

The Judas Effect: Betrayal in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*

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The puzzling ending of Jean-Luc Godard's seminal film *Breathless* has been widely analyzed and debated.¹ This essay aims to revisit some of the issues with which critics have already engaged and proposes a new way of looking at betrayal and at the denouement of the film. *Breathless* (1960), for the most part, escapes categorization. It has often been considered to be a trailblazer, a film that, along with François Truffaut's *400 Blows* (1959), sparked the Nouvelle Vague 'New Wave' movement. While there is plenty of merit to that claim,² Godard and the other New Wave directors never made another film like *Breathless*. The film is unique because it attempts to create a successful narrative at the intersecting point of three aesthetics. Michel and Patricia are film noir characters bound by religious dynamics—akin to Jesus and Judas—placed in a neorealist setting. In essence they are characters without a genre, always out of place, and their existential drifting generates a Judas effect—a trope that establishes betrayal and sacrifice as necessary narrative tools and that suspends the classical (cinematic) Oedipal cycle.

The narrative arc of *Breathless* revolves around Michel, a small-time crook, fascinated by the persona of Humphrey Bogart. Michel is on the run because he shot a policeman; he is also in love with an American girl, Patricia,³ who is a student at the Sorbonne and sells the *New York Herald Tribune* in the streets of Paris. The film slowly moves around Paris following the two characters as they attempt to figure out their relationship, each other, and the next step. In the end, Patricia decides to turn in Michel, who consequently is shot by the police in the middle of the street. He dies uttering the confusing words “c'est dégueulasse” ‘it's a real bummer.’ Throughout the film and especially in the ending, *Breathless* attempts to reconcile, via religion, two aesthetics of cinema, neorealism and film noir.⁴

Neorealist Affinities

Famed French critic and theorist André Bazin, who had an immense influence on the New Wavers, took a special interest in the aesthetic of the Italian neorealist movement and its tendency to shoot outdoors: “City life is a spectacle, a *commedia dell'arte* that the Italians stage for their own pleasure. And even in the poorest quarters ... offer outstanding possibilities for spectacle.... Add to this the sunshine and the absence of clouds ... and you have explained why the urban exteriors of Italian films are superior to all others” (28-29). The term “spectacle”

is used very loosely here, and it may refer more to the possibility of making cinema anywhere: anything is filmable (this idea is quite close to the reason for which Walter Benjamin looked at cinema as a potentially revolutionary medium of representation, 233-36). For Godard, though, “spectacle” is more clearly connected to spectatorship, as he takes the less active Italian background, transposes it to a Parisian context, and gives the audience an animated spectacle.⁵ Michel stumbling down the street, shot in the back, Patricia following him with her hand on her chest in hyperbolic despair (see Figure 1), the exhaled cigarette smoke coming out of Michel’s mouth—his dying breath—all of this amounts to a meticulous production, a spectacle not unlike Slavoj Žižek’s reading of the crucifixion of Christ to which we will return shortly.



Figure 1

Thematically, Italian neo-realism thrives on the uninterrupted flow of “real” life, and foregrounds the conflicts of ordinary rather than heroic protagonists. Italian neorealist directors made films with very low budgets and shot on location, which supported their quest for objectivity and authenticity. They favored long and medium shots in deep focus, and avoided unusual movements of the camera, odd camera angles (although exceptions do exist, for example De Sica’s *Bicycle Thief*, 1948), and used natural light as much as possible. The editing also tried to convey a sense of reality by not drawing attention to itself and even being minimal on occasion, which resulted in achieving a “real-time” effect. André Bazin was also concerned with what he called the “ambiguity of reality” (36), which was revealed through the aforementioned long shot, deep focus⁶ and *mise-en-scène*. These elements allow the spectator to enter into a closer relationship with the image (Bazin 42) because it matches our perception of reality; spectators take everything in at their own

pace and identify with a familiar reality. However, the image remains ambiguous, as each spectator extracts his or her own meaning from it (unlike Eisenstein's intellectual montage, which manipulates the spectator toward the meaning sought by the director). In other words, the free will of the spectator remains intact.⁷

Both Godard's film and the neorealist aesthetic attempted to recreate an "authentic human experience," as Mark Shiel observes in his study of neorealist cinema: "the search for authentic human experience and interaction was a central preoccupation of neorealist cinema from the outset" (13). This sought-after interaction was best observed in the setting of the post-war Italian city, which led to one of the capital characteristics of the movement—the image of the city. The neorealists were profoundly concerned with the representation of the city and the process of modernization, focusing for example on post-war reconstruction and industrialization, which, obviously, took place mainly in the city. Furthermore,

Neorealist films set in urban space were deeply preoccupied with the iconography, social make-up, phenomenological experience and widespread influence of the city: as a physical space with distinctive sights and sounds; as a lived environment in which the struggle for food or work was particularly intense ... (Shiel 16)

The French filmmakers would later appropriate this wide range of themes concerning the Italian city, and there are traces of this tendency in Godard's film, even though it was shot in 1959 (and released the following year). During the famous tracking shot of Michel and Patricia, the Champs-Élysées become as much a character as the two actors. The personification of Paris renders the city more present and more vital. Godard continues to make the city come alive at various moments in the film by keeping the camera at the scale of a long shot and thus focusing equally on characters and their surroundings. Yet, as will become apparent shortly, *Breathless* also represents a departure from neorealist norms because of its insistence on idiosyncratic editing, jumps-cuts, and atemporal storytelling.

