

Jean-Luc Godard and *Breathless*

Introduction

Jean-Luc Godard is an icon of post-modern intellectual discourses which rely on his work to legitimize many key concepts and illustrate the departure of art from modernism. In a way, he is the only one living filmmaker to enjoy the status of a film philosopher rather than a film director. This stalwart genius who vehemently interrogates the very idea of individual genius is now paradoxically a demigod for many experimental filmmakers across the globe. In other words, he is a filmmakers' filmmaker.

Learning Objectives:

To enable the learner to:

- i. To understand the role of Godard in the evolution of contemporary cinema
- ii. To watch and analyse *Breathless* as a representative film of the French New Wave
- iii. To familiarise with the cultural, social and political contexts of Godard's films
- iv. To provide the theoretical backdrop for appreciating experimental cinema

Life and Career

Jean-Luc Godard was born in 1930 in Paris to wealthy parents of Franco-Swiss descent with aristocratic roots. The Protestant faith of his cosmopolitan family in a predominantly Catholic France and the elite circles around his mother and father who was a physician, made his childhood privileged and distinct. His family moved to Nyon, a French bordering small town in Switzerland, when he was four years old and Godard attended school there living a life of high mobility and affluence. As he stated in an interview, at the age of thirty-three, "There are Godards like there are foxes" his bondage to the family was so strong and strange simultaneously because he said it when he was estranged from the family (MacCabe). This ambivalence since childhood is formative in the artistic career of Godard because he was an aberrant child who defied the rules of nobility and stole the expensive books of his grandfather to sell to the second-hand book sellers, not for money but for adventure. Such a childhood of rebellion against elitism permeates his work and so demands our understanding of the personal history of Godard especially as he says: "I have a feeling that I'm not asking for power or riches or anything, because I had more than plenty until I was fifteen. More than anyone. It was very different from Truffaut, for example." The affluent life around the lake *Lac Léman* moving between France and Switzerland was disturbed slightly in World War II; but thanks to the Swiss neutrality the Godards spent time at peace. In 1941 Godard entered the Collège de Nyon which offered excellent education for the elite in classics, art, music and science. Jean-Luc was a noted skier at school but played the fool occasionally where the male-female segregation existed in class rooms and in school dramas till 1945.

In 1945, after the end of the War Jean-Luc entered Lycée Buffon in Paris leaving his parents who were parting slowly and a subject of gossip till their divorce in 1952. His life as student collided with his education in the cine-clubs of the capital. But the family was unaware of his passion when they heard about his failure in exams and saw him as a black sheep. In 1948 he returned to Switzerland after failing in the baccalaureate. Next year he went to Paris and

joined a boarding school for retest and passed the exam. He estranged himself from the world of formal language and etiquette in the family and caricatured the family members for their bourgeois hypocrisy in his self-made books. Cinema was not yet his chosen art, he painted a lot and his mother organized an exhibition of his paintings in 1949. The same year he registered at Sorbonne for a certificate in Anthropology but did not attend classes and luckily, he could understand the intellectual trend of the time by his exposure to structural anthropology. Jean Rouch began his series of African anthropological films at that time and Godard frequented the film circles and visited Cinetheque a museum like facility founded by Henri Langlois and Gerges Franju in 1936 for housing and screening films. That was like a film school for young Godard.

1950 is an important year in the life of Godard because his father closed his clinic and went to the USA with the children where Jean-Luc started a long journey to South America that had a big impact on his mind. But his parents arranged him a job in a Swiss construction company and thereafter he joined Swiss television service in Zurich where he was jailed for theft from his own employers. His father got him out of jail and persuaded him to go to a mental hospital specialising in psychotherapy. This episode created a serious may be final break with the family and after returning from the hospital he joined the construction company again and saved his wages for his first film, a documentary on the construction of the dam at La Grande Dixence entitled '*Opération 'béton'* (Operation Concrete). In the meanwhile, Godard with Maurice Schérer a literature teacher and writer (took the pseudonym *Éric Rohmer* for his mother would have been shocked for his connection with cinema) and Rivette, founded the short-lived film journal *La Gazette du Cinéma*, which saw publication of five issues in 1950. He wrote short but powerful articles on films under the pseudonym *Hans Lucas* in this journal. It was a time when film was looked upon as a medium and rejected by the champions of high culture and the journal struggled for the status of cinema as a great art form. For this goal the journal published a short text by Paul Valery and a long lecture by Jean-Paul Sartre "Why the Cinema is not a Bad School". Godard wrote in every issue about films like Jean Genet's masterpiece *The Song of Love (Un Chant d'amour)* to Hollywood classics. In his writing the influence of Andre Bazin lights each word and an ideology of film as a revolutionary art underscores. When Bazin and his friends founded the journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1951 Godard became a young film critic contributing reviews and articles regularly.

