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BREATHLESS

FRENCH (1960).* *Original Title: "A BOUT DE SOUFFLE"* (Out of Breath). AN SNC PRODUCTION. Released in the U.S. by FILMS AROUND THE WORLD. Producer: GEORGES DE BEAUREGARDE. Director: JEAN-LUC GODARD; Under the Supervision of CLAUDE CHABROL. Screenplay: JEAN-LUC GODARD; Based on an Original Story by FRANCOIS TRUFFAUT. Photography: RAOUL COUTARD. Editor: C. DECUGIS. Sound: J. MAUMONT. 89 Mins.

Patricia Franchini JEAN SEBERG
Michel Poiccard JEAN-PAUL BELMONDO
Liliane LILIANE DAVID
Inspector DANIEL BOULANGER
Parvulesco JEAN-PAUL MELVILLE
Berrouiti HENRI-JACQUES HUET
Used Car Dealer CLAUDE MANSART
Editor VAN DOUDE
Informer JEAN-LUC GODARD

Synopsis

Michel Poiccard is a young Frenchman with no visible means of support. Indifferently brash, completely self-centered and totally amoral, he has patterned his character after that of Humphrey Bogart's screen image, taking what he wants when he wants it. One day, while loafing around Marseille, he casually steals a car and then roars north to join his American girl friend, Patricia Franchini, a young expatriate who sells the Herald Tribune on the Champs-Elysees. En route, Michel's reckless driving brings out a swarm of policemen and, when he is finally cornered by one of them, he cold-bloodedly shoots him down. Back in Paris, he makes a date with Patricia and pays for it by mugging and robbing a gentleman in a restaurant men's room. When he learns the police are after him, he holes up in Patricia's flat and then later in the apartment of a friend. It is here that Patricia tells him that he has made her pregnant; but even this he shrugs off with casual indifference. Overcome by an impulsive fit of anger and frustration, Patricia calls the police and betrays him. Almost immediately she repents and pleads with him to leave before he gets caught. Not even the thought of death, however, can move him and he continues to linger about the house. When he finally does leave, the police are just arriving. As he runs down the cobblestoned street,

* *A Bout de Souffle* is the first feature-length film directed by 30-year-old Jean-Luc Godard, a former cinema critic who previously had directed only a few short subjects. Aided by fellow "new wavers" Francois (*The 400 Blows*) Truffaut and Claude (*The Cousins*) Chabrol, Godard made his film in four weeks at a cost of \$90,000. No actual sets were used and much of the dialogue was improvised just before or even during the actual shooting of scenes. For exterior scenes, Godard sometimes placed his cameraman in a wheelchair and pushed him through the city streets. . . . The film also contains numerous "inside" jokes: it is dedicated to Monogram Pictures, Truffaut, Chabrol and Godard himself make fleeting appearances, Miss Seberg's former husband, Francois Moreuil, does a bit as a newsreel cameraman, and there is a scene at the Orly airport in which the producer-director Jean-Paul Melville parodies a well-known French author.



BELMONDO and SEBERG

they fire bullets into his back until he falls. When Patricia reaches his bleeding body, he looks up at her, makes their secret funny face, affectionately calls her a "little bitch," and then dies.

Critique

THE N.Y. TIMES. "Powerful — not in a strong, heroic way, not in a rich accumulation of a stunning philosophy (which is what we get in a *Tunes of Glory* or one of Eugene O'Neill's plays), but in its harsh illumination of a stratum of modern young folks, who here happen to be Parisians but who might be matched in any metropolis of the Western world. They are frighteningly amoral young people. . . . They are brutally cold toward other people, have no moral scruples at all. The fellow as callously kills a policeman as he slugs and robs a victim in a gentleman's room. The lovers' tenuous attachment to each other seems little more than a plain erotic urge. They exist, but there seems no joy for them in living. They are the antithesis of human beings. Yet, on the basis of the knowledge we have from looking at certain young types in recent years — even ones who are not precisely criminal but are no less ruthless and amoral — we have to admit that these characters are undeniable. They are as accurate delineations of social phenomena as were Scott Fitzgerald's loose-lipped sports of the Jazz Age. And as played by Jean-Paul Belmondo, a bewitchingly ugly young man, and the American actress, Jean