Film Noir Affinities

The aesthetic of the film noir—a genre⁸ that, like neorealism, emphasizes the description of the city—thrives on internal conflict and generally offers a "bleak view of human nature" (Buss 17). Michel and Patricia may be film noir characters, but they find themselves ontologically misplaced.⁹ Godard's film is not reliant on hyper-stylized angles and lighting, and unlike neorealism, film noir tends in fact to favor stylization by making extensive use of low or Dutch angles and of lighting contrasts, alternating low and high-key, and creating a chiaroscuro

effect.¹⁰ In Stephen Neale's opinion, the archetypal shot in film noir is "the extreme high-angle shot, an oppressive and fatalistic angle that looks down on its helpless victim to make it look like a rat in a maze" (68). This oppressive shot appears in *Breathless* at various moments (see Figure 2), but it is especially poignant toward the end when the two lovers are in the hideout apartment. The two characters walk around the apartment, apparently aimlessly, and they do resemble rats in a maze, stuck on the inside (see Figure 3). They are symbolically caught in a narrative trap, which is underlined by the literal walls of the small apartment.



Figure 2



Figure 3

The movement from outside (neorealist) to inside (noir) is highlighted often in Godard's film. *Breathless* is predominantly shot with a hand-held camera, which gives the audience the impression that they are following Patricia and Michel as they move about the city. But the camera also moves high up to survey the street and the characters from a distance, without any particular point-of-view attached to it. During the Champs-Élysées scene, the camera first starts at eye-level, and once Michel is ready to leave, it moves up to give an overview of the street and to show Patricia running back to kiss Michel on the cheek (see Figure 4). Given the (objective) distance between the camera and the street, the kiss helps the spectators identify Michel amid the other pedestrians, and it also echoes the infamous kiss that Judas lays on Jesus in the gardens of Gethsemane. As the action unfolds, the camera tracks Michel, revealing him coming up from subway stations, going into cafés, looking for his friend Tolmachof, always moving, and at the same time letting the audience see the city—different parts of the city, the tourist locations as well as the lesser known parts, and also at different times, from morning to dusk. Michel continuously moves between inside and outside spaces, and, appropriately, his walk with Patricia on the Champs is countered with long episodes when the two are inside an apartment.



Figure 4

Even when Michel and Patricia are in her apartment and thus isolated and indoors, the outside still plays an important role. The city reminds the audience that it is still out there, quite alive, as constant noises make their way through the open window into the private space of the apartment. The characters' words are actually often covered up by the sound of the city. At one point, a very loud siren is heard passing by and almost completely muffles Michel's voice as he tells Patricia that Americans admire the worst about French culture. Even though the focal point of the dialogue should be on Michel's hostility, it is the loud noise

coming from outside that takes over the soundtrack. Another siren goes by their room again within a few minutes, covering Michel's tirade about people being liars. At the same time, Patricia has her record player on and classical piano music becomes intermingled with the overbearing siren. The world of high art is trumped by the reality happening on the street. The siren, whether police, fire department, or ambulance, does not carry a positive message: this is a warning that an accident or something outside the law has taken place. The privacy of an intimate space, the inside, is permeated by the force of the sounds coming from outside. A very similar situation repeats itself during the interview with the writer Parvulesco, played by real life director Jean-Pierre Melville,¹¹ whose answers are often cut off or covered up by loud plane engine noises, since the interview takes place at the airport. The inside/outside dichotomy and the sounds covering other sounds are reflected in the relationship between Michel and Patricia—they are neither here nor there—and particularly in their identity as genre-less characters (or characters associated with multiple genres that, like the sounds, overlap).

The aesthetic choices of film noir are all meant to generate an ominous atmosphere, a dangerous city, or setting dominated by crime. It is indeed the presence of crime that gives noir its most common characteristic (Neale 19), but complicating the issue is the ever-ambivalent main character who makes it hard for the audience to take sides. Michel comes very close to this description. The audience must be against him as a murderer, but he is also charismatic and funny. In the first scenes, Michel drives and talks to himself. Then he looks into the camera and therefore at the audience, while continuing to speak. Michel engages us directly and we are unexpectedly transposed in the car next to him, creating a bond—we are suddenly accomplices.

Existential Shades

Existentialist philosophy dominated the post-war French intellectual climate and encapsulated the country's (and Europe's) burgeoning pessimism. Film noir, with its "prevailing mood or tone, one that can be characterised as cynical, pessimistic . . . with a strong sense of alienation and that existence is meaningless and absurd" (Spicer *European Film Noir 2*) proves to be a significant cultural complement to existentialism. Indeed, there seems to be an obvious connection between the noir character and the existentialist man who faces a confusing, meaningless world that he cannot accept. Albert Camus's exploration of the myth of Sisyphus from 1942 cements the theory behind the existentialist character who faces a choice. Unlike elsewhere in his oeuvre, Camus appears to reject the possibility of suicide in this instance and claims that one has to imagine Sisyphus happy because he is acutely aware of his condition and he embraces it. Geneviève Sellier finds similarities between the New Wave and

Camus through another absurd character, Meursault: “New Wave heroes live an absurd everyday life directly inherited from Camus’s *L’Etranger*: nihilism and the absence of altruism” (96). Most film noir characters, and Patricia and Michel too, face a similar alienation and occasional lack of logic, and they, too, never reach a state of happiness. These characters have to make a choice proposed by another existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, that between being and nothingness, and they each choose opposite sides. Yet, they are both condemned to constant lament, and are pushed into perpetual alienation and marginality. Michel and Patricia take separate philosophical paths, and in the end, they may both be wrong. The reference to Sartre is not gratuitous, as another connection to him can be made through Michel’s last words.¹² David Sterritt claims that “*dégueulasse*” ‘it’s a real bummer’ refers to the situation in which the two characters have fallen, and that it echoes Sartre’s nausea, which, reductively, is the angst that accompanies our pointless everyday lives (42).

