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Film History and Aesthetics 110

April 18, 2013

### Breathless: A Jazz Solo of Choreographed Improvisation

One of the most influential films of the French New Wave is Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*) of 1960. The thesis of this paper is how Godard artistically and intelligibly communicates with the viewers the style of his film through symbolic movements, phrases, and characters in a self-reflexive manner. This paper will explore several major elements that contribute to Godard's influential film making style. First, is the unique mind-set Godard shows while approaching his film making process which directly targets his reference to cinematic history. The second aspect to be analyzed is intersection of French New Wave cinema with the historic elements of Italian Neorealism. The paper will describe the two styles of film making followed by an example of the implementation of the techniques used in *Breathless*. The third key point is Godard's artistic use of symbolism through specific actions of the actors. Finally, the paper will conclude with an analysis of two major scenes that truly illustrate strong support of the thesis. Within these scenes, the phrases and movements of characters are metaphorical for the stylistic elements of the film as constructed by Godard.

As one of the major film makers of the French New Wave—Godard—created films that always involved some form of auto critique or interrogation of cinema itself. He tends to break down the cinematic conventions to expand film as a medium to pursue intellectual, artistic, and

often political self-expression (Cook 450). Godard is quoted during an interview with Bertrand Tavernier of *Sight & Sound*, “Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed. I think of myself as an essayist, producing essays in novel form or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them” (Thompson 28-31). *Breathless* is considered to be a hallmark of Godard’s craft.

Through understanding the past techniques and motivations of film makers earlier in history, the New Wave directors incorporated their film knowledge to further emphasize their power as director to “manipulate all aspects of his medium” (Cook 445). There is a sense of control New Wave directors portray within their films. Certain elements in the film, *Breathless*, clearly remind viewers that the director is in fact controlling the process behind the camera as an artist. What is unique about Godard as a director is his strong awareness of cinema history. He refers to his film making as creating cinematic essays by consciously placing elements of history within them (Thompson, 28-31).

A prime example of historic referencing is how Michel’s character is largely influenced by Humphrey Bogart. During the scene where Michel stands in front of the theater, he stares into the picture of Bogart as Bogie for his latest movie, *The Harder They Fall*. Michel removes his sunglasses, puffs smokes towards the picture and deliberately swipes his thumb across his lips again, as if to signify, yes, this is a strategically planned moment. Again, *Breathless* shows the director’s control of the medium and Godard’s incorporation of his cinema history knowledge.

The next major element that contributes to Godard’s intelligent incorporation of cinema history knowledge is the understanding of two major film styles. The 1960 film is a self-reflexive

work that clearly performs an intersection of French New Wave cinema with the historic elements of Italian Neorealism. Nearly twenty years before *Breathless* was created, Italian cinema began a movement evoking the art of capturing social reality within film. This movement of film technique—known as Neorealism—was theoretically founded by Zavattini in 1942 (Cook 258). Italian Neorealism film makers aimed to illustrate reality in its most natural form. This is achieved through reducing the formal elements of the cinematography and through utilizing non-professional actors with improvisation of script, natural lighting, and shooting ordinary situations of daily life outside of the studio (Cook 259). As Cook describes in the text, *A History of Narrative Film*, Italian cinema is, “one that would take cameras out of the studios and into the streets and countryside to probe the lives of the ordinary men and women in relation to their environment” (Cook 259).

There are several examples of how hints of Italian Neorealism glisten into the setting and character behavior within *Breathless*. Major aspects of Neorealism are portrayed by the scenes that are often shot along the cobblestone streets of Paris and several shots along the countryside as Michel speeds along the road. The character behavior shows the influence of Neorealist improvisation during the lengthy scene in Patricia’s bedroom where the two lovers casually banter in a light hearted almost charming sense. In general, there is a relationship between fiction and reality, and in *Breathless*, the relationship is between New Wave and Neorealism. *Breathless* exhibits aspects of Italian Neorealism, yet this particular film is one of the most influential works of the French New Wave.

