

IN THESE DYSTOPIAN TIMES, JEAN-LUC GODARD'S  
REMARKABLE WORK IS MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER

By Chris Darke

Jeremiah has never had  
much success in  
pretending he doesn't  
thoroughly enjoy his job.

Kingsley Amis *New Maps of Hell*

**S**even and a half miles from the heart of São Paulo there is a gated community which houses 30,000 of the city's richest and most security conscious residents, many of whom travel by helicopter to work among the 17 million other inhabitants of the world's third largest city. According to the *Washington Post*, 'at night, on "TV Alphaville", residents can view their maids going home for the evening, when all exiting employees are patted down and searched in front of a live video feed.' In his account of 'a walled city where the privileged live behind electrified fences patrolled by a private army of 1,100', the *Post's* correspondent failed to discover

which keen ironist had named the development after the film by Jean-Luc Godard. Nor, I suppose, would it have been much appreciated had the reporter, as he flew low over the teeming *favelas*, the prisons and choked highways, casually asked his host, a CEO and Alphaville resident, 'You do realise you're living in a movie, don't you?'

Developed by the Alphaville Urbanismo Corporation in the 1970s, Alphaville São Paulo 'resembles its fictional namesake in elaborate and all-encompassing surveillance techniques' writes an American professor of urban studies, 'including high walls, hidden cameras and alarm systems ... The Alphaville gym specializes in self-defence and is called CIA! The facts about the

Alphaville, São Paulo, 2003  
(photograph courtesy of Desperate Optimists)



# ALPHAVILLE EXISTS

## The un-policed imagination is the sovereign enemy so, in Dystopia, no one will let you dream.

development get better, or still worse, depending on whether one prefers dystopia to remain firmly in the realms of fiction or to come fully fledged to life:

To advertise Alphaville, the company sponsored some episodes of a popular prime-time Brazilian soap opera whose leading male character is an architect. The architect and his mistress visit Alphaville where, according to Brazil's *Gazeta Mercantil*, the characters exalt the safety, freedom and planning of the place, comparing it to the neighbourhoods shown in US films.

And so ... Godard's film about a city of the future, shot on location in the Paris of the mid-1960s, has endowed not just one but thirty gated communities in Brazil with its name. And reality, having provided fiction with the raw material for its most dystopian scenarios, returns the compliment by materialising them. The back-and-forth between image and reality is dizzying: from CCTV to soap opera, from European art cinema to aspirational Hollywood and back again. Where does the utopian projection end and dystopian reality begin? We might call it, with a certain queasiness, the 'Alphaville effect'. But surely this is only an accident of naming, a sick joke? Are the 'Alphas' paying to inhabit their top-security luxury lock-up only so-called compared to the *favela*-dwelling 'Epsilons'? How long before Alphaville becomes a suburb of Los Angeles, a satellite of Mumbai? As the oracular tones of the supercomputer Alpha 60 remind us at the beginning of Godard's film, there are indeed times when 'reality becomes too complex for oral transmission. But legend gives it a form by which it pervades the whole world.'

### Dystopia Discovered & Described

The first question to be asked about *Alphaville's* dystopia is, how seriously should we take it? Wasn't Godard's vision of technological servitude, a talking computer-god and a surveillance-ridden city-state already a little derivative, if not old-hat, back in the sixties? And isn't the dystopian element in the film just that, an *element*, one among many of which the master-collagist avails himself? The answers I propose to these questions are, in reverse order: 'yes', 'yes' and 'very seriously'. Before considering Godard's depiction of dystopia, it's worth recalling how the word has come down to us. As an invented word for an imaginary place, 'dystopia' designates the worst of all possible worlds but if we consider how familiar the adjective 'dystopian' has become, a shorthand blessing for knee-jerk JEREMIAHS everywhere, we have to ask at what point in the long history of 'no places' did the bad begin to edge out the good? The strict meaning of dystopia's antonym 'utopia' is *nowhere* or *no place* but has often been taken as meaning *good place*, as in the title of Sir Thomas More's classic proposal of an ideal society published in 1516. John Carey describes this as being because of 'confusion of its first syllable with the



Greek *eu* as in *euphemism* or *eulogy*. As a result of this mix-up another word *dystopia* has been invented, to mean *bad place*! Sensibly deciding that dystopia nevertheless remains a 'useful word', Carey makes a useful distinction:

Strictly speaking, imaginary good places and imaginary bad places are all utopias, or nowheres ... To count as a utopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of desire. To count as a dystopia, it must be an expression of fear.

