

THE CONSPICUOUS PAST-PRESENT SIMILITUDE IN GODARD'S ALPHAVILLE

TAHER ABD EL-GHANI

Contact: taherabdelghani@hotmail.com

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Abstract

In 1965, worldwide acclaimed French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard created a dystopian world governed by a totalitarian system, and to be specific a computerized entity, criticizing exactly what the present societies of the 21st century are considered victims of. His attempt to recreate Paris as, on one hand the heart of European modernism and on the other a foreground image of the future metropolis, has not only exploited the common background thoughts of European cinema, but also reimagined a whole universe of technological totalitarianism. The striking aspect of *Alphaville* (1965) is the extreme similarity with the current world's commodified image. On a narrative level, the main protagonist's name 'Caution' comes from a place known as the 'Outlands', strong repelling names that are referred, according to the movie, as every place or person that does not correspond to the technological rules and principles of the city of Alphaville. Mapping these names on today's reality, they can refer to certain political actors who deviate from the state's exerting-power approach, of which in my opinion would be the future of Paris in Godard's perspective. On a symbolic level, the city imposes certain policies and regulations to be followed, exerts political power and control over its citizens through artificial intelligence, and encompasses symbolic signs, e.g. arrows, whose aim is to force individuals to move in a directed path with limited freedom or flexibility. On an architecture level, Alphaville is represented physically with modern features and hard reflective surfaces, which basically identify the soulless society that has become imprisoned within its own modern computerized buildings.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the similarities between Godard's dystopian picture and the world today, with the focus on Paris during the 1960s and today, from three perspectives: the characters, the symbolic images, and the architecture features. My objective is to explore Godard's personal stance on the political world through Alphaville, and how he attempted to re-draw and at the same time predict the future of the modernized society.

Introduction: It's a Stage Eventually!

If philosophy has established a quite ambiguous definition for the existence of man, I believe it is urban sociology that acquired the bald attempt to explicate individuals' inner most interventions in their environment that happen to correspond to their very nature of existence. They have created what Mumford (1937) would refer to as the "geographic plexus" (p. 480), a group of organizations and institutions. Artificial images that responded to the urge needs of modern-day globalization, a sense of dissatisfaction towards natural order. Simmel (1978) claims that individuals have intervened to rearrange qualities in such a way that satisfies our deepest desires, yet this order

exists where “equality is completely eliminated, in which the highest level of one point is adjacent to the lowest level of another, in this series, the fundamental quality is not uniformity, but difference” (p. 56). The picture is not just fixed within a familiar ‘money-printing-machine’ like framework but has also extended its paradoxical arms to include individuals’ freedom and how they can react to troubling situations. That was the main focus of the Nouvelle Vague period in France, and notable filmmakers as Godard, Truffaut and Rohmer have taken the streets to document the best and worst of human nature (McNett, 2009). They have transformed the city into a stage, a theatrical representation of human interventions and cultures, even though they weren’t the first people to do so.

So, a city is a form of spatial culture upon which stands highly skilled actors and actresses. Their distinctive performances and personalities are reflected onto the exterior sociological interactive public, and with the aid of symbolic gestures and the exclusion of other daily acts that are not part of the dramatic setting itself, even though they are part of the real world, the city is then transformed into an artistic scenery (Mumford, 1937). Here emerges the role of the dreamer, or the artist, or the filmmaker, who grasps the total sum of signs and endless possibilities, and sort of magnifies the fragmented pieces of the delirious cultural universe onto the stage, or the screen, in a way that corresponds to his own inner conflicts and open-ended questions. The artist, generally, was able to depict the metropolitan ambience and its effect on individuals’ stimulated minds. The accelerated aura of information and physical infrastructure has created a variety of impressions on the citizens of the metropolis (Mennel, 2008), where such impressions, as Sociologist Georg Simmel claims, are characterized by fragmentation and discontinuity, yet were retrospections to the major shift to the 20th century, thus in turn, a contribution to the existence of “sensory foundations of psychic life, [and] sensory mental image” (Simmel, 1903, p. 175).

