Death of a Hero, Birth of a Cinema or Who or What is *A bout de souffle* ?

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Death of a Hero, Birth of a Cinema or Who or What is *A bout de souffle*?[1]

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THE DEATH OF MICHEL POICCARD, anti-hero of Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle,* in the film's closing minutes hardly comes as a surprise. Firstly, Michel has shot and killed a policeman in cold blood in order to save himself from legitimate arrest, a deed which the conventions of crime fiction, being rather more rigorously enforced than extra-fictional laws, seldom leave unpunished. Furthermore, it is clear from the opening section, when he steals an American serviceman's car and roars down the road from Marseille to Paris in search of his money and his girl, that Michel is one of those fictional characters out to live life to the full, regardless of the consequences, a variation on the romantic outlaw for whom any fate but death would be too sad. Michel himself constantly reinforces this image: he asks Patricia if she ever thinks about death and, when she does not answer, continues, "Moi j'y pense sans arrêt"; losing his footing in the hotel room reminds him of a joke about a condemned man mounting the scaffold who slips on the steps and says "décidément..."; when Patricia asks him, rather lightly, to choose between grief and nothing he opts for nothing, saying "le chagrin, c'est idiot. Je choisis le néant. C'est pas mieux, mais le chagrin est un compromis. Il faut tout ou rien"; lastly, shortly before he is shot he speaks directly to camera, saying, "je suis fatigué, je veux dormir."

As if all this were not enough, there are the many other references to fast life and/or early death scattered throughout the film: Michel sees a man run over and killed; a cinema poster advocates: "Vivre dangereusement jusqu'au bout!" while another reminds the reckless that the harder they come "puis dure sera la chute"; the author Parvulesco, whose press conference Patricia attends, gives an ironic echo to Michel's attitude when he states that his own ambition is "devenir immortel . . . et puis mourir"; lastly, the breathlessness of "à bout de souffle" has an air of finality lacking in its English translation, a finality reinforced, as Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier notes,[2] by its echo in the French version of the film-title "Ten Seconds to Hell" quoted above—"jusqu'au bout."

Michel is clearly courting death and die he duly does, with an almost over-determined inevitability.

In retrospect, however, the fulfillment of so well sign-posted a destiny is itself surprising in a film which in other ways seeks consistently to undermine audience expectations. Why should Godard allow the rules of narrative and psychology that *A bout de souffle* so blatantly signals to remain unbroken, particularly when Truffaut's original screenplay let the hero break his fictional fetters and get away with it all? Reading the film in the light of its relationship to *film noir,* Steve Smith explains Godard's decision to change Truffaut's ending as a reflection of his "unwillingness to transgress"[3] the *noir* genre's rule that the hero die, usually as a result of a woman's actions, and this is a view to which Godard himself lends weight when he says, 20 years later, "je me souviens que je croyais quand je faisais *A bout de souffle* faire un film de ce genre-là" (i.e., *film noir*).[4] However, unwillingness to transgress a rule seems an odd motive to impute to the Godard of *A bout de souffle,* as the filmmaker suggests later in the discussion cited above, when he says, "c'est un film qui n'avait pas de règles et dont la seule règle était: les règles sont fausses ou mal appliquées" (ibid., 33). I want therefore to argue here that Michel's death is the culmination of a different logic from that of *film noir,* one which underlies the film and of which the director may or may not have been conscious when it was made. In accord with the main thrust of Smith's article, to the effect that, rather than simply imitating *film noir, A bout de souffle* "explicitly foreground[s] and problematiz[es] the notion of imitation as such" (Smith, "Godard and film noir," 66), I therefore propose to consider the portrayal of Michel's death as a key moment in the film, which problematizes not only a low-life's imitation of his *noir* hero, but also that of life by fiction and the incarnation of a character by an actor, taking a swipe at more slavish French imitations of Hollywood (real or imaginary) along the way.

Why does he die?