Seberg, they come at you with terrifying power, he with the sinuousness of a serpent, she with the eerie force of a corrupted child. We have often expressed some misgivings about the obsessive interest of the French 'new wave' in matters of crime, corruption, eroticism and unsettled, unhappy homes... But we have to recognize that in *Breathless*, just as in *The 400 Blows*, *Le Beau Serge*, *The Cousins* and *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, they have got onto certain ugly aspects of life and frustration as they are and have put them upon the screen with candor and in cinematic idioms that drive them home." *Bosley Crowther* (2/12/61).

SATURDAY REVIEW. "I'll shamelessly admit that I found the picture somewhat distasteful, as well as lacking in the meanings that the French critics attributed to this improvised study of a footloose French thug... This is not to deny that the movie is an occasionally interesting experiment in improvisation, that it has original touches, among them a sometimes amusing and sometimes unsettling cutting technique that jumps one sequence into the next, with a resulting jazzy pace that suggests the jerky thought sequences of the young criminal... All this is to the good. Godard obviously has ideas about cinematic movement. And he presumably espouses a modish French neo-nihilism. In a nihilistic world (if you wish to posit it as such) why not a conscienceless criminal as hero?... The difficulty is to find Godard's intent. Is he parodying these young types? Does he see them as funny, sad, or monstrous? Or is he perhaps merely parodying other movies, with their emphasis on violence and sex... As the moony psychopath expires in conventional Monogram Pictures style from police bullets in his back he affectionately calls the girl the French equivalent of a bitch. 'What did he mean?' she asks bewilderedly. End of thriller. No old-fashioned moral attitudes or platitudes. All is a washed-up Humphrey Bogart world, a world, of course, that never existed in the first place... Godard, it would seem, has found critical safety in mixing up the real and the unreal, and by eliminating meaning. He has set a clever trap: if nothing is said, what is there to attack? So he has made an intriguing film, but let's face it, not really a good one... Miss Seberg is carefully kept a nonactress by her director, who sees to it that both her face and voice remain expressionless. Belmondo, clearly a striking new personality, has an uncommon face and what might be called a 'cute' manner. The trouble is, he's all too sympathetic; he should have been playing someone else." *Hollis Alpert* (3/11/61).

TIME. "A jaggedly abstract piece of visual music that is often about as easy to watch as Schoenberg is to listen to... But more important [is] the film's heart-stopping energy and its eye-

opening originality... Godard has achieved a sort of ad-lib epic, a Joycean harangue of images in which the only real continuity is the irrational coherence of nightmare. Yet, like many nightmares, *Breathless* has its crazy humor, its anarchic beauty, its night-mind meaning... Director Godard obviously means that some people are monsters, but quite possibly the film has an existentialist [meaning], too. The hero and his story can be seen as an extemporization on the existentialist tenet that life is just one damn thing after another, and death is the thing after that. But Godard does not pose his philosophical questions very seriously; he seems chiefly concerned with developing an abstract art of cinema, in which time and space are handled as elements in a four-dimensional collage... Noises and images, words and actions conflict or collaborate in amusing, revealing or intentionally meaningless ways. At one point the screen goes black in broad daylight while the characters go on talking - they are really in the dark. More daringly cubistic is the way Godard has assembled his footage. Every minute or so, sometimes every few seconds, he has chopped a few feet out of the film, patched it together again without transition. The story can still be followed, but at each cut the film jerks ahead with a syncopated impatience that aptly suggests and stresses the compulsive pace of the hero's doomward drive... The hero lives, like the animal he is, from second to second, kill to kill. A nasty brute. Godard has sent him to hell in style." (2/17/61).