Paris was seeking enormous economic revitalization after the war, Former President Charles De Gaulle had already come up with his idea of an independent France that depended on no other nation and would also emphasize the ability of France to become a centre of attention to the whole of Europe (Angliviell, 2015). The Gaullist utopian vision of France was set up to fabricate a “messianic vision of France’s historic destiny, reaffirm its prestige in the world, and transcend the national humiliations of the past” (Kritzman, 2006, p. 51). Of course, the use of the word ‘utopia’ here has its own reasonable context, it wasn’t exactly corresponding to its Latin definition – a no-place as Thomas More’s new island – but rather there was the least to say a sense of attempt to make its existence ever more possible. With the emergence of several branches out of utopia that reflected dissatisfaction of traditional urban life by the 1960s, e.g. economic, political, religious, scientific and technological, modernity has caused a major adaptation of spatial concepts from ‘the dreams of a better place’ to the ‘ideals of a better society’ that were supplemented with vertical elevations (Andersen, 2008). The city grew vertically, like a tree. Progress marched its modern promenade “from grasses to inspired spruce towers, all affixed, like chess pieces to a diagrammed flat board, a common platform on which social strategies are enacted” (Andersen, 2008, p. 754). It is then that our notions became muddled with space, or according to Foucault, with all that is simulated and juxtaposed. The writers of Cahiers du Cinema could not be isolated from the radically-changing world surrounding them, eventually taking on a more political role to depict the newly-emerged ‘social war’ universe, eventually filmmakers of the Right Bank, though existed out of Leftist ideologies, have adjoined themselves with the May 68’ revolutionary anti-capitalist slogans.

The aim of this paper is more than just merely examining a certain French film. It serves the purpose of understanding the whole context, to provide a vivid background of the world during the 1960s, and specifically the image of Paris that was subject to a technical capitalist system, one that imposed a certain direction to be followed. The paper also strives to explore Godard’s Situationist approach with a blend of political and artistic theories when

tackling such accumulated conditions of dehumanization and artificial sexuality. His 1965 movie *Alphaville* is basically about the continuous struggle of individuals against a totalized computer-driven society, a “Tarzan vs. IBM” concept (Yoshioka, 2012). It is a representation of the essence of the capitalist world that encompasses natural desires to plan all its actions against human interests.

France: Back then & Now!

Evidently, every nation involved in the Second World War was deeply affected, and especially France, who also witnessed subsequent failures in Vietnam (Babula, 2012), suffered deep affliction and war damage, represented in it being a “helpless victim, lazy and ineffective military force, a valued ally, [and] a crippled industrial power” (Neupert, 2002, p. 4). As the nation feared the downfall of their nation, Charles De Gaulle emerged, in the eyes of the many, as the savior and ultimate liberator of the country’s economy – through establishing the Fifth Republic, he declared himself as the one and only, as the powerful authoritative figure that ensured his totalitarian regime over the country. Yet, a leftist movement, known as the Situationist, which shifted from poetry to politics, perceived De Gaulle as an “agent of a soft fascism” (Brody, 2008, p. 69) due to his full acquisition of France and his determination to elevate its international status, in terms of both politically and militaristically (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The French weekly satirical publication *Le Canard enchaîné* publishes a cartoon by Lap illustrating the Gaullist vision of European policy: ‘A Europe of my Six’ moving forward under the command of General de Gaulle. Source: CVCE.EU

Prominent Situationist figures were active at that time whose writings defied the era of French structuralism which happened to correspond to the Gaullist plan for national unity after the Algerian crisis (Hayward, 2006). It was a period of ‘robotization’ of the French society, where their social directions were predetermined by machinery, automobiles and Americanized forms of globalization. The Marshall Plan in 1951 proved its success – calling out for incorporating American culture and planting it within inner European physical structures. The result was consumerism, or rather a passive consumerist society that was able to perform its economic function with utmost perfection, which can be basically dimensioned as Debord’s own words “accumulation of spectacles” (1967, p. 7). France was introduced to a whole new disposition of capitalism – unlike the 19th century productivist era (Teurlings, 2013) – it was now the consumerist age of representations and machinery. American influence spread its wide wings among the French economy, in a way Elaine Dundy would take over the nation through her novel *The Dud Avocado* which was published in 1958. In other words, images took over functionality. Later, machines would diminish human quality. New automobiles introduced in France have increased the chances for the public to take

