

CHAPTER ONE



The Theory of Production

Although the mainstream cinema continues to proliferate, and blockbuster films like *The Rock* (1996) and *Twister* (1996) capture huge theatrical audiences, the cinema itself is going through a period of radical change at the end of its first century, coexisting with CD-ROM interactive "movies," video cassette and laserdisc distribution, cable television, satellite television, video games, and a host of competing sound/image constructs. While such recent films as *Virtuosity* (1995) demonstrate the limitations of interactive video systems rather than heralding a seemingly limitless figurative horizon, the 1995 production of *Mortal Kombat* is a spin-off of a wildly popular video game, and owes whatever temporal popularity it achieved as an ancillary manifestation of its source material. The *Wayne's World* films are spin-offs from the television comedy showcase *Saturday Night Live*; *Super Mario Brothers* (1995) is yet another non-interactive version of an interactive original. Low-budget films such as *The Brothers McMullen* (1995), *Clerks* (1994), *Go Fish* (1994) and other fringe enterprises may momentarily capture the public's fancy, but in every case, these productions are now seen as stepping-stones to larger-scale Hollywood films rather than individual achievements in and of themselves. The exponentially rising cost of film production (not to mention distribution and publicity) helps to ensure the hegemony of the dominant industrial vision in the

middle-American marketplace, and the super-conglomeration of existing production, distribution and exhibition entities further assures the primacy of the readily marketable, pre-sold film, as opposed to a more quirky, individualistic vision.

Theatrical distribution, the mainstay of motion picture distribution for more than a century, is obsolete. Target audiences are increasingly younger, and these viewers perceive the experience of seeing a film primarily as an escape from the mundanity of their prepackaged existences, as witness the popularity of such lowest-common-denominator films as *Clueless* (1995), *Dumb and Dumber* (1995), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Operation Dumbo Drop* (1995), and others too numerous to mention. European films are no longer distributed in America; they are remade in Hollywood, in English, with American stars—and then distributed overseas in this revisionist format. The few foreign films that attain moderately wide release in the United States are lavish costume spectacles.

As we approach the millennium, it is apparent that people today go to the movies *not* to think, *not* to be challenged, but rather to be tranquilized and coddled. Sequels are safe bets for exploitation, provided that the original film performs well at the box office; it is for this reason alone that nearly every mainstream film today is designed with an “open” ending, allowing the film to be franchised if the parent of the series captures the public’s fancy. Television has become a wilderness of talk shows and infomercials, with time so precious that even the end credits of series episodes are shown on a split-screen with teasers from the upcoming program, to dissuade viewers from channel-surfing, which is nevertheless rampant.

Psychic hot lines offer spurious counsel at \$3.99 a minute, shopping channels commodify the images we see into discrete, marketable units, “no money down” real estate brokers hope to dazzle us with their varying formulae for success. The cable movie channels run only current fare, or thoroughly canonical classics, avoiding subtitled and black and white imagery (with rare exceptions) at all costs. Revival houses screen films in only a few major cities, particularly Paris and New York. And indeed, it seems very much as if the first century of cinema will now be left to the ministrations of museum curators and home video/laserdisc collectors, rather than remaining a part of our shared collective cultural heritage.

With films so banal, is it any wonder that more adventurous viewers/auditors are turning to the internet, e-mail, the nascent world of cyberspace, in search of not only a cheap medium of expression, but also human contact? For this last is what the cinema inherently denies us; sealed in a can, projected on a screen, we watch it, and it surveils us, but the connection between viewer and viewed is gossamer thin. CD-ROM and cartridge games offer a more concrete, though still synthetic connection to the spectacle witnessed by the viewer/participant—an illusion, in fact, of control and interactivity.

The limits of this insular spectacle are striking, and the technology at present is clumsy and expensive. But the experiential horizon is there, and the strip of film that runs through a conventional 35mm projector is an archaic *aide de mémoire* of an era of puppet shows and magic lanterns. To satisfy us, the spectacle must engulf us, threaten us, sweep us up from the first. The “plots” of most interactive games are primarily simple—kill or be killed. These games achieve (at home and in the arcade) a wide currency among viewers bored by the lack of verisimilitude offered by the conventional cinema. And because of this lack, the cinema, to put it bluntly, is dying.

Would the career of a *cinéaste* like Jean-Luc Godard have been possible in our present marketplace of imagistic constructs? Denied theatrical release, relegated to the “Hot Singles” section of Blockbuster, how could any of Godard’s cheap and transcendent early films ever have achieved a global audience? The exigencies of 1960s theatrical film distribution constituted a series of paradoxically liberating strictures; for a film to make a profit at all, it *had* to appear in a theater. Other markets, with the exception of television (which ran only older films) did not exist. Thus distributors were forced to seek the widest possible theatrical release pattern for even the most marginal of films, and it is this way that Jean-Luc Godard achieved and consolidated his initial reputation in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Such a project would be impossible today. Godard’s budgets of the early period of his career—an average of \$100,000 for a 35mm B/W feature film—are also astonishing today.