The journeys taken through these imaginary places have become a staple of the modern imagination and Carey is right to describe 'desire' and 'fear' as their impetus. Across the twentieth century, these journeys have departed from the desire to control the future and to imagine the techniques by which this might be achieved only to culminate in the fear of having lost control of those same techniques. The British novelist Kingsley Amis came to a similar conclusion in his 1960 study of science-fiction literature, *New Maps of Hell*:

Whereas 20 years ago, the average yawn-enforcer would locate its authoritarian society on Venus or in the thirtieth century, it would nowadays, I think, set its sights at Earth within the next hundred years or so. The machinery of oppression, then, is wielded not by decadent quasi-aristocrats in ceremonial dress – these are far more common in fantasy – but by business-like managerial types well equipped with the latest technological and psychological techniques for the prevention or detection of heresy.

'Dystopia' really came into its own around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, encouraged by a brace of nightmarish fictional speculations that included Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949). Its contemporary coinage was the work of Glen Negley and J. Max Patrick, a pair of American scholars who, in 1952, published *The Quest for Utopia*. Duly coined, the word passed rapidly into common currency.



2,3,4 Neon, night signage in the non-place of Alphaville



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## The avowed purpose of Alphaville's city-state is, bowdlerising Diderot, to strangle the last lover with the entrails of the last poet.

*Alphaville* owes equally to Fritz Lang. Wood's criticism neglects Godard's bravura creation of the city itself, not from sets but through filming some of the most modern structures Paris had to offer in 1965 and from the careful selection of surface detail. This undeniably qualifies as much as an 'idea' as a production decision; beyond simply making the most of a limited budget it also observes the 'presence of the future' that was materialising in the metropolitan fabric of Paris. The British novelist J.G. Ballard summed it up well: 'For the first time in science fiction film, Godard makes the point that in the media landscape of the present day the fantasies of science fiction are as 'real' as an office block, an airport or a presidential campaign.'

It is not only the conventional sci-fi image of the futuristic metropolis that Godard invokes in an inverted form. The character of Lemmy Caution, for example, is a comical inversion of the 'Visitor from another Time', as Godard admitted: 'I didn't imagine society in twenty years from now, as [H.G.] Wells did. On the contrary, I'm telling the story of a man from twenty years ago who discovers the world today and can't believe it.' And it is this man from the past who must confront the 'Tyranny of the Machine' with the only weapons he has: low cunning, a loaded gun and lyric poetry. Similarly, Lemmy and Natasha join the ranks of characters such as Winston Smith and Julia in *Nineteen Eighty Four* and D-503 and I-330 in *We* – each guilty of the 'Crime of Love'. In *Alphaville*, love is not the carnal transgression it is for those other outlaw lovers but a chaste and lyrical romanticism. Love remains a crime, though, because it represents the royal road to the imagination, which allows the lovers to entertain the idea that another world is possible. In the name of 'Silence, Logic and Security' the avowed purpose of *Alphaville*'s city-state is, bowdlerising Diderot, to strangle the last lover with the entrails of the last poet. One might say that in the eutopian mode all the imagination goes into the world-making, whereas in the dystopian it goes into escaping that world. And, from Zamyatin's *We* – '... you are sick. And the name of your sickness is FANTASY!' – via *Brave New World*'s bliss-inducing drug Soma to the crowd-pleasing pabulum of Prolecut as imagined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the inhabitants of dystopia are everywhere encouraged in their 'eager denial of mind'. The un-poled imagination is the sovereign enemy so, in Dystopia, no one will let you dream. There is another dimension to the idea of the no-place worth mentioning. Godard once claimed that the principal achievement of the new wave was to have established a new country on the map of the world and the name of that country was 'cinema'. What could be more utopian than that?

### From no-place to non-places

Science-fiction films tell us as much about the time in which they were made as the future they project and

between the two moments – the one specific, the other nominal (1984, 2001, etc) – a sense develops of their qualities of prescience and allegorical vision. The enterprise of proposing a world-to-be is always a hostage to the future's fortune. The law of diminishing returns that applies as regards special effects bears this out. How soon before *Matrix*-era 'bullet time' looks as dated as Douglas Trumbull's 'star gate' pyrotechnics in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)? Which may explain why *Alphaville* hasn't aged as badly as other examples of the genre; it finds its 'special effect' in the specifically cinematic resource of light.