The film showcases all these varied elements throughout, but especially in its denouement, beginning with the scene in which the two characters hide in an apartment as Michel awaits a phone call. The first shot in the new sequence is of Michel, his head on the table, listening to classical music. His body language suggests that he is tired. He turns his head to the right, so that we can see half of his face, and his eyes are closed. Then as he turns again to the left, the film cuts to the next shot. The movement of his head punctuates the cut in the film, almost as a wipe effect would. The transition materializes into a high-angle, objective shot. The audience is removed from the action and from the characters as more distance is created between viewers and characters. As already suggested, this type of shot also gives us the impression that the two characters are trapped: the end is nearing for Michel.

The *mise-en-scène* for the next sequence is exquisite: when Patricia enters the hideout apartment to the right of the frame, the two characters are clearly separated by the wall, which foreshadows their impending split. The camera then tracks Patricia’s movement, as she gives the newspaper to Michel, then goes into the kitchen to drop off the milk she bought. When she comes out of the kitchen, she is still holding the bottle of milk, and then finally returns to Michel. It is a rather superfluous gesture then, an unnecessary movement, perhaps suggesting that she is mulling over her decision to betray Michel. He drinks some of the milk, and asks her if she is thirsty, which she is not—she appears to need nothing. At this moment, he starts walking, and he follows the same path that she took just before, and then moves around in a circle. The two characters are locked into a quasi-dance, but while they are clearly connected by their actions, they are equally separated, visually, in the shot sequence. Therein lies the paradox of their relationship, as Godard explains cinematically the complicated relationship between his two characters—not really together, not really apart either.

Furthermore, the walk in the apartment is interrupted by two jump-cuts, which are superfluous cuts since the angle does not change, and this amounts to breaking the 30-degree rule. As Patricia lets Michel know about what she has done, as she reveals her choice, two rules are broken: that of the couple, her betrayal, and also that of the 30-degree rule. The content of the film is thus cinematically matched: Patricia is a Judas figure in a film that is a Judas figure itself because it betrays cinematic (mainstream) conventions. Godard often indulges in such departures from the norm. According to the auteur theory that François Truffaut laid out in his influential essay, *A Certain Tendency of French Cinema* (1954), the director retains all the creative power and every auteur garners a particular style that comes across evenly throughout the body of work. In other words, the filmmaker creates a film in his or her own image, as it were.

While Patricia and Michel walk around the apartment, the camera follows them in hand-held tracking shots. The characters are speaking simultaneously as if fighting for the aural space of the sequence. Suddenly there are two monologues and no more dialogue between the two. The breakdown in communication is finalized, as the audience by now is well aware of the translation issues from before, such as Patricia constantly asking Michel what certain words mean (Michel Marie describes the entire film as “a tragedy of language and of the impossibility of communication,” 168). However, the circular movement in the apartment suggests being stuck in a repetitive mode; she talks about being in love, and about how she reached the conclusion she was not in love because she was mean to him. When she reaches him again, he has put on his sunglasses,¹³ as if to suggest that he is trying to defend himself. It is an act that suggests self-preservation, and he asks of her to repeat what she said. So she starts walking around the apartment again, the two of them again speaking at the same time, in yet another redundant movement and quasi-dialogue.

He is upset with her, calls her “lamentable,” and then he starts walking in the same pattern as she did before while their words briefly overlap again. As he is buttoning up his shirt, he tells her he wants to go to jail and does not want to flee. Michel, who seems to snap out of a daze, abruptly interrupts the odd monologues. He remembers that his friend, Berutti, was supposed to come meet him, so he runs outside. When Berutti tries to convince him he should flee, Michel looks up at the camera and tells us that he is fed up, tired, and that he wants to sleep (see Figure 5). He also refuses to take his friend’s gun when the latter offers. Michel’s concession at this juncture reminds us of his choice from earlier, in Patricia’s apartment, when she mentions reading Faulkner, and they discuss choosing between grief and nothing: he picks nothingness. In the end, he chooses to do nothing, which leads him to nothingness. It is almost as if he finally admits to himself that he has chosen wrongly, that in his existentialist attitude he

fails to make the right choices. He is ready for his punishment: he accepts that his fate rests with Patricia and embraces the proverbial death drive.



Figure 5

There is not much information about why or how Patricia makes up her mind. We initially see her in a café where she asks for a scotch, but then settles for a coffee, and puts her head down on the counter in frustration for being unable to make a decision. Very tellingly, before she gets to the coffee shop, she goes by a newspaper stand where a sign is hanging: “vendredi jour de chance” ‘Friday lucky day,’ in spite of the fact that the French traditionally believe Friday to be a bad-luck day. The newspaper seller tempts her with a ticket for the lottery saying, “it’s your lucky day.” It is a deeply ironic episode pointing to the lack of luck of both Patricia and Michel. It is especially worth noting the irony that Michel dies on this “lucky day,” just as the earthly death of Jesus is celebrated on “Good” Friday.

