

The Language of Emotion in Godard's Films

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So, to the question 'What is Cinema?', I would reply: the expression of lofty sentiments. — *Godard, in an essay* 1

Nana: Isn't love the only truth?2

Emotion in the New Wave films is a fraught concept. Critics like Raymond Durgnat have commented that the New Wave films are characterized by emotional "dryness," but such a view fails to engage with the complexity of the films.³ In what may seem like a paradoxical statement, these films display a passionate concern for the status of emotional life while being simultaneously engaged in the critique of emotion. This paper seeks to discuss the complex dynamics of emotion in three of Jean-Luc Godard's films— *Vivre Sa Vie* (*My Life to Live*, 1962), *Alphaville, une Étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* (*Alphaville, A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution*, 1965) and *Week End* (1967). All of them belong to the fertile period of the 60s in which Godard's aesthetic strategies became increasingly daring. These will be examined in relation to some of his critical writings.

An important paradigm within which Godard's films will be analyzed is that of cinema's relationship to reality. A foundational principle of the New Wave was the faith in the intrinsic realism of the cinema, something Bazin had expounded upon. However, according to Godard, Bazin's model of cinema was novelistic, the realist description of relationships existent elsewhere. In his model, the director constructs his film, dialogue, and mise-en-scene, at every point: Reality is formed as the camera is framing it. For Godard, "All great fiction films tend towards documentary, just as all great documentaries tend toward fiction... each word implies a part of the other. And he who opts wholeheartedly for one, necessarily finds the other at the end of his journey."⁴ His first two films especially try to capture a non-fabricated, spontaneous reality, lending a documentary realism to them. Through the use of jump cuts, non conventional angles, natural settings, non-stylized acting and free wheeling, elliptical dialogues, the scene before our eyes becomes less of a scene. The bedroom scene in *Breathless* (1959) and the restaurant conversation between Belmondo and Karina in *A Woman is a Woman* (1961) typify this everyday feel that Godard wanted to create. The director uses or simulates spontaneity in order to naturalize the artifact, to make the fiction seem natural and real. Yet, paradoxically, calling attention to the discontinuity and arbitrariness of reality draws attention to the apparatus of the film, thus reinforcing the fictionality of the film. Each implies the other, as Godard said.

However, in Godard's later essays spontaneity is no longer celebrated simply and directly as a thing or quality existing in the world, which is seized or copied by cinema. It is no longer the 'natural.' Godard situates spontaneity decisively within discourse. I would argue that from *Vivre Sa Vie* onwards, Godard's films display themselves as constructs in increasingly radical ways. They display meta textuality through a range of techniques, with the characters self consciously staring into the camera (a characteristic of almost all his movies); talking to the audience (*Vivre sa Vie*, *A Woman is a Woman*, *Pierrot le fou*); commenting on the genres within the film (*Pierrot le fou*, *A Woman is a Woman*, *Week End*); commenting on the

film within a film (*Week End*) and acting out certain poses to reinforce the impression that the film is not mimesis (*A Woman is a Woman*), amongst others.

This exposure fundamentally questions what we take for granted as reality. Kavanagh calls Godard revolutionary because from the 1960s onwards, he does not accept the “real” world as being the film’s referent. The epistemological imperialism that spoken language and the language of the image exercise over us has to be shattered. Thus Godard’s cinematic technique, as a revolutionary praxis, consists in restoring, on an explicit level, the implicit contradictions rendered invisible by the normal inclusion of every sound-image unit in a similarly oriented ideological context such that can the “real” be shown in its arbitrariness, in its highly motivated service to a definable political system.⁵

Vivre Sa Vie (1963) is introduced to us as “A Film in Twelve Tableaux”, thus undercutting the conventional seamless sequence of a film’s narrative at a very fundamental level, even before the film starts. The first scene decisively fractures the sound-image unit which spectators have learnt to take for granted. Nana, the protagonist, is in an overcoat up to her head, disallowing us from identifying with her as the object of desire. She sits at a bar and converses desultorily with Paul, her ex husband. Throughout the conversation, their backs are turned to the camera. Sontag points out that in the scene, the emphasis is on what is heard rather than seen, and that this systematic deprivation of the viewer disallows him or her from becoming involved.⁶ I would add that it is symbolic of the audience’s deprivation of any intimate knowledge of the protagonists, —an impression which the dialogue reinforces. A mirror in front of them allows us to see them from a distance. In a self reflexive gesture, Godard is making us aware that this is mirrored reality and enhancing the effect of emotional distantiation). Another reason why we are led to focus on the dialogue is that it sets out a central preoccupation of Godard in this film (recurrent in his entire oeuvre)—the anxiety about language, self expression and meaning.

