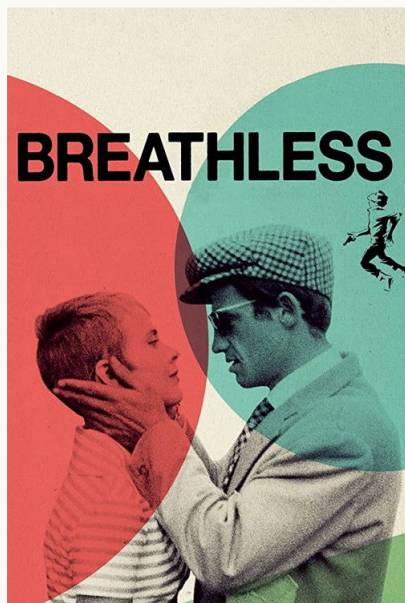




DRAMA · CRIME · ROMANCE

Breathless

1960 · Directed by Jean-Luc Godard

French New Wave

Art Cinema

Auteur Cinema

A small-time crook in Paris drifts through the city with a borrowed swagger, modelled on Hollywood gangsters, while the police close in. He spends his time trying to win over an American student who sells newspapers on the Champs-Élysées. A crime story told with a restless, improvised-feeling energy.

DIRECTOR Jean-Luc Godard

YEAR 1960

RUNTIME 1h 30m (90 min)

COUNTRY France

GENRES Drama, Crime, Romance

CAST Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean Seberg, Daniel Boulanger, Henri-Jacques Huet, Roger Hanin

MUSIC Martial Solal

IMDB 7.6 / 10 (95,230 votes)

ROTTEN
TOMATOES 95% (critics)

METACRITIC 96 / 100

TMDB SCORE 7.5 / 10 (2,097 votes)

WHERE TO
WATCH Stream (US): HBO Max Amazon Channel, Darkroom, HBO Max
Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home
Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 The film that announced the French New Wave to the world

Godard's first feature is the most famous single statement of the New Wave. It turned a low-budget street shoot into a global signal that cinema could be remade by young outsiders.

2 An editing revolution you can see on screen

Its jump cuts, which break continuous time inside a scene, looked like errors to many viewers in 1960. They became one of the most imitated rhythms in modern film.

3 Two screen personalities that define cool

Jean-Paul Belmondo's restless, lip-rubbing charm and Jean Seberg's cropped hair and ambivalence made a style as much as a story. Much of the film's pleasure is simply watching them talk.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining work of the French New Wave and the moment when the movement's critics-turned-directors proved a film could break classical grammar and still be a popular, youthful hit.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a love letter to Hollywood B-movies that is also taking the genre apart as it goes.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How scenes are cut: moments are skipped inside a single conversation or car ride, so time jumps while the action seems to continue.
- How the two leads talk. Long exchanges in a small room feel loose, circling and half-improvised, and they carry as much of the film as the crime plot.
- Echoes of American film and culture, including posters, gestures, and the way the hero imitates a screen tough guy.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

Is the hero acting out a role he has borrowed from the movies, and does the film want you to admire him or see through him?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** French cinema was dominated by polished studio films that the young critics of Cahiers du Cinéma disparaged. Godard wrote for that magazine before directing, and this was his first feature.
- **Technology:** Lighter cameras and faster film stocks allowed shooting on real streets with minimal lighting and a small crew. Sound was largely added afterwards.
- **Dominant styles:** Classical continuity editing, designed to hide cuts and keep time and space seamless, was the standard of both Hollywood and mainstream French cinema.
- **Movements:** Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and Chabrol's early films had just shown that young directors could succeed. Truffaut provided the story idea here and Chabrol served as an adviser.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

TRADITION

Hollywood B-movie crime films

The film borrows the gangster archetype and low-budget energy of American crime movies, and its dedication to Monogram Pictures openly acknowledges the debt.



FILM

The 400 Blows (1959)

Truffaut's film proved that young New Wave directors could win critical and popular success, and Truffaut supplied the story behind *Breathless*.



