

GCE A LEVEL



# WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

## COMPONENT 2

Case Study: Vivre Sa Vie /  
My Life to Live (Godard, 1962)

Student Resource  
EXPERIMENTAL FILM



## Experimental Film

### Case Study: *Vivre Sa Vie/My Life to Live* (Godard, 1962) Student Resource

*Vivre sa vie* is the story of Nana, a young Parisian woman who aspires to be in the movies yet ends up a prostitute. It is structured in twelve episodes or ‘tableaux’. Each tableau details Nana’s tragic life. Director Jean-Luc Godard cast his then wife, the iconic Anna Karina, in the role of Nana.

*Vivre sa vie* exemplifies the experimentation of French New Wave films. Sequences were improvised and most scenes were shot in one take. Godard deliberately challenges the conventions of classical Hollywood and cinema itself, yet also pays homage to cinema through film references and clips from other films, such as one of the masterpieces of European art cinema, Carl Dreyer’s *The passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). Nana’s short bobbed hair is a homage to silent film actresses of the 1920s, notably Louise Brooks.

#### Tasks: Contexts – before the screening

These tasks will help you contextualise *Vivre sa vie* and guide your expectations before the screening.

## French New Wave

Individually or in pairs, research French New Wave cinema. Refer to chapters in film studies text books, reliable websites and documentaries.

Here are some resources to get you started:

<http://www.filmeducation.org/pdf/resources/secondary/FrenchNouvelleVague.pdf>

<https://www.criterion.com/explore/4-french-new-wave>

Watch the section on French New Wave in the Mark Cousins documentary, *The story of film: an odyssey* (Episode 7: European New Wave).

After conducting your research, answer the following questions:

- What are the defining characteristics of French New Wave films?
- Who are the key directors of the French New Wave and why are they significant?
- Which are some of the most influential and well-known French New Wave films and why?
- What motivated these directors to make experimental films? What was their approach to filmmaking?

**Auteur: Jean-Luc Godard**

Film critic John Patterson describes Godard as “... a revolutionary... He saw a rule and broke it. Every day, in every movie. Incorporating what professionals thought of as mistakes (jump cuts were only the most famous instance), mixing high culture and low without snobbish distinctions, demolishing the fourth wall between viewing himself as a maker of fictional documentaries, essay movies, and viewing his movies as an inseparable extension of his pioneering work as a film critic for Cahiers du Cinéma in the 1950s.”

(‘Jean-Luc Godard: A Beginner’s Guide’, The Guardian (Online), 2 December 2015  
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/dec/02/jean-luc-godard-a-beginners-guide>)

Vivre sa vie was the fourth film Godard directed. You will be shown sequences from two previous films he directed: A bout de souffle (1960) and Une femme est une femme (1961).

In pairs, discuss and make notes based on the following questions:

- What are the similarities between the three films? Can you locate Godard’s auteur trademarks?
- What are your expectations of Vivre sa vie based on your research and viewing sequences from his previous films?



**Task: General questions after screening**

This task is to be completed after you have seen Vivre sa vie.  
 In small groups, discuss the following questions. Make notes on the key points which emerge from your discussions.

- How is Vivre sa vie different to the kinds of films you normally watch? Consider narrative and visual style.
- Godard stated, ‘In Vivre sa vie I have attempted to film a mind in action, the interior of someone seen from outside’. How does he achieve this?
- The film is shot in an observational, cinéma vérité style. Look back over your notes on documentary film. What techniques of documentary cinema does Godard employ in Vivre sa vie, and to what effect?
- How does the film break away from studio-bound filmmaking?



**Task: Brechtian techniques**

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a playwright and director who thought that commercial theatre was uncritical and emotionally manipulative. He was disturbed by the Nazi’s use of emotional manipulation in propaganda to promote hateful, racist ideology. It is in this context that Brecht developed his ‘**distancing**’ or ‘**alienation**’ effects in theatre. These effects may be produced by **breaking the fourth wall** as an actor may suddenly address the audience. Other techniques include **making the audience aware of theatrical devices**, such as the use of harsh lighting which draws attention to itself and **use of sound and music which suddenly interrupts the action**. The **continual flow of the story is broken up through episodes**, usually indicated by placards telling the audience what is going to happen. Audiences cannot just sit back passively. They are made to think critically and become **active spectators**. Audiences do not fully identify with the characters, as they must maintain a **critical distance** from them.

