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Dolls, Parasites, and One True Gangster: An Examination of Michel and Patricia's Relationship
in *Breathless*

Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) is ostensibly a gangster film modeled after the mobster movies of depression-era Hollywood. The leading male protagonist, small-time car thief Michel, is a caricature by choice. He actively emulates Humphrey Bogart, an embodiment of the lawless American ideal, both in dress and mannerisms. Furthermore, the film's high-level plot points are largely unoriginal, depicting Michel's demise as he shoots a policeman and attempts to convince Patricia, his love interest, to join him in escaping to Italy before ultimately succumbing to her betrayal. Yet the genre-flick formula is frustrated by the intricacies of Michel and Patricia's relationship. They possess a mutual infatuation with personal facades which generates a shared conflation of external appearances and internal identities. However, their aspirations differ. Michel is dogged in his desire for fornication and flight, but his appeals are met with hesitation from the comparatively contemplative Patricia. Patricia's indecisiveness and lack of intrinsic identity yield an amoral character with selfish motivations. Michel may wear a suit, but Patricia is the true gangster in *Breathless*.

While Patricia is quite shrewd, Michel lacks the acumen of his idol, Humphrey Bogart. This disparity in mental aptitude is demonstrated within the protracted, intimate, bedroom scene lying at the heart of *Breathless*. The scene begins with Patricia entering her room only to find Michel, uninvited, under her sheets. Unsure about her feelings towards the brash Michel, Patricia

proceeds to continuously probe his psyche. Midway through the scene Patricia asks, “You know William Faulkner?” to which Michel replies, “No who’s he? Someone you slept with?” (Godard). She then proceeds to read from a Faulkner novel, “Between grief and nothing, I will take grief,” she narrates (Godard). All the while Michel is draped around her shoulders and slyly removing her top’s shoulder straps, preoccupied with lust. Michel’s single-minded infatuation with sex is a recurring theme. While conversing with Patricia, he flips through one of her books which offers an artistic examination of the female form and uses the photographs of nude women as soft-core pornography. Michel is like a hormonal teenager; he wears slightly oversized suits in a vague attempt to emulate his famous idol and possesses a one-track mind heavily biased towards sex. He goes on to assert that all girls from Sweden and Paris are unattractive, showcasing an exorbitant capacity for superficiality. And yet, the same is true for Patricia, whose intellectual prowess does not preclude her from a degrading obsession with human facades.

Throughout the bedroom scene there is an intense infatuation with appearances by both characters. The scene begins with Patricia staring into a mirror and adjusting some minute details in her clothing before proceeding inside. Notably, she does so without knowledge of Michel’s presence, expecting to enter an unoccupied room. After recovering from the shock of having discovered Michel in her bed, she immediately enters her bathroom to once again gaze upon a mirror, as if magnetically drawn to the reflective glass. She brushes her eyebrows, exits the bathroom, and Michel takes her place. Glaring at his own reflection, Michel thumbs his lips, the classic Bogart gesture. This marks just one of no less than three instances of the pair engaging with a mirror while together in the bedroom. In particular, Patricia returns to brush her hair, apply perfume, use lotion, cut singular hair follicles which lie askew, and wash her feet. Throughout the scene the hand-held camera also reveals the walls of Patricia’s bedroom to be

plastered with posters, most of which are art prints and serve to, in part, emphasize Patricia's refined tastes. After pinning a print of Renoir's *Portrait of Irène Cahen d'Anvers*, she requests Michel to compare her beauty with that of the painting's subject, a decidedly superficial inquiry. In addition to the art, Patricia has a photograph of herself, enlarged to poster size, proudly displayed, and serving as a manifestation of her vanity. If these posters epitomize narcissistic behavior, the print lying above Patricia's headboard provides the behavior's motivation. Introduced via a lingering shot and centered within an otherwise empty frame to emphasize its importance, the print depicts an abstracted man holding a mask. The image suggests that Michel who lies below the poster for much of the scene and Patricia whose walls the poster adorns, are obsessed with appearances because they are in costume.

