JEAN-LUC GODARD (3 December 1930, Paris, France)

from the British Film Institute website: "Jean-Luc Godard was born into a wealthy Swiss family in France in 1930. His parents sent him to live in Switzerland when the war broke out, but in the late 40’s he returned to Paris to study ethnology at the Sorbonne. He became acquainted with Claude Chabrol, François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette, forming part of a group of passionate young film-makers devoted to exploring new possibilities in cinema. They were the leading lights of Cahiers du Cinéma, where they published their radical views on film. Godard’s obsession with cinema beyond all else led to alienation from his family who cut off his allowance. Like the small time crooks he was to feature in his films, he supported himself by petty theft. He was desperate to put his theories into practice so he took a job working on Swiss dam and used it as an opportunity to film a documentary on the project. The construction firm bought the film, an early indicator of Godard’s more recent success working on corporate video commissions. A bout de souffle (Breathless) (1959) was his first feature, based on an idea by Truffaut. Made on a shoe-string budget with Chabrol as artistic supervisor, it was spontaneous, vibrant and groundbreaking original. Suddenly the typical B-feature crime plot was reborn, with startling cinematic techniques, hand-held camerawork and natural lighting. References to Sam Fuller and Humphrey Bogart and quotations from Faulkner, Aragon and Apollinaire mixed up pop and literary allusions in a dazzling jigsaw of hip cultural awareness. It was a revelation and made Jean-Paul Belmondo a star. It was to be Godard’s only box office hit. By the early 60’s Jean-Luc Godard was probably the most discussed director in the world. He made a an enormous impact on the future direction of cinema, influencing film-makers as diverse as Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, Jim Jarmusch, Wim Wenders, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino and Wong Kar-Wai. As the 60’s progressed, Godard became less and less accessible, both in his personal life and his work. After making Week-end (1967), which features a ten-minute tracking shot of a hideous traffic jam, Godard abandoned his increasingly antagonistic relationships with film industry colleagues (his mutual disaffection with Truffaut, for example, is well documented). He left Paris for Switzerland, which has been his home for the last 20 years. Fascinated with developments in new media, he has experimented with video, making several on commission for clients including Channel 4, France Telecom and UNICEF. Amongst his ‘revolutionary films for revolutionary people’ is his highly regarded eight-hour history of cinema, recently edited into a 90 minute version. His latest film is Eloge de l’amour (In Praise of Love), concerning in part an elderly couple who are former heroes of the Resistance and whose life story Steven Spielberg has offered to buy. The film has just received its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival 2001 to great acclaim. It is expected to have a British release later this year. Godard’s reputation for being a bitter and reclusive figure clearly does not go unnoticed, but is not observed without humour, as a recent anecdote in the New Yorker illustrates. He told Richard Brody that he and his partner (the filmmaker Anne-Marie Mieville) had clipped a cartoon from the paper which exemplifies their situation: a unicorn in a suit is sitting at a desk and talking on the phone with a caption reading ‘These rumours of my non-existence are making it very difficult for me to obtain financing.’ Some of his other films are Meeting Woody Allen (1986), Sauve qui peut (la vie)/Every Man for Himself (1979), Sympathy for the Devil (1968), La Chinoise (1967), 2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle/Two or Three Things I know About Her

Breathless/À bout de souffle (1960)

Jean-Paul Belmondo.....Michel Poiccard/Laszlo Kovacs
Jean Seberg.....Patricia Franchini
Daniel Boulanger.....Police Inspector
Jean-Pierre Melville.....Parvulesco
Henri-Jacques Huet.....Antonio Berrutti
Van Doude.....The Journalist
Claude Mansard.....Claudius Mansard
Jean-Luc Godard.....An Informer
Richard Balducci.....Tolmatchoff

Directed & written by Jean-Luc Godard

Based on a story by François Truffaut
Produced by Georges de Beauregard
Original music by Martial Solal
Cinematography by Raoul Coutard
Film Editing by Cécile Decugis and Lila Herman
Production Companies: Imperia, Les Films Georges de Beauregard, Société Nouvelle de Cinématographie (SNC)
[fr] 87 minutes
Bande à part/Band of Outsiders (1964), Le Mépris/Contempt (1963), Les Carabiniers (1963) and Une femme est une femme/A Woman is a Woman (1961). Some of his most quoted lines: "I don’t think you should FEEL about a movie. You should feel about a woman. You can’t kiss a movie." "Tracking shots are a question of morality." [on Los Angeles] "It’s a big garage." "All you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun." "There is no point in having sharp images when you’ve fuzzy ideas." "It’s funny how things make sense when they’re finished." A web site with many good Godard links:www.geocities.com/glen_norton/essays.html.

