

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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My Life to Live 1962

Jean-Luc Godard. (1930-

STORY

Setting. As in many of Godard's films, *My Life to Live*(1962) shakes open the movie going assumptions of an audience for which the cinema was still basically entertainment. Hollywood was starting to decline in mid century, but the new wave of auteur driven films, by Western European directors like Bergman, Herzog, Fassbinder, Godard—and many others—was beginning to turn its attention in directions formerly subordinated to issues of plot and character: issues like the depiction of society, the very society the film industry was embedded in; like the techniques, working materials, and special effects introduced by the increasing refinement of cinema as a technical achievement; issues like the role of the director as a living factor in the films he produces. *My Life to Live* drives cinematic thinking in the direction of the documentary, reaching out toward one segment of contemporary urban life, prostitution, in which the dehumanization of labor can promote sharp edged insights into the street level sufferings of society.

Framing. The film opens with a sequence of portrait shots of Anna Karina (Nana), the main character—and Godard's wife of the time, his wife whom he is throughout the film attempting in fact to woo back to him. Subsequently we encounter the same woman—from the back of her head—seated in a café looking out onto the rather indistinct traffic of downtown Paris. Beside her, also seen only at the back of his head, sits her husband to whom she is addressing recriminations, and whom she has, apparently, just left, along with their child, in search of a role in the entertainment industry. It is as though we are meeting this lady from two different angles, and being challenged to put her together. It is not as though we are being led into a story.

Plot. To the extent there is a plot, internal to the twelve segments that constitute the film, it will follow (In each section introduced then abandoned by few passages of Michel Legrand's music) by the jump-cut narrative progression by which Godard (like French novelist counterparts such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, 1922-2008) wished to signal the presence of artifice and construction, where in the past we signaled our world-happiness by simply going with the flow of the story.

Flow. That flow in the present case is a sterterous onflow of episodes by which we experience aspects of Nana's life and eventually death. Nana goes to play pinball, and as we play it with her we realize she is just a youngster, into it, her eyes everywhere. Then we redirect to see her working in a record store, one more piece of human equipment—and it occurs to us we may be watching exhibit A of labor-force dehumanization. Nana's decline is marked by her trans-segment request for money, which she has no access to during her period of exile from married society. Her impecuniousness leads her out onto the streets, a homeless, a tramp, and when she tries to break back into her flat she is caught and thrown out onto the street again. A guy picks her up, to go to a movie, *The Passion of Jeanne d'Arc*, and she shudders at the scenario of a lone brave woman judged by men. She walks away from the guy who invited her, then finds herself picked up by the cops, on a dubious charge of street theft.

Prostitute. The camera presents her with Raoul—it is as though the camera is a third eye—her pimp to be. They embrace, exchange exhalations of smoke, kiss, and her eyes remain beautiful and blank, as though nothing matters to her. This turn into prostitution segues into our introduction to Paris' laws regarding 'the life'—and our lovely Nana is now a cog in the wheel of one more Parisian industry. It will be her last, for we are about to see her indifference to life take her life. Raoul, Nana's pimp, takes Nana to a meeting with a gangster, to whom he has decided to sell her; there follows a dispute over terms; gunfire breaks out, and Nana is shot and killed. The tale of the girl we surveyed with such compassion and

interest, at the start of the film, lies dead in the street, as disposable as was her own view of the meaning of her life.

THEMES

Prostitution This ancient profession, known in French as 'the life,' 'la vie,' is long in the cards for the Nana we meet at the start of this film. She is abandoning her husband and child, and letting herself go into dreams of a music career; then gradually slips into casual street sex, finally ending up before the police, and in the grips of a professional pimp, Raoul, who takes her to her death. The whole film illustrates the gradual slippage of a woman whose beauty, gradually fading, puts her within reach of any man with a few sous in his pocket.

