

# Vivre sa vie

(1962, Jean Luc Godard, France)

## Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

### Specialist Study Area: Auteur Narratives

### Rationale for study

- A perfect example of the stylistic experimentation of the French New Wave, it's also a beautiful study of a woman who "tries to be who one is".

### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- 00:00 - 00:08:00 - Titles and Tableau
- 00:54:00 - 00:58:15 - Nana dances and on the street

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography

##### *Sequence 1*

- The whole of Tableau One is really just two shots – the first sequence after the titles is the rear of Nana and her husband's heads and backs. Their faces are glimpsed but obscured in the mirror above the counter. This completely defies the 'rules' of how to film conversations: neither shots nor editing reveal the characters' emotions. It seems Godard is trying to hide rather than reveal the story (see Aesthetics). This has the immediate effect of making the characters more mysterious, and the spectator more attuned to

their facial expressions when we are shown them. Throughout, shots are framed so Nana's face is blocked, giving the impression that she is never fully knowable – perhaps a statement about the actress' relationship with Godard (see Auteurs). In other scenes, the camera lingers on Nana's face and she appears to be looking directly at us and effect is almost uncomfortably intimate.

##### *Sequence 2*

- As Nana dances and flirts her way around the pool hall, the camera seems to come loose from its formal and restricted movement in the rest of the film. The sudden kineticism captures how Nana is feeling at this moment: revelling in her sexuality, lost in the joy of the music. In the final shot of this scene, she embraces the pole as if it were a lover and her face takes on a wistful expression, as if she has just remembered her actual position: a prostitute brought to a meeting by her pimp.

#### Mise-en-Scène

- Most of the film is shot in real-life locations in Paris. Godard said that he was trying to achieve a level of naturalism. He had done so for his breakthrough, *A Bout de Souffle* (1960) where his use of street photography achieved a cinema *verité* style in a dramatic narrative. He didn't ask for permits to film, and for some street scenes he even hid the camera in the back of a moving van to achieve a tracking shot.

##### *Sequence 1*

- The mirror above the counter is used to show glimpses of Nana's face. After the title sequence where we are free to examine Nana's face in detail, this maintains our emotional connection whilst also frustrating our attempts to empathise with her during the conversation.

##### *Sequence 2*

- The pool hall and jukebox could be from any number of post-war US films. Godard was fascinated by American culture and the way it was infiltrating Paris. In *A bout de*

*souffle*, Michel's hero is Humphrey Bogart and Patricia sells the New York Herald Tribune on the streets, whilst in *Vivre sa vie* the record shops, bars and gangsters show the 'Americanisation' of Europe after WWII.

### Editing

#### Sequence 1

- In an important article for *Cahiers du cinema* (an important French journal that established film as an art form), Godard had praised the use of editing in US films, stating that a swift cutting rate could express character's emotions in a way long takes could not. In *Vivre sa vie*, however, his approach to editing is the opposite of this: he avoids shot/reverse-shot to show the conversation, and most of the scene is a single lengthy shot.

#### Sequence 2

- Compared to the rest of the film, this scene has far more energy, created by a combination of camera movement and editing. As she dances around the pool hall, we cut to Nana's POV and we see the owner staring at her. This, combined with her mock-flirtatious dancing, shows Nana genuinely enjoying herself, exalting in her attractiveness and living in the moment.
- The juxtaposition with the next scene, with Nana leaning against a flat wall, smoking and waiting for clients is a reminder of her social circumstances. It contrasts the romanticism of her *joie de vivre* in the previous scene with a rawer reality.

### Sound

- In earlier films, like *A bout de souffle* (1960), the actors worked without a script and Godard dubbed the dialogue during post-production. In *Vivre sa vie*, he decided to record most of the sound live, which adds to the naturalism. But then there are sections – notably the reading of the Poe story – which have been dubbed in later (it is actually Godard's voice reading the story – again blurring the line between fiction and the reality of his relationship with Karina).

#### Sequence 1

- The music in the title sequence begins at the start of each of the shots of Nana's profile – then abruptly halts – then begins again. It's as if each shot begins to tell her story, then falters. This stresses her psychological mystery.
- The dialogue in this scene introduces one of the core themes of the film. The repeated

"What do you care?" not only illustrates the distance between Nana and her husband, it also introduces the idea that people are unknowable. "The more we talk, the less the words mean" echoes later conversations (especially with the philosopher) about how language is insufficient at revealing the 'reality' of people and life.