The first few lines of the dialogue amply demonstrate my point:

Paul: Do you really like this guy? Nana: I don’t know. I wonder what I’m thinking about? Paul: Does he have more money than me? Nana: What do you care (she says this four times successively in different intonations) Paul: What’s the matter? Nana: “Nothing. I wanted to be very precise. I didn’t know the best way to say it. Or rather, I did know but I don’t anymore. Just when I should know too. Does it never happen to you? Paul: Don’t you ever talk about anything but yourself?....Nana: I thought it was important to talk to you but I don’t anymore. We might have gotten together again but the more we talk the less words mean. [my emphases] Paul: You are leaving me because I am poor. Nana: When all is said and done, maybe.

The director’s expose of the false synthesis of film language is paralleled by the protagonist’s expose of the falsity of spoken language. She feels the need in this moment to purify her speech by saying only what is truly meant, in the most precise way. But paradoxically, she realizes that communication is superfluous. This small exchange is enough to show Godard’s skepticism about complete self knowledge, pure expression and there being ‘a truth’ to express. The contradictory, divisive, complex subjectivities of Godard’s characters can perhaps be expressed most truly when their speech is contradictory, evasive, elliptical and obscure, like in the above dialogue. Thus, paradoxically, Godard’s attempt to expose the unreliability of language is simultaneous with his desire to make his characters’ expression truer to their subjectivities.

In episode 3 there is a memorable scene which showcases Godard's attempt to lead the audience to reflect on the language and apparatus of cinema. It shows Karina attending a revival screening of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928), a silent film. It is the scene where Joan is being sentenced to death, and Nana is crying in response. We see a soundless image from the film in alternation with the screen which shows the dialogue as a written text. Thus we are confronted with soundless images at two levels—at the level of the film we are watching as well as the one she is. This fragmentation in the sound-image unit allows us to keep a critical distance from the image, helping us see its subtle manipulation of the viewer. We can see that Joan's tears and the messenger's sympathetic expression (continuously shown in close up), are calculated to move the spectator emotionally. In fact, to reinforce Nana's absorption of the image, Godard shifts from a close up where Joan blinks and the tears fall down from her face, to a close up of Nana in a replica of the same action. Seeing the process via which Nana is drawn into a sentimental identification with fictional characters and situations makes us reflect on our position as spectators. Godard's aim is that his audience's emotional response be mediated by an intellectual awareness.

It is a difficult goal for a film where the vulnerable, confused protagonist struggles to find love and meaning in her life only to meet with a ruthless end. One strategy he uses to prevent the spectator from feeling sorry at Nana's death is to preempt it through the multiple texts within the movie. In the episode discussed above, the cross-cutting between Falconetti's distracted expressions and Karina's own tear-streaked face creates an interplay between the two characters' pathetic search for deliverance, and foreshadows the latter's own doomed end. Two stories told to the protagonist during the film perform a similar function. But there is, obviously, a more significant purpose to the multiple texts used in the movie. Sontag points out that there is no longer a single unified point of view, either the protagonist's voice or a Godlike narrator, but a series of documents (texts, quotations, excerpts, set pieces) of various descriptions.⁷ A multiplicity of registers creates space for a multiplicity of interpretations. I would add that the intertitles, though seemingly the narrative point of view, represent one of those multiple texts that allow for various interpretations. The intertitles often tell us Nana's state of mind in an attempt to eschew psychological probing by the audience. But they are unreliable and occasionally ironic because Godard doesn't want to present any totalizing point of view. For example, the intertitle of episode 8— "Afternoons. Money. Sinks. Pleasure. Hotels", contradicts the language of the image.⁸ We see Nana in uncomfortable positions, hardly seeming to think that her situation is pleasurable.

The futile quest of the prostitute who discovers what she wants too late, ends, appropriately enough, with her death. We have not been allowed to identify with her character emotionally and thus our feelings are not moved in deep pity or sympathy. Yet a negation of emotional identification does not imply a negation of emotion. In fact, we feel disturbed at the ruthless absence of emotion seen in the last scene where she is shot. We feel a sense of loss of love and meaning as the character who has tried to find it unsuccessfully, dies.

