

Logic, poetics and ontology of *Alphaville*

Miguel Alfonso Bouhaben

Translated by Violeta Alarcón Zayas

It is indisputable that underlying *Alphaville* (Alphaville. Une aventure étrange Lemmy Caution, Jean Luc Godard, 1965) is a fierce criticism of all systems that seek to restrict individual freedoms. In the film, the city of Alphaville is controlled by Alpha 60, a sort of computerised Big Brother that watches, weighs and predicts any subversive element beyond its reach. This absolute control of Alpha 60 can be identified with the theory of determinism posited by Pierre-Simon Laplace:

We may regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its past and the cause of its future. An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes. (LAPLACE, 1951: 4)

In a manner similar to Laplace's demon, the calculating and predictive logic embodied by Alpha 60 seeks to abolish the slightest hint of individual thought. Lemmy Caution, the protagonist of the film, played by the inscrutable Eddie Constantine, represents the philosopher who wonders about the causes of things, thus set against Alpha 60 representing a cold, inhuman mechanism that can only understand consequences:

"The task of Alpha 60 is to calculate and project the results which Alphaville will subsequently enjoy."

"Why?"

"No one ever says 'why'; one says 'because'. In the life of individuals, as in the life of nations, all is linked, all is consequence."

However, Laplace's demon and Alpha 60 both fall prey to the following illusion: if it is possible to know all the forces that set nature in motion, it would be possible to know all the past and all the future. Freedom would thus be eliminated and it would be impossible to escape the limits and determinations imposed by the Almighty Intelligence. Chance would be impossible. It could therefore be suggested that Alpha 60 operates as the Prime Mover of reality. The Prime Mover, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, the first movement that has the ability to draw out, flawlessly, any result: "We record, calculate, draw conclusions. [...] An order is a logical conclusion. One must not be afraid of logic. Simply that. Period."

What position should we adopt towards such deterministic logic, capable of the greatest massacres and brutality? Should we not be afraid of such a totalitarian system that imposes an equally totalitarian semantics? For Godard, this determination necessarily restricts freedom. The world of Alphaville is "the world of large urban concentrations intended to suppress adventure in the interests of planning" (GUBERN, 1969: 82). Only from the perspective of indeterminacy and freedom will it be possible to construct a logic, a poetics and an ontology beyond this planned universe to strive towards a libertarian, nomadic landscape. Godard is clearly closer to Heisenberg than to Laplace. In an interview with Serge Daney, he confesses it: "I really like *The Physicist's Conception of Nature*, where what Heisenberg says is not what he has seen. There is a great struggle between the eyes and language" (DANEY, 1997: 23). We must remember, at this point, that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle refers to the way of measuring subatomic particles and he asserts that a subatomic object cannot be observed without being changed by it. To observe is to transform. Hence the conclusion that we cannot know both the position of such an object and its velocity. And if we cannot know both the position and velocity, then we cannot predict whether two things will connect. It is thus impossible to maintain the logical order of Laplace based on the principle of causality. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze suggests some keys for the construction of a new ontology critical of Laplace's causality and much more in keeping with the scientific theories of Heisenberg whom Godard admires so much: "No one, not even God, can say in advance whether two borderlines will string together or form a fiber, whether a given multiplicity will or will not cross over into another given multiplicity, or even if given heterogeneous elements will enter symbiosis" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 276)



Alphaville (Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution, Jean-Luc Godard, 1965)

These subatomic particles transformed by observation as defined by Heisenberg are referred to in Deleuzian ontology as individuating differences. These particles are also in a permanent state of indeterminacy, in total mutation, consequently impeding any prediction or logical conclusion about their past or future states. This new ontology requires the invention of a new logic, a new way of thinking, a new way of creating, but also a poetics. Lemmy Caution, Godard's metaphysical detective, will come from the Outlands to propose a new ontology, a new indeterminate logic and a new but far from fixed poetics that puts an end once and for all to the fascist hegemony of Alpha 60. As a starting point to explain his critical position, consider some of the answers that Lemmy gives to Alpha 60's questions:

"What were your feelings when you passed through galactic space?"

