

Alfaville, Godard's Apocalypse

by MEL BOCHNER

"Torpor is the enemy."—Eca de Quieroz

A centrally located circular light, too intense to look at, blinks on and off at regular intervals. The sound track opens in a raspy, monotone:
"Sometimes . . . reality . . . is . . . too . . . complex . . .
Fiction . . . gives . . . it . . . form . . ."

"In a series of pictures he transforms the nothingness of listless and uniform days into an oppressive condition of repugnancy, boredom, false hopes, paralyzing disappointments and piteous fears. Nothing happens but that nothing becomes heavy—a grey and random human destiny moving towards its end." Erich Auerbach on Flaubert's Madame Bovary.

Alfaville Locations: Deserted lobbies, parking lots, shopping plazas, cloverleaf intersections, curtain-wall buildings, self-service elevators, hotel bathrooms, phone booths, circular staircases, highways around large cities, a bedroom with a juke box.

"My movies are blocks."—Jean-Luc Godard.
CAST:
Lemmy Caution Eddie Constantine
Natasha von Braun Anna Karina
Henri Dickson Akim Tamiroff

Alfaville ——— society of the present-future ——— ruled by a mad physicist outcast from earth ——— governed by a computer, "Alfa 60," which acts always in the "common good" ——— phenomena maintained by a "crisis constant" ——— the state provides strangers with women ——— anxiety as an operational value ——— behaviorism ——— drive—cue—response—reward ———. For Alfa 60 the boundary of life is language ———. "There is nothing else to experience except words; as long as words keep their meanings and meaning its words" ——— political executions are carried out in a swimming pool.



Natasha and Lemmy suffering dumbly from certain external and unintelligible strains.

Lemmy: This book you call The Bible . . . it's a dictionary.
Natasha: Is there a difference?

"Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits."
—Wittgenstein

If words define experience, then behavior becomes subject to the problems of language . . . tautology, conundrum, diffusion, paradox, ambiguity, contradiction, vicious circle.

Words are suspect, the dictionary is altered at the whim of the "authorities," convention collapses. Communication ceases. Thought becomes impossible. Symbols separate from their assigned meanings, questions go unanswered, answers go unquestioned, words substitute for action. Action becomes impossible. Stasis.

Wherever Lemmy Caution goes he takes snapshots with a Kodak Instamatic Camera and flashcube attachment.

A sign caught in the headlights:
LOGIC: SILENCE

Surfaces: A. The film
coarse, grainy, uneven, pocked.
B. Object matter
hard, brittle, smooth, reflective.
1. transparent
glass, plexiglas.
2. opaque
stainless steel, poured concrete, aluminum, formica, chrome.

Eddie Constantine is numbed by a powerful sottishness as he moves down the labyrinthian corridors of Alfaville. His mind is sluggish and opaque. Lassitude. His face is parched and immobile. His body heavy, virtually stagnant. His reactions slow and tepid, he acts, it seems, out of nothing more than a slightly roused boredom. His avowal of humanist values such as love and personal feeling are all the more disproportionate.

"Perhaps all pleasure is only relief."
—William Burroughs
"There seems a certainty in degradation."
—T. E. Lawrence
"The love of life is the kiss of death."
—Ad Reinhardt
"If you look at something long enough, I've discovered that the meaning goes away."—Andy Warhol

"Once we have devised computers with a genuine capacity for self-improvement, a rapid evolutionary process will begin. As the machine improves both itself and its model of itself, we shall begin to see all the phenomena associated with the terms 'consciousness,' 'intuition' and 'intelligence' . . . it is unreasonable to think machines

could become nearly as intelligent as we are and then stop, or to suppose we will always be able to compete with them. Whether or not we could retain some sort of control of the machines, assuming that we would want to, the nature of our activities and aspirations would be changed utterly by the presence on earth of intellectually superior beings."—M. L. Minsky

Shots: A. Frames
cut off, casual, often missing the action, static, exaggerated angles (in the manner of TV news coverage), discontinuous.
B. Tonality
washed-out grays over- or under-exposed, random negative footage, irregular patches of extreme dark or light.



Godard as the Law.



Systems of tentative paralysis.

On the perimeter of the city live those who cannot conform. In this gray zone Lemmy locates his old friend Henry Dickson, a fellow "Outlander," living in a sleazy hotel. On the stairs Lemmy asks, "Is Dick Tracy dead? Is Flash Gordon still alive?" Once inside the dilapidated room he is forced to hide behind a chest of drawers while a beautiful, scantily clad girl (a state prostitute and spy) offers herself to the old man. While engaged in preliminary love-making, the old man is seized by a heart attack. His last words to Lemmy: "Save those who weep."

