

GCE A LEVEL



# WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

## COMPONENT 2

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

Teacher Resource

EXPERIMENTAL FILM



## Experimental Film

### Case Study: *Vivre Sa Vie/My Life to Live* (Godard, 1962) Teacher 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 students contextualise *Vivre sa vie* and guide their expectations before the screening. The tasks will help students prepare for a challenging film.

#### 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).

If time is limited, you might ask students to conduct most of their research on French New Wave as a homework task, then ask them to bring their findings to class.

You may guide students towards relevant sources such as sections on French New Wave in film studies texts books. If you have a copy of *The Story of Film*, screen the section on French New Wave in class.

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?

Students may answer these questions by using their notes as part of a wider class discussion or you may ask students to write a paragraph on each question and hand it in to you to be marked.

#### Possible responses

Defining characteristics of French New Wave films (this is not an exhaustive list):

- New movement in filmmaking in France from the late 1950s to the early- to mid-1960s
- Rejection of literary French cinema
- Experimental in style – e.g. jump cuts, breaking the 180° rule, handheld camera, long takes
- Location shooting often on the streets of Paris – realism of mise-en-scène
- Low budgets
- Young directors who were also critics – developed the notion of the auteur
- Films pay homage to classical Hollywood yet also break its conventions
- Stylish, cool films which appealed to young people – experimental yet also entertaining
- Re-working genres such as the gangster film and the melodrama

- Looser narratives and seemingly unmotivated characters

Key directors:

- Students may mention Agnes Varda, François Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Éric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Demy and Jean-Luc Godard. Students may discuss the significance of these directors as film critics and as auteurs.

Influential films:

- Examples may include: *The 400 blows* (1959), *A bout de souffle /Breathless* (1960), *Jules et Jim* (1962), *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), *Band à part* (1964). Students may discuss their international influence such as their influence on the New Hollywood directors of the 1960s and 1970s and contemporary filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino.

Motivation and approach:

- The flood of Hollywood films into France after World War 2
- The ideas developing in film theory, e.g. critics writing in *Cahiers du Cinema*, Alexandre Astuc's 1948 manifesto, *The birth of a new avant-garde: the camera-stylo*, and Andre Bazin's championing of a realist cinema and techniques such as deep focus and long takes.
- The auteur theory – the French New Wave directors were inspired by directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles and John Ford whose films carried their signature despite working within a studio system.

### 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', 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. Choose sequences from two of the previous three films he directed to show in class: *A bout de souffle* (1960) and *Une femme est une femme* (1961).

Consider showing students the opening 10–15 minutes of each film. Students could then watch the remainder of each film in their own time as a homework and research task.

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?

**Possible responses**

- Handheld long takes
- Unexpected, quick jump cuts
- Experimental and abrupt use of sound – music may suddenly cut in and out
- Characters breaking the fourth wall
- Location shooting in central Paris, often in recognisable locations
- References to other films and stars
- Scenes which lack establishing shots
- Loose narratives

### 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?

#### **Possible responses**

- Students may begin by giving their personal response to the film. They might find it 'strange' or 'different'. These responses can be used to prompt a discussion about the experimental nature of the film. What is strange and different about the film?
- Students might refer to the film's episodic structure which breaks up the film's narrative and gives us key plot points in the titles. They may notice that the plot appears disjointed and fragmented, with pieces missing.
- They may apply their knowledge of Godard's style to the film and discuss how he uses techniques such as long takes, abrupt use of sound and jump cuts.
- Students may discuss how documentary techniques, such as a handheld camera, may be used to enable us to see Nana from 'the outside'. They may refer to Tableau 8 where Raoul's voice becomes a documentary-style voice-over, offering spectators an insight into the life of Parisian prostitutes.
- They may discuss the use of Paris locations, making the film more realistic, in contrast to the studio built sets of classical Hollywood films

#### **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.

#### **Possible responses (this is not an exhaustive list)**

- The use of episodes signalled by a title card which interrupts the flow of the narrative and draws our attention to narrative devices. The description on each title card reads as it would on a screenplay, making us aware that the film is a construction.
- The repetition of the music throughout which appears abrupt and jarring at times and draws our attention to the use of music in film.
- We remain distanced from Nana. This distance is achieved by breaking the rules of classical Hollywood such as the use of the camera positioned in the back of her head in the opening tableau. At the start of each tableau, Nana's face is deliberately obscured, through devices such as shadows, a profile shot or a book.
- At one point Nana looks directly at the camera, breaking the fourth wall.

**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?

#### **Possible responses**

*Vivre sa vie* meets all of Bordwell's characteristics of art cinema:

- Narratives are explicitly against the classical narrative mode. Art films are characterised by looser narratives and looser sense of cause and effect. Narratives have a drifting, episodic quality
- A realistic cinema with use of real locations
- Psychologically complex characters dealing with real problems

- Characters may lack defined desires and goals
- A cinema of reaction rather than action – focus on psychological effects and their causes
- May have a documentary factuality and/or an intense psychological subjectivity
- Violations of classical film time and space – e.g. jump cuts, plot manipulations of story order
- Stylistic devices such as the long take, the moving camera and deep focus may be employed
- Foregrounding of the film’s author/auteur – director has creative freedom
- The viewer expects stylistic signatures rather than order in the narrative
- Viewers encounter the film and auteur through film festivals, essays, reviews, film education
- Auteur signatures manifest through violations of classical cinema
- An ambiguous cinema, reflecting character ambiguity, the author’s signature and “life’s untidiness”.

