Contempt*, the films of Hawks and Hitchcock, of Lang, Minnelli, and Rossellini mark the end of an attitude toward cinema traceable back at least as far as the filmmaking of Chaplin and Griffith. Godard even includes a poster from one of his own films, *Vivre sa vie* (1962), on that wall of decay and reading these citations in allegorical terms is unavoidable. The Godard of 1963 was arguably the most historically self-conscious filmmaker of the French New Wave, and in *Contempt* he is already imagining the decline and irrelevance of his own work in the midst of the decline of his predecessors. Writing on the historical importance of *Contempt* seven years after its release, Serge Daney argues that the film raises the issue of whether “failure is not more profound than any success. That is, is it not the demiurges who fail?” Godard's film marks “a turning from which the cinema has scarcely begun to come back.”<sup>6</sup>

During this period, the dominance of classical narrative cinema as an aesthetic force (as opposed to its dominance of a strictly economic nature) gives way to other methods that challenge this hegemony. Sharply

defined alternatives to classical cinema are gaining widespread recognition, principally within the realm of European art cinema—especially that of the French New Wave but also certain developments within Italian cinema (particularly the work of Antonioni and Fellini) and a bit later still, New German Cinema. “For the first time since the silent period,” Geoffrey Nowell-Smith writes, “the cinema, or part of it, found itself aligned fair and square with the artistic culture of modernism.”<sup>7</sup> The methods of classical cinema up to this point are closely bound up with a filmmaking that became solidified in the 1920s and that emerged out of a highly developed industrial mode of production exemplified by the frequently imitated studio system of Hollywood. The decline of this cinema begins in the early to mid-1960s, when these industries are either suffering from economic problems or reorganizing their modes of production. In the past, Hollywood and classical cinema in general had often been able to absorb the lessons of modernist developments in film form easily. To varying degrees, they would continue to do so throughout the 1960s and 1970s although in a much more uneven and idiosyncratic manner. All of this creates a climate that seems to throw the earlier classical cinema into a state of uncertainty.

Three years prior to acting in *Contempt*, Lang directed what would turn out to be his final film, *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960), made in Germany. Disastrously received by the press in Lang’s native country, it did not open in the United States until 1966, as part of a double bill in a theater in Times Square, dubbed into English and released without benefit of press screenings. It did, however, make Godard’s Ten Best list in *Cahiers du Cinéma* for 1961 (the year it was released in France) and finished sixteenth in the magazine’s annual critics poll, just after Jean Rouch’s *La Pyramide humaine* (1961) and John Cassavetes’s *Shadows* (1959), two very different films that more obviously represented the changing direction of the cinema of the 1960s. Although indisputably one of the most innovative film directors in the history of the form, the Fritz Lang of 1960, returning to the country in which his reputation was established, no longer belongs “to his own civilization” or creates “in harmony with nature.” The cultural environment and the technical resources that produced *Metropolis* (1927) and the earlier Mabuse films have ceased to exist. To many critics and spectators of the period, *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* is a film that seems to have been (to borrow a phrase from Manny Farber) “dropped into the present from a past which has become useless.”<sup>8</sup>

Between 1960 and 1963, then, we have Lang’s most recent film, largely regarded as a failure. Among the most vocal defenders of this work are the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, many of whom (as filmmakers) are engaged in a significant rewriting and rethinking of the nature of

cinematic form. Lang's work remains alive for these critics and filmmakers in a way that it is not elsewhere. But Lang makes no other films after *The Thousand Eyes* and later expresses regret at ever having made it. Although he was often publicly supportive of the work of the New Wave, it is a support marked by such ambivalence that one wonders if Lang even fully understands its most basic impulses: He is mystified by its concern with realism and improvisation, for instance, and considers this "the death of art."<sup>9</sup> In spite of their great admiration for Lang, the New Wave directors clearly, if they do not surpass him, move elsewhere and implicitly critique many of the assumptions of Lang's cinema. Unwittingly perhaps, their films and writings also magnify the general perception of Lang's decline. For the New Wave, the classical film auteur was first to be constituted as a model. But this process also entailed the necessity of foregrounding historical distance, of mapping out a distinct space within which new and distinctive forms of production could emerge. With this came major differences in the approach to film form between the Great Masters and the Young Turks of the New Wave. Whereas many of the Great Masters continue to make films during the 1960s, the nature of the investigations of the New Wave and other art cinema practices are such that this recent work by the canonical "first generation" of filmmakers was felt to suffer from historical dislocation by comparison. For the Great Masters who are still working and aware of this situation, the problem now is how to adapt and to continue creating a cinema that has not lost its historical relevance.

