

Fall Film series 2023

Vivre sa vie

(1962)

Homage to J-L Godard

Cinematheque-Montclair Film

***Vivre sa vie*: An Introduction and A to Z**

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*In* Vivre sa vie *I have attempted to film a mind in action, the interior of someone seen from outside.*– Jean-Luc Godard, *Télérama*, 1962*Vivre sa vie: Film en douze tableaux* (1962) tells the story of Nana (Anna Karina) in twelve parts. Like scenes in a Brecht play, they show how Nana, short of money, turns to casual then regular prostitution, falls in love, begins to reappraise her life, but is accidentally killed. Each episode is preceded by a title summarising the incidents.Before they begin, a simple credit sequence: three silhouettes of Anna Karina, left profile, full face, right profile. These are also shots of her Louise Brooks hairstyle, announcing other 1920s film references to come, and a memory also of the moment of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill.The credits are superimposed, grouped into fours, shaped into rectangles, accompanied by brief phrases from Michel Legrand’s pathos-laden score. Fifty-two names are credited, including that of the camera (Mitchell), the sound equipment (Perfectone) and the film stock (Kodak 20), but not that of the director. The signature in these credits is the face of Karina, the director’s wife.

**TABLEAU 1: *A BISTROT – NANA WANTS TO LEAVE PAUL – PINBALL***

*SEPARATION*: Nana is leaving her husband, the father of her child. Six shots, the back of her head alternating with the back of his, with their faces seen in a mirror, vaguely. This is not how conversations were supposed to be filmed, and the sequence is famous for showing the New Wave breaking the conventions of mise en scène and parodying shot/reverse-shot through formal experiment. A seventh shot shows the two as a couple for the last time, playing pinball. François Truffaut had said that the one thing the New Wave directors had in common was a love of pinball.

The café is the Rallye-Villiers, in Levallois (3 place de la Libération, 92300).

**TABLEAU 2: *THE RECORD SHOP – 2000 FRANCS – NANA LIVES HER LIFE***

*WORK*: One three-minute shot, panning back and forth as Nana does her job, living her life and worrying about how to pay the rent. The tableau closes with a pan back out to the street, and we watch others living ordinary lives as a woman’s voice mouths sentimental clichés.The record shop is at 25 avenue de Wagram, 75017.

**TABLEAU 3: *THE CONCIERGE – THE PASSION OF JOAN OF ARC – A JOURNALIST***

*PASSION*: A cinema. Nana cries, watching Maria Falconetti as Joan in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1928 film, *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*. The art of the close-up, played as a comedy of identification: Nana is not Joan, Karina is not Falconetti; the tears are not real. The café-conversation that follows is another one-shot, three-minute sequence. The conventional cuts of shot/reverse-shot are replaced with nine awkward shifts of the camera, right to left then left to right.Nana lives in the rue Verneuil, no. 8. The interior of the cinema is the Panthéon, rue Victor-Cousin (owned by the film’s producer, Pierre Braunberger; his wife had played the concierge in the preceding scene). The café is the Escholier, place de la Sorbonne.

**TABLEAU 4: *THE POLICE – NANA IS QUESTIONED***

*IDENTITY*: A police station. Identification of a woman: we learn Nana’s surname (Kleinfrankenheim), her place and date of birth (Flexburg, 15 April 1940), where she lives (no fixed abode) and what she wants (“to be someone else”). The film has become an investigation, an interrogation. In *Le Petit soldat* (1963), Veronica Dreyer (Karina) tells the man photographing her that it’s like being interrogated by the police: “Yes, he says, photography is truth, and cinema is the truth twenty-four times a second.” Here she is photographed in three close-ups, each closer than the last, till we approach the composition and lighting of the opening credits. This last shot ends with an almost imperceptible whip-pan, cut away from to the title announcing the next tableau.The interrogation was shot in the production company’s offices.

**TABLEAU 5: *THE OUTER BOULEVARDS – THE FIRST MAN – THE HOTEL ROOM***

*THE STREET*: Nana finds her first client, somewhere near a cinema showing Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960) (“death is the only freedom a slave knows”). A hotel room, the first liaison filmed in the manner of Robert Bresson’s *Pickpocket* (1959), as a thing of suffering.

The camera travels along the boulevard Péreire, past Nana, then finds her in a nearby street, where she is picked up by her first client. They go to a hotel, the Monaco, now a club for swingers (10 bis rue du Débarcadère, 75017)

**TABLEAU 6: *YVETTE – A CAFÉ IN THE SUBURBS– RAOUL – MACHINE-GUN FIRE***

*THE CAFÉ*: The streets again and another café. More pinball, some Sartrian existentialism, a jukebox, a pimp, gunfire, the police again. Here, at the centre of the film, Nana claims responsibility for her feelings, her gestures, her actions, while the camera fixes on Karina, lovingly. When she is left alone, her gaze turns towards the camera, and on cue the jukebox plays “Ma môme” (my girl). Karina smiles at the momentary identification (she is Godard’s “môme”), but the camera’s gaze is also hard to bear. We see a soldier on leave from the war: the film is shot and set in March 1962, as the ceasefire talks between the FLN and the French are taking place, but the Algerian shot by the police at the end of the sequence shows that the firing has not yet ceased. A month before, eight people were killed in the streets of Paris, at a pro-Algeria demonstration. The machine gun is accompanied by rapid-fire jump-cutting, a rare piece of bravura montage among the long slow takes, as if this “histoire politique” was from another film.

