

Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*

PREFACE: *Vivre Sa Vie* invites a rather theoretical treatment, because it is—intellectually, aesthetically—extremely complex. Godard's films are about ideas, in the best, purest, most sophisticated sense in which a work of art can be "about" ideas. I have discovered, while writing these notes, that in an interview in the Paris weekly, *L'Express*, July 27, 1961, he said: "My three films all have, at bottom, the same subject. I take an individual who has an idea, and who tries to go to the end of his idea." Godard said this after he had made, besides a number of short films, *A Bout de Souffle* (1959) with Jean Seberg and Jean-Paul Belmondo, *Le Petit Soldat* (1960) with Michel Subor and Anna Karina, and *Une Femme est Une Femme* (1961) with Karina, Belmondo, and Jean-Claude Brialy. How this is true of *Vivre Sa Vie*, his fourth film, which he made in 1962, is what I have attempted to show.

NOTE: Godard, who was born in Paris in 1930, has now completed ten feature films. After the four mentioned above, he made *Les Carabiniers* (1962-63) with Marino Mase and Albert Juross, *Le Mépris* (1963) with Brigitte Bardot, Jack Palance, and Fritz Lang, *Bande à Part* (1964) with Karina, Sami Frey, and Claude Brasseur, *Une Femme Mariée* (1965) with Macha Méril and Bernard Noël, *Alphaville* (1965) with Karina, Eddi Constantine and Akim Tamiroff, and *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) with Karina and Belmondo. Six of the films have been shown in America. The first called *Breathless* here, is by now established as an art-house class; the eighth, *The Married Woman*, has had a mixed reception; but the others, under the titles *A Woman Is a Woman*, *My Life to Live*, *Contempt*, and *Band of Outsiders*, have been both critical and box-office flops. The brilliance of *A Bout de Souffle* is now obvious to everybody and I shall explain my esteem for *Vivre Sa Vie*. While I am not claiming that all his other work is on the same level of excellence, there is no film of Godard's which does not have many remarkable passages of the highest quality. The obtuseness of serious critics here to the merits of *Le Mépris*, a deeply flawed but nonetheless extraordinarily ambitious and original film, seems to me particularly lamentable.

1

"The cinema is still a form of graphic art," Cocteau wrote in his *Journals*. "Through its mediation, I write in pictures, and secure for my own ideology a power in actual fact. I show what others tell. In *Orphée*, for example, I do not narrate the passing through mirrors; I show it, and in some manner, I prove it. The means I use are not important, if my characters perform publicly what I want them to perform. The greatest power of a film is to be indisputable with respect to the actions it determines and which are carried out before our eyes. It is normal for the witness of an action to transform it for his own use, to distort it, and to testify to it inaccurately. But the action was carried out, and is carried out as often as the machine resurrects it. It combats inexact testimonies and false police reports."

2

All art may be treated as a mode of proof, an assertion of accuracy in the spirit of maximum vehemence. Any work of art may be seen as an attempt to be indisputable with respect to the actions it represents.

3

Proof differs from analysis. Proof establishes that something happened. Analysis shows why it happened. Proof is a mode of argument that is, by definition, complete; but the price of its completeness is that proof is always formal. Only what is already contained in the beginning is proven at the end. In analysis, however, there are always further angles of understanding, new realms of causality. Analysis is substantive. Analysis is a mode of argument that is, by definition, always incomplete; it is, properly speaking, interminable.

The extent to which a given work of art is designed as a mode of proof is, of course, a matter of proportion. Surely, some works of art are more directed toward proof, more based on considerations of form, than others. But still, I should argue, all art tends toward the formal, toward a completeness that must be formal rather than substantive—endings that exhibit grace and design, and only secondarily convince in terms of psychological motives or social forces. (Think of the barely credible but immensely satisfying endings of Shakespeare's plays, particularly the comedies.) In great art, it is form—or, as I call it here, the desire to prove rather than the desire to analyze—that is ultimately sovereign. It is form that allows one to terminate.