"The silence of infinite space appalled me."

"Do you know what illuminates the night?"

"Poetry."

"What is your religion?"

"I believe in the immediate data of consciousness." [quote from the philosopher Henri Bergson]

In the following section, I will offer a brief outline of the consequences of each of these questions in an effort to establish the logic, the poetics and the ontology of this film.

Logic

I will begin by analysing the above questions and answers. Alpha 60's first question ("What were your feelings when you passed through galactic space?") is a question about sense. Following González Requena (1999: 25), sense can be defined in three different ways: linguistic (sense as meaning), logical (sense as direction) and sensory (sense/feeling as experience). In the case that

concerns us here, sense/feeling refers to an act of transgression: stepping across the border into the Outlands and back into Alphaville. This transgression appears in the film itself according to the three types of sense indicated above.

Firstly, transgression of linguistic sense. In this film, Godard plays constantly with double entendres, decontextualisations and portmanteaus (constructs that fuse two meanings into a single word). In *Alphaville* we find this type of synthesis, for example, in the name of the newspaper that Lemmy reads: the *Figaro-Pravda*. These games with language played by Godard run counter to the totalitarianism that has invaded language theories, especially the Platonic totalitarianism of the name-idea that condenses a heteromorphous multiplicity into the domain of a single signifier. Faced with a portmanteau, Plato would have struggled to find its corresponding reasonable and logical idea. He would probably have dismissed it as a meaningless freak of nature. But Plato is not the only enemy to fight with. For Godard the greatest enemy is the dominant language and the mechanisms of propaganda that impose their power structures on minority languages. The dominant language is the one that *must* be spoken in Alphaville to avoid death. As Lemmy remarks:

I walked through the theatre of executions. Usually, we would seat them in a room and electrocute them in their chairs as they watched a show. Then we'd dump them into huge rubbish bins and the theatre was ready for the next batch. If an individual showed hope of reclamation he was sent to a chronic illness hospital where mechanical and propagandistic treatments soon cured him.

This world of *Alphaville* is not so different from the one in which we live. Godard knows this and shows it with his usual sagacity and with a certain sarcasm in his repeated correlations between Nazi Germany's and Hollywood's methods of alienation. A world in which sense-meaning is gradually destroyed by man's barbarity to man. This world is a world that has to be re-signified. And Godard produces this resignification with unprecedented depth and creativity.

Secondly, transgression of logic or of sense as direction. *Alphaville* is obviously not a film with a linear, predictable



Alphaville (Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution, Jean-Luc Godard, 1965)

narrative direction. Although the content of the film revolves around modes of alienation and their subsequent logical and scientific organisation, it should be noted that the structure of the sense of the film in terms of direction is constantly being reoriented. In fact, Godard distributes a series of arrows that point in different directions. At the beginning of the film, Godard introduces an arrow pointing to the right, in the direction of Western writing. But just when Lemmy is arrested as an insurgent, Godard introduces a new arrow in the opposite direction. The typography of the symbol is different, suggesting the idea that each arrow outlines the direction of the confronting forces in the story. It may seem that the arrow of the beginning indicates the direction of Lemmy, while the other arrow indicates the direction of his opponents, Alpha 60's arrow. However, the directions are not so clear and defined, as in the scene where Lemmy takes a taxi we find the following an enlightening dialogue:

"Do you prefer I pass through the North Zone or the South?"

"What's the difference?"

"There's snow in the North and sun in the South."

"Anyway, it's my journey to the end of the night."