Godard was influenced by Brecht as he used these Brechtian techniques in his films.

- Provide three examples of Brechtian techniques used in *Vivre sa vie*. Give specific examples from the film and discuss the effects of these techniques.



**Discussion:** Refer to the key points of David Bordwell’s essay ‘Art cinema as a mode of practice’ (this is available in the Introduction to experimental film student resources).

How many of the characteristics identified by Bordwell apply to *Vivre sa vie*? Is *Vivre sa vie* an art film?

### Task: Aesthetics

- Describe the overall look, feel and style of *Vivre sa vie* using as many adjectives as possible:

- Write a paragraph explaining how sound and editing contribute to the film’s overall aesthetic. Refer to one key moment in the film:

### Tasks: Sound

Godard used direct sound and recording rather than synchronised sound. Sound is also used in a playful and experimental way.

Answer the following questions on the use of sound in *Vivre sa vie*:

- Where did you notice a more playful use of sound? Consider those scenes or episodes where your attention was drawn to the use of sound or even lack of sound.
- What is the impact of silence when Nana watches Joan of Arc being found guilty and sentenced to her death in *The passion of Joan of Arc*?



Read the extracts from this essay ‘An audacious experiment: the soundtrack of *Vivre sa vie*’ by Jean Collet. The essay originally appeared in *La revue du son* in December 1962, and was translated by Royal S. Brown in his 1972 book, *Focus on Godard*. The essay is available online:

<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1442-an-audacious-experiment-the-soundtrack-of-vivre-sa-vie>

Highlight key points which give further insights into Godard’s use of sound. Discuss how these new insights contribute to your appreciation of *Vivre sa vie* as an experimental film.

...The soundtrack of *Vivre sa vie* represents the result of an extremely audacious experiment, a kind of challenge Godard kept in mind throughout the entire film. For not only was this film shot in natural settings, the soundtrack (both dialogues and noises) was also recorded directly. On a single track. This is no doubt the first sound film shot outside a studio and involving no sound editing. Almost the only mixing that was done was the addition of the music to a soundtrack recorded live during the shooting of the film.

This experiment is nothing less than revolutionary. For years now, shooting techniques have been becoming less and less restricted, thus allowing the visual part of the cinema to get rid of the various artifices that have long weighed it down. The proof of this lies in the greater and greater utilisation of natural settings. But, paradoxically, this greater fidelity in the realm of pictures seems to have brought about a much less authentic use of sound. For a film to be shot in natural settings, the dialogues have to be postsynchronized: all of the synchronous noises have to be fabricated after the fact, as do the various appropriate ‘atmosphere’ sounds.

Jean-Luc Godard’s idea was simple: apply to the sound the same demands as to the pictures. Capture life – in what it offers to be seen and heard – directly.

Godard refused to cheat with the rules he had set for himself, even in the scenes where this kind of cheating would have seemed indispensable, such as the café sequence in which Nana plays the jukebox. Normally, the record in question would simply be recorded directly onto the soundtrack. If one wants to be ‘true to life’, one usually settles, during the recording, for distorting the fidelity of a jukebox record by boosting the bass. Here, however, the sound was actually recorded in a café, with a great amount of care. And it is thus the jukebox we are really hearing. The same goes for the twist, during which we continue to hear the noises of the billiard game.

The interest offered by this method is obvious: the director opts for the real rather than the realistic. Being ‘realistic’ always implies having a point of view on what is real, an interpretation of the facts. Here, an attempt has been made, thanks to the special machines used, to establish a material point of view rather than a human judgment. The microphone is capturing what it picks up, just as the camera is, and the artist avoids intervening at this level of the creation. And reality has its surprises, such as the noise of the heavy truck that fills the room and rises like a dramatic crescendo the first time Nana goes through the act of prostituting herself. Another example is in the very last sequence, when, at the moment of Nana’s death, a hospital bell is heard chiming in the silence of the deserted street. Such details cannot be invented. And the normal criterion of sound quality becomes worthless next to these moments of unexpected beauty that spring up out of everyday life.

## Key sequence analysis 1

### Tableau 1: A bistro – Nana wants to leave Paul – pinball

Watch the following sequence twice. Make notes on the sequence based on the following questions. Feed your responses back to the whole class.

- This sequence is famous for defying the rules of classical Hollywood cinema. Explain how the sequence does this. What rules does it break and to what effect?

