

## The French New Wave, Part One: 1957–1968

### *Introduction*

The next two chapters focus on the historic importance of the New Wave (*nouvelle vague*), a radical film movement that changed the way we think about and understand film narratives as an art form and cultural construct. The movement was initiated by a young, talented group of French film critics, namely, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette, whose first feature films in 1959 revolutionized film production in Western Europe. Their improvisational approach to acting, directing and script-writing followed the documentary techniques of filmmakers like Jean Rouch, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, using handheld cameras, on-location shooting, and small crews. As writers and directors they followed André Bazin's concept of the long take and *mise-en-scène*. The unifying principle behind these films was French Existentialism, in which they expressed a personal vision of the world. They merged this philosophy with the dramatic theories of Bertolt Brecht. The New Wave displaced the postwar French commercial cinema, the Tradition of Quality, in which studio writers adapted novels into filmscripts to produce a cinema of "psychological realism."

### *The Influence of French Existentialism on the New Wave*

During the postwar years French Existentialism, through the writings of Jean-Paul

Sartre and Albert Camus, became part of a significant philosophical reflection on the nature of being and the absurdity of the human condition. Sartre and Camus proposed a concept of human freedom based upon the possibility of a deliberate and conscious choice in which the actions of human beings are not limited or determined by powerful cultural forces. On the contrary, it is the experiential choices they make that fully bring whatever endowments they have into being. "Man is a self-creating being who is not initially endowed with a character and goals," notes Sartre, "but must choose them by acts of pure decision ... [and make] existential leaps into being" (Sartre 1943). Contrary to Plato, Sartre places one's existence before the idea of essence. By acknowledging that people are temporal beings conscious of their own mortality, a person must strive to live *authentically* with the understanding of this fact as leading to a person's own ultimate destiny.

These concepts were born out of the philosophers' own experiences during the French struggle against German occupation during World War II. For some documentary French filmmakers such as Alain Resnais, Georges Franju and Alexandre Astruc, it was necessary to depict on film these atrocities, symbolically or otherwise, if only to document them. This political commitment to documentary filmmaking began with the early short documentaries of Georges Franju (1912–1987), the co-founder of the Cinémathèque Française with Henri Langlois. His *Les Sang des Bêtes / The Blood of the Beasts* (1949) is a surreal documentary on a Paris

