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A Bout de Musique

Godard's fascination with the American film noir genre reflects the contemporary climate of the French film industry: while France has its own industry during the 1960s, it is predicated upon American standards of filmmaking. Playing on this condition, Jean-Luc Godard's film, *Breathless*, is homage to American film noirs, fetishizing conventions of the genre and infusing them with elements of the French New Wave style. In particular the music draws upon American themes and inspirations. All of the music, both diegetic and non-diegetic, comes from, or alludes to, America. The constant presence and domination of American styles of music in France in *Breathless*, and its fragmented and repetitive nature, demonstrate America's dominance over the French film industry and Godard's response to it.

Most of the French film auteurs and critics distrust, or at least have distaste for, American films at this time. As much as French directors are striving to find a voice of their own with which to express themselves through filmmaking, they admire the American style and can't deny the influence it has upon them. Eric Rohmer affirms this in his article for the *Cahiers du Cinema*, "Rediscovering America." He posits that the reason that French film makers find America so influential stems from familiar convictions: "This science of efficacy, purity of line, economy of means—hang it all, were these classical characteristics not our prerogative all through French history?" (Rohmer 90). Thus, for a French filmmaker to channel American storytelling and conventions into his film seems only natural, a given. It is reasonable to believe that

Jean-Luc Godard shares his opinion, and his love of American cinema. He enjoys it so much that he makes *Breathless* a cinematic homage to some of his favorite filmmakers. Each aspect of the film draws inspiration from the conventions and themes that Godard observes, and reinterprets them in the French New Wave style.

The music in *Breathless* follows conventions of an American style, jazz, but changes it, morphs it, into something new. It is an appropriation of a foreign style whose new form makes it different than what it once was, but not so different that one does not recognize its origins. It breaks up traditional jazz conventions into bits and pieces and examines them by replaying the film's main theme repeatedly. There are different variations on the same limited number of notes played in the theme, but they keep being used over and over again. This fetishizes the music. It is similar to when one gets a song stuck in his head, and that same chorus keeps playing over and over again. That small section of music becomes the signifier for the whole song. After Patricia has her lunch date with the other American, the camera follows Michel as he stalks the pair to see what they are up to. During this scene the core theme of the music is repeated as before, but is accented differently depending on what happens onscreen. When he is walking confidently, the music plays normally. When he sees the two of them kiss, the music falters and missteps, breaking out of its normal rhythm to reflect Michel's surprise and his distaste for the event. Unexpected notes create a sense of improvisation and spontaneity that jazz is known for, which compliments what is going on in the film. It also adds another layer to Godard's homage to American film because it reasserts the idea that "[what] is so admirable in the American cinema is that it cannot help being spontaneous" (Bazin 251). In one sense, the musical score is the signifier for Michel's

personality. On another level it is a signifier for American movies, and on another for the whole genre of jazz.

The rest of the film contains these layers as well: the clothes that Poiccard wears, the cars he drives, the fatalistic narrative the film portrays; all of these things are signifiers for an entire genre and classification of film that Godard is fascinated by. *Breathless* is a manifestation of Godard's love of noirs and each of the signifiers represents a genre convention that he is dotting on and fetishizing. In the case of the music, it is that single section that, for Godard, perfectly demonstrates what film noir music is and what it should be. Music in his film goes along with the rest of it: it is a French noir, an auteur-inspired one, an assimilated one.

Some aspects of American culture and cinema resonate with France, and others do not. This also explains the fragmentation and repetition of music in the film. The aspects that do resonate with French audiences are more emphasized, while the other miscellaneous notes and themes are downplayed, and in this film completely left out. It is as if Godard took a complete musical score and deleted all of the parts that would not be received as well by French audiences; what are left are pieces of a whole. These small chunks of music become audio fetishes, reifications of American ideas as perceived by French audiences and filmmakers. When Michel is introduced in the film, and anytime where he channels Humphrey Bogart in his character, those iconic eight notes get repeated. The score in this sense reflects Michel's obsession with noir characters—especially “Bogie.” The same eight notes get repeated because they demonstrate how Michel internalizes and expresses his love of Humphrey Bogart: he becomes a commodity and a fetish.

For something to become a fetish, it must be focused on with unusual intensity. The *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v.1.1)* defines fetish as “an object regarded with awe as being the embodiment or habitation of a potent spirit or as having magical potency.” Much the same way that the camera cuts up a woman’s body, focusing in on certain body parts and making fetishes out of them, so too does the music editing focus in on one part of the score to make it into a fetish. Godard cuts up and focuses on specific aspects of the music of film noirs and the jazz genre in order to call attention to what is happening in the film and connect it to the Hollywood films that he admires so much.

Even though France has a long history of art and music, after the reconstruction of Europe following World War II, America sees a lot of mass media distribution all over Europe. American popular culture invades the French film and music industry. In a sense, the country has lost some of its cultural identity to America. America has invaded not only to push back the Germans, but to take advantage of the hearts and minds of a people who have no industry left to create their own popular media in the aftermath of the war. Godard’s response to this episode of cultural imperialism in France is to assimilate Hollywood style and conventions into French discourse in a way that allows for it to be transformed. By blending together elements from both countries’ filmic discourses, he has made an entirely new kind of film, one that contains inspiration and admiration for the Hollywood style of filmmaking as well as French auteur style and New Wave conventions.

Works Cited

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