For Patricia, perhaps it is her lucky day because she rids herself of Michel. Patricia is the active, deciding factor in the equation. Her power is obvious even in the *mise-en-scène* choice of clothes. At this point, Michel’s shirt is unbuttoned, suggesting fragility—he is exposed and weak. Visible again (more prominently in the apartment scene) are his two necklaces—an odd extravagance that points to Michel’s duplicitous nature. His shirt has vertical lines, perhaps foreshadowing the fact that he may be headed to jail. Opposite him, Patricia’s fancy dress sports horizontal lines that are in stark geometrical contrast to his outfit. Her dress is well fastened, all the way to the top, and she appears more centered, more in charge of the situation.

Following her phone call to the station, the detectives arrive at the scene, and they get out of the car, weapons in hand. Michel’s friend throws him a gun, which he picks up, and as a result, the police open fire, but we do not see the

impact of the bullet. Two jump-cuts—an aural one (from silence and the diegetic gun going off to extra-diegetic music) and a visual jump-cut (Michel is already running down the street, still smoking and holding his injured back)—underline the importance of Michel's imminent death-spectacle (see Figure 6). The immediate observation is the location of the wound, in his back,¹⁴ even though it would appear he was facing the police initially, but all sense of objectivity is lost at this point, as Bazin's realities are thrown out the window. Patricia's betrayal—a stab in the back—is also referenced here. Michel's actions point to Patricia's Judas-like betrayal in a cinematic moment that suggests Godard's Judas-like betrayal of Bazin's realism.



Figure 6

But where is he running? He was tired, he wanted to sleep, but he is suddenly running in the middle of the street. Michel is headed toward the intersection, and the spectators may now recall that at a different intersection Michel witnesses a fatal accident earlier in the film. So, for all intents and purposes, he is running to where he is supposed to die (i.e. to fulfill the foreshadowing of the accident). Intersections are obviously symbolic, but more importantly and as established previously, the film itself appears to materialize at an aesthetic crossroads—Michel must expire on this makeshift cross. The hand-held camera tracks Michel as he stumbles through the street, bumping into parked cars. The first interruption is a reverse shot of Patricia running after him; she is framed in a medium shot and her right hand touches her chest in an exaggerated gesture meant to suggest she worries about Michel. So perhaps he does not run away from the police, but from her. He is trying to escape her.

He finally arrives at the intersection and falls face down. Almost immediately we get another reverse shot. This time Patricia is framed in a medium-long shot, the implication being that there is more distance between the

two. Interestingly, neither of these last shots are point-of-view shots, though, because Michel only glimpses back, and at the very end, he is lying on the ground. So in this case again, a neutral point-of-view dominates. Michel turns around and wipes his mouth, and the butt of the cigarette falls off as he exhales more cigarette smoke. His arms fall to either side of the body in another suggestive cross (see Figure 7). He is still wearing the glasses and he is shown in an oblique position in the frame, surrounded by the feet of the detectives. After a quick moment, Patricia's shoes come into the frame, to his left. The camera shifts to a close-up of her, hand on face in what appears to be more genuine concern. The film cuts back to Michel's face in a close-up from an unknown source (Patricia is to his left, the shot comes from his right, and we have yet to see any of the officers' faces). He makes the grimaces he had made back in her room, much earlier in the film. These grimaces¹⁵ appear to be significant, but it is not clear exactly what they mean, so we can only speculate. During the long episode at Patricia's place, he explains to her what "faire la tête" 'to sulk' means by making the same facial expressions, only more exaggerated. Thus, a possible explanation in the context of the ending is that Michel is sulking toward Patricia and about what she did, rather than the more obvious reason to be upset—his impending death. Ignoring the expected, normal physical and psychological torment that should assail him at the moment so that he can express a much more trivial feeling would be congruent with his apathetic persona, as well as with the existentialist dogma that glorifies death as the only possible solution to an absurd life.



Figure 7

From Michel's sulking, the camera returns to Patricia, who touches the side of her head in a gesture that hints at slight embarrassment; perhaps his facial expressions remind her of the intimacy they had shared and now she feels guilty,

or perhaps she feels guilty about having brought on this mayhem. The camera switches back to Michel and he finally says “c’est vraiment dégueulasse,” which is translated in the Criterion edition of the DVD (2007) as “makes me want to puke,” but a more accurate translation would be “it’s a real bummer.”¹⁶ Then, he closes his own eyes with his left hand. Noticeably, his finger gets stuck in his mouth for a split second, opening up his lips, which he has been touching constantly throughout the film.¹⁷ As his head falls to the right, we can hear Patricia’s voice asking, ‘what did he say’? One of the policemen answers from off screen: “vous êtes vraiment une dégueulasse” ‘he said you make him want to puke’ or more accurately, ‘you really are a scumbag.’ Regardless of the chosen translation, it is an obviously problematic moment, perhaps a mistranslation, perhaps a misunderstanding. Importantly, it is the voice of the law—unseen, thus acousmatic and God-like—that casts these words upon Patricia, so she has to accept what is coming, whether it be judgment or scorn. And yet, she still does not understand. She turns her head towards the audience, touches her lips as Michel would and asks for the meaning of the word “dégueulasse” (see Figure 8). We never hear anyone answer that question, so answering becomes the responsibility of the audience. Does “dégueulasse” refer to her betrayal, to the death of Michel, to the actual denouement of the film, which may not be satisfactory to some? Possibly, all of the above. As Patricia slowly turns to the right, and therefore her back to the audience, a fade out takes the screen to black and us to the conclusion of the film.