4

An art concerned with proof is formal in two senses. Its subject is the form (above and beyond the matter) of events, and the forms (above and beyond the matter) of consciousness. Its means are formal; that is, they include a conspicuous element of design (symmetry, repetition, inversion, doubling, etc.). This can be true even when the work is so laden with "content" that it virtually proclaims itself as didactic—like Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

5

Godard's films are particularly directed toward proof, rather than analysis. *Vivre Sa Vie* is an exhibit, a demonstration. It shows *that* something happened, not *why* it happened. It exposes the inexorability of an event.

For this reason, despite appearances, Godard's films are drastically untopical. An art concerned with social, topical issues can never simply show that something is. It must indicate *how*. It must show *why*. But the whole point of *Vivre Sa Vie* is that it does not explain anything. It rejects causality. (Thus, the ordinary causal sequence of narrative is broken in Godard's film by the extremely arbitrary decomposition of the story into twelve episodes—episodes which are serially, rather than causally, related.) *Vivre Sa Vie* is certainly not "about" prostitution, any more than *Le Petit Soldat* is "about" the Algerian War. Neither does Godard in *Vivre Sa Vie* give us any explanation, of an ordinary recognizable sort, as to what led the principal character, Nana, ever to become a prostitute. Is it because she couldn't borrow 2,000 francs toward her back rent from her former husband or from one of her fellow clerks at the record store in which she works and was locked out of her apartment? Hardly that. At least, not that alone. But we scarcely know any more than this. All Godard shows us is that she did become a prostitute. Again, Godard does not show us why, at the end of the film, Nana's pimp Raoul "sells" her, or what has happened between them, or what lies behind the final gun battle in the street in which Nana is killed. He only shows us that she is sold, that she does die. He does not analyze. He proves.

6

Godard uses two means of proof in *Vivre Sa Vie*. He gives us a collection of images illustrating what he wants to prove, and a series of "texts" explaining it. In keeping the two elements separate, Godard's film employs a genuinely novel means of exposition.

Godard's intention is Cocteau's. But Godard discerns difficulties, where Cocteau saw none. What Cocteau wanted to show, to be indisputable with reference to, was magic—things like the reality of fascination, the eternal possibility of metamorphosis. (Passing through mirrors, etc.) What Godard wishes to show is the opposite: the anti-magical, the structure of lucidity. This is why Cocteau used techniques that, by means of the likeness of images, bind together events—to form a total sensuous whole. Godard makes no effort to exploit the beautiful in this sense. He uses techniques that would fragment, dissociate, alienate, break up. Example: the famous staccato editing (jump cut *et al.*) in *A Bout de Souffle*. Another example: the division of *Vivre Sa Vie* into twelve episodes, with long titles like chapter headings at the beginning of each episode, telling us more or less what is going to happen.

The rhythm of *Vivre Sa Vie* is stopping-and-starting. (In another style, this is also the rhythm of *Le Mépris*.) Hence, *Vivre Sa Vie* is divided into separate episodes. Hence, too, the repeated halting and resuming of the music in the credit sequence; and the abrupt presentation of Nana's face—first in left profile, then (without transition) full face, then (again without transition) in right profile. But, above all, there is the dissociation of word and image which runs through the entire film, permitting quite separate accumulations of intensity for both idea and feeling.

8

Throughout the history of film, image and word have worked in tandem. In the silent film, the word—set down in the form of titles—alternated with, literally linked together, the sequences of images. With the advent of sound films, image and word became simultaneous rather than successive. While in silent films the word could be either comment on the action or dialogue by the participants in the action, in sound films the word became (except for documentaries) almost exclusively, certainly preponderantly dialogue.

Godard restores the dissociation of word and image characteristic of silent film, but on a new level. *Vivre Sa Vie* is clearly composed of two discrete types of material, the seen and the heard. But in the distinguishing of these materials, Godard is very ingenious, even playful. One variant is the television documentary of *cinéma-vérité* style of Episode VIII—while one is taken, first on a car ride through Paris, then sees, in rapid montage, shots of a dozen clients, one hears a dry flat voice rapidly detailing the routine, hazards, and appalling arduousness of the prostitute's vocation. Another variant is in Episode XII, where the happy banalities exchanged by Nana and her young lover are projected on the screen in the form of subtitles. The speech of love is not heard at all.

