

Article

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Revisiting French New Wave: Aesthetics, Modernity and Cinema

Jules et Jim (François Truffaut, 1962)

Since the appearance in the late 1950s and early 60s of the debut films of directors like Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Claude Chabrol, Agnes Varda and others, critics and scholars alike have devoted unprecedented attention to the path breaking phenomenon of the French Nouvelle Vague. While critics have been hard pressed to find commonality on the stratum of aesthetics, politics, theory, and approaches to production among the disparate directors that comprise the French New Wave, they all necessarily recognize its lasting importance and dramatic influence not only on subsequent French film but on cinemas across the world. This genealogy can certainly be debated, but it does have the strength of tradition behind it now. In this brief article, we will emphasize on several key elements in order to define a body of critical concepts that open an initial approach to the New Wave Cinema.

The Old and the New

Film historians often assume that a break occurs at the dawn of the 1960s, with the appearance of New Wave. At this point film history is split into two parts – a before and an after of the New Wave, an old and a new cinema. The old cinema is generally a ‘cinema of teamwork,’ (Capdenat, 1989) a well-organized, professional cinema made by experts of decor and lighting, with its slick images. It is also a

cinema of screenwriters, with well-known dialogue writers such as Jacques Prévert, Jean Aurenche, Pierre Bost, and Henri Jeanson adapting literary classics or novels. It is, as well, a ‘cinema of stars’ magnifying their images and aura on their commercial attractiveness, which the popular press helps boost. And finally, it is a big-budget work, subject in part to the logic of production for a mass audience.



Cléo from 5 to 7 (Agnès Varda, 1962)

The new cinema, or the New Wave, in turn, the ‘young cinema’ with its indicative works, such as – *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*), *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*), *Paris Belongs to Us* (*Paris nous appartient*), *Les cousins* (Chabrol, 1959), *Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais, 1959), and *Cléo from 5 to 7* (*Cléo de 5 à 7*). The budgets were tight, the funding at times from personal sources, the producers at home in the avant-garde or with artistic documentaries. The shooting is hurried, the settings natural, the teams modest, made up of personnel who sometimes lack formal training or even qualifications but who are adaptable and inventive. The screenplays are written by the directors or their “pals” or else are improvised. The actors are often young and inexperienced. The films show the world as it is, streets at dawn, cafés, “young people” making a first road trip, and freer sexuality.

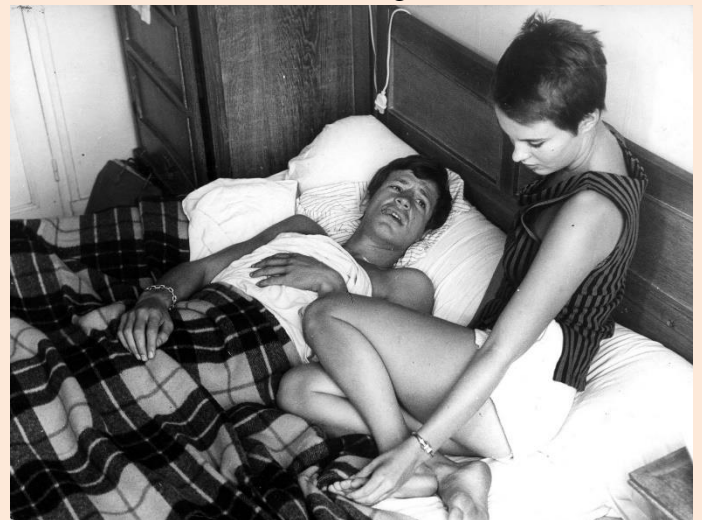
The directors, young cinephiles, renew the art of cinema. In this respect the New Wave resembles other ‘artistic revolutions’ such as, Impressionism or Surrealism. In contrast to the academism of a cinema committed to the rules of craft and commerce, this film movement, elevated as such to the status of an ‘artistic school’ (Marie, 1997). It closes off the era of production and opens up the era of creation.

