

# **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

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## **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: [proceedings@eurosa.org](mailto:proceedings@eurosa.org)

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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***The Politics of Poetic Language:  
An Analysis of Jean-Luc Godard's Alphaville***

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ABSTRACT. My paper explores the relation between poetic and ordinary language through an analysis of Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville*. I argue that, in *Alphaville*, poetic language becomes political as poetry is a way of revolting against the dominant ideology which is laid down in language. Poetry changes the ways of seeing the world and thus serve as critique of ideology. This relation between seeing and critique of ideology is also central to Slavoj Žižek's analysis of John Carpenter's *They Live*. Although Godard and Carpenter stage different means to overcome the ideology of the ordinary, both poetic language and the glasses are metaphors for what films can do. My argumentation follows three steps: first I analyse the role of poetic language in Godard's *Alphaville*; second, I explore the political task of poetic language and relate it to Žižek's analysis of Carpenter's *They Live*; finally, I suggest that these films offer a reflection on film as bringing the viewer to another way of seeing.

Theories of language—philosophical or linguistic—often postulate from the outset a separation between ordinary and poetic uses of language. Far from being neutral, this separation also suggests a hierarchy: poetic uses would be secondary to ordinary ones, and therefore philosophically less relevant. This hierarchical dimension can be observed in the words theorists and

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philosophers use to characterise poetic language: as a ‘deviation’ or a ‘deviance’ (with the moral prejudices the latter word contains) from ordinary language. This separation further nourishes a common picture, namely that poets are somehow isolated from the world, contemplating it from their ivory tower. According to this picture, poets and their poetic language would have no impact on the world, especially not a political one. Poetic language would be a language deprived from its political force.

A perfect example of such considerations can be found in J. L. Austin’s ordinary language philosophy. In *How to Do Things with Words*, he famously considers poetic uses of language as non-serious ones, and this is precisely the point of criticism Jacques Derrida raises against him.<sup>2</sup> In his article ‘Signature, Event, Context’—which gave rise to the Derrida-Searle debate<sup>3</sup>—he attacks Austin on the normativity of his ‘ordinary language’. In a very schematic way, Derrida considers that the total context necessary to understand an ordinary use of language can never be fully given, and that there cannot be any ordinary context as opposed to non-ordinary (i.e. poetic) ones. If ordinary language is to be defined as an ordinary use in an ordinary context, and if this ordinary context can never be fully determined (and therefore never be considered ordinary for certain), there can be no ordinary language. For Derrida, the ordinary-poetic dualism is a remnant of

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<sup>2</sup> See Austin (1962: 9-10, 20-22, 104, 121) and Derrida (1988: 1-23).

<sup>3</sup> This debate has been important in the recent philosophical landscape, especially in attempts to connect so-called analytic and continental philosophies. Among the many papers discussing the debate, two book-length discussions have even been published in the past few years: see Moati (2014) and Navarro (2017).

metaphysical dualisms which must be deconstructed.

One of the consequences of Austin's rejection of poetic uses as non-serious is that such uses cannot have a political force. By depriving them from any performative or linguistic force, Austin deprives them from any potential political force. Such a consideration is not limited to Austin's philosophy and Jean-Paul Sartre, a philosopher very distant from Austin, follows a similar view. Although he defines literature as the most politically committed artform, he denies any commitment to poetry, precisely because poetic uses of language would be too distant from the world: 'How can one hope to provoke the indignation or the political enthusiasm of the reader when the very thing one does is to withdraw him from the human condition and invite him to consider with the eyes of God a language that has been turned inside out?' (Sartre 1988: 34)

There is a normativity to ordinary language which gives it its political force and this idea is at best exemplified by dystopian stories which represent a reduction of language, such 'Newspeak' in Orwell's *1984*. Rare, however, are stories that show poetry as resistance to such a reduced ordinary language. Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* brings up such an idea, and I will argue in this paper that artworks have a political role even when they do not exhibit it explicitly, and that this role is to disturb—and ultimately destroy—the dominant perspective or ideology, i.e. the normativity of language.