To take the last point first, one of the themes running through *A bout de souffle* is Europe's fascination with America, crystallized in the relationship between Michel and Patricia. Patricia's interest in European culture is superficial: her naively banal question to M. Parvulesco—"quelle est votre plus grande ambition?"—shows her unconcernedly out of her depth at a French intellectual's press conference, while her main

interest in the posters of paintings by Picasso and Renoir she sticks on her hotel room wall seems to be whether or not the women they depict are prettier than she. Her command of the French language is fairly fluent, but flawed in a way she seems to exploit with her final question, "qu'est-ce que c'est, dégueulasse?" which can be understood as evidence of a refusal to understand an unfavourable French judgement of her conduct as well as the simple lack of vocabulary she has displayed throughout. Her attitude to Michel himself is unstable: she says she wants him to love her, but then again not, because she wants to be independent, and this desire for independence is the reason she gives for informing on him. The final shot of the film shows her taking back the gesture Michel has borrowed from her compatriot Humphrey Bogart before staring impassively into the camera, unscathed by all that has occurred.

Michel, on the other hand, is profoundly influenced by American popular culture. It is his infatuation with and imitation of the icons of Hollywood, as manifested in his gangster persona and his obsessive desire for "une Américaine," a car and, more especially, a woman, that bring about his death. He does not understand that Patricia, the modern American girl, wants a career more than a man; however, although he is unable to predict her betrayal, as I have described above, he seems ready to accept from the outset that his adoption of the style of an American screen idol will ultimately prove fatal. As Smith says: "[Michel's] staring at the promotional still of Bogart fails completely to distinguish between actor and role, and he thus takes on the impossible task of reconciling them in himself" (ibid., 73). But for Michel, as for perhaps the majority of *A bout de souffle*'s audience, the actor is no more of a real person than the role, belonging as he does to an America known only imaginatively at second-hand. Ironically enough for one who talks of living life to the full, Michel is ultimately seduced and destroyed by the power of American popular culture's imaginary world.

Michel dies because he places a greater value on a fictional world whose relation to reality he does not understand than on the world of his own life. More specifically I think his death can be seen as a testimony to both the power of Hollywood and the ultimate undesirability of imitating it from the outside. This is the view Smith advances when he says, "condemned to a Frenchness he never truly escapes [Michel] comes to represent the essential limitation of Melville's simple and equally doomed project of an imitative French version of Hollywood" (ibid.). But if imitation is not the way forward, in a medium which reproduces an image of

real people and places, how should the story be told and the death of the would-be *noir* hero be portrayed?

How does he die?

A bout de souffle is not a film about how not to make films; instead, it seeks to transform the way the medium has been used hitherto; so, rather than imitating American *film noir,* Godard refers to it. The quasi-documentary style of shooting and editing used on and off throughout *A bout de souffle,* notably to show the rambling, apparently improvised exchanges between Michel and Patricia, owes far more to Italian neo-realism,[5] or indeed to the pre-war realism of Renoir. As well as external locations and/or use of available light, this style involves the use of shots that seem to function primarily to show something—the expression on a face, a conversation, the street—for its own sake rather than to move the story on. In prioritizing the documentary aspect of film, this style questions the relation between cinematic fiction and the elements of recorded reality from which it is composed, an effect particularly apparent in relation to the portrayal of Michel and Patricia. These two are seen less as "characters" in the sense of fictional people with particular personalities, psychological motivations and other hidden but suggested depths, than as embodiments of certain styles of dress and attitude: Michel the sharply dressed would-be gangster who takes his cool from that of Bogart's screen persona and steals only American cars; Patricia the cushioned child of wealthy parents who experiments with culture and even with life on the wild side before reverting to the safety of her (exotic) type. The result is that for much of its time *A bout de souffle* appears on one level as a documentary of the performances of two people trying on styles, with the difference between Jean-Paul Belmondo and Michel Poiccard, Patricia Franchini and Jean Seberg lying more in what we know about them—we know the biographies of the actors differ from those of their fictional characters—than in what we see. This is clearly something Godard intended, and indeed Royal S. Brown quotes him referring to *A bout de souffle* as "a documentary on Belmondo and Seberg."[6] For the realism that interests him is not that of "realistic" characters in a naturalist fiction, where "naturalist" means that the fiction denies its own status as fiction; it is rather the creation of a fiction that gives weight to the recorded reality from which it is made, blurring the boundaries of the diegesis.

