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FEATURE: My Life to Live (Vivre sa Vie) (1962). Written and directed by Jean-Luc Godard. ~~Produced by Pierre Braunberger.~~ Starring Anna Karina, with Saddy Rebbot, Andre Labartre and Giselle Schlumberger.

Godard and other "new-wave" directors have been attacked for the apolitical, amoral attitudes embodied in their films. LE PETIT SOLDAT, Godard's second film, was banned for three years for political reasons -- but not for partisanship. If we may trust the appraisal of one critic, the film suggested that "Political theories of right and left are meaningless, as are moral and social values. . . .There exists no other idea than the acte gratuit." The concept of the acte gratuit may be a key to understanding Godard's films. If one cannot or will not accept any philosophy or code as a guide for action, but prefers to act on the basis of the impulses of the moment, one cannot provide any explanation for an act other than that given by Anouilh's Antigone: "For myself." For this "reason" a young woman may betray her lover, as in BREATHLESS, and for this "reason" Nana becomes a prostitute. In VIVRE SA VIE causality and motives are not so much denied as they are shrugged aside, like politics. If we wish to do so, we may interpret the two overhead shots of the courtyard of Nana's apartment house as a link between her economic plight and the disastrous consequences. Perhaps Godard's Nana, like Zola's, is a victim of circumstances. Yet Nana doesn't quite see it that way: "I lift my hand: I'm responsibleWe're responsible for everything."

If we are responsible for what we do, why can't we know why we do it? Why must we talk instead of remaining silent, especially when the more we talk, the less we mean? Why is Nana willing to sleep with a photographer, but unwilling to pose in the nude for him? Why does a person who wants to be somebody special make herself an object for hire? Some questions cannot be answered, while others can, such as how much a prostitute can earn, and how many clients she can take care of on a holiday weekend. If we have the faith of St. Joan, we can trust that "God knows where he leads us." Without that faith, we will probably continue to probe for the truth. "A chicken," the child's essay begins, "has an inside and an outside. Remove the outside and you find the inside; remove the inside and you find the soul." La poule, more than one reviewer has pointed out, is a slang term for a loose woman. An application for a position in a brothel need only describe the outside. The public health authorities want to know about the inside. An artist who paints a portrait may attempt to know the soul. But can he succeed? And if he succeeds, has he murdered by laying bare the soul, as in the Poe story? The implications of the final episodes are especially disturbing to those of us who believe the unexamined life is not worth living. The contrast is explicit between the vibrant Nana, on a busman's holiday, dancing joyously and provocatively in order to attract a handsome young man; and the serious, troubled Nana, listening to the story of Porthos, whose efforts to understand how he ran caused him to be blown up.

--Ray McKnight