on more vacations, attend more events and spend long nights at restaurants and nightclubs (Neupert, 2002), hence alter people's lifestyles. The biggest fear, which was Godard's mental image as well, was the decline of French cinema as a result of reality TV takeover in several households. Indeed, the bicentenary society celebrated a structuralist crisis of 'man' and 'humanism' (Ross, 1995). In his successful bestseller *The American Challenge* (1968), Servan-Screiber, more or less, anticipates such crisis during the Post-Gaule times when America would become the dominant economic power which would prove its valuable existence and complete post-industrial dominance over Europe (Kurlansky, 2008). Whilst the book emphasizes the human spirit as the centralized image wealth, signs and power rather than armed legions or capital, it was Godard's Alphaville that considered love a crime to be punished for by death (Darke, 2005). To Godard, the modernization of Paris was seen as dehumanizing human culture and values under the Fifth Republic regime – a capitalist phenomenon that would mutate itself into worldwide globalization and privatization by the beginning of the new millennium. But for the French New Wave filmmaker, it was both capitalist and communist worlds that have established concrete obstructs to human independence and progressive artistic thoughts (Brody, 2008).

For the next three decades in the French historical timeline, the shift from the 1960s ideological utopianism encompassing famous slogans, e.g. "*l'imagination au pouvoir*" and "*sous les pavés, la plage*" (Ingram, 2017, p. 14) to a collective combination of Europeanization and Globalization has been a conspicuous trend that modified, with the help of technological and demographic challenges (Vinokur, 2012), the French economy and society. Such transformations were later translated into forms of fear, worry and dissatisfaction with imminent danger of 'Disneyfication' of societal principles and cultures, having stemmed out from traces of globalization as consequences of openness to outside cultural influential borders (Gordon & Meunier, 2001). For the French society, thirty years after Gaullist domination, globalization was defined as Americanization. It was no longer mere sci-fi fantasy novelty of Ursula Le Guin, rather the spectacle extended its roots to fast food chains and major film studios that brought national culture to a sharp decline with no consideration to social justice, but a maximization of profit (Vinokur, 2012). The era witnessed the rise of individualism, "a narcissistic approach to life" (Girling, 1998, p. 165), and a principle adjustment from the 19th century French values in the forms of the Church and the Republic schools to the cult of the self (Gilliard-Russell, 1997).

The forces of globalization has succeeded in producing a fragmented, opaque French society which no longer corresponds to what Perry (1997) would define as '*La société mosaïque*', as well as being associated with loss of traditional roots and dissolution of social bonds. Along this route within the entertainment sector, the performance of French cinema within France reflected such flux as being dominated by American exports (Gordon & Meunier, 2001). For the period of the beginning of the new millennium, French films accounted mostly to around 7% of tickets sold, compared to those of American films which occupied more than 90% of the tickets (Dahlburg, 2000). The same year, France encompassed 40 successful films, 27 out of which were American and 7 were French, in addition to the fact that half of the French films did not attract as many viewers as the American films. Thus, Godard's influence with comic characters such as Dick Tracy would also be considered an obsession for the contemporary French society, hence emerged a non-readable French language obstructing the relationships between political parties and individuals, alter expressions of cultural diversity and practices of democracy (Meunier, 2004). The future of France was truly dystopianized in Alphaville.

La Nouvelle Vague: A Political Representation

When one starts a discussion about prominent resounding cinematic movements as the French New Wave, an automatic calculation promotes itself to a level of political analysis of such a movement. The French new wave was not just a mere movement of several directors who reshaped storytelling techniques and cinematography approaches, rather it was about the logic and reason behind a certain film – an opportunity for the viewer to reach what lied beyond the cinematic scope into his/her own realistic experiences and emotions of the surrounding world (Hitchman, 2008). Its utmost crux was, on one hand, rejecting mainstream Hollywood approaches to narration which was based on emotional progression in-between scenes, but rather emphasizing the belief of the auteur – “Film is a product of a personal artistic expression and should bear the stamp of personal authorship” (Hitchman, 2008). While on the other hand, carrying a certain message and escalating it to a level of societal communication instead of mere entertainment was yet another important aspect of such movement, at a time when culture-starved post-war France encompassed dry and inexpressive films. The French new wave contributed to Richard Saage’s term ‘*political utopia*’ as being committed to the future (Tietgen, 2006, p. 115), and was universally acknowledged as the movement of the youth.

