

BREATHLESS

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Jean-Luc Godard's first feature film, *Breathless*, follows a criminal, Michel, who is on the run from law enforcement after stealing a car and killing a police officer. *Breathless* is an intimate film that captures a nihilistic perspective on life through the actions of its lead character. A notable sequence that indicates this meaningless life for Michel occurs at the beginning of the film right after he steals a car and is driving it through multiple roads, creating a montage sequence of a car ride.

The editing in the first road introduces the audience to the aimless nature of the Michel. It begins with a lap dissolve transition from Michel putting his car in reverse in the preceding scene to the car moving forward on a relatively empty road. In the prior scene, a woman asks Michel to take her with him, but upon learning what time it was, Michel declines the request, implying a sense of urgency – an appointment he needs to make perhaps, yet there is none. Even the music that transitions between the two scenes starts as urgent but trails off to a calmer tone. Michel has just stolen a car and is presumably on a time crunch, but rather than a fast paced or tension filled pursuit with alternating cuts between a policeman and Michel or between Michel and his awaiting destination, Godard instead edits the drive into a scenic trip along the countryside with alternating cuts not of a chase, but of the road in front of Michel. The sequence is edited such that each road Michel is driving on is distinctively different from each preceding road, creating a montage-like series of shots, indicating a passage of an unspecified length of time. The cuts between each road scene are quick and not always exact match cuts. For example, the camera occupies a lower position on the very last shot of the montage, and it is after this shot that we return to a close up of Michel followed by a longer shot of the road. The camera is positioned such that the audience is watching from the same perspective as Michel. In contrast to the handheld shaky camera throughout the majority of the film, these perspective shots are still shaky but this shakiness is due to the natural motion of the objects on the screen as opposed to solely the camera operator. As a result, the shakiness of the shots here is much more prominent and draws attention to a glaring instability. What might initially appear to be a peaceful countryside jaunt is marred by the jostle of the car, adding an unexpected tension and questioning of what is depicted for the viewers.

There are only two shots of Michel in relation to dialogue. The first one is a closeup of him commenting on a Renault trying to pass him, and the second is a closeup that precedes the last piece of dialogue, creating a disconnect between the audio and visual. In the first, Michel talks about a mundane and trivial topic, and everything makes sense from an audience standpoint. However, in the second closeup where he describes his plans, we're not able to see the connection between the speaker and the words. It is obviously inferred, but by framing it such that we only hear the dialogue after the last closeup, Godard subtly indicates the disconnect of Michel from reality. A plan to 'collect the dough', 'ask a girl to marry him', then 'move to Rome' is a childish fantasy, not one that is uncommon, but it highlights a certain lack of awareness for the intricacies of life and society, in an optimistic form of nihilism. In a way, it also indicates an element of self-delusion and bluster in Michel's character.

Accompanying this montage is Michel humming and singing while driving, an action that unlike the road, is uncut and continuous even while the camera subjects are changing. Such a technique would be usual for a normal montage – music played over a collection of shots – but the music at play here is 1) diegetic and 2) off key and the cutting of the shots is almost erratic in nature. It's disorienting when viewing and underscores the aforementioned disconnect in Michel.

This montage sequence ends with a panning shot as the car continues down the road, and the camera stays behind. We would expect the next scene to be Michel arriving at his destination, but instead, we return to the car, and Michel is still driving on a road, only this time with more commentary about his surroundings. At this point, Michel appears to be driving for the sake of driving with no specific destination in mind despite having just professed his plan. There is no immediate action for the plan, framing the plan more as a fleeting daydream rather than a call to action, a characteristic which makes the rest of the film so much more intriguing when we see Michel actually follow through on this plan.

What we learn about Michel in this scene is surface level in the information that is directly conveyed, but through editing, Godard sets up Michel as a lost character clinging to the only purpose he sees for himself no matter how delusional or far-fetched it may be.