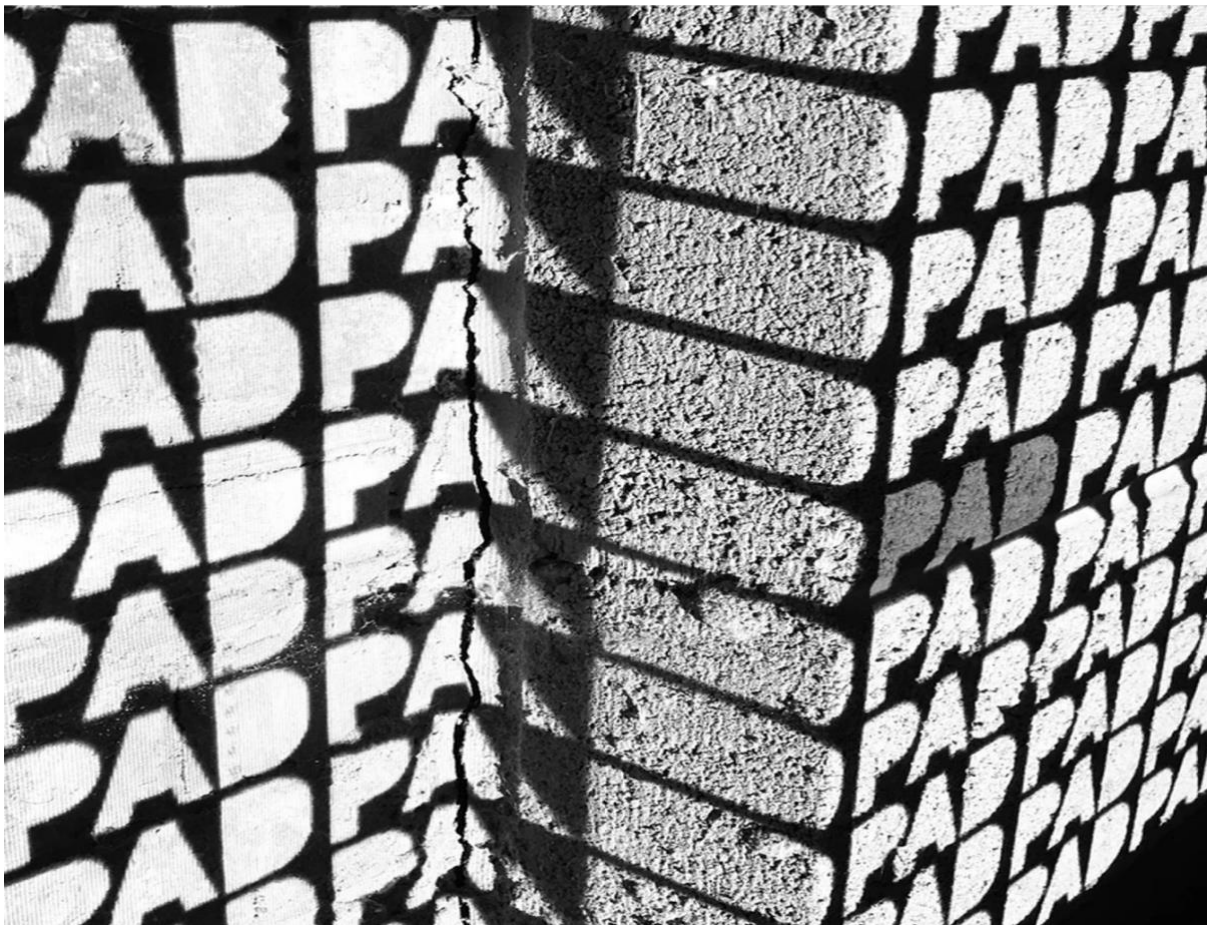


REFLECTION: HOW DO THEMES OF EXISTENTIALISM & IDENTITY LINK WITH THE AUTEUR THEORY & THE FRENCH NEW WAVE?

