

## The French New Wave

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The term French New Wave or *La Nouvelle Vague* refers to the work of a group of French film-makers between the years 1958 to 1964. The film directors who formed the core of this group, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer, were once all film critics for the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Other French directors, including Agnès Varda and Louis Malle, soon became associated with the French New Wave movement. This essay examines what was distinctive about the early films of these directors.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s young film-makers in many countries were creating their own "new waves", for example the working-class cinema of the "angry young men" in Britain, but the new wave movement in France turned out to be the most influential. The French New Wave directors' background in film theory and criticism was a major factor in this. They changed notions of how a film could be made and were driven by a desire to forge a new cinema. The *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics were highly critical of the glossy, formulaic and studio-bound French cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, but praised the work of 1930s French film-makers Jean Renoir and Jean Vigo and the work of the Italian neo-realists, including Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica. They also championed certain Hollywood directors, for example, Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray and Howard Hawks, who they saw as *auteurs* (authors) of their films, despite the fact that they worked within studio systems making genre pictures. These directors were labelled *auteurs* because of distinctive themes that could be detected running throughout the body of their work. Through their writings the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics paved the way for cinema to become as worthy of academic study as any other art form.

In the late 1950s the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics took the opportunity to become film *auteurs* themselves, when film subsidies were bought in by the Gaullist government, and they put their theories into practice. The core group of French New Wave directors initially collaborated and assisted each other, which helped in the development of a common and distinct use of form, style and narrative, which was to make their work instantly recognizable.

The unique experience of French film-makers was evident in their films. During the war France was an occupied country, unlike say England or the USA, and the experience of austerity and internal tensions, created by a population that in part resisted and in part collaborated with the Nazis, left a mark on the country's psyche. A distinctive philosophy - existentialism - evolved in France in the post-war years. This philosophy, associated with Jean-Paul Sartre and other French intellectuals, was a major influence on *La Nouvelle Vague*. Existentialism stressed the individual, the experience of free choice, the absence of any rational understanding of the universe and a sense of the absurdity in human life. Faced with an indifferent world an existentialist seeks to act authentically, using free will and taking responsibility for all their actions, instead of playing pre-ordained roles dictated by society. The characters in French New Wave films are often

marginalized, young anti-heroes and loners, with no family ties, who behave spontaneously, often act immorally and are frequently seen as anti-authoritarian. There is a general cynicism concerning politics, often expressed as a dis-illusionment with foreign policy in Algeria or Indo-China. In Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (1959) the protagonist kills and shows no remorse, while in Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961) the protagonist stops playing the roles others expect of her, when she discovers she has cancer, and starts to live authentically.

The French New Wave directors took advantage of the new technology that was available to them in the late 1950s, which enabled them to work on location rather than in the studio. They used lightweight hand-held cameras, developed by the Eclair company for use in documentaries, faster film stocks, which required less light, and light-weight sound and lighting equipment. Their films could be shot quickly and cheaply with this portable and flexible equipment, which encouraged experimentation and improvisation, and generally gave the directors more artistic freedom over their work.

The films had a casual and natural look due to location filming. Available light was preferred to studio-style lighting and available sound was preferred to extensive studio dubbing. The *mise-en-scène* of Parisian streets and coffee bars became a defining feature of the films. The camera was often very mobile, with a great deal of fluid panning and tracking. Often only one camera was used, in highly inventive ways; following characters down streets, into cafes and bars, or looking over their shoulders to watch life go by. Eric Rohmer's *La Boulangère Du Monceau* (1962) opens by establishing the action in a specific location in Paris, and is almost entirely filmed in the streets, cafes and shops of this area. In *A Bout de Souffle* (1959), the cinematographer Raoul Coutard, who worked on many of the French New Wave films, was pushed around in a wheelchair - following the characters down the street and into buildings. Innovative use of the new hand-held cameras is evident, for example, in Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cent Coups* (1959), where a boy is filmed on a fairground carousel.

The way the films were made reflected an interest in questioning cinema itself, by drawing attention to the conventions used in film-making. In this manner, the French New Wave directors strove to present an alternative to Hollywood, by consciously breaking its conventions, while at the same time paying homage to what they regarded as good in Hollywood cinema. Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* set the tone for *La Nouvelle Vague*, by telling a simple story about a relationship in a convention-challenging style with numerous references to previous cinema. In addition to telling a love story, the film can also be seen as an essay about film-making.