Yet what is most remarkable about Jean-Luc Godard’s career in the cinema may be the fact that he has gone on making “small,



FIGURE 1. Jean-Luc Godard during editing of *Les Carabiniers* (1963).
Courtesy New Yorker Films.

personal" films, films created entirely to suit himself and his collaborators, when the rest of the industry is desperately scrambling to please the widest possible audience. Godard did away with narrative after his first dozen films; now his films and videos are visual/aural essays, meditations, created in a world removed from ordinary commerce. Yet Godard still finds backers for his films, even when the results don't always please his sponsors, and seems more dedicated to his lonely, individual vision at the age of sixty-five than he was in his twenties. Jean-Luc Godard may joke in his videos and films from time to time, but he is not an entertainer. Godard is a moralist—perhaps the last moralist that the medium of cinema will ever possess.

Indeed, Jean-Luc Godard is arguably the consummate essayist and aesthete of postnarrative cinema/video. With his first feature, *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*), made in 1959, Godard created a visual style of radical jump cuts *within* a scene that startled both audiences and critics; in 1994, working with international Euro-star Gérard Depardieu, Godard directed *Hélas pour moi* (1994), a semi-autobiographical meditation on his life and work of such personal intensity that Depardieu, unable to stand the strain of collaborating with Godard, walked off the picture after three weeks of shooting on a six-week schedule. Typically, Godard was unfazed by Depardieu's departure: he completed the film, using all of Depardieu's material that he could salvage, and later publicly complained that he got along with the famed actor "not at all. He was supposed to work six weeks. He walked out after three. The extras did more acting than he did, but without him there would have been no money" (Sarris 1994, 89). The same thing happened in 1987 when Godard created his highly idiosyncratic version of *King Lear* with Molly Ringwald, Woody Allen, Burgess Meredith, and theatrical director Peter Sellars. Originally, Norman Mailer and his daughter, Kate, were to have appeared in the roles taken over by Ringwald and Meredith; when Mailer bailed out on the production on the first day of filming, Godard used every frame of footage he had on the Mailers in the final film (repeating one scene twice by using alternative "takes"), and incorporating the story of the Mailers' defection into a whispered voiceover on the film's soundtrack.

Godard called for the colorization of his early black and white films when others were still outraged by the process; he also directed a series of controversial advertisements for Girbaud blue jeans in 1988, to support his work as a filmmaker. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Godard fervently declared himself a Marxist filmmaker on any number of occasions; now he flatly states that "I never read Marx" (Sarris 1994, 89). He has made only the films that pleased him, in the way that he wished to make them, using commercial stars like Brigitte Bardot (in *Le Mépris* [*Contempt*], 1963) to obtain financing when necessary, but never compromising his individuality as an artist. Indeed, this book will demonstrate that Godard is incapable of creating a conventional film, with the possible exception of *Opération béton* (1954), a documentary of the building of a dam that is Godard's first recorded cinematic effort.

Most recently, Godard has completed an autobiographical meditation on his life and work in the cinema entitled *JLG/JLG—autoportrait de décembre* (1994), produced by the French cinema distribution giant Gaumont; in 1995, Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville co-directed a sponsored video which perversely heralds the death of French cinema while purporting to celebrate its first centenary, *2 x 50 ans de cinéma français*, much to the surprise of the video's producers. For Godard, the cinema may be dead, but he continues to create work in a medium he knows to be sealed off in the past, combining a vast swirl of existing images in his ongoing personal series *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989–), and even creating an industrial film for the French telephone company Télécom (*Puissance de la parole*, 1988), which ridicules the telephone as a worthless means of false communication. No matter who his producer is, Godard does exactly as he pleases, creating work that is simultaneously caustic and idiosyncratic. With difficult yet simultaneously resonant films such as *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro* (*Germany Year 90 Nine Zero*), made in 1991 but not released theatrically in the United States until January 1995, Godard has moved further and further away from the typical concerns of mainstream cinema: narrative, continuity, even theatrical or video distribution on a modest scale. At present, Godard seems intent upon *production* above all else—the creation of new work with a minimum of exploitation

fuss. Godard's early black and white films, such as *Le Petit Soldat* (*The Little Soldier*), made in 1960, or *Les Carabiniers* (1963), touched off storms of controversy upon their initial release, and were beloved and reviled in equal measure by Godard's partisans and critics. The early films cost between \$100,000 and \$150,000 each, a figure that is risible today, and yet each of these early films barely recouped the combined costs of production and distribution because of their unconventional visual and narrative structure.

