The Potency of *Breathless*

At 50, Godard's film still asks how something this bad can be so good

I first saw **Jean**-**Luc** Godard's celebrated film A bout de souffle (**Breathless**, in its English translation) in 1969 when I was 16 and ripe to fall under its spell. Part of its mystique lay in its being French and being in French, a language that I knew well enough to want to watch the movie without the subtitles, though not well enough to understand it without them. I found the protagonists attractive in an unconventional way, which was an important part of the aesthetic I shared with my generation--we were, as a group, uniformly unconventional in our tastes.

A particular source of the film's mystique for me and, I suspect, for others like me, was that it was so boring. It was hard to sit through even the first time I saw it. Of course, I had no idea then that I was bored; I was seduced by the film's apparent indifference to holding my interest--the beginning of a general trend in art which turned audience abuse into a value. If I was restless, I assumed it was my own fault. In Godard's defense, the film repaid the difficulty of watching it with the pleasure of discussing it afterward. Like an obscure philosophical text, **Breathless**, from its inception, seemed destined to inspire dissertations.

Today, an important aspect of the **Breathless** mystique is its association with la nouvelle vague, or the New Wave, which developed in France in the 1950s around a group of theoretical-minded film critics that included, most notably, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and Godard. The group purported to "see" film in a new way, anointing selected filmmakers as artists (or, in the terminology, auteurs) and championing the making of films that were, in some unspecified way, new. They did this first through theoretical exposition in the journal Cahiers du cinéma, which became the house organ for the movement, and later by becoming filmmakers themselves.

Filmed and edited in 1959 and released in 1960, **Breathless** appeared early enough to be labeled a groundbreaking New Wave film yet late enough to have antecedents in the movement. Truffaut had made The 400 Blows and Chabrol The Cousins a year earlier, and the Cahiers group had already developed an extensive if not especially coherent cinematic criticism to which the film could be referred. Godard went on to make many more films, some of them arguably "better" (a vexed term with regard to his work), but **Breathless** has remained his most famous, meaning the one most often included in introductory film courses. As we approach its 50th anniversary, now seems a good time to evaluate the fame and influence of this landmark work.

**Breathless** tells the story of a small-time Parisian hood, Michel Poiccard (**Jean**-Paul Belmondo), who finds a gun and in a moment of panic shoots a policeman. He then tries to collect money with which to flee the country, badgers an American girl to accompany him, is pursued by the police, turned in by the girl, and in the end shot in the middle of a Paris street. The girl, Patricia, is played by the American actress **Jean** Seberg.

Though simple, this plot offers plenty of possibilities for suspense, emotional expressiveness, and complex motivation. Yet the film has none of these things: there is no suspense, no apparent feeling between characters, and no rationale for action. Godard also eschews professional-looking camera work and editing in favor of a rough, amateurish style. His use of the jump cut in particular--the lopping out of unwanted material from a continuous take--has become an important part of his legacy, though its use was reportedly accidental: a cheap way to shorten the film after shooting was completed.

It is significant that Breathless achieved its greatest traction in the international market in the late 1960s, almost a decade after it was made. This was when the Hollywood studio system had broken down and foreign films had become the fashion, easily available to art cinemas and film societies. It was also a moment of intense political unrest, especially among young people. Like the jump cut, which took on more meaning in later contexts, the film's precipitating plot point--the killing of the policeman by Poiccard early in the film--took on new resonance in the wake of later hostility against the police. (Godard's personal involvement in the 1968 student revolt in Paris helped this retrospective reading.)

The film's appeal to precocious young people was heightened by its scattered allusions to highbrow art and literature. Even the otherwise dim Poiccard has occasional verbal riffs that make him sound like a philosophy graduate student. These sorts of elements, mixed with plot details (Poiccard's shooting of the policeman, Patricia's revelation, quickly dropped, that she might be pregnant), were especially appealing to the adolescent imagination.