On the Origins of the Movement

It all began on March 30, 1948, when AlexAndré Astruc, a literary critic-cum-filmmaker, published an article, ‘La camera stylo’, in *L’Ecran Francais*, announcing a New Wave in cinema. Astruc focused his article on analogy, comparing a film director to a novelist, where a camera became a pen. The

comparison implied that cinema had a language of its own. The idea was also clear, to elevate cinema to the level of the other arts, and to emphasize on its personal, philosophical and psychological value. A few years later, François Truffaut wrote “A Certain Tendency in the French Cinema” (1954), a theoretical essay that paved the way for the French New Wave. It ridiculed and questioned the ‘tradition of quality,’ evident in the earlier films by the likes of Claude Autant-Lara and Jean Delannoy, where the script was paramount and the emphasis was on psychological realism and tasteful, artistic production values. Together, Truffaut-Astruc challenged the conventional idea, that a film is a producer’s medium, causing the idea of *politiques des auteurs* to become a central idea of the Cahiers and the New Wave.

Thus, the nouvelle vague or the New Wave relied on a close relationship between criticism and filmmaking, that is, the prime films were made by film critics who often became directors themselves. The first of the Cahiers critics to come up with a film was Chabrol with *Le beau Serge* (1958), followed by Truffaut with *The 400 Blows*. Both films tackle the theme of coming of age, and were filmed largely on real location. Other films, such as Rohmer’s *Le signe d’ulion* (1959) and Rivette’s *Paris nous appartient* (1960) followed, but it was with Godard’s *Breathless* (*A bout de soufflé*) in which point the New Wave arrived with a bang.



Breathless (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960)

Cahiers du Cinéma was a French film magazine, founded in 1951 by a trio of writers, the chief among them was France’s most respected film critic and

theorist, the 33-year-old André Bazin. He attracted a group of young men with passionate and critical views on cinema, frequently expressed in extreme. They attacked literary cinema and the tastes of an older generation and exalted the director as individual creator, especially old Hollywood masters. Many of the best-known Cahiers critics – notably François Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette, became the key figures of the French New Wave, and their stylistically iconoclastic films found a world audience in the early 1960s. Since then, they and their concept of the auteur had a permanent impact on world cinema. Though the auteur theory has been highly debated since its inception, nevertheless, it is an important tool to understand films through views of the directors and their body of works.

The Auteur Theory aka La Politique Des Auteurs

The key concept of auteur was promulgated by Truffaut in 1954. It concerns the ‘politique des auteurs’ or auteur policy, which is attributed, sometimes mistakenly, to André Bazin, who was in fact quite wary of this group of young turks, as he and Cahiers du Cinéma co-editor Jacques Doniol-Valcroze quickly labelled them. Truffaut even demonstrated this policy in a critical review of a fairly commercial, impersonal film by Jacques Becker, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1954), which was co-produced by its star, the popular Fernandel. Truffaut pointed, that there is only one auteur of a film and that is the director. All creative paternity is denied the scriptwriter, who does nothing more than supplying the raw material to the auteur.

This politique was thus provocative and paradoxical by choice. It denied the collective nature of the whole cinematic process and reduced scriptwriting to a secondary level. Only directing, defined as the concern of the auteur, is taken into account. In short, this theory, which was largely derived from Astruc’s elucidation of the concept of ‘camera stylo’, holds that the director, who oversees all audio and visual elements of the motion picture, is more to be considered the ‘author’ of the movie than is the writer of the screenplay.

Kingpins of the French New Wave

Cahiers or the Right Bank

The Cahiers or the Right Bank were François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol. They were the key promulgators of the movement by writing about its elements — elements which they would eventually show since they would all become renowned filmmakers. These film critics devised certain aspects of film that were solely interested in the artistic capabilities of the medium of film, not the traditional or the entertaining ones.



