Michel Marie
THE FRENCH NEW WAVE
An Artistic School
Translated by Richard Neupert
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W**hen citing film titles** for this introductory-level history of the French New Wave, in first references I have included in most cases both the original French title and then the predominant English-language title. When the distributed print generally retains the French title, as is the case with *Hiroshima mon amour*, I have left it in French, though I do provide a translation in parentheses, to aid non-French speakers. However, part of the importance of Michel Marie’s book is that it cites a great many movies from the 1950s which, while popular in France, may never have received widespread distribution, and therefore do not have any official English-language title; in those cases I provide a literal translation of the title. It is also worth noting that the title given to a movie in the UK is sometimes very different from its equivalent in the United States. I generally retain the title that has become most common in other histories, though some films have been so dramatically changed from the French that I retain all release titles to aid in their recognition, as in the case of *La Traversée de Paris*, which was given the unfortunate titles of *Four Bags Full* for its US release, but *Pigs across Paris* in the UK! Marie’s original text did not include notes; I have added them for clarification of sources where necessary.

Richard Neupert
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)?
Introduction

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. 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, 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. 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. Many of these books cover the lively period from the French liberation to the New Wave and beyond.

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Chapter One
A Journalistic Slogan and a New Generation

L’Express and their “New” Campaign

Surprisingly, the expression “Nouvelle Vague,” which refers for everyone today to a moment in French film history and a particular collection of films, such as The 400 Blows and Breathless, was not specifically linked to cinema at the beginning. The label appeared in a sociological investigation of the phenomenon of the new postwar generation, and the inquiry was launched and popularized by a series of articles written by Françoise Giroud for the weekly magazine L’Express (which is the French equivalent of Time or Newsweek). This detail of origins is important. Its genesis signals the thematic role played by the new youthful generation, but also the role played during the 1950s by a new sort of publication, represented by L’Express, which first appeared in 1953. We see here the beginning of a general application of surveys and inquiries as well as a particular mode of sociological studies.

In August 1957, L’Express, modeling itself on the American weekly news magazines, launched a huge survey, in an obvious effort to reach and define its new readership. With the collaboration of the Institut français d’opinion publique (IFOP), they tried to question nearly eight million French people between the ages of 18 and 30, a segment of the population who, in ten years, “will have taken France in hand, their elders taking leave, the younger ones helping move them out.”1 The theme of “the succession of generations,” crucial, as we will see, in regard to the cinema, was already
strongly present in the ideological landscape in the late 1950s. France would change its face, its government, and also its cinema. The survey’s results appeared in *L’Express* between October 3 and December 12, 1957 with the slogan “The New Wave Arrives!” and an accompanying photograph of a smiling young woman. The tallies also reappeared in a volume published by Françoise Giroud under the title *La Nouvelle Vague: portraits de la jeunesse* (*The New Wave: Portraits of Youth*). Within these portraits, the researchers touched on all subjects: clothing habits, morals, values, lifestyles, and cultural behavior, amongst which the cinema was of secondary importance. When films are mentioned, they are titles said to parallel this “new generation’s” values, and are summarized by the researchers as representing “new moral values, presented with refreshing, never before seen frankness.”

It is not difficult to imagine how Roger Vadim’s first feature, *Et Dieu créa la femme* (*And God Created Woman*), which premiered in Paris on November 28, 1956, became the exemplary, “call to arms” film for this mindset. His leading actress, Brigitte Bardot, who was just 22 years old, symbolized the young French woman who was finally “free and liberated.” Vadim, who had been a young journalist for *Paris-Match* magazine, and assistant director and screenwriter for fairly traditional films, such as Marc Allégret’s *Futures Vedettes* (*Future Stars, 1955*) and Michel Boisrond’s *Cette Sacrée Gamine* (*That Naughty Girl, 1955*), knew what he was doing in selecting such a title. The press responded: “Vadim’s cinema creates a new image of the young French woman,” and that image was suddenly much more exportable than the established typical 1950s French woman as portrayed by Martine Carol, Michèle Morgan, or Françoise Arnoul. We will return later to the image offered by this new sort of French girl proposed by Vadim’s film. But first it is important to underline the revealing role played by a social phenomenon: huge numbers of young French women identified with the character Juliette in *And God Created Woman*, and even more with the actress who incarnated her, Brigitte Bardot, as scholar Françoise Audé has explained in her 1981 book, *Ciné-modèles, cinéma d’elles.*

In 1959, during the early furor over the New Wave, a journalist asked François Truffaut, “Does the label ‘New Wave’ correspond to reality?” Truffaut responded:
I think the New Wave had an anticipated reality. It was, after all, first an invention by journalists, which became a reality. In any case, even if no one had invented this journalistic slogan at the Cannes Film Festival, I think the label, or some other, would have been created by the force of events as people became aware of the number of “first films” coming out.

