

How and why does Godard's *Breathless* explore the relationship between French and American cultures?

TVWriters.com

Introduction

Godard's *Breathless* is a quintessential artwork said to depict the history of the youth culture after war produced in the 1960s (Oscott, 2010). There is an exquisite blend of music, fashion, and literature which amplifies the contemporary youth culture in France. Concisely, the film is a rework of old forms with an appeal to "modern sensibilities" (Manabat, 2014 para 1). After the war, France had to rebuild herself, especially in the fashion industry. This is perfectly illustrated by Jean Seberg and Jean-Paul Belmondo as they fall for each other.

Recovery from war

World War II had left France reeling, and she was in dire need of social and economic changes. Notably, the film industry had a gradual shift regarding the demography of the audience with young people increasingly becoming dominant viewers. Additionally, attendants had distinct characteristics citing high social, economic status, high education, and a privileged background (Manabat, 2014).

Expansion of education, intellectuals, and elite class

Social, demographic, and economic dynamics of post-war France are illustrated explicitly by a growing class of intellectuals and elites. Typical modern young people are consumers hence their high-economic stake and financial dependence. Conversely, the pre-war generation was tasked with labouring for its fortune. In "*Breathless*," the main character depends on her parents financially while studying in a prestigious university in Paris. After World War II, there was an accelerated growth of higher education with the rural population shrinking (Neupert, 2002). Consequently, more young people attended the post-secondary institutions implying increased intellectualism.

The growth of "Teen-Age" population in the U.S.

Similar to the French demographic dynamics, the U.S. young population was garnering protracted attention. The then-new youth culture was labeled as “teenage” as published by renowned magazines such as the *Vogue* and New York Times (Savage, 2002). One distinct characteristic of this age group was their unpreparedness of adulthood responsibilities thus engaging in frivolous matters such as crime. Notably, Belmondo (another star in the film) gets involved in matters of crime and decides to escape from security officers where he meets the American potential young journalist. According to Bornell (1978), American and French adolescents struck a similar trait; consumerism. They would passionately spend their disposable income on entertainment. It is by her background and similar characteristics that she is able to put up well with the French criminal.

France's post-war entertainment and fashion industry

It can be deduced that Seberg (a fashionable young American student) represents the American culture. Other than her appearance, she is endowed with good disposable income which underscores the consumerism culture of the modern world. After falling in love, the two savour their leisure time discussing their cultures and smoking. Considering the element of music and fashion, Godard portrays the young American as an epitome of modernized society in America. She appears classy with her sexuality, cropped hair and dark sunglasses besides her favorite Chesterfields brand. Soundtracks of cool jazz in the streets of Paris seem to be her taste (Handyside, 2002).

Further, she is an aspiring journalist working for an American paper (New York Herald Tribune). Possibly, the young lady journalist represents a youthful American culture of which she would like to extend to her French lover. More so, she is depicted as a young university student attending one of the prestigious institutions (Sorbonne University) in Paris. The young journalist copes well with the urban elites and intellectuals.

The theme of love and inter-cultural convergence

Having committed the crime of killing a cop, Belmondo finds solace and love the young American. Oscott (2010) underscores this fact by stating that, “ Breathless” is a pop artifact and a daring work of art, made at a time when the two possibilities existed in a state of almost perfect convergence. That is the source of its uniqueness. Its sexual candor is still surprising (para 14). Two different nationalities and genders bond which fascinates the French. There appears that some straits from Belmondo attract Serberg so allow him to put up with her. However, the same young man becomes uneasy after realising that his lover is the betrayer. Surprisingly, the young lady becomes more popular in the foreign country compared to her native country. Handyside (2002) asserts that the young American woman plays a role that stresses, “powerful intersection of gender and nationality.” Suggests something more general about how the American female star’s image functions in France” (166).

Freedom and independence in making decisions

Another element that comes out clearly when Seberg and Belmondo become lovers is independence and freedom of choice looking at the decision(s) made by the young American lady. Even though she has fallen in love with a criminal, she is still perturbed to hide his evils before authorities catch up with him. As a result, she betrays Belmondo leading to his death. To make such a decision, one requires a lot of strength and resolve. At this point, the ramifications of her actions do not matter anymore compared to her conviction that evil deeds like murder ought not to be condoned in the society. The fact that she agreed to settle with French man (already married) underscores her determination to make personal decisions regardless of what community ethics stipulate; such a relationship is unconventional and inappropriate. Serberg’s decision to enter an unhealthy relationship echoes the modern youth culture which is rebellious and degraded (Biltereyst,).

Conclusion

Though produced a little more than half a century ago, Godard's "Breathless" is billed as a unique film touching on inter-cultural blending, love, sexuality, adolescent consumerism, fashion, and music. More so, it portrays post-war France as an era of a demographic shift with the youth breaking from the norms of the older population. Specifically, the young would like to invest more in cinemas and other leisure activities. Inter-cultural blending meant that some of American cultural practices were induced in the foreign country. The theme of love, independency, and freedom of choice is well illustrated by looking at some of the tough decisions made by Seberg.

TVWriters.com

References

- Biltreyst, D. (2007). "The Cross-Cultural Reception and Censorship of *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle*, and *Rebel Without a Cause*." *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*. Ed. Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel. Austin: University of Texas, pp. 9-26. Print.
- Bonnell, R. (1978), *Le Cinéma Exploité*. Paris: Seuil, pp. 55. Print.
- Bradshaw, P. (2010). *Breathless*. *theguardian*, n. p. Available at:
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jun/24/breathless-godard-film-review>
- Handyside, F. (2002). "Stardom And Nationality: The Strange Case Of Jean Seberg." *Studies In French Cinema* 2(3), PP. 165. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 12 Nov. 2012.
- Manabat, S. (2014). JEAN SEBERG in "BREATHLESS": america and youth culture in postwar FRANCE. *University of Calgary*, n. p. Available at:
<http://www.thereelcan.com/2014/06/jean-seberg-in-breathless-america-and-youth-culture-in-postwar-france/>
- Neupert, R. J. (2002). *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*. 2nd ed. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2002. Print.
- Savage, J. (2002). *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*. New York: Viking. Print.
- Oscott, A. O. (2010). A fresh look back at right now. *The New York Times*, n. p. Available at:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/23/movies/23scott.html>