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Existentialism is a philosophy that is used to question human existence, amidst the expansive conversations brought with this mindset lies the category of “what is our significance in life?” (Ayto, 1999, p.206). The following essay will discuss themes of existentialism found in the French New Wave film movement, the relationship between the art and the artist, stories that depict a character’s journey in questioning their own identity, as well as key filmmakers who practice this artistic philosophy such as François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard.

The French New Wave – also known as La Nouvelle Vague, was made up of primarily young film fans who used limited resources to voice they are by producing films that were shot in public settings, skipping the studio system and establishing a platform for the filmmaker’s voice to be the loudest of the story being told on screen (Bergan, 2013, p.42). A method that even over fifty years later still plays an integral part in the mindset of young independent filmmakers, an example of this can be found in the form of REFLECTION.

REFLECTION is a short film written and directed by me that was made in August 2020 during the initial national COVID-19 restrictions in the United Kingdom. The short narrative piece shows a nameless character wondering around in a pandemic-affected Hartlepool reminiscing on what was average mundanity but now sits as missed history. The film explores themes of existentialism through showing a hometown that has been shaken from a lifechanging virus with torn-up billboard posters, an empty beach and a closed cinema. The existential effects of the pandemic are presented from the perspective of the lonely protagonist when he breaks the fourth wall by facing the camera sharing to the audience a self-written haiku penned onto placards, the words shared expressed (Fitchett, 2020):

Wind trapped in a glass,
Watching emptiness alone.
Sunshine sets, leaves fall.

The purpose of the character's journey through a barren Hartlepool in combination with his haiku was an attempt to discover how his life changes from the old ordinary to the new normal, what his new normal is and who he is without the old ordinary, inevitably concluding in him not finding the answers but succumbing to more questions of his loneliness and the ongoing cycle of his seemingly bland reality stating (Fitchett, 2020):

Basically, I'm lonely and lockdown sucks.
THE END.
But is it ever the end?



Figure 1: REFLECTION dir. Oscar W. Fitchett

REFLECTION was created not as a depiction of a fictitious character, but as an outlet of my personal thoughts, feelings and experiences since the Coronavirus effected life. The character in the film not only was portrayed by me but is an extension of me and was brought to life the only way that I know best, through my passion of filmmaking, an avenue of thought that can be best described as auteurism (Palis and Corrigan, 2018).

The term auteur was first connected to film in the 1950s within the French film magazine – Cahiers du Cinéma by such then-critics as François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard (Ayto, 1999, p.389), with Truffaut being the voice at the forefront of the movement when in a 1954 article titled *A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema* he would breakdown the state of 1950s French cinema as one of bland unoriginality full of novel adaptations that take an individuals' work and turn it into an impersonal product put together by a committee of people, devoid of any relatability (Truffaut, 1954).

Within the same article, Truffaut would clarify that the state of French cinema was not one hundred percent populated by soulless projects and that France was also home to filmmakers creating films with personal character depth of the likes of Jean Renoir, Max Ophals and Jacques Tati all of which were directors who also wrote their scripts resulting in having full creative control of their original stories and establishing a distinctive artistic voice within their films, or as defined by Truffaut, these men were auteurs (Truffaut, 1954). François Truffaut believed for a director to fully express their authentic vision they had to make a film outside the corporate production system and on a smaller budget, even promoting the abandonment of studio provided sets in favour of a director's hometown being a project's location, taking an intimate look at narratives closely linked to the filmmaker, their life experiences and opening doors to new stories to be told from a varied perspective of social classes (Brody, 2019).

Recommended Citation: 4
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In 1962, auteurism would be defined as a cinematic concept by American film critic Andrew Sarris in his essay titled *Notes on the Auteur Theory*, where Sarris claimed that this artistic theory relates to a director's collection of work in their filmography instead of referring to a single motion picture. This point being emphasised as by looking across a filmmaker's body of work a viewer can pick-up on common themes present thus piecing together a perception of said director (Sarris, 2009, p. 562). Andrew Sarris would also equate the auteur theory as being a mindset that is an élan of the soul, terminology that connects the work ethic of a writer/director taking on creative authority with the viewpoint that in doing so the filmmaker unlocks the gateway for them to release their soul and honest emotions through cinematic storytelling (Sarris, 2009, p. 563).

