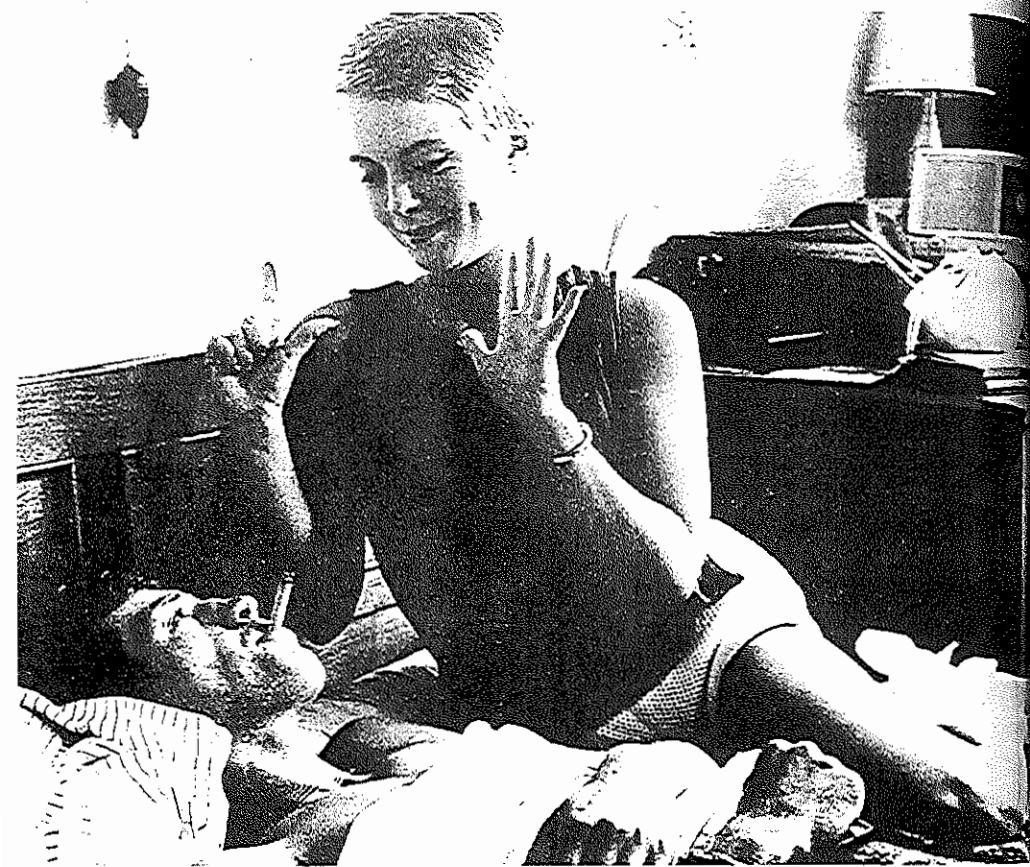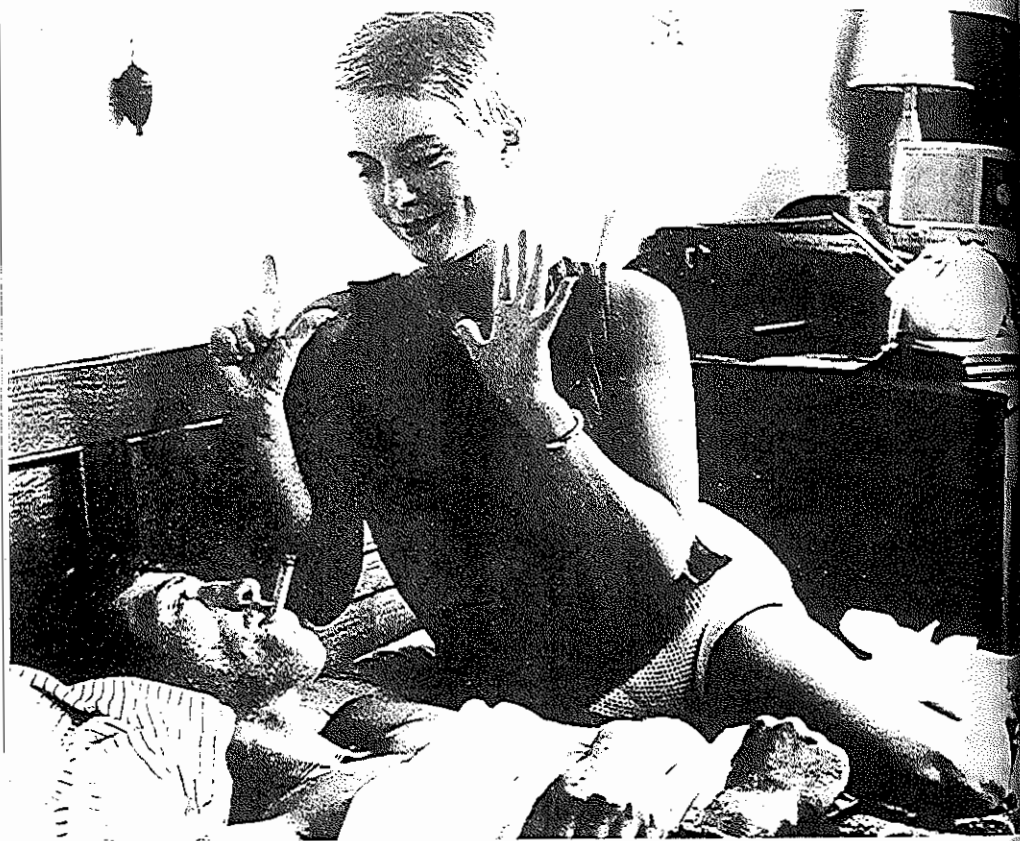# Breathless (1960)

