KINONIK

MODESTY BLAISE (1966)

Directed by Joseph Losey

WEDNESDAY May 20th 7PM

SATURDAY May 23rd 2PM / 7PM



Before Carmen Sandiego, before Sharon Tate cribbed the silhouette for The Wrecking Crew, before the Gorillaz dropped her name into "Rock the House" — there was **Modesty Blaise**, a Sunday-comics super-thief turned reluctant asset, conscripted by Her Majesty's government to babysit a shipment of diamonds across the Mediterranean. The shipment is, naturally, being hunted by an arch-criminal named Gabriel (Dirk Bogarde, platinum-wigged, purring) and his "stylishly bloodthirsty" lieutenant Clara Fothergill. Modesty's accomplice is Willie Garvin, a Cockney rough-trade playboy played by a young Terence Stamp in his narrowest tie. Evan Jones gets the screenplay credit; Harold Pinter did uncredited work, presumably to pay for cigarettes.

Behind the camera sat Joseph Losey. Wisconsin-born, Brecht-trained, blacklisted out of Hollywood, by 1966 fully resident in his London period and three years past The Servant (the last Losey we laced up at Kinonik). He was reportedly miserable making this; one critic later called it "the only Losey film that feels like a commercial necessity." But commercial necessity in 1966 meant a Bond-shaped object shot by Oscar-winner Jack Hildyard (Hobson's Choice) on location in Amsterdam, Naples, and London at peak Carnaby Street. The result, depending on whom you ask, is either "shockingly stupid" (Senses of Cinema) or "psychedelically inventive… the cinematic fireworks of an auteurist 007" (Richard Brody, The New Yorker). Both readings are correct simultaneously, which is part of the appeal.

The real story, though, is Monica Vitti. By 1966 she had spent six years as the patrician, glacial face of Antonioni's modernist anomie — L'Avventura, La Notte, L'Eclisse, Red Desert — a counterweight to the Loren-and-Magnani voluptuousness that dominated Italian cinema. Antonioni, her partner of nearly a decade, kept turning up on set and whispering corrections into her ear until Losey finally had to ask him to leave. Within a year the relationship was finished. Vitti spent the rest of her career making light comedies and became, by most accounts, the most beloved comedienne in Italy — dominating a genre that had been male territory. Modesty Blaise is her inflection point, and a touchstone for the most fashionable girls you know. Watch her grin through it; she's escaping.

Nominated for the Palme d'Or in 1967, which says less about the film than it does about 1967.