Also contributing to the film's appeal when I first saw it was the odd flatness of its protagonists. Physically, Belmondo and Seberg are enormously attractive, but their cinematic personalities are not. Belmondo's petty delinquent Poiccard has neither heroic stature nor antiheroic pathos; he evokes neither the cool and courageous Bogart (despite his adoption of the Bogartian gesture of tracing his lips with his thumb) nor the angst-ridden, soulful Brando. Seberg's American girl, Patricia, is even more stubbornly opaque. She personifies the seductive pixie type, what the French call gamine (I immediately ran out to copy her haircut), but Patricia is entirely bereft of a discernible personality, no less a grounded sense of character. Most of us watching the film in the 1960s knew something of Seberg's backstory--that she was plucked from a small Iowa town to star in Otto Preminger's Saint Joan, a big 1957 production in which she spectacularly flopped. **Breathless** seemed positioned to compensate for that failure. But if the film gave her intellectual respectability, this cannot be credited to her acting, which is as thin and stilted here as it is in Saint Joan. The difference is that Godard uses her lack of talent as part of the disjointed, rough-hewn "style" of his film.

We are led to wonder if Seberg's weak acting and the film's general roughness are meant to be parodies of conventional acting and filmmaking. But such a diagnosis doesn't fit. Parody suggests consistent mockery in the service of a specific goal, usually that of puncturing pretension, with the immediate aim of getting a laugh. But **Breathless** is more pretentious in its low-key way than any film-noir production that it could be said to parody. It doesn't ramp up but brings down and scatters conventional elements. Belmondo's occasional imitation of the Bogart gesture is just that--a momentary and out-of-context reference. Although there are several scenes that some viewers might find humorous--Poiccard stealing money from his former girlfriend while she struggles to get her dress over her head; Patricia interviewing a pompous writer (played, as part of the films smirking allusiveness, by suspense director **Jean**-Pierre Melville); Poiccard and Patricia making love under shifting white sheets (less funny than frustrating for the foreign viewer trying to decipher the subtitles)--this humor is of the whimsical not the parodic variety.

Today we are inclined to see **Breathless** as an example of reality cinema, a style sporadically championed by critic André Bazin, a cofounder of Cahiers du cinéma in 1951 and its editor until his death in 1958. When I first saw the film, I assumed that it realistically portrayed the way people in France behave (never having lived there) and that Patricia's interaction with Poiccard was the way one acts with a lover (never having had one). But the assumptions of an inexperienced American girl do not a realistic film make. The insouciant attitude that **Breathless** takes toward its audience may encourage impressionable viewers to mistake it for realism, but there is nothing about the characters' talk or behavior that corresponds to the way people actually talk or behave, even in France.

The best way to understand the film, I now believe, is to reconsider its genre--that is, to approach it primarily as a work of ideas rather than as a work of art. The British critic Matthew Arnold, in his 1864 essay "The Function of Criticism in the Present Time," noted that art and criticism are distinct but mutually supportive genres, and that the relative merit of each may vary in different eras and in different cultures. The French, he argued, tend to be drawn to ideas, while the English distrust them, with the result that English art is often less intellectually informed than one would wish (even the great Wordsworth, he added, would have done well to read more books). A corollary, which Arnold doesn't pursue, is that French art tends to be overladen with ideas, to be more like criticism than art--an assumption that pertains well to **Breathless** (and, indeed, to much of Godard's subsequent work).

Arnold employs criticism to encompass what seem to be two distinct activities: criticism and theory. Criticism is narrower, an activity with an object (parody is a subset of it); as such, it is backward turning, concerned with evaluating and amending what already exists. Theory, by contrast, creates its own set of objects that can be used--or critiqued-by others in the future. It might be argued that **Breathless** is a work of criticism insofar as it critiques by negation the stylistic tropes and assumptions embedded in Hollywood movies. But if Godard thumbs his nose at these things, what end does he have in view? He does not appear to have the pointed aim of Bertolt Brecht, for example. He seems less concerned with critiquing bourgeois culture in this film (though admittedly, later films of his would make such attacks) than with expressing ideas. In this respect, the film resembles a work of theory.

And indeed, like a difficult theoretical text, **Breathless** seems to demand interpretation. In its aimless, uninflected characters and meandering plot we can postulate, for example, a Sartrean conception of existence without essence. In this reading, the characters not only became symbols in a philosophical matrix but also statements about the absurdity of life without a political-philosophical commitment. This reading has the added advantage of making the film conform to any political ends that the filmmaker or its audience may champion. Thus a seemingly unfocused, amoral film can be transformed, through interpretation, into an aggressively moral or political one.