Godard made a short film *A Flirtatious Woman* in 1955 in Geneva. Richard Bordy says, "His three short films of 1957-58 are not cinema but a substitute for cinema. In effect, they are conceptual gags that allowed Godard to exercise his powers of verbal invention". When Claude Chabrol left his job in the publicity department of Fox film production company he invited Godard to receive the post. This was a turning point in the life of Godard and his friends. Chabrol had began his *Les Cousins*, (The Cousins) Truffaut was preparing for *The 400 blows*, and Rivette was busy working for *Paris Belongs to Us*. Godard tried all means for making his own film. That was the beginning of a new generation of film makers known later as the French New Wave who emerged dramatically out of their hard labour and persistence for a cinema of anti-capitalist politics that might deny the semioticity of the genre with director as auteur/ author. Pierre Braunberger produced the short film *All the Boys are Named Patrick* directed by Godard. Another short *Charlotte and Her Boyfriend* followed this.

In 1959 all his Cahiers friends were in Cannes Festival, an indigent Godard in Paris desperately sought money and "borrowed" from the till of the journal for making his journey to Cannes. There he met Truffaut and Chabrol and started working on a story once discussed

with them called *Breathless* which later became the first feature directed by Jean-Luc Godard. Georges de Beauregard financed and made possible the long-deferred dream of Godard. *Breathless* became one of the great milestones in the history of cinema. It was the beginning of an extraordinarily prolific career followed by success after success.

For the sake of study, we can divide the films of Godard into four periods:

New Wave Period (1960-1967) comprising *Breathless* (1960), *The Little Soldier* (1961), *My Life to Live* (1962), *The Carabiniers* and *Contempt* (1963), *Band of Outsiders* (1964), *A Married Woman* (1964), and *The Chinese* (1967) as the culmination of his political statement through the medium followed by a more sensational and abstract *Weekend* (1967) in which Karl Marx was famously placed with Jesus Christ. *Breathless* is the most celebrated film from this period and we can discuss more about it later. *The Chinese* might be considered as a departure from the obviously interior world of individuals that was explored since *Breathless* for a direct focus on politics. The familiar world of relationships and conflicts within individuals evolved into a chaotic reality of social unrest and political uncertainty through these films. In other words, Godard started from the ABC of bourgeois film sensibility and denounced it completely for an inconvenient depiction of truth following the anti-war movement in the time of American invasion of Vietnam and the Marxist aesthetics of the time.

Revolutionary Years (1968-1979) Godard's movies like, *The Joy of Learning* (1968), *Film Like Any Other* (1968), *British Sounds* (1969) *Wind from the East* (1970), *Struggle in Italy* (1971), *Everything is Well* (1972), *Here and Elsewhere* (1974), *Number Two* (1975) belong to the Revolutionary Years phase. Among these films *The Joy of Learning* is an instance of Godard's philosophy of making political films politically. He began the shooting of the film before the events of 1968 and finished it just after the end. Referring to Fredrick Nietzsche's *Gay Science/ Joyful Wisdom* (1882) this film discusses the existential angst of modern world and travels beyond the limits of cinematic realism for a deeper philosophical debate with the viewers. The director engages the spectators in an intimate conversation leaving behind the story of Patricia and Émile.

Cycle of Video Experimentation (1975 onward) from *Number Two* in 1975 Godard experiments with video as a tool that produced a number of works like *Everyman for Himself* (1980), *Passion* (1982), and others. *History of Cinema* (1980-1998), a monumental work that took almost two decades to finish is the most important work among them. It is an overarching essay on the history of images, sounds, music, art and literature. Collages and superimpositions portray ideas and impressions with documentary style comments and interviews in this experimental series. The advent of video art, video installations and digital art could transform the very concept of video in recent times and Godard might be a significant contributor.

