

Cannes review: Nouvelle Vague, a warm homage to the pioneers of French New Wave

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A film about cinephiles for cinephiles is one way to describe 'Nouvelle Vague' (New Wave), Richard Linklater's love letter to movies. You could also say that it is about the making of '*Breathless*', which it is. But it's truly, gloriously more. It's about being young and alive, broke and audacious, lucking into friends who make you come alive, having each other's backs — all while changing the world.

In the 50s, a bunch of French film critics were busy discovering the joys of 'middlebrow Hollywood commercial' cinema, which was treated with disdain by a high-minded earlier generation. Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard were among those who contributed to *Cahiers du Cinema*, a journal which published these rebels-with-a-righteous-cause.

But writing trenchant prose and tearing into fresh releases for their scrappy journal wasn't enough after a time, and many of these turned to making their films. Thus was born the 'French New Wave', which changed the way movies were made.

How this particular group of film critics-turned-filmmakers became so influential — they may have been the 'OG influencers' — has been the subject of weighty tomes, but those who saw the films when they came out, and the scholars who came after were unanimous that Godard's debut *A Bout de Souffle* ('*Breathless*', 1960) was an instant classic.

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The actors who play Godard (Guillaume Marbeck), Jean-Paul Belmondo (Aubrey Dullin) and Jean Seberg (Zoey Deutch), Truffaut (Adrien Rouyard), Chabrol (Antoine Besson), could practically be doppelgangers, so amazingly alike are they.

All the familiar markers are in here. Belmondo's lips (the New Wavers loved Brando), Seberg's uber-stylish striped dresses, thin cigarettes, long tail-finned cars, cobbled Parisian streets, stubby handguns, and the catchy score take you right back to your first encounter with *Breathless*, when you were instantly smitten with French petty thieves and their pert American girl-friends while waiting for 'that' shot that made movie history.

But while 'Nouvelle Vague' is a homage, it isn't reverential. You can see Godard being annoying and obdurate. Early on, Seberg demands make-up and the former refuses it; in another instance, the director dismisses the person in charge of continuity, saying that's not what life is about. One of the pleasures of the film is how he uses famous quotes, as do several other characters: it's all very self-aware and a lot of fun.

Both Dullin, who captures Belmondo's sunny sexiness, and Deutch, all radiance even when she is irritated, are terrific: did Belmondo and Seberg have a moment in real life? We see a distinct, momentary spark.

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Marbeck's Godard is impeccable. His trademark dark glasses do not come off anywhere in the film, even when he somersaults. His whims (pack up, the shoot is over, or no shoot today because not-in-the-mood), the producer's panicky rants, and the baffled faces of the cast and crew do become a tad repetitive, and I did become a bit restive in those bits.

But perhaps it was important to recount just how shambolic, and learning-on-the-job the making of 'Breathless' was, not just for the mercurial, brilliant Godard, but for the rest of the cast too, who had no idea that they were at work on something that would turn iconic in its first run itself.

'Breathless' rewrote the rules of the game. Godard jumped. So did the movies.