Then as now, Godard's films caused extreme reactions in those who viewed them. Such now-classic films as *Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* (*Alphaville*), made in 1965, and *Masculin Féminin* (*Masculine Feminine*), made in 1966, were dismissed by many contemporary reviewers when first released as amateurish, obscure, and didactic to the point of boredom. Now, *King Lear* (1987), *Passion* (1982), *Prénom: Carmen* (*First Name: Carmen*) (1983), *Détective* (1985), and *Grandeur et décadence d'un petit commerce de cinéma* (*The Grandeur and Decadence of the Smalltime Filmmaker*), completed in 1986, elicit similarly polar responses from those lucky enough to see them in a theater, or more likely on videocassette. Yet all these films really seek is an audience at once sophisticated and innocent enough to appreciate Godard's (and Gorin and Miéville's) bracingly apocalyptic vision of the cinema/video image/sound construct. Godard and his collaborators have created a cinema of resistance, a domain of hypertextual imagery that is both reflexive and peculiarly seductive. In thirty years, perhaps, one may be able to judge more accurately the scope and breadth of Godard's accomplishments.

For the present, it seems to me that all valuational judgments of Godard/Gorin/Miéville's work are both premature and ill-informed. The contextual subtext of Godard's work is not only the domain of cinema, but also literature, painting, music, and the related plastic arts. Godard and his associates represent something rare in twentieth-century culture: the filmmaker as philosopher. Nietzsche's later works fell dead from the press upon their initial publication; F. Scott Fitzgerald's novels and short stories were all out of print when he died in 1940. Today, both Fitzgerald and Nietzsche, and a host of other misinterpreted and prescient

artists, are recognized for the visionaries they were; I would argue that the same is true of Godard. As of this writing, in late 1997, Godard continues to produce new films and videos with ever-increasing prodigiousness, without bothering with theatrical, or even home-video release in a number of cases. Godard today is intent, above all other considerations, on the creation of new work, whether or not it reaches an audience.

Jean-Luc Godard was born on December 3, 1930, in Paris, the second of four children. Godard's grandfather was a person of considerable wealth, and his parents, Paul-Jean Godard, a physician, and Odile Monod, the daughter of an extremely rich family, made sure that the young Jean-Luc's childhood was both luxurious and secure. Jean-Luc Godard had one older sibling, Rachel Godard, and many years later his parents would have two other children, Claude and Véronique. Paul-Jean Godard was from all accounts a highly distinguished practitioner, and obtained a license to practice medicine in both France and Great Britain. Odile Monod, daughter of Julien Monod, founder of the Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas, met Paul-Jean Godard during the course of their joint medical studies at university, but Odile dropped out of school to marry Paul-Jean Godard and start a family. Godard recalls his childhood as one of idyllic peace and safety, and certainly, from a child's perspective, he is entirely correct in this perception. He spent much of his time at the home of Julien Monod, Odile's father, who owned an enormous tract of land in France near Lake Geneva. As Colin MacCabe notes, "Godard's memories of his childhood are of a paradise full of affection and wealth. Everything centered on Julien Monod and his large estate on the French side of Lake Geneva, the site of endless family gatherings, as the pious Protestant banker commemorated the feasts of the year with his numerous children and grandchildren" (MacCabe 1992, 14). Indeed, Godard would emotionally if not literally "revisit" this haunted site of childhood in his later film *Nouvelle vague* (1990), a meditation on the forces that helped to shape his intellectual outlook as an adult.

But Jean-Luc Godard also retained strong ties to his Swiss heritage, inasmuch as his father, Paul-Jean, decided almost immediately after Jean-Luc's birth to move his family to Nyon, Switzerland, where he set up a successful medical practice. His parents

lived their lives with a considerable degree of domestic friction. Odile attempted to return to medical school after the birth of Claude, but soon gave up this ambition; Paul-Jean's medical practice was profitable, but scarcely of the same financial dimensions as the world of banking inhabited by the Monods. The young Jean-Luc thus travelled back and forth constantly between the serene geography of the Swiss countryside, and the palatial grounds of his grandfather's estate.

Thus there was a conflict between these two enormously talented people that seems never to have been satisfactorily resolved, and inevitably, some of this conflict spilled over into Jean-Luc's upbringing. It seems Jean-Luc Godard got along well with his mother, but was often at odds with his father, who, as Godard entered adolescence, considered his son both impractical and impulsive. After early schooling, Godard found himself in Paris in 1940 when the Nazis marched into France, and was taken to school in Brittany, and thence to Nyon, where he attended the Collège de Nyon until the end of World War II. During this period of global upheaval, then, Godard managed to absent himself from the turmoil that gripped the rest of the world almost entirely. In 1940, the Godards saw to it that Jean-Luc became a naturalized Swiss citizen, and he holds this dual French/Swiss citizenship to this day. Jean-Luc enjoyed sports, going to the movies, and other typical teenage pastimes. So until 1945, we see that Jean-Luc is privileged, perhaps slightly spoiled, but in most respects a rather average adolescent, without any real clue as to his future direction in life.