The ideas of auteurism in film brought to the table by François Truffaut was the catalyst for not only a new wave of French cinema, but also a collection of films that would go on to inspire later generations of influential filmmakers (MasterClass, 2020). La Nouvelle Vague (Thirlwell, 2009) was the result of Cahiers du Cinéma writers putting the auteur theory into practice to produce stories that they themselves wish to see; the pioneering names behind this film era are François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette (The Cinema Cartography, 2015).



Figure 2: Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut

It is unclear as to what the first film in the La Nouvelle Vague movement was, whether it was Agnès Varda's 1955 feature debut *La Pointe Courte* (Vincendeau, 2008) or Cahiers alumni Claude Chabrol's 1958 *Le Beau Serge* (French, 2013). What is known is that a 27-year-old François Truffaut made his mark for the movement when at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, a year after being banned from the festival as a critic (Romney, 2011), winning the Best Director award for his debut feature *The 400 Blows* (Thirlwell, 2009). A coming-of-age story following a 13-year-old boy growing up in a dysfunctional home and feeling out of place in every situation he is in, eventually running away from home and school to live a new life on the streets of Paris (Truffaut, 1959), a story that stands as semi-autobiographical in relation to Truffaut (Insdorf, 2014). Akin to auteurism opening up director's storytelling techniques to new heights, Truffaut winning at Cannes opened the gates for other young talented creatives to express their voices in an unconventional manner

(Thirlwell, 2009); Godard (2009) states that *'the face of French cinema has changed'*

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in relation to *The 400 Blows* injecting new life and representation into cinema, and it would only be a year later for Godard himself to add his voice in the French New Wave with *Breathless* (Godard, 1960).

Breathless was first conceptualised by Godard's Cahiers contemporaries Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut (Nerdwriter1, 2015) with Godard himself eventually taking on the project due to Truffaut's confidence in him, using his success from Cannes to convince producer Pierre Braunberger (Neupert, 2007, p.209). Jean-Luc Godard, now having reins of a feature film, re-evaluated Truffaut's original scenario and would mould it into one more authentic to himself, as Brody (2008, p.58) states – Godard wrote a letter to Truffaut describing the changes to *Breathless*' script as: *In general, the subject will be the story of a boy who thinks about death and that of a girl who doesn't.*

In order to understand the link between *Breathless* and Godard, it is first important to have knowledge of Jean-Luc Godard. Jean-Luc was born in Paris, France being the son of a doctor – Paul and Odile, daughter of the founder of the Banque Paribas (Brody, 2008, p.4). The Godard's would relocate to Switzerland (Brody, 2008, p.4) continuing his life born into luxury. Jean-Luc's upbringing was in stark contrast to Truffaut's origins who grew-up in an unhappy family household (Neupert, 2007, p.163) where he found himself attempting to escape the broken family setting by hunting for various forms of refuge, meanwhile Godard would spend childhood days in Lake Geneva (Neupert, 2007, p.208).

During his later adolescent years, Godard would be uncertain as to what he wanted to pursue as a profession, a concern had by his father (MacCabe, 2016). This led him down the path of theft with the goal not being to have physical items but to have recognition, specifically in the form of punishment from his father (MacCabe, 2016). Godard knew he wanted to make movies at this time but was not supported by his father; Godard's constant actions of stealing led Paul to make the decision to send

Recommended Citation: 7
Fitchett, O.W. (2023) REFLECTION: HOW DO THEMES OF EXISTENTIALISM & IDENTITY LINK WITH THE AUTEUR THEORY & THE FRENCH NEW WAVE?' PAD Perspectives in Art and Design: Edition 4, Article 1.

him to a mental hospital for psychotherapeutic sessions for a number of months (MacCabe, 2016). MacGabe (2016) states Jean-Luc understood his father's reaction with Godard telling him:

My father didn't know what to do, he was a general practitioner. He'd probably heard Freud's name but not much more. I think my father was very good and very human, very good as a generalist, but then he didn't understand what I wanted. With the other children it was clearer, but with me nobody knew and I didn't even know.