RICHARD NEUPERT

Godard Jumps Ahead

Context

As Jean-Luc Godard likes to point out, D. W. Griffith used to claim that all you need for a film is a girl and a gun. Godard adds that when he saw Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* in 1953, he realized you could also make a movie about two people in a car, just talking (qtd. in Rancière and Tesson 34). A perfect synthesis of these two models is *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*), which owes a great deal to early film practice and 1950s aesthetic and social forces but still manages to catapult film language in new, unexpected directions. Godard's history as a film critic strongly determined his historical perspective on filmmaking. He began writing film reviews for his friend Eric Rohmer's short-lived *Gazette du cinéma* in 1950 and after 1952 for *Cahiers du cinéma*. His early reviews addressed classical Hollywood films, documentaries, and Soviet films that inspired him to write about political cinema. While many of Godard's reviews have been called "confused and badly organized" (Milne 7), and "quirky and elliptical" (Monaco 107), they were nonetheless marked by a passionate, confident, and even reckless cinephilia.

At a time when the cultural power of the cinema was rising to a near frenzy in France, reviewers like Jean-Luc Godard established their own voice by retelling cinema history from their own perspective. Godard's reviews provide a valuable context for his later film practice, and he often proclaimed that writing criticism was a form of filmmaking and vice versa: "All of us at *Cahiers* thought of ourselves as future directors. Frequenting *ciné-clubs* and the Cinémathèque was already a way of thinking cinema. . . . Writing was already a way of making films" (qtd. in Milne 171; Godard, Interview). Early on, Godard found a distinctive approach to film criticism, an approach that often opposed him to André Bazin's faith in long takes and deep-space filmmaking. For

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instance, in "Towards a Political Cinema" (September 1950), which addresses Soviet and German films, Godard already refers to images in terms from the field of semiotics, in which all meaning is said to derive from culturally determined signs, which are composed of a concrete signifier and the concept, or signified. As Godard writes in his review, "Here the idea of a shot . . . takes on its real function of sign, indicating something in whose place it appears." Godard even adds a footnote to refer the reader to philosopher Brice Parain's claim that "the sign forces us to see through its significance" (qtd. in Milne 16). His reviews combine the auteurist assumption that the director controls the film's ultimate meaning, a position common to *Cahiers du cinéma*, with an awareness that films are cultural representations built from signs, rather than faithful recordings of reality. For Godard, the film screen was never an objective window onto the world.

