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| **French New Wave** |
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| The French New Wave is a term associated with a group of French filmmakers and the films they directed from the late 1950s until the mid-60s. Its most representative directors were championed by the influential magazine Cahiers du Cinéma, and include François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, Jean-Luc Godard, and Eric Rohmer. Since most of these directors were also prolific film critics, the New Wave is also notable for the important body of theoretical work it produced, particularly the auteur theory introduced by André Bazin, one of the Cahiers’ founders. |
| Overview The French New Wave is a term associated with a group of French filmmakers and the films they directed from the late 1950s until the mid-60s. Its most representative directors were championed by the influential magazine Cahiers du Cinéma, and include François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, Jean-Luc Godard, and Eric Rohmer. Since most of these directors were also prolific film critics, the New Wave is also notable for the important body of theoretical work it produced, particularly the auteur theory introduced by André Bazin, one of the Cahiers’ founders. A secondary group of directors, the so-called Rive Gauche (Left Bank) Group, was associated largely with Cahiers’ arch rival, Positif, and had a contentious relationship with the core New Wave group, although they were equally influential on the French cinema of the time and were often designated as New Wave themselves. Important Left Bank directors were Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda and Chris Marker.  It is important to recognize that French New Wave does not designate a specific film school or even an organized movement (hence the sometimes disputed affiliations of some directors); rather, it is a label bestowed by the press and the critics to identify a new mode of radically innovative cinema production and direction that sought to separate itself (sometimes forcefully) from the older studio-bound practices of the so-called cinéma de qualité (quality cinema), characterized by an over-reliance on period dramas and literary adaptations. In contrast, New Wave films are experimental, playful and innovative, largely produced outside the studio system and for markedly lower budgets, favoring exterior shots and natural sound. Notable techniques include long takes and discontinuous editing. Thematically, they tend to focus on young characters whose exuberance hides existential dilemmas associated with modern life. Narratives frequently employ a mix of subjective and objective perspectives and sometimes break the fourth wall. The New Wave is also noted for its love of Hollywood genre films (like those of Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles and Nicholas Ray), a trait that is absent from most of the work of the Left Bank directors. Naming the New Wave: Critical Reception The New Wave label has been somewhat controversial from the very beginning. Popularized by the weekly L’Express in the mid-50s as a way to refer to certain innovative and youthful tendencies in French culture, the designation did not sit well with the very directors to whom it was attached. They resented what they perceived as pigeonholing. Claude Chabrol, whose Le Beau Serge *[Beautiful Serge*, 1958] is generally considered the first French New Wave film, goes so far as to deny the existence of a New Wave in the first place: ‘In 1958 and 1959, myself and the whole Cahiers team, once we started making films, were promoted like a brand of soap.’ (qtd in Vincendeau 10).  Regardless of labels, the directors of the New Wave were definitely moving in uncharted – if not entirely new – territory. Neupert (2002, 2007), alongside Nowell-Smith (2007), contends that, while its products were certainly original, the French New Wave itself was simply the local manifestation of broader innovative trends emerging in several European post-war cinemas – most notably, Italian neorealism, widely acknowledged as an influence on the New Wave’s preference for location shots and observational realism. Neupert in particular is very careful to trace the origins of the New Wave through several larger cultural shifts happening in French culture. The experiments of nouveau roman novelists like Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras, and nouveau thèatre dramatists like Beckett, Ionesco, and Adamov, are reflected in the impersonal, often schematic narrative, occasional absurdism and flat characters of Godard’s À Bout de souffle [*Breathles*s, 1960] and Bande à Part [*Band of Outsiders*, 1964] or Truffaut’s Tirez sur le pianiste [*Shoot the Piano Player*, 1960]. Robbe-Grillet and Duras would later collaborate with Alain Resnais on L’anée dernière à Marienbad [*Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961] and Hiroshima mon amour (1959) respectively. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes’ championing of structuralism is especially relevant, Neupert observes, as its analysis of culture as a complex system of signs aligns almost perfectly with the New Wave’s tendency to draw attention to the mechanisms of cinema, exposing its articulations and artificial nature via sudden shifts in perspective, freeze frames, or breaking the fourth wall. In addition, Barthes’ 1957 collection of essays Mythologies approached elements of popular culture like wrestling, film, or advertising with the theoretical instruments and scholarly application usually reserved for high culture – a method which Cahiers du cinéma was simultaneously applying to Hollywood genre fare.  The New Wave’s reputation as an organized movement kept growing long after the trend itself had ceased. By 1976 James Monaco’s The New Wave: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette was praising the New Wave for the intellectual nature of its films. Other notable studies, like those by Antoine de Baecque (1998) and Serge Daney (1998), similarly stress the complexity and importance of the New Wave corpus though, as Vincendeau (2009) notes, the hierarchies established by the Cahiers’ *auteur* politics [politique des auteurs] remain largely unchallenged.  That is not to say that the praise has been universal or unconditional. As early as the 1950s, the critics associated with Positif (Raymond Borde and Gérard Gozlan among others) were challenging Cahiers’ (and by extension, the New Wave directors’) quasi-fetishization of the auteur, the muddled terminology of their theoretical work, and the films’ perceived shallowness and lack of political engagement. More recently there have been attempts to rethink the New Wave canon (see Flitterman-Lewis 1990) along gender lines by focusing on Agnès Varda, a formative yet oddly marginalized figure. Foundations The seeds of New Wave cinema were planted soon after World War II in the animated conversations taking place in the ciné-clubs that were popping up all over France. Most notable were Objectif 49 (organized by Alexandre Astruc, André Bazin, Jean Cocteau and Robert Bresson) and Eric Rohmer’s Cinéclub du Quartier Latin. The eclectic, sprawling collection of Henri Langlois’ Cinémathèque Française helped cement the cinephilia of the New Wave generation of directors and critics.  The theoretical foundations of the French New Wave grew out of this sophisticated film culture and can be located in three seminal essays published between 1948 and 1958. In ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo’ (1948) Alexandre Astruc refuses the modernist avant-garde’s focus on visuality as the sole property of film and seeks to broaden cinema into a dynamic language which could put it on equal footing with literature. François Truffaut’s rebellious, even arrogant ‘A Certain Tendency in French Cinema’ (1954) rails against the so called ‘quality cinema’ of the French studios of the 40s and 50s. The writers of such films (mostly adaptations of literary works) started from the premise that cinema is inferior to literature and therefore simplified narrative and character development into mediocre, boring products. The alternative to this ‘scriptwriters’ cinema,’ Truffaut argues is the ‘auteur cinema’ of Henri-Georges Clouzot and Robert Bresson, where the director is involved in almost all the creative decisions, beginning with the script. Finally, Bazin’s seminal ‘The Evolution of Film Language’ (1958) establishes the foundations of a new cinematic canon, signaling the shift from montage understood as the basis of cinematic expression towards a visual language based in long takes that afford the viewer’s gaze the luxury of wandering about a scene and in which editing takes on a purely negative quality of ‘eliminating what is superfluous’ (69). Frequently cited names are Robert Murnau, William Wyler, Jean Renoir, Roberto Rosellini and, of course, Orson Welles, whose proto-*auteur* film Citizen Kane is arguably the French New Wave’s fetish film.  So strong was this drive to theory that the French New Wave holds the peculiar distinction of having a significant number of its major figures (like Truffaut and Rohmer) start off as film critics rather than directors. Some scholars, most notably Roy Armes (1985) even go as far as to consider these critic-directors as the only ‘pure’ members of the New Wave. Astruc, Truffaut and Bazin’s essays reflect an intense preoccupation with the legitimization of film as a complex artistic language, which (despite Astruc’s protestations to the contrary) places the French New Wave in direct continuation of similar concerns voiced by the avant-garde filmmakers of the 20s and 30s. The auteur theory promoted by Cahiers du cinéma thus emerges as a direct reaction against the perceived artistic indifference and anonymity inherent in the conception of film as a purely industrial practice. The ideal director is therefore also a writer – someone who exerts full control over every frame of the film and guides the gaze of the spectator through long takes and complex mise-en-scene. The auteur theory reflects the complex nature of the New Wave’s filmic corpus, favoring simultaneously an unobtrusive form of observational realism bordering on the metaphysical, and the playful revelation of the artificiality of the medium – the former evidenced by Bazin and Truffaut’s admiration for Bresson and Rossellini, and the latter manifest in Godard, Chabrol and Truffaut’s love of Hollywood genre fare like gangster movies and melodramas.  