

The **FILMCLUB** Guide to...

À BOUT DE SOUFFLE (1960)



A guy, a girl and a gun.

What's it about?

This first feature from 30-year-old film journalist Jean-Luc Godard revolutionised the way stories were told in cinema, forming a vital part of what would be called the French *nouvelle vague* or “new wave.” This movement comprised filmmakers who championed American cinema of the 1940s and 50s, particularly the thriller genre. One, François Truffaut, provided the storyline for this French riff on the gangster movie. When petty crook and tough guy wannabe Michel kills a policeman, he seeks out an American girl he met a few weeks before and asks her to hide him – but can he trust her? 50 years after it turned cinema on its head, this film remains an inspiration.

Who made it?

Parisian writer -director Jean-Luc Godard was born in Paris in 1930 to a wealthy family who cut him off when he became a filmmaker. Winner of numerous awards, Godard continues to direct today.

Jean-Paul Belmondo (Michel) studied acting at France's prestigious “Conservatoire” and made his film debut in 1957. One of France's top male stars, he divides his time between stage and screen.

Jean Seberg (Patricia) was born in Iowa, USA, in 1938. She was cast in her debut film *Saint Joan* (1957) after winning a nationwide search. Suffering from depression and addiction issues, she committed suicide in 1979.

Backstory

Writing for French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1950s, Godard found like-minded critics who rejected conventional ideas about filmmaking, and embraced directors who put their own personal “stamp” on a movie. Some, like Godard and Truffaut, went on to become filmmakers themselves. This “new wave”, which abandoned accepted ways of presenting a narrative, was a radical departure for filmmaking - which at once idolised movie history and set out to reinvent it.

The Production

Working on a shoestring budget, Godard insisted on filming in real locations rather than on movie sets - using natural light and handheld cameras to create a documentary feel. His lack of actual film was apparently behind the film's famous “jump cuts” (shots of the same thing from slightly different angles to draw attention to a “gap” in the action), and instead of the camera moving on a traditional “dolly”, it was attached to a wheelchair.

The reviews

“Modern movies begin here, with Jean-Luc Godard’s “Breathless” in 1960. No debut film since “Citizen Kane” in 1942 has been as influential.”

American critic Roger Ebert

“More than any other this was the film which epitomised the iconoclasm of the early *Nouvelle Vague*, not least in its insolent use of the jump-cut.”

Time Out

Look out for

While the way the film was made (or “unmade”) gives it its historical significance, the performances in *À Bout de Souffle* are just as important in creating its aura of timeless Gallic cool. Jean Seberg is often overlooked, perhaps because of her chequered career, but her first scene here is a truly thrilling cinematic moment – not just because of how she is being directed, but simply because of Seberg herself. Selling copies of the New York Herald Tribune on the Champs Elysees, her artless, effortless presence defines “modern” as much as jump cuts and handheld cameras. She seems always to be right in the present – even in a film made in 1960.

What happened next?

François Truffaut once stated, “There is the cinema before Godard and the cinema after Godard.” But *À Bout de Souffle* was a tough act to follow. Godard’s next few films had a mixed reception (although 1965’s futuristic thriller *Alphaville* was hugely acclaimed), with his style increasingly becoming more experimental and less accessible.

Talking points

Close your eyes. Which image can you conjure up from this film?

Do you think the film glorifies the criminal Michel, or exposes him?

This film inspired a generation to become independent film-makers – which movies make you want to pick up a camera or write a script?

Review starter

A turning point in film history, this low-budget French thriller took the camera onto the streets of Paris...

Ahead of its time in the 60s, still ahead of its time in the 2010s ...

À Bout de Souffle, a lesson in cool ...

What we think

A tragic love story, an explosion of energy – and a film that changed film.