RAOUL COUTARD (1924, Paris), has been cinematographer for 76 feature films, 17 of them directed by Godard, 6 directed by Truffaut, one directed by Chabrol. CÉCILE DECUGIS edited 19 films, 8 of them by Rohmer, 2 by Truffaut, 3 by Godard. LILIA HERMAN edited 3 films, all of them for Godard. It wasn’t just directors that made the Nouvelle Vague the Nouvelle Vague.

JEAN-PAUL BELMONDO (9 April 1933, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hauts-de-Seine, France). Biography from Leonard Maltin’s Movie Encyclopedia: This charismatic French star – the logical successor to Jean Gabin – galvanized international film audiences as the Bogart-worshipping thug in Breathless (1959), his first starring vehicle and the directorial debut of Jean-Luc Godard. With his thick lips, bumpy nose, and tousled hair, Belmondo neatly upended the conception of “movie-star looks.” A sculptor’s son, he performed in small provincial theaters in France before breaking into films in 1958. Following his triumphant appearance in Breathless Belmondo became the New Wave’s principal star attraction, effortlessly carrying more than a dozen films before redefining his persona in That Man From Rio (1965), playing an ultra-suave, totally unflappable secret agent à la James Bond. He brightened the all-star casts of several international productions, including Is Paris Burning? (1966) and Casino Royale (1967). Mississippi Mermaid (1968), Borsalino (1970), The Burglars (1971), Stavisky (1974), L’animal (1977), Le Professionnel (1981), and Happy Easter (1984) are among his other starring vehicles. Belmondo, like the greatest Hollywood stars who toiled under the homogenized studio system, drew moviegoers to even the shabbiest productions; part of his charm derived from his seeming disregard for whatever absurdities might be taking place on-screen. His laid-back style consistently captivated audiences, and although his youthful rebelliousness and ebullience are long gone, he has aged gracefully into more distinguished roles, including Cyrano de Bergerac.

JEAN SEBERG (13 November 1938, Marshalltown, Iowa—8 September 1979, Paris, France, barbiturate overdose) came to fame with her first film, the title role in Otto Preminger’s St. Joan (1957). The fame was for the wrong thing, alas (she was chosen for the lead out of 18,000 candidates) rather than the film (which wasn’t very good), and her American career never fully got going again. Her second film, the lead in Preminger’s Bonjour Tristesse (1958) wasn’t much better. She did one more American film (The Mouse that Roared, 1959) and then departed for France. The next year she appeared in Breathless, the first of more than a dozen French and German films over the next 15 years. She also appeared in Airport (1970), A Fine Madness (1966), and Lilith (1964), one of her best screen roles. Because of her support for the Black Panther organization she was apparently harassed by the FBI as part of its COINTELPRO program. Some of her friends and biographers say that harassment was a major factor in her suicide.


At the time Rivette and Rohmer were making their first short films and Godard acted in several of them. Between 1952 and 1954 he wrote for Cahiers du Cinéma, often using the pseudonym “Hans Lucas” (“Jean-Luc” in German). He also traveled extensively with his father in North and South America. In 1954 he returned to Switzerland for his mother’s funeral (she had been killed in a car accident) and got a job as a laborer on the Grand Dixence Dam. With the money he earned he financed his first film, a documentary about the construction of the dam called Operation Béton. In 1955 he made his second short film, Une Femme Coquette, in Geneva, and then returned to Paris, where from 1956 through 1959 he wrote regularly both for Cahiers du Cinéma and Arts, earning a living meantime as a press agent for Artistes Associés.

More than thirty years later, he explained to an interviewer: “For us at that time, doing criticism wasn’t at all sterile. To do criticism was just like doing film: talking about one thing and another.”

His work as a critic in the 1950s was overshadowed by Truffaut’s–Truffaut, after all, was the enfant terrible of the New Wave who wrote the scathing essays that called attention to this new group of critics. During this period, Godard more quietly developed an ambitious rhetoric of cinema, which, taken together with his later filmed “essays,” is regarded by many as the most influential theory of film and filmmaking since Sergei Eisenstein’s.

Breathless took the cinematic world by storm when it was released in the spring of 1960. There had been earlier films in the New Wave, but none so clearly demonstrated that a new generation of filmmaking had begun.

The story itself is probably the most conventional Godard was ever to use. (It was based closely on a fifteen-page scenario by Truffaut.) It wasn’t the story that gave filmgoers around the world a
sens e of radical departure: it was the style, the attitudes of the film. Like others of the New Wave, Godard got out into the streets, away from the studio. But unlike the others, Godard’s streets were rhetorical streets, full of the clash of images and sounds, words and images, metaphors and syllogisms, political half-truths and cultural clichés. A homage to the past of American B-movies and to Belmondo’s hero, Humphrey Bogart, Breathless is also a map of the future for Godard, the poet-thinker.