In *Alphaville, A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution* (1965) Godard's concern with language assumes a thematic manifestation.⁹ The film grounds its critique in a future that has already come to pass (that the picture was shot on location around Paris with no sets constructed suggests this anaesthetizing government had sprung up over night, and no-one was looking), and explores the implications of state-(and self)-imposed semiotic desensitization. Alphaville, today's Paris and the intergalactic imperialist of the twenty-first century, is the city where language is reduced to its functional use so as to facilitate the city's

computer mastermind's manipulation of the city's inhabitants. Godard's computer Alpha 60 (which apparently stands for the supremacy of logic) is an image taken straight from popular mythology in which science and the possibility for totalitarian thought control are closely linked together. Cybernetics can only be the workings of the evil deity in the Manichean universe of popular mythology. In *Alphaville* we find that the limits of experience have come to be defined by comic strip language. The computer's "Bible", a dictionary from which useless words are regularly pruned in order to reduce the range within which men can feel and think, reflects Godard's anxiety about the dangers of epistemological imperialism in contemporary society as well as his anguish about the increasing inadequacy of language to capture a nuanced and complex reality.¹⁰

Godard uses pop art as a form of critique. The destruction of popular myth can be brought about by mythologizing these myths in their turn. Having lost its belief in any form of "realistic" mimesis, pop sensibility then self-consciously creates works that are essentially ironic works about other works, ironic representations of representations, or mythic formulations of myth. Caution, a character created by British pulp novelist Peter Cheyney, is an ambivalent figure, both a creation of pop irony and a subversive force that defines itself as sheer energy in revolt against the canons of repressive culture. This ambivalence characterizes much of pop art, for it is evident that many pop artists have also seized the pop mode as a means of fighting against the dominant artistic conventions of official culture.¹¹ Thiher argues that another reason for using pop art is that it succeeds in causing a Brechtian form of distantiation, for it is evident from the film's beginning that ironic distance must be maintained throughout the film.

I would qualify this statement. The distantiation is simultaneous with the audience's realization that we occupy the same position as the residents of Alphaville, controlled by Alpha 60. I would like to apply the Foucaultian idea of panoptic gaze in a slightly modified way to the voice of Alpha 60 that dominates the movie. The panoptic voice is present everywhere in Alphaville, not only in institutional spaces, but in private spaces like the bedroom. It is the voice of room service in hotels, the interrogator of 'threats' like Caution, the instructor (at an institute called, appropriately enough, the "Institute of General Semantics"). Crucially, it even serves as the narrator of the film—narrating not events, but philosophizing on reality, itself and human nature, right from the first scene onwards. It is crucial to Godard's agenda that we are not allowed any distantiation from this panoptic voice. We realize that we are, like the Alphaville residents, subject to a totalizing discourse in our lives. The narrator, whose reliability is usually taken for granted, turns out to be the Manichean enemy of the pop fiction world, making us realize the danger of omniscient points of view.

The imperialist aim of Alpha 60 can only succeed with an unthinking and unfeeling race of people. Thus the 'logic' that *Alphaville* is built around relies on a repression of emotion—people are executed for crying because that is 'illogical' behavior. Words like "love", "tenderness" and "conscience" have been deleted from the 'Bible.' However, this policy neither ensures 'logical' behavior or a non ambivalent language. We find people saying "I'm very well, thank you very much" without being asked how they are. Natasha shakes her head every time she says yes. These contradictions are symbolic of the divisiveness within the self that the logic of repression has brought about.

The antithesis to this ideology is emotion and love. Thus Dickson tells Caution—save those who weep. We know Natasha will be saved because she cries when Caution is beaten up

and taken away. The language that the film proposes as a form of resistance to Alpha 60 is the poetic language of Eluard's *Capitale de la douleur* (*The Capital of Pain*)—the language of surrealism and anti-rationality. It is a demonstration of the harmony that might result if image and language could coincide in a moment of adequate expression. Natasha recites a few verses by Eluard, as she dances with Caution. Juxtaposed against a series of intercuts that show the arrival of the police, this montage creates an image poem in which Godard, echoing surrealist myth, shows the couple to be the locus of salvation:

More and more I see the human predicament/as a dialogue between lovers./The heart has but a single mouth./Everything by chance./Everything said without thinking./Sentiments drift away./Men roam the city./A glance, a wind./And because I love you everything moves. . . .