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Thus, *Vivre Sa Vie* must be seen as an extension of a particular cinematic genre: the narrated film. There are two standard forms of this genre, which give us images plus a text. In one, an impersonal voice, the author, as it were, narrates the film. In the other, we hear the interior monologue of the main character, narrating the events as we see them happening to him.

Two examples of the first type, featuring an anonymous commenting voice which oversees the action, are Resnais' *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* and Melville's *Les Enfants Terribles*. An example of the second type, featuring an interior monologue of the main character is Franju's *Thérèse Desqueyroux*. Probably the greatest examples of the second type, in which the entire action is recited by the hero are Bresson's *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* and *Un Condamné à Mort s'est Échappé*.

Godard used the technique brought to perfection by Bresson in his second film, *Le Petit Soldat*, made in 1960 in Geneva though not released (because for three years it was banned by the French censors) until 1963. The film is the sequence of the reflections of the hero, Bruno Forestier, a man embroiled in a right-wing terrorist organization who is assigned the job of killing a Swiss agent for the FLN. As the film opens, one hears Forestier's voice saying: "The time for action is passed. I have grown older. The time for reflection has come." Bruno is a photographer. He says, "To photograph a face is to photograph the soul behind it. Photography is truth. And the cinema is the truth twenty-four times a second." This central passage in *Le Petit Soldat*, in which Bruno meditates on the relation between the image and truth, anticipates the complex meditation on the relation between language and truth in *Vivre Sa Vie*.

Since the story itself in *Le Petit Soldat*, the factual connections between the characters, are mostly conveyed through Forestier's monologue, Godard's camera is freed to become an instrument of contemplation—of certain aspects of events, and of characters. Quiet "events"—Karina's face, the façade of buildings, passing through the city by car—are *studied* by the camera, in a way that somewhat isolates the violent action. The images seem arbitrary sometimes, expressing a kind of emotional neutrality; at other times, they indicate an intense involvement. It is as though Godard hears, then looks at what he hears.

In *Vivre Sa Vie*, Godard takes this technique of hearing first, then seeing, to new levels of complexity. There is no longer a single unified point of view, either the protagonist's voice (as in *Le Petit Soldat*) or a godlike narrator, but a series of documents (texts, narrations, quotations, excerpts, set pieces) of various description. These are primarily words; but they may also be wordless sounds, or even wordless images.

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All the essentials of Godard's technique are present in the opening credit sequence and in the first episode. The credits occur over a left profile view of Nana, so dark that it is almost a silhouette. (The title of the film is *Vivre Sa Vie. A Film in Twelve Episodes*.) As the credits continue, she is shown full face, and then from the right side, still in deep shadow. Occasionally she blinks or shifts her head slightly (as if it were uncomfortable to hold still so long), or wets her lips. Nana is posing. She is being seen.

Next we are given the first titles. "Episode I: Nana and Paul. Nana Feels Like Giving Up." Then the images begin, but the emphasis is on what is heard. The film proper opens in the midst of a conversation between Nana and a man; they are seated at the counter of a café; their backs are to the camera; besides their conversation, we hear the noises of the barman, and snatches of the voices of other customers. As they talk, always facing away from the camera, we learn that the man (Paul) is Nana's husband, that they have a child, and that she has recently left both husband and child to try to become an actress. In this brief public reunion (it is never clear on whose initiative it came about) Paul is stiff and hostile, but wants her to come back; Nana is oppressed, desperate, and revolted by him. After weary, bitter words, Nana says to Paul, "The more you talk, the less it means." Throughout this opening sequence, Godard systematically deprives the viewer. There is no cross-cutting. The viewer is not allowed to see, to become involved. He is only allowed to hear.