In 1945, Godard moved back to a liberated Paris immediately after the conclusion of the war, and attended the Lyceé Buffon, resuming his studies toward a baccalaureate. Godard lived with the members of his mother's family, the Monods, often staying with his mother's twin sister, and it was during this period that he grew closer to his mother at the seeming expense of his relationship with his father. Jean-Luc was becoming an increasingly troubled youth, who finished his baccalaureate only with the help of some ancillary study in Switzerland, and he was vacillating wildly as to his chosen profession. Originally, Jean-Luc registered as an anthropology major, but then drifted into mathematics, and then art. A brief flirtation with fiction writing

ensued, and then cinema attracted the young man's interest. It was about this time that Godard's parents, finally acknowledging the growing gulf between their aspirations and backgrounds, decided to divorce. Thus, as Godard began his apprenticeship in the cinema, the world of domestic shelter which had nurtured him for so long was finally shattered, and Jean-Luc Godard began to seriously confront the uncertain responsibilities of adulthood.

As with François Truffaut and numerous other cinéastes who would later make up the ranks of *la Nouvelle Vague* (the New Wave) of French filmmaking that exploded on the world in 1959 after simmering in a number of short films and critical writings in *Cahiers du Cinéma* for nearly a decade, Godard began his study of the cinema *in* the cinema—watching movies. Godard has always been at great pains to credit the late director of the Cinémathèque Française, Henri Langlois, for providing, through the Cinémathèque, the young Godard with a history of the cinema when this was unavailable elsewhere. Godard attended daily screenings at the Cinémathèque with such future filmmakers as Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer (both of whom he met in 1948), and the critic André Bazin and future director François Truffaut (whom he first became acquainted with in 1949). In addition to his film viewing at the Cinémathèque, Godard became a regular in 1948 at Travail et Culture, a "ciné club" that regularly screened 16mm prints of classic movies, and the Ciné Club du Quartier Matin, where Eric Rohmer regularly introduced the films being screened.

In addition to Rivette, Rohmer, Bazin, and Truffaut, Godard met future filmmakers Claude Chabrol and Alain Resnais during this period, and supported himself through acts of petty thievery committed against his relatives. Godard's associate, François Truffaut, was even more of a "wild child," regularly tangling with the Parisian juvenile court system over a variety of minor offenses. It seemed that nothing but the cinema mattered to the members of this small, select band; the cinema of dreams and myths, of reality and calculated fantasy, a world that only came alive when the lights of the external world were extinguished. In 1949, Godard began attending the Sorbonne, where he would eventually receive a diploma in Ethnology in 1952; he also kept up his "cinema studies" at the Cinémathèque. The cinema was

slowly, inexorably beginning to become the ruling passion of Jean-Luc Godard's existence.

In 1950, Jean-Luc Godard appeared as an actor in Jacques Rivette's *Quadrille*; he also began to write film criticism for the journal *La Gazette du Cinéma*. In 1951, Godard acted in Eric Rohmer's early film *Présentation ou Charlotte et son steak*. In March of that year, through his relationship with André Bazin, editor of the journal, he began writing for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which was to become one of the most influential magazines in the history of cinema (a distinction it retains to this day), often writing under the pseudonym of Hans Lucas. However, in 1952, all of this activity was interrupted when Godard's father, Paul-Jean, became alarmed at the increasing political tensions in Europe, and impulsively packed up and moved to Jamaica to practice medicine. Jean-Luc followed him, although his father soon gave up on the idea and decamped to Switzerland.

Jean-Luc, however, stayed on, and for the next year and a half visited Brazil, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, and Argentina (MacCabe 1992, 14), obtaining lodging from relatives on his father's side as he went along. This nomadic existence allowed Godard to take advantage of his Swiss citizenship and avoid French military service in the rapidly expanding conflict in what is now known as Vietnam, for Godard was unwilling to undertake any sort of military obligations. This exhausted his father's patience altogether. Cut off from Paul-Jean Godard's financial support, Jean-Luc Godard drifted back to Paris, and soon found himself back in the circle of ciné clubs and *Cahiers du Cinéma*, where things were beginning to heat up. More and more of his compatriots were beginning to make their own films, but Godard held back. His critical writings appeared regularly in *Cahiers*, but Godard seemed content for the moment to be an observer, nothing more.

In 1952, Godard's mother got her son a job with the Swiss television national network (MacCabe 1992, 16). Godard's thefts of small amounts of money from his mother, his father and other relatives were becoming increasingly unattractive, and in 1953, despite his employment with the Swiss television network, Godard again became involved in the theft of some money. This time, the theft was not "in the family." Godard was jailed briefly in Zurich, then released through the efforts of his father, who

nevertheless now pronounced himself exasperated with Jean-Luc's conduct, and had the twenty-three-year-old sent to a mental clinic for observation, which seems to have been a turning point in Godard's career (MacCabe 1992, 16). For the first time, Jean-Luc Godard found himself in serious trouble, confined and unproductive, unable to see films, committing petty acts of thievery to support his dreams, and cut off from the world of wealth and luxury he had known since childhood. It was during this period that Godard made up his mind to apply himself to the craft of cinema with greater seriousness than he had ever attempted before. Something had to be done. Godard, in the final months of 1953, was facing the crossroads of his life, and trying to meet the challenge of personal responsibility for his own actions.