FILMS IN REVIEW. "Bilge... The sickness of Western culture is all too well exemplified in this jejune film from France. The story is intellectual juvenile delinquency par excellence. The publicity for *Breathless* says it 'has to do with two young people whose anti-social course is, perhaps, their way of facing up to the perplexing circumstances of our times.' That is a sinister declaration.. It means that *Breathless* upholds, and promotes, the idea that theft, murder and amoral nihilism are legitimate reactions in contemporary society. Any society which abets such propaganda is doomed... Godard's directorial abilities seem to me to be rather flash-in-the-panish. He lacks intellectual and artistic integrity, but he has energy and some cinematic resource. There are pan shots that enhance verisimilitude and are a cinematographic contribution. The quick cuts in this film are also very interesting, for they prove how briefly an image need be on the screen to be effective. Except for these merits, however, Godard's direction of *Breathless* is devoid of cinematic interest. Indeed, much of his direction is infantile, especially of dialogue, some of which was made up during shooting, and much of which has the prurience of boys writing on lavatory walls ('I want to sleep with you' 'are you sleeping with him,' 'can I urinate in your sink,' etc.). Some of the action is equally adolescent - the girl dares the hoodlum to walk behind a passerby and lift her skirts up from the rear and he does so... Miss Seberg's performance is a curious and pathetic one... It seems her young Iowa face, beneath a boy's haircut, has

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become a fetich-image for the perverted of both sexes. This fact has not been overlooked in *Breathless*, especially in the bedroom scene, in which she dawdles with a man's hat on her boyish-looking head. As for Jean-Paul Belmondo, he is a not-so-handsome young Jean Gabin. He was once a pugilist, and his large nose is now flat and otherwise out of shape. His role in this film is that of the male who takes what he wants when he wants it, the irresponsible one who is so appealing to women, and the myth-image that is so useful in disintegrating a society's striving toward sexual morality." *Henry Hart (Mar. '61)*.

THE N.Y. HERALD TRIBUNE. "*Breathless* at least proves that Jean-Luc Godard is a master of the fast cut and the slow kill. At moments of action he cuts so abruptly he leaves you momentarily wondering if you missed something — and sometimes you did. On the other hand, his hero, who you know from the first is headed for a messy end, takes a long time to get there, spends most of it dealing out rather juvenile aphorisms about life and love, and then stumbles through as drawn out a demise as you are likely to see... Frankly, the film does not come to grips with its subject. Presumably this has something to do with the point it is trying to make — I think Jean Cocteau has called it 'romantic nihilism' — but at times the aloofness with which Godard watches his people seems almost a species of courtesy, a reluctance to intrude... There seems to be a general distaste for saying things out loud — one feels the over-lapping cuts at moments of violence suggest a wish they needn't be mentioned at all. And the long sequence in Miss Seberg's bedroom — it must last thirty minutes — becomes downright exasperating despite the fluency of Godard's camera angles. The finale is the neatest segment of the picture and demonstrates clearly enough Godard's talent for picture making; unfortunately, it also suggests that his story has little more than twenty or thirty minutes of vitality in it." *Paul V. Beckley (2/8/61)*.

VARIETY. "This film shows the immediate influence of Yank actioners and socio-psycho thrillers. This adds up to a production resembling such past Yank pix as *Gun Crazy*, *They Live By Night* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. But it has local touches in its candor, lurid lingo and frank love scenes... The pic uses a peremptory cutting style that looks like a series of jump shots. Characters suddenly shift around rooms, have different bits of clothing on within two shots, etc. But all this seems acceptable for this unorthodox film which moves quickly and ruthlessly... There are too many epigrams and a bit too much palaver. However, this does give a new view of a certain type of fed-up, stagnating French youth. It is picaresque and has enough insight to keep it from being an out-and-out melodramatic quickie. The film does not engender much feeling over the ironic death of the petty thug, but then the characters rarely feel anything. Miss Seberg lacks emotive projection but it helps in her role of a dreamy little Yank abroad playing at life. Her boyish prettiness is a real help. Jean-Paul Belmondo is excellent as the cocky hoodlum." *'Mosk' (Paris — 2/4/60)*.