

Document Citation

Title	40 years ago, 'Breathless' was hyperactive anarchy. Now it's part of the canon
Author(s)	David Sterritt
Source	<i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i>
Date	2000 Apr 07
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	B7-B8
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	À bout de souffle (Breathless), Godard, Jean Luc, 1959



JEAN-LUC GODARD

40 Years Ago, 'Breathless' Was Hyperactive Anarchy. Now It's Part of the Canon

By David Sterritt

Everything can be put into a film. Everything should be put into a film.

—Jean-Luc Godard, 1967

“ALTHOUGH I felt ashamed of it at one time,” said Jean-Luc Godard in a 1962 interview, “I do like *Breathless* very much, but now I see where it belongs—along with *Alice in Wonderland*. I thought it was *Scarface*.”

Godard was speaking of his first major film, released in 1960 and returning to American screens this spring in a reissue on its 40th anniversary. Like countless other statements by Godard, this one teeters between the sincere and the sardonic, refusing to pin down where the filmmaker stands vis-à-vis his film.

And that, of course, is the point. “I want to restore everything, mix everything up and say everything,” he remarked four years later, summing up one of his basic attitudes: Film is as unlimited as life itself, and just as resistant to categories and pigeonholes. No movie is a monolith, and a work as rich and mercurial as *Breathless* may well be a fantasy and a *policier*, a mobster flick and a social critique, an occasion for shame and a cause for pride, a godchild of Howard Hawks and Lewis Carroll at one and the same time. Starting with his first feature—the most revolutionary he ever made in terms of sheer impact on world cinema—Godard mixed everything up with a vengeance.

Based on a scenario by François Truffaut, another key member of the *Nouvelle Vague*, or New Wave, filmmaking group, *Breathless* is the story of a gangster and his girl. The former is Michel Poiccard, played by Jean-Paul Belmondo in the defining performance of his career. The latter is Patricia Franchini, played by Jean Seberg in the performance that rescued her from oblivion after the failure of *Saint Joan* (1957) and *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958), the Hollywood pictures that were supposed to make her a star. Michel is a small-time thug who finds big-time trouble when he steals a car, goes for a joy ride, and kills a cop who chases him. Patricia is an American student who casts flirtatious eyes around Paris when she isn't busy hanging out with Michel, peddling newspapers on the Champs Élysées, or attending an occasional class at the Sorbonne so checks will keep arriving from her parents back home.

After its explosive start, with Michel's burst of violence and flight from capture,

the movie settles into an edgy, yet oddly unhurried, ramble as he dodges the police, hunts for an accomplice who owes him the cash he needs to get out of town, and pesters Patricia for sex, sympathy, and a promise that she'll flee to Rome with him when his money comes in.

Meanwhile, the cops tighten their dragnet, making the city a gigantic trap for our increasingly nerve-jangled protagonists. All of which becomes moot when Patricia abruptly picks up the phone and betrays Michel to the police, who gun him down in the street outside the apartment where he's been hiding. His final dash toward freedom seems almost perfunctory—by now he's fed up, played out, “at the end of breath,” to translate *À bout de souffle*, the film's French title—and he expires under Patricia's eyes, mumbling about how disgusting the whole affair has been. She gives Godard's camera a last enigmatic gaze before the movie fades to black, leaving us to wonder if love and loyalty have simply eluded this particular pair or have become irrelevant illusions, unsuited to our existentially anguished age.

Breathless takes its title partly from Michel's ultimate exhaustion, but more from

the hyperactive style Godard employs to tell his story. That style, along with the formula-jolting narrative twist provided by Patricia's betrayal, is what gave the movie its extraordinary influence on a generation of filmmakers. Cinematically speaking, *Breathless* represents a remarkable blend of inventive maneuvers that build upon the best of film's then-recent past while anticipating a newly freewheeling future.