Liberation brought with it a great desire for self-expression and open communication after the end of the Second World War, as certain writers and film critics at the time hopped on the post-modern platform, yet caught within an ambiguous state of aesthetic style and political reality (Hoskins, 2013). French cine-clubs acted as Scotus’s interpretation of ‘abstractive cognition’ (Schabel, 1998, p. 393), where the future of French cinema was considered an unknown speculation, yet the knowledge was enfolded within the hands of a “spirit of youthful iconoclasm” (Coates, 2010). Henri Langlois, a cinephile and film archivist, opened the doors of the ‘Cinémathèque Française’ to the then newcomers of the French film industry that included: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, and Jacques Rivette (Hitchman, 2008). Being the youngest member of the *Cahiers du Cinema* group, Truffaut’s restless cinematic revolutionary spirit drove him to conduct a very famous written piece entitled ‘*Une Certaine tendance du cinéma française*’ (A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema) which was an honest attack at the then ‘Tradition of Quality’ mainstream French cinema electrifying the minds of other followers, including Godard himself, who had undergone a major political shift (McNett, 2009). The inception of the May 1968 student demonstrations witnessed a strong French new wave solidarity, and this was the point where youth ideologies were equally levelled with the Nouvelle Vague, creating a new form of French mythology (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Filmmakers of La Nouvelle Vague (From left to right) Claude Lelouch, Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, Roman Polanski and Louis Malle, on strike at the Cannes Film Festival in solidarity with French students, May 1968. Source: newwavefilm.com

French film critic Antoine de Baecque emphasized the state of political ambiguousness where the Nouvelle Vague was situated within – a sort of paradoxical complexity between a Leftist and a Rightist approach till it could not “reconcile in a changing world which was being increasingly defined as being at social war” (McNett, 2009). Unlike some members of the Nouvelle Vague, Godard – with a tendency towards a politically centered Brechtian model (McNett, 2009) – got tangled inside a web of contemporary French trend that prioritized aesthetics over content. His political interpretations of the Gaullist government and the American intervention in Vietnam was enmeshed within the newly born ‘reform vs. revolution’ debate that caused division among oppositional positions, i.e. Maoists, Marxists and Trotskyists versus the French Communist Party (Totaro, 1998). Within the film industry, there was also great division among film movements which were part of a greater entity called ‘*Estate générale du cinéma*’. Then emerged a new policy to storytelling that dealt with more political-economic themes shifting away from the notion of the ‘*caméra-stylo*’. There was an eager need to look beyond the surface of realism.

Godard: The Artist, the Political and the Parisian

During an interview conducted with Godard in 1966 for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, he mentioned the difficulty of living in Paris during the contemporary era claiming that one must force himself/herself to prostitution and to accept it as the daily norm – a satisfactory modern-society living condition (Gooch, 2005). To Godard, modern Paris was never a newborn – the real core of the spectacle “has always been fundamental to urban life, and its political aspects have long played an important role in the constitution of legitimacy and social control” (Harvey, 2003, p. 205). Places like Belleville were an escape for the French society during the mid-19th century, a break from the culminating working environment, a speculative reflection of the influx of American films into Parisian cinemas almost a century later. Godard’s interpretation of Paris within the context of Gaullist’s economic reforms placed emphasis on perplexing images of the built environment – an unfinished bridge, a rising tower block or a cement truck in his 1967 picture ‘*Two or Three Things I Know About Her*’ – that encompassed notions of “increasing encroachment of unopposed capitalism into people’s everyday lives” (Soft Morning, City, 2011) (Figure 3 & Figure 4). In *Alphaville*, it was robotic sexuality that merged with hard rough surfaced buildings to create the futuristic norm – the protagonist’s uninterested feeling in the women accompanying him to his room is a reinforced facsimile of the man from the electricity company who asks the woman where the meter is, completely disinterested in the fact that she is actually bathing.