It is this *idea* of the death of classical cinema, its circumstances and implications, which are the primary concern of this book. The type of death I am situating here is not, by any means, a fact. Rather, it is a descriptive and historical attempt to give a name to a way of filming that, within several critical discourses of the period (and, to a certain extent, today as well), is regarded as being anachronistic. Numerous films and filmmakers from the period, stretching roughly from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, are relevant to the arguments I make here: the Jean Renoir of *The Testament of Dr. Cordelier* (1959), *Picnic on the Grass* (1961), or *The Elusive Corporal* (1962), the Michael Powell of *Peeping Tom* (1960), the George Cukor of *The Chapman Report* (1962) or *Justine* (1969), the Howard Hawks of *Red Line 7000* (1965), the Elia Kazan stretching from *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) up through *The Visitors* (1972), the John Ford of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) or *Seven Women* (1966), the Robert Rossen of *Lilith* (1964), the Allan Dwan of *The Most Dangerous Man Alive* (1961). My primary concern, however, will be with three films: Lang's *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*, Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), and Minnelli's *Two Weeks in Another Town* (1962). My reasons for choosing these three films and filmmakers over the others is something that will become clearer

over the course of this introduction. I cannot deny, however, that my choices are also the result of a personal preference or, to be more precise, a *passion* that is stronger than the admiration I have for the other films listed here. As we shall see, such apparent indulgences are not antithetical to the nature of my project.

As with many of the films listed previously, *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*, *Marnie*, and *Two Weeks in Another Town* were largely perceived as being not only failures but, in certain quarters, as catastrophes for these directors, clear indications that they were losing their relevance as filmmakers as well as being symptomatic of the declining power of classical cinema. But the word catastrophe also has another meaning for this book. Donald Kuspit has drawn attention to the recurring rhetoric of death, crisis, and catastrophe that invariably emerges when art is perceived to be in state of advance. “The birth of a new art is informed by a sense of catastrophe, displaced onto an old art by describing it as decadent, which it may or may not be,” he argues. But the death of an old art is likewise informed by this sense of catastrophe. “The old art defends itself by regarding the new art as far-fetched and arbitrary,” he writes, “or else the old art quietly assimilates the new art’s advances, to stay in favor with the society that admires them.”<sup>10</sup> What is taking place with the cinema during this period, however, does not precisely conform to any of these tendencies Kuspit outlines, although elements of all of them are at work here. In *Contempt*, for example, Godard may well view classical cinema as being in a decadent or ruined state. But this is far from being a simple negative evaluation, especially because Godard views his own work as engaged in a similar process of decay. And in spite of Lang’s publicly expressed skepticism about the value of the French New Wave, Lang’s own cinema, as well as that of Hitchcock’s and Minnelli’s, was clearly serving as a crucial model for a new type of modern cinema. Moreover, the admiration that both Hitchcock and Minnelli had for this new cinema emerging during the 1960s appeared to be quite strong—stronger than Lang’s. A reversal of sorts begins to take place in which this new cinema itself became a type of model for these older figures and in ways that cannot be simply categorized as one of quiet assimilation.

To say that classical cinema has become a thing of the past is a statement fraught with historical problems. As an economic force within popular culture, classical cinema (particularly that of Hollywood) is as strong now as it ever was and it is still sometimes capable of producing works of interest. But my concern here is not with classical cinema as a monolithic cultural form practiced across twentieth-century history. Rather, I want to focus on the beginning of a specific historical moment when classicism is perceived to be in a state of decline. What are the implications of such a

supposed decline in terms of how we understand, define, and historically locate this form so often identified as classical cinema? Or is this decline illusory, the subject of a melancholic fantasy about the cinema?

If we say that classical cinema is in a state of decline during the 1960s, and if we are to discuss this decline in relation to certain auteurs, how then do we account for the work of, for example, Hollywood filmmakers of the same approximate generation as Minnelli who do not appear to face the same problems that he did during this decade, directors such as Otto Preminger, Robert Aldrich, Don Siegel or, working completely out of Europe by this period, Joseph Losey? Any attempt to assess the development of classical cinema fully during the 1960s and after would need to address the ways in which these filmmakers, rather than going into decline, not only easily adapted to current trends but also arguably produced some of their best work during this decade and beyond it. Furthermore, how do we account for filmmakers of the same approximate generation as Lang or Hitchcock who continue to work during the 1960s but without feeling the need to adjust their filmmaking styles significantly in relation to changing fashions: Billy Wilder or especially Chaplin who, in *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1966), creates a film that seems to be willfully archaic? I raise such questions not to answer them here, but rather to pose them as historical problems. Although the concept of decline should not be entirely disregarded as a myth, arguing that classical cinema during the 1960s and early 1970s undergoes several important changes and transformations of which the films being discussed in this book are but three examples is more precise.

### What Is Classical Cinema?

Before proceeding further, explaining how the terms *classical cinema* and *modernist cinema* will be used here is necessary. Defining them, like defining any historical and group style, is a complex, ongoing process. As Charles Rosen argues in his study of classical music, “the concept of a style does not correspond to an historical fact but answers a need: it creates a mode of understanding.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, I offer not one concise, textbook-like definition of either classical or modernist cinema, but instead negotiate my way among several major attempts to create a mode of understanding these cinemas.