But this light, let's remind ourselves, is the light of the past brought to bear on the presence of the future *now*. Would it be going too far to suggest that, in adding the dimensions of past and future to the present of 1965, Godard was able to set the controls of his particular time machine to withstand the very test of time? There's no shortage of films that seek to travel in time following *Alphaville*, from *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Mauvais sang* (Leos Carax, 1986) to *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997) and *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998). There is also the developing genre of what critic Jonathan Romney has named 'steel and glass cinema' which he describes 'as cinema set in the recognisably contemporary urban world but framed and shot in such a way that it becomes detached, not unreal so much as unreal, bordering on science fiction', examples of which include *Elle est des nôtres* (*She's a Jolly Good Fellow*, Seigrid Anoy, 2002), *Demonlover* (Olivier Assayas, 2002), *Cypher* (Vincenzo Natali, 2002) and *Code 46* (Michael Winterbottom, 2003). Romney claims *Alphaville* to be 'the mother' of such cinema and with good reason. In the forty or so years separating *Alphaville* from *Demonlover* it has become evident that the no-place of Godard's dystopia, with its labyrinth of corridors and lobbies, was already one big non-place in waiting. The presence of the future that Godard was keen to capture back in 1965 has since taken shape as a global non-place crossing continents and time-zones. 'It may be that we have already dreamed our dream of the future', J.G. Ballard has mused, 'and have woken with a start into a world of motorways, shopping malls and airport concourses which lie around us like a first instalment of a future that has forgotten to materialize.' Or, to put it another way, *Alphaville* exists. Everywhere. ▀

This is an edited extract from Chris Darke's monograph on J-L Godard's *Alphaville* to be published by I.B.Tauris in 2005. Chris Darke is a writer, critic and lecturer on the moving image. His book of selected writings, *Light Readings*, is published by Wallflower. He is also represented, with his film study *Chris on Chris*, on the DVD of *La Jetée* and *Sans Soleil*. See also pages 26 and 38.

5,6 'Natasha Von Braun (Anna Karina) and Lemmy Caution (Eddie Constantine) face up to the Capital of Pain'

In the summer of 2004 I was an artist-in-residence at the studios on Suzhou Creek in Shanghai. Artists Links, The British Council, Arts Council England and BizArt were all involved with the residency and the work expressed is in no small part thanks to them. Hereunder is a statement of artistic intent developed during my stay and which to date has been mostly realised.

Andrew Kötting  
Summer 2004

# SHANGHAI FROLIC



**S**hanghai Frolic might be seen in the context of a Situationist derive or wander but this work is meant to be read as a frolic. It would be an unmediated spectator-visitor meander.

I would make a series of eight bicycle trips: North, North East, East, South East, South, South West, West, North West. The flat in Brilliant City near Suzhou Creek would act as the start-finish point for these forays. I would travel the highways and byways, daytime and night time, hither and dither; serendipity would be my master.

Using a small Dictaphone I would record to tape my first impressions and contemplations of the city. With an 'Olympus Trip' 35 mm stills camera I would also snap pictures. Wherever possible I would stop to investigate and record the 'music-concrete' of the place: from the banging and drilling of the construction to the hooting and tooting of the traffic, from the whistling and shouting of the people to the becking and calling of the wildlife.

I would then extract my voice observations and contemplations to produce a book. These first-hand impressions would be translated into both Chinese written characters, (pictographic

symbols of spoken words) and *Rebus*, (a simple pictographic text-based symbol system used for people with communication difficulties in the West).

The book would be modelled on the traditional Chinese Calligraphy books that are found in stationers all over Shanghai and would include carbon-copied drawings taken from the *Olympus Trip* snapshots.

A CD would also accompany the book, and this would contain edited recordings from the *cycle derives* as well as any other found sounds that were deemed apt.

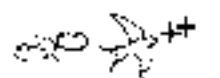
The final component to Shanghai Frolic is dependent on being able to present the book, the CD and the drawings within the context of an Installation.