Directions have lost their specific significance for Lemmy. He is adrift, a wanderer in a world of predetermined directions that cannot be transgressed. He is a genuine outsider in a hyper-encoded world. For him there is neither north nor south, neither east nor west. There is not even a world of ideas or a world of reality. All spatial location has been thrown to the wind. Yet Godard constantly inserts directional elements throughout the text; both the arrows pointing east and west, and the neon signs pointing north and south. In a sense, the posters are part of the expression of Alpha 60 and they seem to have the specific task of keeping Lemmy from drifting through this gridded city, to impose obstacles or predetermined directions on Lemmy's aimless wandering. But Lemmy, like a good Nietzschean, does not submit to the ordinates and abscissas. Nor does Godard, whose films are, as David Oubiña suggests, "a visual heterotopy more than a dialectical montage" (OUBIÑA, 2000: 26)

Thirdly, transgression as sense experienced. It is true that Lemmy battles Alpha 60's language of power and the legally approved dictionary that has erased all words deemed dangerous to its domination. His sense-direction is not prewritten or predefined, however much the forces in this dark and demonic city may try to restrain his freedom of movement. But it is also true that what Lemmy feels in this world, his experience in Alphaville, gives a new dimension to the word "sense". Lemmy's journey from beyond the Outlands and crossing infinite space to reach Alphaville has left him shaken: "The silence of infinite space appalled me." Lemmy's answer here reveals how the infinite nature of space constitutes an extraordinary experience. Unlike Laplace's space, which is finite, the infinite space beyond Alphaville always admits an outside world towards which to reach, a great beyond to be conquered: an open space without precise limits where meetings and intersections between things and beings are possible, where differences of differences are random and unpredictable. This unleashes a kind of Deleuzian nomadic distribution of being: an arrangement that means a leap over all fences and all barriers and involves the fusion of boundaries to dissolve the identity. Thus, if space is open and infinite, then it is not possible to determine things according to the orderly, totalitarian, fascist and predatory logic of Alpha 60. And it is just this nomadic distribution of space that appals Lemmy: the silence of infinite space which is nothing less than the sum of all possible sounds; sounds forbidden in Alphaville, censored with the violence with which Plato treated the poets. In this way, sense as experience is hinted at in this film as that unspeakable experience that is inscribed into Lemmy when he crosses the silence full of the sounds of infinite space, and his consequent devastation over the annulment of all feeling among the inhabitants of Alpha 60.

In conclusion, the narrative and expressive logic of the film is a logic contrary to dictatorial suppositions of Alpha 60: an alogical logic that operates through unpredictable alliances, a logic where sense as meaning, direction and experience calls into question the univocity of the Platonic idea. A logic of multiple senses.

Poetics

Alpha 60's second question, Lemmy's second answer, that the night is transformed into light by poetry. This answer, without doubt, constitutes an inversion and perversion of Platonic logic. For Plato, the passage from the night of the cave –of shadows and of appearances– to the light of the world outside, that is, the world of ideas, does not happen through poetry but through dialectics. The Greek thinker argues that ideas cannot be grasped through poetry. Indeed, poetry is his fiercest enemy in the sense that the rhythmic images that poetry brings into play can never offer access to the world of perfect and universal ideas, or to the truth of reality. The images of poetry are copies of the objects of the real world, which, in turn, are copies of ideas, "they [poetry lovers] may not have remembered when they saw their works that these were but imitations thrice removed from the truth [...] they are appearances only and not realities" (Plato, 1892: 311-312). For this reason, and for other moral reasons, such as when he assumes that poetry imitates the irrational parts of the soul and is a pernicious example for youth and for a State founded on law and reason, Plato seeks to expel poets from the Greek *polis*: "we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a well-ordered State, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason" (Plato, 1892: 320) In Alphaville, a city that takes the ideal of the city-state proposed by Plato to the extreme, they are more emphatic: anyone who does not conform to the prescriptions determined logically by Alpha 60 is inevitably executed. And, logically, those who fail to adapt to the technocratic society of Alphaville tend to be those who have a different way of looking at reality: poets, artists, musicians. In one scene, Henry Dickson and Lemmy appear, and while they talk, Lemmy hits a light bulb, striking at the light as a Platonic symbol of truth, in a poetic gesture

