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'IT REALLY MAKES YOU SICK!'

Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle* (1959)

Michel Marie

Jean-Luc Godard shot *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*) in four weeks, from 17 August to 15 September 1959, on location in Marseilles and on the 'Nationale 7' highway, but principally in various parts of Paris. His modest budget was only 40 million francs at 1959 value (50 million according to *Le Film français*), half the average budget for the period (Godard 1980, 26).

By 1959, Godard had made five shorts, the first in 1954, *Opération béton*, which he produced himself, the second in 1955 in 16mm, *Une Femme coquette.* Pierre Braunberger produced the three 35mm shorts he made for Pléiade Films: *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick, Charlotte et son Jules*, and *Une Histoire d'eau.* But by August 1959, Godard had become one of the last of the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics to embark on a feature-length film. Shortly before, Rohmer had begun shooting *Le Signe du lion* (July–August 1959), produced by Claude Chabrol for AJYM Films. As for Chabrol himself, he had just made his third feature, *A Double Tour*, which was to be released on 4 December 1959. In it, Jean-Paul Belmondo plays a friend of the son of the family, a young sponger called Lazlo Kovacs. *Le Beau Serge* and *Les Cousins* had come out on release in February and March 1959. *Les 400 coups*, François Truffaut's first feature, which had been selected for the Cannes Festival where it was awarded the prize for *mise-en-scène*, came out on 3 June 1959, followed by *Hiroshima mon amour* by Alain Resnais on 10 June. And Jacques Rivette had begun filming *Paris nous appartient* in 1958, to be finished in 1961. Godard knew that Sergei Eisenstein and Orson Welles had made their first films at the age of 26 years; he had just turned 29 years old and desperately needed to get into the swim and, like his hero Michel Poiccard at the beginning of the film, forge ahead: 'After all, I'm an idiot. After all, yes, I must. I must!' This convergence between the director's position and that of the central character was to be a determining factor in the film's rhythm. It was absolutely essential that this first attempt should prove to be the work of a master. 'Afterwards I felt nothing but terror, the terror of not being able to make another film, like not being able to get food' (Godard 1985, 16). Truffaut wrote later,

'While he was making *A bout de souffle*, Godard didn't have enough money in his pocket to buy a metro ticket, he was as destitute as the character he was filming – more so, really' (Godard 1985, 28).

A bout de souffle was produced by Georges de Beauregard. Born in 1920 in Marseilles, he was not yet 40 years old and already had five features to his credit. A former journalist, Beauregard specialized in the overseas distribution of French films, especially in Spain, which had led him to produce two of Juan-Antonio Bardem's best-known features, *Muerte de un Ciclista* and *Calle Mayor.* He then produced *La Passe du diable*, co-directed by Jacques Dupont and Pierre Schoendoerffer, then two Pierre Loti adaptations directed by Schoendoerffer (*Ramuntcho* and *Pêcheurs d'Islande*). At this juncture, Godard was editing documentaries for Pierre Braunberger and travel films for the publisher Arthaud, and he also wrote dialogues for Edouard Molinaro and Jean-Pierre Mocky, for two films that were never made. In 1958 he worked on the dialogue for *Pêcheurs d'Islande* and was present at the beginning of the shooting. His experience in editing and dialogue was to be decisive for *A bout de souffle.* Pierre Schoendoerffer had been a cameraman in the armed forces film unit, then a war correspondent in Indochina. Schoendoerffer's cameraman on his three features had also himself been a cameraman for the armed forces in Indochina, then a great reporter, and Beauregard insisted that Godard should use him for his film: it was of course Raoul Coutard.

The script for *A bout de souffle* was written by François Truffaut:

> a month after the premiere of *Les 400 coups*, he asked me to lend him the scenario of *A bout de souffle* so he could give it to Beauregard to read. It was a story I had written several years earlier. I had been following an incident that took place over one weekend and made a deep impression on me.
>
> (Truffaut, in Collet 1963, 171)