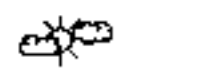
A two screen video projection would be produced. On one screen a panoramic view of Shanghai (shot from the 34<sup>th</sup> floor of the flat in Brilliant City as a large storm builds over the skyline), on the other, close up footage of people's apartments at night time. All shot from the 34<sup>th</sup> floor of the flat in Brilliant City and reminiscent in part of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. The sound filling the Installation would be taken from both the CD and the "field" video recordings. ▀




  
建筑施工  
Construction drilling.

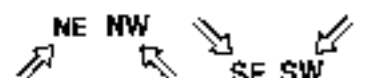
  
电焊钻的火星  
Welding sparks


  
百灵鸟  
Siskinks.

  
(都市)在天空中的轮廓  
Skyline

  
调皮捣乱  
Prock

  
北，南，东和西  
North, South East and West

  
东北，西北，东南，西南  
North East, North West, South East, South West.

  
我在自行车上和一件脏汗衫  
Me on a bicycle and my filthy vest.

  
出汗  
Sweating.

  
汗珠直流  
Drops dropping.

Translation : Zoé Wang Jué

NB. 'Shanghai Frolic' is inspired in part by Woody Guthrie's 'grassy grass grass, tree tree tree, leafy leaf leaf, 1 2 3, birdy bird bird, fly fly fly, nesty nest nest, high high high'.

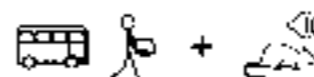
NBB. Whilst making the cycle trips I would leave in my wake a series of Xeroxed 'LOST' notices. They are produced in a style normally associated with pets that have gone missing. They would be placed in phone boxes and ask for information that might lead to the whereabouts of my deadad or any other deadads for that matter. This is a continuation of a project instigated a year ago in London. There is an email address for replies and I am curious to see whether they might elicit a response from the people of Shanghai. If so then these might also find a way into the book.


NBBB. Text and pictograms generated using 'Writing with Symbols'.

NBBBB. Henri Michaux IDEOGRAMS IN CHINA (pub.New Directions).




The Limited Edition of **Shanghai Frolic Bookwork** is available from [Badbloodandsibyl@ukonline.co.uk](mailto:Badbloodandsibyl@ukonline.co.uk) priced at £200 to include 8 original drawings, original sound work cd and text piece all presented and signed in cloth-bound traditional Chinese calligraphic covers.


  
载客的公共汽车发出嘎吱声  
Buses carrying and squeaking.

  
大街上来来往往的睡衣  
Street pyjamas.


  
我们不应该忘了哲学是一门掩藏痛苦的艺术  
One should not forget that philosophy is the art of masking inner turments


  
超大的遮阳帽像是用来防蜜蜂叮咬用的  
Hectopert-much-large-shad-hat

  
被破布缠着的树像是被裹住的脚  
Trees bound like feet in rags.

  
广口瓶里的池塘水  
Pondwater in jars.

  
树阴下打牌  
Cards in the shade of trees

  
绿叶子茶  
Green leaf tea

  
含着痰咳嗽，吐痰  
Phlegm cough up and spit

  
蹲着上厕所  
Squatting defecation

## HIS HOMETOWN: IN LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF, THOM ANDERSEN TAKES THE MOVIES TO TASK By Nick Bradshaw



**Nick Bradshaw:** Your film takes issue with a couple of Los Angeles shibboleths – the idea that no-one walks in the city, and that all its inhabitants work in the movies. Another is that no-one is originally from Los Angeles.

**Thom Andersen:** There's a certain truth to them all. There are parts of the city where nobody walks. Parts of downtown are deserted after hours, like Bunker Hill since they rebuilt it. At night it's quite eerie. But just a couple of blocks away is East Broadway, which is a big Latino shopping district, crowded with people. The generalisation that 'nobody walks' expresses the fact that, for a lot of white people, black and Latino people are invisible.

I'm not originally from Los Angeles, but I grew up here from the age of three. When I was about 12 we spent one semester in New York City – my father had a postgraduateship at Columbia University. When I got out of college I had this plan to go to New York, but it didn't work out. I did spend about ten years in Buffalo, New York and Columbus, Ohio, but realised I wanted to move back to Los Angeles, and finally was able to. I suppose I don't know a lot of people born and raised here. It's still a magnet for people from elsewhere.

