

(Post) Modern Godard: Vivre Sa Vie

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In this essay the author uses Susan Sontag's benchmark essay on Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* as a springboard to investigating the film from a position that the critic could not have considered when her piece was published: that Godard's depiction of twelve episodes in the life of a Parisian prostitute bears traits of the modern and the postmodern.

“I shall write old verses on top of new forms.”
— Jean-Luc Godard, 1952¹

“[Godard] is a deliberate ‘destroyer’ of cinema—hardly the first cinema has known, but certainly the most persistent and prolific and timely.”
— Susan Sontag, “Godard”

Jean-Luc Godard, whom Susan Sontag calls “the deliberate ‘destroyer’ of cinema” (150), is considered exemplary of the French New Wave (*La Nouvelle Vague*) directors.² *Vivre Sa Vie* (*My Life To Live*, 1962), now widely hailed as the most complex and successful among Godard's early films, epitomizes his radical “destruction” of orthodox cinema. More importantly, many of the essentials of his (counter) cinematic techniques in this film—such as improvised shots and the narration of a series of disjointed episodes—have become characteristic of what is now called “Godard's style.” His endeavour to split with the values of classical cinema and create something new is no doubt the very spirit of modernism; and yet, concurrently, some of the innovations in *Vivre Sa Vie* open the gate

to postmodern aesthetics.

“Moviegoers interested in postmodernism and multiculturalism,” David Sterritt maintains, “have recognized his work as a precursor and paradigm of important developments in these films” (2). Although the line between modernism and postmodernism is sometimes not quite clear, and although the concept of postmodern differs according to different critical fields, I will try to explore the modern and postmodern aspects of *Vivre Sa Vie* in the context of literary and painterly modernism/postmodernism—since, substantially, cinema is an art form of the fusion of word and image. This essay, in other words, aims to elaborate the view that *Vivre Sa Vie* is a seemingly paradoxical composite of modern and postmodern aesthetics, that it is a practice of the (Lyotardian) theory of postmodernism as both in continuity and discontinuity with modernism.

I

“Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities.”
— Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

If modernism is a trans-artistic movement, the call for something new is unquestionably the *lingua franca* of modern arts. “This compulsion to novelty demanded that artists attempt new things during each stage of their

careers. A painter like Pablo Picasso developed a series of distinctive styles and a writer like James Joyce attacked new formal problems in each of his works” (Hoffman and Murphy 8). Thence arises formal experimentation, one product of which is fragmentation: the fragmented space of Cubist painting and collage, the truncated lines of Imagist poetry, and so on. Markedly, what is latent beneath modern formal experimentation is actually an epistemological doubt about—or really, lust for—reality; or rather, a fragmented mode of presentation represents the modern artist’s notion of reality—which is greatly fashioned by philosophers like Nietzsche, Bergson, and Whitehead. Whitehead’s notion of real experience encapsulates the modern notion of reality:

The most obvious aspect of this field of actual experience is its disorderly character. It is for each person a continuum, fragmentary, and with elements not clearly differentiated. . . . This fact is concealed by the influence of language, moulded by science, which foists on us exact concepts as though they represented the immediate deliverances of experience. The result is that we imagine that we have immediate experience of a world of perfectly defined objects implied in perfectly defined events. . . . (142)

In other words, reality is pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual and thus unrepresentable. Hence, we see that much of modern art seeks to concretize the modern knowledge of reality: “Scepticism about the traditional notion that objects are unified and independent . . . becomes perfectly visible in the earliest canvases of the Cubists and Futurists where fragmentation, multiple images, interlocking planes, abstraction and *lignes-forces* imitate, not the appearance of objects but their status in reality as the modern mind was beginning to perceive it” (Korg 34). In other words, deviating from illusionistic realism, which aims to present “a world of perfectly defined objects,” the modern artist intends to represent in his/her works the “disorderly,” “fragmentary,” “heterogeneous” nature of reality. This is why Lyotard says modern art seeks “to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists,” to “make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible” (78). We have, for example, the idea of pre-linguistic reality, but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it—which is what the modern artist aims to illustrate. It behooves us to say, then, that the same desire to render reality accurately that manifests itself in nineteenth-century realistic art loses none of its force in the twentieth century; what no longer exists in the modern period,

however, is the commitment to realism.