Neo-realism seeks to make its fictions appear as "real" as possible, and to that end uses naturalist styles of shooting and editing. *A bout de souffle,* on the other hand, rejects naturalism by exploring the conditions and potentialities of its own medium through non-naturalistic sound, editing and acting. To this extent the film's aesthetic, though a logical extension of realism insofar as it constantly reminds us that the diegesis is a construct built from different bits of recorded reality, tips over into something more properly described as modernism because of its stress on the materiality of the means of mimesis.[7]

However, such a strategy is not without its difficulties: film as a medium resists awareness of its materiality, and particularly when it is portraying something as dramatic as a death. In *A bout de souffle,* moreover, Michel's death is that of the film's hero, his relationship to his incarnator Belmondo has been thus far very close, and his death is the climax of the story. In order for the film to maintain its integrity, therefore, the death scene must allow the story to have its climax without abandoning the modernist aesthetic that has prevailed thus far. This is quite a tall order, but I think *A bout de souffle* meets it, and I now propose to analyse the film's final scene in the light of this double requirement.[8]

Michel's death scene takes place outside in a Paris street. His friend Beruti drives up in a car and gives Michel the money he has been trying to get throughout the film. Michel tells him that Patricia has informed on him, then speaks to camera, saying he is tired, as I cited earlier. Beruti offers him a gun, which he refuses. There follows a rapid sequence of camera shots: the police car arrives, Beruti throws the gun out of the back of the car and drives off, Michel bends to pick the gun up, we see the policemen in front of the car, and then one of them fires his gun. After this the pace slows dramatically, with a cut to a wide-angle shot tracking down the street behind Michel, who is seen half running, half staggering, clutching his lower back. After a cut to a tracking shot of Patricia, seen from the front in medium close-up and running along looking distraught, we return to the tracking shot of Michel, who reaches the end of the street and falls on his face exactly in the middle of a pedestrian crossing. Another shot of Patricia is followed by a medium close-up of Michel on his back, taking a cigarette from his mouth and blowing out smoke as he is surrounded by men's feet, with Patricia's feet appearing last. Patricia is then shown in close-up, looking downwards with her hand over her face. She takes her hand away and there is a cut to

a high-angle close-up of Michel, who repeats the three grimaces with which he has earlier illustrated the expression "faire la tête." After another close-up of Patricia looking down, a close-up of Michel shows him whispering "C'est [or perhaps "T'es"] vraiment dégueulasse." He then closes his eyes with his hand and lets his head fall to one side. We hear Patricia ask, "Qu'est-ce qu'il a dit?," then she is seen in close-up, still looking down, while a policeman's voice (we assume) replies, "Il a dit, 'vous êtes vraiment une dégueulasse.' " Patricia raises her glance and looks left, then turns back to look straight into the camera. She runs her thumbnail over her lips in imitation of the gesture Michel has used throughout the film, apparently himself imitating Bogart, and asks, "Qu'est-ce que c'est dégueulasse?" Then, after staring into the camera for a second or so longer, she turns around and the film ends with a fade to black followed by the title "Fin."

Clearly this scene, like the rest of *A bout de souffle,* breaks certain rules of naturalism, most obviously when Michel speaks directly to camera, to us the audience, whose existence naturalist drama ignores and indeed denies. On a more subliminal level, the shooting and editing of the sequence showing the conversation between Michel and Beruti undermines naturalist directional continuity, notably by breaking the 180° rule according to which different shots of, say, two characters talking are taken from the same side, so that, for example, character A is always seen to the left of B, who always looks left at A.[9] The confusion thus created is compounded by the lack of any establishing shot which might help to identify the position of the characters on the street. In this way the sequence of Michel and Beruti creates no clear sense of the space in which the action is taking place, thereby generating a more or less subliminal sense of disorientation and perhaps also frustration in the spectator.

