Discussion Guide for

ALPHAVILLE

Jean-Luc Godard

The Great Books Foundation
ABOUT THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

How should society be governed? How should communities be structured? Download the free Great Books Foundation Film and Book Discussion Guides to continue the conversation. These guides were developed by Great Books Foundation editors, to extend the discussion of utopia and dystopia to films and longer written works.

This discussion guide includes references to the 1998 Criterion Collection edition of Alphaville.

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LEADING SHARED INQUIRY
DISCUSSIONS WITH FILMS

SPOILERS: Our film guides contain no spoilers through the Before You Watch section, but after that, the guides will contain spoilers. You may find it helpful to read the whole guide before watching the film, but be warned! Spoilers abound.

The Shared Inquiry™ method of learning focuses on asking interpretive questions in a group discussion about meaningful works of art. One of the many virtues of Shared Inquiry is that it can be applied to discussions not only about written works but also about cinematic works. There are some unique considerations when approaching Shared Inquiry discussion of a film. To foster lively conversation, pay attention to elements particular to the medium of film. The combination of story and the visual ways filmmakers create meaning will give you a wealth of discussable material.

Below, find some quick definitions of cinematic elements to help your group start thinking about the unique ways films create meaning.

**Cinematography:** The movement and placement of the camera in a film. Think about the height of the camera, its angle, its movement, and how it portrays space in the film. Also consider how scenes are lit, where the light sources are, and what kind of light a film has (natural, studio, even, harsh, warm, etc.).

**Editing:** The way a film is pieced together from individual shots and scenes to create a coherent, logical structure. Editing determines a film’s rhythm—are the scenes long or short? Does the film feel serene or agitated? Admittedly, editing can be hard to discuss with certain films because some editors aim for invisibility. But if a film feels unsettling, you may be able to trace that feeling to the editing on a shot-by-shot level.

**Mise en scène:** French for “to put into the scene.” Mise en scène is exactly what it sounds like: all of the props, costumes, characters,
actors, and settings that compose a film and its individual scenes. Questions about why an actor plays a part a certain way, why scenes look cluttered or spare, why characters always look a certain way, or why a film seems to have a blue tint are all questions related to *mise en scène*. Reminding your group that all of these elements were chosen to be in a film for a specific reason may help them generate questions. *Mise en scène* is a very broad term, but it allows you to analyze purely visual elements of film, which can be forgotten if you focus too heavily on the story or plot alone.

**Sound:** Both the score/soundtrack and the sound originating within the film itself. Though this seems fairly self-explanatory, this cinematic element tends to be overlooked in discussions of film. Imagine a film like Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* without sound: it would still be frightening, but the ambient sound and thrilling score contribute so much to the atmosphere that the film would be lacking without them. Think about how sound and image relate to or are juxtaposed with one another, and what sort of atmosphere they create together.

In addition to these special considerations, you should also think about the best logistical way to facilitate discussion. Watching a film twice is ideal (just like reading a written work twice), so have your participants watch the film once beforehand on their own and once all together before your discussion. If the film is long, consider gathering as a group for the discussion portion only. When taking notes, it’s easiest to refer to a scene’s timestamp if you want to find it later as an example in your discussion. Once you adjust to a few new techniques and different terminology, you will find that Shared Inquiry can lead to stimulating conversations about film, just as it does with written works.
BEFORE YOU WATCH

Like many of Jean-Luc Godard’s films, *Alphaville* is uncompromising in both style and execution. It is dense with allusions to contemporary art and politics, and its tone leaps from comic to horrific in the span of a single take. Threaded throughout the film is a view of life and society that is radical, romantic, and conservative all at once. At first glance, this combination of ideas and ideologies may seem almost nonsensical. But no matter how meandering his script, Godard never loses his sense of purpose, and as a consequence, *Alphaville* rewards careful viewing in much the same way as an extended essay.

Godard has a style all his own, a style so distinct, in fact, that it can be jarring to someone unfamiliar with his work. By 1965, when *Alphaville* was released, Godard had established a reputation as the avant-garde visionary among his already innovative New Wave peers, especially in matters of cinematography and editing. His shoots were spontaneous and informal, blurring the boundary between theater and real life, and he often made reference to genre conventions and icons of the film world. As a result, Godard is difficult to watch in a vacuum, and *Alphaville* is no exception. You may want to take notes on specific references and look them up after your screening. Alternatively, you may want to discuss, as a group, what you know about Godard, his movies, and France in the midsixties. Calling up these contexts will help you understand the real-world implications of Godard’s dreary dystopia.
As you watch Alphaville, consider the following questions:

- Which parts of everyday life in your community might you see as utopian? Which parts might you see as dystopian?
- How does Godard’s use of special effects, or lack thereof, affect your interpretation of the film?
- What is the significance of light and darkness in the film?
- Why does Godard interpolate shots of symbols, such as the neon sign reading “e = mc²,” into certain scenes? Why does he edit the sound of beeps or of Alpha 60’s voice into other scenes?
- Which parts of Alphaville seem borrowed from film noir? Which parts seem borrowed from science fiction?