“[N]o one has yet made a more modern cinema than Godard” (22), said Kreidl in 1980. Indeed, Godard shares with the modern artist the reaction against traditional realism: on the subject of *Vivre Sa Vie* Godard says that, “[r]ealism, anyway, is never exactly the same as reality, and in the cinema it is of necessity faked” (Narboni and Milne 185). Godard therefore engages himself in representing “reality” with recourse to unconventional cinematic techniques. “[O]f all French directors,” as Richard Roud points out, “Godard stands out by his insistence on, his belief in, the *real*” (71). Improvisation is one of his strategies to reject cinematic realism and do justice to the *real*. Godard answers to the question about the production of *Vivre Sa Vie*:

I didn’t want elegant effects, I wasn’t looking for any particular effects. . . . The film is a series of blocks. You just take them and set them side by side. The important thing is to choose the correct ones at first go. Ideally, I wanted to get what I need right away, without retakes. If retakes were necessary, it was no good. The impromptu means chance. It is also definitive. What I wanted was to be definitive by chance.³ (Narboni and Milne 185)

One outcome, or really, the serendipity, of being “definitive by chance” is found in the church bell heard chiming while Nana gets shot to death in a silent street at the very end of the film. As a matter of fact, sound editing as well as image editing is very much avoided in *Vivre Sa Vie*.⁴ Its inelegant sound quality is another result of chance. Dialogue is inaudible at points throughout the film. For example, in the first scene, in which Nana is conversing with her former husband Paul in a run-down café, a few lines are almost muffled by the *natural* or *real* noises in the café. As Collet comments on Godard’s conception of chance: “[Godard applies] to sound the same demands as for the pictures. [He captures] life in what it offers to be seen—and to be heard—*directly*” (161). In fact, it would not be excessive to view Godard’s “be[ing] definitive by chance” as an extension of the automatic techniques of expression fostered by the Surrealists in their efforts to jettison the rationalist view of reality and to lay bare the real by rendering things surreal.

Hence, if, as Roud remarks, “even in the most so-called realist film, sound has always been an exception” (74), then Godard in *Vivre Sa Vie* makes a bold step forward in *directly* capturing reality. If the *real* has been more or less adorned, or rather, “faked” (in Godard’s terms),

in classical/orthodox cinema, Godard has the *real* divested of its decorations and restored to its *pre-filmic/photographic* condition. That is to say, he returns *realness* to the filmic image and sound by making them surreal, in the literal sense. Godard's metaphor of having things "brought to light" recalls Heidegger's notion of "disclosedness" (105). In classical cinema, the "elegant" quality of image and sound has become akin to what Heidegger calls the "ready-to-hand" (103); the viewer has been accustomed to their "elegant effects" and thus takes them as real. Hence, to deprive image and sound of those effects is to let them, in Heidegger's terms, lose their character of "readiness-to-handness" (103), to let them "disclose" themselves (105). Heidegger's philosophy of "disclosedness" may very well be the rationale for the modern artistic technique of defamiliarization: modern writers endeavour to defamiliarize linguistic conventions to awaken us to pre-linguistic reality.

One of Godard's starkest moves to disclose the fakeness and artificiality of (the production of) cinema and provoke defamiliarized effects is to chop up the film into a series of twelve tableaux, each introduced by a heading describing and/or questioning its content. In an interview, Godard explains his motive for the division: "Why twelve, I don't know; but in tableaux to emphasize the theatrical, Brechtian side. I wanted to show the 'Adventures of Nana So-and-so' side of it. The end of the film is very theatrical too: the final tableau had to be even more so than the rest" (Narboni and Milne 187). The Brechtian fragmentation of the film into a series of discontinuous subtitled tableaux results in what Silvio Gaggi calls "obtrusive stylization" (16), the impact of which is that the viewer, forced to be aware of the artificiality of the work, "does not psychologically lose himself or herself in the work but remains apart from it, regarding it critically and intellectually" (37).