By the time *Breathless* was being made Godard, unlike his early living experiences, within his late 20s was a man of little wealth and had very little motivation in himself (Neupert, 2007, p.209). This period of sadness for Godard combined with his hunger for feature filmmaking is what was the catalyst to what would become *Breathless*.



Figure 3: Jean-Luc Godard directing

Breathless is a film that follows the story of Michel, a man with little to no money to his name who finds himself escaping the police after killing an on-duty officer in a shoot-out. However, the main crux of the narrative lies in Michel's complicated on-and-off romantic relationship with Patricia, an American lady in her early twenties who aspires for a successful life outside of marriage, striving towards a career in journalism (Godard, 1960). The film may be a visual homage to Hollywood film noir tales of decades gone by (Heller, 2010) but the deeper themes explored by Godard are found in the conversations had between Michel and Patricia.

French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Satre brings forth his views on life's purpose by believing that existence occurs before essence, meaning that there is not a predetermined plan for man but one's reason for existence is whatever man chooses for themselves (Satre, 2007, p.22). Satre elaborates with a story of a student who after losing his brother and father in war only had his mother left, he had the option to enlist into the military to fight for his country and additionally fight for his late brother/father but in the process would leave his mother alone with the possibility of causing a third loss for her; he could either be a small element in an act that would effect a large amount of people, or stay home and have a large effect on a singular person's life (Satre, 2007, p.30). The outcome of the story told is that Satre could not give the student an answer to his dilemma, neither could his contemporaries, the answer could not be presented to him by a higher power and his choice was not laid out for him in a re-planned timeline, but the answer can only be made by a self-discovered conclusion he arrived to as to what his purpose in his life was (Satre, 2007, p.31). Existence before essence is a mindset that can open the human mind to a bevy of self-analytical possibilities creating an alternative path in artistic expression to showcase this thought process via cinematic storytelling, a pathway explored by Godard in *Breathless*. (Godard, 1960)

Michel and Patricia are both a pair of lost souls caught in a psychological limbo where they are in a transitioning period in points in their lives, the divergence between the two however is while Patricia has an end goal in becoming a journalist, Michel does not have a fully thought-out long-term plan for himself other than running away to Italy with Patricia (Godard, 1960). The whole one-hour thirty-minute runtime has multiple instances of the two exploring their thoughts through conversation, however the scene that establishes who these characters are to themselves, each other and what they are searching for in life takes place in Patricia's apartment.



Figure 4: Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg in *Breathless*

Throughout the scene, the two characters share dialogue between each other that ranges from Michel flirting with Patricia, Patricia playing music from her record collection and both go through their morning routine, what is spliced throughout these everyday activities are sequences when Godard allows for the audience to take look behind the curtain at what Michel and Patricia truly think about on a regular occurrence. Towards the latter half of their late-morning conversation, the pair are nested in the bed – a location of solitude and traditionally a place of marriage

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constitution (Freud, 2005, p.70) – and just as Michel asks her if she would let another man touch her in a loving manner, Patricia takes a slight pause before responding (Godard, 1960):

You're right, Michel, I'm scared... I want you to love me. And I want you not to. I'm very independent you know.

Her statement indicates that she is at a stage of conflict on which pathway of life to walk down. On one hand Patricia wants to break away from a more conventional way of living that is marrying early in her adulthood, instead strive towards a career that she herself is passionate about and is on her way to securing that lifestyle through independently pursuits.

On the other hand, Patricia is a twenty-year-old American woman living alone in France, amidst the excitement of adventure a new country and career brings what can also be found is the fear of the unknown and questions of if that is the right decision to make. To have these thoughts brew in the mind when you are by yourself during the transition of adolescence to maturity can be a cold empty feeling. The presence of Michel – a person who shows attraction towards her – acts as a blanket of comfort that brings her happiness in a different way compared to her goal to become a journalist (Godard, 1960). Returning to existence precedes essence, Patricia is grappling with two different emotions that would result in much different ways of living, decisions that only she can control her road through existence: live isolated but attaining a dream job role, or live bonded with another person in happiness but trapped in restricted tradition.