Only after Nana and Paul break off their fruitless conversation to leave the counter and play a game at the pinball machine, do we see them. Even here, the emphasis remains on hearing. As they go on talking, we continue to see Nana and Paul mainly from behind. Paul has stopped pleading and being rancorous. He tells Nana of the droll theme his father, a schoolteacher, received from one of his pupils on an assigned topic, The Chicken. "The chicken has an inside and an outside," wrote the little girl. "Remove the outside and you find the inside. Remove the inside, and you find the soul." On these words, the image dissolves and the episode ends.

11

The story of the chicken is the first of many "texts" in the film which establish what Godard wants to say. For the story of the chicken, of course, is the story of Nana. (There is a pun in French—the French *poule* being something like, but a good deal rougher than, the American "chick.") In *Vivre Sa Vie*, we witness the stripping down of Nana. The film opens with Nana having divested herself of her outside: her old identity. Her new identity, within a few episodes, is to be that of a prostitute. But Godard's interest is in neither the psychology nor the sociology of prostitution. He takes up prostitution as the most radical metaphor for the separating out of the elements of a life—as a testing ground, a crucible for the study of what is essential and what is superfluous in a life.

The whole of *Vivre Sa Vie* may be seen as a text. It is a text in, a study of, lucidity; it is about seriousness.

And it "uses" texts (in the more literal sense), in all but two of its twelve episodes. The little girl's essay on the chicken told by Paul in Episode I. The passage from the pulp magazine story recited by the salesgirl in Episode II. ("You exaggerate the importance of logic.") The excerpt from Dreyer's *Jeanne d'Arc* which Nana watches in Episode III. The story of the theft of 1,000 francs which Nana relates to the police inspector in Episode IV. (We learn that her full name is Nana Klein and that she was born in 1940.) Yvette's story—how she was abandoned by Raymond two years ago—and Nana's speech in reply ("I am responsible") in Episode VI. The letter of application Nana composes to the madam of a brothel in Episode VII. The documentary narration of the life and routine of the prostitute in Episode VIII. The record of dance music in Episode IX. The conversation with the philosopher in Episode XI. The excerpt from the story by Edgar Allan Poe ("The Oval Portrait") read aloud by Luigi in Episode XII.

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The most elaborate, intellectually, of all the texts in the film is the conversation in Episode XI between Nana and a philosopher (played by the philosopher, Brice Parain) in a café. They discuss the nature of language. Nana asks why one can't live without words; Parain explains that it is because talking equals thinking, and thinking talking, and there is no life without thought. It is not a question of speaking or not speaking, but of speaking well. Speaking well demands an ascetic discipline (*une ascèse*), detachment. One has to understand, for one thing, that there is no going straight at the truth. One needs error.

Early in their conversation, Parain relates the story of Dumas' Porthos, the man of action, whose first thought killed him. (Running away from a dynamite charge he had planted, Porthos suddenly wondered how one could walk, how anyone ever placed one foot in front of the other. He stopped. The dynamite exploded. He was killed.) There is a sense in which this story, too, like the story of the chicken, is about Nana. And through both the story and the Poe tale told in the next (and last) episode, we are being prepared—formally, not substantively—for Nana's death.

14

Godard takes his motto for this film-essay on freedom and responsibility from Montaigne: "Lend yourself to others; give yourself to yourself." The life of the prostitute is, of course, the most radical metaphor for the act of lending oneself to others. But if we ask, how has Godard shown us Nana keeping herself for herself, the answer is: he has *not* shown it. He has, rather, expounded on it. We don't know Nana's motives except at a distance, by inference. The film eschews all psychology; there is no probing of states of feeling, of inner anguish.

Nana knows herself to be free, Godard tells us. But that freedom has no psychological interior. Freedom is not an inner, psychological something—but more like physical grace. It is being what, who one is. In Episode I, Nana says to Paul, "I want to die." In Episode II, we see her desperately trying to borrow money, trying unsuccessfully to force her way past the concierge and get into her own apartment. In Episode III, we see her weeping in the cinema over *Jeanne d'Arc*. In Episode IV, at the police station, she weeps again as she relates the humiliating incident of the theft of 1,000 francs. "I wish I were someone else," she says. But in Episode V ("On the Street. The First Client") Nana has become what she is. She has entered the road that leads to her affirmation and to her death. Only as prostitute do we see a Nana who can affirm herself. This is the meaning of Nana's speech to her fellow prostitute Yvette in Episode VI, in which she declares serenely, "I am responsible. I turn my head, I am responsible. I lift my hand, I am responsible."