Nouvelle Vague, translated as New Wave, rose from primarily the group of directors who were known as the generation educated in film history. In contrast to Italian Neorealism, the French New Wave films are consciously crafted through characteristic techniques. *Breathless* includes nearly every cinematic element of this age such as a rather shaky handheld camera shot on location with natural lighting and often an improvised plot and dialogue (Cook 445). The prominent editing technique is definitely rough and mismatched jump cuts even within the same shot (Cook 445, Thompson 28-31). While viewing the film through a cinematic technique lens, the continual jump cut techniques create a montage of unsmooth transitions and ever-changing frames.

As briefly mentioned before, *Breathless* contains nearly every major aspect of New Wave cinema. To describe an example of New Wave techniques, midway through the first segment of the film, a particular scene clearly illustrates the jagged jump cuts French New Wave. Within the sequence, Michel is driving a long-highway in the French countryside via a stolen car. The camera is capturing a point-of-view from the passenger's seat including angles facing Michel at eye level as well as views of the scenery outside the car and roadway. As Michel chatters on, the editing jump cuts from him talking, to sections along the road and passing other cars at high speeds. This French New Wave style of editing could be interpreted as a technique to illustrate time progressing.

The same scene illustrated Godard's technique to gain depth of this character, Michel as he talks to himself and the audience. He introduces the location by saying, "I like France," then continues to develop his character by pulling out a gun casually hinting at his thug behavior and

rambles of women in a sexually objective manner. Within this conversation, Michel's character breaks the fourth wall by speaking directly into the camera. Typically, film portrays a "three-wall environment" and the fourth wall is transparent which the audience views through (Lauzen, Deiss 379-386). The characters normally act unaware of the audience making no direct comments to them (Lauzen, Deiss 379-386). According to a study conducted in 2008 on breaking the fourth wall, behind-the-scenes story tellers may prompt the character to speak directly to the audience which allows characters to reveal their inner thoughts, emotions, and become more relatable to the viewers (Lauzen, Deiss 379-386). In *Breathless*, this method helps viewers understand Michel's laid-back yet dangerous personality. By breaking the fourth wall, viewers may gain more empathy for him before his troublesome yet charming behavior expands.

The next key element that draws self-reflexivity within the film is symbolism. The actors communicate with the viewers through symbolic movements and character development to convey the style of the film itself. Symbolism is the suggestion of the expression and representation of a certain meaning. There are multiple symbolic elements within *Breathless*. For example, during the opening scene, Michel is reading a newspaper with a picture of a scandalous woman on it and says, "After all, I'm an asshole." The first reveal of his physical character frames Michel's upper body as he arrogantly stares down the brim of his nose out from under his hat shadow. To further emphasize his too cool vibe, he puffs smoke out and intentionally swipes his thumb across his full lips. The lips symbolize sexual tension and the beginning of a common reminder that Godard is directing the performance.

Analyzing the symbolism on a more abstract note, Michel's suave character is symbolic and represents the style of the film itself. Both Michel and the style of the film as a whole are hip, sexy, are relaxed with a sense of ease while creating trouble and havoc. The jump cuts and shaking hand held camera is similar to Michel's ruckus thug behavior. The intelligent reference to film history throughout is a nod to Michel's witty tongue. Overall, there are many aspects of symbolism within this film.

The final arguments of this paper will discuss an in-depth interpretation of two scenes which fully support the film's self-reflexive capacity as a whole. The performance of the actors is symbolic in itself representing the intersection of Italian Neo Realism and French New Wave cinema styles. An intersection of French New Wave technique and Italian Neo Realism occurs especially during the lengthy scene in Patricia's bedroom. Here the two lovers lounge around casually bantering with each other of love, literature, death, and music in a quite charming manner (Scott). First, Michel stares into the mirror watching himself make three distinct faces as actors do before performing. This symbolizes and communicates with the viewers that indeed Godard is directing a performance. What is unique about this scene is how the realistic elements of natural lighting, improvised acting (as if non-professionals), and a common social situation such as light hearted bed room talk illustrate a reference to Italian Neorealism tied to the control of Godard's direction. As a result, this tie brings forth a delightful set that appears very natural. The natural acting makes this scene quite beautiful.