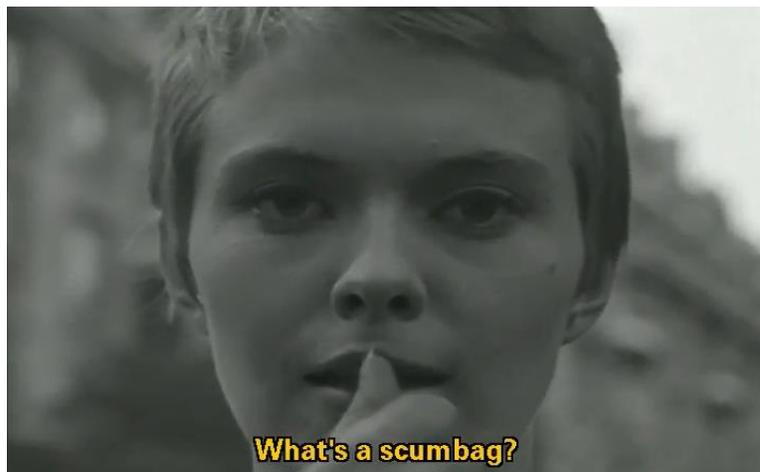


Figure 8

Betrayal, Sacrifice, and the Judas Effect

So why does Patricia turn Michel in and betray him? It could be because she was afraid of the police, because she feared for her student status in France, or

perhaps she was not sure about her feelings towards Michel. The answer lies in an ethical gray area. Regardless, her choice was a necessary one in order to close off the narrative trajectory of this paradoxical film.¹⁸ Michel must die so that the film can achieve a sense of finality; he must also die in a spectacular, memorable fashion that will help him transcend the diegetic barriers; in other words, so that he can become a symbol of Godard's cinema, of the French New Wave, of cinema in general (just as the spectacular death of Christ turns Him into a symbol of Christianity). For these two elements to happen, Patricia has to fulfill her role of a quasi-femme fatale through the act of betrayal.

According to Neale there are two types of femme fatale: "alluring—and dangerous—*femme fatale* on the one hand, and dependable, respectable, safe and undemanding partners, wives and girlfriends on the other" (160). Patricia seems to fall somewhere in between these two categories in spite of Michel's best efforts to turn her into the latter. Ultimately, she is not a full-fledged noir character since she is not merely the cause of temptation that leads to the hero's fall, but her ambivalent betrayal is (because it can be interpreted as a sacrifice). She is a necessary evil in the equation. Exploring the religious undertones of *Breathless* may offer another venue through which one might understand where the two characters fit aesthetically. On the one hand, film noir is a genre filled with moral ambiguity that essentially places characters in God-less environments and on existentialist paths. On the other hand, Italian neorealism originates from the cultural tenor of the Catholic Church. Moreover, as an auteur, Godard exhibits omniscient and omnipresent qualities in the creation process of filmmaking.¹⁹ Furthermore, he operated in a country known for its inherent fatalism²⁰ born in Calvinism. So, a possible link that could explain where Michel and Patricia fall as cinematic characters is religion, and, more clearly, the most famous betrayal/sacrifice of our humanity: Judas's betrayal of Jesus.

Two key moments that function as quasi-bookends to the Old and New Testaments are of relevance here: Abraham's decision to kill his son Isaac and Judas's decision to turn in Jesus to the Roman authorities. If we look at the biblical conundrum of Abraham's sacrifice and if we agree that he had to sacrifice Isaac because God asked him to, did not Judas then have to do the same thing? He had to betray Jesus and sacrifice his own soul in order to fulfill God's plan, which leads to Slavoj Žižek claiming that Jesus manipulated him into the betrayal (19) and asking the following rhetorical question: "Is Judas not therefore the ultimate hero of the New Testament, the one who was ready to lose his soul and accept eternal damnation so that the divine plan could be accomplished?" (16).

The idea of manipulation finds some support diegetically in the fact that Michel calls Patricia a "coward"—a word often associated with Judas's actions—on two occasions: during the first car ride together and in the long apartment scene. He also tells her he considers cowardice to be the worst human flaw. In

other words, he dares her to be courageous. It takes tremendous courage for Judas to betray Jesus/God and for Patricia to betray Michel. However, because the betrayal is allowed by the higher powers, Judas and Patricia are not villains and their betrayals could be considered virtuous. And that is what I mean by a Judas effect: Judas was a necessary villain/evil, (self)-sacrificed for the greater good; Patricia as a villain and betrayer is necessary in order for this film to function *narratively* and, at a secondary, extra-diegetic level, necessary in order for Michel to become the iconic character he is today (and by extension, his creator, Godard). However, beyond the obvious betrayal, Patricia sacrifices a chance to fulfill her cinematic Oedipal cycle, which dictates that she must settle down. So then the drawback of the Judas effect is that it strips the characters of their current identity by interrupting their cinematic Oedipal trajectory and rendering the union or marriage of the couple impossible. So, Godard's auteur cinema bypasses the Oedipal trajectory, which is the most common paradigm for classical Hollywood cinema, and thus effectuates a "betrayal" of its own. The end result is that, as the necessary villain, Patricia has to follow through with her betrayal to bring the story to an end, and in doing so she also loses herself, just as Judas does.

The rapprochement between Patricia, Michel and Godard on the one hand, and Judas and Jesus/God, on the other hand, leads to a much more problematic, if not imperfect, alignment between Michel and Jesus. Michel's grand plan is to flee to Rome, which happens to be the eternal city of God. He also mentions that he used to work as a film assistant at the Cinecittà in Rome, which links him extra-diegetically with a more immediate power figure—the director. As already suggested, Michel is the one who allows Patricia this betrayal. However, perhaps he has a change of heart at the very end and his last words do inculcate Patricia, just as Jesus cast blame on the eventual betrayer: "Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed" (Matthew 26:24). In the end, the interpretative venue that most clearly brings these characters together and justifies the comparison to Christ and Judas is provided by love, a concept that might transform the betrayal into (self)-sacrifice.

