



EVENTS

Breathless

+ intro by Programmer-at-Large Geoff Andrew

In tribute to the iconoclastic and hugely influential filmmaker, critic and theorist Jean-Luc Godard, who died on 13 September aged 91, we are screening his acclaimed first feature, *Breathless*, a major early hit for the French New Wave. Based on a scenario by François Truffaut, the film is both a witty homage to American B-movie crime thrillers and a love letter to Paris; its charismatic stars Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg play, respectively, a petty criminal on the run from the police and the American newspaper-vendor he falls for. Raoul Coutard provides the lovely black-and-white camerawork, Martial Solal the cool jazz on the soundtrack, while Godard himself is responsible for the film's distinctively light-hearted narrative style, as fresh today as when it first appeared. The screening will be preceded by a brief introduction by Geoff Andrew, editor of the *Sight and Sound* anthology *Jean-Luc Godard: Histoire(s) du Cinéaste*.

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'We barged into cinema like cavemen into the Versailles of Louis the Fifteenth.' (Jean-Luc Godard)

Godard's first feature is as fresh as ever after [in 1988] nearly thirty years. If Truffaut's debut, *The 400 Blows*, beats it to their common style, this more mercurial, coolly pathos-free, follow-up wonderfully complements its stable-mate. Godard and Truffaut's briefly shared style (regularly misattributed to the New Wave as a whole) was one response to an unprecedented conjunction of inspirations and opportunities. Technical developments suddenly extended the range, finesse and facility of reality-watching, and of expressive formalisms, and of their combination. Production costs plummeted. New youth and art-house audiences coincided with new subject matter: a bourgeois cultural revolution in sexual morality, social mobility, cosmopolitanism, education. The *Cahiers* ethos was largely bourgeois or conservative, and *Breathless* is entirely and radically incompatible with the mid-60s bourgeois-left-radicalisms which mistook Godard for a cultural leader.

This irresistibly insolent movie remains vivid witness to its era, in a manner transcending journalism and nostalgia alike. It's not just its observation of significant forms then new (sunglasses all over, the skirts whose freely billowing forms Michel abuses, his wide-boy clothes, Jean Seberg's cropped hair, the film's MJQ-style cool jazz, its bleached-and-fidgety look). There's a deeper resonance with a new, and crucial, social stratum, a virtual lumpenbourgeoisie, mixing young media people, hip students, criminal money getting into the leisure industry (like Tolmatchoff's), smart-thoughtful spiv-drifters like Michel. His Cinecittà job appropriately evokes the overlapping world of *La dolce vita*. This film's specific issues (underworld loyalty, love's treachery) vividly paraphrase the alienation from old moral expectations that

was swiftly spreading amongst educated youth. In particular: sexual transactions, freed at last from moral disrepute, promptly seemed void, *because* innocuous; and moral free-thinking unleashed so many moral codes as virtually to compel sensations of treachery.

Michel personifies a not uncommon mixture of (a)moral ideals: a French strain of 'live dangerously' macho; Bogartian mellow; anarcho-romanticism; and Sartre's admiration for criminal outsiders as nay-sayers of great integrity; all combined with realistic pettiness, ignominy and callowness (Michel's perfect indifference at killing a man). The problems and paradoxes of such positions win Michel our sympathy as a morally honest loser, as lucidly foreseen in his, and the film's, first speech: 'After all, I'm a cunt. But – *one must!*' That mix of absurdism and voluntarism inspires Michel's mime, the set of facial expressions that becomes a leitmotif. He sets his jaw (or silently screams?), smiles (or shows his teeth?), and scowls (or looks worried), then thoughtfully rubs his thumb along his lips. As if to say: 'All attitudes are arbitrary. But – one must!' Patricia represents a less heroic, more viable mixture: bourgeois egoist, little girl lost, early feminist. She's Bardot's drier, more cerebral, soul-sister, but also, alas, an American Friend (in Wenders' sense); her treachery contrasts with two crooks' loyalty. Belmondo and Seberg play with rare finesse, pulling us right inside their potentially derisory characters.

Not that the film is a simple choice, or conflict, between their specific positions. Godard's subtle and mordant dialogue involves a wide range of a-/anti-moral positions, extending his film's 'content' far beyond its narrative (which can rarely structure, and never define, a text's meanings). Here Godard applies his gifts as philosophical prankster to a certain morality of action, as thoroughly as *Week End* will involve itself with an absence of morality in action. The earlier film is traditional drama, in that Godard still feels with and through characters in situations; *Week End* progressively foreshortens them while refocusing on (and, alas, resenting and refusing) language and form.