In early 1954, Godard's mother Odile again found Jean-Luc work, this time as a construction laborer, working with a crew creating a dam in Switzerland. Godard used his wages to support the production of his first film, a seventeen-minute industrial short chronicling the making of the dam, titled *Opération béton* (1954). Godard served as producer, director, editor, and scenarist for the project, which was photographed by Adrien Porchet. Godard scored the film with music by Bach and Handel, and significantly saw that it was shot in 35mm, albeit without synchronous sound, whereas several of his *Cahiers* colleagues were content to work in the more amateur medium of 16mm film. The professionalism of the finished short prompted the construction company to buy the completed film to publicize their accomplishment, and Godard parlayed the profits into the production of his next short film, *Une Femme coquette* (1955), and returned to Paris to write again for *Cahiers* and a competitive journal, *Arts*. Godard produced *Une Femme coquette* independently, and this time he took on all the key production duties. For the film, Godard served as the "production company" ("Jean-Luc Godard Productions"), the producer and director (under his own name), and the scenarist, director of photography, and film editor (under the pseudonym of Hans Lucas which, as James Monaco points out, is "Jean-Luc in German") (Monaco, 392). Based on a short story by Guy de Maupassant, *Une Femme coquette* featured Marie Lysandre, Roland Tolma, and Godard as cast members, was shot in 16mm, and lasted all of ten minutes, with music appropriated from Bach.

However, this nascent success was overshadowed by a tragic event in Godard's personal life, when Godard's mother, Odile, was killed on April 25, 1954, in a motorcycle accident near Lausanne. Yet Godard pressed on, dedicating himself to a life within the cinema. In 1957, while keeping up his work as a critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Arts*, Godard made his first short film produced as a professional project, *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick* (*Charlotte et Véronique*), released in English as *All Boys Are Called Patrick*. The film was shot in 35mm again, with a professional cast, including Jean-Claude Brialy, Anne Colette, and Nicole Berger. Produced by Pierre Braunberger's firm Les Films de la Pléiade, the film was directed by Godard from a screenplay by Eric Rohmer, and photographed by Michel Latouche. Godard also began working in the publicity department of the Paris branch office of Twentieth Century Fox, and produced two additional short films: *Une histoire d'eau* (1958), a bizarre "comedy" about the then-recent flooding of Paris which was "co-authored" with François Truffaut; and *Charlotte et son Jules* (1959). *Une Histoire d'eau* is little more than a bad joke extended arbitrarily to an eighteen-minute running time, with Godard serving as narrator: the title itself is a pun on *The Story of O*, a famously scandalous pornographic novel of the period. *Charlotte et son Jules* is slightly more ambitious, and features a young Jean-Paul Belmondo in a key role (although his voice is dubbed in the film by Godard himself). Thus, by early 1959, Godard had one industrial film and four fiction shorts to his name, when an opportunity came knocking that would permanently alter the course of Godard's life, and change the face of cinema forever, not only in France and the United States, but throughout the entire international cinema community.

By 1958, *Cahiers du Cinéma's* attacks on the then-moribund French cinema were becoming overwhelmingly vitriolic. One has only to read some of the early reviews published in *Cahiers* and *Arts* to realize the depth of Truffaut and Godard's scorn for the "classic" French and American film and their appreciation for all that was then new and vital in the cinema. Into this artistic vacuum stepped the young director Roger Vadim. Although his place in cinema history has been largely forgotten today, Roger Vadim's *Et Dieu créa la femme* (*And God Created*

Woman) was first screened in Paris on November 28, 1956, at the Cinéma Normandie, and was an immediate commercial success. Truffaut was enormously taken with Vadim's film, although it was almost universally attacked elsewhere, and wrote a long review for *Cahiers* praising the work. Vadim thus became a model for this new generation of filmmakers-to-be. Truffaut and Godard saw in Vadim's freewheeling visual and narrative structure a new vision of the cinema, completely removed from the works of the older, more respected directors then lionized in France and America. Vadim's work was fresh, original, more interested in mood than plot, more sensuous than self-consciously constructed. For Godard and Truffaut, Vadim represented an early clue to a new direction: the movement that would explode in 1959 as the New Wave.

