

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Alphaville 1965 Jean-Luc Godard (1930-)

STORY

The first manned spacecraft landing—American-- touched down on the moon in July of 1970, and took place in an atmosphere of vivid international competition, the Russian space program having made a non-manned landing a year before the Americans arrived. The reality of outer space was in the air.

Imagination. An imaginary void, which had long fascinated mankind, was at once filled: for instance the nineteenth century French surrealist, Jules Verne, opened up the genre of imaginative voyages through space, and gave great impetus, in his lifetime of space and science adventure fictions, to the imaginative tradition which had--passing as it did through Voltaire, Mary Shelley, Paul Claudel—readied the culture world for the actual landings in outer space; invitations to reconfigure the entire notion of space writing.

Science fiction. The modern wave of science fiction writing and filming, which we now take for granted as part of the repertoire of our imaginations, began to take its own path—through films like the one before us (or, say, Tarkovsky's *Solaris*)—into a thinking genre marked by the new awareness of the actuality of space, the discoveries in space unlocked by such darings of science as the moon landings. The finesse of our space discoveries has now permanently altered the possibilities of imaginative thought, making possible the documentary horizons of work like Herzog's *Wild Blue Yonder*, which interweave fantasy and illusion with hard science.

Spacewriting. Poised between historical awareness of the new actualities of space, and the desire to think imaginatively through space, Godard turns in *Alphaville* to write a parable of values with space as its background. The film's protagonist will arrive in the planet of Alphaville from the outer planets, Earth. In this case, the place where he learned his human values, such as love—though he is tough as nails, a Humphrey Bogart like trench coat wearer with a sharp resemblance to fictional tough guys like Philip Marlowe, the been there done that detective in *The Big Sleep* (1939)—inclines him to the emotion most scrupulously expunged on the purist star, the computer run planet of Alphaville. Armed with that tough guy sense of love, in the end a soft and subtle heart, Lemmy Caution enters his hotel in Alphaville, and is struck at once by the affectless mode of the hotel personnel.

Incognito. Posing as Ivan Johnson, a journalist, Lemmy has a double mission—to find his predecessor and to bring back to earth, or kill, Professor von Braun. Though the hotel management seems indifferent to this mission, Natasha the Professor's daughter does appear in his rooms, bringing with her beauty and hot tips on how to get in touch with Lemmy's predecessor. She also reveals to Lemmy what kind of 'polity' Alphaville is; a polity run by a giant computer, which programs life and behavior for all the citizens, and whose gravelly voice pops up from time to time throughout the film, with announcements for the citizenry. Meanwhile Lemmy is able to make contact with his predecessor Dickson, and to find even this very imposing figure reduced to weakness and timidity after his years under the reign of the Alpha computer. Just as Lemmy is starting to reanimate his old friendship with Dickson, the elderly man is poisoned by a prostitute. Lemmy has by this time realized that the Alpha computer sooner or later kills everybody who is capable of physical or spiritual life.

Warfare. There follow sequences of gunfire and hairbreadth escape in which Lemmy gets closer to his drive to first understand, and then destroy, the Alpha computer; while he is at the same time clear that the computer has got his number—exact information about his whereabouts and mission—and is trying to destroy *him*. Professor von Braun continues to hunt Lemmy, but Natasha has by now decisively fallen for Lemmy, and Lemmy stops the computer by posing to it a complex riddle, the answer to which is happiness, the last concept the Alpha computer would naturally come upon. By this time, in fact, signs of

computer breakdown occur, human emotions are beginning to assert themselves on Alphaville, Natasha has steered Lemmy to an available spaceship and they are sailing home to Earth. The moral narrative has completed its passage.

THEMES

Humanism. Godard is both a daring experimentalist in film, ever taking us on adventures of sight, hearing, formal reconfigurations, which make us self-conscious participants in the film's own make up. At the same time, though, Godard is a rather conservative observer of the new worlds of value and form. In films like *Week-End* or *Good bye to Language*, Godard is visually and structurally daring, but what we find for ideology, inside the formal presentation, is basically a protest against the overcrowding, insipidity, indifference, and scorn for traditional values which (in Godard's opinion) characterize our moment. Lemmy, though tough guy in packaging, is basically on a mission to bring humanism and love to the computer-sterilized planet of Alphaville.