Another important aspect of Godard's earliest criticism lies in its "quirky and elliptical" organization. As a reviewer, Godard already leaps from topic to topic, with incredible numbers of references to literature, theater, and painting as well as movies. While able to refer to a vast array of artistic, political, and historical background information, Godard nonetheless jumbles these references together in demanding and highly subjective ways. It is quite fitting, therefore, that Godard's first feature film, *Breathless*, should be as bold as his writing style and include references to Pierre-Auguste Renoir, William Faulkner, Guillaume Apollinaire, as well as a host of other intertextual citations. There is also a brash self-confidence in Godard's film criticism that carries over into his production of *Breathless;* it is no coincidence that his first feature opened with titles composed of white block letters on a black background, similar to *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941).

French films like *Breathless* were also shaped by the upheaval and revitalization underway in all aspects of cultural practice in France during the 1950s. In 1957, the magazine *L'express* went so far as to announce that this post–World War II French generation of late teens and twentysomethings comprised a *nouvelle vague*, or "New Wave," population possessing very different perspectives from those of their parents, which was reflected in the arts as well as real-world lifestyle shifts. Thus, the New Wave was initially a journalistic slogan that prompted reporters and the population at large to look for a cinematic manifestation from this young generation. They did not have to wait long. Marks of a *jeune cinéma,* or young French cinema, were identified in sexy new movies such as Roger Vadim's *And God Created Woman* (*Et Dieu créa la femme,* 1956) and Louis Malle's *The Lovers* (*Les amants,* 1958). By 1958 and 1959, when Claude Chabrol's *Le beau serge* and *The Cousins* appeared, followed quickly by François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (*Le quatre cents coups*) and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour,* movies by Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Eric Rohmer, among others, were going into production. This burst of new *jeune cinéma* movies was labeled New Wave cinema. These first features would all be evaluated in the context of one another.

Most of the hundreds of movies that could be called New Wave—typically films by directors who had never directed a feature film before the period of 1958–64—were produced under unusual and often striking conditions. These movies were not merely new in the stories they told, but also in their mode of production and resulting styles. Typically, New Wave films were shot quickly, on location, with recently discovered, often amateurish actors and minimal crews, to reduce costs. These conditions helped determine the trend toward contemporary stories and settings. This less-industrial mode of production was also made possible by a new generation of lighter, cheaper 35 mm cameras and sound-recording equipment. *Breathless* pushed the new shooting style further, using only available light and a film stock not even meant for cinema. The resulting New Wave stories were loosely constructed art-film narratives that followed characters whose desires and goals often remained a bit confused, or at least unfocused. Further, the unpolished, sometimes disjointed film styles fit these rather chaotic, spontaneous tales of youths wandering through contemporary France.

But while the New Wave as a whole looked a bit unprofessional and even careless in contrast to classical Hollywood and mainstream "quality" French films, *Breathless* managed to stand out as one of the more extreme and challenging products of this experimental movement. As Claude-Jean Philippe explains, "It is with [*Breathless*] that the first real blows against syntax, or rather the conventional forms of film language were struck." *Breathless,* with its ellipses and jump cuts, opened up a new world of filmmaking options (qtd. in Douin 37). For such critics, *Breathless* follows in the steps of *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu,* Renoir, 1939) and *Citizen Kane* as an important marker of a new era in film history. Godard had brought his own personal experiences and

aesthetic views from the rich context of 1950s French cinephilia to produce one of the greatest films of all time during a period when many important groundbreaking films were appearing in France. The story and style of *Breathless* set it apart from much of that parallel film practice during the New Wave, and close analysis helps us rediscover some of what has made Godard's first feature so fresh and intriguing for over forty years now.

Analysis

With *Breathless*, Godard managed to synthesize his own critical concerns and revitalize the fiction film while celebrating key elements from cinema history. Part of the dynamism and loose spontaneity of Godard's story springs from its unusual development process, as Godard gradually managed to convince producer Georges de Beauregard to fund his first feature. Godard worked briefly with Beauregard, editing several travelogues and touching up dialogue on a number of scripts, before pitching the idea of a low-budget gangster film. Beauregard became interested, thanks in large part to the recent triumphs of Godard's friends Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut. Godard's story came from a newspaper article that Truffaut had noticed. Godard and Truffaut had discussed it as a possible movie idea, but only had brief notes. At Godard's request, Truffaut wrote up a fifteen-page script outline, which convinced Beauregard. That treatment reveals that while Godard took liberties with character names and some events, the overall plot structure still owes a great deal to Truffaut's summary (Andrew 153–60). Claude Chabrol served as "technical adviser," and Beauregard insisted on Raoul Coutard, a young cinematographer with documentary experience. Jean Douchet notes that Coutard brought "rough and tumble" experimental camera techniques with him (253). Godard's unusual lighting and camera-mobility demands further motivated Coutard to give *Breathless* a radical visual style. Coutard and Godard mixed documentary and fiction film tactics for a new synthesis. The film was shot quickly, August 17 to September 15, 1959, for approximately $85,000, with the largest paycheck going to star Jean Seberg, then under contract to 20th Century–Fox.

