Alphaville

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Alphaville is the story of special agent Lemmy Caution, played by American actor and naturalised *noir* icon Eddie Constantine, who has voyaged (in his white Ford Galaxy) across time and space to Alphaville, the capital city of a distant planet. His mission: to bring back the scientist Professor von Braun. The Professor, however, has since become king of the city by creating Alpha 60, the computer that controls Alphaville along harsh technocratic lines: weeping is outlawed and poetry goes unrecognised, words such as conscience and love have been erased from the lexicon. Add to this Anna Karina as Natacha von Braun, daughter of the Professor, who is loved by Lemmy; Constantine's whisky-drinking, poetry-spouting, outrageously overdetermined hard man of a special agent whose fight sequences, as Wim Wenders noted in his essay on the actor, 'are like dance sequences in a bad musical'; and Raoul Coutard's cinematography, the luminous opposition of its Expressionist black and white matching the film's abstract absolutes of good and evil, love and death, conscience and technology, poetry and science. Plus, of course, Paris.

Alphaville is Paris, 1965. Or rather, Paris 1965 is Alphaville, a modernist nightmare of post-Bauhaus functionalism where the curtain-walled skyscraper becomes the simultaneous symbol of progress and apocalypse. With *Alphaville* the *nouvelle vague* aesthetic of shooting in the streets reaches an apotheosis. *Alphaville*'s is a short-circuited realism applied to the least likely of genres – science fiction – that serves to make strange a real already so strange that it positively demands the strategy.

Part of the modernity of the *nouvelle vague* can be attributed to the use of new lightweight Éclair cameras and Nagra sound-recording technology to bypass the convention of studio-based shooting associated with the despised cinema de qualité. This allowed the new filmmakers to take to the streets and boulevards, quartiers and apartments of the real city, all the better to mythologise its historic centre. In the January 1967 issue of *Cahiers du cinéma*, the young Bernardo Bertolucci wrote of Godard's 'vulgarity' adding that for him this was a positive quality: 'I call 'vulgarity' his capacity and his ability to live day-to-day, close to things, to live in the world as does a journalist, always aware of the right time to arrive on the scene.'

The characterisation was to stick – Godard the modernist exotic, fascinated by the surfaces, sounds and shapes of modern Parisian life but not by its substance. It was a barely veiled accusation of profligacy of style and theme, of bad taste, of formlessness and lack of aesthetic harmony – forgetting that in Godard's case the old rules simply don't apply and never did.

The 'blurring' of Paris in the cinema of the *nouvelle vague* is a chronicle of the incursions into the city centre of modernist architecture and of the cultural ascendancy of Le Corbusier and the International Style. As a result, the characters lose their bearings – and worse their love of the city. It is just such a fear that informs *Alphaville*'s image of an architecturally brutalist future world in the heart of the city. In its despair over 60s urbanisation, *Alphaville* was part of a wider concern about the perceived dehumanising effects of mass-scale housing and the contemporary renovation of the city.