Figure 3. Godard’s vision of modern era consumerism emphasized by rising tower blocks and electric cables in a snapshot from his 1967 picture ‘*Two or Three Things I know About Her*’. Source: celluloidwickerman.com



Figure 4. Godard sifts through consumer cleaning products in the suburbs of Paris, during the production of *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967). Source: BFI Film Forever

Being a follower of Jean-Paul Sartre's insights, who opposed the influx of American films into Parisian theatres calling it "American cultural imperialism" (Hitchman, 2008), Godard believed strongly in the engagement of cinema within the political sphere, which he found possible during the 1968 uprising – it was his opportunity to prove his alliance with the French youth activists. His lens of

montage-style filmmaking attempted to map themes of consumerism, government control, bureaucracy, loss of free will, and lack of any sort of human expressive

potentials, e.g. love (Babula, 2012). Thus, not only the "conversations over coffee and cigarettes and wine-evening wonders" (Kotina, 2016) that were documented as in Godard's early-60s films, but rather a political escalation of realism and objectivism. Godard's first impressions of reality was an increased sense of image mediation – the things being represented and expressed mean more to human lives than the essence of representation and expression (Roud, 1968, p. 68) – commodities took over human values, hence camera lens represented reality. His adoption of Brecht's *'Epic Theatre'* fashion to filmmaking created a sort of arbitrary effect – an alienation effect – where the audience is not allowed to get attached to the picture or the characters (Berlatsky, 2011). Alternatively, Godard achieves *'Emotive Knowledge'*, the knowledge of what it would feel like (Jones, 2013, p. 17). As dystopian literature engages their readers' imagination into an unknown speculative future, the acclaimed French storyteller attempts to establish the same effect within the viewers' minds through metaphysical poetic representation – one of the ways for achieving this, which is also considered a Brechtian model, was breaking the fourth wall, i.e. the characters' gaze towards the camera and talking directly to the audience (Figure 5). This dialectic setup between fiction and reality emphasized Godard's *'Nietzscheian'* opposition to modernity, ergo mainstream universe. Alphaville corresponded to *'The Birth of Tragedy'*, both of which were endeavors to shift the spotlight on a science-centered culture that blinded humanity to the real world (Mussman, 1968, p. 68). Thus, to Godard, Paris during the 1960s was a political stage, a confused space utilizing a montage technique of societal fragmentation, contrast and contradiction on the one hand, while being a reservoir for American cultural invasion on the other.



Figure 5. A snapshot of Godard's Brechtian adoption to filmmaking which is breaking the fourth wall, i.e. the character in the film gazes to the camera and talks directly to the audience, *Pierrot Le Fou*, 1965

Alphaville (1965): Godard's Metaphorical Mirror

The 3-minute opening scene into *Alphaville* is more of an abstract to all what's upcoming. The film opens with a voice-over from Alpha 60, the totalitarian machine that is running the state bureaucracy – "sometimes reality is too complex for oral communication. But legend embodies it in a form which enables it to spread all over the world" – the camera pans across several high-rise towers. Godard then cuts to Lemmy Caution, a secret agent whose lighted cigarette flashes across his thuggish face with a James Bond style of character (Mortice, 2011). A metaphorical gesture embraces our attention in the next frame when we notice a direction symbol, followed by a brutal dark landscape where a train moves across as if following the direction pointed earlier. It seems like a hopeless place, no longer suitable for humanity to survive and progress, similar to the first lines of John Betjeman's *'Slough'* – "Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough! It isn't fit for human now. There isn't grass to graze a cow. Swarm over, Death!" – A political confrontation of determinism vs. dehumanization (Yoshioka, 2012). As previously mentioned, Godard's *Alphaville* is a reflection of Godard's Paris, a dystopian totalitarian regime that has swept the minds of the public immersing them in a globalized universe and expunging all features of a Parisian identity. The final section of the paper deals with the conspicuous similitudes between *Alphaville*, its symbolic and metaphorical traces, and Paris back then via three aspects: The characters, the symbolic images, and the architectural features.