Godard's story of Michel Poiccard's three-day pursuit of money and Patricia is deeply indebted to plot devices and icons from a wide range of movies from the past, and thus analyzing it as a dialectical text poised between classical genre filmmaking and art-cinema experimentation proves very useful. As Bordwell and Thompson explain, Godard here does not criticize classical Hollywood so much as update 1940s *film noir* conventions by mixing them with a modern, self-conscious treatment. Gone are the clear plot and character development of classical cinema. Moreover, they point out that the halting plot, with a fair amount of seemingly inconsequential dialogue and action, "make Michel's story quirky, uncertain, deglamorized" (367). Much like Godard's "quirky" critical reviews, his first feature film's story leaps about in loosely connected fits and starts as it delivers bits and pieces of information about Michel, Patricia, and the fictional world they inhabit.

Breathless is a movie that boldly acknowledges its debt to other films, genres, and directors via intertextual references and quotations. Godard even dedicates it to Monogram Pictures, which made many B movies. Monogram was "famous for their ability to turn out tightly paced films on short shooting schedules and poverty-line budgets. This was precisely the ideal of the New Wave" (Cook 444). Dedicating *Breathless* to Monogram was part provocation and part tribute; so when Michel finds a pistol in the American car, Godard further demonstrates his debt to American genre films—Hollywood provides the gun and the girl (Seberg, via 20th Century–Fox). Both Dudley Andrew and Michel Marie (in *The French New Wave*) provide useful lists of genre films referred to in *Breathless,* including many gangster films. For Andrew, *film noir* is the genre that most promotes but also problematizes freedom, proving that Michel, like *Breathless* itself, struggles to escape the limits of genre (12). It is also a genre populated by exploited women and *femmes fatales* trying to survive in a man's world. Moreover, Patricia, standing over the dead Michel, echoes Ida Lupino at the close of *High Sierra* (Raoul Walsh, 1941): both are confused and shocked over the outcome. Romance and happy endings are not part of this generic world. As James Naremore notes, many European *auteurs* have reworked *film noir* self-consciously. In the process they "grounded their work in allusion and hypertextuality rather than a straightforward attempt to keep a formula alive." Godard's version includes reducing the gangster film to comic-book stereotypes (202).

Evidence of a tension between classical genre films and Godard's art-film variation can be seen in just about every scene in *Breathless.*

While the film is dotted with genre references, those scenes which would prove the very stuff of action and characterization in a classical *film noir* seem almost tangential, rarely advancing the key story events. For instance, at one point, Michel is unaware that the police inspectors have been tipped off and are close behind him. He casually exits the metro onto the Champs-Elysées and pauses before a picture of Humphrey Bogart's face, advertising his last film, *The Harder They Fall* (Mark Robson, 1956). A moment of silence follows in tribute to Bogart, who had died of lung cancer, during which a starry-eyed Michel blows smoke and says "Bogey." An iris-out ends the scene, but not before revealing that the police are right behind Michel, though they fail to see him. Thus this plot point is left unresolved; the chase is interrupted by Michel's tribute to his role model, but his idle moment does not help the bumbling police catch him.

Next, there is a fade-in on Patricia asking Michel if he will take her to dinner. But the transition produces a gap between the iris-out and the fade-in, leaving the time and space unclear; no explanation is provided about where the police are now. The pursuit is simply suspended. Michel, broke, heads down to the café restroom, where he knocks out a man to rob him, in a scene that Andrew notes is a citation from Bogart's *The Enforcer* (Bretaigne Windust, 1951) (13). But once he and Patricia are back on the street together, Michel shows no sign of the tough-guy cop killer who just assaulted a man for dinner money. Rather, he recounts the tale he read of a thief who robbed in order to have money to impress a girl, which of course is what Michel just did in the café. Michel finishes the story by explaining that the woman became the man's accomplice until they were both caught. This situation impresses Michel, as if he is providing Patricia with a blueprint for their possible relationship. However, Patricia suddenly remembers a prior engagement, so she will not be joining Michel for dinner after all. Thus, Michel's assault in the café for dinner money becomes pointless and inconsequential, because Patricia dines with another man anyway. Michel's violent act becomes a silly gesture in Godard's comic-book reworking of *film noir*. The generic bits are there, but Michel ends up less a tough thug than a cartoonish criminal crossed with a spurned lover.