In the ensuing rapid sequence showing the arrival of the police and the shooting, the spectator's disorientation is heightened by cuts back and forth between shots showing either Michel, Beruti or the police in isolation, with no spatial relations established between them. Furthermore, in this rapid sequence, each shot functions rather like a cartoon frame, showing a "moment" which indicates the progress of the drama. With the content and length of each shot subsumed to the needs of plot, the image takes on the chiefly instrumental function of signifying rather than showing the action. Such progress by "moments" emphasises the temporal ellipses between shots, so that the spectator's sense of the

scene's duration is also disturbed. Ropars-Wuilleumier's comment that "all the old habits of the eye, which had been trained to forget the breaks between the shots in order to reconstruct, through the succession of images, the linear evolution of a character or an action, are therefore totally upset."[10] is as relevant now as when she wrote it in 1967 or when the film was first seen in 1959; for the denial of spatial and temporal orientation is built into the fabric of the sequence and must, I would suggest, be registered by any audience familiar with naturalist film drama and despite any evolution of cinematographic conventions over the last 35 years.[11] The resulting difficulty of reading the film disturbs its cinematic fascination, drawing attention to its substance as film and to the cracked diegesis as both artifice and artefact.

The cut that follows the shot of the policeman firing his gun is an important one, firstly because it marks the end of the "cartoon"-like sequence discussed above and the transition to the long tracking-shot of Michel running down the street. In complete contrast to the previous sequence, this shot represents a return to the documentary style I discussed earlier; however, as I hope to show, in contrast to its effect throughout the rest of the film, here it is used not to blur the difference between diegetic and extra-diegetic but to define it in a process of separation that begins with the cut from the shooting policeman to the wounded Michel running. The second reason why this cut is important is that, in terms of the story, it "contains" the moment when Michel is hit by the bullet that kills him. In other words, the fiction's moment of truth when retribution and death catch up with the hero, though implicit in the fiction, is missing from the film.

This omission seems to me significant in the light of what follows, where Michel's death is portrayed in a manner that is far from "realistic" —or naturalist—and more interesting than simple parody, where parody means imitation at an amused distance. For the fact that we do not see Michel hit puts an implicit question mark over the event. The long tracking-shot of him clutching his back gives us to understand that he has in fact been shot; however the man running down the street while the soundtrack blares its discordant climax does not look hurt; he looks like an actor competently carrying out the instruction to run all the way down a street in a long tracking shot, pretending he has been wounded. This might have seemed an obvious parody of the long-drawn-out yet rather bloodless death of many a screen hero, were it not for the fact that instead of concentrating on the Michel/Belmondo figure, who is some-

what depersonalized by being filmed from behind, the wide-angle shot takes in both pavements with their parked cars and passers-by. As a result, Michel's long run seems less a comment on death scenes than a pretext for a long tracking-shot documenting a Paris street in which a performance is taking place. Similarly, his final collapse is a clearly choreographed dive onto a pre-arranged spot, and the shot seems to be as much about the skill involved in falling forward onto such a hard surface and the star-like metal studs of French pedestrian crossings as it is an image of someone imitating someone else dying. The last puff on the cigarette and the three grimaces are clearly not the actions of a dying man, and they are too simply performed, their references too entirely internal for them to appear as parodic imitations of death scenes. Finally, and to cap it all, the man closes his own eyes, thereby usurping the ultimate survivor's gesture signifying that death has occurred.

I would suggest that it is its quality as documentation of a performance that enables the sequence showing Michel's death, from the ellipse that "contains" his wounding to the moment when he closes his own eyes, to bring into focus the boundaries between the diegesis, in which Michel dies, and the extra-diegetic reality from which the diegesis is formed. If these two elements are to continue to coexist in the death scene as they have done throughout the film, they clearly have to part company. Thus, Belmondo the actor gradually separates from Michel the character, while still physically representing him, so that the story runs its course despite the fact that Michel's death becomes something that is increasingly signified rather than represented in gestures that become ever less imitative of a dying man: the run, the fall, the gentle admonition of the three grimaces and finally the eye-closing gesture that marks both Michel's end and Belmondo's definitive separation as survivor.

But the film lives on . . .