In *Breathless*, the traditional method allows Godard to keep playing his ace, the intimation of moral and philosophical issues and finesses through casual, conversational terms. This essentially verbal strength is concentrated in four sequences: Michel's drive to Paris (a fine filmic 'soliloquy'), the lovers' dialogues, the Parvulesco interview, and the finale. Much of the rest is mechanical stuff, though saved by context and speed. In the interiors, the results of 'wheelchair-camera' almost justify the technicians' derision – and Seberg's distress – at the production. The plethora of half-averted faces and backs-of-heads facilitated add-on dialogue during post-synching, Fellini-style, and induce an – entirely appropriate – psycho-moral unease. The editing corroborates stories that Godard, having shot without knowing the continuity rules, vainly strove to edit the film conventionally until, with desperate inspiration, he topped and tailed every shot, leaving the middle sections juxtaposed by jump cuts. Which intensifies the flip, hip feeling of the new, jazzy, free-form montage idiom established by Truffaut.

Godard works it very skilfully, the fusillades of close-ups of Jean Seberg's head having a Miles Davis feel. Some fine 'classical' effects occur, notably in the killing of the cop, where cutting wonderfully expresses reflex, panic, switched fate. The Griffithian iris-ins evoke lost purity. The looks and direct

address into camera, far from inducing Brechtian alienation, or spectator guilt over ‘voyeurism’, suggest sincerity (even via insolence), thus intensifying spectator identification. The subtitle dedicating the film to Monogram is a vague gesture, or ploy to amaze critics, excuse cheap flaws, plead unpretentiousness, and underline this film’s enormous differences from Monogram’s notoriously, and really dull, dim product. Despite the movie references, the film’s genre ingredients are all French *noir*: humanly vulnerable gangsters (Becker, Melville), doomed lovers, treacherous women, finessed psychology, alfresco realism *à la* Renoir. Its soul-brother is *Shoot the Pianist* (also 99.9% French, notwithstanding its literary source). The two films’ gangster-waif overtones might just be Truffaut’s input. No Chabrol touch is discernible, though his commercially ‘hot’ name must have reassured the producer.

Raymond Durnat, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1988

BREATHLESS (A BOUT DE SOUFFLE)

Director: Jean-Luc Godard
Production Companies: Société Nouvelle de Cinématographie, Productions Georges de Beauregard (Paris), Impéria
Producer: Georges de Beauregard
Assistant Director: Pierre Rissient
Screenplay: Jean-Luc Godard
Based on an original idea by: François Truffaut
Director of Photography: Raoul Coutard
Camera Operator: Claude Beausoleil
Stills Photography: Raymond Cauchetier
Editor: Cécile Decugis
Assistant Editor: Lila Herman
Make-up: Phuong Maïttret
Music: Martial Solal
Music Extracts: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Sound: Jacques Maumont
Artistic/Technical Adviser: Claude Chabrol
This film is dedicated to: Monogram Pictures

Cast

Jean-Paul Belmondo (*Michel Poiccard*, ‘Laszlo Kovacs’)
Jean Seberg (*Patricia Franchini*)
Henri-Jacques Huet (*Antonio Berrutti*)
Liliane David (*Liliane*)
Daniel Boulanger (*Inspector Vital*)
Liliane Robin (*Minouche*)
Roger Hanin (*Carl Zubart*)
Van Doude (*Editor Van Doude*)
Claude Mansard (*Claudius Mansard*)
Michel Favre (*2nd inspector*)
Jean-Pierre Melville (*author Parvulesco*)
Jean-Luc Godard (*informer*)
Jean-Louis Richard (*journalist*)
Jean Domarchi (*drunk*)
Richard Balducci (*Tolmatchoff*)
André S. Labarthe (*journalist at Orly*)
François Moreuil (*photographer at Orly*)
Jacques Siclier
Michel Mourlet
Jean Douchet (*passer-by*)
Philippe de Broca
Guido Orlando
Jacques Serguine
R.S. Louiguy
Virginie Ullmann
Emile Villion
José Bénazéraf
Madame Paul
Raymond Ravanbaz

France 1960
90 mins

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