In the end, Caution poses a riddle to Alpha 60 which makes it self destruct by making it a victim of Cartesian doubt. The answer to that riddle is 'Happiness.' The film ends with a reaffirmation of the language of emotion. Natasha struggles to find the words that will save her. She comes up with them slowly: 'I love you.' We see no response from Caution— the movie ends with a close up of her smiling. Godard deprives us of conventional emotional closure, and of the feel good factor aroused by them being in love. We feel happy as well as empathetic at the profundity of that smile. It symbolizes so much— the realization of so many feelings hitherto repressed. Having intellectually and emotionally realized the danger of the negation of emotion, we feel profoundly the significance of its recovery. Had Godard not encased the film in a pop art format, we would have seen it unthinkingly and identified with the protagonists at a surface level. By using a mode which ironizes itself, we are led to an intellectual engagement with the film, and through that our surface emotions are left behind and a deeper core of emotion touched.

Week End (1967) is definitely the most radical of Godard's pre '68 movies.¹² The very first intertitles of the film serve to undercut the film radically: "A film found on a scrap-heap," "A film adrift in the cosmos," "A film found on a dump." The intertitles seem to laugh at the spectator's attempt to engage with the film at any level—"anal-yze", says an intertitle in a bizarre scene where Corinne recounts her orgy. *Week End* ties together the themes of class struggle, environmentalism, body-politics, commercialization, and the very end of civilization itself into a tour de force evisceration of modern life that begins with another instance of a bourgeois couple on the run but ends with the lovers' "crossing over" with a band of cannibalist para-revolutionaries. The film shows the apocalyptic self destruction that society is heading towards.

However, MacBean is right in pointing out that despite the apocalyptic feel of the film, Godard concentrates almost exclusively on two of the most flamboyant aberrations of contemporary life—the bourgeois materialist in his most aggravated fever of accumulation and consumption; and his double, the antibourgeois, antimaterialist drop-out from society, whose only alternative to the horror of the bourgeoisie is more horror still. *Week End* is, first and foremost, a spectacle which examines civilization's ritual of the spectacle. Godard identifies the malady of contemporary society: the image, no matter how far removed it may be from the real thing, has somehow become more important than the thing itself. Godard tries to provoke the audience to critically question both the ritual of the spectacle and the society which has evolved this form of ritual.¹³

Since the medium of the film is symptomatic of this malady, *Week End* undercuts itself constantly. One way that he does this is by making the spectacle spill over into life. When

the bourgeois husband in *Week End* kills his mother-in-law and pours her blood over the flayed carcass of a skinned rabbit, we may flinch a bit but only because it's such a grisly image. But when we see one of the hippie band slaughter a live pig and a goose, the props are knocked out from under us. Suddenly we don't know where we stand: it was all such wonderful spectacle a moment ago, and now, the image and the thing itself are one; the cinema is real life.

We laughed earlier in the film when the characters kept insisting that cinema was real life; but we don't laugh anymore. What this shot accomplishes, if we are honest with ourselves, is to shatter one of our most cherished illusions—the illusion of the innocence of the spectacle. For all our talk about audience involvement and ecstatic communion, we have obviously refused to accept one iota of responsibility for what takes place in the theater: it has all been a spectacle and we have considered ourselves innocent, untouched, and uninvolved.

The distance between us and the spectacle is shattered effectively because spectacles are viewed with clinical detachment by the characters in the film. The sex orgy scene which is rather bizarre for the ordinary viewer is narrated in a dry, monotonous undertone by Corinne; the traffic jam queue is interspersed with overturned cars, strange animals, a sailboat, but no one seems to be surprised—instead they play ball, indicating their insulation to the scene around them; Corinne gets raped, her cries for help ignored by Roland as he smokes nonchalantly alongside; the couple sees various scenes of violent accidents on the way without expressing any emotion; the modern bourgeois girl eats her husband's flesh at the end of the movie nonchalantly. This is, in fact, a selective list.