## Practical task: Storyboard

This practical task will help you recognise the differences between the classical Hollywood style and *Vivre sa vie*. In small groups, storyboard tableau 1 in the style of a classical Hollywood film. You can produce the storyboard as either a drawn or digital storyboard. Compare your storyboard with the actual sequence from the film.

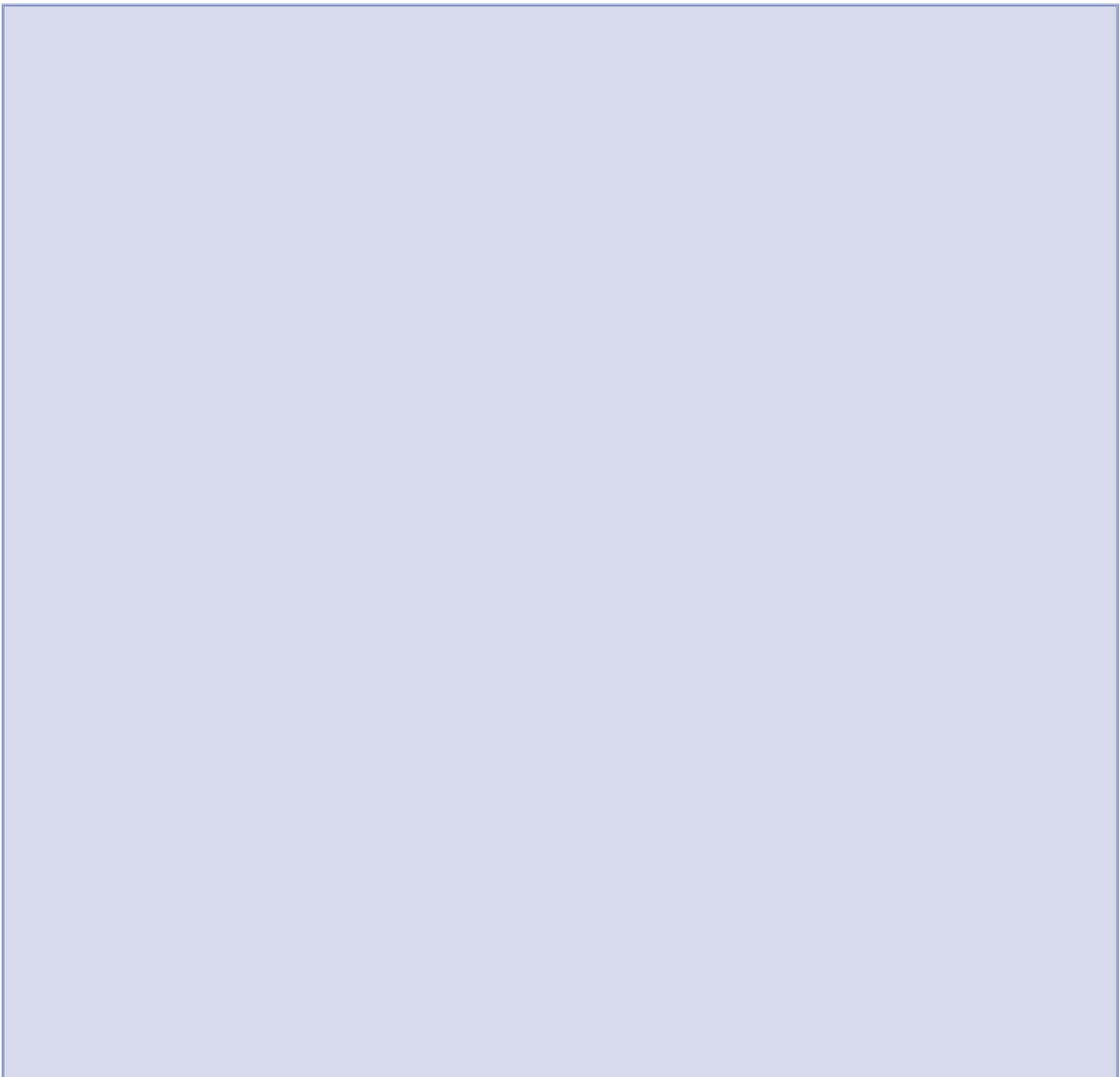
## Key sequence analysis 2

### Tableau 8: Afternoons – money – washbasins – pleasure – hotels

This sequence takes a question and answer form, as Raoul explains to Nana what to expect in her life as a prostitute. Raoul's dialogue is based on a 1959 sociological account of prostitution in Paris.

