

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Breathless 1960 Jean-Luc Godard. (1930-

STORY

In the late fifties, in France, a synergy of daring new film innovators gathered around what was becoming their independent idea-center, the journal *Les Cahiers du cinema* (1951-). It was in the pages of this cutting edge journal that a new wave of cinematographers—Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, and Jean Truffaut—were finding their voices and theorizing a new cinema, the essence of which would soon find itself called *la nouvelle vague* (The New Wave) and find itself dubbed the cinema of the *auteur* (author), to indicate the vigor with which the directors of this new cinema felt entitled to stamp their own mark on the complex material of the individual film enterprise. Whereas the literary creator wrote without paraphernalia or apparatus, from 'his imagination,' the cinematographer, complained many critics of the still new art form, created at the center of an army of colleagues and technicians, thereby surrendering the purity of art; an allegation which the theorists of *Les Cahiers du cinema* were eager to rebut, insisting instead on both the unique collective achievement of the cinema, and on the extraordinary role thereby set aside for the *auteur* himself.

Positioning. Alain Resnais (*Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959) and Francois Truffaut, (*The Four Hundred Blows*, 1959) had readied the French cinema public for new styles and events onscreen, so that the trademark actions of the 'new wavers' were to be anticipated: the stress on the camera itself as the 'stylo', the writing pen of the film; the stress within film on the history of film, the cultural baggage it brought along with it, and particularly the jazzy appropriations of American B film type flicks. Nonetheless, certain critics have maintained that Godard went farther than even these coequal innovators, in opening himself freshly to the language of the new cinema.

A plot. The story revolves around a breathless and hectic period in the life of a young Parisian thug who is, like the film director himself, an addict of American B films, and especially of Humphrey Bogart. (This American reference is consistently maintained, from the first scenes, when Michel first hits the screen, to his initial actions of stealing a car, gunning it out of town, and, when finally stopped, killing a cop and roaring off back toward the city.) Michel needs money fast and will do what he must to get it—hence the breathless. The quest drives Michel first of all to an old girlfriend, who earns her living by selling the New York Herald Tribune along the Champs Elysees; watching her dress herself, in her flat, he notes that her purse is unguarded, and crams all the bills into his pocket before her eyes come out of the dress material. And from there, stealing here stealing there, we are off.

Goal. Michel comes to discover, as one money search leads to another, that his tangible goal is to reach a certain bank agent who has a check waiting for him; all Michel needs to find is this guy, a search which, never to be completed, will occupy Michel until his soon to be completed, and by no means unexpected, death. In the interval of questing, Michel moves breathlessly from one crime through another, mugging a guy in a restroom, stealing two or three cars, and in the meantime spending enough time in bed with Patricia, the American girlfriend who sells The Tribune, to allow in a few long chats between the two lovers, on things like William Faulkner, a Renoir painting, Romeo and Juliet.

Finale. After a couple of police scrapes, from which he emerges by the skin of his teeth, Michel is turned in by a phone call from Patricia to the cops. She doesn't hide this action from him. She may genuinely consider it to his advantage. In any case Michel learns that, simultaneously with the upcoming police intervention, the bank agent is arriving outside the building with the check Michel has been seeking for. It is of course seriously too late, the cops get there first, there is a brief shoot out, after which the slain Michel staggers down the road, in between the rows of parked cars, dying minute by minute before finally collapsing, dead after a breathless quest. As he dies, Patricia stares directly into the lens, imitating Michel's Humphrey Bogart expression.

THEMES

'Americanism.' 1960's America was itself headed toward breathlessness, what with assassinations of great people, reckless war, and struggles over civil rights. Godard is a genius at picking up the translation of this American 'style' onto the streets of Paris.

Crime. A crime spree is perhaps an appropriate theme for the breathless image of a modern city, with its endless and aggressive traffic flow, and a set of social behaviors constantly dehumanized by the rush of machines. The blitheness of Michel's spree plays into the director's stress on the filmness of his film, on the fact that it is both deadly serious and an artifact, as is the world news we absorb every day.

Self-awareness. The very breathless quality, of the film before us, reinforces Godard's impression that he is creating this artifact as he 'goes along.' Is it that we do not precisely take Michel's actions seriously? They are serious actions—he kills, he steals—and yet interspersed with those actions he makes time to attend a press conference interview at the airport, and to neck his way through a film with Patricia.

Money. The quest that drives the whole film is the money Michel needs, in order to get out of town, and yet the money, which initially he thought available directly through his American girlfriend, Patricia, keeps eluding him, requiring one more step in search of it. There results a kind of grail theme, with the golden fleece always around one more corner.'

CHARACTERS

Michel is the 'main character,' breathless, reckless, indifferent to others, full of Bogart like self-imagery, dangerous. Do we find him charming or likeable? He is interesting, makes things happen around him, is in a sense simply a pastiche of behaviors and impressions, of style attitudes for which he is largely indebted to the clichés of American culture as France was currently living it.

Patricia is Michel's American girlfriend, who makes her living in Paris by hawking the New York Herald Tribune along the Champs-Élysées. Robbed by Michel, generally used by him, she strikes back against him in the end by reporting him to the police, who shoot him down in the streets outside her apartment.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MICHEL

Character Michel is a construct of attitudes, Bogartish and peeled off of the then surface of current American cinema culture—the work of the American B film industry, and of a coterie of 'fashionable' directors—Hitchcock, John Ford, Howard Hawks, even Jerry Lewis. Michel knows himself as reckless, yet pours directly ahead. As he gets closer to the beloved money he needs, in order to get out of town, we become more clearly aware that he, Michel, would not know what to do with the money if he got it. He is a dangerous cardboard man.

Parallels. For the pure atmosphere of spree, in criminal flight, one thinks of Bonnie and Clyde, and the rush that consumed them as they coursed the American Prairies, fully living the exuberance of the outlaw. Within the literary imagination, it is hard to imagine more complex criminal flight than that of Raskolnikov, in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. For guilty flight from murder we can all shudder at the inner mind of Graham Greene's Pinkie, in *Brighton Rock*; a figure acting his way straight up to the gates of Hell.

Illustrative moments

Racing. Our first shots of Michel follow him out of Paris, as he guns his stolen car outward into the suburbs, then into a woody area where he pulls over, and shortly after kills a policeman who has been following him.

Stealing. Upon returning to the flat of his girlfriend, Patricia, Michel is quick to open her wallet and steal the cash from it---as she is pulling her dress over her head, and is momentarily unable to see what he is doing.

Discussing. When Patricia gets back to her apartment, after a day hawking the Trib, she finds Michel in her bed. He is lounging, as though in the midst of a normal day---though the police are after him everywhere---and he is up for a discussion of Faulkner, American film, and the niceties of cinema stylistics.

Dying. After Patricia has turned him in, Michel finds himself surrounded by cops, and in no time staggering half dead down the street. His dying process is prolonged and almost dance like. Then at last he collapses, and in a moment carefully pulls his lids down over his own eyes.

Discussion questions

Has Godard a moral stance, as director of *Breathless*, or is he creating an artifice, inside of which he can work through aesthetic notions about the nature of film?

What is the meaning of the city, for Godard, as a setting for *Breathless*, or for his later *Le Petit Soldat*? Is the city a 'real city' or a metaphor, in these films?