Breathless was a commercial as well as a critical success. According to Godard, all of his thirty-plus movies since, with the single exception of Sauve qui peut la vie, have been commercial failures. Nevertheless, Godard had found a new and different way to write essays, using a camera rather than a pen.

[Une Femme est une femme/A Woman is a Woman] This is a love story and Godard’s attempt at a musical, or at least an essay about musicals. At one point Angela and Alfred (Anna Karina and Jean-Paul Belmondo) announce that they want to be in a “musical by Gene Kelly with choreography by Bob Fosse.” Godard knows those days are gone: Singin’ in the Rain can never be made again, and as a result an air of nostalgia suffuses Une Femme est une femme.

In early 1962 he shot his fourth feature Vivre sa vie (My Life to live), in less than four weeks. It’s as dark as Une Femme was light: a dramatized Brechtian essay on prostitution and feminism. For the first time, Godard brings himself into a film as himself, enacting his role as narrator, reading statistics that are juxtaposed against the story of Nana (Anna Karina), a young woman who casually turns to prostitution to pay the rent and is casually shot down in a quarrel between pimps.

By this time Godard was very involved–we can tell with hindsight–in experimenting with different modes of discourse. He had been fascinated with the philosophical phenomenon of film since he was twenty years old. In an early essay he had quoted the philosopher Brice Parain: “the sign forces us to see an object through its significance.”

Godard turns Contempt into a resonant essay on commercial moviemaking in the mid-sixties. At the end of the opening credits Godard quotes André Bazin: “The cinema gives us a substitute world which fits our desires.” But what Godard is after is not a substitute world but a real cinema. Levine required a nude scene with Bardot. Godard gives it to him: the opening scene of the film lasts more than twenty minutes with Bardot lying nude in bed but the scene is shot through red and blue filters. The images are beautiful but they are not erotic. The attempt is an investigation of the persona of characters too. Jack Palance was never more “Jack Palance” and Fritz Lang and Godard himself appear to contrast with the actors.

The basic mode of dialogue in the film [Masculin/Féminin] is the interview. . . At the same time that Godard is picturing the new generation, he is giving us a heady description of Paris in the winter of 1965. Masculin-Féminin is a document, not unlike the earlier movies of Chris Marker and Jean Rouch.

On Monday, February 12, 1968, he joined a spontaneous demonstration of several hundred filmmakers and cinéphiles in front of the Cinématèque Française to protest the French government’s plan to oust the founder and director of the Cinématèque, Henri Langlois. His old friends from early days were there, including Truffaut and Chaprol. The demonstrations for Langlois are generally remembered as the opening shot of the Events of May 1968. By the time of the Cannes Film Festival, a few months later, Godard, Truffaut, and the others were able to bring the festival to a halt “in solidarity with workers and students on strike.”

In the fall of 1972 Gorin and Godard made “Letter to Jane,” a forty-five minute analysis of a still photograph of Jane Fonda in Vietnam which had been published in the French magazine L’Express in the beginning of August 1972. . . . It is meant as a commentary on Tout va bien (whose star was Jane Fonda) and “asks the same question as that film: what part should intellectuals play in the revolution?

Between 1978 and 1980, Godard wrote numerous versions of a script for an American film that was to be entitled, successively, “Bugsy,” “The Picture,” and “The Story.” About the gangster Bugsy Malone, the film was going to be produced by Francis Ford Coppola and star Diane Keaton and Robert De Niro. Like his earlier abortive attempts to make an American movie, this project was never realized.

Early in 1970 Godard and Gorin went to Palestine to shoot Jusqu’à la victoire, about Palestinian politics. It was never finished, but Godard’s involvement with Palestinian issues remains a contentious subject for many critics and observers. Vladimir et Rosa was shot early in 1971. The film is nominally about the Chicago Eight trial which is parodied effectively; Godard undercuts this impression by explaining at the beginning: “Why are we making this film? Well, the last film was the Palestinian film. We are making this film to pay for that film. Economic necessity.”


If influence on the development of world cinema is the criterion, then Jean-Luc Godard is certainly the most important filmmaker of the past thirty years; he is also one of the most problematic.

Godard’s importance lies in his development of an authentic modernist cinema in opposition to (though, during the early period, at the same time within) mainstream cinema; it is with his work that film becomes central to our century’s major aesthetic debate, the controversy developed through such figures as Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno as to whether realism or modernism is the more progressive form. As ex-Cahiers du Cinéma critic and New Wave filmmaker, Godard was initially linked with Truffaut and Chabrol in a kind of revolutionary triumvirate; it is easy, in retrospect, to see that Godard was from the start the truly radical figure, the “revolution” of his colleagues operating purely on the aesthetic level and easily assimilable into the mainstream.

