

Holly Cao

Claudia Calhoun

Introduction to Cinema Studies

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*Breathless* Analysis: Michael's Prison

One of the most puzzling moments in film history is when Michel Poicard in *Breathless* accepts his capture by the police which resulted in his death. This is a romantic gesture which the main character Michael made to Patricia. Even though the story is about Michael running away from the police, the formal patterns of the film points to a theory that Patricia is in fact the one imprisoning Michael. By this theory, the film has a happy ending when Michael can no longer be with Patricia when he chooses to go to the literal prison.

According to Miseur Parvulesco in his press release with Patricia, "The American woman dominates the man. The French doesn't dominate him yet." An iconic movie of the French New Wave, *Breathless* reflects the power dynamic of French and American cultures in late 1950s represented by Michael, a French, and Patricia, an American. There are two ways in which Patricia has control over Michael: romantically and socially. At the very beginning of the film is the scene where Michael drives down a road to Paris while singing about Patricia whom the audience have not met. This scene creates a suspense of Patricia and her relationship to Michael which is to be revealed

d and redefined throughout the film. The answer lies in the response of Patricia in the middle of the film when Michael tells Patricia that he loves her, but Patricia gives an ambiguous response, saying that she needs 8 days to figure it out, which lengthens the suspense. This creative decision of story writing promotes a logical and objective instead of emotional and subjective response. For one thing, it gives the audiences time to process and observe their relationship based on their own opinions. It also takes away the subjective opinion of Patricia and give the power of defining the relationship to the audience. In the same scene, the two characters referred to the story of Romeo and Juliet, suggesting their have mental power over each other. Although it partially defines the relationship, this clique is quickly dismissed by Patricia who says that Michael is able to live without his love unlike Romeo. Towards the end of the film, their relationship dynamic experiences a shift when Patricia gets recognized by the police of acquaintance with Michael, and she takes her societal power. In the end, Michael realizes the power that Patricia has over him, so he surrenders upon her reporting to the police.

The angle of the shots also reflect this power dynamic. For starters, Patricia is presented in the film with physically higher position than Michael. In Patricia's bedroom, she stands up and walks around while Michael lies on on the bed. In the scene in the house, she peeks out from the attic looking down at him. There is an elevation of Patricia's power when Michael

l comes into the city to follow her around. We first see Patricia walking on the street selling newspaper. The elevation of her power is confirmed by the shot that she ascends the escalator to see the editor in chief, with Michael stalking her. The camera shoots Patricia from a higher position as she arises toward it. Later in the film during the interview when Miseur Parvulesco states his views on power between men and women, we see for the first time a low angle shot of Patricia looking at Michael. What cannot be seen, but can be inferred from the sound effect is that Miseur Parvulesco descends from the sky in a helicopter to do this press release. The physical heights of Miseur Parvulesco and Patricia suggest that the ideology of love dominates Michael.

Another perception that the camera angle provide is the sense of confinement that the audience can feel for Michael. There are times such as on the street and in the apartments where Goddard used the god's eye view to suggest Michael's powerlessness over his destiny, as if the audience is looking from the outside Michael trapped in the world of the film. The film starts with Michael entering this world in Paris from the vast countryside to see Patricia. The buildings and the traffic prevents Michael from see and going far which is of high danger to Michael who needs to run away from the police, but Michael wishes tell her that she loves her and take her out of this world to Rome. In the final scene in the house, we see the camera breaking the 180 degree rule of classical Hollywood to pan around the room, lea

ving the audience with no room of imagining the space of the happening and a strong sense of the environment surrounding the characters. This scene displays the entirety of Michael's physical confinement, which responds to his consequential confinement by the police and Patricia. Iris is another commonly used motif that shows the restraint. Back in the scene in Patricia's bedroom, Patricia looks through paper to see Michael in an inspecting way. A few iris cuts are also used in the film. Iris separates audience from the world of characters, to heighten the awareness of existence of more than one world, for the confined and the other the confiner. In the end Michael's experience from the world with Patricia is shattered as the camera tilt to a dutch angle, and then to the god's eye's view to give audience the experience of being introspector of the death.