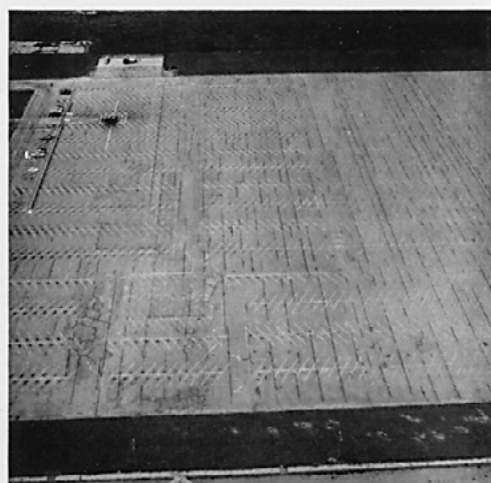
The implications of Alfaville are moralistic. Godard opts for humanist values in the context of his projection of "technologism." He sees Alfaville as present and apocalyptic. The erasure of individuality and personality, or what Lemmy Caution calls "poetry," he views as tragic. Godard's "sociology" is exceedingly romanticized. Man has already been displaced from the center of the universe.

"You must never say why; only because."
—Natasha von Braun

"Time is a circle, the descending arc is the past, the ascending arc the future, there is only the present."—Alpha 60
"Time is never a corruption or even a catastrophe, but merely a change of place, a hideout for data."—Roland Barthes



Barriers of reflection.



"Parking lots." Ed Ruscha, photo/Aeanis.

In Alphaville there is no time. The clock is a circle and time is the measurement of the movements on its "face." "Before" in relation to "after" is the character of time. "Before" and "after" are divisions of "time" separated by "now." But "now" as a "part" of time is unavailable. It has no duration, and the bleak search for the "present" becomes the interminable "past." At that juncture time stops.

"The movies are a world of fragments."
—Jean-Luc Godard

Political executions are carried out in the swimming pool. The person to be executed, hands tied, is led to the edge of the diving board. Around the balcony various officials look on. The condemned man generally makes a short speech about freedom, existence or human solidarity. The strange hollow sound of his words is punctuated by a burst of machine-gun bullets. After he falls into the water, a bevy of girls gracefully dive in after him and, if necessary, finish the execution with knives.



Catatonia in the "Capital of Pain."



Phenomena of consciousness.



Alias William Burroughs.

Godard's eschatology is conventional within the tradition of "crisis" literature and art of the twentieth century. Yeats, Pound, Wyndham Lewis, all envisioned the Apocalypse and an ensuing "renovation out of decadence." They confronted it with the posture of authoritarianism; the Surrealists, in turn, preferred pseudo-anarchism. More recently, artists such as Warhol have presented an attitude of passivity. In his movies Warhol demonstrates a preoccupation with the more fictive elements of "crisis" by presenting everything as stereotype. Even more interesting than Warhol are the movies of Roger Corman, especially

his *Wild Angels*. Unlike Godard, he makes no assessments of the "contemporary malaise"; his concern is only with appearances and the surface of things. The *Wild Angel* motorcyclists are complete fabrications, only tangentially based in fact. When Corman's characters speak, motives do not exist. Nancy Sinatra, a motorcycle gang girl, in reply to her boyfriend's question "How have I changed?" says, "I don't know . . . it's just kinda weird." The audience is distanced

by banality and what Brecht refers to as the "alienation effect." Godard, on the other hand, eschews the artificial and attempts to portray believable human feelings. He asks that we forego theatricality and believe emotionally in the plight of a "hero" and "heroine" who are themselves in a state of disbelief.



Fictitious excess within rigid boundaries: "Corman's Wild Angels"

"Never show reality. If a man must travel over land, use land that has been burned up in a forest fire. Preferably he should journey over or past water, because water has a dreamlike quality. And there must be fog and fire . . . The function of the camera is to portray reality, but I like to show that much reality is unreal."

—Roger Corman

"The alienation effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware of from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible. Before familiarity can turn into awareness, the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be, it will now be labeled as something unusual . . . an alienation of the automobile takes place if

after driving a modern car for a long while we drive an old model T-Ford. Suddenly we hear explosions once more; the motor works on the principle of explosions. We start feeling annoyed that such a vehicle can move; in short, we understand cars, by looking at them as something strange, new, as a triumph of engineering and to that extent something unnatural. Nature, which certainly embraces the automobile, is suddenly imbued with an element of unnaturalness, and from now on this is an indelible part of the concept of nature."

—Berthold Brecht



Urban dis-location.



Contrivances of experience.

"[In] The last scene of the film . . . Natasha tells Lemmy that she loves him, but pronounces it as a child speaks its first words. She has been reborn, and for them both a normal human life is possible again."

—Jean-Luc Godard

Godard suggests a morality which is at best questionable, for finally any "values" based on "normal human life" versus "cold, inhuman computer" are contrived. The old conventions of ethics and rationality are all used up.

"Everything has been said before."

—Alpha 60