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François Truffaut and La Nouvelle Vague

Defining la nouvelle vague (The ‘French New Wave’)

The best way to conceive of la nouvelle vague from a contemporary perspective is perhaps to think of the ways in which the UK press created the idea of ‘cool Britannia’ or ‘Brit Art’ during the late 1990s. In France between 1959 and 1963 over 150 new filmmakers and actors became identified with the new and ‘youthful’ trend in French cinema (and the arts generally). The defining moment (i.e. when the term was first widely used) appears to have been the success at Cannes of François Truffaut’s Les quatre cents coups (400 Blows) in 1959.

![Image of Francois Truffaut and others](http://www.mediaculture-online.de)
Film scholars have discerned a number of different groups of filmmakers, each of which challenged the dominant mode of so-called ‘quality cinema’ from the 1950s onwards. The group which gained the highest profile were arguably the quintet of critics turned directors; François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette. These five all wrote for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the magazine set up in 1951 which had become by the 1960s an internationally known magazine of film criticism. The group’s ideas were developed through the 1950s in their critical writing. Their filmmaking styles were not identical but they did share a number of commitments so that, at least in the beginning, there were identifiable elements in all their films (and in those of other young directors):

- characters were ‘young and reckless’
- they used new young actors, creating new ‘stars’ – Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean-Claude Brialy, Stéphane Audran, Anouk Aimée, Anna Karina etc.
- the films were set mostly in Paris or the ‘tourist’ areas of France
- mostly shot on location, using natural light and hand-held cameras – improvised and self-conscious cinematography
- editing ‘rules’ were broken and devices from cinema history re-worked
- rising stars of cinematography, music etc. worked on several new wave films, e.g. Raoul Coutard, Henri Decaë, Michel Legrand
- narratives were either ‘original’ or based on popular fictions; ‘small stories’ were as important as ‘big’ ones
- they often paid *hommage* to Hollywood and to the European masters (Renoir, Vigo etc.) with direct references in the films
- new producers appeared to back the films, including via co-productions with Italy
- the group helped each other get films started, taking on associate producer roles, providing script ideas or appearing as actors in small parts
- the directors were the product of years of film viewing and criticism rather than film school – cinéphiles rather than technicians.

**Truffaut and La nouvelle vague**

François Truffaut (1932-84) became a convinced *cinéphile* in his early adolescence, escaping from his own unhappy family circumstances into the cinemas of Nazi occupied Paris. After the war he became an *habitué* of the Paris *Cinémathèque*, meeting the other
young men with whom he would become identified as first a vigorous critic of the established tradition de qualité in French cinema in the 1950s and later as a ‘new director’. In 1954, at the tender age of 22, Truffaut wrote his famous essay, ‘Une certaine tendance du cinéma’, in which he denounced the cinema of ‘old men’, concerned with highly polished and carefully constructed artificial stories, and strove to promote an alternative cinema which gave true expression to the ideas and emotions of the filmmaker.

From this developed la politiques des auteurs. The emphasis on the director as auteur or ‘author’ as distinct from metteur en scène (literally the person who filmed the script) became the effective manifesto of the young, first time, directors who comprised La nouvelle vague towards the end of the 1950s.

It was Truffaut who in his first three films best demonstrated what the New Wave had to offer. Les quatre cents coups (The 400 Blows) offered a frankly autobiographical story of a 13 year-old truanting in Paris, shot on the streets in a fresh and exciting manner.

Truffaut brought to the film not only his own memories of ‘delinquency’ and obsession with cinema, but also a freshness derived from the location shooting learned from working as an assistant to the Italian neo-realist director Roberto Rossellini. If 400 Blows was an intensely ‘personal’ film, Tirez sur le pianiste (Shoot the Pianist) (1960) followed up with an experimental film ‘playing’ with the idea of the American ‘B’ crime film – an approach well ahead of its time. This film puzzled critics and audiences alike but now can be seen to prefigure postmodern crime films and especially those of Quentin Tarantino.
La tradition de qualité
The idea of a ‘quality cinema’ was similar in France and the UK during the 1940s and into the 1950s. It referred to ‘highly polished’ studio based productions, very much the creation of script writers attempting to adapt literary works to produce a ‘psychological realism’ using established ‘star’ actors (as distinct to the more direct realism achieved through location shooting and use of non-professionals). ‘Quality films’ required relatively large budgets and by definition reduced opportunities for more experimental work. Truffaut’s attack on la tradition de qualité was very much a polemic – he wanted to argue for a new kind of cinema so he exaggerated the uniformity of the established filmmaking style. In reality, the differences were not so great between the quality films and those which were emerging from new filmmakers in the 1950s.

