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Chris Darke, *Alphaville*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. xii + 114 pp. Notes, appendices, filmography, bibliography. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-252-03088-8. \$15.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-252-07329-8.

Review by Tom Conley, Harvard University.

Published in the “French Film Guide” series under the editorship of Ginette Vincendeau, *Alphaville* is a terse and incisive treatment of Jean-Luc Godard’s feature of the same title. Godard’s film appeared in 1965 after a number of brilliant features, some having gained immediate acclaim (*A bout de souffle* [1960], *Vivre sa vie* [1962], *Le Mépris* [1963]) and others less so (*Le Petit Soldat* [1960], *Une femme est une femme* [1961], *Les Carabiniers* [1963], *Une femme mariée* [1963]). *Alphaville* was Godard’s sign of continuity and deviation: continuity, in the photography of Raoul Coutard who once again endowed every shot with a *profondeur de surface*—a tension of the image conceived as a plane on which characters and forms can be read and seen at once, and a depth of field in which illusion, vital for narrative, is manifest; and deviation, as a piece of science fiction built from a critical relation to Fritz Lang’s cinema of the Weimar Years and film noir of the 1940s.

Chris Darke complicates our appreciation of Godard’s film through a carefully charted analytical itinerary. In the first chapter, after reviewing the biographies of Coutard and four players (Akim Tamiroff, Howard Vernon, Anna Karina, Eddie Constantine), he engages a spatial appreciation of the city that the camera causes to be equally familiar and strange. *Alphaville* is Paris, to be sure, but it is hardly the diurnal or touristic metropole that had been shown so vividly throughout the first half of *A bout de souffle*. Tracking shots in unreal corridors of office buildings made of glass and reinforced concrete register a dystopia that Godard implicitly associates with urban renewal of the postwar years. It offers “those signs of modernity the promise of which is at best ambiguous and at worst [t] downright frightening” (p. 25). Following Kingsley Amis, Darke notes that in the 1960s, science fiction abandoned its usual depictions of other worlds in favor of new treatments of alienation as it was experienced in everyday life on the planet earth. In the new work, automation prevails, along with standardization of affective life and fear of nuclear catastrophe. Building on this new turn in the genre, Godard harks back to Lang’s *Metropolis* (1925) in order to put things “new” and “modern” into a world of “architectural non-places” (p. 33). They are, notes Darke, like those that Marc Augé has since located in zones of transit in airports (p. 33) or those Gilles Deleuze described as *lieux quelconques*, corporate sites found anywhere and everywhere in our midst.[1]

Chapter two studies the film as an allegory of light. A nocturnal counterpart to *A bout de souffle*—that studied reflective illumination through the legacy of existentialism and film noir—*Alphaville* obtains effects of chiaroscuro with HPS black-and-white film stock. Cigarette lighters are implied to be laser-swords, and matches are instruments fulminating amorous and social combustion. As in *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*, in which the embers of a cigarette are likened to the extinction of a galaxy, *Alphaville* plays on galactic luminosity that shoots through language. “Matches” are at once phosphorescent and, as the director shows through allusion to Howard Hawks, signs of linkage, passion, and rupture. As in *Vivre sa vie*, the frontal framing in *Alphaville* of Anna Karina staring at the camera underscores the extra-missive force of vision at work in eyeline “matches” made with the spectator implied to be on the other side of

the screen. Images in positive and negative refer to special effects in Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Cocteau's *Orphée* while at the same time, they both distinguish and blend real and oneiric worlds. Darke astutely remarks that just as Godard blurs the distinction between the "positive" aspect of the film stock with its "negative" reverse, so also does he establish fields of tension between curved and straight lines. The difference stands, as early modern typographers long ago observed, at the origin of *alphabetical* signs. The film thus presents writing in its field of view while it simultaneously *writes* itself not with ink on paper, but with shafts of light projected through space.

Neon signs, innocuously present in everyday life, are shown by Darke to embody Einstein's theory of relativity. Light is seen shining in tubular glass bent into letters and words. It "is made in a medium that depends on the atoms of a gas (neon) being...transformed into energy when ionized by an electric field, which causes electrons to flow through the gas and light to be emitted" (p. 64). Thus by way of "science fiction," Godard teaches—good pedagogue that he is—principles that define physical phenomena and laws that govern visibility. As a consequence, the political force of the film becomes part and parcel of its science. *Alphaville* makes clear the fragility of worlds that become the fiction of science. Everywhere the feature bears traces of tragedies witnessed in 1945, whether the Final Solution, the effects of Hiroshima and Nakasaki, or even the bureaucratic fact that IBM (a close relative of the ICBM) had played a strong role in the technology of Nazi genocide.

The third chapter argues that "*Alphaville* is not yet obsolete" (p. 82). The name now commonly refers to the fluorescent nightmares of contemporary life, but in all events the film reflects on cinema as a time-machine. It has more than a casual resemblance to Chris Marker's cinema—a point that Jacques Rancière ratifies in *La Fable cinématographique* [2]—and reaches a level of abstraction that many sci-fi films rarely attain, in no small way because Godard forces, through constant references to cinema and poetry, instant recall of memories with which the seventh art has crafted the affective geographies of our lives. In the films Godard directed since 1965 (including *Allemagne année 90* [1991], *Eloge de l'amour* [2001], and especially *Histoire(s) du cinéma* [1988-98]), fragments of *Alphaville* are cited and layered upon those of other films. Godard creates from images and sounds what Deleuze calls "stratigraphies" and what here Darke evokes as palimpsests.[3] One of these is drawn from the myth of Orpheus. Like the plot of *A bout de souffle*, that of *Alphaville* swings on the myth that Maurice Blanchot, in *L'Espace littéraire*, retrieved to claim that writers cannot "look back" to redeem their creations.[4] In Godard's film, Lemmy Caution (Constantine) inverts the myth by imploring his Eurydice (Karina, playing Natasha von Braun) not to cast a backward glance on the nether world from which they are escaping. Taken as an oracle, the crowning episode of the feature reflects on cinema, attesting to what Godard later confirmed (as cited by Darke), that "neither an art, nor a technology, but a mystery" (p. 98), the medium must look forward as it reflects upon its past. In the parabola from *Alphaville* to *Notre musique* (2005), Godard's films have become increasingly oracular and their director an Orpheus of the kind Blanchot described.

The sense of Godard's career cannot be followed without reference to this unique piece of science and fiction. In a growing industry of Godard studies, Darke's guide is a valuable point of reference. Its command both of the film and the commentaries it has inspired is impeccable, and so are its many remarks on how the film is a chronicle of its moment and an oracle announcing the dilemmas we witness in our time. This monograph is an ideal guide to an often overlooked masterpiece.

## NOTES

[1] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 1: L'Image Mouvement* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), pp. 154ff.

[2] Jacques Rancière, *La Fable cinématographique* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), pp. 212-16.

[3] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'Image Temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), p. 317.

[4] Maurice Blanchot, *Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1988 [1955]).

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