

Topic: Film Studies

For BA (JMC) 5th Semester students

Introduction to the French New Wave:

The French New Wave (in French, *La Nouvelle Vague*) was a film movement that rose to prominence in the late 1950s in Paris, France. The movement aimed to give directors full creative control over their work, allowing them to move away from overwrought narratives in favor of improvisational and existential storytelling. French New Wave filmmakers transformed both French cinema and the global film industry, paving the way for modern independent and auteur-driven filmmaking.

The French New Wave emerged as a direct rejection of the then-popular “Old Hollywood” style of filmmaking, which emphasized strong, linear narratives produced by large studios that controlled most, if not all, aspects of the creative process.

Origins of the French New Wave:

The French New Wave began with a group of film critics and cinephiles who wrote for *Cahiers du cinéma*, a renowned French film magazine founded by André Bazin. These critics—including Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and Éric Rohmer—opposed the dominance of large film studios over the creative process and advocated for complete artistic freedom for directors.

This movement gave rise to the concept of auteur theory, which views the director as the primary creative force behind a film, whose personal artistic vision is evident in every work. Members of the French New Wave particularly admired filmmakers such as Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, whom they regarded as early examples of auteur directors.

After articulating their ideas through criticism, these filmmakers began directing feature films themselves. Due to their rejection of studio systems, they worked with limited budgets, which led to innovative filmmaking techniques such as shooting on real locations, using natural lighting, and recording live sound—hallmarks of French New Wave cinema.

Primary Characteristics of French New Wave Cinema:

French New Wave films share several distinctive characteristics:

1. Rejection of the Studio System

The primary motivation of French New Wave cinema was to wrest creative control from large studios and place it in the hands of directors. While this freedom allowed filmmakers to experiment with unconventional storytelling, it also meant working without the resources of major studios. Consequently, directors often filmed on location using handheld cameras, relied on natural lighting, and recorded sound during takes rather than dubbing, which was common at the time.

2. Departure from Conventional Narrative

Unlike Old Hollywood films that focused on seamless and engaging narratives, French New Wave films sought to challenge viewers and prevent passive consumption. Techniques such as jump cuts, direct address to the audience, and fragmented storytelling were used to remind viewers that they were watching a constructed film. Script-based filmmaking was often replaced with improvisation.

3. Expression of Complex Ideas

While Old Hollywood films primarily aimed to entertain, French New Wave films focused on expressing the director's personal ideas and emotions. They explored philosophical themes such as existentialism, alienation, and the absurdity of life. Long takes and open-ended narratives encouraged audiences to actively think during and after the viewing experience.

Examples of French New Wave Cinema

Some of the most notable examples of French New Wave films include:

1. The 400 Blows (1959) – François Truffaut

2. Breathless (À bout de souffle) (1960) – Jean-Luc Godard
3. Claire's Knee (1970) – Éric Rohmer
4. Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959) – Alain Resnais
5. Lift to the Scaffold (1958) – Louis Malle
6. Band of Outsiders (Bande à part) (1964) – Jean-Luc Godard
7. Shoot the Piano Player (1960) – François Truffaut
8. Le Beau Serge (1958) – Claude Chabrol
9. Vivre sa vie (1962) – Jean-Luc Godard
10. Céline and Julie Go Boating (1974) – Jacques Rivette
11. Lola (1961) – Jacques Demy
12. Last Year at Marienbad (1961) – Alain Resnais
13. Adieu Philippine (1962) – Jacques Rozier
14. Cléo from 5 to 7 (1962) – Agnès Varda

Courtesy Note:

Content compiled from books, websites and YouTube lectures.

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