The Characters

The film encompasses a number of symbolic characters that reflect reality, as Monaco (2004) claimed "Alphaville want us to see that it is not the future which is frightening, but the present" (p. 162), which explains Godard's vision of using the back then current Parisian political and economic conditions to metaphorically orchestrate his film. The protagonist (Figure 6), a secret agent, pretending to be a reporter from *Figaro-Pravda* newspaper – the linguistic mixture of both French and Soviet newspapers (Turan, 2014) – coming from the 'outlands' (references in the movie made to Tokyo and New York), resembles the outcome accumulation of American influences (Figure 7), e.g. *Dick Tracy* or *James Bond* – his character elements, e.g. the private eye, the book, and the gun, are a reflection of *The Big Sleep*. Caution arrives to the city of *Alphaville* in a futuristic, yet present, modern industrial time where

the universe seems to have become a victim of global science. In a scene, he is interrogated by Alpha 60, the computerized ruling system in Alphaville, which “[imposes] its logical orientation on all aspects of social organization” (Grant, 2015). Such orientation is quite obvious in Natasha – Anna Karina’s character – who holds no feelings of love, or even heard of such a word that is being banned in Alphaville. Emotion is forbidden, execution before the public’s eyes is the penalty for whoever feels love, i.e. the pool scene. Due to the downfall of Godard’s marital relationship with Karina which led to their ultimate divorce just before shooting the film, Lemmy’s character was considered a seed of Godard’s own inner emotional outreach to his former wife, an important message carrying the importance of love and human connection in a world of technological advancement.



Figure 6 (Left): Lemmy Caution, played by Eddie Constantine, is Alphaville’s protagonist that is influenced by American comic characters. Source: comicbookreligion.com

Figure 7 (Right): The famous fictional character Dick Tracy, which is believed by many critics was the source inspiration for Peter Cheyney, the creator of Lemmy Caution. Later, Caution would appear in several films, including Alphaville. Source: comicvine.com

own emotional struggle, but hers as well – in a world where she could not feel or express emotion. She is confused as she comes across the work ‘conscience’ in a copy of *Capitale de la douleur* (Capital of Pain) – she doesn’t even place the right definite article, saying “le conscience” instead of “la conscience” – to be conscious of ourselves, our environment, and our existence, and in parallel, to be aware of our own actions, ethics, morals and relationships (Monaco, 2004). The ending of the movie signifies the ultimate triumph of human values when Natasha acquires the difference between “I” and “You” by saying “I....Love.....You” – the movie ends.

The Symbolic Images

In his book *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Herbert Marcuse reinforces the significant role of art in resisting societal repression, although still believing that reality is no fairy tale where good triumphs, rather historical truth has proved otherwise, while “there are only islands of good where one can find refuge for a brief time” (p. 47). Alphaville, the city, is already an establishment that reflects reality in its most absolute form, while Alphaville, the movie, represents the power of art in “[breaking] the monopoly of established reality to define what is real” (p. 48). Godard’s experimental approach installs a number of symbolic tools within which lies hidden political meanings, corresponding to Godard the political. Upon his arrival to Alphaville, Caution encounters a billboard that reads “SILENCE. LOGIC. SECURITY. PRUDENCE”, expressions that represent the acceptable behavior of individuals living in the city. The characters in the movie seem to accept such rule – their dull, emotionless, tasteless and robotic expressions are emphasized by an arrow (Figure 8). The arrow, which is always the ‘correct’ path (Yoshioka, 2012), is a symbol of lack of choice and free will and dominance of determinism. It is the one and only direction to be taken, just like an expression or a sentence used repetitively by a person showing lack of ideas and innovative thoughts, e.g. the lifeless third class seductresses who accompany Caution to his hotel room, in two scenes, constantly repeat “You’re tired, sir?”, “You wish to sleep, sir?” and “I’m very well, thank you so much”. Another symbolic image is the equation (Figure 9), the backbone of Alphaville upon which the city operates, the era of digitalization and advanced technological tools that seek to, not only limit choice, but to impose a sense of fear and madness on the thought of moving in the opposite direction.

Within Godard’s expressionistic vision, innovative technology has caused Paris’s great leap into the 21st century, into the new era of consumerism that has replaced elements of love and entertainment (Mulligan, 2014). The general sense in Alphaville is the idea of mathematical interventions within human existence and rationality, manipulation of the mind, and electronic operation of individuals’ behavior (Tietgen, 2006). Godard’s atmosphere circulates a complementary image of ‘one-dimensional thought’ (Yoshioka, 2012), a dystopian visual novel extracted from Huxley’s *A Brave New World* and Lang’s *Metropolis*, which sought to control society, as the character of Joh Fredersen, from a control room (Tietgen, 2006, p. 117).