Beauregard had turned down an earlier proposal from Godard: *Une Femme est une femme*; although, in fact, Godard had published the original script of this film in August 1959 in *Cahiers du cinéma* (98), a few weeks before making *A bout de souffle.* And that same year Philippe de Broca made *Les Jeux de l'amour* based on a script developed by Godard (from an idea by Geneviève Cluny). *A bout de souffle*, as directed by Godard, is reasonably faithful to the way the narrative develops in the script by Truffaut (Truffaut, in Godard 1968, 47–9). The opening quotation from Stendhal, 'We are going to speak of dreadful things' is replaced by a dedication to Monogram Pictures, a small American company specializing in low-budget Westerns and horror films, and crime series like *Gun Crazy.* Truffaut's Stendhalian 'Lucien' was rechristened Michel, the name of the friend at the Inter-Americana Agency in Truffaut's version, who was renamed Tolmatchoff in the film. But most

significantly, Godard took complete responsibility for the dialogue and reworked many details of the script. The most fundamental change was the development of the very long sequence in the hotel room (more than twenty-five minutes) which was only ten lines in Truffaut's script; similarly, the second long sequence in the Swedish woman's flat was scarcely hinted at in the original text. The last change was the ending, which was much less tragic in Truffaut's version where Lucien was allowed to escape, calling Patricia names:

> Lucien is furious. But he has to get away. He starts up the car which Berruti has driven over in. From the car-door, he hurls insults at Patricia. The last shot shows Patricia watching him drive off, not understanding a word because her French is still not good enough.
>
> (Truffaut, in Godard 1968, 49)

According to Truffaut,

> Jean-Luc chose a violent end because he was by nature sadder than I. He was in the depths of despair when he made that film. He needed to film death, and he had need of that particular ending. I asked him to cut only one phrase which was absolutely horrible. At the end, when the police are shooting at him one of them said to his companion: 'Quick, in the spine!' I told him, 'You can't leave that in.' I was very vehement about it. He deleted the phrase.
>
> (in Collet 1963, 174)

Michel Poiccard is played by Jean-Paul Belmondo. In 1959 the actor was 26 years old. From 1953 to 1956 he had been a student at the Conservatoire d'Art Dramatique in Paris. He then joined a little theatre company with Annie Girardot and Michel Galabru. In 1955 he had a part in a film about Molière (by Norbert Tildian) and began to appear in comedies: *Sois belle et tais-toi, A pied, à cheval et en voiture.* He made an impression as one of the gang in *Les Tricheurs*, but Laurent Terzieff was the star of the film. In a review of *Un Drôle de dimanche*, Godard was highly critical of both screenplay and actors:

> The script is lamentable, so are the actors. . . . but you can't save much of a Serge de Boissac script with Bourvil, nor Jean Marsan dialogue with Cathia Caro. With Jean-Paul Belmondo you just might, since he is the Michel Simon and Jules Berry of tomorrow; even so this brilliant actor would have to be used differently and elsewhere.
>
> (Godard, in Milne 1972, 99)

This is what Godard did himself by giving the actor the central role in his short film *Charlotte et son Jules*, dubbing it with his own voice:

> For Jean-Luc's friends, there is something particularly precious in this film, in that Belmondo, who was doing his military service, was dubbed in by Jean-Luc. Jean-Luc's intonations make this little film more moving, less relaxed than it would have been had Belmondo dubbed himself.
>
> (Truffaut, in Collet 1963, 170)

The theme of this little sketch is well known. Charlotte returns briefly to the home of her old boyfriend (her 'Jules'), who proceeds to bombard her with words, in turn scornful, moralizing, protective, loving, begging, not allowing Charlotte to open her mouth, until the final moment when she confesses that she has come back to fetch her toothbrush. This film, dedicated to Jean Cocteau, and a real homage to the film-maker Guitry, prefigures in more than one way the manner in which words function in *A bout de souffle*, especially Michel and Patricia's two long parallel monologues; and it was fortunate that Godard was able to use Belmondo again for his first feature rather than Jean-Claude Brialy, the eponymous hero of *Tous les garcons s'appellent Patrick*, who was considered briefly for the role of Poiccard (Salachas 1960, 8).