Before the scene when Patricia tells the police, Michael is neither aware nor concerned about Patricia's negative impact on his life, although it is clear that he is running away from something. A sense of urgency is created by the frequent repetition of the scenes of character's journey to various places, usually by car. The ostensible justification is that the police is looking for him because he killed people, yet the audience are shown too little about the police for it to be a significant part of the story. Michael travels through the space of the scene for a significant part of the film. His wandering around gives a sense of directionlessness, following Patricia around, not knowing ironically that she is the one that Michael ne

eds to get away from. The audience can see the background moving because of the unconventional cinematographic decision to put it in focus, but the conversations inside the cars are seldom relevant to their physical locations which creates an unexplained sense of lost. The audience is reminded at times of the locations by the ariel and establishing shots such as shots of the Eiffel Tower and the Paris streets. As the urgency of Michael in the story to run away from the police gets stronger, the car is driving slower in a contradiction. At first Michael speeds in the countryside road. And then he drives Patricia in the city at a reduced speed. At one point in the film, Patricia takes the wheel, and she drives even slower. When a woman on the street recognizes Michael towards the end, the car passes slowly in front of her. Michael asks Patricia to drive faster, but the film cuts right to the shot where the car stops at destination. The car speed represents Michael's diminishing ability to escape as Patricia takes control of him. In the hideaway spot Rue Campagne-Premiere towards the end of the film, Michael realizes that he is already captured, by Patricia who called the police. A shift in the character's thought takes place, he wants to get away from Patricia. He has no ability to leave as the police closes in. When he is offered the car wheel once more by the guy who delivers him money, Michael turns it down. Because of the two types of power Patricia have against him, Michael knows that if he leaves Paris, he could find Patricia again. The only way he can escape is to go to jail or die. Instead of taking the car, he choo

ses to run on his feet. A car can be controlled by others such as Patricia, but feet can only be controlled by Michael.

A second implication of Michael's lost sense of direction is presented through the music. The volume and intensity of music is kept constant throughout the beginning, climax and end, which implying that what Michael is destined to run away from is always the same distance. The consistent non diegetic music emphasize on the audience's' experience as spectators, distancing them from the story. We do however hear the various themes in the music. The jazz music in the minor key commonly represents danger and the major-key classical piano represents love. The back and forth between these two styles of music, as well as the transitions between majors and minors represent the themes of romantic and social power. For example, the jazz music is played in the opening scene when Michael drives down the road and kills the men to bring out the theme of villain running away and the awareness of what it means to kill someone in the lawful society. When he finds Patricia walking along the street, the music switches to romantic, classical music. To maintain the sense of urgency in the diminishing car speed, percussion kicks in the music in the escaping scenes in the car towards the end. Unlike in traditional filmmaking where the music is used for dramatic effect, *Breathless* use music to enforce the presence the themes and to control the mood of the audience. For example, in the scene where Michael shoots the men, the music maintains the jazz sequence instead of something more scary.

Physical elements in the film also demonstrates the sense of directionless. Reflexive materials such as sunglasses, glass windows and mirrors are used commonly in the scenes to represent Michael's mental confinement and his inability to see the truth. There are shots in the film where Michael and Patricia look at themselves through the mirrors. Goddard plays on the fact that people like to see themselves in the mirrors, and they control what they see by shifting their expressions. In the scene in the bathroom, Michael makes some weird faces, Patricia imitates and says that they suit her very well. This statement hints on the sculpability of faces, the metamorphosis nature of people. The same sequence of face-making is present at the very end of the film, as one of the last things that Michael does before he dies. Because people can change how things look, they cannot see them for what they are. For the other repetitions of characters looking at themselves through the mirrors, glasses and the street reflected on the sunglasses, looking reflexively is part of the characters daily routines, yet they cannot truly see anything. Michael cannot truly see Patricia because she can change her face. There are scenes where we see Patricia expressionless, and we see a still photo of her face that she hangs on the wall. Not to mention that one particular scene when Michael tells Patricia to smile. Patricia on the other hand stares at Michael, trying to find the answer of whether she loves her, but she cannot find it. The lack of visual variation highlights the theme of the repeating world and similarities between images, which is ac

hieved by having the film in black-and-white. This creative decision also allows a statement in the characters' costuming: striped clothes. Patricia is wearing various striped shirt or dress in all scenes of the film which patterns resemble the prison bars. When Michael comes to Patricia's apartment, he also wears a striped robe. This pattern stands out in this black-and-white movie as other characters costumes favor pure colors. It associates Patricia with the prison that Michael know throughout the film to run away from.

In the end it becomes apparent that Michael is supposed to run away from Patricia, since she is the one that called the cops. And in the very end when Michael is dying and running down the street, we see not the cops, but Patricia chasing him along. In the end Michael is on the floor and Patricia looks over him. We see a shot of feet surrounding Michael's head, and Patricia's feet is the one to close the circle, leaving Michael nowhere to escape. Even though Michael could not physically escape, he escaped spiritually through death. *Breathless* was shot after World War II when the French society is damaged because of the war and flooded with American culture because of political agreements. Patricia is a representation of the American Hollywood culture that captivated the French. Cahiers du Cinema critics like Goddard made films that do not strictly follow the classical Hollywood rules to make beautiful, near-perfect pictures, but they are filled with inspired ideologies such as the power dynamics in *Breathless*.