Figure 5: Final Shot of *Breathless*

Godard does not show where Patricia inevitably goes in due course, the film concluding in Michel being killed in a police shoot-out with his final words to her being (Godard, 1960) *'you're a lousy bitch...'*. Although Michel is dead this does not equate to Patricia moving towards the direction of independence since throughout the film, she gradually fell further in love with him by helping him escape the police on multiple occasions, discovering that she can in fact experience monogamous love. The death of Michel also indicates a closure of that specific pathway leaving Patricia with no one currently in her life to fill the void of romance, presenting her with the liberty of a journalist career. The final shot of *Breathless* is a close-up of Patricia standing over Michel's corpse looking directly into the lens, shattering the fourth wall and making sharp eye-contact with the viewer until the screen fades to black (Godard, 1960); no answers were given to her in relation to what she should do in her life, only Patricia can tell Patricia what path to take. Similarly, Godard did not give the audience any answers to the completion of Patricia's arc, leaving the viewer to come to their own conclusion.

Recommended Citation: 12
Fitchett, O.W. (2023) REFLECTION: HOW DO THEMES OF EXISTENTIALISM & IDENTITY LINK WITH THE AUTEUR THEORY & THE FRENCH NEW WAVE?' PAD Perspectives in Art and Design: Edition 4, Article 1.

In the same apartment scene where Patricia says the conflicting statement, Michel also puts into words a strong representation of himself. After reading an excerpt from a William Faulkner book, Patricia asks Michel if he would choose grief or nothing and where Patricia tells him she would choose grief Michel counters with the decision of nothing, expanding the point by stating (Godard, 1960) *'grief's a compromise... I want all or nothing...'*. By saying under ten words Michel communicates his entire life philosophy, which although is never specified in the film as a clear goal such as journalism with Patricia, what Michel is after is whatever pathway he walks down he has a legacy that follows.



Figure 6: Michel's character introduction

When Godard first introduces Michel, he has him wearing a fedora and smoking a cigarette (Godard, 1960), iconography that associates itself with Hollywood film noirs of the 1940s and 1950s (Ross, 2019) linking Michel's clear appreciation towards the genre to Jean-Luc Godard's real-life passion for cinema (MacCabe, 2016). He then steals an American military officer's car; the alleged reason by Michel for stealing the car was to travel to Patricia – however the case can be made that he committed theft instead of taking public transport that along with being poor, Michel welcomed the

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possibility of getting caught to play-out a fantasy that his heroes in film noir's find themselves in (Sehayek, 2016). Additionally, Michel's criminal act plays as a cry for someone to give him attention and a result of not understanding what he truly wants in life, a reflection of Godard's younger years of car theft for his father's acknowledgment (MacCabe, 2016).

The art imitating life element of Michel also communicates as a cathartic experience for Godard to see in front of him a psychical embodiment of his own existential crisis, with *Breathless* being a self-created version of The Mirror Stage. The Mirror Stage was coined by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and is a psychological description of the moment that occurs when an infant child first sees their reflection (YaleCourses, 2009), up until that moment all the baby is aware of is the world around them and they're just witnessing the ongoings of life, this mindset is thrown into disarray once the baby looks into a mirror for the first time and sees themselves. Once the child notices their reflection, they now identify the image of a being in front of them as who they are, no longer witnessing life but discovering they are a part of existence, proceeding to form a perception of who/what they are in relation to the rest of life (Bailly, 2012).