The next aspect analyzed within this scene is the strategically planned and metaphorically structured phrasing during the characters' lines. Mid sequence, Patricia is framed while

comparing her beauty to the girl in a poster as Michel declares, “When you’re scared or surprised or both at once, there’s a funny glint in your eyes. I wanna sleep with you again, because of that glint.” The message from this exchange of words to the audience is Godard expressing the beauty of what is natural and real. The natural beauty of Patricia is special and the natural beauty of realistic acting is beautiful. As the Encyclopedia of Empiricism states, “perceptual beauty is the soul’s recognition of its own nature in the forms, and intelligible beauty is just the nature of the forms themselves.” *Breathless* contains both perceptual and intelligible beauty. Michel says, “Funny...I can see myself in your eyes,” and this statement refers to the soul’s recognition of its own form reflected by another. Cinephiles may experience this feeling of natural beauty by relating to the performers of the films.

To further support the claim that the actor’s phases are metaphorical for the film’s style is within the same bedroom scene. As the camera floats around them, Michel tells Patricia, “It’s better to tell the truth in poker. The others think you’re bluffing and that’s how you win.” This comment refers directly to the formal elements of the scene. The performers act natural and realistic within the controlled and planned outcome of the sequence. In the final moments of the bedroom setting, Michel consciously swipes his lip again which implies sexual tension and communicates to the audience “we know we’re performing, but don’t call my bluff.”

Fast forwarding from the casual bedroom setting, Godard exudes a conscious and deliberate scene construction within the final act. This final sequence is a prime example of French New Wave cinematic techniques. The first element of the artistically choreographed final sequence is after Michel is shot by the police, and the camera frames him with a long tracking

shot straight down the Paris side street. As described in *Film Quarterly* of 1961, *Breathless* is “fascinating as a cinematic jazz” (Cohen). The French jazz escalates rising in crescendos as Michel stumbles to the rhythmic notes in a near dancing fashion. With a 180 degree view change, the frame cuts to Patricia following him shown with a reverse tracking shot in front of her. The music downturns to a fluttery measure similar to her running gate. This exchange of music and character frame continues until Michel collapses, rolls over, spits his cigarette out, and police feet circle his head. A trumpet sequence plays that signifies trouble throughout the film. Silence fills the screen with a close up of Patricia covering her face and emotion with her hand.

During the final seconds of the film, Godard uses a handheld camera and cuts to a frame of Michel staring at Patricia. He makes the same three distinct acting faces from the bedroom scene as if to say, “I know you were performing, but so was I.” After an exchange of few words, he takes his hand, pulls it over his face to shut his eyes and sleeps for good; the typical movie death. At this point, Patricia actually breaks the fourth wall herself by staring directly into the camera. This mere expression acknowledges the presence of the audience (Lauzen, Deiss 379-386). She slowly draws her thumb across her lips as Michel always did, across the top then full circle across the bottom lip. This symbolizes the end to their sexual relationship, as characters, and the end of a conscious film performance.

The casual movie goer may ponder this film as a love story, crime story or simply a thin film noir—one depicting the darker side of human nature—but Godard defies conventional expectations. *Breathless* is well-constructed and full of symbolic elements much deeper than one may suspect. It is a film that is self-conscious and taps into a reservoir of past references which

truly makes the director's love of other movies quite evident (Scott). Godard creatively incorporates the ideals of Italian Neorealism within nearly choreographed scenes of his French New Wave style film by planning to use improvised and natural moments. Concluding from the supporting analysis of *Breathless*, the most compelling message of this film is how Godard artistically and intelligibly communicated with the viewers the style of his film through symbolic movements, phrases, and characters in a self-reflexive manner. A bout de soufflé directly translates to at the end of breath, so the last gasp of air or *Breathless* is actually the beginning of the French New Wave.

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*The methods for abstract interpretations of the film have in part been inspired through the lectures of:*

*Film History and Aesthetics – Dr. Cunningham and Professor Desilets*

*Literature – Professor Heimbürger*