Watch the following sequence twice then make notes based on the following questions. Feed your responses back to the whole class.

- How does Godard use montage and documentary techniques and to what effect?
- What do we learn about prostitution in Paris?
- How does Godard want the viewer to regard how Nana is treated by Raoul?





### Task: Small group analysis of a key sequence

In small groups of three or four, you will be assigned a tableau from *Vivre sa vie* to analyse (except Tableau 1 and Tableau 8, as you have already studied these in class).

In your groups, you will analyse your assigned tableau, focusing on the following areas of study:

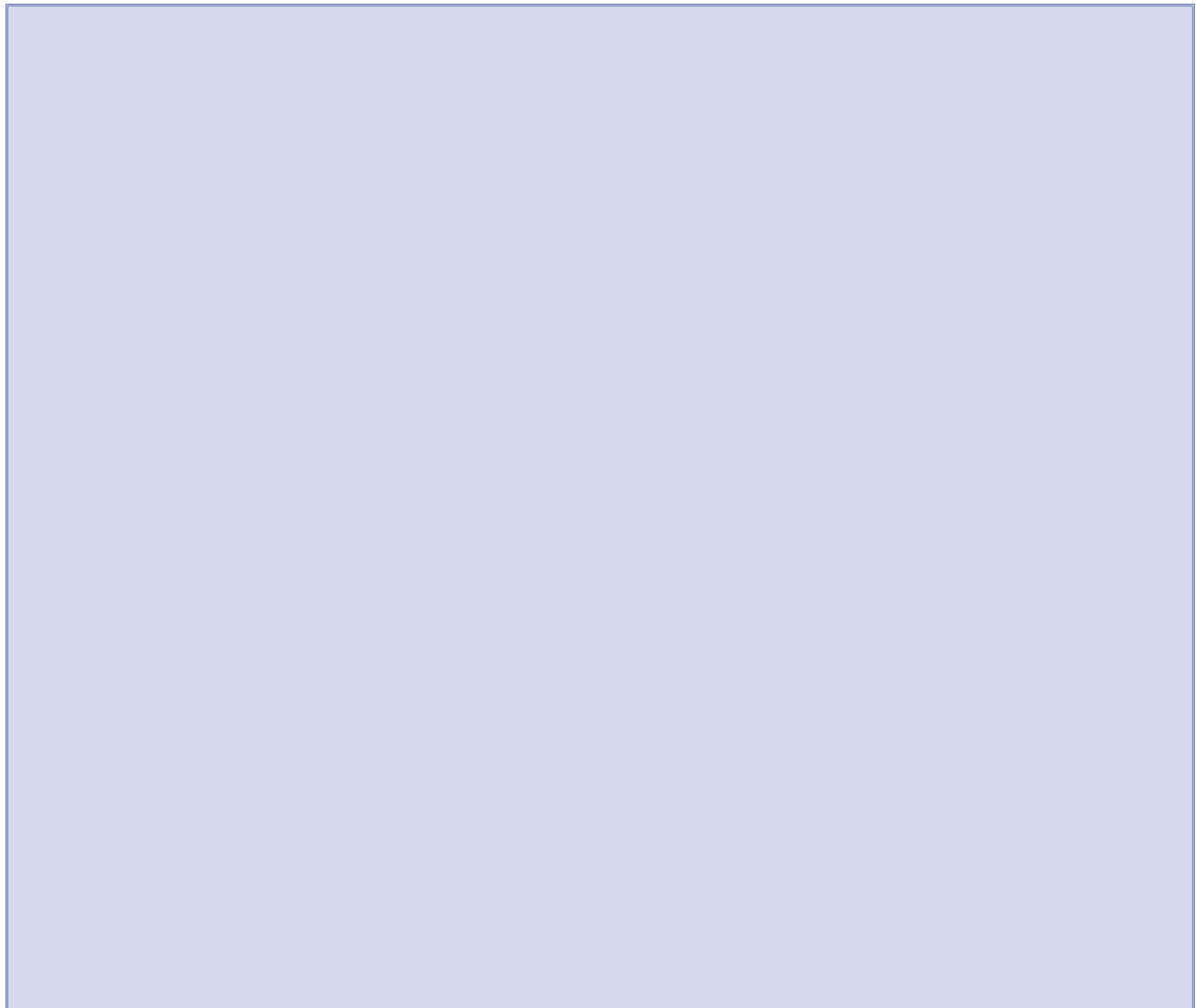
- Film form: mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound and performance
- Representations: How is Nana represented?
- Narrative: where the episode is placed in the film, the structure of the episode and its place within the overall narrative.