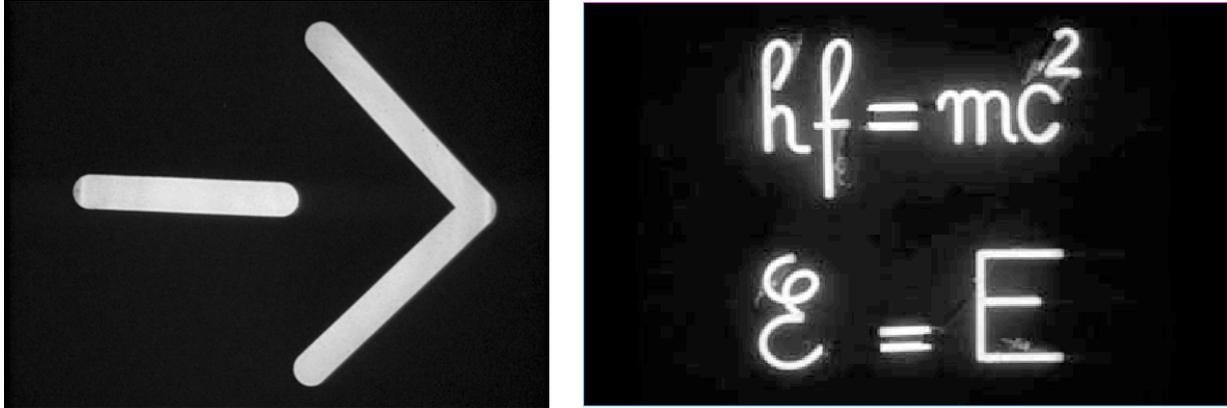


Figure 8 (Left): The arrow in Alphaville represents the imposed, 'correct' path forced by the totalitarian regime, Alpha 60, on individuals. Source: Alphaville (1960), DVD

Figure 9 (Right): The equation is another symbolic image in the film that represents the backbone of a society ruled by a computerized, science-centered cultural, society. Source: Alphaville (1960), DVD

The Architectural Features

What differentiates Alphaville from other science fiction films is the sense of “deriving confusions and anonymity from already-existing places” (Mortice, 2011). Godard presents a futuristic place using the current existing elements to portray a bleak present, fear of the outcome. The picture somehow carries visual psychological signals via Godard’s filmmaking style, i.e. abstract imagery, spontaneous jump cuts, and flashing lights cutting out of frame. His outlook on Paris is displayed throughout the endless corridors inside office buildings, hotel rooms and spiral staircases (Figure 10), all combined together to compose a “patchwork of transitional zones” (Woolfolk, 2008, p. 193). Modernity is the keyword. The beginning was a project to rehabilitate the historic neighborhoods of the urban centre around Le Marais under the supervision of Andre Malraux, De Gaulle’s then Minister of Culture (Vince, 2016). The aim was to push workers and lower middle class society to the city’s peripheries while, globally, celebrating a new era of consumerism of elite through the erection of modern flats and office towers that replaced residential buildings. Godard placed his film within this tension portraying the sharp dramatic changes in the Parisian physical and social landscape, questioning “whether the rapid expansion of the anonymous and abstract space of the urban periphery was challenging the quality and nature of Paris itself” (Webb, 2014, p. 239).



Figure 10: The spiral staircase in the film represents the sense of complexness offered by modernity, a patchwork of transitional zones. Source: BFI Film Forever

The theatrical dystopian atmosphere offered by Alphaville appeared quite peculiar and unfamiliar to the viewers. Godard's cinematographer, Raoul Coutard, framed the Electricity Board building, the Hotel Sofitel Paris le Scribe and the Maison de la Radio within long shots of dark highways lit only by passing cars and some interior office rooms' fluorescence (Vince, 2016) (Figure 11). Thus, instead of the usual romantic shots, we are faced with rapid development and emergence of electrical landscapes that seem to lack coherence and harmony with all what surrounds them. Godard successfully predicted such absurdity when in 1969 the construction of the Tour Montparnasse was initiated, and after its completion 4 years later it received so much criticism as the ugly, monotonous figure that "ruined forever classical scheduling the most beautiful city in the world" (Cedric, 2015). In this sense, Godard's vision of modernity is a mixture of both art and industry. He reinforces the notion of the spectacle through the excessive, uneasy use of see-through glass windows – an approach portrayed in the movie when we notice a naked woman inside a small glass chamber kneeling down, as if she is some sort of an antique or a desired utopian object used to gaze at (Vince, 2016) (Figure 12). Modernity in Alphaville represents obscurity that kills Paris.