Godard's fascination with motion-picture history grew from his 1950's training as an obsessive cinephile and a critic for *Cahiers du Cinema*, the French journal edited by André Bazin, a legendary supporter of reality-based film. Bazin's notions of *mise en scène* helped form the predilections and rebellions of Godard, Truffaut, and other protégés who developed the auteur theory—calling for directors to “write” with their cameras as personally as poets write with their pens—and later sparked the New Wave movement devoted to putting that theory into practice. Like his mentor and colleagues, Godard greatly admired the Italian neo-realists of the late 40's and early 50's, who turned away from studio artificiality and movie-star glamour in favor of naturalistic stories with authen-

The 40th-anniversary reissue of *Breathless* is scheduled by the distributor, New Yorker Films, to open April 7 in New York, and subsequently at theaters in cities including Boston; Chicago; Detroit; Los Angeles; Portland, Ore.; San Francisco; and Seattle. *Breathless* is also available on video.

tic settings. Godard followed the neo-realists' lead, shooting his first feature in streets, apartments, offices, and cafés, making the film as much a documentary about Paris as a fiction about two (sometimes) likable losers.

Realism was only one factor in Godard's innovative equation, however. Classical Hollywood filmmaking had played down the prominence of cinema's most overt directorial aspects—editing, camera movement, musical scoring, and so forth—to absorb spectators in a story's emotional and psychological values. Godard rejected that approach, reveling in cinematic expression for its own sake and placing stylistic pyrotechnics at the center of the moviegoing experience. During the shooting of *Breathless*, the camera glided with unprecedented freedom as Godard propelled the cinematographer Raoul Coutard through the action in a wheelchair and a mail cart. During the editing, Godard spliced disparate shots and yanked out extraneous frames with an improvisatory gusto that relied—like the behaviors of his characters—less on rules and customs than on the unfettered impulses of the moment.

THE RESULTS of his directorial revolt seemed insufferable to traditionalists, who questioned not just the worth of this proudly subversive movie, but also the competence and perhaps the sanity of the upstart who had slammed it together. Their distaste for its style was matched by their disdain for its content, and Godard added fuel to the fire by proclaiming *Breathless* to be the “anarchist film” he had dreamed of directing, raising questions as to what sort of anarchism he intended to represent via such incorrigibly aimless characters.

“This rebel is far from being a leftist,” complained the respected critic Georges

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An existential affair: Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg share a bed, but neither love nor loyalty, in “*Breathless*.”

IMAGES FROM PHOTOFEST

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Sadoul about what he saw as Godard's penchant for knee-jerk nonconformity at any price. "The anarchist Michel is part of the same group that writes 'Death to the Jews!' in the corridors of the subway," wrote Louis Séguin in *Positif*, an anti-New Wave journal, "and makes spelling mistakes in doing so." The lack of evidence for such right-wing fanaticism (even if Michel at one point does say he "likes cops") was apparently irrelevant to its infuriated critics. Godard's scorn for what a pro-*Breathless* reviewer called "the rules of film narrative" had struck a nerve—many nerves—and angry members of France's film establishment didn't mince words in expressing their outrage.

Others recognized the vast possibilities held out by Godard's highly original techniques, and the vigorous ways in which *Breathless* mirrored the increasingly volatile tone of the transitional period when it was made. The end of the 1950's was marked on both sides of the Atlantic by a tendency to evade social and political problems (relating to war, racism, poverty) that stubbornly refused to go away. At the start of the 1960's, pressures generated by those problems were building toward a sociopolitical eruption that drastically challenged existing values. Filmmakers of the era modified their methods a bit, expanding the classical style—more color productions, new wide-screen formats, looser censorship codes—to shore up theatrical film against those changes and rising competition from television. But such efforts proved too timid for growing numbers of young people who questioned conventional notions of authority and propriety in art and politics alike. Artists in many fields began echoing and amplifying this trend.

It's no coincidence that the jazzed-up writing of the Beat-generation authors reached a pinnacle in 1959, embodying a spur-of-the-moment literary sensibility that is uncannily close to Godard's own. *Breathless* was a movie of its richly precarious time, plugging into the cultural Zeitgeist with incontestable energy.