Recent Contemplative Period since 1980s to the present the work of Godard takes a more contemplative turn crossing the aesthetic of his own explicit political style. He is speaking both philosophy and politics in a more subtle and self-reflexive fashion. David Sterritt called it subjunctive cinema "in which every important gesture, each image, sound, cut, superimposition, and so on- is less a link in an expository chain" (35). Instead of conveying something, everything is in a process in these films that question and revise both the films and the filmmaker. *Hail Mary* 1985, *New Wave* (1990), *For Ever Mozart* (1996), *Film Socialism* (2010), *3X3D* (2013), *Goodbye Language* (2014) and *The Image Book* (2018) are

best examples to grasp the dialogue Godard started with himself and later with his fans. His inexhaustive passion to divulge the complex depth of human mind in a more complex cinematic language and the exhibition of his mastery over the medium might distract even his admirers from these recent adventures. But Godard goes on without a halt even at the age of eighty eight.

By itemizing Godard's oeuvre so neatly we may miss the unconventional trajectory of his career that resisted all categorization in all possible means. This includes his many shorts, docufictions and documentaries not to mention yet to be named experiments with film making. Formalistic look at his works reveals them in a collision between realism and formalism in 1960-1968 as in films such as *Breathless* and a phase of making political films politically with Jean-Pierre Gorin and Dziga-Vertov group-a collective of far-left artists in 1968-1975 and a mystical turn since 1976 for a more personal cinema. The more experimental ways of looking at himself developed by Godard are attempts to write his own biography with others' words.

Breathless (1960)

Godard's *Breathless* appeared in a time of drastic changes in sensibility throughout the world. As historian Eric Hobsbawm stated, 1960s was the decade of cultural revolution across the world leaving behind the bitter experience of World War II. Culture rather than economy or politics per se took the centre stage of debates across the world. This cultural turn gave birth to Beat generation in the USA, New Wave in French cinema, Rhythm & Blues and Soul in music and witnessed the emergence of Third World in political ideology. In the domain of philosophy existentialism achieved almost the status of a religion or way of life as Jean-Paul Sartre as the high priest and prophet. All these points are important in understanding the movie *Breathless* and its director Godard because these are not mere undercurrents but the substance for both.

Originally titled *À bout de souffle*, meaning "end of breath" or "being winded" travelled to English speaking countries as *Breathless*. Even after six decades of its release, *Breathless* is the most widely known and frequently seen work of Godard (Sterritt 39). In terms of cinematic syntax, the jump-cuts, character asides, breaking the eyeline match in continuity editing and characters addressing the audience with thoughts, feelings, and instructions *Breathless* ruthlessly shattered the realist traditions. But it could create a large group of fanatic fans everywhere and as Michelangelo Antonioni said it divided cinema history into pre-Godard and post-Godard.

The story is based on a scenario by Truffaut. Richard Brody says, "His original plan had been to use Truffaut's story outline and merely add dialogue to it. Instead, he remodelled the entire story, reconfiguring the action, adding and subtracting characters, and drastically shifting the emphases." *Breathless* opens by showing the front page of Paris Flirt, a newspaper, on it the ad image of a girl in skimpy dress holding a doll, who resembles the heroine, and the words "So I am a son of bitch", "After all, it's got to be done. It has to", obviously spoken by the decadent existentialist hero, a white machismo with a large cigar in mouth. His name is Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo), a rascally Parisian who loves France and living on stealing cars, a seducer rogue with lots of connection but few friends. David Sterritt continues, "Looking directly toward the camera, he surveys the scene around him and lifts his hand to his mouth, rubbing his thumb across his lips in a nervous back-and-forth motion...Later we'll learn that this thumb-to-lips gesturer is borrowed from the tough-guy

persona often adopted by Hollywood star Humphrey Bogart...” (57). Michele’s self is the product of cinema at least in terms of his movements and gesture. This “cultural kleptomania” is revealed when we realize that he is a Bogart fan. The cinephiles and the fandom everywhere consciously or unconsciously model their lives on cinematic characters and images and this process makes cinema a social force.