Truffaut went so far in his attacks on French cinema of the period that he was banned from attending the 1958 Cannes Film Festival on grounds of critical apostasy, a position made even more uncomfortable because of Truffaut's marriage to Madeleine Morgenstern, who was the daughter of one of the most important film producers in France. At length, disgusted with Truffaut's attacks on the official entries for the Cannes festival, Morgenstern offered to back Truffaut's first feature film *Les 400 coups* (*The 400 Blows*) in 1959, and Truffaut (who had directed only two short films earlier in his career, *Une Visite* [*A Visit*] in 1954 and *Les Mistons* [*The Brats*] in 1957) rose to the occasion with the surprise hit of 1959, starring a young Jean-Pierre Léaud in a semi-autobiographical account of Truffaut's own highly troubled youth and early adolescence.

None of Truffaut's success was lost on the highly competitive Godard, who now yearned to make a feature film of his own. Nevertheless, the origins of this debut feature, *À bout de souffle*, are shrouded in a good deal of mystery. Roger Vadim claims that he met Godard shortly before shooting on *À bout de souffle* began, and that the film's scenario, credited in the film to François Truffaut, consisted of nothing more than a few brief phrases scrawled on a matchbox. According to Vadim, Godard cornered him one day on the set of a film Vadim was directing, announced "I'm a genius," and thrust a box of matches at the surprised director. Vadim writes: "I could make out a few words:

'He's a hooligan. Obsessed by heroes of American films. She has an accent. She sells the *New York Herald Tribune*. It's not really love, it's the illusion of love. It ends badly. Well, no. Finally it ends well. Or it ends badly'" (Vadim, 140). James Monaco, however, insists that the film "was closely based on a fifteen-page scenario by Truffaut" (Monaco, 393), which was subsequently published in *Avant-Scène du Cinéma* 79 in 1968 (Marie, 214). According to Michel Marie (202–3), Beaugard had already "turned down an earlier proposal from Godard: *Une Femme est une femme*" (202), which Beaugard and Ponti would ultimately co-produce with Godard directing. In his essay "It Really Makes You Sick!: Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle*," Marie offers substantial documentary evidence of Truffaut's significant involvement with the project. In light of all this, Vadim's claim seems fanciful.

There are also apocryphal stories that Godard was so jealous of Truffaut's success in obtaining financing for a feature film that he raided the *Cahiers du Cinéma* treasury to start production of *À bout de souffle*, and was jailed for his efforts, only to be bailed out by François Truffaut. Truffaut, according to this account, arranged with producer Georges de Beaugard to provide more conventional financing for *À bout de souffle*. There may be some truth to this highly romantic account of the film's genesis, although it seems unlikely. Nevertheless, shooting of the film began in the summer of 1959, with Godard pushing his cameraman, Raoul Coutard, around in a wheelchair on the set, while Coutard shot the film with a silent 35mm Arriflex (Godard would add the sound later). The stars were Jean Seberg and Jean-Paul Belmondo. Shooting took place in apartments, and in the streets of Paris. Natural light was used whenever possible.

Producer Beaugard was terrified by the seemingly haphazard way the film was being shot, but Truffaut and director Jean-Pierre Melville (an older filmmaker, who was nevertheless lionized by the *Cahiers* crowd for his work with the great French filmmaker Jean Cocteau on *Les Enfants terribles* [1950]) kept the financier at bay, and filming moved along at a steady if impoverished pace. Michel Marie notes that "Truffaut wrote later, 'while he was making *À bout de souffle*, Godard didn't have enough money in his pocket to buy a Metro ticket'" (Marie, 201).

Released in March 1960, the film was a hit with both the public and the critics, and Godard's career as a feature filmmaker was finally and definitively launched.

À bout de souffle is a remarkable feature film debut in a number of respects. It is audacious and assured, insouciant and knowing, calculated and spontaneous. The editorial structure of jump cuts within scenes has been much remarked upon; in assembling the film, Godard simply edited out those sections of a scene that were boring to him, and spliced together the remaining sections of the scene without the use of dissolves, wipes, or other traditional transitional devices. As late as 1994, this bold, jagged visual style was being remarked upon by Andrew Sarris, who interviewed Godard in New York, while the director was on a press junket to publicize the opening of *JLG/JLG*. *À bout de souffle* was, by this time, thirty-five years old, yet Sarris admitted to Godard that: "I've always wondered how you hit upon the electrifying jump cuts in *Breathless*. Was it instinct?"

Godard replied:

Yes, partly. But the fact is that, unless you are very good, most first movies are too long, and you lose your rhythm and your audience over two or three hours. In fact, the first cut of *Breathless* was two and a half hours and the producer said, "You have to cut out one hour." We decided to do it mathematically. We cut three seconds here, three here, three here, and later I found out I wasn't the first director to do that. The same process was described in the memoir of Robert Parrish, who was an editor on Robert Rossen's *All the King's Men* [1949]—he was the third or fourth editor, actually, because his predecessors weren't capable of making the cuts. Parrish told Rossen: "Let's do something different. We'll look at each shot and we'll keep only what we think has more energy. If it's at the end of the shot, we'll throw out the beginning. If it's at the beginning, we'll throw out the end." They did exactly what I did later, without knowing what they had done. Only, I said, "Let's keep only what I like."