Indifference Nana does indeed 'lead her own life,' but by letting it happen to her. One might say that she feels rare moments of joy or frivolity, as for instance when she dances to the tune of the juke box, flirting with the pool player who makes as if not to notice her. Such moments only accentuate the indifference with which in general she greets her own daily routine of street survival or lifeless sexuality. Even her fatal hook up with Raoul, which will be the death of her, evokes little emotion from her.

Randomness. Life on the streets of Paris roars on, in the procession of chance events which dominate modern urban existence. While 'to live one's life,' the film's title, might seem to suggest 'taking charge of one's life,' in Nana's case the title means something closer to 'put up with one's life,' 'to take it as it comes.' In the same fashion, the film in which Godard presents this world develops in an aleatory, chance-ridden manner. Berthold Brecht's 'alienation theater' is one source of Godard's procedure here. Another is his sense, shared with many writers and film makers around him, that the structures made in art do not develop in coherent, orderly stages, but are randomly joined to one another.

The City The city, in this case Paris, is portrayed as colorless, fast moving, and available to violence. This is not the Paris of romance, but the Paris that consumes those whose lives take place in its streets. No parks, no little kids playing, no lovers walking hand in hand.

CHARACTERS

Nana is the main character, although she is almost totally without the decisiveness, or sharpness of traits, which typically go into establishing character. She lets the winds, and men's desires, lead her to her eventual death.

Raoul, Nana's pimp, who catches her eye on the street, is a cool pimp who catches Nana in his web. When Nana later falls for a younger and intellectual guy, a reader, Raoul quickly drives her back into the fold. He controls and ultimately kills Nana.

Brice Parain is a Parisian philosopher—Godard's own philosophy prof at University—who plays himself, and engages Nana in café conversation. He tells a meaningful story about flow in life, and the dangers of excessive self-examination.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

NANA

Character. Nana, almost an anti-character because she lets life sweep her forward, is at first a kind of free spirit, who is breaking from her husband and child, and who is self-directed enough to work in a record store, and support herself. However she is very low on cash, forever trying unsuccessfully to borrow, and gradually gives in to street sex, which helps her to survive, at least until she succumbs to a skillful pimp, Raoul. Nana continues to relate meaningfully to certain men, the philosopher with whom she chats, the intellectual young man who is reading Poe, but essentially she is dead to her world, and will thus soon perish, in a gun battle between underworld figures.

Parallels. One thinks of Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893), with its harsh picture of a girl whose family setting is chaotic and cruel, and who soon finds her way to prostitution and death. One can retreat far into literary history, and encounter the prostitute in Mary Magdalene, the whore who is Jesus' truest ally, or Jesus' defense of 'the woman taken in adultery.' In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare juxtaposes the virtuous Isabella with the fallen Mistress Overdone, ever ready to go horizontal; Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and Monet's *Olympia* both look the sex worker closely in the eye.

Illustrative moments

Posing. The film opens with multiple shots of Nana, face to the watcher, profile, side glance. We are being familiarized with her through the technique of the camera eye, for which she is posing, as though the camera itself were another person in the visual equation.

Humiliated. As her living situation degenerates, Nana finds herself growing desperate for shelter. She tries to recover the key to her old flat from her concierge, but she is caught, and driven away from the premises, a public figure of shame.

Curious. At her best, Nana is once again the civilized and charming figure we find from the start intuit deep within her. Later in her declining fate she still retains the social openness to chat with a philosopher at a nearby café table, and to fall for a young man whose literary tastes run to fiction like Poe's.

Joyous. Nana is capable of breaking into a dance of pure flirtatious joy, as she puts money in the juke box, and whirls around the pool table, where a guy is trying to concentrate on the cue ball.

Discussion questions

Raoul devotes some attention to indoctrinating Nana into the business of prostitution, which is highly organized, and covered by many regulations, concerning sanitation, safety, compensation. What is Godard's own attitude toward this institution of the sex worker industry?

Godard is always interested in the presence of the camera in creating his films. In what ways does he draw attention, in the present film, to the presence and shaping power of the camera itself?