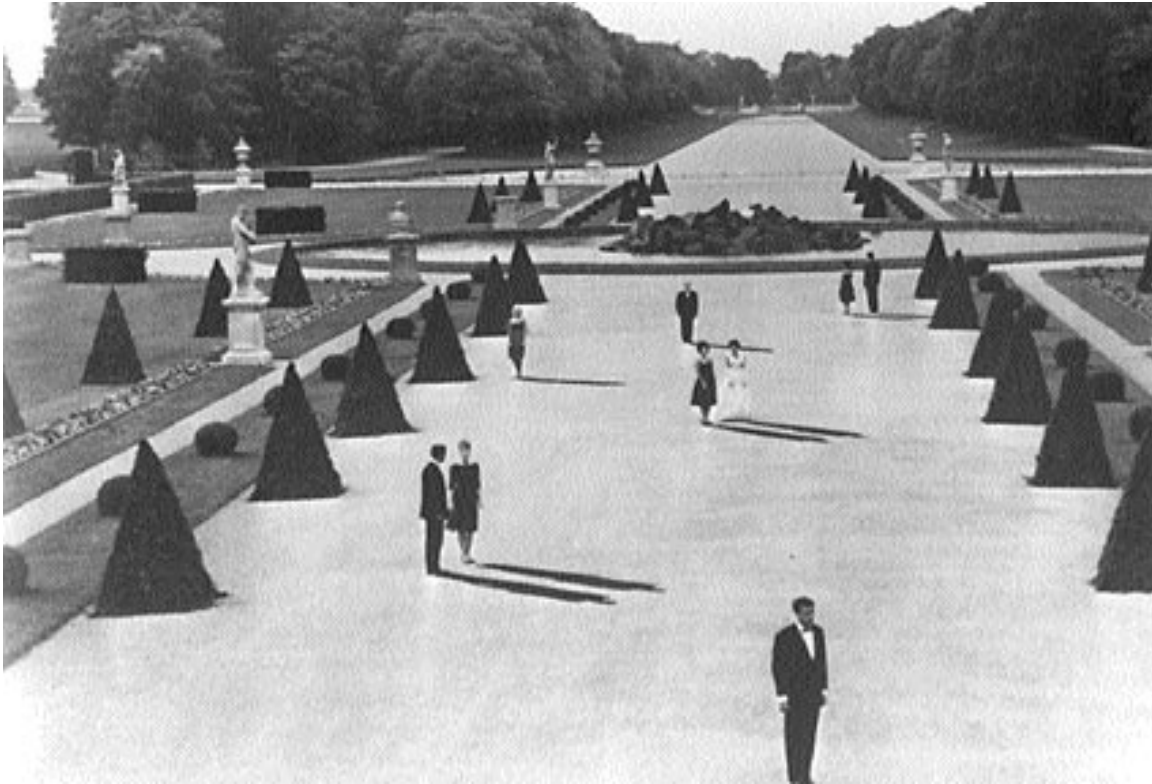


Alain Resnais in *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) uses shots of gardens and statues of a hotel where remembrances of times past confuse time present.

slaughterhouse that becomes an allegory of the Nazis and their butchery of French Resistance fighters. His other short films, one on Georges Méliès, the other on Madame Curie, deconstruct myths about heroism and heroes. His first feature film, *La Tête Contre les Murs / The Keepers* (1958), a partly surreal documentary on the French insane asylums, is cited as a forerunner of New Wave attacks on traditional institutions and structures that Michel Foucault revisits in his account of mental institutions in *Madness and Civilization* (1965/1981).

Alain Resnais (b. 1922) is another important documentary filmmaker to influence the New Wave filmmakers and critics. His early work included short documentary films about Van Gogh and Gauguin. In *Nuit et Brouillard / Night and Fog* (1955), he interweaves past with present in a political documentary on Nazi con-

centration camps. Resnais uses brief, almost subliminal, flash cuts as a method to pursue the effects of time and memory and how they play upon our present sense of reality. A somber voice-over narration throughout the film leads to his warning for viewers to remember the horrors of the death camps. His meditations on the effects of time upon memories and how we perceive them became the theme of his first feature film, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), followed by *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad / Last Year at Marienbad* (1962) whose intersection of past and present affects our sense of the future. These themes are taken up by another documentary filmmaker, Chris Marker (b. 1921). In his science-fiction short, *La Jetée / The Pier* (1962), we become involved in a time-travel adventure of a man revisiting his past only to discover his own death. In *Le Joli Mai* (1963) Marker focuses upon



Impersonal relations between lovers, indicated by long tracking shots of empty corridors and outdoor vistas, disorient the viewer trying to sort out the flashbacks and present-day actions in *Last Year at Marienbad*.

the political strife in Parisian life as he mixes present time with fading memories. Resnais and Marker and other documentary filmmakers were part of the Left Bank group associated with the New Wave, but were committed to a more existential approach to documentary films.

Alexandre Astruc (b. 1923) championed the *direct cinéma* style of Franju and Resnais. He expressed his critical thoughts on filmmaking in his 1948 essay, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Style” (camera-pen). According to Astruc, this new cinema would “gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language” (Astruc, quoted in Graham 1968, p. 18).

By breaking away from a traditional narrative technique, and more into a surreal stream-of-consciousness approach, the director would

use the camera as a pen to express his own thoughts and ideas independent of a given scenario, as opposed to adopting a style from literature or the theatre. This “writing with the camera” would see filmmaking as a spontaneous happening, in which the director would face the problems of expressing ideas and thoughts through the very activity of filmmaking. Using this cinematic technique, Astruc believed young French filmmakers would be able to find a personal style and form of expression comparable to a written language. Thus, they could discover a new audiovisual language that abandoned the classical style of montage editing and linear narration. This new cinema would give the filmmaker the status of author, or *auteur*, since the mode of filmmaking investigated natural phenomena according to the director’s personal attitude and beliefs. As a film style, it would emphasize the use of the “long-take” and *mise-en-scène*.

## *The French New Wave Directors, 1956–1968*

The critical comments of Alexandre Astruc on a personal, first-person filmmaking technique were advanced by André Bazin (1918–1958) in the influential film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* which he founded as *La Revue du Cinéma* with Jacques Doniol-Valcroze in 1951. The term to describe this filmmaking practice became known as the *politique des auteurs*, and was defined by Bazin in his own essay as follows:

The *politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then of assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next. It is recognized that there do exist certain important films of quality that escape this test, but these will systematically be considered inferior to those in which the personal stamp of the *auteur*, however run-of-the-mill the scenario, can be perceived even minutely [Bazin, quoted in Graham 1968, p. 151].