The appearance and actions of the lead characters wholly determine their identity and emotions. For Michel, donning a suit, smoking excessively, and thumbing his lips, do not merely allow him to masquerade as a mobster, rather they constitute a complete transformation. He also relies on a false equivalence between action and sentiment. For most, behavior is a byproduct of emotion; we weep when sad and laugh when happy. This is not true for Michel. During the bedroom scene he proclaims that his love for Patricia directly follows from his desire to sleep with her. Patricia utilizes similar reasoning when, in the final scene, she justifies her decision to betray Michel and divulge his location. "Since I'm being mean to you, it proves I'm not in love with you," she asserts (Godard). As a consequence of this reversal in causality both characters are relegated to the status of dolls. They are merely vessels for Godard to manipulate and through which different personas can operate. A doll can mutate from nurse to astronaut simply by trading in scrubs for a spacesuit; Michel and Patricia are no different. Their ability to dictate emotion with action results in a pair of protagonists divorced from sympathy. Michel's murder of

a policeman is treated as innocuous both by the perpetrator and Godard who employs rapid jump cuts to strip the scene of emotional resonance. Similarly, Patricia's newfound pregnancy is met with apathy by both involved parties and occupies less than a dozen lines of disinterested dialogue. For Michel his gangster persona is static, but Patricia spends much of the film in a state of flux, masterfully manipulating men as she decides where her allegiance lies.

The plot of *Breathless* is driven by Patricia's uncertainty about which persona she should adopt; a sort of identity crisis unfolding entirely through Patricia's appearance and actions. The bedroom scene is characterized by Patricia's repeated attempts to see through Michel's mask, to uncover the information she needs to determine whether to commit her love. "I want to know what's behind your face," she declares (Godard). Just as she leverages her sexuality to further her journalism career, Patricia exploits Michel's sexually preoccupied mind as she chooses between personas. She is a parasite extracting value from her male hosts before casting them aside. The dynamic of parasitic sexual manipulation continues until the final scene when Patricia betrays her companion. The climax begins with Patricia bringing a bottle of milk, a beverage tinged with undertones of childishness, to Michel who begins to drink. The film infantilizes Michel to accentuate his relative innocence as, unlike Patricia, his intentions were always pure though immature. Hence, Patricia refuses the liquid. After a verbal altercation imbued with melancholy, Michel enters the city streets where he is shot by police. After an exaggerated sequence of the dying Michel stumbling down a Parisian road with Patricia in chase, he collapses, allowing his lust-interest to witness his final acts. Emulating a gangster till the end, Michel takes one last puff of his cigarette as Patricia stands over him. Initially, she obscures her face with her hand as if in disbelief, but once revealed her expression is devoid of sympathy. Michel proceeds to painfully contort his face into a sequence of three grimaces that have reoccurred throughout

the film. Representing the various personas either character may choose, these grimaces are the only actions capable of eliciting a response from Patricia. The sight of them makes her distraught as they remind her of the alternative personas she could have chosen. However, her self-questioning is short-lived, and her stone-faced expression quickly returns as she looks down the barrel of the camera and thumbs her lips, the same gangster mannerism Michel was so fond of. Through this gesture, the film's final frames assert that Patricia has adopted a gangster persona. She has chosen to go alone, to be independent, and to act solely out of self-interest.

Michel and Patricia's relationship is predicated on a shared infatuation with their external facades. Ironically, it is this very superficiality that provides the film's depth. The protagonists are mere dolls, their personas being deterministic functions of their actions and appearances. Yet, they are not equal. The camera in *Breathless* may follow Michel, but the film is about Patricia. Only Patricia undergoes change and only Patricia is faced with a difficult decision. It is Patricia's indecisiveness and manipulation which drives the plot. She is a doll but moreover she is a parasite. Michel was ultimately a victim of the parasitic Patricia who in the film's final frames turns to leave the shot, off to find another host.

Worked Cited

Godard, Jean-Luc, director. *Breathless*. Société nouvelle de cinématographie, 1960.