Le Beau Serge (Claude Chabrol, 1958)

Claude Chabrol’s *Le Beau Serge* (1958) is cited to be first product of the French New Wave movement. It follows a man who returns to his small village hometown to discover that many of his friend’s lives have changed and become more complicated for the worse. The film employs early techniques of experimental editing, handheld camera work, and, of course, real locations. Undoubtedly, the film was inspired by Italian Neo-Realism with its look into the dark, crude and mundane aspects of everyday life. Following and often compared to *Le Beau Serge* was Chabrol’s next film *Les Cousins* (1959). Like *Le Beau Serge*, *Les Cousins* was a dark narrative driven by personal relationships.

François Truffaut was one of the most influential figures of this movement, and began his career by criticizing the Cannes festival for praising films with no artistic vision of the director. Because of his harsh criticism, he was banned from the Festival. In response, he made the cinematic masterpiece *The 400 Blows* (1959) which was the next big step in the New Wave movement.



The 400 Blows (François Truffaut, 1959)

Thematically, the film pushes back against iconoclasm, nationalism, the ‘system,’ and other things that take away from individuality — which was obviously a common New Wave trend. Aesthetically, *The 400 Blows* popularized the technique of having the actor(s) actually look into the camera, thus breaking the veil of reality within film and reaching for some kind of higher truth. Surprisingly, this film won Truffaut Cannes’ Best Director prize in 1959. In 1962, Truffaut would make *Jules and Jim* — considered to be an ‘encyclopaedia of the film language’ as Truffaut used newsreel footage, still photographs, freeze frames, dolly shots, whips, masks, handheld camera work, and voice over narration throughout the film. While *Jules and Jim* had much more robust production, *The 400 Blows* would be what really inspired other Cahiers such as Jean-Luc Godard, who made *Breathless* the subsequent year.

Jean-Luc Godard, considered to be one of the fathers of French New Wave and art-film in general — has been hailed by directors like Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, Martin Scorsese, and many others as a master filmmaker. Throughout Godard’s magnificent filmography, he stylized and challenged every aspect of filmmaking from ‘point of view’, use of colour, story-structure, and most importantly editing techniques. Godard made three extremely relevant and pertinent films to French New Wave (and the history of cinema as well) — *Breathless* (1960), *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962), and *Pierrot le Fou* (1965).

Breathless is arguably his magnum opus, his first feature film and debut masterpiece that also broke him into legendary status. The classic crime-romance drama was where Godard first used his technique of jump cut to distort the viewer’s perception of time. Godard also used next-to-no external lighting, and all real locations — such as

apartments and open streets — for the whole film, so it took almost no budget to make. His next film, *Vivre Sa Vie* is very aesthetically similar to *Breathless* but is structured with heavy voice over narration and dialogue that controlled the pulse of the film. Much like *Breathless*, *Vivre Sa Vie* was a dark philosophical look into the nature of identity and existential strife. *Pierrot le Fou*, unlike the previous two films, was shot in colour and had quite a pallet. The film is famously recognized for its use of colour as a means of visual storytelling and representation. The use of harsh primary colors throughout the narrative was meant to allude to the dominant pop-art movement of the time. While the film is just as dark as *Breathless* and *Vivre Sa Vie*, it had a more theatrical aesthetic atop the heavy content.



Paris Belongs To Us (Jacques Rivette, 1961)

Jacques Rivette’s famous *Paris Belongs To Us* (1961), cemented itself as one of the most culturally and aesthetically relevant films in the New Wave. It evidently possesses some of the radical flavour that would define the movement, with a particularly Rivettian twist. He wanted to solidify the ‘fragmented narrative’ trope while using the film as a sort of meta-poetic commentary on the New Wave movement itself, as the film featured cameos from fellow filmmakers like Claude Chabrol and Jean-Luc Godard. However, Rivette’s films, received little acclaim at the time of their release causing him to make only two other films during the movement.

