

ely
film
society

jan
2019

the
notes

coming up
@ kings lynn

- **FILM** Sunday 27th Jan, times tbc
**THE GUERNSEY LITERARY AND
POTATO PEEL PIE SOCIETY**
+ *post-film meal*

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Alphaville

Jean-Luc
Godard,
France 1965

French title *Alphaville, un aventure
de Lemmy Caution*

Eddie Constantine ... Lemmy Caution
Anna Karina Natacha von Braun
Akim Tamiroff Henri Dickson
.Valérie Boisgel

... 2nd Seductress Third Class
Jean-Louis Prof. Jeckell
Michel Delahaye

... von Braun's Assistant
Jean-André Fieschi ... Prof. Heckell
Christa Lang

... 1st Seductress Third Class
Jean-Pierre Léaud... Breakfast waiter
László Szabó Chief Engineer
Howard Vernon

... Prof. Leonard Nosferatu
aka von Braun

Produced by André Michelin

Music by Paul Misraki

Cinematography by Raoul Coutard

Film Editing by Agnès Guillemot



*It is seventeen minutes past midnight,
Oceanic Time; having driven all night
through intersidereal space, secret agent
Lemmy Caution - disguised as Ivan
Johnson, reporter for Figaro-Pravda -
arrives in the suburbs of Alphaville. The
road is empty, the night grey; Lemmy is
alone, with only a revolver in the glove*

compartment.

Devotees of "science fiction"
dislike the term: to them SF stands
for Speculative Fiction. Devotees
of hardboiled crime fiction dislike
being toyed with by intellectuals.
Intellectuals dislike philosophical
tenets being put up for ridicule by

popular culture. Nobody told Godard this, for *Alphaville* is a free-for-all mashup of all three strands and more.

Film is a speculative medium, right back to the 1890s experiments of Georges Méliès, its high-water mark being perhaps Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* [1926]. Action films go back just as far, reflecting film's genesis as a novelty act in turn-of-the-century circuses. And philosophy? Well, what else do you get with a medium invented (they claim) by the French?

Broadly, *Alphaville* is a reimagining of Voltaire's 1758 satirical novella *Candide*, in which a group of friends set out to investigate the world in a spirit of wilful innocence. Voltaire intended to challenge the spirit of the Enlightenment, in which all ideas could be invented anew without legacy: if all things are approached without at least some preconceptions, how can you decide what is good, for the individual or the society? France tested this idea to destruction in the events of 1789 and after, and it remains a binding strand in the French outlook. When is a small demand actually a compelling right? Godard swam readily in the radical politics of his time: *Les Carabiniers* [1958] is an anti-war film, and *Le Petit Soldat* [1960] is explicitly about the Algerian crisis which convulsed French opinion: both films attracted the ire of Gaullist ministers keen to consolidate the ethic of the Fifth Republic. The films after *Alphaville* included the sloganising of the many ultra-left groups who hit critical mass on the streets of Paris in May 1968, with *Weekend* [1967] chronicling the collapse of peevish bourgeois snobbery into a state of anarchy as the country descends into a feral traffic jam, as funny as it is savage.

The *nouvelle vague* film directors who emerged in the 1950s were, however, obsessed with the ways in which genre films could be bent to tell tales about more than themselves. A cowboy is a moral avenger or a traitor; a detective looks upon human despair and is unmoved - or is he? Their hero was Alfred Hitchcock, and it was a great coup for Godard to be able to

“...of all French directors Godard stands out by his insistence on, his belief in, the *real*. An anecdote from the continuity girl on *Alphaville* brings this out pertinently: "The film was shot, you might say, without any extra light; in the dark, in fact. For one scene, Coutard [the cinematographer] said, "I can add a bit of light and by closing the lens it will come to the same thing - no-one will notice the difference. But Godard refused: it had to be real. So he shot without lights; he used very fast film, but even so. It became the joke of the film - "It's too dark to see anything... So what, we're shooting just the same". The result: several thousand feet of film were "unusable". But Godard didn't reshoot them entirely. Some of them were scrapped, but others ent, just as they were, into the film. The most extraordinary thing of all is that they are some of the best things in the whole film.”

Godard by Richard Roud [1967]

cast as his hero Eddie Constantine, an American actor who could channel the grimy charm of Humphrey Bogart in fluent French. Originally a nightclub singer (talent-spotted by Edith Piaf), Constantine had since 1953 been France's greatest popular film actor in a series of pulp thrillers based on novels by British writer Peter Cheyney, himself channeling the seedy tales of Raymond Chandler through the adventures of private eye Lemmy Caution. The films had no traction outside France (Cheyney is forgotten here, and the "American" settings of the films fooled no American audiences) and were ripe for satire for their recognisability alone, just as Johnny English need not mention James Bond.

The mean streets down which Lemmy slouches are those of a placeless technocivilisation in perpetual night, lit by nightmare sodium lights that meld car park,

hospital, prison and flophouse. This is *Alphaville*, a surveillance state overseen by the invisible Alpha-60, which may or may not be an all-knowing supercomputer, prone to uttering philosophical koans in a croaking voice (voiced by an actor who had been fitted with an artificial larynx after a cancer operation). *There are times when reality becomes too complicated for Oral Communication*, begins the film in voiceover. *But KLegend gives it form by which it pervades the whole world...*

Lemmy declines to be fooled by this. He wants information. Alpha-60 wants him dead, or removed, or at least silent. A grim caper ensues, aided by a Seductress sent to distract him (grubby sexuality is never far away in Godard, nor are his trademark silly fights) but who reluctantly becomes his guide and guard as he inches ever closer to Alpha-60, trying to work out what is going on, and how it can be changed. But into what? *Alphaville* is among other things a satire, not of Enlightenment, but of the dumb totalitarianism that comes in the shadow of technological advance, a prescient theme in 1965, and the death of beauty brought about by modernist building - a theme later taken up by Jacques Tati in *Playtime* [1967]. *Nearly every day, words disappear because they are forbidden. They are replaced by new words expressing new ideas*, intones the seductress. A statement of the obvious or of the unimaginable?

Alphaville is also a film noir. Godard has always had an eccentric approach to cinematography - films have no obligation to be "real" if it's more fun to fake them - but the pools of hard light, black expanses, patterns of lit windows and sour lifts and corridors make their own statement. Nothing here is natural: mankind creates its own hell.

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
ARCHIPELAGO
(Joanna Hogg, UK 2010)
Monday 8 February 2019

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