**NB:** When did you first suspect the movies might not be an accurate reflection of the city?

**TA:** I guess that shouldn't come as a big surprise. Originally I was more struck by the ways in which the movies were like the city – by seeing places and things I recognised in the movies. It only occurred to me later that that was surprisingly rare. But the real impulse for my film was the way that movies

'This is the city,' Thom Andersen growls over an aerial shot of his smog-shrouded hometown at the start of *Los Angeles Plays Itself*. 'They make movies here. I live here. Sometimes I think that gives me the right to criticise.' And criticise he does, scouring over 200 feature-film clips for documentary impressions and distortions to mount a stout and surly entreaty for a side of Hollywood's host city that the movie machine rarely recognises. The result is both Andersen's 'city symphony in reverse', and a trenchant treatise on the intersection of modern politics and semiotics. Andersen teaches film and video at the California Institute of the Arts.

misrepresented the history of the city, rather than its geography or appearance. *LA Confidential* confirmed everything I'd been thinking for a while, maybe since *Chinatown* first appeared.

**NB:** Were you already familiar with your 'public history' of Los Angeles when you first watched that film's 'secret history'?

**TA:** No, I don't think so. I mean, you can't blame *Chinatown* – it's not, as some people say, bad history. Robert Towne was simply inspired by the history of the building of the Los Angeles aqueduct, which he read in Carey McWilliams' *Southern California Country*, which I suppose was the best history available at the time. And I think *Chinatown* itself probably inspired more thorough scholarship, which in turn informs my movie.

What bothers me about *Chinatown* is how it contributes to the popular notion that there's something illegitimate about the very existence of Los Angeles, because it's sustained by water from elsewhere. In fact giant cities as we know them today would be almost impossible without the ability to divert water from other places. There's a kind of geological determinism at work there that's just wrong. In fact you could say the opposite: Los Angeles is located in the largest basin on the Pacific coast of North America so, far from being illegitimate or unnecessary, it's kind of inevitable.

The other thing I still object to in *Chinatown* has to do with the cynicism of the ending that Polanski imposed. That's what creates the film's political conservatism. There's a Los Angeles writer called DJ Waldie, who is, I think, the finest

writer about Los Angeles, and my movie inspired a recent text he wrote on *Chinatown*. He says what I wanted to say more eloquently:

*'In the end the story of Los Angeles has dwindled to a conclusion we are powerless to affect, like a landscape watched in the rear-view mirror of a car fleeing a crime scene. At the end of our story, this is Chinatown, only Chinatown, and we're only along for the ride.'*

And that applies as well, I think, to *LA Confidential*.

**NB:** The film is assiduously iconoclastic. *Chinatown* may be your biggest prize jewel, but Joan Didion and David Thomson get it in the neck too. And your readings of many other films are very fresh.

**TA:** Well, there wouldn't be any point to a project like this unless you did that, right? For me art is all about describing things that are obvious, yet unrecognised, so they can be acknowledged and maybe acted upon. I do think in this movie I managed to stick to saying pretty obvious things, and maybe mostly things people hadn't thought of before. When it comes to Los Angeles it's pretty easy to disagree with most people who've covered it, because they usually have a provincial point of view – that is, most of the people they know are other writers, or other people in the movie industry.

But things are changing. There's a new Los Angeles literature now flowering from people born here, who grew up not in what's called the West Side of Los Angeles, but in the eastern and south-eastern suburbs, where most people live.

And I think soon there'll be a new kind of cinema produced. A couple of CalArts graduates, Andrew Garza and a guy called Francisco Romero, are Latinos who live here; they made some interesting movies. But there's been kind of a resistance to them, because they're about commonplace, ordinary things.

**NB:** That's one question the film begs, when you're looking at the relationship between reality and representation in all these films, is whether film might not have a natural predisposition to lean towards myth-making. Maybe when you're throwing something up on a big screen, the first temptation is to rearrange it?

**TA:** Make it bigger than life, better than life? Yeah, there's a place for that, but there's another way as well. Maybe that's why we admire Ozu. His movies aren't slices of life, they're all about key moments, the most dramatic transitions in a person's life: marriage, death. But he manages to make movies about ordinary death, as opposed to violent, extraordinary death. So there's plenty of drama, but it's the kind of drama that actually exists in our lives. And I think Charles Burnett and Billy Woodberry do that as well. Although they're also inspired by the desire to represent lives that aren't acknowledged at all in Hollywood cinema.