*Alphaville* is a science-fiction film which opposes the hero, Lemmy Caution, to the villain, Professor von Braun and his machine Alpha60 which control the city according to the laws of logic and science. Briefly



summarised, Lemmy Caution is sent to Alphaville in order to stop the Professor and manages to do so with the help of the Professor's daughter—Natacha von Braun—and a volume of poetry—Paul Eluard's *Capital of Pain*. Although the film raises many questions which would be of contemporary concern such as the loss of control over the machine or issues in gender studies, I will focus in this paper only on the notion of poetry. In one sequence especially, the film offers a defence of poetic language as a means to escape the oppression of the machine's technical language. In other words, in *Alphaville*, poetry becomes the language of revolution. If the role of the machine is to control language in order to control the minds of the citizens, poetry appears as an act of resistance and therefore acquires a political role from which it is often thought to be very distant.

In the first part of my paper, I will analyse a central sequence in in which poetic language is the key to resist the ideological ordinary language represented by a bible. According to Alpha60, in a world dominated by technology, poetry has no place because it offers a way of thinking things differently and escapes the normativity—or ideology—of ordinary language. However, Godard suggests that it is precisely in such a world that poetry is the most needed. To further explore the notion of ideology and the political force of poetry and art, I then compare the role of poetry in *Alphaville* to that of the glasses John Carpenter's *They Live* through Slavoj Žižek's analysis thereof. According to Žižek, the glasses in *They Live* play the role of a critique of ideology by changing the ways of seeing. Art and politics are brought together here and Jacques Rancière's analysis of the relation between literature and politics further expands this view. In a

concluding section, I consider these two films as presenting a metareflection on the capacity of film to modify our ways of seeing the world.

### **1. *Alphaville* and the Force of Poetry**

As Lemmy Caution enters *Alphaville*, a signpost indicates the rules which govern the city: 'Science, Logic, Security, Prudence'. These laws are at the basis of the technocratic society of *Alphaville* in which artists and poets have no place at all. As Lemmy Caution later says to Henri Dickinson, a former secret agent who failed to eliminate the Professor von Braun: 'I see. People have become slaves of probabilities.' As Miguel Bouhaben argues: 'For Godard the greatest enemy is the dominant language and the mechanisms of propaganda that impose their power structures on minority languages. The dominant language is the one that *must* be spoken in *Alphaville* to avoid death.' (Bouhaben 2015: 120) To control the people, Alpha60 controls their language and, ultimately, their way of relating to the world. Language reflects the ideology of Alpha60, and the failure to resist against it amounts to the failure to oppose the governing force. As only weapon against this enemy, Lemmy Caution has the book that Dickinson gave him on his deathbed, that we later learn to be Paul Eluard's *Capital of Pain* in a central sequence of the film.

This sequence is at the heart of my analysis. After his encounter with Alpha60, Lemmy Caution returns to his room where Natacha von Braun awaits him. He shows her Paul Eluard's *Capital of Pain* and she reads

sentences from it. Failing to understand some words, especially the word 'conscience', she looks for the bible which turns out to be a dictionary. We learn that words are removed from it every day, including the word 'conscience' which does not exist anymore for Alpha60 and the inhabitants of Alphaville. This revelation is the first step towards the destruction of Alpha60 which then causes the inhabitants to become mad as their ways of relating to the world are profoundly disturbed.

This sequence shows a conflict between two books which represent the opposition between a creative poetic language and a normative ordinary one: *Capital of Pain* and the Bible which is in fact a dictionary. The use of the bible as dictionary reveals the normative dimension of ordinary language and reminds of Nietzsche's words in *Twilight of the Idols*: 'I am afraid that we have not got rid of God because we still have faith in grammar...' (Nietzsche 2005:170) Nietzsche suggests a connection between language and the dominant mode of thinking, and the latter cannot change so long the former remains the same. In *Alphaville*, this normativity of ordinary language is further suggested by the normativity of social interactions such as recurrent greetings: 'I'm fine. Thanks. You're welcome.' In the abovementioned sequence, there is a mood shift after Natacha von Braun realises she does not know the word 'conscience' anymore. Music takes over and she goes back to her ordinary ways of being, thus asking Lemmy Caution when she serves his coffee: 'One sugar or two?'