#### Sequence 2

- Musical sequences are one of Godard's signatures as an auteur. The narrative pausing to allow the characters to indulge in a dance routine was first used in *Band a part* (1964) and has inspired many more contemporary US directors like Hal Hartley in *Amateur* (1994) and Quentin Tarantino in *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

### Representations

#### Gender

- Some have criticised the film as glamorising prostitution. The casting of such a beautiful actress in the role, and the ease with which she adopts the trade, could be interpreted as showing prostitution in a romanticised light. However, there is much evidence to the contrary. The whole of Tableau 8, for example, begins with coldly proclaimed facts about the life of the prostitute. Following this is a montage showing Nana's discomfort with her clients (especially the shot where 'John' attempts to kiss her on the mouth whilst she struggles).
- Godard himself described the film as about "a pretty shopgirl who sells her body but keeps her soul... while experiencing all possible deep human emotion". This – as well as the references to Joan of Arc – could be seen as romanticising the idea of female suffering as a kind of purifying process. At the same time, the film could be seen as dignifying and helping us empathise with Nana's point of view. She has been forced into poverty through a desire to be independent, and it is this poverty (rather than any commonly blamed and more moralistic causes such as drug addiction or even a promiscuous nature) that forces her to become a prostitute. Scenes like those with the philosopher in Tableau 11 portray Nana as insightful and incisively intelligent, and though her end is tragic, she rarely behaves like a victim. Instead, as she explains to

Yvette, it is all “I am responsible”.

- Men, until the finale, are not portrayed as the unfeeling thugs one might assume in this narrative. Her husband seems sadly resigned to her leaving him, rather than being abusive. Even Raoul the pimp does not follow the brutal slave-driver conventions of other crime dramas. A different interpretation is that these male characters are actually being passive-aggressive. Wherever Nana goes, men do try to exploit her or limit her experience; it is the system that does violence to her rather than any specific male character.

### **Aesthetics (i.e. the ‘look and feel’ of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)**

- Godard was a key director in what became known as the French New Wave. This, along with his other films, use techniques that directly challenge the ‘rules’ of narrative cinema. Though a lot of the film features conversations between two characters, the conventions of multiple CUs/MS and shot/counter-shot are deliberately challenged (see key sequences analysis above). There is a reason for this: one of the film’s themes is about how we interpret the world, and the gap between words and reality. If we can’t see characters’ faces, we can’t connect their visual emotional reactions and what they are saying. The spectator is made to experience what the characters are discussing, the dissociation between image (what we see) and text (the dialogue - or written segments).
- The dramatic narrative is punctuated by written or read-aloud texts: an epigram from Montaigne at the start; an extract from a pulp magazine story read by the record shop assistant; even a letter written by Nana herself. At other times, text (written in captions or read-aloud) is overlaid on cinematic images, like the extracts from a Sociology book about prostitution; or the subtitles for the dialogue between Nana and her lover in the last chapter. This links again to the theme of ‘text’ and ‘reality’.
- *Vivre sa vie*, represents a departure from the style Godard had used in his previous films. Instead of lightweight, documentary film cameras, he decided to use heavy Mitchell cameras and expensive film stock. To save time and money, this means each shot has been planned precisely, especially the camera movement – a style known as ‘planimetric framing’ where shots are organised along formal

lines or ‘planes’. Godard also felt he had too swift a cutting rate in previous films, so elected to use very long takes – this also enabled the actors to sustain a particular mood or emotion for longer.

### **CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts**

#### **Social**

- Critic Chris Robé analysed *Vivre sa vie*’s portrayal of prostitution and used it to explore Godard’s conflict between Romanticism and naturalism. The Romantics were a group of artists who stressed the importance of human experience. Beyond morality, their aim was to live life fully, in the moment. Nana is a very Romantic character; she often seems lost in the moment, enraptured by the world she lives in. A good example is the moment in Tableau 6 when she seems to forget her and Yvette’s lives of economic hardship and exploitation. Instead she ‘loses herself’ in the lives of the other people in the café. Yet, the harsh reality of her life as a prostitute is also portrayed in naturalistic scenes like the one that ends Sequence 2 (above), where her previous energy and joy at dancing seems crushed out of her in a single shot that shows her need and poverty. Though he made many films focusing on the lives of women in the 1960s – a period associated with the birth of contemporary feminism – many of Godard’s female characters are forced to suffer (at the hands of men) for their attempts at independence.

