Introduction

The French Nouvelle Vague again!

The Nouvelle Vague, or New Wave, is certainly one of the most famous cinematic movements in film history. Scholars continually refer to it with either nostalgia or some suspicion. As early as 1959, the uncle in *Zazie dans le métro* (*Zazie in the Metro*, Malle) looked about in the middle of a traffic jam in Paris and screamed out ironically, "This is the New Wave!" But what, finally, *is* the New Wave?

Beyond the mythical "circle of friends," the famed band of *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic-filmmakers led by François Truffaut, that virulent young critic who attacked and destroyed all the most respected and prestigious French film productions in his columns for *Arts* magazine, was there any real aesthetic coherence to the New Wave? Was it simply a phenomenon of renewal thanks to the arrival of a new generation, an event that arrives every 20 years anyway? Did it have disastrous effects by glorifying amateurish techniques and a cult of improvisation at the expense of solid scripts, basing a film's quality on perceptions of a few directors and critics? Did it chase average spectators from the theaters? Is it not true that these films appeared at the very moment when the curve for movie attendance began its dizzying descent, which cut audiences in half? Finally, why has this myth survived for so long since the 1960s? And, why did Jean-Luc Godard use this famous expression, "*La Nouvelle Vague*," as the name of his 1990 film, featuring the popular actor Alain Delon, 30 years after his own "Nouvelle Vague" triumph, *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960)?

Nearly every year, on the occasion of some film festival or in the summary of the year's trends in film production, chroniclers ask whether there are any signs of another "New Wave" on the horizon. Whenever two young directors display some evidence of complicity, someone sees in them the potential nucleus of a group that will create a movement of thematic or aesthetic renewal along the model established by this mythical and now distant New Wave. In nature, the movement of waves may repeat endlessly with the rhythm of the seas, but in French cinema, the wave of 1959 remains unique. It is that singularity which this book strives to demonstrate by providing some answers to the questions posed above.

The New Wave is indeed a victim of its own fame, and yet it is difficult to cite a single work within the last twenty years that carefully analyzes this phenomenon.[1] James Monaco's *The New Wave*, published in 1976, has been out of print for years, and was more of an auteurist summary than an historical investigation. Jean-Luc Douin edited a book in 1983, *La Nouvelle Vague vingt-cinq ans après* (*The New Wave, 25 Years Later*), which offered a number of observations and picturesque reflections, but it is a study that remains very limited.[2] In short, most beginning film students and film buffs believe they already know everything about the movement, but this knowledge is often limited to several common sources or short summaries in survey histories that do not always stand up to the test of historical evaluation.

My hypothesis will be the following: the French New Wave was a coherent movement, which existed for a limited period of time, and whose emergence was favored by a series of simultaneous factors intervening at the close of the 1950s, and especially during 1958–9. I will describe these various factors in the first three chapters. I will also propose a fairly strict definition of the concept of a *school* in film history. The New Wave was, first of all, a journalistic slogan connected with a critical movement, that of the "Hitchcocko-Hawksians," as they were rather ironically labeled by film critic and theorist André Bazin, co-founder of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. I will privilege here, however, an analysis organized around the economic and technical trends surrounding the appearance of these films, giving comparatively less attention to thematic and stylistic factors. This focus of inquiry fits recent tendencies in cinema history which strive to give a

privileged place to economic and technical mechanisms in order to anchor more fully aesthetic observations in their generating conditions, which include the production and distribution of films, their commercial fate, and, also, the political and cultural context of this era in France. I have included a chronology of major political and cultural events in the Appendix to help give a concise overview of the era.

This book does not offer detailed analyses of individual films. Rather, it makes every effort to present a global synthesis of a movement distinguished by both strengths and weaknesses. Readers of this book could obviously benefit from seeing or re-seeing key films cited here, as well as consultation of critical studies of particular films. For instance, recent studies by Anne Gillain, Carole Le Berre, Jean-Louis Leutrat, and myself, devoted to *Les 400 coups* (*The 400 Blows*, Truffaut, 1959), *Jules et Jim* (*Jules and Jim*, Truffaut, 1961), *Hiroshima mon amour* (*Hiroshima My Love*, Resnais, 1959), and *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, Godard, 1963), as well as Michel Cieutat on *Pierrot le fou* (Godard, 1965), Dudley Andrew on *Breathless*, and Barthélemy Amengual on *Bande à part* (*Band of Outsiders*, 1964), are all very useful.[3] For a larger overview of the historical period, one could consult the following books. In French, René Prédal's *Cinquante ans de cinéma français* is a helpful encyclopedic text that should be useful for young *cinéphiles* today,[4] while Jacques Siclier's synthetic *Le Cinéma français*, volumes I and II, or Jean-Michel Frodon's *L'Age moderne du cinéma français* are equally important.[5] In English, general sources include Alan Williams's *Republic of Images*, Susan Hayward's *French National Cinema*, and the reference book *The Companion to French Cinema* by Ginette Vincendeau.[6] Many of these books cover the lively period from the French liberation to the New Wave and beyond.

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