Figure 11: The Maison de la Radio, originally completed in 1963, was illuminated using interior fluorescent lights, and the surrounding context was framed within a dystopian feeling using minimal lighting via street lamp posts. Source: sensesofcinema.com

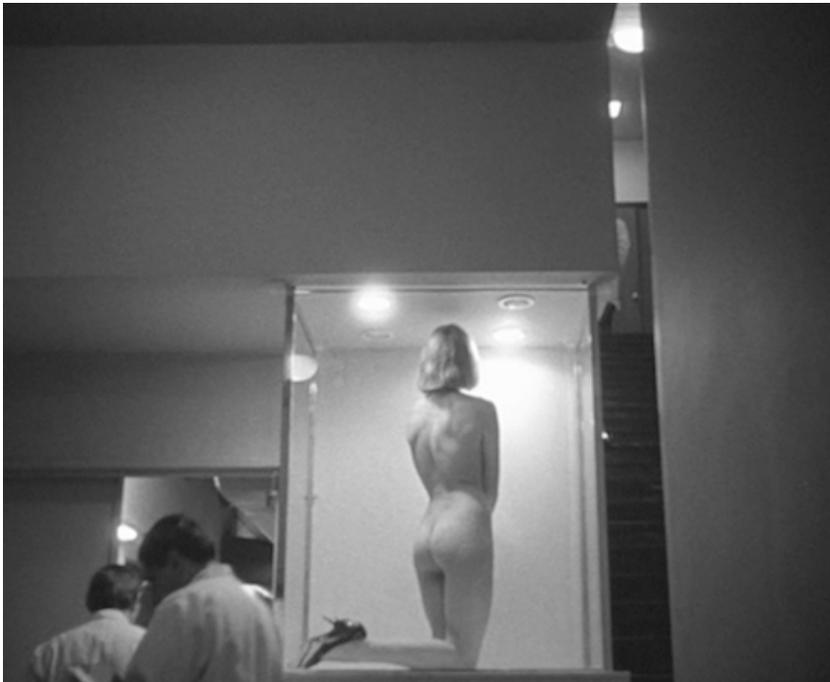


Figure 12: A naked woman kneels down inside a small glass chamber indicating the notion of the spectacle. The woman is used as a sex object or machine to attract individual gazes. Source: senseofcinema.com

Conclusion

With this dystopian vision, Godard, an already established radical filmmaker, was able to spotlight the critical function and powerful role of cinema to expose social and political subjects for the public. To him, the public was Lemmy Caution, the Tarzan-like character, wild and incomprehensible in his behavior in constant struggle with a new entity that has cast its shadows over humanity's physical and social environment, obstructing all what obstructs its evil endeavors. According to him, he was interested in presenting the reality of the illusion rather than the typical sci-fi illusion of reality (Grant, 2015), a message of the irreversible negativity of utopia that would eventually place individuals in a world of oppressive regimes. This article presented an overview of the Parisian 1960s image during the Gaullist economic reform era, a time when the French New Wave group sought to take filmmaking to a new level, emphasizing the aspect of reality, rather than aesthetics, and presenting real-life conditions and characters as they are – Cinéma vérité. Godard, on the other hand, was pushed by his political views to make films that radicalized his position in society, not just as a filmmaker, but also as a supporter of the French youth against capitalist accumulation. As a follower of the Brechtian model, Godard attempted to distance the viewers' emotions from the plot and the characters as much as possible, rather offering them a minimal sense and feeling of the unknown. His lens and montage style mapped themes of modern era consumerism and rapid urbanized development that have affected the French society since the 1960s. His film *Alphaville*, among other films as well, was not just a call out against capitalism and a totalitarian regime, but also against Americanization of the Parisian lifestyle, against lack of harmony and coherence among the physical and social built settings, against random blurred logistics of human values, and against brutal captivity of a once-was artistic romantic landscape.

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