This series of events is typical of the plot structure and resulting characterization of *Breathless*. Godard offers up Michel and Patricia as modified art-film characters whose goals drive the large narrative structure but whose individual actions often lead off on tangents or to anecdotal situations. For instance, Patricia goes to meet her editor from the *New York Herald Tribune*, Van Doude, and he gives her a book about a pregnant woman dying from an abortion and says he hopes she avoids the same fate. At this point we are not yet aware Patricia is pregnant, so the story seems pointless, unless her job is to review the book. At the end of the scene, Van Doude says, "You're coming with me, of course," to which Patricia replies three times, in different tones, "Of course." For spectators, it is unclear whether any or all of the conversation is important for theme or character. Patricia's line to Van Doude, "I don't know if I'm unhappy because I'm not free, or if I'm not free because I'm unhappy," explains her deep malaise in an excessively melodramatic manner. But her language seems artificial, as if Godard were suddenly mocking her naive, college-girl attitudes. That she leaves with Van Doude after saying "Of course" further causes the viewer to question her motives and ponder whether her relations with Van Doude also make her "not free." Is she with this man because she wants the writing assignments he can provide or because she actually likes him? And, is she happy to be with him in order to avoid Michel? Answering such questions is difficult, in part, because Patricia, like Michel, displays few strong feelings about what she does (Bordwell and Thompson 369). For instance, it is only when Patricia learns that Michel is a married cop killer that she says she loves him. She seems excited to help steal a car and hide out with him. But in the morning she rather inexplicably decides to call the police to inform on Michel's location. She follows her declaration of love quickly with betrayal. The film's final moments, with Patricia running to Michel shot down on the street, does not fully resolve her situation. She drags her thumb across her lips, mimicking Michel's repeated gesture: Maybe a clue, but of what exactly?

As spectators, we typically construct characters from textual cues, such as gestures, elements of *mise-en-scène*, editing patterns, and character traits, in part so we can better forge hypotheses about where they, and the story, are headed. However, *Breathless* complicates that process of expectation, often forcing us to readjust our hypotheses retrospectively. Michel, even more than Patricia, challenges attempts either to construct a unified character or to anticipate his actions. For instance, he claims his grandfather drove a Rolls-Royce and his father was a clarinet player. But none of this explains how he came to be the thug he is today,

and the ashtray of a Rolls-Royce that he shows Patricia as evidence of his love of those cars was stolen from his former girlfriend earlier in the film. He seems to make up his life as he goes. Similarly, he mentions that he is one of the few in his crowd who actually likes cops, so why was he so quick to kill one? Godard's narrator provides fragments of character only. Most puzzling is Michel's behavior at the end. Michel, who has finally arranged to receive his cash and a getaway car for Italy, decides instead to stay with Patricia, who has just betrayed him: "I'm all messed up. Anyway, I feel like going to prison." Moments later, he will be shot dead, but even at the end he makes his funny smirking gestures at Patricia, finishes his cigarette, grumbles, and dies. The story retains many gaps, and reading the events retroactively against the ending fails to fill in basic information. The only thing Michel's death seems to complete is the same ambition as that of the writer Parvalesco—to become immortal (Patricia is probably carrying his child) and then die—rather than encapsulating any trait of his own. Such narrative ambiguity in Godard's characters provides a perfect test case for how we make sense of cinematic characters in the first place and where *Breathless* frustrates easy comprehension of character motivation.