The film shows the resistance to this dominant mode of thinking, or ideology, as emerging from the poetic: poetry operates changes in language and reveals the incapacities for the ordinary language Alpha60 ascribes to

give an account of what people experience, and especially in relation to feelings. This failure of language to account for feelings can be connected to Nietzsche once again, as he argues in *Daybreak* that language fails to account for inner processes and drives.<sup>4</sup> The revelation of the shortcomings of ordinary language leads Natacha von Braun to reconsider her way of seeing the world and therefore to question Alpha60. As Bouhaben further argues: 'Poetry offers us another way of knowing, another truth in alliance with the future. Poetry transmutes all materials, transfigures all forms, moves in ambiguity, unleashes all meanings, transgresses all border.' (Bouhaben 2015: 122) In doing so, poetry offers another perspective, enables people to see things differently. To use a Wittgensteinian image, it is as if Alpha60 ordered to see the duck-rabbit as a duck and poetry opened the possibility of seeing it as a rabbit. This change in perspective, as we will later see, is not always peaceful and easy, and the chaos which ensues the destruction of Alpha60 suggests that many people are unable to survive such a change in perspective.

Poetry therefore represents the antithesis to the normative language

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<sup>4</sup> 'Language and the prejudices upon which language is based are a manifold hindrance to us when we want to explain inner processes and drives: because of the fact, for example, that words really exist only for *superlative* degrees of these processes and drives; and where words are lacking, we are accustomed to abandon exact observation because exact thinking there becomes painful; indeed, in earlier times one involuntarily concluded that where the realm of words ceased the realm of existence ceased also.' (Nietzsche 1997: 71)

Alpha60 aims to impose, and the choice of Eluard is not innocent. According to Chris Drake: ‘Eluard’s is a name that carries various associations for Godard; with surrealism and popular love poetry, with the French Resistance and political radicalism. All that surrealism stood for—the creative power of love, the irrational as a liberating force, the “marvellous” discovered in the everyday—is irreducibly hostile to a technocratic society dedicated to the values of “logic”, “order” and “prudence”.’ (Drake 2005: 54) The relation to the surrealist’s conception of ‘the “marvellous” discovered in the everyday’ suggests that poetic language is not only a use of words which do not exist in ordinary language, but also, and thus following the example of the duck-rabbit, a different use of ‘ordinary’ words. In these new uses, the meanings of the words change, and the poetic arises from within the ordinary. This is what Wittgenstein suggests in a remark from *Zettel*: ‘Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.’ (Wittgenstein 1981: 27) In the words of Alpha60 itself: ‘Everything has been said, provided words do not change their meanings, and meanings their words.’

This central sequence exemplifies the role poetry can play in modifying our ways of thinking. To a broader extent, art, in opposition to science and logic, opens new ways of seeing the world, in the sense that an ordinary word in a poetic work might require a different reading, or an ordinary object in a museum a different seeing. But if art brings us to see the world as something else than what the dominant ideology suggests, it acquires a political dimension. It is not only descriptive—saying how things

are—but also critic—contesting the dominant perspective’s definition of how things are. In this framework, even poetry, an artform usually considered so remote from the ordinary politicised world, has a political impact, and Godard’s *Alphaville* represents this perfectly.

## 2. Art and the Critique of Ideology

If Godard’s *Alphaville* stages poetry as political resistance, other metaphors can be found suggesting such a change in perspective. An example which will further develop our analysis of *Alphaville* is John Carpenter’s *They Live*. Instead of poetry, Carpenter uses the common metaphor of glasses to represent the change of perspective. What is especially interesting with this film is Slavoj Žižek’s analysis which compares the glasses to a critique of ideology, and I will argue that these glasses are themselves metaphors for what film does, namely changing our ways of seeing.

*They Live* is a science-fiction film in which aliens have infiltrated human society and manipulate the population with hidden messages. The main character, John Nada, finds glasses which reveal the aliens and the true message hidden behind advertising boards. The glasses operate a change of perspective and Žižek analyses these glasses as functioning as a critique of ideology: putting the glasses on allows the character to extract himself from the dominant ideology and take a new perspective on things. Žižek analyses as follows:

According to our common sense, we think that ideology is something blurring, confusing our straight view. Ideology should be glasses which distort our view and the critique of ideology should be the opposite like you take off the glasses so that you can finally see the way things really are. This precisely, and here the pessimism of the film, of *They Live*, is well justified, this precisely is the ultimate illusion. Ideology is not simply imposed on ourselves, ideology is our spontaneous relationship to our social world, how we perceive each meaning and so on and so on. We, in a way, enjoy our ideology. To step out of ideology, it hurts, it's a painful experience, you must force yourself to do it.

