



Performing Arts | Audiovisual - Film, TV & Radio | All Europe Countries | Featured Stories

Brigitte Bardot defined the modern woman and defied social norms

Brigitte Bardot, a symbol of 20th-century femininity, revolutionized beauty standards and challenged societal norms through her acting and fashion. Despite controversies later in life, her legacy as a liberated icon endures, shaping perceptions of modern womanhood.

By [Ben McCann](#), [University of Adelaide](#)

Brigitte Bardot's death, [at the age of 91](#), brings to a close one of the most extraordinary careers in post-war French cultural life.

Best known as an actress, she was also a singer, a fashion icon, an animal rights activist and a symbol of France's sexual liberation.

Famous enough to be known by her initials, B.B. symbolised a certain vision of French femininity – rebellious and sensual, yet vulnerable.

Her impact on beauty standards and French national identity was profound. At her peak, she rivalled Marilyn Monroe in global fame and recognition. Simone de Beauvoir, France's leading feminist writer, famously [wrote](#) in 1959 that Bardot “appears as a force of nature, dangerous so long as she remains untamed”.

A star is born

Bardot was born in 1934 to a well-off Parisian family. Raised in a strict Catholic household, she studied ballet at the

Conservatoire de Paris with hopes of becoming a professional dancer.

Brigitte Bardot, pictured here in 1946, studied ballet as a child.
Roger Viollet via Getty Images

Her striking looks led her to modelling. By 14, she was appearing in Elle magazine, catching the eye of director Roger Vadim, whom she married in 1952.

She began acting in the early 1950s and her appearance as Juliette in Vadim's And God Created Woman (Et Dieu... créa la femme, 1956) put her on the map.

Bardot was instantly catapulted to international stardom. Vadim presented his wife as the ultimate expression of youthful, erotic freedom that both shocked and captivated French audiences.

Watching this relatively tame film today, it's difficult to imagine just how taboo-breaking Bardot's performance was. But in sleepy Catholic, conservative 1950s France, it set new norms for on-screen sexuality.

The film became a global phenomenon. Critics loved it, but censors and religious groups grew nervous.

An 60s icon

Bardot's lack of formal training as an actress paradoxically became part of her appeal: she adopted a spontaneous acting approach, as much physical as verbal.

She was stunning in Contempt (Le Mépris, 1963), Jean-Luc Godard's masterpiece about a crumbling marriage. Godard [used her beauty and fame](#) both as spectacle and critique. The film's most famous sequence was a 31-minute conversation between Bardot and her co-star Michel Piccoli. Bardot was never better.

In Henri-Georges Clouzot's intense courtroom drama The Truth (La Vérité, 1960), she showcased her dramatic range playing a young woman on trial for the murder of her lover.

Bardot in a poster for The Truth, 1960. LMPC via Getty Images

In 1965, she co-starred with Jeanne Moreau in Louis Malle's Long Live Maria (Viva Maria), a rare female buddy film that blended comedy and political satire. Bardot's anarchic energy remains a dazzling feat.

A Very Private Affair (Vie privée, 1962) saw her portray a woman consumed by fame and chased by the media. The plotline was eerily predictive of Bardot's own future.

She popularised fashion trends like the [choucroute hairstyle](#) and [ballet flats](#). The Bardot neckline – off-the-shoulder tops and dresses – [was named after her](#). She even wore [pink gingham](#) at her 1959 wedding.

Allure and provocation

Bardot's star appeal lay in [her contradictions](#). She appeared simultaneously natural and provocative, spontaneous and calculated. Her dishevelled glamour and effortless sexuality helped construct the archetype of the modern "[sex kitten](#)".

She famously [said](#) "it is better to be unfaithful than to be faithful without wanting to be".

Throwing off the shackles of bourgeois morality, Bardot epitomised a commitment to emotional and sexual freedom. Her turbulent love life was a case in point. She was married four times, with dozens of stormy relationships and extra-marital affairs along the way.

Forever immortalised as a free-spirited ingénue, Bardot was a muse for filmmakers, artists and musicians, from [Andy Warhol](#) to [Serge Gainsbourg](#). Later on, Kate Moss, Amy Winehouse and Elle Fanning mentioned Bardot as [an inspiration](#).

Famously, Bardot [never succumbed](#) to cosmetic surgery. As she once noted:

Women should embrace ageing because, at the end of the day, it's much more beautiful to have a grandmother with white hair who looks like an elderly lady than to have a grandmother who's bleached, dyed, and [...] who looks much older but also really unhappy.

Life after the movies

Bardot retired from acting in 1973, aged only 39, citing disillusionment with fame. “It suffocated and destroyed me”, she [said](#), about the film industry.

She shifted her attention to animal rights, founding the [Brigitte Bardot Foundation](#) in 1986. She became an uncompromising, vocal activist, [campaigning](#) against animal cruelty, fur farming, whaling and bullfighting.

But Bardot courted controversy from the mid-1990s for her [far-right political views](#), remarks about Islam and immigration and repeated convictions for inciting racial hatred. She [publicly defended](#) disgraced actor Gérard Depardieu and [pushed back](#) on the #MeToo movement in France.

Such statements damaged her reputation, especially outside France, and created [a troubling image](#): the once-liberating sex symbol now associated with nationalist conservatism.

While she never identified as a feminist, her unapologetic autonomy, early retirement and outspoken views [led some](#) to re-evaluate her as a figure of proto-feminist rebellion.

France gradually began to [turn against](#) Bardot, bothered by her outspoken views. [But some](#) applauded her couldn’t-care-less attitude and unwillingness to play by the rules.

Ultimately, by rejecting fame on her own terms, she parlayed her 50s free-spiritedness into [a bold stand](#) against conformity and societal norms.

Late in life, she told Danièle Thompson, the writer-director of the 2023 [mini-series](#) about her career, “I don’t understand why the whole world is still talking about me”.

The answer is simple – Bardot continues to fascinate us, flaws and all.

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