Jean Seberg, twice Otto Preminger's leading lady, in *Saint-Joan* and *Bonjour tristesse*, was the only possible choice for Patricia. Godard declared on many an occasion,

> For some shots I referred to scenes I remembered from Preminger, Cukor, etc. And the character played by Jean Seberg was a continuation of her role in *Bonjour tristesse.* I could have taken the last shot of Preminger's film and started after dissolving to a title, 'Three Years Later'.
>
> (Godard, in Milne 1972, 173)

There is a certain physical resemblance between Jean Seberg and Anne Colette, the heroine of Godard's two previous shorts who was dressed like Patricia in a T-shirt with horizontal stripes, and had ultra-short blonde hair and a rounded figure. In a letter to Pierre Braunberger written during the shooting of *A bout de souffle*, Godard wrote,

> I would like to be the only person to like this film, I'd like everyone [except Melville and Anne Colette] to detest it. . . . Even the film stock, you'll see, will be breathless. Seberg is panicking and wishes she hadn't agreed to do the film. I start shooting with her tomorrow. I'll say goodbye because I must work out what to film tomorrow.
>
> (in Braunberger 1987, 184)

The atmosphere of the shooting was fairly tense. Seberg was at her wits' end and Jean-Paul Belmondo felt as if he was working on an amateur silent film. The technical crew were not very enthusiastic either.

> At the rushes, the entire crew, including the cameraman, thought the photography was revolting. Personally I like it. What's important is not that things should be filmed in any particular way, but simply that they should be filmed and be properly in focus. My main job is keeping the crew away from where we're shooting. . . . On Wednesday we shot a scene in full sunlight using Geva 36 film stock. They all think it stinks. My view is that it's fairly amazing. It's the first time that the maximum has been expected from film stock by making it do something it was never intended for. It's as if it was suffering from being pushed to the limit of its possibilities.
>
> (in Braunberger 1987, 183–4)

Raoul Coutard has given a lengthy explanation of Godard's technical requirements involving the use of Ilford H.P.S. film stock which he usually used for photographic journalism in natural light (Coutard quoted by Courtade 1978, 277). Godard refused artificial light; he also refused the machinery of the studio. 'If we used a hand-held camera, it was simply for speed. I couldn't afford to use the usual equipment, which would have added three weeks to the schedule' (Godard, in Milne 1972, 173). But why all these technical innovations, why this intransigence towards the dominant practices of French cinema in 1959, to the point of using a type of film stock hitherto used only in photography and which had to be spliced end to end in rolls of 17.5 metres? It was because Godard, filming after Chabrol, Truffaut and Resnais, wanted to make *A bout de souffle* the standard-bearer of a new aesthetics, that of the French New Wave of 1959. His film was to explore a hitherto unknown continent in the aesthetics of cinema, smash the boundaries of the conventionally 'filmable' and start again from scratch:

> *A bout de souffle* was the sort of film where anything goes: that was what it was all about. Anything people did could be integrated in the film. As a matter of fact, this was my starting-point. I said to myself: we have already had Bresson, we have just had *Hiroshima*, a certain kind of cinema has just drawn to a close, maybe ended, so let's add the finishing touch, let's show that anything goes. What I wanted was to take a conventional story and remake, but differently, everything the cinema had done. I also wanted to give the feeling that the techniques of filmmaking had just been discovered or experienced for the first time. The iris-in showed that one could return to the cinema's sources; the dissolve appeared, just once, as though it had just been invented.
>
> (Godard, in Milne 1972, 173)

In this sense, *A bout de souffle* set out to secure a position in the history of the cinema analogous to that of the monumental *Citizen Kane*, a megalomaniac 26-year-old director's first feature and another manifesto issued some twenty years earlier in defiance of the cinema industry. The similarity between the two title sequences, or rather the absence of a title sequence in both films, confirms the wish for an explicit reference. After the dedication to Monogram, two vigorous notes of music by Martial Solal accompany the title, which is displayed full frame in white letters on a black background, foreshadowing as in *Kane* the later inserts of newspaper headlines. Welles's film begins with the death of the eminent citizen whose biography is then reconstructed bit by bit through newsreel, eye-witness accounts and press headlines. At the start of *A bout de souffle*, Poiccard is a man living on borrowed time, whose tragic progress is punctuated first by the editions of *France-Soir* and then by the neon lights flashing, 'The net is closing in around Michel Poiccard', then 'Michel Poiccard, arrest imminent', just as neon lights had announced to the world the death of the American press magnate.