MOVEMENT

Italian Neorealism

Shooting on real streets with minimal means echoed neorealist practice, though Godard used it for a playful, self-aware style.



THIS FILM

Breathless (1960)

NEW AT THE TIME *It treated the rules of film grammar as optional, cutting abruptly within scenes, addressing the camera, and mixing American genre movies with Paris street life and literary talk.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in de Gaulle's France, during the Algerian War and rapid postwar modernisation, by a young critic making his first feature on a tiny budget.

- **Country and moment:** France in 1959–60 was in the Fifth Republic's first years under de Gaulle, still fighting the Algerian War, while the postwar boom brought cars, consumer goods and American culture.
- **Society and audience:** A postwar generation of young people, shaped by American films, jazz and novels, felt distant from their elders' France. The film reflects that restless, youth-focused mood and a new, casual attitude to love and freedom.
- **Politics and censorship:** Censorship was still active, and the Algerian War made state authority a sensitive subject. Films about young people who flouted the law could attract official attention.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Godard was about 29 and had been a critic at Cahiers du cinéma, after a few shorts. This was his first feature. He worked from a story idea by François Truffaut and on a small budget, with little money and no established name.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Brisk at 90 minutes, but with long, digressive conversations in a bedroom that slow the plot on purpose.
- **Style:** Handheld street shooting, natural light, abrupt jump cuts, direct looks at the camera and playful references to other films.
- **Performance:** Casual and unpolished, with a naturalness that feels improvised and a deliberate gap between acting and character.
- **Colour / B&W:** Black and white, with a grainy, documentary-like Paris.
- **Language:** French with some English. Watch with subtitles, since the language switch matters in the central relationship.
- **Aspect ratio:** Standard widescreen of the period, around 1.37:1 in many presentations.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

14+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings split, from German 16 to British PG/12A, with no US rating; 14 suits teens who can handle adult themes, subtitles and an unconventional style.

Official ratings: US NR · UK PG/12A · Germany 16 · France TP

- **Good for:** Teens curious about film history will enjoy its playful, restless style, location shooting in 1960 Paris, witty banter, film-buff references and cool, charismatic leads. It is short and brisk.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Guns and brief, sudden violence, shown in a matter-of-fact, non-graphic way. Not constant, but treated casually by the characters.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Adult relationships, sexual references and a flippant attitude to crime and consequences. Characters smoke constantly, and the film does not moralise.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** The lead's treatment of women reflects 1960 attitudes and may prompt useful discussion with teens.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Long, rambling conversations and abrupt, jumpy editing can feel disorienting or slow to younger viewers.
- **Explain first:** It is black and white with subtitles for the French dialogue, so younger children may find it hard to follow.
- **Explain first:** The abrupt jump cuts are deliberate. This is a landmark of the French New Wave, which broke the usual rules of film-making.
- **Explain first:** The main character imitates Hollywood gangster films, so his tough-guy manner is partly a performance.

Talk about it after: *>Do you think the film wants us to like its characters, and how do its unusual editing and style shape your feelings about them?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as an exploration of identity built from borrowed images. A young man lives as if he were in a gangster movie, while the world around him follows no script, and the question is what it costs to treat life as a performance.

THEMES

- **Life as imitation of cinema:** Michel models himself on Humphrey Bogart's screen persona. His poses and gestures show how film images can shape the way people want to be seen.
- **Freedom versus commitment:** His carefree drifting is set against Patricia's uncertainty about what she wants. The film asks whether freedom can survive any real attachment.
- **Love and mutual misreading:** Their talk keeps missing its target. Each seems to know the other only partly, and the film leaves their feelings ambiguous.
- **Moral emptiness:** Violence and betrayal happen without large moral reflection. The film can be read as showing a world in which action has lost its weight.
- **Americans and Paris:** A French crook and an American student meet in the city. Their cultural gap reveals postwar France's fascination with American style.