Of the film's "rough-hewn," near-documentary look, Godard noted we "couldn't afford to work in a studio, so our movies were

not something we had planned in advance. In my case, it was my natural way of doing things. I mean, more or less I am always saying, 'Give me more. Let's do what has not been done'" (Sarris 1994, 89).

The plot of the film is slight; in the hands of a less gifted director, *À bout de souffle* might well have been another routine *policier*, a plodding chase film without distinction or excitement. Godard's film, however, takes a simple gangster story and uses it as the jumping-off point for a series of telling and incisive observations on life, the cinema, relationships between men and women, and the authority of the state. In *À bout de souffle*, Jean-Paul Belmondo plays a small-time hood named Michel Poiccard (who also uses the alias Laszlo Kovacs, in homage to the great cinematographer of the same name) who arbitrarily kills a policeman and is on the run from the law. Poiccard takes up with a young expatriate American woman, Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg). Patricia sells the *New York Herald Tribune* in the streets of Paris to eke out a meager existence. The film chronicles Michel's attempts to flee the police, cash a check for getaway money, steal some cars, and sleep with Patricia, most of these activities being documented in a modified "newsreel" style by Raoul Coutard's handheld camera. In the end, Patricia arbitrarily betrays Michel to the authorities. Michel is shot down in the street while making one last attempt to escape. His life, and his death, are both seen as essentially random acts, devoid of meaning and/or consequence; Michel lives only for the moment, and *À bout de souffle* is shot in an appropriately spontaneous style. Long blocks of the film have the feel of spontaneous improvisation, and although the overall narrative structure of the work seems conventional in comparison to later Godard films, for 1959, the film seemed to flout every rule of established cinematic syntax. Godard dedicated this, his first feature film, to the memory of Monogram Studios, the legendary producers of numerous "B" gangster films in the 1940s and 1950s in Hollywood. Both Godard and Truffaut had always been attracted to the modesty and speed of production inherent to the Monogram production process; both men had written critical reviews praising little-known Monogram films for *Cahiers* and *Arts* that went against the grain of the prevailing school of film criticism. Now,

with *À bout de souffle*, Godard constructed a film in much the same manner as a classic Monogram thriller. It had a low budget, it used existing locations whenever possible, it was shot quickly, and it aspired only to be a successful "action" picture. Indeed, with this first film more than any of his subsequent efforts, Godard was aiming for a commercial success above all else—a success that would ensure his future as a commercial feature filmmaker.

Seen today, *À bout de souffle* seems primitive, classic, not at all the audacious ground-breaker it seemed to be in 1959. The jump cuts which were so radical then are now a staple of MTV; shooting on location to enhance the illusion of reality is a staple of contemporary cinema practice. The "studio look" is now used only on films that require an utterly *unrealistic* vision, such as *The Shadow* (1994), and audiences will no longer accept the hyperreal glossiness of 1950s Hollywood glamour as a zone of genuine human habitation. Godard's use of natural locales is indebted to Rossellinian neo-realism, it is true, but like the German Trümmerfilm (or "Rubble-film," literally a film shot in the ruins of Germany after World War II) of the same period, Rossellini shot in the wreckage of newly liberated Rome to create a cinema of despair and renewal. For Godard (and his contemporaries in the New Wave), Paris was simply a huge set waiting to be discovered, magnificent in its architecture, and relatively undocumented by a cinematic tradition that had been confined to the sound stage since the early films of Alice Guy at Gaumont.

And yet *À bout de souffle* is not a realistic film. Godard himself realized this when he stated "although I felt ashamed of it at one time, I do like *À bout de souffle* very much, but now I see it where it belongs—along with *Alice in Wonderland*. I thought it was *Scarface*" (Milne, 175). On the construction of the film itself, Godard has these thoughts:

À bout de souffle began this way. I had written the first scene (Jean Seberg on the Champs Elysees), and for the rest I had a pile of notes for each scene. I said to myself, this is terrible. I stopped everything. Then I thought: in a single day, if one knows how to go about it, one should be able to complete a dozen takes. Only instead of planning ahead, I shall