First of all, everything was possible technically. The signifying potential of editing was to be pushed to the limits, in the manner of *Citizen Kane.* Godard thus did not hesitate to follow a very high angle establishing shot with a big close-up (Patricia runs to give Michel a kiss at the end of their first meeting; the next shot is an insert of a poster saying 'Live dangerously till the end', while Michel crosses the frame in medium close-up); nor did he hesitate to alternate hyper-fragmentation of the image and rapid montage (the series of shots of Patricia's face in profile in the car as Michel declares 'I love a girl who has a pretty neck, pretty breasts, a pretty voice', etc.) with a long continuous take (when Michel finds Tolmatchoff at the Inter-Americana Agency, the camera tracks back in front of them all the time they're walking, the first metaphor of the labyrinth and of the trap in which the tragic hero is caught).

Right from the beginning of the film, the 'Nationale 7' sequence ruthlessly violates the moribund codes of spatial and graphic continuity editing which were so scrupulously observed by professional editors in 1959. It cuts in quick succession between a number of rapid panning shots from side to side of the road, close-ups of the driver framed from the passenger seat or the back seat, intercut shots of the road flashing by, inserts of headlights or of the central white line which the driver transgressively crosses, up to the famous sequence in extreme close-up detailing the cylinder and barrel of the colt, with a cutaway in the opposite direction to the motorcycle cop collapsing. Godard could not have found a more devastating way of reviving the dynamics of Eisensteinian montage and the deconstruction of the revolutionary machine-guns in *October.*

At the other end of the scale, when Michel finds Patricia in the Champs-Elysées the camera tracks the couple as they walk up and down, refusing the classic shot/reverse shot alternation in order to avoid any ambivalent

identification with the characters and to underline the parallel progression of the two monologues, or rather of the soliloquy which Michel began in the opening sequence, and which Patricia's replies merely bounce off, without any real communication ever being established. The motif of the labyrinth, where two parallel paths never meet, is taken up again when Michel and Patricia find themselves in the Swedish woman's flat, the final trap: the camera follows first Michel, then Patricia, as they pace up and down the room. Michel says, 'Whenever we talked, I talked about myself, and you talked about yourself. . . . But you should have talked about me, and me about you.'

This dynamic conception of editing first and foremost has a rhythmic function. As we have seen, Poiccard, like Godard, sets the ball rolling by throwing himself behind the wheel of his 1950 Oldsmobile. The diabolical rhythm of his race to the finish must not lose its hold on the spectator, and the moments of respite based on continued takes are as breathtaking in their movement as the bursts of shots in discontinuous sequences. The important thing is to keep the pace up and not stop until the very last breath, the last grimace, when all the spectator sees of Patricia is the nape of her neck, hiding her soul, as Bruno Forrestier, the little soldier (in *Le Petit soldat*), and Nana, the prostitute (in *Vivre sa vie*), were to say.

As Michel and Patricia kiss to get their breath back, in the darkness of a cinema auditorium two voices, one male, one female, call them to order amid the pandemonium of a Western shoot-out. The man (Godard's voice) says,

> Méfie-toi Jessica.
> Au biseau des baisers – les ans passent trop vite –
> Evite, évite, évite – les souvenirs brisés.
>
> Beware, Jessica.
> With the sharp cut of kisses – the years pass too quickly –
> keep away, away, away – from shattered memories

an extract from a poem by Aragon, the alliteration of which, in French, echoes the title of the film, as Marie-Claire Ropars has indicated (1982, 59–81). The woman rejoins:

> Vous faites erreur, Shériff . . .
> notre histoire est noble et tragique comme le masque d'un tyran.
> Aucun détail indifférent ne rend notre amour pathétique.
>
> You are making a mistake, sheriff . . .
> our story is as noble and tragic as a tyrant's mask.
> No insignificant detail brings pathos to our love.

(extract from the poem *Cors de chasse* by Apollinaire in the collection *Alcools*).

A bout de souffle – above: Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo); below: Michel and Patricia (Jean Seberg).

