

Title of the Module:

French New Wave

La Nouvelle vague, or the New Wave, brought in a paradigm shift in French Cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. It was one of the biggest intellectual and idiomatic earthquakes which remodeled the cinematic planet. According to John Baxter, the phrase “nouvelle vague” was coined by Françoise Giroud, a journalist with L’Express magazine in 1953 to describe all creative young people who were disappointed with the mainstream French cinema of the 1950s, but had the conviction that it could be improved. However, later new young filmmakers appropriated the label to describe their films (184-185). The French New Wave film movement had a lasting influence on numerous filmmakers across the world. The ripples of nouvelle vague are still being felt in, especially in experimental cinema. The French New Wave was a radical approach to the very institution of cinema which had created a revolutionary shift in filmmaking practices, in film appreciation and in cinema aesthetics. The French New Wave brought in many alternative approaches to film narrative, editing decisions, visual idiom and in the selection of issues for generating social discourse through cinema.

Learning Objectives:

To enable the learner to:

- a) understand the idea of French New Wave in films
- b) know the various historical factors that contributed to the arrival of New Wave films
- c) trace the origin and development of French New Wave cinema
- d) familiarize themselves with major New Wave filmmakers and their films
- e) comprehend the characteristic styles of New Wave films
- f) appreciate and critically respond to select French New Wave films

The French New Wave, in a way, was the result of the interrogation of and resistance against the mainstream status quo film practices existed in France during the time. What was the problem with the existing, or ‘old-wave’ films in France? The mainstream French films of the 1930s and 1940s failed to provide a realistic representation of post-WW II life in France, especially those of the youth. Mainstream cinema of the period strictly adhered to the “Tradition of Quality”, so they were often referred to as ‘cinema of quality’ or ‘cinema de qualite.’ Max Ophul’s 1952 anthology film *Le Plaisir* (House of Pleasure) is a perfect specimen of cinema of quality. *Le Plaisir* is a cinematic adaptation of Guy de Maupassant’s three short stories. The French Quality movies of 1950s could also be called as cinema of craft because they engaged professional experienced actors and established scriptwriters, professional technical crew, meticulously followed a pre-fixed rigid script, shootings were confined to sound-proof state of the art studio-sets, observed narrative linearity, and adapted impressionistic acting style. Because of this heavy dependence on senior artists and technicians in the cinema industry, cinema de quality were sarcastically called by François Truffaut as, Daddy’s cinema or le cinema de papa. Another example for cinema de qualite is *Jeux interdits* (Forbidden Games, 1952), directed by René Clément. This was also a cinematic adaptation of François Boyer’s novel with the same title. Most of such quality films were adaptations of

canonical literary works. Those Quality films were idealistic hero-oriented ones and had used well-rehearsed dialogues. Such highly artificialized films with very smoothly moving plots with continuity both spatially and temporally, provided a romanticized utopian picture of contemporary life.

New Wave films rejected the French of cinema de qualite and classical Hollywood tradition of assembly line film production and continuity editing. The New Wave films were influenced by the Film Noir movies and Italian Neorealist films. It is a generally accepted critical opinion that the French New Wave film movement officially got inaugurated with Francois Truffaut's film *Les quatre cents coups* (400 Blows) which was released in 1959. The New Wave receded slowly by 1962. More than hundred New Wave films, most of them, directed by new young filmmakers who were in their 30s and 40s, were released in France from 1958 to 1969.

Francois Truffaut debut film 400 Blows follows the life of a rebellious adolescent boy Antony Doinel (played by Jean-Pierre Leaud). This film was mostly shot in outdoor locations in Paris. How various social disciplinary mechanisms like family, school, police, judiciary and prisons mishandle adolescent children's behavioral eccentricities lies at the thematic core of the film. In this semi-autobiographical cinematic narrative, Francois Truffaut shows how juvenile petty crimes, when handled unprofessionally, wreak havoc and leave the growing children shattered emotionally. The film's final iconic shot of the boy's stern gaze into the camera lens, with the sea in the background, leaves the audience feel ashamed and reminds them that each one of them is responsible for the boy's lost childhood and bleak future. Broken family and judgmental parents leave Antoine in total detachment, both from home and from society, with haunting traumatic memories. This film is dedicated to Andre Bazin, who was a patron of Francois Truffaut.