Romance. The Romance between Natasha and Lemmy is a definer for the entire film, for it gives a valid point to Lemmy's trip to Alphaville. Natasha is a push over for Lemmy, for in the end she rides the wave of values which is slowly sweeping over Alphaville.

Lifelessness. The hostility of Alphaville to Lemmy is rooted in the disturbance he brings, to the status quo existence of this distant planet. While the people Lemmy meets are shadowy and without full emotions they are soon to become actively hostile to him, as it becomes clear how dangerously undermining Lemmy's whole 'humane' program is.

Technology. Alphaville is presented as the brainchild of a single vast computer which programs people's lives, telling them what to do and when. The result of this technocratic oppression is deeply depressing, with the result that the people controlled by Alpha have very little consciousness even of being human. It should be noted that the depiction of the effects of Alpha is very simplified—as to the specific nature of the kind of machine in question. We are, for instance, barely aware of the people who service, control, and upgrade the computer at the center of Alphaville culture.

CHARACTERS

Lemmy Caution, working under the pseudonym Ivan Johnson, is the adventurous traveler from Earth to Alphaville. His mission, never blocked out in full detail, is to rescue his predecessor, who has been held on Alphaville, and to capture or kill the vicious Professor von Braun, who has been the mastermind of the culture of Alphaville.

Natasha von Braun is the very attractive daughter of Von Braun. She is who presents herself to the otherwise besieged Lemmy, as he checks into his Alphaville hotel, and she is who falls in love with Lemmy, as she comes to understand the values he brings with him. Natasha has been born on Earth, so she has a kind of proprietary advantage, when it comes to understanding Lemmy.

Henri Dickson is the predecessor of Lemmy, on Alphaville. As a captive of the computer world he has been reduced to a shadow of his former self, and ekes out his living in a seedy hotel.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

LEMMY

Character

The main character is Lemmy Dickson, who is carrying out a dangerous mission to the extremely distant planet of Alphaville, where he is expected to degrade the status quo of computer tyranny, which is exercised by the computer Alpha 60. He falls in love with the daughter of the scientist, Professor Von Braun, and eventually returns with her to her own birthplanet Earth. By the time Lemmy has completed

his mission he qualifies as a hero, having basically incapacitated the Alpha planet which is Earth's Enemy # 1.

Parallels. A literary community of science fiction and space war heroes would include Doctor Who in the eponymous drama, Darth Vader (*in Star Wars*), Captain Reynolds (*in Firefly*), Hal, *in A Space Odyssey*, and Rick Deckard in *Blade Runner*, a heterogeneous crew whose existence through vast extents of space binds them as a common denominator.

Illustrative moments

Confused Lemmy is confused, upon arriving in Alphaville, to discover that the citizenry is without feeling or emotion. It takes him a while, and the help of Natasha, to assess the situation on the ground of the planet.

Informed. It is not until he meets his predecessor, the greatly reduced and aged Dickson, that Lemmy realizes what a dire oppression has taken over Alphaville. From that point on Lemmy has a sharper sense of mission.

Shocked Lemmy is shocked to learn that the scientists working on the Alphaville computers—not to mention the ordinary folks on the streets—are essentially slaves of the concentrated power in the Alphaville computers.

Riddling. Lemmy, like an archaic folk hero, invents a mystery conundrum to present to the authorities of Alphaville. The answer to the conundrum is happiness, a quality which the authorities are beginning to grasp, even as they grasp Lemmy's conundrum.

Discussion questions

How does the director, Godard, view the possible uses of the Alphaville computer? Does he see any 'brave new world' concealed there? What is the view of Professor Von Braun toward the computer?

Does Godard, in the present film, indulge his postmodern interest in the way the film is put together, or being made? Or is Alphaville a straight narrative tale?