Screen the extract to the whole class and present your analysis in the form of a handout or a short presentation.

### Tasks: Specialist study area – narrative

In small groups, discuss *Vivre sa vie*'s narrative by focusing on the following questions:

- How is the narrative structured? How does this differ from a conventional narrative film?
- Why do you think Godard gives us the key plot points in the description of each tableau? What does it encourage us to focus on instead?
- What is the overall effect of the film's structure?
- Do you think the film aligns us with Nana or distances us from her (or both)?



Read extracts from Bosley Crowther's review of *Vivre sa vie* (New York Times, 24 September 1963, <https://nyti.ms/2MltTbk>).

[Godard]... has chosen to be completely offbeat in the method and structure of this take of the far from happy experiences of a young Parisian prostitute.

The simplest way to describe it is as a simulated documentary film, recounting in episodic sections the decline and fall of a pretty, shallow girl.

... the point of view of the camera is objective and repertorial throughout. In a sense, this might be regarded as a social worker's case report.

Indeed, in one section, the narrative purpose is pursued in a question-and-answer stunt, with the voice of the girl on the soundtrack asking her procurer how to go about her work and the voice of the procurer telling her in detail, very professionally, while the pictures on the screen are a montage of shots of the girl doing as she is told. Significantly, these glimpses, while candid and sordid as screen material, are not erotic or lascivious. They have an ugly, repulsive look.

Thus it is evident that Mr. Godard does not intend this film to be a glamourisation of the life of a prostitute. Evidently his intention is to catch in a novel, forthright way an external sense of the aloneness, inadequacy and pathos of the girl.

And he has oddly intruded techniques and details that seem aimed toward this end – to involve the viewer with the girl's emotions without visually describing them. Thus the opening scene of the picture finds the girl sitting on a bar stool with her back to the camera, talking to a friend (who also has his back to the camera), with whom she is ending a love affair.

The scene, lasting several minutes, is shot entirely that way, with only an occasional glimpse of the girl's face in the mirror. This is strictly an outsider's view of what is obviously a crucial personal experience.

... And the tedious devices of suggesting some spiritual hunger by having her listen to a young man reading pages from Edgar Allan Poe or talk for several minutes, merely talk, to an old philosopher, do little but slow the picture from reaching a melodramatic end.

After reading the review, answer the following questions. Highlight the key points.

- How does Crowther define the narrative of the film? What does he compare it to?
- What is Godard's intention by structuring and shooting the film in this unconventional way?
- What does Crowther think of the scenes where Nana listens to the young man reading and the conversations with the philosopher?
- Godard based the film on journalistic accounts of sex work in France. How does the film's narrative reflect newspaper articles and exposés? Consider the film's structure and narrative devices employed.

#### Task: Specialist study area – auteur

Create a mini-exhibition on Godard and Anna Karina for your classroom. The exhibition will consist of three large posters with visual images. Each group will research a key area relating to Godard and Anna Karina, then create a board or poster for the exhibit based on your findings.

#### Group 1: A short biography of Godard

Who was Jean Luc Godard? What was his motivation for making films? How did his personal relationships impact his films (consider his relationship with Anna Karina).

#### Group 2: A star profile of Anna Karina.

Define Anna Karina's star persona. Research Anna Karina's contribution to the film. Provide images of Anna Karina from other films she starred in.

#### Group 3: Godard's auteur trademarks

Research Godard's auteur trademarks. Look at some of his interviews and essays. What were his intentions as a filmmaker? What were his key philosophies and approaches?

#### Group 4: An analysis of *Vivre sa vie*

Apply your knowledge of Godard's trademarks from your initial study before the screening to *Vivre sa vie*. Demonstrate through screenshots from the film and accompanying analysis how the film is a personal art film. Include Godard's references to other films in *Vivre sa vie*.

## Summative assessment task: Essay question

The following can be completed as an essay with a set deadline or as a timed essay. You should aim to write at least one side of A4.

What is experimental about *Vivre sa vie*? Refer to key sequences.