One telling result of such ambivalent characterization is the film's failure to build a consistent "structure of sympathy" that allows the audience to identify fully with Michel and Patricia. Murray Smith argues convincingly from a cognitive theory approach that viewers respond to characters in systematic ways that involve three levels of engagement: recognition, alignment, and, finally, allegiance. Recognition involves our perception of characters as "integral, discrete textual constructs" and allows us to identify characters by their physical and behavioral traits. Alignment is an active process by which "spectators are placed in relation to characters," in part by the narrative's range and depth of information, which includes which events we witness and whether we see and hear from the character's point of view or even share their mental perspective via flashbacks or dreams. Thus, we not only recognize Michel Poiccard as the fellow checking how much money he has in his hand; we then watch as he robs the man in the café. We as viewers begin to see the world through Michel's eyes as we are shown both the problem and Michel's solution. But the final stage of the structure of sympathy—allegiance—requires that spectators take a moral stand based on our understanding of the character's motivation and our

decision of whether to empathize with the character's goals and actions (Smith 81–85). Reducing Michel's assault to a cartoonish pastiche derails the process. Godard's excessive style and elliptical plot make it difficult for viewers to "identify" with Michel and Patricia as fully as we might with more generic film characters.

The plot organization of *Breathless* fails to align us consistently and restricts much of the information that could help us further understand Michel and Patricia's experiences. We witness Michel's displeasure at seeing Patricia kiss Van Doude, for instance, and get a great deal of information during the long discussions in her room the next day. However, the plot denies us other information that would help us understand their basic motivations. First of all, we never find out exactly why Michel is owed the money. If it were from some ghastly crime, this fact would certainly affect our opinion of him (and Patricia). Similarly, we never get any view of Patricia and Michel's initial meeting during her vacation. If *Breathless* provided the sort of mental subjective flashback present in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), when Bogart's Rick recalls the "good times" from the past, we might better understand Michel's obsession with Patricia as well as her reticence to continue the relationship. A final example of denied information is that the plot does not show us any of Patricia's evening with Van Doude beyond what Michel sees. Thus, while she may explain to the jealous Michel in the morning that she did not have sex with Van Doude, we, like the suspicious Michel, have no evidence. Godard's incommunicative narration playfully shifts alignment and short-term allegiance back and forth. In this same scene, Patricia is frustrated that Michel has invaded her room, Michel is frustrated over his money and jealousy, Patricia blurts that she is pregnant, and he scolds her. But the situation is still complicated by the fact that she "thinks" she is pregnant by Michel. Nothing is certain.

Godard offers a fragmented, complex, and incomplete structure of sympathy, especially in contrast to classical *film noir*. By the end, when Patricia tells Inspector Vital where to find Michel, and Michel refuses to leave and is shot in the back, any definite alignment or moral allegiance for either character has been weakened. Both seem to be acting against our expectations. But it is not only the lack of character information that complicates our ability to judge Michel's and Patricia's every action. The narrative discourse and its stylistic devices interfere with any simple structure of sympathy. As Smith explains:

One of the central actions of the story—Michel's killing of the policeman—is represented in such a discontinuous, elliptical fashion that it is impossible to make a confident moral assessment of the action and therefore, to some degree, of the character. Does Michel simply reach for the gun as the cop approaches him, and casually fill him with lead? Or is the shooting an impulsive act of desperation? . . . Godard's discombobulated montage sequences obscure rather than clarify the moral valence of the action. (215)

The visual style, and the discontinuity of the editing, in particular, disrupts further the spectator's labor of reconstructing a unified story with clear character traits, much less a conclusive sense of allegiance with the protagonists.

If *Breathless* seemed radical, even among the narrative experiments of the French New Wave, this had much to do with its editing and sound mixing. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier has famously summed up Godard's contribution:

It all begins with the disruption of a certain mode of communication. . . . Once Godard removes, in *Breathless*, all the dramatic connections between scenes, but also within a scene and even a shot, he is attacking the logical continuity and thus the completeness of the narrative itself. By cutting out transitions and explanations, he draws the spectator's attention to each image that remains . . . leading to the invention of a new aesthetic. (18–19)

The disruptive editing, and especially the jarring use of jump cuts, has invited detailed attention from critics and historians. As David Bordwell explains in "Jump Cuts and Blind Spots," 1960s *auteur* criticism was particularly interested in distinguishing authorial interventions, so the jump cuts in *Breathless*, in which a temporal ellipsis is created within what could have been a continuous shot, have figured prominently in all accounts of Godard's first feature (8–9). While the jump cuts contributed to some hostile attacks on the supposed unprofessionalism of *Breathless*, for most film historians they are one more way that Godard's film referred to cinema's past—Georges Méliès and Soviet montage directors, in particular—while repackaging it as part of a new film language.

