



## TCM BREAKFAST CLUB SCREENING

### Breathless (À bout de souffle) | 1950

Directed by Jean-Luc Godard

Jean-Luc Godard's first feature-length movie, perhaps the most explosive influence in La Nouvelle Vague - France's cinematic New Wave - remains as fresh and invigorating as when it was first released nearly half a century ago. He co-wrote it with François Truffaut, and it was released the year after two other seminal works, Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. This eye-popping triumvirate announced

to the world that something new and exciting was happening to French films. Characterised by jolting jump cuts and hand-held camera shots, the bold visual style and editing on display in *Breathless* proudly owed nothing to Hollywood, or, indeed, any other school of cinema. TCM writer David Humphrey describes a movie that broke all the rules and introduced groundbreaking styles and techniques that today are accepted as commonplace.

Ever the innovator, Jean-Luc Godard did not work from a completed script but instead wrote scenes in the morning and filmed them that day, giving the actors their lines as the scenes were being shot to create a crackling spontaneity. What we see unfold is a story built around Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) a two-bit thug who models himself after Humphrey Bogart. After stealing a car, he guns down a policeman who has followed him onto a country road. Penniless and on the run from the police, he seeks help from his American girlfriend Patricia (Jean Seberg), a student and would-be journalist, who sells the New York Herald Tribune on the streets of Paris. She agrees to hide him and the pair spend their time evading the police and hiding in her apartment, while he tries to raise the cash to get to Italy. Eventually, she betrays him to the police, and Michel confronts his pursuers in the street.

Breathless makes constant references to films and to Godard's work as a critic, with the chief allusion being to Bogart, hugely popular in France three years after his death at 57. Michel's constant lip-rubbing takes its cue from Bogie, and in one scene we see him gazing at a poster of the screen icon. Meanwhile, when Patricia hides from a detective in a cinema, a passage from *The Maltese Falcon* can be heard in the background.

The whole movie was shot on a hand-held camera on a miserly budget of \$50,000. It was filmed entirely on location in Paris, with Godard occasionally pushing the cinematographer around in a wheelchair (an idea filched from Jean-Pierre Melville, who had

used the same thrifty technique in *Bob le flambeur* (1955) and *Le Silence de la Mer* (1949)). In one sequence the camera was even positioned in a mail trolley on the Champs Elysees as it followed Belmondo and Seberg. Godard dedicated the movie to Monogram Pictures as a tribute to the B-movie American gangster flicks he idolised as a young man and which he regarded as superior to the staid products of the mainstream French studios in the 1940s and 50s.

With filming completed, the rough cut was found to be around two hours long, or 30 minutes longer than what was required for commercial release. Rather than delete whole scenes or sequences, Godard decided to trim within the scene, and thus, totally unintentionally, devised the jagged cutting style which has become a hallmark of today's action movies. Far from a conscience attempt to create a new style of editing, this was a case of Godard simply snipping out anything he thought boring. A revolution in thinking? Hardly, but it must be near the top of the list in *Great Accidental Moments in Film History*.

Further reading: *Jean-Luc Godard* by Douglas Morrey (Manchester University Press); *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at 70* by Colin McCabe (Bloomsbury); *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible* by David Sterritt (Cambridge University Press).

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