The most fundamental innovation of *A bout de souffle* is the dialogue, which constitutes the most revolutionary use of language since the coming of sound. We know that the film was made entirely without sound. Godard edited a first, post-synchronized, version which was an hour too long. Then he decided to make cuts in the middle of sequences, eliminating particular fragments (shots of Van Doude telling a story about going to bed with some girl) or series of shots (countershots of Michel accompanying the views of Patricia, framed in profile in the car while he is enumerating her charms). This deliberate opting for visual discontinuity goes hand in hand with the general autonomy of the soundtrack, which has its own time, regardless of its links with the image. Thus, at the beginning of the film, while Michel is talking to himself at the wheel of his American car, the image track cuts between fragmented images of his journey with very obvious spatial ellipses, while the language, however nonsensical, operates in a relatively continuous way.

> La, la la, la (he hums). Buenas noches, mi amor, . . . If he thinks he's going to get past me in that bloody car. . . . Pa, Pa, Patricia! Patricia! So, I'll get the money, I'll ask Patricia for a yes or a no . . . and then. Buenas noches, mi amor . . . Milano! Genova! Roma!

Michel Poiccard is the one who is cursed, the one who brings bad luck ('la poisse'). According to the *Littré* dictionary, from the beginning of the seventeenth century, 'poissard' (Poiccard) was the name given to the slang of the lower classes. Despite the distinctive language used by Henri Jeanson and his disciples, Poiccard was the first film character to violate the refined sound conventions of 1959 French cinema by using popular slang and the most trivial spoken French. The 'Nationale 7' sequence, in itself a demonstration of what the film as a whole sets out to do, piles up sweeping examples of spoken French, of contemporary slang which was to be heard even within the intellectual microcosms of the Champs-Elysées and Saint-Germain des Prés, and of a language reminiscent of Céline, which scriptwriters in French cinema had never before rendered on screen except via the conventions of *série noire* slang. To come back a moment to the opening monologue quoted briefly above, it offers: the humming of an onomatopoeic tune, the chorus of a popular song ('Buenas noches, mi amor'), a fixed slang expression ('sa frégate à la con'/'his bloody car'), provocative pseudo-sentences and gratuitous aphorisms of an ideological nature ('Women at the wheel are the epitome of cowardice'), made-up quotations ('And as old Bugatti said, cars are made to go, not to stop'), and frequent spontaneous interjections of slang ('Yes, shit, roadworks, shit, the fuzz'). There is no point in giving more examples, the whole linguistic texture of the film is shot through with a wealth of popular and slang terms and expressions.

Through his use of language Godard was clearly showing what he had learnt from the central character of *Moi, un noir*, filmed and recorded by the ethnologist Jean Rouch at Treichville in the suburbs of Abidjan (made in 1958, winner of the Prix Louis Delluc in 1959 and released on 12 March 1960, a week before *A bout de souffle*). He wrote two very appreciative articles on Rouch's film in *Cahiers du cinéma* in March and April 1959. Jean Rouch's film portrays an unemployed youth from Abidjan nicknamed 'Lemmy Caution' and his friends 'Eddie Constantine' and 'Dorothy Lamour'; Rouch used a handheld camera to follow the half-improvised adventures of the characters. Even more remarkably, the actor Oumarou Ganda (who plays 'Edward G. Robinson') dubbed himself, improvising a monologue as he viewed the edited version of the image track. At one point in the film when 'Eddie Constantine' meets 'Dorothy Lamour' in the street, the voices are those of the two actors who improvised *a posteriori* a conversation which is very approximately synchronous with the image. Later on in the film, 'Robinson' , both narrator and character, mixes simultaneous dialogue with subjective comments added later.

> One must take it at its word when it comes from the mouth of Lemmy Caution, American federal agent and unemployed of Treichville, as he waits for girls at the church door, or tells P'tit Jules why France lost the match in Indo-China in a speech which is part-Céline, part-Audiberti, part nothing at all ultimately, because the conversation of Rouch and his characters (whose resemblance to persons living or dead is absolutely not coincidental) is as new and as pure as Botticelli's Venus, as the black rising from the waves in *Les Statues meurent aussi.*
>
> (Godard, in Milne 1972, 129)

> And when Eddie Constantine, American federal agent, is arguing with P'tit Jules in a staggering flow of words along the lines of *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, and Rouch, kneeling beside them with the camera on his shoulder, suddenly straightens up slowly and lifts *à la* Anthony Mann, his knees serving as the crane, to frame Abidjan, O! Abidjan of the lagoons, on the other side of the river, I love it.
>
> (*ibid.*, 134)