Abraham's sacrifice in the name of his love for the Lord gains a new perspective in Soren Kierkegaard's²¹ *Fear and Trembling* (1843). The most important aspect of Abraham's story is that the murder/sacrifice never happens. Kierkegaard writes, "He knew it was God the Almighty that tried him, he knew it was the hardest sacrifice that could be demanded of him; but he also knew that no sacrifice was too hard when God demanded it—and he drew the knife" (23). There is hardly any doubt in Abraham's actions, even though he had time to reflect, almost four days according to Kierkegaard's reading of the Old Testament (61), and "what is left out of the Abraham story is the anguish" (29). The audience does not witness Patricia's anguish except for the quick shot of her at the coffee shop when she places her head on the counter in apparent torment. But the

question of anguish is central to Kierkegaard's analysis: "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac; but in this contradiction lies the very anguish that can indeed make one sleepless; and yet without that anguish Abraham is not the one he is" (31). Of course, in the case of *Breathless* the issue is complicated; Patricia does not murder Michel with her own hands, but effectively one can argue she is the one who causes his death. So not only is she willing (ethically and religiously) to murder him, she actually follows through. In the case of Abraham, if we eliminate the variable of faith (which we really cannot), then Abraham is willing to murder Isaac. In the case of Patricia, the variable that gets eliminated is love. In fact, she says that she is no longer in love with Michel; she rationalizes her actions as a direct result of lack of love: "I stayed to find out if I was in love with you or if I wasn't in love with you." She concludes that because she was mean to him and she betrayed him, "it proves I don't love you." This reasoning may then eliminate the possibility that her betrayal is the ultimate act of love—what Žižek termed "'pure' betrayal, betrayal out of love" (17), that is ultimately a betrayal of the self.²²

In spite of the uncertainty of love between humans, Abraham had love for God and Kierkegaard seems convinced of this also (36). Abraham must have been convinced that God was not going to take Isaac from him because of love (both for God and his son), but he was prepared to give him up. Michel, too, had to believe that Patricia was not going to betray him because of love. Abraham is not surprised at the outcome, which is a positive one for him, and Michel should not be either. It is a strong reason why his last words cannot possibly be addressed to Patricia in a vindictive way. He is disgusted about the lack of love. That lack is a recurring theme in Godard's work. Colin MacCabe quotes Godard's longtime cinematographer, Raoul Coutard, who claims that "there are only two subjects in Jean-Luc's films: death and the impossibility of love" (*Portrait* 123). Love and faith must be regarded as equals in terms of paradoxes: "the dialectical element, in the form of *problemata*, in order to see how monstrous a paradox faith is, a paradox capable of making a murder into a holy act well pleasing God, a paradox which gives Isaac back to Abraham, which no thought can grasp because faith begins exactly where thinking leaves off" (Kierkegaard 61). Kierkegaard reinforces the idea that faith is a paradox on several occasions, but the important thing from this declaration is the clear demarcation of the moment when faith begins. We can certainly argue that the key moment in the film is Michel's reckless abandon of self—when he transforms into Kierkegaard's knight of resignation—or at least that this moment is on par with Patricia's decision. The abandon is a necessary gesture, an act required by Christian dogma in order to completely trust and connect with God, through death. Like Jesus, Michel abandons himself to death because that is the plan; like Jesus, his words are

ambiguous and open to interpretation. Žižek muses on Jesus's rhetorical question to His Father—why thou hast forsaken me? Jesus, as part of God, must know the outcome of his ordeal (i.e. that he will rise from the dead), in which case his words are simply part of the “spectacle” of death, a spectacle meant to impress upon the public in order to fuel the transformation into the symbol mentioned above. If Jesus does not know the outcome, then a problem of omnipotence or lack thereof arises.

When placed in the same equation with Abraham, Michel and Patricia are noir, neorealist, existentialist, and also tragic. According to Kierkegaard, Abraham is not a tragic hero because he gets Isaac back on the strength of the absurd, which is to say that the former eventually benefits from his blind commitment to faith in God. Abraham would have been a tragic hero, though, had Isaac been killed. So, by elimination, he is either a murderer or a man of faith (Kierkegaard 65-66). He cannot be a tragic hero because he does not follow the ethical. This would actually mean that Patricia qualifies as a tragic hero because she follows the ethical—after all, she was asked by the police to turn in a murderer. At the very least she qualifies as a moral hero. During the idiosyncratic interview with Parvulesco, the writer—an authoritative figure diegetically—is asked “what is more moral, a woman who betrays or a man who abandons?” He answers, the woman, essentially sanctioning Patricia's future betrayal. Patricia's tragic and moral qualities make her, to gloss and pervert Kierkegaard's second book (*Either-Or: A Fragment of Life edited by Victor Eremita, 1843*), neither/nor: neither wholly tragic, nor quite ethical. Once again, she is out of place, an in-between character. Her actions are meant to demonstrate that she is in control of the situation, so she does it for the sake of the system, and ultimately for herself because “Faith contains an element of egoism” (Kierkegaard 84). This train of thought brings her closer to Abraham: Abraham is tempted; he gives in to the temptation to demonstrate to God that he has faith, so he does it for God's sake and his own (Kierkegaard 69-70). However, most intriguingly, Michel is both a murderer and a man of faith. We know the latter not just because of his reckless abandon, but also because of the car accident mentioned above. As Michel walks away from the car crash and victim, he clearly makes the sign of the cross (see Figure 9). This cannot be superfluous gesture—he does have faith. One last connection is provided by Parvulesco who answers another question in an odd manner: to “what is your greatest ambition in life,” he quips, “to die, and then become immortal.” Which is exactly what must happen to the Jesus the man before ascending to Heaven as Christ. Similarly, Michel must die in the street, before he can ascend to the pantheon of memorable, “immortal” characters.