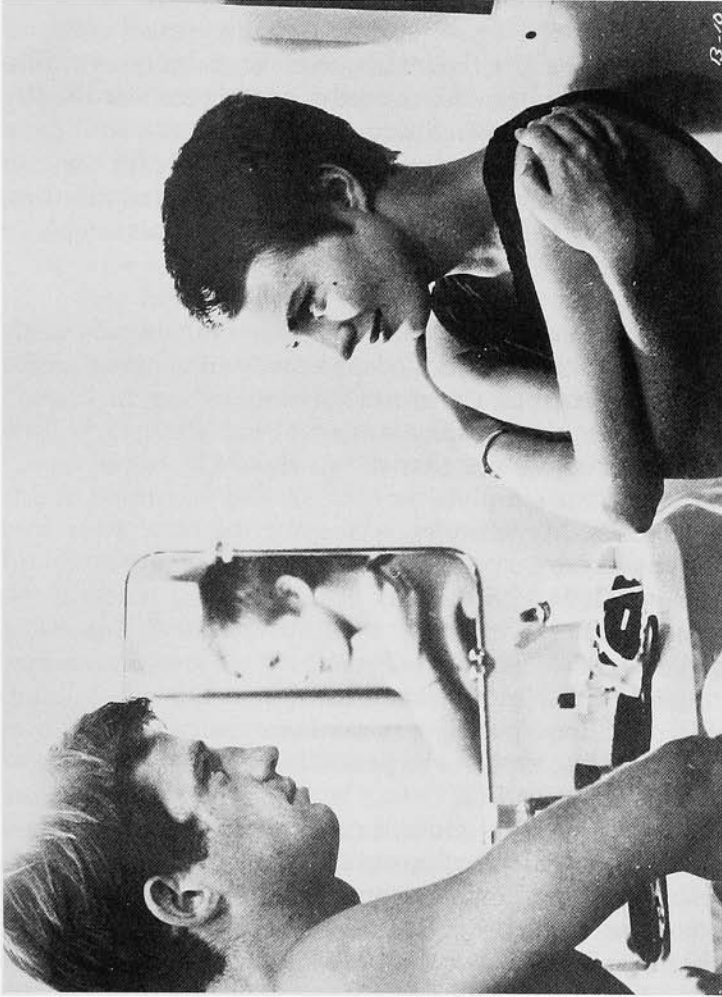


FIGURE 2. Jean-Paul Belmondo (Michel) and Jean Seberg (Patricia) in *À bout de souffle* (1959). Courtesy New Yorker Films.

invent at the last minute! . . . But [Jean-Paul] Belmondo [who played Michel] never invented his own dialogue. It was written. But the actors didn't learn it: the film was shot silent, and I cued the lines. . . . *À bout de souffle* was the sort of film where anything goes: that was what it was all about. . . . 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 [in the transition to Mansard's junkyard], as though it had just been invented . . . if we used a handheld camera, it was simply for speed." (Milne, 172–73)

Nor was the crew of *À bout de souffle* sanguine about the film's technical execution. As Godard wrote during production of the film, "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" (Braunberger 1987, 183–84, as cited in Marie, 204–5). But Godard rushed ahead anyway, desirous of nothing more than getting the film shot at top speed despite any and all objections, pursuing an aesthetic that was all his own, pushing film "to the limits of its possibilities" (Braunberger 1987, 184, as cited in Marie, 205).

In *À bout de souffle*, Godard created a narrative cinema of simplicity and primitive charm, as befits the first film of a cinéaste, and a film which was an immediate commercial and critical success. Godard's colleague François Truffaut, as mentioned, had been barred from the 1958 Cannes festival because of the brutality of his cinema criticism; now Godard, Truffaut, and Alain Resnais all burst on the scene in 1959 with three major films, which in each case immediately established the reputations of their makers. The older French films were swept aside with a single brusque gesture; the Nouvelle Vague represented the generation of invention, vitality, speed, and improvisation. This

failure at the time of its original release, but from our current perspective, the film seems both postmodern and postnarrativist, a construct that anticipates the later work of such filmmaker/theorists as Michael Snow, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Ernie Gehr, and the late Hollis Frampton.

By this point in his career, Godard was alternating films aimed at a wider audience with films paradoxically designed to alienate the conventional spectator. The semi-traditional narrative of *À bout de souffle* and the desultory stab at a musical in *Une Femme est une femme* was counterbalanced by the brutal intensity of *Le Petit Soldat* (which was released in Paris during the filming of *Les Carabiniers* after a three-year hiatus) and *Les Carabiniers*. Godard was using modest budgets and short shooting schedules to create his personal vision of the cinema, a cinema designed more to instruct than entertain. Predictably, the critics liked *À bout de souffle* and *Une Femme est une femme*; they disliked *Le Petit Soldat* and *Les Carabiniers*, both films that implicitly or explicitly criticized the government of Charles de Gaulle.

Godard was no longer the predictable purveyor of cinema entertainment, if he ever *had* been; already François Truffaut's films were becoming more conventional and somewhat softer and elegiac in tone, while Godard's films were ever more polemical in tone and content. With these first four features, Godard was making his own contribution to the history of the cinema. Now he sought to pay homage to its past, to the directors whose works he admired, to the Hollywood studio system, to the world of the big-budget movie, and the international co-production, in a film that celebrated both the star system and the *politique des auteurs*. This led to the creation of his first international co-production, the epic consideration of the history and practice of the cinema that constitutes the text of *Le Mépris*.