**NB:** It's an irony that what first attracted filmmakers to Los Angeles was its environment, and yet, as you point out, the city's horizontalness, its sprawl, makes it hard to 'get right' on the vertical screen. Some of the corollaries of that sprawl are the clichés of Los Angeles' suburbanisation and civic atomisation. To what extent are you taking to task films that propound those clichés, and shun a



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hidden civic Los Angeles? And to what extent are you actually critiquing the plans and designs of Los Angeles' concrete elite – which, of course, might then be reflected in the films they make?

**TA:** There are two lines in the movie that are like throwaways, but to me they're the most important. One is a comment on the bleakness of *Chinatown*'s ending, where I say: "This is history written by the victors, but as usual it is written in crocodile tears." The other would be almost at the very end, over Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts*: "So many men unneeded, unwanted, in a world where there is so

much to be done." For me, those are the politics of the movie. I think it is critical of a number of institutions in Los Angeles – the police and the transit authority particularly. In a way I wish I could have made a more political film, but that seemed to be moving too far away from the movies themselves. So those lines are just kind of hints; I hope people pick up on them.

**NB:** There used to be a sense of the city as being on the western edge, the testbed for developments in western secularism. What do you think now that Mike Davis, perhaps the city's most famous chronicler, is moving his attentions to Las Vegas?

**TA:** He's also moved his attentions to San Diego. And for a while it was Hawaii. But, maybe more crucially, to the new third-world cities. Reading his *Planet of Slums* in *New Left Review*, it does make me feel that the problems of Los Angeles are somewhat trivial in comparison with those of some third-world cities. Los Angeles used to be the city of the future; now it's a future that's come and gone. The recent and cataclysmic destruction of third-world agriculture in the last few years has created other patterns of migration and other kinds of cities. I suppose those are now the cities of the future. **V**

Nick Bradshaw is a film writer for *Time Out* London and co-edits the film section of *Plan B* magazine.

# WHERE ANGELES FEAR TO TREAD



1-3. Los Angeles Plays Itself

# FACES IN THE CROWD

A REMARKABLE GALLERY SURVEY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE CITY CREATES A LABYRINTH OF ECHOES AND REFLECTIONS ACROSS THE CENTURY By Gareth Evans



Showing, suitably, in the heart of London's multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, artist-accommodating East End, perhaps the city's most defining point of entry for generations of migrants from across the world, the Whitechapel Art Gallery's extensive group exhibition 'Faces in the Crowd' is a remarkable examination of modern urban life. Considering the relationship between the individual and society and between private space and the public realm, it contains much screen-based work, but what should really excite cinephiles is that the whole premise is inherently cinematic. From spatial enquiries to suggestive implications of narrative, from the sense of framing to the figurative focus, from Vertov to William Kentridge, the imperatives of cinema feed fruitfully into a layered reading.

Truly, and appropriately, a multifarious experience, the dozens of artists and artworks featured converse provocatively with each other, throwing up echoes, collisions and reflections across the decades. Perhaps inevitably, it's the establishing sequence downstairs that really compels. As we move upstairs and into the present tense, any sense of containing the argument becomes impossible, just as cities themselves have expanded exponentially. But this is truly stimulating viewing and, whether street protest or the pleasures of the ball quicken one's heart, it can all currently be found in Whitechapel's palace of pictures. ▀

*Faces in the Crowd* continues at the Whitechapel Gallery, London until 6<sup>th</sup> March. Tel: 020 7522 7888 for more information.

1. Marcel Broodthaers, *The Visual Tower*
2. Christian Schad, *Maika*
3. Edouard Manet *Le Bal Masqué à l'Opéra / Masked Ball at the Opera*



AS MIKE LEIGH'S *VERA DRAKE* PEELS BACK THE FAÇADE OF '50S LONDON, SO THE DIRECTOR'S PORTRAIT OF THE END-CENTURY CAPITAL IN *NAKED* REVEALED A SETTLEMENT OF AMBIGUOUS ALIENATION WHICH CONTINUES TO INFORM OUR VISION OF THE METROPOLIS

