

Alphaville: Our Future City of Digital Surveillance

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Introduction

“Reality is too complex. What it needs is fiction to make it real,” recites the Computer at the beginning of *Alphaville* (1965). Jean-Luc Godard foresees and invents *Alphaville* as a totalitarian city-state governed by a pseudo-human Computer called Alpha 60, the supreme power of Artificial Intelligence. Secret agent Lemmy Caution comes to *Alphaville* with the impossible mission of taking down its highest leader.

Made on a low budget and devoid of flashy effects or futuristic sets, *Alphaville* is a science fiction film without special effects. Godard’s visionary science-fiction noir is a triumph of the imaginative power of cinema to penetrate the human condition under technocracy and totalitarianism. The cinematography creates nightmarish sights and sounds, at once fantastic and realistic, which transform the nocturnal streets and modernist architecture of Paris into a surreal black-and-white dystopia, projected as shimmering mirages of our lived realities. Godard describes *Alphaville* as “a fable on a realistic ground.” His film both exaggerates and redeems reality. The dystopic film is unequivocally a cry of protest against the worshippers of science and logic as well as against any form of tyranny or law imposed upon the free will of humans.

“Do you know what illuminates the night?” Alpha 60 asks Caution. “La poésie,” the protagonist replies. Poetry, in the sense of the ancient Greek meaning of *poiesis*, is human creativity, imagination, and expression. *Alphaville* is Godard’s resounding declaration on the poetry of cinema and the poetry of love. Toward the end of his failed mission, Caution flees the city with Natasha, the daughter of the scientist who designed Alpha 60.

Alphaville has never seemed more timely — our world today is very much closer to the director’s creation than it was back in 1965. Will AI rule our technological world or even aid the authoritarian regime? Can Poetry—in the ancient Greek language of *poiesis* to denote creativity, imagination, and human affectivity — save our world from AI/the computer’s logic and its semantic control of human consciousness? Is there a flickering hope of optimism and humanism in the age of digital surveillance and authoritarian governance?

Cinema Counter Reality

Alphaville presciently anticipates a future in which humans are dominated by the technocratic state, administered and managed by a prevailing computerized network. Earlier cinematic representations of dehumanizing machine-worker relationships can be traced to Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) and Charles Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936). Coming out in the mid-1960s, Godard’s film seems to have echoed Herbert Marcuse’s argument in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). The Frankfurt School Marxist philosopher criticizes Soviet-style dictatorships as much as he bemoans Western capitalist societies characterized by an increased technological development that creates false needs to indoctrinate individuals into the existing system of production and consumption via mass media and technological management.

Tarzan versus IBM

Godard’s working title for *Alphaville*, “Tarzan vs. IBM,” points to the uphill battle between human and computer, the latter acting increasingly as an alternative proxy for the human brain in anticipation of modern-day

Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). The famous British computing pioneer Alan Turing, in his 1951 lecture entitled “Intelligent Machinery: A Heretical Theory,” prophesized that “machines can be constructed which will simulate the behavior of the human mind very closely.” Turing predicted that as soon as the “machine thinking method” had started, the machines would be able to converse with each other to sharpen their wits. And it would not take long for the machines to “outstrip our feeble powers.” Turing warned that someday “we should have to expect the machines to take control.” He believed by the year 2000, people would accept the idea of A.I. in that we will be able to speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted.

Will Our World Become a Global Alphaville?

Will AI rule our world or even aid the authoritarian regime? Is there a flickering hope of optimism and humanism in the age of digital surveillance and governance? Godard’s visionary sci-fi noir enables us to ponder the ethics and politics of AI in the age of science elitism, authoritarianism, and digital humanities.

References

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Biography

Kenny Ng is an Associate Professor at the Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University. He obtained his PhD from Harvard University, East Asian Languages and Civilizations. He teaches film art and visual culture, transmedia adaptation, transnational cinema and Hong Kong film history. His research interests are broad in the areas of politics and visibility, film censorship and social surveillance, Cold War culture, cultural memory, and comparative literature, including writings on Chinese utopian novels and HKSAR dystopian science fictions. He has published numerous articles and a book on historical fiction and cultural geography, co-authored a book on Hong Kong independent cinema, and is currently working on two monographs on Cold War cinema and left-wing cosmopolitanism. An engaged cultural critic, he is one of the curators of the retrospective of futuristic cinema, “Critics’ Choice 2020—The Future is Now,” hosted by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society in November 2020.