**ABOUT ALPHAVILLE**

Alphaville takes place in a dimly lit technocracy ruled by a supercomputer called Alpha 60, but this technocracy looks an awful lot like 1960s Paris. The resemblance is no accident; not only did Godard’s budget preclude the use of special effects, but so did his vision for dystopia. Frequent allusions in the film to figures either current or recent, and enigmatic statements about the past, present, and future, only reinforce the impression that the oppressive regime in Alphaville is a pointed allegory for the here and now. But the film’s genius, and the root of its enduring significance, is in the way that Godard simultaneously creates a feeling of surreal displacement, so that the destruction of Alphaville seems a genuine cataclysm, and Natasha’s liberation has a real human resonance.

As the secret agent cum hardboiled hero Lemmy Caution penetrates deeper into the city’s secrets, we learn that Alpha 60 has virtually succeeded in suppressing human irrationality in favor of its own cold reasoning. The computer’s logic circuits have determined that art must be outlawed and that tenderness is an aberration to be stamped out. Alpha 60 represents the incarnation of a kind of ultraconservatism, in which hope of change or
reform is unthinkable. History has become immune to human intervention. “The acts of men carried over from past centuries will gradually destroy them logically,” it drones to a class full of “programmers.” “I, Alpha 60, am merely the logical means of this destruction.”

In the rational world of *Alphaville*, human relationships are reduced to mechanical transactions. “I’m very well, thank you very much,” is the automatic refrain of its inhabitants, regardless of what has been said, and sex is the purview of robotic Seductresses, who receive and escort visitors under Alpha 60’s omniscient direction. Natasha, the Seductress with whom Lemmy falls in love and whom he eventually rescues, doesn’t know the meaning of “love” or of “conscience” until Lemmy awakens them in her. Even emotional attachment is outlawed, as evidenced by the prisoners who are executed in the swimming pool—their chief crime appears to be tenderness for those close to them.

This ruthless logic also condemns the work of artists, which, according to Natasha, are censored because they “write incomprehensible things.” Paul Eluard’s landmark 1926 book of surrealist poetry, *The Capital of Pain*, is held up as an exemplar of such art. The book becomes a powerful symbol of human complexity—passed from the expiring agent Dickson to Lemmy and then to Natasha—and it provides Lemmy the key to confounding Alpha 60 and, possibly, the means of its destruction. Certainly Lemmy, with his gritty Luddism and his romantic private-eye persona, could be construed as an emissary from the old world of emotion and poetry. When Alpha 60 asks him his religion, he answers, “I believe in the inspirations of conscience,” invoking art and morality in one concise statement.

The tension between art and technology, between love and bureaucracy, culminates in Natasha’s halting words, “I love you,” as she and Lemmy flee the self-destructing *Alphaville*. A chief reason for her ignorance of love seems to be its absence from the “Bible,” which in *Alphaville* is a dictionary containing the words that are approved for public use. When words disappear from the dictionary, their meanings also disappear. Yet Natasha, as is soon uncovered, was born in the Outlands, giving her a faint memory of “love” and “conscience.” Lemmy manages to free her
from her emotional and semantic imprisonment, but the process is not complete until he has killed her father, destroyed Alpha 60, and escaped with Natasha into “intersidereal space” in his Ford Galaxie. Even then, Natasha must volunteer the words for Lemmy to consider her “saved.” Whether it is the new words that Lemmy teaches her, her childhood in the Outlands, the power of Lemmy’s love, or his sheer force in tearing her away from Alphaville that ultimately frees Natasha from indoctrination, is left to the viewer to decide.

The crux of the film is Lemmy’s destruction of Alpha 60, which sets in motion a chain reaction leading to the city’s total collapse; the computer is so integrated into the fabric of the city’s existence that its inhabitants can’t even survive without it. In their second verbal standoff, Lemmy tells the computer a riddle: “Something which never changes, day or night. The past represents its future. It advances in a straight line, yet it ends by coming full circle.” He warns Alpha 60, “If you find it, you will destroy yourself simultaneously, because you will become my kin, my brother.” Shortly thereafter, Godard begins to cut between negative takes and positive ones, and the city slowly falls apart. Does Lemmy create the perfect riddle, a piece of poetry that destroys Alpha 60 by its sheer illogicalness? Or does this riddle somehow implant in Alpha 60 a knowledge of human emotion and human values? When Lemmy returns to rescue Natasha from the interrogation booth, he taunts the disintegrating computer, “Look at her and me, there’s your answer. We’re happiness, and we’re heading toward it.”