Chris Darke, *Sight and Sound*, July 1994

Big Screen Classics

The Swimmer
Wed 2 Jul 18:15 (+ intro by film critic Phuong Le);
Sat 5 Jul 20:45; Mon 21 Jul 20:30
Unrelated
Wed 2 Jul 20:40; Tue 22 Jul 21:00;
Wed 30 Jul 18:10
Water Lilies Naissance des Pieuvres
Thu 3 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by Diana Cipriano, BFI Flare
programmer); Thu 31 Jul 18:05
Mon Oncle
Thu 3 Jul 20:30; Sun 13 Jul 12:30;
Sun 20 Jul 11:45; Thu 24 Jul 12:20
Three Colours: Blue Trois couleurs: Bleu
Fri 4 Jul 12:30; Wed 9 Jul 18:10 (+ intro by Jason
Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public
Programmes and Audiences); Tue 15 Jul 20:45
The Cameraman
Sun 6 Jul 12:20; Sun 27 Jul 19:00
Alphaville
Mon 7 Jul 15:00; Tue 22 Jul 20:45;
Mon 28 Jul 18:20
Deep End
Tue 8 Jul 20:50; Wed 16 Jul 12:30; Sun 20 Jul 18:45
Sexy Beast
Thu 10 Jul 20:50; Sun 13 Jul 18:50;
Tue 29 Jul 18:00
La Piscine The Swimming Pool
Fri 11 Jul 20:35; Wed 23 Jul 17:55 (+ intro by critic
and programmer Cici Peng)
**Million Dollar Mermaid (aka One-piece Bathing
Suit)**
Sat 12 Jul 12:10; Sat 19 Jul 15:00; Wed 30 Jul
18:00 (+ intro by Amber Butchart, curator of Splash!
A Century of Swimming and Style exhibition at the
Design Museum)
Boogie Nights
Sat 12 Jul 16:45; Thu 17 Jul 17:50
Drowning By Numbers
Mon 14 Jul 20:15; Sat 26 Jul 11:45
La Ciénaga The Swamp
Fri 18 Jul 18:20; Sat 26 Jul 14:20
Swimming Pool
Fri 25 Jul 18:10; Mon 28 Jul 20:45

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'Alphaville': a contemporary review

Like *The Red Desert*, *Alphaville* is concerned with alienation in a technological
society – Natacha is a robot restored to humanity by Lemmy's love – but
Godard's method is far removed from Antonioni's minute, patient analysis.
There are times, Alpha 60 gratingly announces at the beginning of the film,
when reality is so complex that it can only be transmitted through legend; and
Godard accordingly proceeds to work through legend, or two legends, to be
precise. There is the legend of Lemmy Caution shooting up his opponents and
winning the pretty lady with the traditional, uncomplicated, strip-cartoon
brutality; and there is also the poetic legend of Cocteau. It is no accident that
echoes of Cocteau's work abound here: Lemmy's interrogation by Alpha 60
recalls the tone and style of Cégeste's aphoristic poetry ('*Quel est le privilege
des morts ?' Ne plus être vivants*'); when Alphaville is destroyed, people
stagger down labyrinthine corridors or cling blindly to the walls, like the
inhabitants of 'La Zone de la mort'; and at the end, as they escape from the
city, Lemmy tells Natacha, like Eurydice, not to look back.

It is through this curious marriage of legends that *Alphaville* makes its
comment: in a world rendered arid by technology, it is left to the brutal, matter-
of-fact Lemmy to take over the mantle of Orphée and recall the existence of
poetry; and in the beautiful central sequence of the film, the illogicality of poetry
is born again as Lemmy forces Natacha to seek for the meaning of forgotten
words like 'tenderness', 'conscience' and 'love'. It isn't so much that Lemmy
(God forbid!) is poetic – his dialogue and thoughts for the most part remain
characteristically monosyllabic – as that he alone in *Alphaville* is aware that
neither he nor anybody else can live in a world deprived of poetry and feeling.

Without benefit of special lighting or trickery, Paris stands for Alphaville simply
by having Coutard's superb photography present an icy, dehumanised view of
it as a city of glittering lights and staring windows, a warren of push-buttons
and heartlessly clicking machines in which Natacha, wide-eyed and hesitant,
presents the one source of warmth. This is a world in which one cannot trust
appearances, and Godard invents the perfect human detail to go with it: the
hotel chambermaid ('Séductrice, Troisième Classe') with the identification
tattoo on her neck, making guests comfortable by putting tranquillisers in the
bathroom and stripping invitingly to her underwear; the down-and-outs
squatting in the suicide hotel on the other side of town, nibbling cereals out of
the packet; bored guests politely applauding executions at the municipal baths,
while a bathing belle-executioner acknowledges their tribute with a graceful
arabesque in the water. *Alphaville*, in fact, is the first science fiction film to offer
the uneasy reminder that our own world is already more than halfway to
science fiction.

Monthly Film Bulletin, May 1966