But it is important to remember that the jump cut is one exemplary strategy among many significant stylistic innovations in *Breathless*. Godard as a critic had boldly attacked many mainstream filmmakers for their stories and styles, so he was very conscious of the high stakes in presenting his own feature. He was also aware that he was trailing just behind the first part of the New Wave: "Godard, filming after Chabrol, Truffaut, and Resnais, wanted to make *À bout de souffle* the standard-bearer of a new aesthetics, that of the French New Wave" (Marie, "'It Really Makes You Sick!'" 162). Godard saw his first feature as a chance to build on his own critical and historical perspective: "What I wanted was to take a conventional story and remake, but differently, everything the cinema had done. I also wanted to give the feeling that the techniques of film-making had just been discovered or experienced for the first time" (qtd. in Milne 173). It is worth remembering that only a few months before shooting *Breathless*, Godard had written a review of Chabrol's *The Cousins* that concluded, "When I say that Chabrol gives me the impression of having invented the pan—as Alain Resnais invented the track, Griffith the close-up, and Ophuls reframing—I can speak no greater praise" (qtd. in Milne 129). With *Breathless*, Godard seems to have set out to give the impression of rediscovering editing in particular.

Godard's overall style for *Breathless* involves the exploration of sound-to-image relations and their obvious construction and even disruption of the fictional events. Nearly every scene lays out a complex approach to narrative style. The narrator manipulates information on the micro level of individual jump cuts and musical interventions, as well as in larger scene-to-scene juxtapositions. Godard signals from the beginning that *Breathless* will provide highly overt marks of narration, acknowledging that this is all a fictional construct. For instance, while Michel is driving to Paris, he not only outlines his character's goals, he also hums continuously during jump cuts of the road ahead of him. This micro-level disruption foregrounds diegetic sound that is continuous, but an image that is discontinuous. *Breathless* reminds viewers that sound is recorded and edited separately from the image, and the final print can accommodate what would be impossible in the "real" or profilmic world. This is a movie about cinema that goes far beyond the level of intertextual references to Bogart and *film noir*, referring now to the filmmaking apparatus as well.

As Michel drives, he even addresses the camera/spectator directly. But once he breaks the traffic rules, the disorienting editing and hectic sound track assault the viewer with fast-paced pandemonium. In the eight shots that make up the seventeen-second initial chase, a police whistle sounds as the car crosses the center line; the editing gets more discontinuous, with short, jarring takes; and the music increases in volume and intensity, mixing clumsily with engine noises, a horn, and even squealing tires on the dirt road. During the disorienting montage of the chase, his car changes screen direction repeatedly, traveling right to left, then left to right, and back again. This is all further complicated by rapid pans from inside his car and jump cuts. Once on the dirt road there is a short respite as Michel opens his hood, but then, in a rather conventional point-of-view shot, Michel sees one motorcycle pass, but soon return. Suddenly, the camera work and editing seem to leap into action along with Michel as he ducks into his car. Next we hear the voice of the officer proclaim, "Don't move or I'll shoot," but the accompanying camera shot wanders down Michel's head to his arm. Michel is standing upright now, facing screen right, even though the police officer was last seen to the left. There is no reestablishing shot, and the sound track is silent for a moment, providing no cue as to what happened in that small gap. Next there is a jump cut as the camera follows along Michel's arm to his revolver and cuts in to an even tighter shot of the gun itself, and then, bang, to the falling officer. The series of camera shots overtly resembles a comic strip, with variously posed elements of a conflict. But the final one is of Michel running across a field, with the music again rising loudly before dissolving into the more lyrical theme music as the image fades to black and inexplicably fades up on Michel getting a ride in Paris.

This important sequence reveals the narrator's manipulation of the narration on small and larger levels. During the chase, the disjointed montage provides images that do not easily line up. It is unclear how long this chase took, how Michel got far enough in front of the motorcycles to turn off the highway unseen, where the second police officer ended up, or where exactly the doomed officer was in relation to Michel. The larger leap, of course, is how Michel managed to escape to Paris. It is a disorienting film style that nonetheless preserves its *film noir* milieu while violating classical narrative norms. The editing, camera work, and sound track complicate the narrative events, often denying the viewer access to everything from tiny bits of information (the middle of Michel's arm in a jump cut during a pan) to large portions of the action (the location of the second police officer).