Key scenes

The opening car theft and the shooting

It establishes the film's tone in minutes: sudden violence handled almost casually, with elliptical cutting. Michel talks to himself and to us as if it were a game, and the consequence arrives too quickly to absorb.

The long bedroom conversation

This sequence takes up a large part of the film. It trades plot for mood, showing two people who circle each other with questions, jokes and games. It is where the film's real subject, intimacy and its failure, takes shape.

The Champs-Élysées street scenes

Shot with a handheld camera among real crowds, they capture Paris as a living documentary background. They helped create the New Wave look of spontaneity and made location shooting a signature of the movement.

The final chase and last words

The ending turns the genre's expected showdown into something abrupt and ambiguous. Michel's last line and Patricia's response, imitating his gesture, leave the film asking what either of them understood.

Filmmaking

- **Editing:** Jump cuts remove frames within a continuous action, so scenes lurch forward. Godard has said much of this came from needing to shorten the film, but he turned it into a style that exposes cutting rather than hiding it.
- **Cinematography:** Raoul Coutard shot mostly with a handheld camera, natural light and fast film stock. The look is rough, mobile and intimate, which suited the low budget and the street locations.
- **Writing and improvisation:** Truffaut supplied a short outline based on a news story, and Godard wrote dialogue on the day of shooting. The film feels improvised, though it is carefully shaped.
- **Sound and music:** Dialogue was recorded after filming, which gives voices a slightly detached quality. Martial Solal's jazz score adds a nervous, modern energy.
- **Direct address and allusion:** Michel looks at the camera, and the film quotes posters, names and gestures from earlier films. The effect is to remind us that we are watching a movie.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Michel Poiccard, a small-time crook who models himself on Humphrey Bogart, steals a car in Marseille and drives toward Paris. When a motorcycle policeman stops him, Michel shoots him dead and continues on, as casual as before.

In Paris, he looks for Patricia Franchini, an American student and aspiring journalist who sells newspapers on the Champs-Élysées and with whom he has had a brief affair. He also tries to collect money owed to him so that they can flee to Italy. Patricia, who may be pregnant, keeps him at a distance, unsure of her feelings and her wish for freedom.

The police identify Michel, and detectives begin to track him through the city. He moves through cafés, cars and her apartment, joking and quoting, while Patricia is questioned by the police.

Eventually Patricia, uncertain what she wants and unable to settle her feelings, tells the police where he is. She warns him, but he refuses to run. A policeman shoots him in the street, and he dies after a short run, saying a line that Patricia does not quite understand. She repeats his gesture of rubbing his thumb across his lip and asks what he said.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **A Truffaut idea:** François Truffaut supplied the story outline, which came from a news item about a petty criminal. Godard took it and rewrote it as he shot, so the film became more his own than the source suggests.
- **Shooting on the street:** The film was shot quickly and cheaply in Paris, with cinematographer Raoul Coutard working with light equipment and often in available light. This gave the film its documentary look and made the New Wave style practical.

- **Cutting for length:** Godard has said the first cut was too long, so he removed parts of shots instead of whole scenes. The jump cuts that resulted became the film's signature and a lasting editing technique.
- **Cameo and homage:** The film is dedicated to Monogram Pictures, a low-budget Hollywood studio. Director Jean-Pierre Melville appears in a cameo as a novelist being interviewed, a nod to the film's place in French crime cinema.
- **Myth:** The film was entirely improvised with no script. **Reality:** Truffaut supplied a treatment and Godard wrote scenes and dialogue on the day of shooting. It was loosely planned and spontaneous in method, but not simply improvised.
- **Myth:** Godard invented the jump cut. **Reality:** Abrupt cuts had appeared earlier in cinema. What Godard did was make them a pervasive, visible style in a feature, which gave them influence.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

TRADITION

Hollywood B-movie crime films

The film borrows the gangster archetype and low-budget energy of American crime movies, and its dedication to Monogram Pictures openly acknowledges the debt.