For both the bourgeois and anti bourgeois characters, this detachment is the product of a complete lack of intellectual or emotional connection with the world around them. They are the embodiment of the malady of having lost connection with the thing itself in their delusion by the image. In their maniacal drive for consumption of material objects, they have become so hardened that they destroy and watch destruction without feeling anything. Corinne asks dead people for directions and gets hysterical only when her Hermes handbag is burnt in the explosion. The spectacular deadness of emotion disturbs us both intellectually and emotionally for we realize that their insulation is only a more intense form of ours, and we are part of the same culture that worships the superficial image. Godard's portrayal of the murderous bourgeois couple, and the cannibalists, though absurdist and ironic, is, I believe, a passionate cry against the death of emotion that he sees as pervasive in the urban bourgeois landscape.

The breakdown of any relation between people is reflected in the crisis of language that Godard depicts. None of the encounters with the various people the couple meets on their journey is productive at any level. All these characters speak languages that the protagonist couple cannot understand or relate to— be it the song of love, Mozart's music, or discourses on different subjects. The couple pays least attention to these discourses on Marx, God, civilization, American imperialism, music, science, poetry, the relation of words to things. As usual, the audience is not allowed to other itself from the couple.

My attempt in this paper has been to show through a detailed analysis of three of his films that for Godard, negation of emotion is in fact a negation of life. According to him, it is emotion, connection with others and love in conjunction with an intellectual awareness that can transform the solipsistic self destructive state that our society has reached. He attempts

to provoke this response by undercutting a superficial sentimental identification with the image as well as eschewing a purely intellectual, critical awareness. His meta textual films seek to make us a self reflexive audience which balances its association with and dissociation from the image such that something can change within us.

However, his pessimism about the transformative power of his films can be seen in the last title of *Week End*—the end of cinema. It is an appropriate title, because after this film Godard stopped making movies for a regular audience and started making films with the Dziga Vertov group, a radical collective that produced low budget agitprop without any commercial aspirations. Critics are divided on whether he managed to achieve his revolutionary aims through those films. I believe that his pessimism for his pre 68 movies was unwarranted, because they do manage to destabilize even the bourgeois audience of his times as well as ours in potentially revolutionary ways.

Arguably his films are even more relevant for our times than his. Almost half a century after he made these films, Godard's predominant concerns—the crisis of language, epistemological imperialism, people's unthinking absorption of images and a projected reality, the dangers of the pervasive consumerist and materialistic culture in Western society, and the anxiety about the role of cinema—have become even more urgent. Godard's cinematic praxis can be called radical even today. In his treatment of these themes, he is able to provoke and unsettle his audience in many different ways and at various levels. His films, which demonstrate his inventiveness, deep thought and passion, can hardly fail to at least impress upon us the need to be roused out of our mould as passive spectators.

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Notes

1 Jean Narboni and Tom Milne, ed., with an introduction by Richard Roud, *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Da Capo, 1986), 31.

2 *Vivre sa Vie*, dir Jean-Luc Godard, perf Anna Karina, Sady Rebbot, Andre S Labarthe, Guylaine Schlumberger, Brice Parain, Peter Kassowitz, Films de la Pléiade, 1962.

3 Raymond Bergnat, *Nouvelle Vague: First Decade* (Essex: Motion Publications, 1963), 12

4 Jean Narboni and Tom Milne, ed., with an introduction by Richard Roud, *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Da Capo, 1986), 132-133

5 Kavanagh, Thomas M. "Godard's Revolution: The Politics of Meta-Cinema." *Diacritics*, Vol. 3, No. 2. (Summer, 1973): 53- 54

6 Sontag, Susan. "Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*." *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1961), 203

7 *Ibid.*, 202

8 Using the written word is another way Godard uses to fracture the classic unity of cinema. Film critics have noted that Godard's use of writing is unparalleled in the history of cinema.

9 *Alphaville, a Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution*, dir Jean-Luc Godard, perf, Eddie Constantine, Anna Karina Akim Tamiroff, Athos Films, 1965.

10 It is not just epistemological imperialism that Alpha 60 is bent on achieving. Like any other imperialist, it seeks to control the world, under the guise the 'ultimate good.'

11 Thiher, Allen. "Postmodern Dilemmas: Godard's Alphaville and Two or Three Things That I Know about Her." *Boundary 2*, Vol. 4, No. 3. (Spring, 1976): 950- 953

12 *Week End*, dir Jean-Luc Godard, perf, Mireille Darc, Jean Yanne, Jean-Pierre Leaud, Juliet Berto, Athos Films, 1967.

13 Macbean, James Roy. "Godard's Week End, or the Self Critical Cinema of Cruelty." *Film Quarterly* 21, No. 2. (Winter, 1968 - Winter, 1969): 36-40..