French New Wave films had a free editing style and did not conform to the editing rules of Hollywood films. The editing often drew attention to itself by being discontinuous, reminding the audience that they were watching a film, for example by using jump cuts or the insertion of material extraneous to the story (non-diegetic material). Godard, in particular, favoured the use of the jump cut, where two shots of the same subject are cut together with a noticeable jump on the screen. In a Hollywood film this would be avoided by either using a shot/reverse shot edit or cutting to a shot from a camera in a position

over 30 ° from the preceding shot. In Godard's first full-length film *A Bout de Souffle* jump cuts are used during a lengthy conversation in a room and in a scene in a car driving around Paris. Irrelevant shots were sometimes inserted for ironic or comical effect, for example, in Truffaut's *Tirez le Pianiste* when one character says "May my mother drop dead if I'm not telling the truth", the shot is cut to one of an old lady falling over dead. The latter is also typical of the casual, sometimes anarchic, humour found in many *Nouvelle Vague* films.

Long takes were common, for example, the street scene in *A Bout de Souffle*. Long takes have become particularly associated with the films of Jacques Rivette. The use of real-time was also common, for example, in Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7*, in which the screen duration and the plot duration both extend two hours, and in the slice-of-life scenes in Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962). These two films are also both firmly shot in the present tense, a common feature of French New Wave films generally. The films tended to have loosely constructed scenarios, with many unpredictable elements and sudden shifts in tone, often giving the audience the impression that anything might happen next. They were also distinctive for having open endings, with situations being left unresolved. Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cent Coups* is typical in ending ambiguously, with the protagonist Antoine on a beach caught in freeze-frame looking at the camera.

The acting was a marked departure from much that had gone before. The actors were encouraged to improvise their lines, or talk over each others lines as would happens in real-life. In *A Bout de Souffle* this leads to lengthy scenes of inconsequential dialogue, in opposition to the staged speeches of much traditional film acting. Monologues were also used, for example in Godard's *Charlotte and her Bloke* (1959); as were voice-overs expressing a character's inner feelings, as in Rohmer's *La Boulangère Du Monceau*. The actors in these films were not big stars prior to the French New Wave, but a group of stars soon became associated with the films including Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean-Pierre Léaud and Jeanne Moreau. Women were often given strong parts, that did not conform to the archetypal roles seen in most Hollywood cinema, for example, Jeanne Moreau in Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962) and Corinne Marchand in Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7*.

French New Wave cinema was a personal cinema. The film-makers were writers who were skilful at examining relationships and telling humane stories. Truffaut's films were particularly autobiographical. His first full-length film *Les Quatre Cents Coups* drew upon his early life, and the life-story of the main character Antoine Doinel was developed through three subsequent films: *Antoine et Colette* (1962), *Baisers Volés* (1968) and *Domicile Conjugal* (1970).

The *Nouvelle Vague* film-makers, being critics, were very knowledgeable about cinema. Their films incorporated elements of American genres, for example, film noir in *A Bout de Souffle*, the gangster movie in *Tirez le Pianiste* and the thriller and the musical in Godard's *Bande à Part* (1964). They also frequently contained references to particular Hollywood stars or films by American auteurs. In *A Bout de Souffle*, for example, Jean-Paul Belmondo models himself on Humphrey Bogart, while Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'Echafaud* (1957) and several of Claude Chabrol's films make reference to Hitchcock.

The American jazz music that was popular in Paris at the time also featured in some of the films, for example, the Miles Davis score for *Ascenseur pour l'Echafaud*.

The French New Wave directors were prolific film-makers. The five *Cahiers* directors (Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rivette and Rohmer) made 32 films between 1959 and 1966. Although the films represented a radical departure from traditional cinema, and were aimed at a young intellectual audience, many of them achieved a measure of critical and financial success, gaining a broad audience both in France and abroad. Truffaut's *Les quatre Cent Coups*, for example, won the Grand Prize at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, while *A Bout de Souffle* was a big European box office hit. This contributed to the growing influence of these directors. After 1964 the experimentation elements of the French New Wave were already starting to become assimilated into mainstream cinema. The directors meanwhile diverged in style and developed their own distinct cinematic voices. Truffaut incorporated more traditional elements in his films, for example, while Godard became increasingly political and radical in his film-making during the 1960s.

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