Éric Rohmer, a fellow New Wave master, took the movement in a more ethical direction. His two most notable films include *My Night At Maud’s* (1969) and *Clair’s Knee* (1970). The former is the

third film in his Six Moral Tales series, and famously discusses the validity of Pascal's Wager, which is one of its main themes. It was also produced using funds that Truffaut helped raise since he liked the script so much. The latter is the fifth film in his Six Moral Tales series, and follows a career diplomat who becomes infatuated with a young girl's knee while vacationing. The film is a study of desire, the human condition, and plays around Kant's idea of the categorical imperative.



Clair's Knee (Eric Rohmer, 1970)

The Left Bank

In the early 1960s, critic Richard Roud attempted to draw a distinction between the directors allied with the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* and what he dubbed the 'Left Bank' group. This latter group embraced a loose association of writers and film-makers that consisted principally of the directors Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda. They had in common a background in documentary, a left wing political orientation, and an interest in artistic experimentation.

Agnès Varda is the most celebrated female director to be associated with the New Wave. She was a photographer before making her debut *La Pointe Courte* in 1955 — which would eventually become one of the great Left Bank films. Varda would later make the more acclaimed *Cléo from 5 to 7* which included a cameo from Jean-Luc Godard. *Cleo from 5 to 7* cantered itself around feminism, war, and existentialism in France. Like many of her other films, Varda would challenge gender roles and the nature of absurdism throughout the film.

Another major figure in the Left Bank was Chris Marker who gained most of his acclaim from

one short film called *La Jetée* (1962). The film was a science fiction narrative about a post-nuclear war experiment done in time travel. The film itself is almost entirely a reel of still images. It makes many references to the work of Alfred Hitchcock, especially his film *Vertigo*.



Hiroshima mon amour (Alain Resnais, 1959)

Alain Resnais would be known as making the most prominent film in the Left Bank — *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). The film used short flashback sequences to craft non-linear storyline — making it highly experimental. The film was originally a documentary about WW2, but eventually morphed into a romance narrative. He studied film editing at France's first film school, IDHEC. After leaving college, he directed a couple of documentaries, including the celebrated *Night and Fog* (1955), a highly evocative work on the horrors of Auschwitz. Resnais's films illustrate a crossover between the developments in *nouveau roman* (new novel) and the *nouvelle vague* cinema.

Historical Consequences of the Movement: A Symbolic Revolution

One of the most direct consequences of the movement was to impose the idea that cinematic creation requires a regular renewal by young directors. Mechanisms put in place within France during the 1970s have promoted the continued flowering of first features, though few of them are very promising. It has become almost as easy to produce a first feature as to publish a first novel, even though the financial investment necessary is nowhere near comparable. But out of the hundreds

of new directors, very few authentic new auteurs appear.

But it is undeniable, that what happened to the world of cinema was much like what took place in literature and painting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The world of cinema finds itself in a whole new state, it has achieved a greater autonomy; more than before it is its own legislator; and the grip of professional, economic, political, and ideological powers has been weakened. Providing that the actions of the New Wave directors are considered in all their dimensions, dimensions that inevitably are economic, technical, and thematic, we are able to grasp their revolutionary effect. True, there is still a commercial cinema, a cinema of stars, a cinema of sets and special effects, a genre cinema; but there also exists a cinema that situates itself counter to this dominant production and that is from now on called “auteur cinema.” This is not a genre, rather it is a symbolic force which underlines the structure of cinematographic space so that it can take the form of an autonomous field, and so that it thereby confers upon cinema as a whole a greater

legitimacy, increasing its value on the market of cultural and artistic goods.

Concluding Remarks

The French New Wave and auteur theory itself has influenced countless filmmakers today such as Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, Michael Haneke, and Terrence Malick and much more — all of whom have a distinct visual style to their work and deal with philosophical themes in their films. New Wave even influences many ‘youtubers’ today, as it has become a common trend to cut out the space between the words while they speak — a form of jump cutting. So, to conclude, we can say that the French New Wave was one of the most artful, creative, and significant film movements of all time that permanently enhanced the rigorous demand, inventiveness, and philosophical potential of film. The movement proved that quality films didn’t necessarily need money or high production value, but merely the foresight, passion and vision of an artist.

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