The “New Wave” originally designated a real, official survey carried out in France by some statistical research agency on French youth in general. The “New Wave” was about future doctors, future engineers, future lawyers. That

Bardot as Juliette, “the new French woman;” *And God Created Woman* (Vadim, 1956).

Produced by Raoul J. Levy
study was published in *L'Express*, which lent it broad public attention, and for a number of weeks *L'Express* appeared with the sub-title “*L'Express*, the magazine of the New Wave” on the front page.³

### From the Perspective of Critical Cinema Journals

The journal *Cinéma*, published by the French Federation of *Ciné-clubs* and edited by Pierre Billard, first appeared in November 1954, at the very moment when nationalistic movements set in motion what would become the Algerian War. The first issue of *Cinéma 54* (the title changed with each new year) featured a cover photo of actor Gérard Philipe holding actress Danielle Darrieux in his arms, from a publicity still for *Le Rouge et le noir* (*The Red and the Black*, Claude Autant-Lara, 1954). Autant-Lara’s film was very representative of the dominant aesthetic known as the “tradition of quality” at the heart of a certain tendency of French film production.

Four years later, in February 1958, Pierre Billard proposed an inquiry into the younger generation of French cinema. The specialized press thus followed the example set by the new weekly magazines. The report was entitled, “40 who are under 40: The young academy of French cinema.” While the front cover of this small journal featured a standard publicity portrait of Ava Gardner in *The Sun Also Rises* (Henry King, 1957), the back cover was devoted to two very different photos: one was Brigitte Bardot (apparently naked, hiding behind two fans), the second was a popular, 30-year-old actor named Darry Cowl, and the caption read, “The two favorite muses of the young academy of French cinema.”

Pierre Billard applied one strict biographical criterion, the date of a person’s birth, in distinguishing between “ancien” (a word suggesting both older and ancient) directors born before 1914, and “new” directors born after 1918. This dividing line left Jean-Pierre Melville, born in 1917, to fall between the cracks, since he was older than the young generation, but also an important precursor of their movement, as he himself attested on numerous occasions. It was the notion, however, of a “young academy” or school
that recurred systematically during the article, while the term “New Wave” was used only once as a detour in a paragraph to designate clearly some unsettling, observed conformism: “The prudence with which this New Wave follows in the steps of their elders is disconcerting.” Admittedly, when Billard wrote this in February 1958, Claude Chabrol had just finished Le Beau Serge, shot during December 1957 and January 1958. But Le Beau Serge would not be released for a full year, premiering on February 11, 1959 at the Studio Publicis in Paris, so Billard’s notion of a young academy seems a bit premature to us now.

It was again L’Express that renewed the New Wave label by applying it to new films distributed early in 1959, and in particular to the youthful works presented at the Cannes Film Festival that spring. This time, the original generational and social senses of the term were swept away so that it could be employed more strictly in relation to the cinema, and this specialized focus was in part due to the extraordinary success of a publicity campaign orchestrated by Unifrance-film, the official agency of the Centre national de la cinématographie (CNC) charged with promoting French film abroad. Their activity intervened directly on the heels of the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, which had been organized for the first time under the tutelage of the new Minister of Culture, André Malraux, who was both a famous novelist and a filmmaker. The term “New Wave” was quickly relayed by the daily and weekly press and was unfurled from their columns during the entire film season between spring 1959 and spring 1960. Truffaut’s interview confirms the importance of this festival:

Because of this stroke of luck, which turned the Festival into a forum for films by young directors – not just for France, but also for foreign nations – the film reviewers and journalists made use of this expression to designate a certain group of young directors who did not necessarily come from among critics, since Alain Resnais and Marcel Camus were included. And that is how this slogan was forged. In my opinion, it never really corresponded to reality in the sense that, for example, outside of France, in particular, people seemed to believe there was an association of young French directors who got together regularly and had a plan, a common aesthetic, when in fact there was never anything like that and it was all a fiction, made up from those outside.4