Art conflicts with what Žižek calls ideology and, following Nietzsche's words in *The Gay Science*, 'Without this art we would be nothing but the foreground and live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes what is closest at hand and most vulgar appear as if it were vast, and reality itself.' (Nietzsche 2001: 79) Whereas the ordinary perspective makes everything flat, art gives depth to our perception of the world and of our existence. Only through art can one escape the vulgar perspective in which we usually live. Godard's *Alphaville* suggests such an escape through poetry as poetry gives depth to ordinary language whereas Carpenter's *They Live* focuses on the level of perception.

In Žižek's interpretation of *They Live*, the vulgar would be the dominant ideology and art the glasses which reveal the world as it really is. In Nietzsche's words: 'Work and artist.—This artist is ambitious, nothing more. Ultimately, his work is merely a magnifying glass that he offers

everybody who looks his way.’ (Nietzsche 2001: 147) It would however be misleading to consider that there is such a ‘reality’ to be found behind appearances. If we follow Nietzsche’s vocabulary of perspectives—or even Wittgenstein’s notion of seeing-as—there is no ultimate truth to be found but only a multiplicity of perspectives to experience, there is not correct way of seeing the duck-rabbit but different ways of seeing it. Art presents such perspectives and the films themselves, *Alphaville* and *They Live*, operate as such perspectives.

What is interesting with Žižek’s analysis is that he establishes a direct connection between art and politics. Art is not isolated from the politicised world but operates a critique of ideology. This theme is quite common in contemporary continental aesthetics and Jacques Rancière is exemplary to that regard. Indeed, he suggests a connection between political statements and literary locutions (which could probably be extended to artistic expressions): ‘Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making.’ (Rancière 2004: 35) Works of art and political statements have a similar task of drafting maps of the visible and the sayable, although they do so in quite different ways. Rancière’s conception of literary locutions is especially interesting as it suggests that art, rather than being a stance remote from the ordinary politicised world is at the very heart of it. Making things visible, such is the task of both politics and art. But if politics gives us the dominant perspective, art offers an alternative



which can lead, in turn, to a political change.

### **3. Conclusion: *Alphaville* and *They Live* as Reflections on Film**

What both Godard's and Carpenter's films suggest, is that to change perspective or way of seeing is not an easy task. Godard considers poetry as the vehicle for such change, Carpenter glasses. But in both cases, we can think that the film itself serves as a means to change perspective, and that *Alphaville* and *They Live* play the role of poetry or the glasses. As Margo Kasadan argues, Godard's choice of Eluard's poetry is related to his conception of film: 'Godard, it is clear, contemplates in Eluard a poet whose work can be related to cinema, a poetry that explores essential elements of film—lighting, the glance into and within the image, reflexivity, the multiplication of the image—and relates them in turn to love, one of cinema's traditional narrative concerns.' (Kasdan 1976: 7)

Eluard is in this sense a cinematographic poet for Godard, as Godard himself is perhaps a poetic cinematographer. Poetry is a metaphor for what the film itself is supposed to do, namely reveal the limitations of our worldview imposed on us by the dominant language. This dominant language is not only to be thought of in terms of a technical language, but much more in terms of the ordinary language we use every day. Thus, Derrida's quarrel with Austin is not just a linguistic matter, but also a political one. If we accept, in Derridean terms, the language of metaphysics

and its related dualisms and hierarchies, we accept an established order. To deconstruct the dualism between ordinary and poetic language is thus not a matter of imposing the poetic as the original language (as Heidegger would for instance suggest), but of maintaining freedom within our uses of language.

Poetic uses of language show us ways of distorting and disturbing the established order which permeates through what we call ordinary language. In Žižek's terms, such an ordinary language is also and above all an ideological language, and one needs to put the glasses on in order to escape it. Poetry and the glasses are both metaphors for what the films themselves aim at, namely changing the spectator's way of seeing and thinking.

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