By the same token, and not necessarily at odds with the above interpretation, the film can be understood through the lens of linguistic theory (the academic discipline that Godard studied before he became involved in cinema). The key to this approach can be found in the last scene: Poiccard has just been shot in the back by the police, and Patricia stands over him as he lies dying in the middle of the street. As he dies, he mutters: "C'est vraiment dégneulasse" (It's disgusting). Patricia turns to the policeman and asks what he said. The policeman answers: "Il a dit: 'Vous êtes vraiment une dégueulasse'" (He said: "You are a disgusting person"). At this, she stares directly at the camera, traces her lips with her thumb in the way Poiccard has done in imitation of Bogart throughout the film, and intones: "Qu'est que c'est: dégueulasse?" (What does that mean, dégueulasse?)

This closing sequence, unlike so much else that is random and rough about the film, is absolutely precise in its line of development. The shift from C'est (It is) to T'es (You are--the policeman presumably heard T'es instead of C'est, but used the formal Vous êres in relaying this to Patricia) is a shift from a generalized statement to a pointed accusation. It is made based on a mishearing--or a calculated miscommunication--of the original statement. Yet Patricia doesn't register the accusation because she does not know, or pretends not to know, what the meaning of the accusatory word is. Thus, the signifier, having shifted from it to you, now shifts again from you to the adjective dégueulasse, much as the gesture of tracing the lips has shifted from Bogart to Poiccard and now to Patricia. The meaning of these words and this gesture is thus shown to be contingent on external variables. What does the tracing of the lips mean?--no more than what the final statement means or is understood to mean, carried forward, misheard, reinterpreted from one figure to the next.

This sequence of shifting signifiers corresponds to ideas about meaning that the linguistic philosopher Jacques Derrida was developing, under the name of deconstruction, during the same period. (Asked if he had been influenced by Godard, Derrida adamantly, perhaps too adamantly, denied it.) Deconstruction maintains that meaning is a matter of always shifting contingency: continually deferred and remade, from signifier to signifier, in perpetuity. In deconstructionist terms, then, the film's sloppiness becomes a value, a way of exposing both the arbitrary constructedness of past meaning and the opportunities for making new meaning in the future. The former is what Matthew Arnold would term criticism; it constitutes the political dimension of the film insofar as it critiques what has been done in the name of cinema, society, capitalism, or whatever. The latter is the theoretical dimension, the film's way of demonstrating what is possible if one lets loose from old constraints and assumptions.

It is the theoretical dimension of **Breathless** that has made it so important in the history of cinema, where it stands as an improvisational workshop for cinematic ideas. Filmmakers as diverse as Robert Altman, Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese, and Quentin Tarantino have borrowed these ideas and deployed them in the service of their own aesthetic ends. Some of these ideas were intended by Godard to be new; others were accidental and became useful in new contexts. Regardless of intention, the film was a site where ideas were introduced and played with. Matthew Arnold argued that great art generally follows periods of great criticism and the latter lays the foundation for the former. In this sense, Godard's film can be viewed as the critical antecedent to a new era in which movies were freed, for better or worse, from the constraints of classic Hollywood cinema.

Acknowledging the influence of **Breathless** is, however, different from granting it aesthetic value in its own right. I continue to be bothered by the way some critics insist on referring to it as emotionally compelling and to its stars as delightful and charming. Such statements seem to be the result of a kind of sentimentality, examples of bad faith that undermine the possibility of assessing aesthetic quality in an authentic way. Matthew Arnold noted that it is better to have good criticism than bad art, and I would argue, similarly, that it is better to acknowledge a work as good criticism (or theory) than try to rationalize it as good art.

If **Breathless** set in motion a juggernaut based on a kind of misreading of what it was, it seems fitting that its original title was mistranslated for English consumption. A bout de souffle does not mean **breathless**, with all that this suggests of delight in the face of beauty or novelty. Rather, it means at the end of breath, at the last gasp. The mistranslation serves as a kind of metaphor: From a last gasp we got a new beginning.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): **Jean** Seberg and **Jean**-Paul Belmondo: no suspense, no apparent feeling

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