The café is in Versailles, rue au Pain.

**TABLEAU 7: *THE LETTER – RAOUL AGAIN – THE CHAMPS ÉLYSÉES***

*THE PIMP*: Another café. Bresson-like close-ups of a hand writing a letter, then yet another alternative to shot/reverse-shot for the conversation between Nana and the pimp, Raoul. The camera moves from the right of the couple sitting face-to-face to stop immediately behind the man, his head blocking hers completely, then moves to the left, stops, moves back again, and continues this ballet for a further two minutes. By the end of the sequence, Raoul (Sady Rebbot) has taken Nana on.

The café has a trompe-l’œil photograph of the Champs-Elysées as décor, and the café itself is somewhere near the Champs.

**TABLEAU 8: *AFTERNOONS – MONEY – WASHBASINS – PLEASURE – HOTELS***

*SOCIOLOGY*: A question and answer sequence on the life of the prostitute, with accompanying images. The answers are taken from a 1959 sociological exposé of prostitution in Paris. Explicit scenes from Tableau 10 were cut by the British censors, but here they missed a veiled tribute to the end of *Alfred Hitchcock’s North By Northwest* (1959), where a train is used to suggest sex from behind.

The hotel scenes were filmed at the Eiffel-Seine (3 boulevard de Grenelle, 75015).

**TABLEAU 9: *A YOUNG MAN – NANA WONDERS IF SHE’S HAPPY***

*DANCING*: Yet another café, an upstairs room. Nana’s freestyle dance (based on “The Swim”) around the billiard table, for the benefit of a shy young man, is the closest thing to “joie de vivre” in *Vivre sa vie*, a release from the tensions between Nana and her pimp. Legrand’s score abandons its brooding themes for a parody of dance-band banality: “Swim, swim, swim … swim je t’aime … swim tu m’aimes …”.

**TABLEAU 10: *THE SIDEWALK – A MAN – THERE’S NO GAIETY IN HAPPINESS***

*SEX*: Nana does her job, on the streets and in hotel rooms. The scenes cut on the film’s first British release included shots of nudity and the suggestion of a *ménage à trois*.

The street is the Boulevard de Grenelle, and the hotel is again the Eiffel-Seine.

**TABLEAU 11: *PLACE DU CHÂTELET – THE STRANGER – NANA THE UNWITTING PHILOSOPHER***

*PHILOSOPHY*: A sixth café scene, the last. Preceded by six brief travelling shots from a car, documenting prostitutes on the streets of Paris. In the last of them is Nana, just another passerby. In the café, she joins in an improvised dialogue with “a stranger”, the philosopher of language Brice Parain. He tells her the story of Dumas’ Porthos, who, the first time he thinks, dies. After eight-and-a-half minutes, he concludes that “love can be a solution, if it is true”. This conversation is edited as shot/counter-shot, as if filmed straight, without device, as if the camera is actually paying attention – at least, until six minutes in, when it forgets the philosopher and fixes on Karina. She looks at the camera, uncomfortable again beneath its loving gaze.

The street scenes are of the rue Saint Denis, near the Fontaine des Innocents. The café is the Zimmer (1 place du Châtelet, 75001).

**TABLEAU 12: *THE YOUNG MAN AGAIN – THE OVAL PORTRAIT – RAOUL SELLS NANA***

*LOVE AND DEATH*: This could have been a love story. First, Godard’s voice reads Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” and tells Karina that it is their story, “an artist painting the portrait of his wife”. The artist loves his wife, but his art kills her. The accompanying image is Nana and the young man from the billiard room, now lovers and happy. The young man explains the æsthetic of the film: “Life is art, beauty.” But his words are given as subtitles, a cinematic artifice, and we see them embrace in four shots, linked by cuts that jump back: more artifice. After the idyll of art, the film returns to life, to the street, where “cinema is no fun, during the week you can’t go because of work, and Sundays there’s always a queue” (we see a queue for Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim*, 1962). Nana is to be sold on to rival pimps. In Paris, in 1962, love ends in death, “the slave’s only freedom”.

Nana and the young man are in her room on the rue Verneuil. The pimps drive her from there past the Arc du Carrousel, along the Avenue de l’Opéra, past a factory on the rue de Rambouillet (“Enfer et ses fils”, no. 10), and bring her to the rue Esquirol, by the “Restaurant des Studios”, no. 17.

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