Alphaville is a movie of extremes. It shifts rapidly from silence to noise, from light to darkness—even from realism to poetry. It is a disorienting film, and yet the world Lemmy visits is recognizable. It is a world of order, automation, and ceaseless progress, a world that makes eminent sense. There is nothing evil about Alphaville: as Alpha 60 puts it, likening itself to West and East both, “Nor is there in the so-called capitalist world, or communist world any malicious intent to suppress men through the power of ideology or materialism, but only the natural aim of all organizations to increase their rational structure.” Lemmy, who would seem to represent one alternative, is an outdated cliché, destined, in Professor Von Braun’s words, to extinction.
And yet, who would not choose the admirable individualism of Lemmy Caution over the “simple physical and mental existence” promoted by Professor Von Braun? There is something human, Godard seems to say, about being out of touch when you live in a city like Alphaville.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Why does Godard set his dystopia largely in normal urban settings?
2. Why does Godard choose a private eye as his protagonist?
3. Why does Godard choose a man using a voice box to play Alpha 60?
4. Why is Lemmy able to save Natasha?
5. Why do people in Alphaville say “because” instead of “why”?
6. Why does Alpha 60 say that in the capitalist and communist world there is “only the natural aim of all organizations to increase their rational structure”?
7. Why does Lemmy read from *The Capital of Pain* to Natasha?
8. Why does Alpha 60 break down?
9. What does Lemmy mean when he tells Alpha 60 that if it finds the answer to his riddle, it will destroy itself, because it “will become my kin, my brother”?
10. Why does Lemmy say to Alpha 60, “Look at her and me, there’s your answer” when he rescues Natasha from the interrogation room?
11. Why does Alpha 60 say, as its last words, “I am Time . . . it is a Tiger which tears me apart . . . yet I, too, am the tiger . . . For our misfortune, the world is a reality . . . and I . . . for my misfortune . . . I am myself”?
12. Is Alpha 60’s breakdown the result of Lemmy’s riddle, Von Braun’s death, or something else entirely?
13. Why does Lemmy tell Natasha that she must come up with the words “I love you” all on her own?

**FOR FURTHER REFLECTION**

1. Are logic and reason necessarily opposed to change and innovation?

2. When is technology good for society? When is it bad?

**ABOUT JEAN-LUC GODARD**

Jean-Luc Godard (1930–) has created a body of work that does great credit to the auteur theory that he and his Nouvelle Vague (New Wave) peers set out in the late 1950s. Godard, along with his colleagues François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Éric Rohmer, and Claude Chabrol, argued that in every film there is traceable the influence of the director (auteur is French for “author”). They scoured the history of film for exemplars, elevating the reputations of such now-esteemed masters as Howard Hawks and John Ford. These five writers soon became directors, translating theory into practice and, in the view of many, changing the history of the art form. They looked down on the often stilted studio traditions of the French cinema and they celebrated movies that were personal, authentic, and stylistically sophisticated. Above all, they wrote about the idea that film has its own language much like music or literature and that it is an art form comparable to those venerable, older traditions.

The New Wave had a watershed year in 1960, with Godard’s radical debut *À Bout de Souffle (Breathless)* following swiftly on the heels of Truffaut’s sensitive and autobiographical *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959, *The 400 Blows*). *À Bout de Souffle* made Godard famous almost overnight, and it was followed by eight years of acclaimed and prolific output, including such acknowledged masterpieces as *Le Mépris* (1964) and *Bande a Part* (1964). Though his movies could take the form of crime films, romances,
or musicals, Godard consistently and self-consciously pushed the limits of the medium, and one of his favorite topics was film itself. He is particularly famous for his innovations in cinematography, editing, and sound, but it would be difficult to find a dimension of moviemaking that his work leaves untouched. Godard practically disappeared from the film industry for a period of almost ten years, but in the eighties he began releasing feature-length films once more. Though his experimental style and radical politics has limited the viewership for his later work, Godard’s stature in film has, if anything, grown. Fiery, personal, and iconoclastic, it is no exaggeration to say that Godard has devoted his life and his life’s work to advocating for the cinema as an art form.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S AUTHOR

Dylan Nelson, digital production editor at the Great Books Foundation, originally picked Alphaville off the shelf because the cover copy described it as “one of the least conventional films of all time.” He says that he enjoys Godard’s films because each scene is full of surprises. Dylan attended Loyola University Chicago as a classics major. He has worked at the Foundation since 2011.