Behind the emergence of the French New Wave lies a curious discursive trajectory of cultural movement from film theory to film praxis. Actually, the ethos of these new films had already been theoretically in the making process in the form of scholarly articles critiquing the mainstream French cinema of the time. Such articles began to appear from 1954 in the influential French film journal, published from Paris, *Cahiers du Cinema* (Notebooks on Cinema), which was co-founded by Andre Bazin, Joseph-Marie Duca and Jacques Valcroze in 1951. The journal used to publish high quality theoretical essays on cinema, and film appreciation articles, often with specific focus on film directors who exhibited signature cinematic styles in their creations. Those film scholars who contributed to journal include: Andre Bazin, Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, Doniol Valcroze, Erik Rohmer and many others. Theoretically, the idea of New Wave cinema originated in 1954, five years before the first New Wave film was released! In the January 1954 issue of *Cahiers du Cinema*, Francois Truffaut wrote an essay titled "*Une certaine tendance du cinema francais*" (A Certain Tendency of French Cinema) denouncing the popular, uncritical, simplistic, movies which were primarily poor adaptations of literary works.

Truffaut's 1954 article, "A Certain Tendency of French Cinema", is considered to be the manifesto of the French New Wave Films. In this article, Truffaut interrogates the then mainstream French cinema de qualite for their obsession with scenarios, for their unwarranted adherence to fidelity to literary works, pseudo psychological realism, absence of signature aesthetic style of the director, their pseudo-anti-bourgeois temperament, lack of real-life milieu and their pleasing endings. Here is one of Truffaut's comments on the French cinema of quality

tradition: “The dominant trait of psychological realism is its anti-bourgeois will. But what are Aurenche and Bost, Sigurd, Jeanson, Autant-Lara, Allegret, if not bourgeois, and what are the fifty thousand new readers, who do not fail to see each film from a novel, if not bourgeois? What then is the value of an anti-bourgeois cinema made by the bourgeois for the bourgeois? Workers, you know very well, do not appreciate this form of cinema at all even when it aims at relating to them. They refused to recognize themselves” (n.p) in French cinema of quality tradition.

Alain Resnais’s film *Hiroshima mon amour* (*Hiroshima, My Love*) is another universally celebrated early French New Wave film. Presented largely in a non-linear, piecemeal fragments of mnemonic narrative style, *Hiroshima, My Love* is also about the broken relationships and haunting memories, and recurrent amnesia of She and He, a couple with French-Japanese nationalities respectively, in the immediate backdrop of the American nuclear bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. There is a mixing of the documentary style voice over narration and with personal conversations strewn throughout the film. Political conflict during the WW II, Love in the time of war, conflict between memory and amnesia etc. intermingle in unregulated ways here. Just like the psychologically imbalanced mind of the narrator, long tracking shots move randomly through the city streets of Hiroshima with a disconnected, illogical voice over. The couple’s intimate amorous moments are captured in close up shots bringing the spectator very close to them to follow the meaning of such intimate conversations. Broken and almost desolated city of Hiroshima, with its hospital wards, polluted river banks too add to the general sense of loss. Discontinuity editing, and episodic narrative structure brings a new idiom of cinema in *Hiroshima, My Love*.

Another significant contribution to the French New Wave canon is Jean-Luc Godard’s 1960 film, *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*) which features the life of an aimless and alienated young male protagonist who represents the depressed youth of post-WW II Europe. With its frequent jump cuts, depiction of Paris city streets with its underworld filled with untrustworthy people, *Breathless* becomes a gripping cinematic narrative which ends with the expected death of the anti-hero.

The *Good Girls* (1960 by Claude Chabrol, *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1964) by Agnes Varda and *The Pier* (1962), by Chris Marker, and *My Night with Maud* (1969) by Erik Rohmer are some of the other important films belonging to the genre, the French New Wave Films.

After analysing a small bunch of French New Wave film classics, the following features could be called as trademark features of New Wave films:

#### Discontinuity Editing Practice

Classic Hollywood films and French cinema de qualite followed a continuity editing practice in order to smoothen the temporal and thematic pace of the film. However, in New Wave films, an aesthetics of discontinuity editing is followed which is achieved through spatial and temporal jumping through cinematic cuts. Godard’s *Breathless* offers the finest example of jump cut. This brings in a sort of self-reflexivity and a deliberate reminder on watching the movies as a movie. This editing practice is also known as elliptical cuts because they erase and rearrange time and space quickly in a jerky fashion. Jump cuts were aimed at shaking the audience’s complacent habit of cinema-viewing.

## Introduction of Auteur Theory

The most distinctive and enduring theoretical contribution to cinema by the practitioners of the New Wave filmmaking and film appreciation is the introduction of the auteur theory. Auteur theory elevates the status of filmmaker to that of an autonomous literary author who is the sole authority over selection of narrative style, construction of distinct plot structure and creation of a unique aesthetic appeal. An auteur filmmaker leaves a signature mark on his films. Apart from this, auteurist features are reflected in the entire oeuvre of a filmmaker. For example, Godard's film style can easily be distinguishable from that of Truffaut. Cinema, for the auteur filmmakers, is a subjective work of art with an individual aura around it. Richard Neupert says that, "The critical contexts for the French New Wave was permeated with concern for individual cinematic stylists who developed distinct personal works. Auteurism was the battle cry for many of the Cahiers critics, and they certainly struggled to create their own thematic, mise-en-scene, editing and sound strategies" (357). Auteur filmmakers prioritized cinema as a form of art rather than a commercial product. New Wave films created the cult of iconic director, or the absolute auteur. An auteur is at par with a painter, singer, or author in the context of New Wave films.