Being free means being responsible. One is free, and therefore responsible, when one realizes that things are as they are. Thus, the speech to Yvette ends with the words: "A plate is a plate. A man is a man. Life is ... life."

15

That freedom has no psychological interior—that the soul is something to be found not upon but after stripping away the "inside" of a person—is the radical spiritual doctrine which *Vivre Sa Vie* illustrates.

One would guess that Godard is quite aware of the difference between his sense of the "soul" and the traditional Christian one. The difference is precisely underscored by the quotation from Dreyer's *Jeanne d'Arc*; for the scene which we see is the one in which the young priest (played by Antonin Artaud) comes to tell Jeanne (Mlle Falconetti) that she is to be burned at the stake. Her martyrdom, Jeanne assures the distraught priest, is really her deliverance. While the choice of a quotation from a film does distance our emotional involvement with these ideas and feelings, the reference to martyrdom is not ironic in this context. Prostitution, as *Vivre Sa Vie* allows us to see it, has entirely the character of an ordeal. "Pleasure isn't all fun," as the title to Episode X announces laconically. And Nana does die.

The twelve episodes of *Vivre Sa Vie* are Nana's twelve stations of the cross. But in Godard's film the values of sanctity and martyrdom are transposed to a totally secular plane. Godard offers us Montaigne instead of Pascal, something akin to the mood and intensity of Bressonian spirituality but with Catholicism.

16

The one false step in *Vivre Sa Vie* comes at the end, when Godard breaks the unity of his film by referring to it from the outside, as maker. Episode XII begins with Nana and Luigi in a room together; he is a young man with whom she has apparently fallen in love (we have seen him once before, in Episode IX, when Nana meets him in a billiard parlor and flirts with him). At first the scene is silent, and the dialogue—"Shall we go out?" "Why don't you move in with me?" etc.—rendered in subtitles. The Luigi, lying on the bed, begins to read aloud from Poe's "The Oval Portrait," a story about an artist engaged in painting a portrait of his wife; he strives for the perfect likeness, but at the moment he finally achieves it his wife dies. The scene fades out on these words, and opens to show Raoul, Nana's pimp, roughly forcing her through the courtyard of her apartment house, pushing her into a car. After a car ride (one or two brief images), Raoul hands Nana over to another pimp; but it is discovered that the money exchanged is not enough, guns are drawn, Nana is shot, and the last image shows the cars speeding away and Nana lying dead in the street.

What is objectionable here is not the abruptness of the ending. It is the fact that Godard is clearly making a reference outside the film, to the fact that the young actress who plays Nana, Anna Karina, is his wife. He is mocking his own tale, which is unforgivable. It amounts to a peculiar failure of nerve, as if Godard did not dare to let us have Nana's death—in all its horrifying arbitrariness—but had to provide, at the last moment, a kind of subliminal causality. (The woman is my wife.—The artist who portrays his wife kills her.—Nana must die.)

17

This one lapse aside, *Vivre Sa Vie* seems to me a perfect film. That is, it sets out to do something that is both noble and intricate, and wholly succeeds in doing it. Godard is perhaps the only director today who is interested in "philosophical films" and possesses an intelligence and discretion equal to the task. Other directors have had their "views" on contemporary society and the nature of our humanity; and sometimes their films survive the ideas they propose. Godard is the first director fully to grasp the fact that, in order to deal seriously with ideas, one must create a new film language for expressing them—if the ideas are to have an suppleness and complexity. This he has been trying to do in different ways: in *Le Petit Soldat*, *Vivre Sa Vie*, *Les Carabiniers*, *Le Mépris*, *Une Femme Mariée*, and *Alphaville*—*Vivre Sa Vie* being, I think, his most successful film. For this conception, and the formidable body of work in which he has pursued it, Godard is in my opinion the most important director to have emerged in the last ten years.