



OUTLAW CINEMA: HOW THREE PAIRS OF “FUGITIVE LOVERS” CHANGED THE COURSE OF MOVIE HISTORY

BY EDDIE MULLER

FOR A GLIMMERING MOMENT in the anything-seemed-possible 1960s, Jean-Luc Godard was going to direct *Bonnie and Clyde*. To screenwriters David Newman and Robert Benton, it made sublime, subversive sense. They were devotees of Godard's *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960), the most startling example of France's *nouvelle vague*, the whirlwind of filmmaking innovation that blew from the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* magazine to touch aspiring directors all around the world. Newman and Benton, feature writers for *Esquire*, were so invigorated by Godard's film (as well as François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*, 1960, and *Jules and Jim*, 1962) they wanted to create a cinematic storm of their own, this side of the Atlantic. In much the same way American Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg) infatuates young Parisian gangster Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) in *Breathless*, the cinephilia of late fifties' Paris crossed the Atlantic to inspire these impressionable, ambitious New Yorkers.

What was it in Godard's revolutionary work that Newman and Benton wanted to bring to America?

Above all, attitude. Beyond its revelatory revamping of film technique, the lasting legacy of *Breathless* is its hoped-up depiction of untethered, disaffected youth. Its underlying existential philosophy—the only meaning in life is in the living itself—is recklessly, but lovingly, grafted onto the skeletal structure of 1940s noir films cherished by Godard and Truffaut (who wrote *Breathless*'s story). Newman and Benton sensed the rising of a restless youth culture in America, and grafted their representative take on callow, rebellious outlaws onto the Depression-era tale of bandits Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow.

Secondly, they wanted to emulate the *nouvelle vague* style, to bring something bold and bracing to American films. In *Breathless*, Godard had done for the language of cinema what the Beat poets had done for literature—liberate it from the tyranny of tradition for tradition's sake. Like the Beats, Godard's work angered and inspired in equal measure, a sure sign that it was breaking new ground. Bosley Crowther, resident critic-curmudgeon of the *New York Times*, sniffed that “sordid is really a mild word for [the] pile-up of gross indecencies” that comprised *Breathless*.

Truffaut read an early draft of Newman and Benton's *Bonnie and Clyde* script, and met with the writers in 1964, when he was in New York to interview Alfred Hitchcock for his book, *Hitchcock/Truffaut*. He arranged a screening of an American film that he believed should inform their final draft: *Gun Crazy* (1950). Truffaut suggested his colleague Godard—who was at the screening—should direct. Godard, ever the guerilla-director, quickly offered a rapid-fire shooting schedule. The





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LEFT TOP: *Breathless* (1960).

LEFT BOTTOM: *Gun Crazy* (1950), from a color lobby card.

BELOW: *Breathless* (1960).

enthusiasm was a shotgun blast at the old guard, exemplified by Crowther of the *Times*, who detested *Bonnie and Clyde* even more vehemently than he loathed *Breathless*. Crowther, outnumbered and outgunned, retired. A new school of ultra-hip New York-based critics—Manny Farber, Renata Adler, Penelope Gilliatt, Andrew Sarris, and Kael—took over the cultural discourse on cinema. By and large, for better or worse, they espoused the *auteur* theory of filmmaking (the director as true author of a film), an idea derived from—where else?—the writings of the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics, before they became directors themselves.

Clearly, one cannot overstate the influence of the *nouvelle vague*, and especially Jean-Luc Godard, on modern filmmaking, film watching, or film criticism.

Roger Ebert has declared “modern movies begin here, with Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless*.” True enough, but such proclamations, especially those that place the film in the flag-bearing vanguard of 1960s counter-culture rebellion, often miss something essential in Godard’s debut. The films Godard left in the dust are also what *inspired* him. Far from being a deconstructivist bomb blast, *Breathless* is a bridge between a crumbling era of studio filmmaking—one Godard revered—and the brave new world of “cinema.”

Godard dedicated his film to Monogram Pictures, a low-budget Hollywood-based studio renown for its “B” product. Too-hip critics often refer to this dedication as an “in-joke,” suggesting that the rigorously dialectical Godard was making an intellectually superior nod to cheesy Hollywood fare.



Nothing could be further from the truth. In his *Cahiers* days Godard authored many a paean to American directors who relentlessly pushed the envelope of “pure cinema” while working, commando-style, within the confines of the studio system. He understood that genre pictures—typically scorned by the critical establishment—had an archetypal simplicity that allowed creatively innovative filmmakers to flourish, like jazz musicians riffing on familiar themes. This is clearly what Godard set out to do in *Breathless*, with the familiar theme being fugitive lovers, a staple of film noir.

The mother of all love-on-the-run movies, *Gun Crazy*, had as much influence on *Breathless* as Godard’s film had on *Bonnie and Clyde*. It was the crowning achievement of the King Brothers (Maurice, Frank, and Herman), who during the 1940s produced popular low-budget fare for Monogram, such as *When Strangers Marry* (1944), *Dillinger* (1945), and *Suspense* (1946). In 1947 the Kings bought the rights to a thinly veiled reworking of the Bonnie and Clyde saga that MacKinlay Kantor had written for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Ever the opportunists, they hired pricey veteran screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, uncredited, to pen the final draft. He came cheaply, as his alleged communist sympathies had landed him on the blacklist. At first, the Kings hired Gordon Wiles, a production designer turned director (his archly theatrical *The Gangster* had been an unexpected hit for the Kings in 1947) to direct. But in the smartest move the Kings would ever make, they replaced the stage-oriented Wiles with an up-and-coming director from the B-unit at Columbia, Joseph H. Lewis.

