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## **The New Wave in French Cinema (1959-1968): A Critical Study**

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### **Introduction**

When the 1959 Cannes Film Festival rewarded *Les Quatre Cents Coups* by François Truffaut and *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* by Alain Resnais, it not only confirmed the arrival of new cinema but also of a new generation. Within a span of few years around 1958-1962, almost thirty young directors who were less than thirty came into prominence by their sheer brilliance and have left behind a significant body of work, almost a treasure trove, for the later generations.

It suffices to judge by some of the first feature films made by them from 1958 onwards, like *Les Amants* by Louis Malle, *Lettre de Sibérie* by Chris Marker. 1959: *Le Beau Serge* by Claude Chabrol, *Moi, Un Noir* by Jean Rouch, *Les Dragueurs* by Jean-Pierre Mocky, *Les Quatre Cents Coups* by Truffaut, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* by Alain Resnais. 1960: *L'Eau à la Bouche* by Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, *A Bout de Souffle* by Jean-Luc Godard, *Le Bel-Age* by Pierre Kast. 1961: *Lola* by Jacques Demy, *Le Propre de l'Homme* by Claude Lelouch, *Paris Nous Appartient* by Jacques Rivette. 1962: *The Sign of the Lion* by Eric Rohmer, *Cléo de Cinq à Sept* by Agnès Varda (*her second film*). 1963: *Adieu Philippine* by Jacques Rozier.

All these films, to varying degrees, emerged out of a radical change from the past, which unarguably was characterized by three main issues concerning pre-New Wave films,



i.e., the aesthetic, the critical (visual/literary/technical) and the economic.

### Analysis

Let us analyze the aesthetics to begin with. The New Wave developed a mode of narration, free from causal links of spatial and temporal cohesion to privilege a work which relates at the same time to the sequence plan, the games of literality, the breaks of the montage, the out-of-phase play of the actors and so on. These various modes of manifestation of temporality then take precedence over the action and become the real issues in a filmic narration. This practice of making and the method employed in it quite radically and aesthetically replace the recognizable mode of representation—visual as well as literal—reflected by strongly typified characters, the form of narrations, authorial adornments and symbolical ambitions.

To clarify this aesthetic renewal somewhat schematically (given the possible exchanges), we can identify perhaps three possible ways:

1) The use of direct cinema (La cinéma directe), in particular the founding work of Jean Rouch—*Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), *La Punition* (1962)—endeavors, in the very act of filming it provokes the real-time reactions and records it at the same time. The more elaborate approach of Chris Marker—*Lettre de Sibérie* (1958), *Le Joli Mai* (1962; one of the rare films on the French during the Algerian war)—goes through the subjective that comments and questions the image it reports from the documentation. Here can be seen an unusual form of overlapping that makes their narratives fragmentary, almost ruptured to the point that they remain ambiguous. The visual and the spatial play of the broken sequences get



more visibility because of the cut-short editing technique that consequently makes their experimentation an open-ended field. Of course, the lethal combination of visual realism (via the documentary mode), individual subjectivity (via the director as subject) and commentary (via the director as author) convincingly make their aesthetical position and scope for irony clear and understandable, making the cinema critically subversive. All these negotiations could be seen taking place within a particular socio-cultural space and changing political perspectives.

2) Literary adaptation or cinema close to literature, with the flagship figure Alain Resnais, who made *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961) with Henri Colpi in his film *A Long Absence* (1960), Alain Robbe-Grillet, *L'Immortelle* (1963), Marguerite Duras, *La Musica* (1967, coll. P. Seban). Here, contrary to the unimaginative blind and senseless affiliation to literatures and their respective authors, the New Wave film makers became the author of their own cinema. Their existential subjective and personal intervened with not only the literary adaptation but the variety of techniques adopted in documenting, shooting and arranging the scenes. This could be seen having an impact on the young audiences of the time, relieving them from the clutches of so-called dictatorial values of high taste and class in cinema.

At this point it is pertinent to mention that at the crossroads or intersection of these two tendencies mentioned above is a group of names from Cahiers du Cinéma and mostly associated with the New Wave. Their active contribution could be summarized from the use of voice-over by F. Truffaut in *Jules and Jim* (1961) to the reporting system to which J. L. Godard regularly returns, visible in his earlier films like *Vivre sa Vie* (1962) or *Une Femme Mariée* (1964).





3) The third tendency, crucial and the very backbone of the New Wave filmmaking, is the techniques employed. A strong element of experimentation with the medium could be seen with ever new techniques—of editing, photography, live sounds, tracking shots, preference for personal space, tight budget, broken shots, improvised dialogues, scenic change-overs.

These envisioned their changing styles and non-conventional notion of spatial and visual perception bordering at times on the absurd. This helped quite dynamically in simultaneously handling and capturing the momentary, fleeting events, acts and utterances, and giving a new language of visual reality to the narratives of cinema.