A bout de souffle even contains a direct reference to a brief moment in *Moi, un noir* which illuminates Poiccard's offhand manner when, having seen the body of the pedestrian knocked over by the Renault 4CV, he merely crosses himself and continues on his way, reading his paper. At the beginning of *Moi, un noir*, 'Robinson' is wandering through the streets of Treichville when he sees a crowd of people idly staring at a motorcyclist who has been knocked

down. He merely remarks in a detached voice, 'Oh! Another accident! There are such a lot of accidents in Treichville! Cars here last two months at the most. . . . That's why it's such a shambles.'

There can be no doubt that 'Robinson's' long monologue at the beginning of the film had a direct influence on Poiccard's soliloquy at the wheel of his car. Similarly, the constant film references in *A bout de souffle* which everyone has commented on, and which have since been detailed by Dudley Andrew (1986, 11–21), the reworking of American B movie *film noir* (the homage to Bogart, the posters of *The Harder They Fall*, the quotation from *The Enforcer* when Poiccard knocks out the customer in the toilets, the sound-track and photos from *Whirlpool*, etc.) originated in the fanciful imagination of Rouch's young Africans who identified with American *film noir* actors and their parodic French imitations to such an extent that they had only assumed names: 'Eddie Constantine', 'Edward G. Robinson' and 'Dorothy Lamour' never use any other name, whereas when Poiccard finds himself face to face with the picture of Bogart, he murmurs to the actor's nickname (Bogie) but retains his own identity.

In *A bout de souffle*, Godard was exploring every facet of verbal language. So far, the opening monologue and the false dialogue which characterizes the confrontations between Michel and Patricia have been discussed. These examples alone do not do justice to the wealth and diversity of the verbal material used in the film. First there are the innumerable literary, cinematographic, pictorial and musical quotations exchanged by Michel and Patricia; then there are the little stories that Michel recounts, like the one which Van Doude also tells about the bus conductor who had stolen five million francs to seduce a girl, obviously a *mise-en-abyme* of the film ('I'd known this girl for two years', etc.). There is a play on the variety of different languages: the international Americanese that Michel uses ('As you like it baby'), the odd words of Italian ('ciao', 'buon giorno') and Spanish ('amigo', 'buenas noches'); stereotyped plays on words ('Maintenant, je fonce, Alphonse!'), alternation between the formal and the familiar words for you ('tu' and 'vous'), the use of ambiguity and misunderstanding ('qu'est-ce que c'est dingue?' 'qu'est-ce que c'est dégueulasse?'). To sum up, *A bout de souffle* is a tragedy of language and of the impossibility of communication.

This allows us to tackle the question of the subject which Godard talks about in relation to the film:

> *A bout de souffle* is a story, not a theme. A theme is something simple and vast which can be summed up in twenty seconds: vengeance, pleasure. A story takes twenty minutes to sum up. *Le Petit soldat* has a theme: a young man is mixed up, realizes this, and tries to find clarity. In *Une Femme est une femme*, a girl wants a baby right away. In *A bout de souffle* 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. Seberg, on the other hand, was an actress whom I wanted to see doing little things which amused me.
>
> (Godard, in Milne 1972, 177)

However, it is easy to sum up the 'subject' of *A bout de souffle* in the way that director did for *Une Femme est une femme.* A young small-time hoodlum and car thief goes up to Paris to find the young American girl he is in love with, cash a fat cheque and leave with her for Italy. But this synopsis merely reduces the subject to the initial situation of the story, the hero's 'project'. When Poiccard hot-wires the car to get it started in the first few seconds of the film, he sets in motion an infernal machine. The goal of his quest is his desire to sleep with Patricia again. As soon as he finds her, he says quite clearly, 'Are you coming to Rome with me? Yes, it's stupid, but I love you . . .' and later, 'Are we sleeping together tonight?' Before that, he refuses the more or less direct advances of several dark-haired young women: the girl on Marseilles' Vieux Port who asks him to take her away with him, his former mistress whom he wakes up at seven o'clock in the morning. Just as he makes the observation that the two girl hitch-hikers are not fanciable enough, he finds the colt in the car glove compartment, after switching on the radio for a few moments to let us hear Brassens' famous song 'Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux'/'There is no such thing as happy love'. Immediately afterwards, Michel defies destiny by shooting at the sun, and this playful act evokes both the revolver shot fired at the sun by the German engineer at the end of the first part of *Le Tigre du Bengale* by Fritz Lang (released in France on 22 July 1959) and Meursault getting blinded by the sun on the Algerian beach at the beginning of Camus' *L'Etranger.* Indeed, quite unconsciously Poiccard is defying the gods and performing an absurd act, since it is destiny which pulls the trigger at the end of the cutaway travelling shot framing the barrel of the colt.