LEMMY CAUTION, GODARD'S
METAPHYSICAL DETECTIVE,
WILL COME FROM THE
OUTLANDS TO PROPOSE
A NEW ONTOLOGY, A NEW
INDETERMINATE LOGIC AND
A NEW BUT FAR FROM FIXED
POETICS THAT PUTS AN
END ONCE AND FOR ALL TO
THE FASCIST HEGEMONY OF
ALPHA 60

IN THE CASE OF
ALPHAVILLE, THE
LOGICAL DEVICE
BRINGS THE IMMEDIATE
CONSEQUENCE OF
ANNIHILATION OF
ANYONE WHO REFUSES
TO ADAPT

that provokes a stirring of shadows:

"Alphaville is a technocracy, like that of termites and ants."

"I don't understand."

"Probably one hundred and fifty light years ago, there were artists in the ant society. Artists, novelists, musicians, painters. Today, no more."

Thus, the scientific-capitalist society of Alphaville needs to control its inhabitants to prevent them from immersing themselves in the illogic of poetry:

"It controls them. How come?"

"Because they write incomprehensible things. Now I know: it used to be called poetry."

Poetry offers us another way of knowing, another truth in alliance with the future. Poetry transmutes all materials, transfigures all forms, moves in ambiguity, unleashes all meanings, transgresses all borders. In this sense, the limits of the world that Plato's philosophy needs, and the firm, univocal, true and absolute knowledge to which it aspires, are broken by the inherent *hubris* of poetry and by its passion and vocation for the multiplicity of things in the world, for appearances and for movement. As María Zambrano astutely notes: "The philosopher wants oneness because he wants everything. The poet wants each individual thing without restriction, without abstraction or renunciation [...] He wants a wholeness through which each thing is possessed [...] he wants reality [...] the reality of being and non-being" (ZAMBRANO, 2000: 22). This difference between philosophy and poetry clarifies why Plato wanted to expel the poets: their passion for non-being could destabilise the civic republic.

Therefore, the light that Lemmy speaks about is very different from Plato's light: Lemmy's love for each individual thing, his passion for paradox, has nothing in common with the logic and totalitarianism of Alpha 60. The world to which Lemmy aspires is not the world of the *polis* or the world of Alphaville, both of which are extremely codified worlds. Indeed, the structure that Plato advocated for the Greek *polis*, according to a caste system and a predetermined functionality, is the origin, or to be more precise, the inspiration of a State governed by the rule of law. The rule of law, developed to the extreme, has reached heights of subjugation and control of lives even more egregious than those of Alphaville. And the State does not understand poetry, because the poetic is something that is not subject to any law, something free from any ironclad structure of domination. It is no surprise that both Plato and Alpha 60 should hate poets and new ways of naming the world. Poets are dangerous because their way of naming is an act of creation. But they are also dangerous because they know no limits: they jump

and breach boundaries without fear in search of a missing verse. For this reason, the State needs gods instead of poets, theology instead of poetics, a pure breed instead of mixed races, a border instead of the free flow of ideas and beings.

Hence the firm ban on travel to the Outlands, because people there are not subject to these regulations and poetry is not illegal. The Outlands are something like the non-place of the utopia of a poetic society. In Alphaville, however, words are subjected to all kinds of censorship, as the character played by Anna Karina explains: "Nearly every day words disappear, because they are forbidden. They are replaced by new words expressing new ideas." And against this totalitarian regime, Godard makes poetic use of music as it enters into combat with the oppressive images of Alpha 60, music as a breath of life that brings Lemmy from the Outlands: "In Alphaville, music seems to be in counterpoint and even in contradiction to the image: it has a traditional side, romance, which disrupts the world of Alpha 60. It serves as one of the elements of the story: it evokes life, it is the music of the Outlands. And as the characters often speak about the Outlands, instead of filming them I let people hear their music" (GODARD, 2010: 44).