The Cahiers’ near-deification of the director-auteur put it in direct and often virulent conflict with rival magazine Positif, whose editorial team favored a more political and experimental cinema and found Bazin’s metaphysical musings at least imprecisely worded and at worst unbearably elitist. Tangentially associated with the magazine were the so-called ‘Left Bank’ directors like Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda and the enigmatic Chris Marker (born Christian François Bouche-Villeneuve). Despite Positif’s overt rejection of the New Wave auteurs, the Left Bank directors frequently crossed over to their ‘Right Bank’ colleagues, incorporating Varda’s 1962 Cléo de 5 à 7 [*Cléo from 5 to 7*] and Resnais’ Last Year at Marienbad into the New Wave canon. Nonetheless, the Left Bank films are more overtly experimental – Chris Marker’s 1962 short La Jetée [*The Jetty*], for example, consists entirely of still images.. The films are less narrative, often more political and more collaborative, with scripts authored by novelists like Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Legacy The New Wave began to waning around 1964-1965 and ebbed away with the turbulent events of 1968, which rendered its more introspective, apolitical aspects increasingly obsolete. Its legacy nonetheless continued to solidify. Many of its most prominent directors, like Godard, Rohmer and Rivette (as well as Left Bank directors like Varda, Resnais and Marker) would go on to lengthy, fascinating careers, marked by a constant willingness to experiment. The New Wave’s most lasting legacy, however, has been its construction of a new cinematic language. Many of its formal innovations, such as long takes, hand-held shots, jump cuts, and freeze frames have made their way into the work of the New Hollywood directors of the 60s and 70s, most notably Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola and Robert Altman. The New Wave’s iconoclasm, drive towards realism, and flexible production methods pointed the way for the creative upheaval of the Czech New Wave of the late 60s and provided a template for other emerging national cinemas, from Poland to Romania to Iran. More recently, the postmodern pastiche of Quentin Tarantino owes an important debt to the New Wave, particularly to its cinephile culture and to Godard’s playful Breathless and Band of Outsiders (Tarantino’s production company is even named Bande à Part). Finally, contemporary directors like Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach continue to create in the formal tradition of Truffaut and Rohmer. Selected Filmography  1. Precursors   Journal d’un curé de campagne (Diary of a Country Priest; 1951, dir. Robert Bresson)  Le Silence de la mer (The Silence of the Sea; 1949, dir. Jean-Pierre Melville)  Bob le flambeur (Bob the Gambler; 1956, dir. Jean-Pierre Meville)  La Pointe Courte (1955; dir. Agnès Varda)   1. Representative works   François Truffaut  Les 400 coups (*The 400 Blows; 1959*)  Tirez sur le pianiste (*Shoot the Piano Player; 1960*)  Jules et Jim (*Jules and Jim; 1962*)  Jean-Luc Godard  À Bout de souffle (*Breathless; 1960)*  Bande à part (*Band of Outsiders; 1964)*  La Chinoise (1967)  Week-End (1967)  Jacques Rivette  Paris nous appartient (*Paris Belongs to Us; 1961*)  Claude Chabrol  Le Beau Serge (*Handsome Serge; 1958*)  Les Cousins (*The Cousins; 1959*)  Landru (1963)  Eric Rohmer  Le Signe du Léo (*The Sign of the Lion; 1959*)  La Collectionneuse (*The Collector; 1967)*   1. Left Bank directors   Agnès Varda  Cléo de 5 à 7 (*Cleo from 5 to 7; 1962*)  Le Bonheur (*Happiness; 1965*)  Alain Resnais  Hiroshima mon amour (1959)  L’Année dernière à Marienbad (*Last Year at Marienbad;1961*)  Chris Marker  La Jetée (*The Jetty; 1962*)  Le Joli mai (*The Beautiful May; 1963; recut in 2006*)   1. Legacy   Sedmikrásky (*Daisies; 1966, dir. Věra Chytilová*)  Hoří, má panenko (*The Firemen’s Ball; 1967, dir. Miloš Forman*)  The Long Goodbye (1973; dir. Robert Altman)  Mean Streets (1973; dir. Martin Scorsese)  Duminică la ora șase (Sunday at 6 PM; 1966, dir. Lucian Pintilie)  Mosāfer (The Traveler; 1974, dir. Abbas Kiarostami)  Reservoir Dogs (1992; dir. Quentin Tarantino)  Rushmore (1998; dir. Wes Anderson)  Frances Ha (2013; dir. Noah Baumbach) |
| Further reading:  (Armes)  (Daney)  (De Baeque)  (Flitterman-Lewis)  (Marie)  (Monaco)  (Neupert)  (Nowell-Smith)  (Ostrowska)  (Vincendeau and Graham) |