You could discuss with students where they might encounter a film like *Vivre sa vie*. Students may note that it is not a film that would play in a mainstream cinema. It is a film they will encounter through film education (such as this A Level), art-house and independent cinemas and at film festivals.

### 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:

#### Possible responses

- Students might use adjectives such as strange, abrupt, alienating, artistic, fragmented, different, experimental, beautiful.
- Students can refer to any moment in the film but may choose to analyse some of the more striking moments, such as tableau 12 where the sound cuts out completely and subtitles are used instead of dialogue. They might refer to the musical sequence, where Nana dances to diegetic music in one long take.

### 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*?

#### Possible responses

- The music is repetitive and acts a recurrent motif, rather than emphasising emotion as is typical in a Hollywood film. The sudden, abrupt breaks from music to silence constantly remind us that we are watching a film and draw our attention to the use of sound. The abrupt use of music disrupts the continuous flow of the film.
  - The film’s score is used sparingly in contrast to a heavily scored Hollywood film.
  - The sequence where Nana dances to the music on the jukebox pays homage to Hollywood musicals.
  - The sound is realistic at times, particularly during conversations. In tableau 1, the dialogue is sometimes difficult to hear as it merges with the background noise.
  - Nana relates to Joan in *The passion of Joan of Arc*. It is one of the most intimate moments in the film. The use of silence and close-ups of Nana’s face, cutting to Joan in the film, allowing us to focus on Nana’s emotion.
- 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.

Encourage students to highlight or underline the key points which aid their understanding of the film's use of sound. Some suggested points are highlighted here:

...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?

#### Possible responses

- Heavy shadow and low-key lighting obscure Nana's profile. The film then cuts to her face in a full, bright light. This draws our attention to the use of lighting as a dramatic device.
- The sequence at first avoids shot/reverse shot and instead Godard uses a lengthy long take. This ties in with Bazin's notion that long takes are a more realistic way of filming a sequence. Godard then uses shot/reverse shot for conversation but from the backs of the character's heads, taking a common convention and subverting it.
- The music begins at the start of each shot of Nana's profile, then stops abruptly. This draws our attention to the music and deliberately breaks with the classical use of music which would be continuous and used to make us empathise with Nana.
- When the camera shoots Nana from behind, we can only glimpse her face in the reflection of the coffee bar. This makes us peer into the frame and take notice of the *mise-en-scène*. We must watch actively and notice

what is being obscured from view.

### 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 a digital storyboard. Compare your storyboard with the actual sequence from the film.

This task may also help students prepare for their practical work if they are producing the script and storyboard. It will also help them revise the formal conventions of classical Hollywood cinema.

## 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 as 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?

#### Possible responses

- This is the most sociological scene in the whole film. The montage and voice-over give us a glimpse into the realities of life and work for Parisian prostitutes.
- Raoul's narration reveals how women are treated and how their beauty can be used for profit. He also provides factual information on changes in the law and requirements for medical checks. Raoul's matter-of-fact voice over removes any emotion and enables us to see how sex is treated purely as a business encounter.
- The montage of images represents the life of a prostitute without showing the sexual act. Time is compressed into fast-paced cuts which show prostitution as a clinical act, with the exchanging of money and a handshake. There is a series of fragmented close-ups such as her foot on the stairs, a man taking money out of his pocket and Nana washing her hands. This reflects the clinical nature of the act and enables us to view Nana's clients as she views them, as brief encounters. We occasionally cut to a close-up of Nana's face while we assume she is working. She looks bored and shows little emotion.

#### 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).

Assign each group one of the following tableaux to analyse:

- Tableau 2: The record shop – 2000 francs – Nana lives her life
- Tableau 3: The concierge – The passion of Joan of Arc – a journalist
- Tableau 4: The police – Nana is questioned
- Tableau 5: The outer boulevards – the first man – the hotel room
- Tableau 6: Yvette – a café in the suburbs – Raoul – machine-gun fire
- Tableau 7: The letter – Raoul again – the Champs Élysées

- Tableau 9: A young man – Nana wonders if she's happy
- Tableau 10: The sidewalk – a man – there's no gaiety in happiness
- Tableau 11: Place de Chatelet – the stranger – Nana the unwitting philosopher
- Tableau 12: The young man again v the oval portrait – Raoul sells Nana

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 to 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)?

### Possible responses

- The film has an episodic, fragmented structure which departs from the seamless flow of Hollywood films.
- Each title provides the major plot points so that the audience can focus on other aspects of the film rather than the plot. Our focus instead is on the 'everyday' moments such as conversations in cafés.
- The plot is loosely based on the melodramatic trope of the 'fallen woman' narrative.
- The end of the film where Nana is shot in the street is highly dramatic and shocking, especially after we have witnessed so much of her everyday life. Dramatic moments often take place after quiet, reflective moments such as Nana's talk with the philosopher.
- Godard draws our attention to the devices of storytelling in film. The use of subtitles in the final sequence draws our attention to the fact that we are watching a constructed story.
- Although Godard uses distancing techniques, the film's narrative is still emotional in places. We feel for Nana as she relates to Joan in *Joan of Arc* and we are shocked and saddened by her tragic death.

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 read 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.

Encourage students to create a visually striking poster, with key quotations and text where appropriate. The mini exhibition can then be used as a visual aid for revision.

#### 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* and his key quotations about cinema.

### 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.

This essay question should help students prepare for their exam. You should reward students' ability to analyse *Vivre sa vie* in detail with a focus on the experimental nature of the film. They should discuss the specialist areas of auteur and narrative in their response.