Under the guidance of Bazin, a group of young writers and critics who wanted to become filmmakers began studying film at the Cinémathèque Française. This film theatre was founded by Georges Franju and Henri Langlois in 1937 as a film archive designed to promote film study and film culture. After the war, André Malraux, the Minister of Culture, provided funds to maintain the collection and provide public screenings of the experimental silent French films of the 1920s and the sound films of the 1930s, especially films directed by Jean Vigo, Abel Gance and Jean Renoir. Besides these classical French films, American films of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly those of Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray and Howard Hawks, also were screened.

Another important influence on the development of these film critics was Roberto Rossellini (see Chapter 11), who became their film mentor. They followed his advice and made their own independent short films, using his semidocumentary techniques including on-location shooting, nonprofessional actors and

lightweight 16mm cameras, and remembered his dictum to show people as they are. Godard made *Tous les Garçons S'Appellent Patrick / All the Boys Are Named Patrick* (1957), Truffaut directed *Les Mistons / The Mischief Makers* (1958) and Chabrol produced and directed *Le Beau Serge / Bitter Reunion* (1958).

## *The New Wave and Jean-Luc Godard*

The French New Wave was a provocative exploration into commercial cinema at a time when film that relied on traditional stage techniques was seen as a sterile creative movement. The personal styles of these young critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma* challenged this “cinema de papa.” They became filmmakers to examine the relationship of one’s own identity with the role assigned by society. They followed two basic tenets emerging from *Cahiers du Cinéma* and André Bazin. One was the use of the long take, and a *mise-en-scène* that respected the unity of time and place, as opposed to montage. The second tenet related to the use of the camera as an instrument for personal expression as advocated by Alexandre Astruc. Thus universal themes on life, love and identity would receive a personal interpretation as a dialectical play between the representation of self in the cinema and in real life, a play between illusion and reality.

Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut practiced a *cinéma des auteurs*, calling attention to itself as cinema through the process of its own making. Thus, New Wave cinema becomes self-reflexive of filmmaking itself, unmasking the process of its own apparatus. These two directors advocated a freewheeling, improvised style that called attention to the cinematic tricks of filmmaking. They reveled in appropriating cinematic techniques from the silent films of the 1920s and the sound films of the 1930s. As Godard’s cinematic anti-heroes rebel against the norms and conventions set up by a popular culture and consumerism, Truffaut’s misfits try to understand the forces that repress individuality. The goal of their film experiments was to deal with the question of authenticity,

and the coming together of an inner subjective consciousness within a social-political reality.

In this conscious intellectual striving, Godard and Truffaut not only borrowed from American B-movies but also drew upon the modernist tendencies of James Joyce, Bertolt Brecht and William Faulkner. Godard and Truffaut extended the experimental forms of the novel in their exploration of cinema as an art form as well as its role in education and communication. With these two young directors, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette also used a self-reflexive style to establish their roles as *auteurs*. As directors and screenwriters, they established various narrative strategies to explore the moral and social values in a changing existential world of contingency. In this world the personal experiences of life are often alienated by the depersonalizing forces of modern society. The problem is to unmask these forces and liberate oneself from their tyrannies.

### *The Influence of Bertolt Brecht*

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a German dramatist and poet who developed an epic or narrative theatre during the late 1920s in Berlin. His theatre employed anti-illusionistic devices to break down the Aristotelian theatre of illusion, one based upon the theory of catharsis, an empathic identification by the spectator with the stage actor. This response purged the audience of its emotions of fear and pity created by the drama. Such dramas easily brought the audience under their spell, and it became anti-critical of the stage actions. “These powerful empathic responses depended upon stage illusion and served as mental foodstuffs, quickly enjoyed and consumed by the viewer, then forgotten” (Willett 1968, p. 172).

Brecht claimed that the function of theatre should be to challenge the cultural perceptions of the audience. It should communicate, not only provide entertainment. A theatre is a symbolic place where the audience should be made to think, to question and to become politically conscious of the contradictions behind the

events taking place on stage. To insure that his dramas achieved the necessary critical detachment, Brecht advanced his theory of *Verfremdung*, translated as “distanciation” or “estrangement” and referred to as the V-effect. It does not mean alienating spectators in the sense of making them hostile to the play. According to Wright:

*Verfremdung* is a mode of critical seeing that goes on within a process by which man identifies his objects. Further, it sets up a series of social, political and ideological interruptions that remind us that representations are not given but produced. Contrary to popular belief, *Verfremdung* does not do away with identification, but examines it critically, using the technique of montage which shows that no representation is fixed and final [Wright 1989, p. 19].

