



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

BREATHLESS (15)

Director: Jean-Lud Godard

Starring: Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean Seberg

France, 1960, 1 hour 30 minutes, French + English subtitles

As the Criterion Collection introduction to this painstaking, expensive 4k restoration put it: "*There was before Breathless and after Breathless. Jean-Luc Godard burst onto the film scene in 1960 with this jazzy, free-form, and sexy homage to the American film genres that inspired him as a writer for Cahiers du cinéma. With its lack of polish, surplus of attitude, anything-goes crime narrative, and effervescent young stars...Breathless helped launch the French New Wave and ensured that cinema would never be the same.*"

On the face of it, *Breathless* is an unremarkable hard boiled gangster film, famously dedicated to Monogram Pictures, an American studio known for producing low-budget 'B-movies' and film noir series in the 1930s - 50s on Hollywood's Poverty Row. Jean-Paul Belmondo plays Michel Poiccard/Laszlo Kovacs, a cop killing thief, womaniser and amateur boxer, obsessed with Humphrey Bogart, on the run from Marseilles in Paris, who meets up with Patricia Franchini, an elfin New York Herald Tribune street seller played by Jean Seberg. Over the course of three days and two nights the movie recounts the story of his increasingly desperate, and ultimately doomed, attempts to find enough money to escape to Rome before the police ultimately close in. Godard said "I was looking for the theme right through the shooting, and finally became interested in Belmondo. I saw him as a sort of block to be filmed to discover what lay inside." Of Seberg, on the other hand, already a star in the making through her work with Otto Preminger, he said "...*(she) was an actress whom I wanted to see doing little things which amused me: this was the cinéphile side of me, which no longer exists.*" But *Breathless* was to rehabilitate and transform Seberg's image as an awkward Hollywood starlet into an international icon of the French New Wave.

What made *Breathless* into the movie that led veteran film critic Philip French to call it "the real thing...alongside Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Picasso's *Guernica* and Welles's *Citizen Kane*" was the method of its making, from Raoul Coutard's use of short ends of high sensitivity film stock, so pushed that viewers of the rushes pronounced the resulting images "disgusting", whilst delighting Godard; shooting silently - i.e. without sound recording - and without lights, at speed on the streets and in the hotels and offices of Paris; editing with jump cuts, partly to get the finished film down to 90 minutes; and the sheer guiding genius of Godard. On release, it was an immediate success. At around that time, Godard was asked: "Do you love the cinema?" He replied: "I have contempt for it. It is nothing. It does not exist. Thus I love it. I love it yet at the same time I have contempt for it".

Notes compiled by Stephen Hopkins