FILM

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Truffaut's film proved that young New Wave directors could win critical and popular success, and Truffaut supplied the story behind Breathless.



MOVEMENT

Italian Neorealism

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THIS FILM

Breathless (1960)



FILM

Bonnie and Clyde (1967)

This American crime film took the New Wave's mixture of romance, violence and stylish editing into New Hollywood.



MOVEMENT

New Hollywood

Directors such as Scorsese and Altman absorbed its freer editing, location shooting and attitude toward genre.



FILMMAKER

Quentin Tarantino

His crime films, and his production company named after Godard's *Bande à part*, owe a clear debt to Godard's genre play and talky digressions.

Reception and reputation

The film was a commercial success in France and drew strong attention internationally, though some critics found it chaotic or amoral. Many young viewers saw it as the first film that matched their own energy. Godard received the best director prize at the Berlin festival in 1960, and the film made stars of its leads.

It is now a standard reference point for the French New Wave and for modern film editing. Its once-shocking jump cuts are widely taught as an example of how form can express attitude. Its depiction of the male lead is more often questioned today, and the film is read as both homage and critique.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Seberg's look:** Jean Seberg's cropped hair, striped top and Herald Tribune sales shirt became enduring shorthand for effortless Parisian cool. Fashion writers and designers still cite the look when invoking 1960s French style.
- **Belmondo's antihero:** Jean-Paul Belmondo's Michel, with his cigarette, hat and habit of rubbing his thumb across his lip in imitation of Humphrey Bogart, made him a symbol of the insolent, self-mythologising young rebel. The pose is often echoed in later screen outlaws.
- **Seberg and politics:** Seberg's later support for the Black Panther Party led to FBI surveillance and a smear campaign against her. Her story, tied to her fame from this film, was dramatised in the 2019 film *Seberg*.
- **Remakes and teaching:** Jim McBride's Hollywood remake (1983, with Richard Gere) moved the story to Los Angeles. The original is also a staple of film courses, frequently used to introduce the jump cut and the New Wave.

Its lasting influence

Its jump cuts, street shooting and casual treatment of genre fed directly into the New Hollywood generation, including *Bonnie and Clyde* and Scorsese's early work, and into later independent and crime cinema around the world. It also established Godard's career as the leading experimenter of the New Wave.

WHAT NEXT?

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

The 400 Blows (1959)

Truffaut's debut is the other defining New Wave film, more emotional and humane than *Breathless*, and it makes a good companion for seeing the movement's range.

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Band of Outsiders (1964) COMING SOON

Godard returns to crime-film play with a trio of young misfits, extending the loose, referential style that Breathless introduced.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Jules and Jim (1962)

Another New Wave story of love and freedom, but more lyrical and tragic. Comparing it with Breathless shows two different uses of mobile camerawork and shifting tone.

SEE WHAT INFLUENCED IT

Double Indemnity (1944)

A classic Hollywood crime film of fatal attraction and doomed schemes. Seeing the American model helps clarify what Godard is quoting and what he rejects.

JUMP FORWARD

Bonnie and Clyde (1967) COMING SOON

A clear American descendant, mixing outlaw romance, sudden violence and bold editing in the style that the New Wave made possible.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Jean-Luc Godard
DIRECTOR



Jean-Paul Belmondo
ACTOR
as Michel Poiccard /
László Kovács



Jean Seberg
ACTOR
as Patricia Franchini



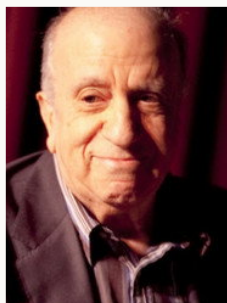
Daniel Boulanger
ACTOR
as Police Inspector Vital



Henri-Jacques Huet
ACTOR
as Antonio Berrutti



Roger Hanin
ACTOR
as Carl Zubart



Martial Solal
COMPOSER