Disappointed by a poor response at the box office (an important consideration for Truffaut), the young director (still only 28) turned to a more obviously commercial proposition and produced one of the most celebrated films of the early 1960s, Jules et Jim.

Jules et Jim
For audiences around the world, Jules et Jim encapsulated the appeal of the New Wave. Unlike other New Wave films, Jules et Jim was based on a ‘literary’ novel, but one written by a seventy-four year-old looking back to the excitement of his youth. Truffaut was able to present a reconstruction of a daring and even shocking set of relationships that avoided the stuffiness of studio bound literary adaptations and appealed directly to younger audiences (young = audiences in their 20s and 30s in this case). He was aided and abetted by the liberated camera of Raoul Coutard who had done so much to bring a sense of exhilaration to Godard’s A bout de souffle (1959).

A single shot in a montage in Jules et Jim recalls the lovers in Jean Renoir’s Partie de campagne (1936).
Like many New Wave films, *Jules et Jim* featured Paris and some of the most beautiful landscapes across France. The music too played an important role, combining with the black and white ‘Scope photography to produce lyrical interludes later copied in Hollywood features like *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* (1969).

Although older and already established as a star, Jeanne Moreau as Catherine brought to the film the same youthful intensity and freshness of Belmondo and Seberg in *A bout de souffle*, but with an added complexity.

Truffaut’s sheer passion for cinema and its emotional appeal also shines through. It is ironic that the ‘newness’ of the film is partly derived from sequences that celebrate the achievements of past cinematic masters Jean Renoir’s lovers on the river, a Charlie Chaplin impersonation, possible Hitchcock references. Unlike modern ‘heritage’ films with their surface realistic details, *Jules et Jim* represents the past through its celebration of cinema. The vitality this creates means that the 1910s and the 1920s feel as modern as the 1960s. The central theme of a strong and mysterious woman and her effect on two weaker and more bewildered men recurs in many later Truffaut films.

*One of the many triangular compositions found in Jules et Jim, this time at the seaside villa.*
“One of the authorial signs that circulates from one Truffaut film to another is the question (sometimes formulated in the affirmative, as a statement): are women magic?… To the spectator who has even a glancing familiarity with feminism, the question… is immediately suspect.” (Holmes and Ingram 1998:144)

There is an interesting argument to make about Truffaut’s attitude towards gender relations, but by the mid 1970s many audiences had decided that his films were becoming increasingly out of touch with contemporary life. In Jules et Jim the novelty of the ‘open’ triangular relationship was attractive to audiences and Truffaut seemed ahead of convention, offering a modern view. In retrospect Catherine is one of Truffaut’s ‘magic women’ with unfathomable motives, viewed only through the distorted lens of Jules’ and Jim’s desire. It is ironic that one of Truffaut’s cinematic idols was Jean Renoir, the great ‘humanist’, yet Catherine seems stripped of humanity.

Whatever the current viewing framework, audiences in the 1960s loved the film and it has remained an important influence on filmmakers ever since. In 1980 Paul Mazursky offered a version of the story in Willie and Phil, in which two men meet after a screening of Jules et Jim and then become friends and lovers of a ‘Catherine’ figure played by Margot Kidder. Michael Winterbottom’s 1996 Jude makes Hardy’s Sue Bridehead into a Catherine figure when she cycles past Jude in an obvious homage to Truffaut. Most recently, Edward Norton’s first directorial effort, the romantic comedy Keeping the Faith (US 2000), replays the familiar story with three childhood friends meeting again twenty years later.
The ‘Catherine’ figure played by Jenna Elfman even poses in freeze frame in the same way as Jeanne Moreau in *Jules et Jim*.

**References**


**Jules et Jim**

(France 1961)

*Directed by* François Truffaut

*Produced by* Marcel Berbert for Les Films du Carrosse and SEDIF

*Writing credits* Jean Gruault and François Truffaut, based on the novel by Henri-Pierre Roché

*Cinematography* by Raoul Coutard

*Film Editing* by Claudine Bouché

*Original music* by Georges Delerue

*Production Design* by Fred Capel

*Runtime*: 100 mins
Leading players

Jeanne Moreau
Oskar Werner
Henri Serre
Vanna Urbino
Anny Nelsen
Boris Bassiak
Sabine Haudepin
Marie Dubois
Christiane Wagner
Michel Subor
Danielle Bassiak
Bernard Largemain

Catherine
Jules
Jim
Gilberte
Lucie
Albert (as Bassiak)
La petite Sabine
Therese
Helga
Narrator
Albert’s companion
Merlin

Website

There is a detailed (several pages) and rewarding essay on Jules et Jim by Anas Ghaibeh on the website at http://www.zenobia.org/film/library/intro.htm

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