In 1948, after years in exile from Nazi Germany, Brecht returned to East Berlin, where he became director of the state-supported Berliner Ensemble. Here he directed his own plays, notably those written while he was living in the United States. During this period, Brecht decided to replace the term epic with the term dialectical to further his political awareness “that the spectator is never only at the receiving end of a representation, but is included in it” (Wright 1989, p. 19). He produced and directed three major plays that became world famous: *Mother Courage* (1941), *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1943) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1955). In each drama, Brecht shows how his “dialectical” theatre, using the V-effect, discourages and agitates against audience identification with stage characters, thus helping the spectator to realize the parts they play in the fictional narrative itself.

For each of these plays, Brecht “developed a variety of effects to present his themes and motifs: songs, inserted texts, self-reference, and the self-presentation of characters.” These effects were all designed to promote a new way of seeing, a new attitude to be shared between the stage and the audiences. Brecht’s dramas aimed at “transforming ‘fear’ and ‘pity’ into a ‘desire for knowledge’ and a ‘readiness to help’” (Wright 1989, p. 33). Brecht’s techniques



Anna Karina plays a prostitute in a series of Brechtian episodes detailing her lifestyle in Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie / My Life to Live* (1962).



Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg as lovers strolling down the Champs-Élysées in *Breathless* (1959), directed by Jean-Luc Godard.

kept the audiences constantly aware that they were being presented with a report of past events. As historical reconstructions his plays openly declared the stage as just a stage, and not a place to be mistaken for the actual world itself. The main function of the enactment was to produce living illustrations that could foster a critical attitude in the audience in hopes of changing the powerful social, economic and historical forces operating upon people's lives.

For Brecht, the art of the drama was to place familiar things, attitudes and situations "into a new fresh and unfamiliar perspective so that the spectator is brought to look critically at what has been taken for granted" (Willett 1968, p. 177). Brecht points out that when the "natural" is made to look surprising or creates won-

derment, then audiences become discoverers of the relationships that exist between people and realize that nothing will seem inevitable. Brecht sought to demonstrate how his characters can develop and grow out of a social function. As that social function changes, so does the action and identity of the person. The idea he explores in his dramas is that nothing is fixed, that there is no absolute role or identity created that is unchangeable. His characters, through their actions and experiences, are in the act of becoming in association with their social and political functions.

In this context, Jean-Luc Godard, in his assimilation of Brechtian theatre, became the foremost experimenter of narrative form in the cinema. He constantly reminds us, as spectators, that we are watching a filmed reality, one

that shares resemblances to actual life but is a constructed reality. Through the use of jump-cuts, elliptical editing, and the elimination of transitional scenes, Godard violates the invisible editing developed by film directors in the classical Hollywood style.

In its place he deliberately creates a self-reflexive cinema. This cinema, which appears to have temporal and spatial continuity through editing is, in reality, a very discontinuous process. In a radical departure from the narrative films of the past, Godard's films become a series of cinematic essays deconstructing the myths that control the social relations of people within modern industrial society.

In the early films of Godard and Truffaut, the central character is always trying to shed an assigned social role, especially in Truffaut's *400 Blows* and in Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie / My Life to Live* (1962). Further, as in Brechtian theatre, the New Wave films always pose this question: How will a given person act in a specified set of circumstances and conditions? Godard, like Brecht, reverses a psychological drama which focuses upon a character caught in a suspenseful Aristotelian plot with a narrative drama which concentrates on a character caught in a particular political situation. By showing a series of episodes, each detailing a different set of circumstances, the writer-director can place familiar characters into new or unfamiliar positions, thus contrasting episodes.

Further, Godard allows the non-literary elements, including the decor, the sound effects, the music and the *mise-en-scène*, to retain their autonomy. In this manner they enter into a dialectical relationship with characters in each episode. Godard uses these non-literary elements to their full extent as he demonstrates in *Breathless*, *My Life to Live*, and *Weekend* (1968). As cinematic techniques, the jump-cuts, slow fades and wipes, the use of titles, newspaper headlines, interviews and voice-overs interrupt the flow of the action and thus break the illusion of reality. In many cases, Godard used different sound effects either from a music score or actual sounds coming into the scene from the environment, to comment upon or contradict the mood of the scene.

### À BOUT DE SOUFFLE / BREATHLESS

*Breathless* is the first feature film directed by Jean-Luc Godard. It is based upon an idea for a love story written by François Truffaut, but Godard scripted and edited the film. Godard dedicated *Breathless* to Monogram Pictures, a minor Hollywood studio that made B gangster movies. As a New Wave critic and filmmaker, Godard exploited this gangster-thriller model and its familiar plot to set up a self-reflexive cinema, making films about the process of making films.