By Asa Jordan

In *Bleak Moments* (1971), Mike Leigh's first feature, we are presented with a vision of suburban alienation and a principal male character (Peter) who, to put it rather coarsely, can't stop talking and start fucking. In *Naked*, more than twenty years later (1993), we are presented with a vision of urban alienation, the naked, nocturnal city, and a central male protagonist who seems to have an unquenchable thirst for both of the above functions. In my days as a cinematic autodidact, I regarded Johnny as the most fascinating and enduring male character in the history of British cinema, and *Naked* its most enduring film. Watching it for the first time was a visceral, watershed moment. In fact, the 'guts' and 'viscera' of the London that Johnny encounters still hold a persistent allure, still hold relevance for me nearly a decade later, particularly since I became an inhabitant of this 'great' city.

I remember one night in particular, in which I was awoken by a lengthy trade dispute between a young lady and her 'financial advisor'. The darkly comic way in which their encounter lurched suddenly, unpredictably, from moments of menace to moments of tenderness and back again, as they staggered away from my window towards the everything and nothing of the night beyond my eyes and ears, was eerily reminiscent of the exit of Archie and Maggie in *Naked*. To walk through the anaesthetised heart of Kings Cross at a similar hour, the almost Dickensian dankness of its cobbled side streets; to ride the Silverlink from Acton to Islington, careering through the dark above the voyeuristic slideshow of innumerable illuminated windows is to experience a 'London' like that of *Naked*. That is, the vision of an evocative yet enigmatic city: we will never see, hear, touch, smell, *know* all of it, yet we know it exists. Within us and without us, beneath us and beyond us: a coterminous space pregnant with individual memory and meaning, pregnant with the possibilities of joy and despair.

*Naked* is the cinematic conception of the city as enigma, an enigma whose very power is derived from the fact that it remains unexplored: it cannot exist in

# Naked City



visual coherence and totality, either for character or for viewer. The film's narrative is one that foregrounds the *invisibility* of the characters' lives, their unseen alienation within the anti-social setting. Unarguably central to this drama is the relationship between men and women. From Johnny's initial encounter with Sophie to his weak and weary teasing of Sandra, the film is concerned with the precarious state of relations between the sexes.

It is from this presentation of gender dynamics and on the uneasy terrain of misogyny that much of the academic and popular criticism of *Naked* is based. Most of this is aimed at the visual representation of women as victims, and the failure of the narrative to move towards a judgemental, or 'moral' conclusion. What I believe we see in *Naked* is a meditation on the complex psychology of rape, and its prevalent, pervasive threat to women in the lawless, 'sightless' city; where there is no clear delineation between concepts such as 'good' and 'evil' (a moralistic blind-spot that could be said to be representative of 'reality'). Despite the indistinct morality of Johnny, as audience are not complicit with his violation and abuse of women, nor do we revel in Jeremy/Sebastian's degradation of Sophie or his tormenting of Giselle.

Such a complex terrain of relationships, with enigmatic personalities and their listless moralities, is bound to provoke negative responses from critics and viewers, for it confronts their world view, questions their perception of things and the ideological

functions that they expect cinema to perform. They shouldn't feel a strange brew of empathy and revulsion when watching Johnny. He shouldn't be almost simultaneously loveable and loathsome; he can't be pitied *and* pilloried. To have an 'excuse', a tragic experience, an early sexual trauma that has dramatically influenced his adult sexual behaviour, as is suggested in the film's later stages, would be too much. People want the filmic 'reality' of a rapist who is evil, who is hated, who is perverted, and who is punished- not a rapist who could be their brother, their lover, their father or their son.

Unable to accommodate the painful paradox of profound loss and justice that is the film's ending, unwilling to be haunted by the final strains of the memorable soundtrack and the last image of Johnny's crippled 'escape', they rest at criticising the film for being 'problematic', for its 'coruscating pessimism'. In my opinion the last lingering smile between Johnny and Louise, far from being pessimistic, is a heart-wrenching, life-reaffirming moment, one of the most wistfully beautiful exchanges between man and woman in British cinema: a flower of hope in bleak and brutal soil. Johnny is a man who has raped and been raped; a man who has been hurt and who has caused pain, stolen, cheated, lied; has loved and been loved, hated and been hated; has been ostracised and forgiven, remembered and forgotten. A man. 'Simply' a man. ▀

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