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in *Film Art: An Introduction* and *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (the latter cowritten with Janet Staiger) offer the most cogent definition of classical cinema. Although they were not the first to use the term *classical cinema*, the influence of their work has virtually enshrined

classical Hollywood as a full-fledged academic category. Putting forth a cognitive approach to film form, strongly influenced by Russian Formalism and the work of the art critic and historian E. H. Gombrich, the authors define classical Hollywood cinema as one marked by a sense of “decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver’s response.”<sup>12</sup> These qualities are achieved through the application of certain formal devices and storytelling techniques: the use of cause-and-effect narrative structures with strong goal-oriented protagonists; a reliance on the continuity editing system in which the action seems to unfold in a fluid and continuous manner; and a discreet use of lighting, camera movement, shot composition and sound that, while sometimes achieving expressive ends, are generally placed at the service of the narrative.

Bordwell’s and Thompson’s approach has its considerable appeal and usefulness, in particular an ability to offer a clear and sharply defined formalist system, a “group style” by which this cinema operates. Of the three directors who are the subject of this book, Minnelli belongs most firmly to this type of classical cinema. While often making use of expressive camera movements and of shot durations that were slightly above the norm for his period, Minnelli essentially creates within this group style. And in spite of his substantial contribution to the development of the musical genre (as well as to postwar melodrama and the domestic comedy), Minnelli’s handlings of genre “only confirm the genre’s fertility.”<sup>13</sup> Hitchcock and Lang offer more complicated cases in that their work represents how an “intermittent and fluctuating” style may assert itself in a film, allowing these directors to “intrude more often than is usual.” In Hitchcock this occurs through the emphasis on “optical subjectivity” and “blatant narrational intrusions,” the latter occurring through the use of such devices as “unexpected” camera angles, symbolic inserts, and sound overlaps.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Lang, we have a filmmaker who creates a “paranoid” spectator through a strategy that initially appears to operate within classical narrative’s investment in transparency, but that often “brutally and abruptly manipulates point-of-view to conceal gaps and force the viewer to false conclusions.”<sup>15</sup>

However, neither Lang nor Hitchcock fully qualifies as modernist filmmakers according to the system that *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* constructs for itself. “Most often,” Bordwell writes, “an idiosyncratic exploration of causality, time, or space works to reaffirm the norm by revealing the suppleness and range of the paradigm.”<sup>16</sup> Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson create three categories as alternatives to classical cinema: the art film, the modernist film, and the avant-garde film. Only the first two of these need concern us here. The art film, like classical Hollywood,

largely conforms to a group style consisting of a greater attention to realism, a less tightly causal method of organizing narrative, and characters that are often ambivalent, less able to drive a narrative strongly forward as they are in classical cinema. A true modernist cinema is one in which “spatial and temporal systems come forward and share with narrative the role of structuring the film” in which “a dynamic of unity and fragmentation is set up within the text.”<sup>17</sup> Examples are given: Yasujiro Ozu, Jacques Tati, Kenji Mizoguchi, Dreyer, Rivette, Bresson, and Godard. Although mindful of ambiguities and exceptions, and while also arguing that “no absolute, pure alternative to Hollywood exists,”<sup>18</sup> *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* tends to position modernist cinema as a more formally complex and idiosyncratic practice than classical cinema. Film modernism here, as in most modernisms, retains its standard function as an aesthetic practice that challenges mainstream norms of perception and formal structure.<sup>19</sup>

However influential, Bordwell and Thompson’s version of classical cinema has encountered a good deal of resistance. Miriam Bratu Hansen, for example, has questioned the validity of the very word *classical* (with its links to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century neoclassical ideals) as a way of describing a practice of filmmaking that may be more aptly defined as a type of “vernacular modernism.”<sup>20</sup> Instead of a cinema devoted to principles of decorum, proportion, formal harmony, and a cool control of the viewer’s responses, Hansen (influenced by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer in their approaches to the culture of modernity) posits a cinema “anchored in sensory experience and sensational effect—in processes of mimetic identification that are more often than not partial and excessive in relation to narrative comprehension.”<sup>21</sup> Where *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* erects a system to understand classical cinema, Hansen sees something closer to “a scaffold, matrix, or web that allows for a wide range of aesthetics effects and experiences. . . .”<sup>22</sup> Although less precisely defined than in Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson’s work, classical cinema in Hansen’s essay also becomes something more disruptive and unstable, its films less strictly conforming to a precise system. Hansen argues (and she is not the first to have done so) that the “totalizing account” *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* offers also serves a potentially repressive function in its need to subsume genre completely into its paradigm.<sup>23</sup> Hansen does not, however, recommend dispensing entirely with the term *classical*, largely because she is unable to offer a more appropriate term and because the term itself still at least “names a regime of productivity and intelligibility that is both historically and culturally specific. . . .”<sup>24</sup> Eric Rohmer’s prediction in 1949 that “classical cinema is not behind us, but ahead”<sup>25</sup> has yet to come to pass and most likely never will because from the moment that the cinema came into existence in the late nineteenth-century modernism was



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