Figure 9

Judas, too, was also both a murderer (although indirectly, like Patricia) and a man of faith (he was one of the disciples). Religious studies scholar William Klassen first establishes the real presence, as a historical character, of Judas:

I consider as authentic the tradition of Judas' role in the arrest of Jesus, indeed one of the Twelve, a group which I also consider as authentic, facts that are recorded by all the four Gospels after the event of Jesus' arrest. I also consider it likely that Judas served as treasurer of the group (John 12:6) which traveled with Jesus. (*Authenticity* 392)

Secondly, Klassen spends considerable time discussing the meaning of the words "Jesus was handed over," and claims that they could refer to an act of God Himself, and that some scholars do not even mention Judas's name. So it is possible that Judas was God's chosen instrument (*Authenticity* 395). However, there is plenty of literature that maintains that Judas did the handing over, that he betrayed Jesus, and Klassen quotes several sources in a more recent publication (*Judas* 42-48). In his popular book on Jesus the historical person, *Zealot, The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (2013), Reza Aslan also identifies Judas as the one who tipped off the arresting party. Aslan refers to the betrayal as part of the passion narratives that "set up a basic sequence of events that the earliest Christians believed occurred at the end of Jesus's life" (146), but then proceeds to debunk the myth of those narratives: "This sequence of events did not actually contain a narrative, but was designed strictly for liturgical purposes. . . . Factual accuracy was irrelevant" (154). Naturally, it is impossible to know what went through Judas's mind and what led him to the betrayal. Nevertheless, as already proposed above, one of the most common defenses for Judas's act is the fact that Jesus allowed it to happen or even pushed for it. H. J. Schonfield claims that

whatever temptation Judas had, “it came in the guise of his Master” (Klassen *Authenticity* 399). Schonfield also points to a preceding betrayal, by Jesus, that may have contributed to Judas’s decision. Jesus warns the disciples that one of them is going to betray Him, but He chooses not to reveal his identity, so it has to be obvious that “Jesus did not believe that Judas’ act was sinful or wrong” (Klassen *Authenticity* 409). In short, “The problem, the dark ethical knot in this affair, is thus not Judas, but Christ himself” (Žižek 16). To reiterate, Michel also must know at some level that Patricia is about to betray him, but he chooses passivity and therefore the responsibility of his death is his own.

Klassen’s main defense of Judas is that there is only one text that mentions Judas as a traitor, which is also a word uniquely used by the apostle Luke (*Authenticity* 399). The relationship between Judas and Jesus is far more nuanced²³ than what we have come to accept nowadays as common knowledge—Judas is a villain: “Even in modern times Judas is held responsible for the death of Jesus and his suicide as God’s punishment for his act” (Klassen *Judas* 8). In fact, French theologian John Calvin squarely puts the blame on Judas in his *Institutes* (1.18.3-4), because, while both God and Judas had to deliver Jesus (to death), their “cause” was not the same. In other words, Judas’s betrayal, while in line with God’s will, carries personal implications for which the apostle remains responsible. Furthermore, Judas was predestined to damnation (3.24.9), which is in line with the Calvinist thought on free will. However, Klassen sustains that there is evidence that might exonerate Judas in the case of what is generally perceived by Christians as the most heinous crime in the history of humanity (*Judas* 42) and he concludes that “Judas acted in obedience to Christ’s will and that in his act of handing over, he could have been obedient to God’s will for there is no doubt that eventually Jesus came to believe and then the early Christians all believed that the handing over of Jesus was God’s will if not God’s act” (*Authenticity* 407). Christ’s acceptance of his fate and refusal to flee echoes Michel’s: “It is thus a barely disguised suicide provoked by the loved woman’s betrayal” (Sellier 113). The newer text of Judas’s Gospel, translated by Rodolphe Kasser, supports this view, too: “[Judas] does so knowingly, and at the sincere request of Jesus” (4). In the same Gospel, Judas is portrayed as a “thoroughly positive figure” (9) and as Jesus’s favorite disciple—the only one who understood Him and with whom Jesus shared secrets (33). Interestingly, this version of the Gospel ends with the “betrayal,” and not the crucifixion, so the narrative is suspended, like the open ending of *Breathless*.

Patricia’s betrayal is an ethical decision, one that is aided by a lack of love for Michel, but she ultimately listens to a higher force (the law, Parvulesco, Godard) and turns in a murderer. In doing so, she embraces her role as a villainous femme fatale and as a Judas for which she is to be hated, but perhaps wrongfully so. Michel understands the necessity of the betrayal and most likely

laments the overall situation, not Patricia's actions. And therein lies one of the essential qualities of betrayal: "I betray you, and then, when you are down, destroyed by my betrayal, we exchange glances—if you understand my act of betrayal, and *only* if you do, you are a true hero" (Žižek 18-19, original emphasis). Michel and Patricia's last glances and gestures, the face grimaces and the touching of the lips, cement their complicity. As a result, unlike the traditional noir femme fatale, Patricia is not punished. Nor does she die (like Judas). At the end of the film, having experienced the Judas effect, she is stripped of her original identity—this is her sacrifice—and returned to the beginning of the cinematic Oedipal trajectory: in other words, she is to start again the search for a man (husband) and love. Her betrayal/sacrifice—the Judas effect—has a twofold purpose, then: it closes off the narratives of the male character and of the film, and it jumpstarts a new Oedipal trajectory for the female character. The fact that she turns her back to the audience underlines that loss and suggests that she will start anew: she faces the open road from where Michel had just stumbled as a neorealist femme fatale Judas.

