



Mr. Klein

Director: Joseph Losey

Country: France

Date: 1976

Condensed from a review by Richard Brody for *The New Yorker*:

The restoration and revival of Joseph Losey’s 1976 film “Mr. Klein,” screening at Film Forum today through September 19th, makes readily available a work that, like most masterworks, has a retrospective air of destiny but resulted from a series of useful accidents. Set in Paris in early 1942, during the German Occupation, it’s the story of a Parisian Catholic man named Robert Klein (Alain Delon) whose identity becomes confused with that of a Jewish man with the same name—and who, as a result, faces the same persecutions that Jews faced in France at the time. [...]

There were many great directors working in Hollywood during the McCarthy era, but Losey was the great filmmaker of that era, whose movies of the late nineteen-forties and early fifties embodied the industry’s and the country’s political crisis, and did so in theme, in mood, and in style—and who then was forced, because of anti-Communist persecution, into exile. His first feature, “The Boy with Green Hair,” fused the pathology of racism with the terror of nuclear destruction; his film noir “The Prowler” was a bilious drama of surveillance, consumerism, predatory sexuality, and feral survivalism; his 1951 remake, on the streets of Los Angeles, of Fritz Lang’s “M” turned city life into a menacing web of observation and pursuit. He devised both a hectic manner of performance and a visual art to match.

Losey went into exile in Great Britain in 1953 and continued his career (at first, with difficulty, and pseudonymously), making such Cold War masterworks as “Time Without Pity” (a story of a father and a son pitted against each other by a dubious arrest) and “These Are the Damned,” a.k.a. “The Damned” (a vision of post-apocalypse now). His romantic drama “Eva,” from 1962, starring Jeanne Moreau, renders intimate desperation as the distilled essence of modernity. Soon thereafter, he changed registers drastically, with “Modesty Blaise,” a hectic and giddily inventive espionage caper that’s adapted from a comic-strip series. He moved to France in the early seventies (fleeing British taxes) [...].

“Mr. Klein” starts with an act of genteel depravity that is all the more shocking for being historically true: a woman is being examined by doctors who are applying pseudoscientific methods (examining her gums and jaw, measuring her nostrils with a specially devised ruler, observing her naked body and her gait) to determine, in an official report, whether she is Jewish. The lone woman’s stifled indignation rises quickly to a collective silent uproar: the doctor’s waiting room turns out to be teeming with patients awaiting similar treatment. Along with the scene’s monstrous substance, Losey draws out its aftermath with an agonizing attentiveness to the specificity of time. The woman’s emergence from the examining room into the outer area, her reunion with her husband, who has undergone a similar examination, their exit past the



distracted gaze of a pair of police officers, their passage through a long windowed corridor—silently, seeking a moment of privacy amid the relentless virtual surveillance of the state that is putting them through this intrusive sham and obscene ordeal—draw out the terrifying suspense of legalistic nonsense to an inconclusive void, setting the tone for the drama of Klein that follows.

As Anthony Lane mentioned in his

review of “Mr. Klein,” Losey took on the project when another one—an adaptation of Proust’s “Remembrance of Things Past”—fell through. Proust, who was Jewish, would have been seventy in the course of the events in “Mr. Klein,” and at the moment that Losey switched gears to the latter project, the title of Proust’s magnum opus, “À la Recherche du Temps Perdu”—“In Search of Lost Time”—was even more fitting for the Second World War and the thirty years of oblivion into which its horrors had sunk. The collaboration of French officials with the German occupiers was officially presented as a sort of aberration of individuals rather than a systemic corruption of French government and society. [...]

As a film of wartime memory brought to life, of French history as intimate experience and vice versa, “Mr. Klein” did what a Losey version of Proust would likely not have done—it reckoned with experiences and actions that, far from being remembered, were actively denied, and it served as a sort of Proustian “Remembrance of Things Suppressed.” Klein is an art dealer living in the tiny Seventh Arrondissement, who doesn’t shrink from buying Old Master paintings from Jews in need of gold to flee the country. His machinations are heard before they’re seen, from the point of view of his lover, Jeanine (Juliet Berto), who overhears just such a perverse purchase from the sleek calm of her boudoir. Frightened by the appearance on his doorstep of an official Jewish newspaper, he heads to the newspaper office and then to the police station to clear up the mystery and instead learns that there’s a second Robert Klein, who lives at a different address—one that was scratched out on the journal’s mailing label and replaced with the first Klein’s own.

What results is a kind of detective story in which Klein’s search for the other Klein quickly becomes an existential search for himself. Meanwhile, uncanny traces erode his sense of who he himself may be. The police show up bearing his calling card, which he’d just given to a Jewish man from whom he’d bought a painting. He goes to the grubby apartment of the other Klein—let’s call him Klein II, as the filmmaker does in “Conversations with Losey,” a remarkable series of interviews conducted by Michel Ciment—and is physically mistaken for him, not for the last time. Seeking documents from his father in Strasbourg that would prove his family background, Klein instead hears some incidental remarks that cast doubt on the received certainty of the family lineage, and the longer it takes for some of the documents to turn up, the wider and darker the abyss of elusive selfhood grows.

Klein knows well the kinds of trouble that he faces when he’s mistaken for a Jew. It was, to say the least, a dangerous identity to bear in France at the time. France’s government, under the dictatorial power of Marshal Philippe Pétain, was expected by the Nazi occupiers to place restrictions on the country’s Jews—but Vichy France’s government went far beyond the occupiers’ demands in its persecution of Jews in its territory. The dire story was documented in detail in the groundbreaking 1981 book “Vichy France and the Jews,” by Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, the second edition of which will be published on September 17th, with new information from belatedly opened French-government files. By 1942, Jews in France were excluded from the civil service and from many professions, including teaching and media, and from many universities (and were subject to quotas in others). Jews in France were subject to summary arrest; businesses owned by Jews were subject to confiscation, as was the personal property of Jews. Marrus and Paxton write that the regime sought nothing less than “to complete the exclusion of Jews from French public life.” Then, in 1942, Jews had to wear yellow stars on their outer garments, to mark them conspicuously; mass deportations of Jews in France began, too, organized not by the German army or the Gestapo but by French police officers and French officials. [...]

At the time of the movie’s release, France was still decades away from admitting its responsibility for its anti-Semitic persecutions and murders during the war. The illusions that Losey revealed weren’t just those to which Klein was initiated but those of France at large, a country that, at that very moment, was a mere simulacrum of itself. No less than Losey’s McCarthy-era movies and Cold War productions, “Mr. Klein” is a political movie in the present tense.

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