Figure 7: The Mirror Stage

There are multiple moments in *Breathless* where both Michel and Patricia reflect on themselves – one scene of reflection comes when Michel walks up to a cinema that displays a poster of Humphrey Bogart – an actor who was known for his leading roles in brooding Hollywood noirs (Caro, 2017). Michel begins to gaze at this poster, his reflection in the glass dwarfed by that of Bogart’s image, looking past his own mirrored image and directly locking eyes with his idol. Before he leaves the street, Michel impersonates Bogart by rubbing his thumb on his lips (Godard, 1960), a trademark gesture of Humphrey Bogart (Hawks, 1944). The Mirror Stage is adapted in this scene from one looking at their own reflection to understand their own identity into Michel trying to manipulate who he is; by showing that Michel’s reflection is visible but not acknowledged by him, Godard presents the concept that Michel wants to forget who he really is and instead wishes he was a film noir anti-hero by glaring into the larger-than-life image of Humphrey Bogart (Godard, 1960). Godard plays with this identity manipulation by putting so much of himself within the character of Michel, therefore creating an extension of who he is shown on the silver screen, moulding himself as the lead focus of the film without ever having an on-camera presence and solidifying his auteur stature.



Figure 8: Michel looking at Bogart



Figure 9: Bogart headshot

Through the most overwhelming points in life, people have various ways of dealing with their struggles with a creative outlet to voice such emotions of existential complexity being a powerful tool. French New Wave is a prominent movement in this form of expression in the craft of filmmaking by platforming writers/directors to voice their authentic emotions in an unconventional manner independent from a larger corporation, all while still honouring films from times gone by admire by the new wave creatives.



Figure 10: REFLECTION placard



Figure 11: REFLECTION behind-the-scenes

The short film REFLECTION honours La Nouvelle Vague techniques not only with the visual presentation of black and white, but also in the storytelling components such as breaking the fourth wall in a Brechtian manner, addressing the viewer with life questioning thoughts and the conclusion of the narrative being ambiguous as to the protagonist's chosen pathway in duration. The making of the film shares the spirit of French New Wave through the exclusion of an external funding department and on-location shooting – the hometown of the crew involved, and lightweight equipment being implemented with 100% of the film being shot on an iPhone. The most important comparison between REFLECTION and films of French New Wave is the story told onscreen is a mirrored image of the filmmaker's own psychological journey through finding essence to existence, incorporating the mirror stage and embodying the storyteller's personality not usually seen from the outside.

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FIGURE LIST

Figure 1: Fitchett, O. (2020) *REFLECTION*. [digital film]. Hartlepool: Hartlepool, UK.

Figure 2: Newsom, C. (2012) *Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut*. [online image]. Available from: <https://www.thecine-files.com/past-issues/spring-2012-issue/featured-articles/cahiers-du-cinema-and-evaluative-criticism/> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

Figure 3: New Wave Film (2020) *Jean-Luc Godard directing*. [online image]. Available from: <http://www.newwavefilm.com/french-new-wave-encyclopedia/jean-luc-godard.shtml> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

Figure 4: Chen, J. (2017) *Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg in Breathless*. [online image]. Available from: <https://medium.com/@1DirectChen/why-breathless-is-my-favorite-movie-of-all-time-a13e1665c994> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

Figure 5: Gypsy (2009) *Final Shot of Breathless*. [online image] Available from: <http://cinophilia.over-blog.com/article-breathless-38665830.html> [Accessed 22 January 2021]

Figure 6: Ebert, R. (2003) *Michel's character introduction*. [online image] Available from: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-breathless-1960> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

Figure 7: Mr. Saxton (n.d.) *The Mirror Stage*. [online image] Available from: <https://mistahsaxton.weebly.com/lacans-mirror.html#> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

Figure 8: Dayoub, T. (2010) *Michel looking at Bogart*. [online image] Available from: <http://www.cinemaviewfinder.com/2010/09/blu-ray-review-breathless-bout-de.html> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

Figure 9: Lemieux, J. (2013) *Bogart headshot*. [online image] Available from: <https://madeleineproject.wordpress.com/2013/09/18/imitation-and-masquerade-in-breathless/> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

Figure 10: Fitchett, O. (2020) *REFLECTION placard*. [digital film] Hartlepool: Hartlepool, UK.

Figure 11: RNQ (2020) *REFLECTION behind-the-scenes*. [online image] Available from: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CI56z3FpfHJ/> [Accessed 22 January 2021]