At a critical level we cannot separate the New Wave from the vast enterprise of reflection with André Bazin as the spiritual father and the *Cahiers du Cinéma* as the most influential journal. This can be further emphasized by the presence of notable names whose contribution to the journal to this day is immensely significant: F. Truffaut, J. L. Godard, C. Chabrol, J. Rivette, E. Rohmer, J. Doniol-Valcroze, P. Kast and L. Moullet as regular and responsible contributors.

Apart from the involvement with the journal mentioned above and the association of Andre Bazin, the new wave filmmakers quite distinctly stood out with two key notions, one is the author and the other is the gaze (point of view). With reference to literature, the notion of author puts the artistic responsibility of the film in the hands of the director (rather than the screenwriter or producer). Way of claiming a new practice of cinema is now conceived as a specific means of expression (like writing or painting). The recurrence of certain themes and figures arising from a personal style, which evolved from film to film, was considered



essential for the director. However, when it came to image, style was determined by the point of view of the author. The New Wave filmmakers as the new generation authors in cinema showed such attitude and perception and so employed different nuances. They were trained in the School of the Cinémathèque, whose vision and purpose of the medium were different and radical. They were critical and immensely instrumental in bringing their criticality in terms of questioning of all those forms that belong to a historical corpus and not by any technical apprenticeship as traditionally proposed by the interminable way of assistantship where any such questions fail to arise. Thus, they were confronted with certain questions whose answers could be searched by the relentless effort of shifting means creativity and imagination. The economy of such means is a relevant case in hand where their intended political inclination and motivation within cultural and economic contexts against the oddities of post-war France are clearly visible.

Few fundamental questions that surfaced among the practitioners of the time are listed below:

1. What does one see of the world?
2. What kind of view do we have for it?
3. What way of seeing can be built?
4. What is the shape of the gaze?

The economic issue and the serious crisis the state of France faced could surely be a conditioning factor for the prevailing fabric of the time that comes with textures in the form





of changes like: small budgets, small teams, lights and more efficient equipments, shorter shooting times, non-professional actors, natural and often outdoor settings (the streets of Paris in particular), neutral lighting – “*aquarium light*”<sup>1</sup>. It should be noted that at the start of the 1960s, young filmmakers took the center stage, alongside some prestigious but isolated figures such as Jean Renior (*Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, 1959), Robert Bresson (*Pickpocket*, 1959; *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1962), Jean Cocteau (*Le Testament d'Orphée*, 1960), Jacques Tati (*Playtime*, 1967) who gave certain old-fashioned look to French quality academicism: René Clément, Jean Delannoy, Claude Autant-Lara, Christian-Jaque, Denys de la Patellière.

The films of the New Wave were well received and highly popular, especially among the youth, who were ready to accept the new style and approach to reality and the prevailing existential life. The mass acceptance of such films offered an opportunity to do away with the already redundant style of conservative storytelling. The economic crisis coupled with the individual one immediately after the war resulted in a widespread brave acceptance of the new. The often erratic, whimsical, sarcastic and non-conventional techniques, methods and forms of cinema gave not only the intelligentsia but the youth from different socio-cultural space more than a utopia, a celebration of incomplete life in details.

Other notable filmmakers of the New Wave were Robert Enrico- *Les Grandes Geules* (1965), *Les Aventuriers* (1966) Yves Robert who started in the mid-fifties continued his career with *Alexandre le Bienheureux* (1967). It was at this time that Claude Lelouch broke through with his film *A Man and a Woman* (1966), occupied an ambivalent place. Some personalities, however, stand out discretely but this was not sufficient to define an overall movement:



Pierre Etaix (*Yoyo*, 1964), René Allio (*La Vieille Dame Indigne*, 1965), and Claude Berri (*Le Vieil Homme et l'Enfant*, 1966), but the film that makes everything that is French run is *La Grande Vadrouille* by Gérard Oury (1966).

However, around 1965, the interest in the New Wave was fading among the public. The increase in film production was not enough to stem the fall in attendance that started in 1957 (and did not stabilize until 1970).

## Conclusion

Summing up, we can doubly characterize the sixties by establishment of the premises of a crisis in attendance which will worsen and the liberation of cinema which opens up to infinite formal possibilities by discovering ways to 'expression'. Crisis is a reflection of a profound social change, the main facts of which are diversification of leisure activities, extension of the suburbs (atomization of the social community and distance from cinemas), development of the television fleet: phenomena that will not be compensated for by any overall audiovisual policy. Aesthetic liberation allowed the development of multiple narrative forms; the approach of new subjects (such as the articulation of the game of feelings on sexuality), which until then were either bypassed or abandoned to other fields, finally had access to production, outside of institutional frameworks. As Richard Neupert writes, the wave was a set of unusual circumstances of anxiety and crisis that equipped out of urgency a dynamic group of directors with myriad trends and opportunities for alternative visions to filmmaking with a low budget. He explains, "It was a combination of new, less expensive



film techniques, stories set in the streets that it could appeal to young audiences, and new portable production equipments that allowed the New Wave to take off.”



**End Note**

<sup>1</sup> According to Nestor Almendros, one of the chief operators of the New Wave, one could not better say that emancipation with a set of codes and corporatist habits of work were done away with and all favorable conditions for access were created for newcomers.



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