In short, poetics of the film is clearly and absolutely contrary to the movement of denial that sustains the predictive and legalistic structure of Alpha 60. Alpha 60 denies poetry in order to impose calculus. Godard, on the other hand, constructs a film that is open to the unpredictable, a film in which fiction and documentary become poetically indiscernible: "Alphaville is a completely fictional film [...] but at the same time it is developed very much in a documentary style" (GODARD, 1980: 116). But this is also a film where borders between genres are blurred, as "it is like a comic [in which Lemmy] comes to conduct an investigation and then goes away again [...] all Westerns are like this" (GODARD, 1980: 117), and where what can and cannot be done in a film is constantly called into question.

It is a poetic film about the madness of instrumental reason. An anti-idealist film against the Platonic motto "expel the poets". A revolutionary film against the narrative laws of causality. "It is, more than any other of Godard's films, a film of poetry" (VIOTA, 2003: 8).

Ontology

Alpha 60's third question, Lemmy's third answer. When asked for his religious affiliation, Lemmy replies: "the immediate data of consciousness", a key text in Henry Bergson's work. First of all, it should be noted that religion is only a symbolic system, a system of representations in which a god or several gods represent the ideal of a people, something highly consistent with Plato's philosophical framework. However, this ideal can be utterly

predatory. In the case of Alphaville, the logical device brings the immediate consequence of annihilation of anyone who refuses to adapt. In the scene of the execution in the pool, we witness Lemmy's surprise and indignation at such an absurd spectacle. When he asks what the accused had done, the answer is that "they behaved illogically". Thus, according to this argument, anyone who does not follow logic is executed, revealing how Platonic logic and its movement towards abstraction can feed all forms of Fascism.

On the other hand, following the ideas of the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, God or gods are projections of Man, which constitutes a new inversion of Platonism, especially Christian Platonism. While previously God was the one who gave life to all beings, now it is the beings who make possible the existence of God. However, Deleuzian ontology establishes that beings are equivocal projections of a Univocal but Immanent Being. As Deleuze points out in *The Movement Image*, for Bergson Being is: Matter = Movement = Image = Light; i.e., a place of immanence where movement-images react to each other on all of their facets and parts, and in which the lines of material-light in motion are constantly propagating themselves and expanding in all directions (DELEUZE, 1984: 56-62). But if everything is in motion, how can there be a consciousness that sees the movement-images, this matter-light in mutation? Who perceives? In reality, we are in the pre-subjective field where subjects are conferred and, therefore, consciousness is merely a special image that reframes the metamorphoses. Each movement-image is a perception of the movement-images that act on it. In this sense, Lemmy's answer, his belief in the immediate data of consciousness, leads to Bergson's idea that consciousness is not something separate from the state of things in mutation. Consciousness, like the rest of things in the world, mutates and differs from others constantly. Therefore, Lemmy's Bergsonian religion is fundamentally anti-theological. His religion is a religion of becoming and immanence opposed to unity and transcendence. It is an ontology without theology, an ontology adrift. Lemmy acknowledges this affiliation to an ontology without theology in one of the final scenes of the film, just when he is getting ready to remove the alienating veil that covers the face of Karina's character:

Increasingly I see the human form... as a lovers' dialogue. The heart has but one mouth. Everything by chance. All words without thought. Sentiments adrift. Men roam the city. A glance, a word. Because I love you. Everything moves. We must advance to live.

In this sense, Lemmy suggests that a different ontology is possible: a random, anti-Laplacean, rhizomatic ontology. Alpha 60, or Laplace's God, or the Platonic Demiurge, are only a string of symbolic transcendent elements that enchain arborescent or circular structures. But the move-



Alphaville (Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution, Jean-Luc Godard, 1965)

ment of life cannot be enchained. If the human form is a lovers' dialogue, there is no reason to set limits between what there is because all outlines are pierced by the positive power of love. It is a power not governed by any causality, but by coincidences; that does not determine or quantify feelings, but leaves them to float adrift; that does not allow things fossilise, but nourishes their becoming and their dynamism. And this fluctuation against the legal determinations and the general semantics of Alpha 60 are revealed by Godard in multiple ways: with the rupture of the narrative, the combination of genres, the play between music and images, and the assortment of references from domains outside cinema, such as those to Eluard, Pascal or Bergson (Liandrat-GUIDES AND Leutrat, 1994: 48).

