

## Document Citation

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The Third New York Film Festival was opened with the first U.S. showing of Alphaville, the ninth film of Jean-Luc Godard. Godard, who had introduced A Woman is a Woman and Band of Outsiders when they were first shown here at last year's festival, was in New York for the opening and remained in the city through the day of the first U.S. screening of Godard's second film, The Little Soldier at the festival about one week later. With The Married Woman playing simultaneously in New York to surprisingly large audiences and a triple bill of older Godard films having been recently revived, it was particularly appropriate that one of the panel discussions on film, initiated this year by the festival, should include a panel interview of the famed French director.

The panel included critics Pauline Kael of Partisan Review, Hollis Alpert of the Saturday Review, Andrew Sarris of the Village Voice, and historian and critic Parker Tyler, with Arthur Knight moderating and director James Ivory on hand for brief remarks on his own film, Shakespeare Wallah, later shown at the festival. Except for Sarris, the members of the panel, as most of the New York paper critics, seemed either baffled or annoyed by Alphaville and evidently felt the same way about most of his later films, if not all his films since Breathless, his first. In consequence, the interview was of a very uneven quality, and what follows are more isolated remarks by Godard on various aspects of his technique rather than any kind of complete portrait of the film-maker today. To clarify the discussion of Alphaville, personal observations have been supplemented.

Alphaville portrays the society of another planet in which science and computer control have superseded all human values and emotions, the vicissitudes of free will. Life in every part of the planet is dominated by the all-governing machine, Alpha 60. It is a sterile, unyielding world, whose inhabitants are conscious of no past and no future, their actions rigorously mechanized, their terms of existence, their language posited for all to know in their ubiquitous dictionaries—volumes that have replaced bibles in every hotel room. Into this world enters Lemmy Caution (Eddy Constantine), the tough earthling gangster-movie hero turned reporter for an earth newspaper The Figaro-Pravda under the alias Ivan Johnson. His mission is to find out Werner von Braun, the leader of Alphaville, and destroy him. The guide assigned to him for his stay, Alpha 60 not anticipating his ultimate goal, is Natasha Von Braun (Anna Karina), the government chief's daughter. She, in the end, escapes the nightmare passive existence of Alphaville with Lemmy Caution, having helped him to destroy Alpha 60, and begins to learn from him for the first time the meaning of the word love.

Godard was asked if it was true he made Alphaville simply because he wanted to make a "pop-art, gangster, camp, science fiction" film, with no essential regard for the actual content of the film. The director replied, Alphaville is not science fiction but a realist film; it had, after all, been shot on locations in Italy and France. The film, he said, is a fable of modern man. It is a film shot in the past future tense, and may be regarded as the story of a man of the present going into the future or, with as much validity, a man of the past coming into the present. It is also, he said, the first film in which he had become so vitally concerned with working out such a tight structure for what was to be his most straightforwardly narrative film.

What so many of the critics had been objecting to as in-jokes on filmmaking or mere gimmicks in the film are essential parts of the film's meaning and style, Godard's unique personal expression. One such device is the switching to negative film Godard employs both here and in The Married Woman. Godard explained that Alphaville is a film of "lights and darks", a society in which humanistic values were reversed and standardized. This is what he wanted to remind us of in the sudden switches to negative. In The Married Woman a similar idea was in mind, plus



the fact the negative was used in portraying a photographer taking shots of models, thus having a more direct iconographic relationship.

Sarris pointed out the appropriateness of Alphaville's musical score, a Max Steiner-ish soundtrack heightening the tension of melodrama, romantic attachment, Lemmy Caution and a world of Warner Brothers films of two and three decades ago placed in the context of the numb, sleep-walking, "superior" society of Alphaville. Frequent shots through glass, also pointed out as gimmicky, serve beautifully, aside from their purely visually exciting nature, to further express the alien nature of Alphaville.

The general tone of many of the slurs against the film indicated the critics had expected a fast and even basically amusing film which Alphaville most certainly is not. The tone is nightmarish. Alpha 60 is seen as a glaring circular neon grill light against a black background, whose slow, harsh, awful voice, as Godard mentioned, was not electronically created, but done by placing a microphone at the larynx of a man whose vocal cords had been badly damaged and who had been retaught to speak through the use of the microphone. Scenes are dimly lit with very few exteriors, lending such unusual impact to the beauty of Natasha when we first see her standing by a window, lit by sunlight. The expressionless face, formal gestures demanded of the inhabitants of Alphaville, cannot obscure well enough for Lemmy Caution the humanity within Von Braun's daughter.

The pace, to critics' dismay, is slow, episodic, with long and scrutinizing close-ups. The camera is constantly dollying down corridors that seem never to end. A terrifying sequence near the end of the film depicts Lemmy and Natasha groping along the walls of the inescapable, unending complex that houses Alpha 60, trying to find the door, never found before, that can lead them to freedom.