Michel's stations of the cross are marked by the signs of destiny. When Patricia offers him the *New York Herald Tribune*, he refuses it because it does not have a horoscope; throughout the film, once he has left Marseilles, he keeps asking the time, making telephone call after telephone call, buying the paper, then lighting up cigarette after cigarette, like the hero of *Le Jour se lève*, imprisoned in his hotel room and also destined to die in a hail of police bullets (although he shoots himself in the end). Patricia, the object of his desire, a little girl with a handbag and a teddybear (another obvious reference to Carné's film) is the agent of destiny. The caricature of her in the opening shot (the 'pin-up' on the issue of *Paris-Flirt* that Michel is reading) indicates as much right from the start: Michel *'must'* go on until death. When she goes to ring the police at the end of the film, she in her turn buys *France-Soir* and goes past a kiosk with a woman selling lottery tickets who calls out, 'Your lucky day! Try your luck, buy a ticket!' As for Michel, he commits act after

act of provocation as if they were gratuitous acts proving that he was free to exercise his freedom; but 'between sorrow and nothingness' he knows that he has chosen nothingness. He knows that destiny is waiting for him at the end of the road (rue Campagne Première) just as Godard knew that he had to get to the end of the film, to keep going come what may. Poiccard's death, despite the concession made to Truffaut, is still agonizing: the camera follows Michel's crazy attempt to run down the street until he collapses on the pedestrian crossing, murmuring with his last breath and with a last grimace, 'C'est vraiment dégueulasse'/'It really makes you sick'. Here Godard is making a direct reference to the spectacular death-scene of a character in *Man of the West* which he had just reviewed, under the title 'Super Mann', in *Cahiers du cinéma* (1959, 92). It's the death-scene of a dumb man, a member of the gang led by a megalomaniac old bandit played by Lee J. Cobb, who makes his way down a seemingly endless street in the middle of a deserted village with a bullet in his back, as Poiccard was to do, until he finally collapses, uttering his first cry and drawing his last breath as he does so.

A bout de souffle was to be Godard's first cry, the only one in his long early career to be heard by a fairly large public: almost 260,000 people saw the film in seven weeks of its first run in Paris from 16 March 1960. Poiccard knew that he was playing double or quits, as Patricia says. He also observes near the end, 'I'm fed up, I'm tired, I want to sleep'. As for Godard, he was to move on immediately to an even more personal second film, *Le Petit soldat*, and despite the fact that the film was completely banned by the censor until 1963, in 1961 he was able to direct the film he had first proposed to Georges de Beauregard, *Une femme est une femme.* Since then he has never stopped making films, even in the 1970s when he decided to adapt the technical conditions of his projects (16mm films, video) to the nature of his discourse. He's still not breathless.

Translated from the French by Carrie Tarr

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For other works on Godard, see bibliographies in Chapters 12 on *Le Mépris*.

Appendix

Jean-Luc Godard (1930–): filmography

1954 *Opération béton* (short)
1955 *Une Femme coquette* (short)
1957 *Une Histoire d'eau* (short)
1957 *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick* (*All Boys Are Called Patrick*) (short)
1958 *Charlotte et son Jules* (short)
1959 *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*)
1960 *Le Petit soldat* (*The Little Soldier*)
1961 *Une Femme est une femme* (*A Woman is a Woman*)
1961 *La Paresse* (sketch)
1962 *Le Nouveau monde* (sketch)
1962 *Vivre sa vie* (*It's My Life* [UK]; *My Life to Live* [USA])
1962–3 *Les Carabiniers* (*The Soldiers* [UK]; *The Riflemen* [USA])