Notes

1. See especially the readings offered by Colin MacCabe (*Godard* 108-23), Michel Marie (158-70), and Geneviève Sellier (112-16).
2. A widespread argument is that the New Wave aesthetic started with Claude Chabrol's films from the late 50s, as well as Agnès Varda's revolutionary *La Pointe courte* (1954), but this is for a different debate (for more, see Neupert, 45-63). However, it was the films of Truffaut and Godard that brought national and international attention to the movement.
3. Her last name is Franchini, which has Italian resonances (although "franc" could be a reference to France, too), but seems rather ironic in that it suggests she is frank, honest ("franchi" is the plural form of the Italian adjective). "Franchi" as a past participle also means "crossed over" in French, which possibly makes reference to her crossing various ethical lines.
4. My thesis goes against Colin MacCabe's observation that *Breathless* is "from beginning to end faithful to one genre ... (a cop story)" (*Artist* 120). Similarly (and also reductively), Dudley Andrew claims that *Breathless* belongs to one genre only, the film noir (12).

5. According to Ginette Vincendeau, French cinema in general (and French film noir in particular) “privileges spectacle over narrative drive” (45).
6. The deep focus was popularized by Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* (1941), which features prominently in the works of Bazin.
7. Less common in academic writings about Bazin are references to his interest in religion and God. See, for example, the essay on cinema and theology in which Bazin claims, “The cinema has always been interested in God.”
8. There is an ongoing conversation about the validity of the term “genre” when applied to film noir. For more see, Andrew Spicer, *European*, 2-3.
9. Relevant here, of course, is a chronological component in that *Breathless* comes to life in 1960, while the classic film noir period lasts from the mid-1940s until at least the mid-1950s.
10. Andrew Spicer warns that relying on “similar iconography, visual style, narrative strategies, subject matter and characterization” to categorize film noir may be “reductive and unsatisfactory because film noir, as the French critics asserted from the beginning, also involves a sensibility, a particular way of looking at the world” (*Film Noir* 4, 25).
11. Robin Buss considers Melville’s films to be closest to the classic pattern of noir (54-57).
12. Also, Sartre and Bazin knew each other, and the former attended many of the latter’s ciné-clubs according to Dudley Andrew (8).
13. The sun is making an indirect reappearance, even though they are indoors. In French, the idiomatic expression “pisser contre le soleil” ‘to piss against the sun’ suggests futile efforts. Michel tried to shoot the sun at the beginning of the film, he now tries to hide still, but reason (the sun) will eventually prevail.
14. In Marcel Carné’s *Port of Shadows* (1938), the main character, Jean, dies rather quickly from a gunshot wound in the exact same spot in the back. It could well be that Godard evokes here the influential aesthetic of French poetic realism.
15. Back in the long apartment scene, Michel looks into the mirror and makes the same three grimaces, later repeated by Patricia. The meaning of the grimaces is vague: Michel’s mouth opens up as if trying to articulate letters or words, but we

cannot be certain which ones. The two communicate through gestures—a new “language” pointing to the impracticality of their relationship.

16. There are two previous moments in the film when the same word is used. First, one of Michel’s girlfriends (from whom he steals money) tells him quite clearly, “t’es dégueulasse” ‘you are a scumbag.’ Secondly, Michel yells it at Patricia when he drops her off to see her editor (and rival to Michel): “fous le camp, dégueulasse” ‘get the hell out of here, scumbag.’ In this instance it seems clearer that he addresses her directly and not the overall situation.

17. This gesture is highly problematic. Conventional thought has been that the gesture is an homage to Humphrey Bogart. But is the gesture also a sexual reference? As Michel touches himself and looks at a photo behind glass, is he trying to “touch” Bogart? This possibility would reveal a homosexual undertone that is usually present among the males of film noir. The gesture could also point to a playful extra-diegetic correlation. In other words, a fictional character (Michel) connects with an actor just as the audience may connect (through the glass of the camera) with Belmondo, the actor.

18. French cinema specialist James Monaco dislikes the “melodramatic stagger up the street” and the “egregiously prolonged death,” but admits, “they put a period to the tale” (119).

19. Of course, other directors may have similar claims over auteurship, but Godard is clearly a more radical embodiment of this quasi God-director than his contemporaries. He is famously controlling on set, to the point of feeding lines to the actors as the camera rolls.

20. The fatalism is matched cinematically by the French film noir films: “their trajectory is often more pessimistic, indeed fatalistic than film noir, making these films darker than their American counterparts with a greater moral ambiguity” (Spicer *European*, 7).

21. Kierkegaard is famously Protestant. Godard had a Protestant upbringing himself, which perhaps narrows the religious gap between Kierkegaard and the film. Kierkegaard also crucially influenced the work of Sartre and the existentialists.

22. See Žižek's findings on God betraying Himself through the split image of God and Jesus, 13-33.

23. For example, Judas may have been imprisoned and forced to disclose Jesus' location (Klassen *Judas* 8).

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