Among Miss Kael's numerous objections was the way Lemmy Caution kept shooting his way out of any desperate-looking dilemmas when Alphaville agents would grow suspicious of him. This, Godard made clear, is the only way Lemmy can solve his problems, and is perfectly valid in the context of the fable. The violence throughout Alphaville is as analytic as grim or brutal. A fight scene is followed in slow motion; an execution of criminals in Alphaville is shown, the condemned forced to jump into a swimming pool at the firing of rifles, and as they swim towards the end of the pool a row of girls dive after them, always catch up to, and stab the condemned to death, to the appreciative applause of an audience; —these are no less realistic, meaningful in the violence they portray as commentary on the nature of the society than Akim Tamiroff's grotesque but more naturalistic death scene. The machine world has made what once might have seemed like terror become the order of the day; it is this terrifying robot-like kind of existence, animation that is given to a series of microphones that move towards and away from Lemmy in a series of close shots of him as he is questioned by Alpha 60 as to his purpose in coming to Alphaville.

Miss Kael was also bothered by Godard's script, as she usually is, and suggested the director seek other writers. Godard frankly admitted he liked writing his own screenplays, could not conceive of working with another writer, and believed his scripts were probably better than others' would be for him to work with anyway. Sarris backed him up in pointing out how wonderfully and totally are Godard's films personalized. Alpert suddenly asked Sarris if he thought Godard was the greatest living director; Sarris expressed his preference for the classics, Hitchcock et. al. but thought Godard was probably the most exciting new director and auteur in films today.

The discussion moved on to more general subjects and other films. Miss Kael was afraid Godard's films had been progressively dealing with less and less "truth" and concentrating too singlemindedly on visual tricks. Godard said he believed



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his style was not something separable from what he was trying to say in his films; what he aimed at were the interchangeable values, truth and beauty, and where he found one, he found the other. He found it both in Rossellini and in Hitchcock, and a camera movement was just as likely to contain as much meaning as a line of dialogue. Kael objected to Godard's reference to Hitchcock, stating that his films had also met with a decline since the fifties; —where was the great Hitchcock of the thirties? Asked to give an example of Hitchcock's decline, Kael offered Vertigo. Godard smiled, evidently in quite fundamental disagreement; Sarris made clear the opposite poles of criticism at which he and Miss Kael stood, and the subject was dropped.

Godard spoke of his early days at the Cinematheque in France where he and so many other filmmakers and critics (Truffaut, Rivette, Rohmer) practically lived in their attempt "to see everything." He said he still saw about ten movies a week to keep up with what had and was being done by people who knew how to make film. Kael took the opportunity to remark that perhaps in seeing so many films he had learned plenty of "cinematic truth," but had lost contact with "life itself." There was no reply.

On early influences, Godard mentioned Preminger's films of the forties. While confessing he did not like Preminger's later works as much, he maintained great respect for the man and could not see how any serious film student would not see Bunny Lake is Missing when it opened. Godard was asked about Brechtian influence in his work and he said the only Brecht he had ever seen was a production of Arturo Ui which inspired him to use the tableau form of My Life to Live.

Regarding general technique, Godard described his various relationships and problems in making films. Concerning actors, Godard confirmed his frequent preference for improvisation, which he has been progressively able to direct with greater and greater control (from the philosophical considerations of Jean Seberg in Breathless to those of Macha Meril in The Married Woman). He likes working with more professional actors, those who can respond most naturally to the roles he wants realized—those such as Jean-Paul Belmondo, Anna Karina, Akem Tamiroff.

Godard expressed the closeness he likes to maintain between himself and all the people working under him, attachments that have resulted in such long artistic partnerships as those with Agnes Guillemot, his editor, and Raoul Coutard, his cameraman. Cameramen in France are often great dictators, Godard commented, and he had at first feared Coutard would be one when the studio had appointed him to Godard. But the match did turn out well, Coutard being perfectly willing to adapt his own creative technical abilities to Godard's style to the extent where Godard, once having explained the needs of a shot to Coutard, feels free in letting Coutard do his own framing. Asked if he prefers working with a large or handheld camera, Godard said he tried to fit the camera to the specific film and scene. Breathless needed handheld movements and Contempt had to be filmed with a Mitchell.

The director was asked if he felt limited by the small budgets he had to work with. He replied that he wasn't at all hampered by this, that he couldn't conceive of making The Married Woman for more than a hundred thousand dollars. Sometime he might want to make a more expensive film, but with the films he is currently making, he feels adequately budgeted. Contempt cost over \$1 million dollars because of Bardot more than anything else, and probably because Joseph E. Levine had envisioned a different film from the one Godard gave him. As Godard understood it, Carlo Ponti had even re-edited much of the film for Italian distribution. Godard had himself been forced by Levine to make some artistic compromises, but for all his former talk of withdrawing his name from the film, he does still consider it his own personal work.

Censorship in France he felt to be a greater problem than money, a much greater restraining influence in France, he believed, than in America. The French govern-



ment forced him to change the title of The Married Woman for French release to A Married Woman in the hope its pessimistic representation of a housewife would not be construed as universally true in France. Godard expresses a desire to make a political film but felt hampered by government controls. The Little Soldier had been banned on its release in France.

Godard anticipated Pierrot Le Fou, his tenth and newest prizewinning film in widescreen and color and with Jean-Paul Belmondo and Anna Karina to open in New York by the end of the year. In two months he plans to start shooting a new film, which he did not describe. It should be noted here that Alphaville is tentatively scheduled to open at the Paris Theatre in New York by mid-October. It should not be missed.

---Robert Edelstein