Indeed, aesthetic distance obtrusively manifests itself in the first half of the final tableaux, wherein the viewer *reads* much of the conversation between Nana and her new boyfriend in subtitles instead of hearing their words. And what is more defamiliarized is that in this moment the *read* conversation alternates with the *heard* one, which very much urges the viewer to doubt whether what is happening between them is real or imaginary. Also, the young man's—or really, Godard's—lengthy recitation of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Oval Portrait" very much emotionally distances the viewer from the action because of the abstract nature of word (as opposed to image): "The pictorial element is emotional, immediate;

but words (including signs, texts, stories, sayings, recitations, interviews) have a lower temperature. While images invite the spectator to identify with what is seen, the presence of words makes the spectator into a critic" (Sontag 185). The emotional distance is much more evident in Nana's even lengthier conversation with the philosopher on the nature of language in the eleventh scene. Intriguingly, the position of the author vis-à-vis the material presented seems analogous to that of the viewer. In spite of his claim to "convey the feeling of what was going on inside . . . [p]recisely staying prudently outside" (Narboni and Milne 187), Godard seems to be concerned more about "staying prudently outside" than about rendering the inside. For "[t]he film eschews," Sontag stresses, "all psychology; there is no probing of states of feeling, of inner anguish" ("Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*" 205). If contrasting his *failure* to convey the inside feeling with his insistence on catching the external *real*, we might be able to infer that Godard wants to bring to the fore cinema's inability to show inner reality: "Godard recognizes that externals are all camera and sound recorder can grasp, and that such outward signs—superficial by definition—may seem sadly inadequate if one is looking for the 'inner selves' of psychologically defined characters" (65), says Sterritt. By applying Brecht's theatrical techniques, then, Godard in *Vivre Sa Vie* coerces the viewer—perhaps himself as well—to reflect on the artificiality of cinematic production and realism, as well as on the nature of cinema and the possibilities of direction.

II

"I don't really like telling a story. I prefer to use a kind of tapestry, a background on which I can embroider my own ideas."

—Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard*

Although employing Brechtian techniques, Godard seems to depart from Brecht's effect at the level of thematic unity. For if in Brecht's plays "the plot is an episodic sequence, a structure analogous to that of a painting that lacks a focus but achieves unity through the repetition of similar formal or conceptual motifs" (Gaggi 39), then unity that can be achieved in Brecht's work seems lost in Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*: "[T]he contradiction between the movie's structure and its tone serve[s] not to clarify or emphasize a central thesis but rather to stress discontinuity and to force on our attention the *absence* of a binding idea or programme" (Perkins 35-36). On a preliminary level, this point is most evident in the film's narration.

In Bordwell's view, "character-centered causality" (157) is the *sine qua non* of classical cinema, inasmuch as it unifies or completes the development of beginning, middle, and end, or briefly, renders a plot well-constructed, continuous. Moreover, it is causality that "commits classical narration to unambiguous presentation" and that holds firm the lines between "objective diegetic reality, characters' mental states, and inserted narrational commentary" (162). Simply put, the very task of classical film narration is to ensure that the viewer knows (usually through the manipulation of the camera and character interactions) what happened, what is happening, and what is going to happen; an omniscient narrator, so to speak, is thus indispensable in the classical film. And more importantly, this must be achieved by dint of an "imperceptible and obtrusive" act of narrating. "Editing," Bordwell claims, "must be seamless, camerawork 'subordinated' to the fluid thought of the dramatic action" ("Classical Narration" 24).

Admittedly, in *VIVRE SA VIE*, Godard shows his impatience with classical narration primarily by drastically tearing down the causal lines or transitions between the twelve scenes. Hence, the presentation of this film turns out to be discontinuous and ambiguous.⁵ Throughout the film, the characters' inner feelings, which very much motivate the cause-and-effect sequences in classical narration, are barely presented. The omniscient narration, which is crucial to classical cinema, is thereby jettisoned for an extremely objective depiction—which, incidentally, may shed light on what Godard means by "staying prudently outside."⁶ Hence, most of the dramatic knots are untied between scenes, within the scenes, and/or even within a single sequence; the film's communication with the viewer is therefore suffocated.

This situation is exactly what Sontag wrote of the opaque storytelling in *Vivre Sa Vie* in 1964, two years after it premiered:

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. . . . Godard in *Vivre Sa Vie* [does not] give us any explanation, of an ordinary recognizable sort, as to what led the principal character, Nana, ever to become a prostitute. . . . 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. ("Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*" 199)

Vivre Sa Vie, in Sontag's view, is a work of art treated as a mode of "proof," which is distinct from that of "analysis."⁷ That is, while "analysis" shows why and how something happened, "proof" shows just that it happened (198-99). Tom Gunning states that, owing to its iconic or mimetic nature, the filmic image, as opposed to language, "can show more immediately than it can tell" (464), so the primary task of cinema is to transform showing into telling, that is, to turn on "the process of narrativization" which "binds narrative discourse to story and rules the narrator's address to the spectator" (465). Apparently, in *Vivre Sa Vie* Godard very much renounces this process and then deprives the viewer of the right to know. Consequently, the difference between "analysis" and "proof" can be seen as that between telling and showing, between the signified and the signifier, or between modernism and postmodernism.