In this way the final sequence allows the film the drama of its close without betraying its aesthetic; for, while the story reaches its climax, as the music helps us to understand, the film continues to assert its status as an artefact made from fragments of reality and its right to be something more than, or at least other than, a transparent vehicle for a diegesis. If Michel's death had been portrayed more naturalistically, so that we were invited to believe in both the character and his end, the documentary ele-

ments would retrospectively have been sucked back into and subsumed by the diegesis, as happens in neo-realist film, and the non-naturalist style of the rest of the film would have been retrospectively understood as, at best, a quirky way to tell a story, rather than part of what the film is about.[12] As it is, *A bout de souffle* refuses to betray its aesthetic and retains its integrity.

Poor Michel clings to the old fiction that a persona, like a diegesis, can have an unsullied reality, with the result that everything escapes him: his girl, his car, his breath, the future.[13] As he leaves the film, his own incarnator closes his dead eyes, after which a lingering shot of Patricia/Seberg shows her taking back the gesture he had borrowed from her fellow American Bogart before staring impassively into the camera. It is an uncompromising shot that neither reveals character nor conveys any final message about what has transpired; instead, it brings diegetic and extra-diegetic back together by documenting the features of a woman who has her place in both, reminding us of their ultimate inextricability. Judging both Michel and the imitative story—telling of French cinema to be "à bout de souffle," the film has killed them off, closing over their drama without a ripple to make its own (and Godard's) bid for immortality.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to Lieve Spaas, who sowed the seed of this discussion.
2. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, "L'Instance graphique dans l'écriture du film" in *Littérature* no. 4 (6 May 1982): 59-81.
3. Steve Smith, "Godard and *film noir*: A Reading of *A bout de souffle*," in *Nottingham French Studies* vol. 32, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 69.
4. Jean-Luc Godard, *Introduction à une véritable histoire du cinéma* (Paris: Albatros, 1980), 25.
5. In this context it is possibly significant that Michel intends to save himself by fleeing to Italy and that his friend Beruti, who gives him his money and tries to help him escape the police, has an Italian name—as, of course, just to muddy the waters, does Patricia Franchini.
6. Godard quoted in Royal S. Brown, ed., *Focus on Godard* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 15.
7. Godard himself notes this effect with an air of what seems rather disingenuous puzzlement: "Il y a quand même quelque chose qui m'intriguait [. . .] c'est que tout de même, ces films [policiers américains] c'est complètement rêvé, abracadabrant, ça a l'air de ne pas se tenir et pourtant à l'époque—ou aujourd'hui les successeurs—les gens ne mettent pas en cause la réalité de quelque chose qui est complètement rêvé. [. . .] Alors que moi quand je fais de la féérie comme *A bout de souffle* ou des trucs comme ça . . . les gens ne le voient pas du tout comme réel; ils disent: "C'est complètement féérique, ce n'est pas du tout réel' " (*op. cit.*, 206-07).
8. *A bout de souffle* has been captured on paper as far as is feasible in Dudley Andrew, ed., *Breathless* (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1987). This invalua-

ble reference work provides a full shot breakdown and soundtrack details of *A bout de souffle,* including an English translation of the entire dialogue, plus reviews and criticism of the film and an overview of Godard's life and work.

9. Cf. Noel Burch, *Une praxis du cinéma,* 2nd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 31.
10. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, "Form and Substance, or the Avatars of the Narrative," trans. Royal S. Brown, in Brown, *op. cit.,* 93.
11. The response of students watching the film for the first time confirms this observation.
12. This subordination of the extra-diegetic to the diegetic is the trap Smith falls into: he describes Michel's death as "notably perfunctory, even humdrum [. . .] it is played out [. . .] on an ordinary Parisian street, which renders Michel's flamboyant overacting all the more incongruous. No one comes to watch, while Godard's camera, in following Michel's final moments, ironically captures the quizzical expression of passers-by—who are clearly not extras—looking a little nonplussed about what to make of it all" (*op. cit.,* 73). Clearly, since the story demands that poor Michel be in the process of bleeding to death, whereas Belmondo clearly is not, any charge of overacting can only be laid at the latter's door.
13. On this point Michel's apparently throwaway response—"J'aime les vieux"—to the girl who approaches him saying he must like young people, is significant, since she is holding, perhaps selling, the New Wave's mouthpiece "Cahiers du cinéma." Our misguided hero is too busy pretending to be someone in an old movie to notice what the cinema is up to these days, let alone that he is part of it.