#### **Political / Historical**

- The French New Wave were responding to the time of political and cultural upheaval in France (and other European countries). After being occupied by the Nazis during WWII, in which many French citizens were complicit, the post-war culture was centred on reinforcing national identity, and cinema was usually based around classic French literature or pre-war history. *The Nouvelle Vague* felt this didn’t reflect the lives, dreams and frustrations of young people, and their films aimed to challenge this status quo. Young people were living during the capitalist and commercial frenzy that followed WWII and also in the shadow of possible nuclear war. France was also involved in a bloody war to maintain control of Algeria (we see this referenced at the end of Tableau 6 where the police shoot an Algerian). The French youth’s

anger at what they considered a lifeless cultural and political era reached a pinnacle in the demonstrations and riots of May 1968, and many see the films of the New Wave – with their dissolute, directionless characters and innovative aesthetics – as capturing the revolutionary spirit of the years leading up to this.

### Technological

- Before the 1960s, filmmaking was expensive. The cost of camera, editing and sound equipment meant films could only be made in collaboration with big studios. But the advent of cheaper, lightweight cameras (like the Arriflex and Eclair), and portable sound equipment meant directors could move beyond the studio, and faster film stocks meant they required less light. This enabled the New Wave to film in real locations and on low budgets that freed the directors to make more personal films with more experimental approaches. In *Vivre sa vie*, however, Godard has returned to using more expensive equipment, but is using it to continue to explore marginalised characters and to experiment with film form.

### SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - AUTEUR AND NARRATIVE - STARTING POINTS - Narratives

- The film's plot is almost melodramatic – a 'fallen woman' story – but the structure of the film and the fundamental choice of what to show are innovative. Godard and the other New Wave directors challenge conventional narratives by featuring the quiet, sometimes reflective moments in between 'big events'. Naturalistic chats in cafés become as significant as shootouts between gangsters. While making *Vivre sa vie*, Godard was influenced by an edition of *Cahiers du cinema* dedicated to the work of German dramatist Bertolt Brecht. Brecht sought to show everyday moments in the life of ordinary people, often the poor or criminals. He also created an approach he called *verfremdung* (alienation): an attempt to deliberately disrupt the audience's emotional engagement. One of his techniques was to remind the audience throughout that they are watching a play, an artificial construction.
- Godard had recently been criticised by fellow director Francois Truffaut who said Godard filmed "the nature of actions" rather than "filming ideas". Godard made *Vivre sa vie* as a response to this. He attempts to use Brecht's

ideas to make a film that is itself a piece of philosophy, engaging mind not emotion. Firstly, he splits the stories into 12 'tableaux' with intertitles like the chapters of a novel. Then the action is constantly being interrupted with other forms of text: quotations, voices reading stories, a long philosophical debate about language and meaning. These challenge the dramatic conventions of how to tell a story. In the final tableau, as Nana and her lover talk, there are subtitles – reminding us that we are just watching a story. As noted above, when there are dramatic scenes, the use of camera and editing 'breaks the rules' of conventional narrative filmmaking. How should we make sense of everything we see in the film? How should we make sense of own reality? These are questions the characters discuss explicitly, but they are also expressed by the way the film is made.

- Yet *Vivre sa vie* is a deeply emotional film. Its tricks don't fully disengage the emotions of the spectator. Critics of Brecht have suggested that even though he wanted to 'alienate' the audience, he was 'too good' a playwright that he couldn't help but create emotionally engaging characters and stories. The same could be said about Godard.

### STARTING POINTS - Auteurs

- The phrase *auteur* (author) was used by writers at *Cahiers du cinema* to describe filmmakers that have a very distinctive 'voice' and who displayed a significant level of creative control over their work. Today we often speak of directors almost as their own individual genres (e.g. Tarantino-esque) but, before the New Wave, directors were seen as just part of the crew, and films were seen as a collective product in an industrial system (Hollywood). Directors like Godard, freed by technology and cultural change, sought to become *auteurs*, to develop their own 'signature' and 'voice' in the style of a novelist.
- One 'signature' of Godard's work is his blurring of fact and fiction. Many of his films are based on his personal relationship issues, with Anna Karina, his actual wife playing out scenes based on their rocky marriage. *Vivre sa vie* was an opportunity to improve his wife's career and save their relationship – and yet the film itself is about the fragmentation of relationships and the commodification of intimacy. Poe's 'The Oval Portrait' could easily be read as an allegory for

Godard and Karina's relationship (especially as it is his voice reading it!) - an artist so in love with capturing the intensity of his wife's beauty that he ends up killing her. This could be seen as 'intellectual celebrity gossip' if it wasn't for the main theme of the film being the questionable relationship between art and life. What is 'real'? Is it what we see? And what is just imitation? Can language (visual or textual) ever express anything that is 'real'? Godard asks deeply philosophical questions by intertwining his own 'personal' reality with the 'public' narratives of his films. See also *Le Mepris* (1963) and *Une femme Mariée* (1964).