In order to illustrate the fine line between modern and postmodern aesthetics, Lyotard dissociates Proust's work from Joyce's—while both are generally pigeonholed as *modern* writers. Proust, according to Lyotard, puts forth the unrepresentable with concern for telling, the signified, wholeness, and thus his work turns out to be unified and closed: The literary institution that Proust inherits from Balzac and Flaubert "is admittedly subverted . . . in that the diegetic diachrony, already damaged by Flaubert, is here put into question because of the narrative voice. Nevertheless, the unity of the book, . . . even if it is deferred from chapter to chapter, is not seriously challenged" (80). By contrast, Joyce is concerned only about showing, the signifier, and as such his work remains—both substantively and formally—incomplete and open: "Joyce allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his writing itself, in the signifier. The whole range of available narrative and even stylistic operators is put into play without concern for the unity of whole, and new operators are tried (80). Also, while in Proust "the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure," the form in Joyce "denies itself the solace of good forms" and, more importantly, "searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (81).

While Proust appears to be closer to a modern aesthetics, Joyce might be said to fit in with a more postmodern approach. It is worth noting here that, in Lyotard, postmodernism seems less a rebellion against modernism than both a derivative of and a departure from modernism; that the line between modernism and postmodernism is not necessarily restricted to the supersession of historical periods. In other words, a text is not always *either* modern *or* postmodern, but can be *both* modern *and* postmodern. We can still simply conclude, nevertheless, that the borderline—which is likely to be crossed—between the modern and the postmodern is that between the whole and the parts, between the closed and the open, between presenting the unrepresentable and presenting the unrepresentability of the unrepresentable, between the signified and the signifier.

Therefore, if *Vivre Sa Vie*, as Sontag puts it, is “an exhibit, a demonstration” in that it “shows *that* something happened, not *why* it happened” (199), then Godard, like Joyce, very much “allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his [film] itself, in the signifier.” Godard foregrounds the signifier by including heterogeneous elements which are meant to clash rather than to harmonize, and thus *VIVRE SA VIE* remains largely incomplete, indeterminate, playful, open, aleatory.

III

“[A] text is . . . a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.”

— Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*

Fragmentation, Lyotard would agree, lies at the very heart of both modern and postmodern texts. However, a modern text “fragments reality in order to reconstitute it in highly organized, synthetic emotional and intellectual patterns. [A postmodern text] does not do this; it collects or sticks its fragments together in a way that does not entirely overcome their fragmentation. It seeks to recover its fragments *as fragments*” (Henderson 61).⁸

The notion of fragmentation is actually bound up with that of intertextuality. In a broad sense, each text is more or less intertextual, insofar as it more or less refers to previous texts. For instance, we have noticed

Renaissance and Baroque poetry and painting refer to the Bible and Greco-Roman mythology. There has never been, however, such an artistic period as the postmodern period, in which intertextuality becomes almost tantamount to artistic creation (and culture). According to Lyotard, a postmodern text is characterized by “bricolage: the high frequency of quotations of elements from previous styles or periods (classical or modern), giving up the consideration of environment” (“Defining the Postmodern” 1613). In other words, a postmodern text is constructed as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of cultures” (Barthes 146). Modern texts have intertextual references to other texts—typically, high art texts—but only in order to harmonize them as a self-contained whole. Postmodern texts quote other texts from both high culture and popular culture, in order to make them at once “blend and clash” (Barthes 146) with each other to the extent that “the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw” (Jameson 1961). Briefly, a postmodern text is a composite of “complexity and contradiction.”⁹

Vivre Sa Vie—Nana’s conversation with the philosopher in Episode XI most pointedly—embodies these virtues. The fact that a prostitute and a philosopher sit side by side to meditate on metaphysics, on the philosophy of language, blurs the line between high culture and low culture. It is no doubt a postmodern phenomenon. Also, stylistically, *Vivre Sa Vie* is in and of itself a cinema too complicated and contradictory to fit into any single category:

On one level, it is a documentary about prostitution. Moving on from there, it is “dramatised documentary” using its central character to present a typical case-history. But the case-history is extended into pure fiction to become the story of a young woman seeking her place in an elusive and alien world. At its most fictional the film again becomes documentary—as sketches of life in Paris in 1962 and as a portrait of Anna Karina. (Perkins 34)

Moreover, *Vivre Sa Vie* is “a tissue of quotations” *per se*: the quotation from a little girl’s essay on the bird told by Paul in Episode I¹⁰; the clip from Carl Dreyer’s *Jeanne D’arc*; the overlong conversation with the philosopher on the nature and purpose of language, in which the philosopher refers to other texts, in Episode XI; the excerpt from Poe’s story read aloud by the young man, or really, Godard himself, in Episode XII; and so forth.

Even though some links between these quotations in *Vivre Sa Vie* can be perceived, they do not serve to establish—formally and substantively—an idea binding other lines of thought. If one makes the point that the quotation referring to the bird may well act as the motif of *Vivre Sa Vie*, then that point would be tenuous, in that Godard, as aforementioned, very much abstains from probing into Nana's inner self. Also, the image of death that we can find in the excerpts from *Jeanne D'arc* and "The Oval Portrait" may foreshadow—but only formally, not substantively—Nana's death. Hence, the absence of a single line of thought which would wrap up the polyphonic quotations and allusions that make up the film. *Vivre Sa Vie*, then, stands against interpretation; it falls short of denotative function, of hermeneutical totality, and thus serves as an example of "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* xxiv). "With the breakdown of the signifying chain," to quote Jameson in a different context, *Vivre Sa Vie* "is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time" (*Postmodernism* 27).

Indeed, the twelve tableaux of *Vivre Sa Vie* very much remain "a series of pure and unrelated presents in time," inasmuch as the film itself, and thus the viewer, fails to unify the past, present, and future of Nana's biographical experience and/or psychic life. *Vivre Sa Vie*, then, is one of the texts that fit into Barthes' notion of the "writerly" text: It "is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice)" (*S/Z* 5-6).

Lyotard's explication of the postmodernist as follows: "Post modern would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)" (*The Postmodern Condition* 81). *Vivre Sa Vie*, as at once a derivative of and departure from modern and Brechtian formal experimentation, is the very practice of "the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)."

This is Shun-liang Chao's first contribution to Synoptique.

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NOTES

1 Quoted from John Kreidl in Jean-Luc Godard (22).

2 In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell sees the French New Wave—after which loomed New Polish Cinema, New German Cinema, and so forth—as the first fullest flower of the art-cinema narration as “a deviation from classical [Hollywood] narrative.” Art cinema, which was strongly influenced by modern art during the 1920s and which can be traced back to Robert Weine’s *DAS KABINETT DES DOKTOR CALIGARI* (THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI, 1919), did not burgeon “as a fully achieved narrational alternative” until after World War II (228-31).

3 The process of Godard’s chance shooting recalls André Breton’s Surrealist automatic writing:

“Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you’re writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard” (29-30).

4 Jean Collet has pointed out that VIVRE SA VIE was “the first sound film shot outside a studio and involving no sound editing” (160).

5 Sontag’s account of Godard’s attitude toward narration acts as an apt gloss on his break with classical narration: “At the Cannes Film Festival several years ago, Godard entered into debate with George Franju, one of France’s most talented and idiosyncratic senior film-makers. ‘But surely, Monsieur Godard,’ the exasperated Franju is reported to have said, ‘you do at least acknowledge the necessity of having a beginning, middle, and end in your films.’ ‘Certainly,’ Godard replied. ‘But not necessarily in that order’ (‘Godard’ 157).

6 Even though an omniscient narrator is an objective narrator, s/he is able to lead the viewer to the inner states of a character. By contrast, Godard stops himself from probing his characters’ inner feelings.

7 Likewise, Bordwell says: “Godard’s films invite interpretation but discourage, even defy, analysis” (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 311).

8 This passage is quoted from Henderson’s comments on the line between montage and collage in film: Eisenstein practices montage and Godard collage.

9 I refer to Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

10 The quotation goes: “A bird is an animal with an inside and outside. Remove the outside, there’s the inside. Remove the inside, and you see the soul.

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