Like Lemmy, if we want to break out of the models of a predatory and alienating ontology that place beings in rigid compartments and classify and discipline them without allowing them a free will, if we want to escape this hyper-encoded system, we need to embrace the rhizomatic, to think adrift, to construct constantly changing dimensions, to jump the hieratic barriers of the State, the Market and the Religions. We need to dive into the new and the unknown. We need to avoid programs or recipes. Instead, we need to foster encounters, intersections and crossroads: love.

In short, we need to do away with univocal methods and recipes of logic (and of poetics and ontologies) to compose a logic

IN SHORT, WE NEED
TO DO AWAY WITH
UNIVOCAL METHODS
AND RECIPES OF LOGIC
(AND OF POETICS
AND ONTOLOGIES)
TO COMPOSE A LOGIC
(AND A POETICS
AND AN ONTOLOGY)
UNDERSTOOD AS
METAMORPHOSIS OF THE
BOUNDARIES

(and a poetics and an ontology) understood as metamorphosis of the boundaries. As Eluard, one of the repeated references in the film, puts it in *Capitale de la douleur*: “We live in a vacuum of metamorphosis”. That is, we live in a universe in motion which has to be defended against totalitarian regimes that seek to stifle life in scientific, economic and religious and legal structures. ■

Notes

- * The pictures that illustrate this article have been provided voluntarily by the author of the text; it is his responsibility to localize and to ask for the copyright to the owner. (Edition note.)

Bibliography

- DANEY, Serge (1997). “Diálogo entre Jean-Luc Godard y Serge Daney.” *Cahiers du cinéma*, 513.
- DELEUZE, Gilles y GUATTARI, Félix (2004). *A Thousand Plateaus*. Edinburgh: A & C Black.
- DELEUZE, Gilles (2001). *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Edinburgh: A & C Black.
- GODARD, Jean-Luc (1980). *Introducción a una verdadera historia del cine*. Madrid: Alphaville.
- GODARD, Jean-Luc (2010). *Jean-Luc Godard. Pensar entre imágenes. Conversaciones, entrevistas, presentaciones y otros fragmentos*. Barcelona: Intermedio.
- GONZÁLEZ REQUENA, Jesús (1999). “Casablanca. La cifra de Edipo.” *Trama & fondo*, 7.
- GÜBERN, Roman (1969). *Godard polémico*. Barcelona: Tusquets.
- LIANDRAT-GUIDES, Suzanne and LEUTRAT, Jean-Louis (1994). *Jean-Luc Godard*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- LOUKOPOULOU, Katerina (2004). “Godard Alone?” In M. TEMPLE, J. WILLIAMS and M. WITT (eds), *For Ever Godard*. London: Black Dog Publishing.
- LAPLACE, Pierre Simon de (1951). *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*. New York: Dover.
- OUBIÑA, David (2000). *Filmología. Ensayos con el cine*. Buenos Aires: Manantial.
- PLATO (1892). *The Dialogues of Plato*. New York: MacMillan & Co.
- VIOTA, Paulino (2003). *Jean-Luc Godard*. Bilbao: Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao.
- ZAMBRANO, María (2001). *Filosofía y poesía*. Madrid: FCE.

Miguel Alfonso Bouhaben (Madrid, 1974) holds a PhD in Communication Studies for the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM) and a degree in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature and Philosophy (UCM). Film lecturer in the Educational Innovation Projects of the UCM and in the Masters in Theory, Criticism and Valuation of Contemporary Art of the Instituto Superior de Arte. He has contributed to the journals *Cine Documental*, *Sans Soleil*, *Fotocinema*, *Toma Uno* y *Metakinema*.