When *Breathless* was first reviewed in the *New York Times* by Bosley Crowther in 1961, he criticized the sordidness of the love affair, and the fact that the key character, Michel, as portrayed by Jean-Paul Belmondo, was "an impudent, arrogant, sharp-witted and alarmingly amoral hood." He cited Jean Seberg's character, Patricia, as a "cold, self-defensive animal in a glittering, glib, irrational, heartless world." For Crowther, these two lovers were fearsome characters since their animalistic drives "were completely devoid of moral tone, and they were mainly concerned with eroticism, and the restless drives of a cruel young punk." But Crowther seems not to be aware that Michel was one of the first film antiheroes, the outsider from the fictions of Sartre and Camus, living immorally in an antisocial world.

The first close-ups of Michel show him reading a newspaper containing erotic photos of bathing beauties. By an association of his image with the newspaper images, we are led to believe that Michel is motivated or driven by lust. This sexual desire, called *l'amour fou* by the Surrealists, removes the person from any rational behavior. Michel is an anarchist who acts impulsively and irrationally. He models himself on movie-made gangsters like Bogart and Cagney to show his contempt for law and order. Michel has no qualms about committing petty crimes to obtain money, including a car theft, which accidentally leads to the death of a police officer.

It is the irrational nature of this character in an absurd world that interests Godard. As in a film noir, Godard creates tensions in *Breathless* as part of a gangster-thriller narrative whose male character is fated to "live dangerously to the end." In this fashion then, Godard can ask



the audience a series of moral questions regarding the nature of contemporary society and its middle-class preoccupations with sex and wealth. As lovers, Michel and Patricia are trapped by different jobs in order to gain what they most desire. In fact, Michel steals cars to pay for their amorous activities. Patricia works for the *Herald Tribune* as a novice reporter, but she uses her sexuality to gain advantage over Michel and other men. Both in their own ways prostitute themselves, hoping to gain an economic edge in their obsessive love affair.

In his films made before May 1968, Godard turned to parables in a Brechtian manner to demonstrate the myriad problems of modern industrialized society. In *Une Étrange Aventure de Lemmy Caution / Alphaville* (1965), he devised a science-fiction thriller using film noir techniques to retell the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. His major character, Lemmy Caution, becomes involved with Alpha 60, a master computer that controls a city where a show of human emotions is punishable by a firing squad. Again, the concern is with alienation in a technological world where human beings are robotized and dehumanized. *Weekend* is a more apocalyptic parable about a modern Garden of Eden turned into a monumental nightmare where the landscape becomes a highway of burning cars and corpses overrun by Maoist revolutionaries. Here the consumer society is reduced to savages engaged in rape, murder and cannibalism in order to survive.

After the May-June student riots in Paris in 1968, Godard immersed himself in a four-year collaboration with the Dziga-Vertov Group, making 11 agit-prop films. This work went mainstream in 1972, when he cast Jane Fonda and Yves Montand in *Tout Va Bien*, co-directed by Jean-Pierre Gorin. The characters are journalists committed to a revolutionary struggle. Using Brechtian techniques Godard examines the nature and uses of propaganda and the cultural packaging of capitalism throughout all media, especially television. In a second film, *A Letter to Jane* (1972), Godard explores the power of images through the use of Fonda's photograph found in the magazine *L'Express* and its impact on the Vietnam War. Godard turned to a television format to continue his rebel spirit to unmask the Victo-

rian melodrama and morality which he believes informs the social constructs of modern society and the world of cinematic "illusions."

DUDLEY ANDREW:  
"BREATHLESS: OLD AS NEW"

Dudley Andrew's essay explores the decade of the 1950s, in which the cultural forces in postwar Europe underwent dramatic changes as found in New Wave filmmaking. Andrew describes the innovations in editing techniques Godard employs in *Breathless* to jolt the viewer as his camera moves from long-takes and pans to staccato jumps and quick cuts. These techniques give Godard the opportunity to explore the romantic possibilities of a world of contingency where chance, accident and random elements collide and play havoc with bourgeois traditions. Andrew analyzes the ways Godard incorporates many surrealist elements to fantasize sex and violence as examples of *l'amour fou*. The complementary emotions of fear and love become the irrational forces that bring the lovers together. Patricia even compares her involvement with Michel to the affair of Romeo and Juliet, lovers who are fascinated by their strange attraction to each other. The parodic elements are also presented in *Breathless* through an interview with a writer who discusses the politics of French and American women and their different concepts of love.

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