## Preference of outdoor real location, light and sound

Whereas Classical Hollywood movies and the French cinema de qualite largely depended on artificially designed indoor studio sets; natural location outdoor, or natural indoor shooting was preferred by New Wave filmmakers. Rejection of artificial lighting and larger dependence on natural sunlight were other features of New Wave films. Natural or direct or live-sound tracks recorded while shooting were mostly made use of in New Wave films. Dubbed or artificially added background score was normally rejected in New Wave film. Instead of a very strict script-bound dialogues, often spontaneous dialogues improvised during shooting are also primarily used in New Wave films.

## Elasticity of Plot

Loosely structured plot that allowed improvisation during shooting are often featured in New Wave films. Melodrama, suspense, animated action scenes, and overemotional human relationships were eschewed by the filmmakers of Cahiers du Cinema legacy. An unheroic, often anti-social male protagonist, and undomesticated female characters occupied the plot of these films. What actually made the arrival of new wave cinema was the rejection of certain cinematic plot conventions followed in the mainstream movies. New Wave films are often juxtaposed with the Classical Hollywood films to find out their essential paths of departures and digressions as far a plot construction was concerned. New Wave cinematic plots refuses to offer a pleasing ending. The presence of a narrator, as if in a documentary format, is often seen in New Wave films. However, such films largely avoided providing a linear, logical narrative continuity.

## Rejection of Big Budget Filmmaking

The New Wave films followed a modestly budgeted financial model by employing new or amateur actors, fresh technical crew and by avoiding costly scenarios etc. The widespread usage of hand-held portable light-weight cameras made it easy for New Wave filmmakers to

go for long shots in experimental fashion thereby reducing expenditure on filmstock and making editing job quicker and financially affordable. However, film historians like Michel Marie is critical of associating small budget filmmaking financial model with New Wave films because she argues that as per the standard budgeting of French Cinema of the time, many of the New Wave films were not produced with small budgets (51).

### Rejection of Adaptation of Literary Works

New Wave filmmakers generally avoided adopting popular and canonical literary works and play texts. Even in the case of such adaptation, they argued that faithfulness or fidelity to literary work is not required when filming the literary work; because essentially both genres speak in different idioms. Another reason for this rejection was the belief that like literature writing, film writing, or writing with camera, is also a creative endeavor. Chris Wiegand says that the French film critic and filmmaker “Alexandre Astruc had put forward the notion of the ‘camera-stylo’ or ‘camera-pen’ in an article published in *L’Ecran Francais* in March, 1948, and his manifesto had been quickly adopted by the Cahiers critics. In the essay, Astruc argued that cinema could have its own ‘language’ just like other arts. The Cahiers critics’ writing meant that cinema’s low-brow reputation and short history were reassessed. Suddenly, certain westerns and gangster movies were equated in terms of artistic merit to impressionist paintings and classic novels” (1955).

### Reflection of Everyday Life

A philosophy of everydayness, alienation from value systems, oppressive authoritarian social system and a general sense of disillusionment prevails the milieu of New Wave films. However, the New Wave movement attempted to create a new cinematic idiom and to communicate a fresh cinematic aesthetics through their realistic depiction of ordinary life. The disillusioned New Wave male protagonists often represented people who are considered to be losers and loners with no definite pursuit of achieving something in their day to day lives. However, feminist film critics like Sellier Genevieve opines that the New Wave rebellious male hero represents the right-wing politics of carrying “a nostalgia for heroic masculinity” (128) and the women of the New Wave films were rendered “between the modern and archaic” (145).

The British Free Cinema Movement of the 1950s, Direct Cinema Movement in the USA and the Left Bank Group of filmmakers are considered to be some of the direct inheritors of New Wave filmmaking practices.

**Content Writer: Dr. Vellikkeel Raghavan, Dept. of English and Comparative Literature, Central University of Kerala**

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#### Web Links:

<https://theculturetrip.com/europe/france/articles/the-french-new-wave-revolutionising-cinema/>

<https://www.britannica.com/art/New-Wave-film>

<http://www.newwavefilm.com/new-wave-cinema-guide/nouvelle-vague-where-to-start.shtml>

<https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/french-new-wave-movie-era/>