Lewis gave the miserly Kings more visual verve per dollar than any film in history. He spiced *Deadly Is the Female* (*Gun Crazy*’s original title) with one stunning set piece after another, turning a simple and slightly cornball lovers-on-the-lam story into an exhilarating cinematic spectacle that—Production Code be damned—displayed more blatant sexual symbolism than either *Breathless* or *Bonnie and Clyde*. Lewis’s prolonged one-shot bank robbery scene (filmed by a camera on a sliding wooden plank attached to the rear of a sawed-off sedan) remains one of the most astonishing single takes in American cinema.

Lewis was an amazingly instinctive filmmaker; his direction of *Gun Crazy* is bold, dynamic, and inventive—and always in the service of the story being told. His technique is so enmeshed with the characters’ tragic trajectory that it becomes impossible to separate the story from the storytelling. It’s a stunning example of the “pure cinema” Godard championed.

Far from being a repudiation of studio filmmaking, as many critics of the time claimed, *Breathless* was Godard’s attempt to translate the exhilarating effects of *Gun Crazy* and its film noir kin to a street-level production. His breakthrough was transposing the fantasy of studio filmmaking into the real world, jumbling “cinema” and “reality” in a fresh, challenging way.

Godard wanted to emulate the propulsive movement of Lewis’s thrilling camerawork, but didn’t have time to lay track or the money to rent a dolly. Instead cinematographer Raoul Coutard held the camera in his hands and was pushed around in a wheelchair—a technique soon adopted by young filmmakers everywhere. Such allusions to *Gun Crazy* run all through *Breathless*, from the cavalier theft of (always) American cars, to the thrilling abandon of the driving sequences, to the lurking camera stuffed in the backseat like a kidnapped witness.

Then, of course, there was Godard’s most unique innovation: the jump cuts. More than anything else, it was the director’s brazen disregard for



continuity (within a scene!) that made people believe he was savagely attacking tradition. The truth, while more mundane, places *Breathless* squarely within the legacy of the low-budget “outlaw” films Godard loved, in which an abundantly creative director runs headlong into practical limitations. As he later explained: “First films are always very long. Since after thirty years [of living], people try to put everything into their first film . . . And I was no exception to the rule. I had made a film that lasted two and a quarter or two and a half hours; and it was impossible, the contract specified that the running time not exceed an hour and a half. And I remember very clearly . . . how I invented this famous way of cutting, that is now used in commercials: we took all the shots and systematically cut out whatever could be cut, while trying to maintain some rhythm.” (*Introduction à une véritable histoire du cinéma*, Jean-Luc Godard, Albatros, 1980)

Godard’s extraordinary decision was to not cut whole scenes, but rather the unnecessary bits of time *within* a scene. His longtime editor, Agnès Guillemot, has declared that “Godard is the specialist of audacity and freedom. He did not edit his films against the rest of the cinema but rather for what he thought they ought to be.” (“Entretien avec Agnès Guillemot,” interview conducted by Thierry Jousse and Frédéric Strauss, *Cahiers du cinéma*, November 1990) Godard’s love of American movies is also obvious in his casting of 21-year-old Jean Seberg, the Iowa-born ingénue whom American critics vilified for her first two performances, in *Saint Joan* (1957) and *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958), both directed by a Godard favorite, Otto Preminger. Patricia is Godard’s amalgam of noir’s most callous femme fatales, brilliantly re-imagined as a blithe 21-year-old gamine. Given Godard’s radical-left politics, one might easily read into the film’s famous final shot of Patricia’s perfectly blank face the director’s conflicted emotions about America itself: a desirable but unreliable ally—seductively innocent, but dangerously self-centered and indifferent.

In the end, the legacy of *Breathless* is that it made “rough” filmmaking acceptable. Jump cuts, lens flares, imperfect lighting, elliptical exposition—all this became palatable, rather than off-putting. Give Godard all due credit—or blame. But if you believe him a genius, just remember this: none of his radical technique would have been accepted had it not come via the timeless charisma of Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg.

If you want to make outlaw cinema—whether it’s Belmondo and Seberg in *Breathless*, or John Dall and Peggy Cummins in *Gun Crazy*, or Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde*—make sure your outlaws are gorgeous, sexy movie stars. That’s who people pay to see, and all revolutions need to be well-funded.



ABOVE LEFT: *Gun Crazy* (1950).

ABOVE: *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).

EDDIE MULLER is a well-known expert on film noir. His novel *The Distance* earned the coveted Shamus Award, and he’s a two-time Edgar Award nominee from the Mystery Writers of America. *Tab Hunter Confidential*, which he co-wrote with the actor, was a national bestseller. He produces and hosts NOIR CITY, the largest noir retrospective in the world, and is founder and president of the Film Noir Foundation.