In the following scene Michel steals a car with the help of a woman and starts his flight from the scene without giving any attention to the woman. This disregard to fellow creatures is the essential part of his loner existence that turns into a disregard to his own self and life in the end. When a police officer on motorcycle chases him for overspeed Michel shoots him and flees on foot into the open fields of countryside. In the following scenes we see him meeting Patricia who sells newspaper but wants to be a writer for the New York Herald Tribune that she sells. When he persuades her to come with him for Italy, she is in confusion and Michel sees another woman and steals money from her. Next, he tries in vain to find an underworld guy who owes him money. Then he visits Patricia in her place and sneaks into her room like a peeping Tom. Following is a twenty-six-minute sequence that takes place in the room mostly showing Michel and Patricia in their own world of making love, teasing, sleeping, waking up and talking about love, life and other things. When Patricia reveals that she is pregnant Michel receives it with cold heart and the same numbness continues in the face of the blaring headlines announcing he is wanted for murder. First Patricia helps him hide from the police but she turns him in when the detectives hint at her deportation and criminal charges. This takes place in very familiar film noir surroundings in a friend’s studio where they found a new hideout. Patricia calls the police when Michel goes out for buying food but warns him afterwards, probably out of love or guilt. Again, the chasing starts. The heart throbbing speed of the action and camera verité sequences make his fleeing live. But he is shot in the back and dies in the street, closing his eyes with his own hand under Patricia’s blank gaze.

The above gist of the action illustrates best Godard’s own often quoted critique of Hollywood citing Griffith that goes like “all you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun”. The fact of the matter about *Breathless* is quite contrary to this storyline. Raoul Courtyard’s supple cinematography, using a hand-held Arriflex camera and the score by Martial Solal that cites from Mozart, Bach etc, and the visual quotes from Bergman, Samuel Fuller, Fritz Lang along with allusions to William Faulkner, Dylan Thomas, Rilke, Maurice Sachs, use of paintings by Auguste Renoir, Paul Klee make something extraordinary in the history of cinema. Right from the unusual dedication that is to Monogram Pictures a production company, Godard begins his play with the medium. Elliptical editing i.e. cutting the time of action from real time and making shorter sequences, jump-cuts in which two sequential shots of the same subject are taken from camera positions that vary only slightly creating the feeling of a jump in time, and the self-reflexive cameo appearance of Godard and another French director Jean-Pierre Melville as a writer are some of the frequently explored points. Long shots such as Michel and Patricia strolling on the boulevard and too short sequences like the killing of the cop collate to form a visual experience unsettling our coherent perception. Jean Seberg’s acting that invited criticism from many reviewers was the advent of a new melancholic style. “Godard appears to be entranced with Seberg as Michel is with the character she plays”, writes David Sterritt (40). Concerning script later Godard said, I write the scenes while having breakfast at the Dupont Montparnasse” or there was no script before the shoot. “This idiosyncratic scripting produced a particular on-screen result. Godard’s spontaneous method deliberately frustrated the actors’ attempts to compose their characters in any naturalistic or psychologically motivated way... In effect, Godard’s actors were quoting Godard. Rather

than becoming their characters, they were imitating them (Brody101). Instead of directorial instructions on acting he asked his actors to enter a café or a phone booth and exit without paying etc. for a more spontaneous acting. In other words, the actors imitated characters not living them or identifying with them. Similarly, the locations in Paris remain intact in the film. Even though the expression is a cliché now, Paris is a character in the film and Godard conceived it that way. The concept of flaneur, the bondage between characters and urban spaces as consumers of the built environment is visible throughout the film. When we watch Michel use the freshly bought newspaper for shining his shoes we realize the extent of American consumerism that conquered French culture of the time and the trashing of print modernity of Europe.

Conclusion

Breathless is not just a movie that changed the French film of the time. Its echoes reverberated world cinema for many decades and even today it attracts film enthusiasts. By exhibiting the seamy side of film as a medium it started a new language for self-reflexivity. In line with the New Wave's idea of cinema as a phenomenon of intelligence *Breathless* kept an array of allusions, citations and codes beyond the obvious. "Become immortal and then dies" is the wish of Patricia. This film remains immortal and unwilling to die!

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Film

(With a very useful intro by Michelangelo Antonioni)

<https://vimeo.com/81983482>