Throughout *Breathless*, Godard's playfully overt manipulation of the viewer's comprehension becomes a consistent strategy. For instance, at the end of the nearly three-minute-long shot sequence of Michel finding Patricia selling papers and chatting with her, he exits after making plans to meet later, when suddenly Patricia runs offscreen in pursuit of him. During the entire sequence, the camera has been in a low position (with cinematographer Raoul Coutard sitting in a mail pushcart), but now loud music blares, diegetic sound is eliminated, and the camera cuts to a high-angle shot looking down on Patricia as she runs in the opposite screen direction. She stops Michel at a newsstand and seems to tell him something, perhaps changing the location of their rendezvous, and he walks off. This transition is a condensed version of the car chase: there are abrupt violations of screen direction, and the sudden music is exactly the same as that in the scene in which Michel runs across the field after shooting the officer. Moreover, after three minutes of hearing spontaneous discussions, the viewer does not hear how the conversation ends. Michel walks off, refuses to buy a *Cahiers du cinéma*, sees a man killed, reads in the newspaper about his murder of the highway patrol officer, and enters the travel agency, where the camera, again in the low cart-level position, tracks around to follow him during his conversation with the travel agent, mirroring the earlier scene's shot sequence.

Godard's narrative style emphasizes the arbitrariness of the story construction, creates permanent ambiguity, and calls the viewer's attention abruptly to the labor of signification. Throughout *Breathless*, whether in the conversations in Patricia's apartment, or when Michel steals a car while Patricia waits, or when Michel and Patricia dodge into a movie theater to hide, every shot and sequence plays with micro- and macro-level disruptions that challenge our expectations as well as the conventions of narrative cinema.

Conclusion

In the end, *Breathless* kills off Michel in a manner fitting the overall *noir* themes as well as the film's ongoing narrative inventiveness. First,

Patricia tries to explain her betrayal to Michel, during which the camera tracks around the room with her, then arcs in the opposite direction as Michel makes a sort of reply, treating them as if they were two satellites in opposed orbits. Next, Michel runs out to the street. Michel's conversation with his friend Berruti is composed from a jumble of editing devices. Further, the police arrive, but there is no establishing shot showing the pursued Michel and the firing police. Godard has assembled the basic pieces of a genre film: Michel is the doomed romantic hero, echoing *film noir* but also Jean Gabin's poetic-realist roles; Patricia is the betraying *femme fatale*; and the malevolent police detectives arrive to gloat. The pieces are there, but it is the craft of the puzzle master that finally impresses the viewer rather than any internal logic of character, theme, or closure.

Breathless lived up to Godard's hopes of becoming the standard-bearer of New Wave aesthetics. Though he never returned to exploring systematically the jump cut, Godard has managed to investigate a multitude of other cinematic techniques and narrative options throughout his amazingly productive career. His cinema revolutionized film language at a time when a few French film critics were just beginning to use new linguistic theories and vocabulary to analyze the cinema. Clearly, Jean-Luc Godard jumped ahead of other filmmakers, but also of most film critics. The legacy of *Breathless* can be seen far beyond the New Wave. It was one of those exemplary films whose imprint can be detected in a host of later films, from a variety of traditions. Films as diverse as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), and *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998) owe a debt to *Breathless*. Godard's first feature provided film studies with one of its richest texts for the simple reason that *Breathless*, like Godard, springs from cinema history itself.

Credits

France, 1960, Georges de Beauregard

Director: Jean-Luc Godard
Screenplay: Jean-Luc Godard, based on a scenario by François Truffaut
Cinematography: Raoul Coutard
Editing: Cécile Decugis
Music: Martial Solal, Mozart's Clarinet Concerto K. 622

Sound: Jacques Maumont
Technical Director: Claude Chabrol
Camera Operator: Claude Beausoleil

CAST:

Michel Poiccard	Jean-Paul Belmondo
Patricia Franchini	Jean Seberg
Inspector Vital	Daniel Boulanger
Van Doude	Van Doude
Antonio Berruti	Henri-James Huet
Carl Zumbach	Roger Hanin
Parvelesco	Jean-Pierre Melville

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