

The Absurdity of French Arthouse Cinema

Shôn Ellerton, February 4, 2019

Have you ever survived an impossibly boring French movie only to find out later that it had amazing reviews?



One evening at home, I retired to the lounge and looked for something to watch in my collection of DVDs, many of which I've never seen before. Being a fan of cult movies, I had accumulated quite a number of cult movies over the years but never had the time to watch them. That evening, I randomly chose a French 1960s classic movie called *Breathless* by Jean-Luc Godard. I vaguely remember obtaining the movie due to its 'importance and influence' across the movie industry. Moreover, the plot seemed reasonably interesting. Motorist randomly shoots policeman on motorcycle. Police look for murderer. Murderer is protected by lover. Lover turns him in. Murderer gets shot by police.

And then I watched it.

Despite raging reviews by high-brow critics from the likes of Roger Ebert and other user reviews who give the movie score 10 out of 10 because of its so-called revolutionary material, this movie was perhaps, the worst written, most disjointed, boring and uninteresting I have ever seen.

Another mind-bogglingly boring French movie springs to mind, the 2005 movie *Caché* directed by Michael Haneke that won many awards including the Cannes Film Festival award. Obviously, there are those who would strongly disagree with

me as it is a matter of personal opinion; however, I have to wonder *how* and *why* it received so many great reviews.

First off, let me share with you what *Breathless* (1960 version) was like in short disjointed sentences (just like the movie!). Gangster called Michel (played by Jean-Paul Belmondo) in awful suit drives American car in French countryside. Shoots cop but the filming was so amateur as to be laughable. Michel has a cigarette permanently affixed to his upper lip pretending to be Bogart throughout whole movie. Nearly half the movie comprises a scene in which Michel and his lover, Patricia (played by Jean Seberg) talk absolute crap in the bedroom whilst throwing cigarettes out the bedroom window. We even get to watch Patricia wash her feet in the bidet (not unlike Mick Dundee in *Crocodile Dundee*). Film utilised 'jump-cuts' which supposed to make it look arty. All it does is make it look awfully disjointed and terribly amateur-looking. Script is amazingly dull and lifeless. French police detective says to Patricia, 'Don't fool with the French police', while she claims ignorance of Michel displayed in the Wanted photo in the newspaper, and then she suddenly remembers his face (as if the inspector wouldn't notice!). They shack up together. She obviously knows now that he is a murdered and then calls the police to turn him in. He doesn't really care. Walks along the street. Police identifies him. He runs away. He gets shot in back. He is near death on pavement with police and Patricia surrounding him. He says to Patricia on his dying breath, 'You just want to make me puke'. FIN

Mercifully, it was less than 90 minutes long; however, the 2005 movie, *Caché*, an even more boring and pointless movie about a middle-class townhouse residence receiving anonymous video tapes showing coverage outside their house extended to nearly two agonising hours of total monotony. How it won the Cannes Film Festival is amazing considering that a not too dissimilar 1997 film, *Lost Highway* directed by David Lynch involved anonymous posting of video tapes in much the same vein. At least, *Lost Highway* was interesting albeit somewhat slow and challenging to watch, as with most David Lynch films.

If it's French, it's got to be good, right?

Imagine if the above two movies were released in the UK or the US. It would be a laughing stock and would never get the same acclaim as it would if it happened to be a French movie along with subtitles. Don't get me wrong, the US has had its share of outrageously bad movies; for example, *Robot Monster* (1953), a movie SO bad that it became one of the funniest cult movies ever. It made *Plan 9 From Outer Space* look decidedly serious and plausible. *Breathless* and *Caché* will never be funny in the same way.

There's a classic Monty Python sketch which absolutely makes wonderful satire of a French Godard-style movie. It takes place on a rubbish heap with a woman sitting in the middle of it with a lettuce on a lap. There are seagulls flying around. The photographer jerkily moves forward towards her. Slowly of course. And then a man dressed as a quintessential Frenchman would with a cigarette pasted on his lower lip approaches the woman. They exchange very simple phrases, 'Good morning.' 'Good morning'. ...Silence. Jerky camera shot. ...'I love you' 'I love you'... *Flashbacks to war scenes and then back to the couple.* ...'I see you have a Webbs Wonder [lettuce]' *long pause* ... 'Yes'... and so on. And then Eric Idle discusses in rapid-fire absolute snob critique-fashion his views about the film as being of utmost paramount importance to the film industry. Here's the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbAoHexT0Ho>

I Don't Want a Lesson in Philosophy

I find some of this self-indulgent film-styling irritating to some extent. It's almost as if these film directors are trying to expound their knowledge of modern philosophy into film somehow proving that if they do so, they will prick the interest of likewise self-indulgent film critics who, again likewise, believe that their knowledge of philosophy is superior to the masses. There is a brief scene in *Breathless* in which Michel shoots a gun through an open window of his car into the sun. It's almost as if the director is intending you to believe that the character is an existentialist much like when the main character in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus shot a stranger (funny enough) in the full light of the sun. I'm no stranger (ha!) to French philosophy but ok, come on.

It's the Content and Entertainment Value that Counts

What many critics tend to forget is that, when it comes to reviewing such movies, it is the content and entertainment value that counts. After reading Roger Ebert's review of *Breathless* (1960), it's clear that it's not so much about the plot or content of the movie, but rather how the film's main character, Michel, influenced other well-known movie actors like Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty, Al Pacino, and Sean Penn. Comparing the main actor in *Breathless* to the above mentioned is delusional. The review also goes on about how it cleverly used jump shots, not using artificial light and how a shopping cart was used to transport the photographer around was visionary at the time. As a viewer who wants to be entertained, I could care less. Yes, there are many other directors out there who pioneered some new technique or another, but it's not what makes the film great

or not. I can go on for some time about the technicalities of how movies are made. I can also go on about the overuse of J-cuts, clichéd background music and flashbacks, but I won't. I just want to be entertained, the difference being for a great movie, is that it is also memorable and could be watched a second time or more.

Conclusion

Perhaps I am being too harsh with my views on French cinema; however, in my experience, I've hit a disproportionately large amount of over-indulgent duds. I started watching another film, *Weekend* (1967), another Godard movie, and after about thirty minutes of an endless traffic jam on a country road, I simply gave up. Perhaps, the film would make a change for the better if I persevered for longer, but then again, why should I?

On the bright side, there are some great arty French movies which I thoroughly enjoyed. *Wages of Fear* (1953), *Irreversible* (2002), and Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) are a small sampling of some of the great French movies which I thoroughly enjoyed although the backwards-playing *Irreversible* was difficult to watch because of its infamous and nasty 10-minute rape scene. Enough for most people to switch off the movie at once.

From my experience, cult and other arthouse movies made by other nations just do not seem to attract the same levels of the 'dud-factor' as those made in France. Meaning that it seems to become more of a lottery if I've chosen a good French movie or not. I've seen plenty of others from other nations, particularly from Germany, Japan, Mexico, Sweden and the former Soviet Union and, more often than not, most of them have been well-scripted and entertaining movies. Unless you're an art student studying film, it's no wonder that French arthouse movies, along with their critics (of which many of them also studied film), get so much flak!