THE IMPACT of *Breathless* was augmented by Godard's position as a founding member of the New Wave group, which soared to prominence in 1959, when Truffaut's masterly drama *The 400 Blows* stormed the Cannes International Film Festival, earning its maker the Best Director prize. Truffaut became an instant superstar, and his associates—Godard plus Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, and Éric Rohmer—were perfectly positioned to capitalize on their fame by association, since all had recently put their filmmaking careers in motion.

The timing couldn't have been better for *Breathless*, which appeared at just the right moment to ride the New Wave's swelling surf, yet had more than enough personality of its own to strike a truly distinctive note. Along with other signature pieces of the early New Wave—subsequent Truffaut films, Rivette's moody *Paris Belongs to Us*, and Chabrol's peripatetic *Les Bonnes Femmes* among them—it had a literally eye-opening effect on filmmakers in Hollywood and elsewhere, who scrambled to emulate its blend of photographic realism, stylistic exuberance, and performances perching on a razor-thin line between Brechtian self-consciousness and B-movie brio.

In the decades since its premiere, *Breathless* has stood as an appropriately scruffy monument to the eminently Go-

dardian values of aesthetic freedom, cinematic spontaneity, and profoundly personal expression. While that is entirely justified, there's a certain irony in the canonization of such a zestfully anarchic work from such a strenuously uncategorizable director. Influenced by the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and his ilk, *Breathless* takes it for granted that existence precedes essence—i.e., human realities seem preordained but are actually mutable, unstable, and shaped by the choices we make in the moment-by-moment flow of experience. Godard directed the film in precisely that spirit, spurning the security of studio production for off-the-cuff shooting from a scenario so sketchy that Godard had to call out the dialogue to his actors as the camera rolled, dubbing in the sound of their voices after filming was over.

That's not to say that his protagonists are models of psychological self-determination. Quite the opposite. They are creatures of the sociocultural scene in which they find themselves, as Michel obliquely acknowledges late in the story when he reels off a veritable catalog of behavioral stereotypes—"squealers squeal, burglars burgle, killers kill, lovers love"—that describe him and his girlfriend all too well, nailing them as no more unfettered or free-spirited than the pop-culture clichés (such as the Humphrey Bogart persona Michel idolizes) that swirl through their media-saturated society. Godard's goal was to capture that society on its own exasperating-exhilarating terms, at once mirroring it, dissecting it, savoring it, and exploding it. In later films of the 60's, he did for other genres what he had done for the gangster movie here—the political thriller in *The Little Soldier*, the musical comedy in *A Woman Is a Woman*, the war movie in *Les*

Carabiniers, and the science-fiction fantasy in *Alphaville*.

He then turned to a drastic form of scorched-earth cinema, starting with films like *Weekend* and *La Chinoise, ou Plutôt à la chinoise*, which carried his increasingly radical ideas to their logical (or illogical) conclusions via heightened conflicts between sound and image, escalating attacks on capitalist ideology, and growing efforts to erase all traces of bygone cinematic traditions now perceived as forces of reactionary decadence. Since then he has remained busy in both film and video, making a partial (and eccentric) return to linear narrative in the later 70's; examining subjects related to sublimity and spirituality in the 80's; and devoting much of the 90's to an epic *Histoire(s) du cinéma* video series, which explores the history of world film from his own proudly idiosyncratic perspective.

But all of that, to quote one of Godard's favorite tag lines, is another story. Friends and foes agree that *Breathless* remains his most frequently watched film, his most deeply influential film, and the film that brought the most attention to the most tumultuously protean figure to emerge from European cinema in the second half of the 20th century. It hit the screen like a blast of fresh air, and has left audiences breathless ever since.

David Sterritt is film critic for The Christian Science Monitor. He is a professor of theater and film at Long Island University, and is on the film-studies faculty at Columbia University. His books include *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) and *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi, 1998).