A simple way of demonstrating the essential thrust of Godard’s work is to juxtapose his first feature, Breathless, with the excellent American remake. Jim McBride’s film follows the original fairly closely, with the fundamental difference that in it all other elements are subordinated to the narrative and the characters. In Godard’s film, on the contrary, this traditional relationship between the signifier and signified shows a continuous tendency to come adrift, so that the process of narration (which mainstream cinema strives everywhere to conceal) becomes foregrounded; À Bout de souffle is “about” a story and characters, certainly, but it is also about the cinema, about film techniques, about Jean Seberg, etc.

This foregrounding of the process—and the means—of narration is
developed much further in subsequent films, in which Godard systematically breaks down the traditional barrier between fiction/documentary, actor/character, narrative film/experimental film to create freer “open” forms. Persons appear as themselves on works of fiction, actors address the camera/audiences in monologues or as if being interviewed, materiality of film is made explicit (the switches from positive to negative in Une Femme mariée, the turning on and off of the soundtrack in Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle, the showing of the clapper-board in La Chinoise.) The initial motivation for this seems to have been the assertion of personal freedom: the filmmaker shatters the bonds of traditional realism in order to be able to say and do whatever he wants, creating films spontaneously. (Pierrot le fou—significantly one of Godard’s most popular films—is the most extreme expression of this impulse.) Gradually, however, a political motivation (connected especially with the influence of Brecht) takes over. There is a marked sociological interest in the early films (especially Vivre sa vie and Une Femme mariée), but the turning point is Masculin-féminin with its two male protagonists, one seeking fulfillment through personal relations, the other a political activist. The former’s suicide at the end of the film can be read as marking a decisive choice: from here on, Godard increasingly listens to the voice of revolutionary politics and eventually (in the Dziga Vertov films) adopts it as his own voice.

The films of the Dziga Vertov group (named after the great Russian documentarist who anticipated their work in making films that foreground the means of production and are continuously self-reflexive) were the direct consequences of the events of May 1968. More than ever before the films are directly concerned with their own process, so that the ostensible subjects – the political scene in Czechoslovakia (Pravda) or Italy (Lotte in Italia), the trial of the Chicago Eight (Vladimir et Rosa) – become secondary to the urgent actual subject: how does one make a revolutionary film?

...Godard distinguished between making political films (i.e. films made on political subjects: Costa-Gavras’s Z is a typical example) and making films politically, the basic assumption being that one can not put radical content into traditional form without seriously compromising, perhaps negating, it. Hence the attack on realism initiated at the outset of Godard’s career manifests its full political significance: realism is a bourgeois art form, the means whereby the bourgeoisie endlessly reassures itself, validating its own ideology as “true,” “natural,” “real”; its power must be destroyed.

...several of Godard’s works might best be described as anti-movies. Passion, for example, features characters named Isabelle, Michel, Hanna, Laszlo, and Jerzy (played respectively by Isabelle Huppert, Michel Piccoli, Hanna Schygulla, Laszlo Szabo, and Jerzy Radziwiłłowicz), who are involved in the shooting of a movie titled Passion. The latter appears to be not so much a structured narrative as a series of scenes which are visions of a Renaissance painting. The film serves as a cynical condemnation of the business of moviemaking-for-profit, as the extras are poorly treated and the art of cinema is stained by commercial considerations.

Next week, March 5, in the Buffalo Film Seminars: Robert Rossen, The Hustler 1961. Eight Oscar nominations and two wins, selected for the National Film Registry. Paul Newman in his star-making role as “Fast” Eddie Felson, Jackée Gleason as Minnesota Fats, Piper Laurie as a woman who substitutes love for booze, George C. Scott as a milk-drinking snake, with bit parts by Vincent Gardenia, Jake LaMotta and Willie Mosconi. Greed, ambition, love, betrayal, redemption. And great pool shots by Mosconi (doubling for Newman) and Gleason (doing his own).

“Screening the Fifties” continues Thursdays at 7:30 at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. This week it’s Stanley Kubrick’s first real feature, The Killing 1956. ...March 7 Emile de Antonio, Point of Order 1964...and March 14, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, Singin’ in the Rain 1952. All hi-res DVD projection except Point of Order, which is available only in video. The Garden Restaurant will be open for dinner on screening nights. Call 716.270.8233 for information and reservations)

This week in the MA FAC Sunday Classics: March 3 BAND OF OUTSIDERS (Jean-Luc Godard, France, 1964, 1 hr 35 min) Godard continued his fascination with dime store novels and American crime films with this free-spirited romp in the same vein as Breathless. More traditional than Breathless in its technical execution, Godard’s film nonetheless sparkles with freshness and originality by using a comical, poetic narration, as well as Michel Legrand’s bouncy score.

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