

Title:

The influence of American popular culture and Hollywood cinema in the French New Wave: A study of Jean-Luc Godard's films from 1959-1966.

Abstract:

This body of research aims to explore in detail to what extent the French New Wave was influenced by American cinema and the arts. This will be discussed with specific reference to Jean-Luc Godard's early body of work ranging from 1959 until 1966. This range has been chosen from his body of work to specifically analyse his evolving style as Godard's early films were so empirically shaped by his knowledge of cinema, arts, and literature. This research will discuss how Godard established himself as an art director and a key member of the French New Wave through his heterodox rejection of, and appreciation of, American Hollywood cinema and popular culture. Godard's time spent writing for *Cahiers Du Cinéma* and time spent as an adolescent in Cinémathèques meant that he had extensive knowledge of media and he, like other young New Wave directors, had intentions of rewriting 'traditional' cinematic conventions within his work.

Text:

The French New Wave is a widely researched and analysed movement that since its demise has appeared extensively in academic research and film theory. The movement is said to have emerged in the late 1950s, however, "dating the exact end of the movement is difficult, but most historians select 1964, when the characteristic New Wave form and style had already become diffused and imitated" (Bordwell, D & Thompson, K, 1997, page 467). The movement has since greatly influenced cinema with its distinctive and revolutionary techniques and is identifiable through the innovative approach to filmmaking that the directors undertook. Naming a few of the more recognisable names, the directors at the forefront of the movement include Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, André Bazin, Alain Resnais and Claude Chabrol; "initially they were a group of friends who shared film experience by spending numerous hours in Langlois' Cinémathèque, viewing early movies, discussing them and building their own film aesthetic" (Mercken-Spaas, G. (Ed.) 1977, page 783). The directors launched their careers into filmmaking after first writing and critiquing for *Cahiers Du Cinéma*, a film magazine launched by André Bazin, Joseph-Marie Lo Duca and Jacques Doniol-Valcorze. The magazine allowed young film cinephiles to regularly write columns discussing recent films that they had seen. *Cahiers* is now "recognized as one of the sites where philosophical, political and psychoanalytic discourses" (Browne, N. 1978, page 405) converged to define "French intellectual culture" (Browne, N. 1978, page 405). These critics spent most of their time attending Cinémathèques and ciné-clubs across Paris; these screened a wide diversity of films, and the new generation of critics prided themselves on watching an extensive selection of cinema, good and bad, "everything from silent Valentino epics to classics by F.W. Murnau and Howard Hawks genre films" (Neupert, R. 2005, page 42). The films that the young critics viewed at these establishments highly influenced their work as they transitioned into filmmaking, in the early

1960's, as they were able to implement the wide variety of techniques and styles that they had viewed on screen into their projects. Specifically, "American films (which had been banned during the war)...had a particularly dramatic impact" (Greene, N. 2007, page 17). In 1959, Truffaut took his semi-autobiographical film *The 400 Blows/Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959) to Cannes International Film Festival and won the award for Best Director, "instantly making himself and his New Wave friends significant players in world cinema" (Sterritt, D. 1999, page 44). *The 400 Blows* brought attention to the New Wave filmmakers and their new style of filmmaking, both critically and at the box office.

The French New Wave directors, whilst they drew from and were largely influenced by other cinemas, they also sought to rewrite and redefine cinematic conventions; "they transformed film into a more personal means of expression, deemphasized complex techniques, and made frequent use of autobiographical themes or self-written scripts" (Mercken-Spaas, G. (Ed.) 1977, page 783). This body of research will explore in detail to what extent the French New Wave films were influenced by American cinema and popular culture. Likewise, a discussion regarding the element of truth will be undertaken when discussing New Wave stylistics as filmmakers pursued a portrayal of truth and reality on screen. However, much debate has been formed surrounding the critique over the extent at which reality can truly be represented on screen without becoming altered by editing, lighting and further fundamental filmmaking techniques. Furthermore, this will be discussed with specific reference to Jean-Luc Godard's body of work ranging from 1959 until 1966. This range has been chosen from his extensive catalogue of work to specifically analyse his evolving style as Godard's films matured and became increasingly political and Left-wing, noticeably from 1967 onwards. Godard's body of work is interesting when it comes to discussing New Wave style and form and contributes largely to the argument that the movement represents both a rejection of and an appreciation of 'traditional' Hollywood filmmaking techniques.

From the late 1940's Godard was an enthusiastic member of the French Cinémathèque; it was here that he met André Bazin and other like-minded critics. Many of the critics were young aspiring filmmakers who were well-educated in global cinema and were desperate to dive into the media themselves. "Godard's critical work with *Cahiers Du Cinéma* in the 1950's was fundamental to his development as a director" (Vanderschelden, I. 2013, page 48). This body of work will discuss Godard's artistic style and approach to filmmaking and how his style was developed from his background of knowledge of American cinema and popular culture through empirical evidence. To discuss Godard's early films critically, one must begin by observing fundamental New Wave characteristics. These include a rejection of classical filmmaking techniques in favour of new and experimental concepts such as, a rejection of, or improvisation of narrative, alternative editing styles, on-site locations, and a disparate retreat from studio restrictions and genre conventions. The authenticity and immediacy of the New Wave directly goes against the glamorous, laborious and polished products of Hollywood cinema.

Godard has conducted a successful career with an extensive range of films filling his catalogue of work. From the late 1950's he began his filmmaking journey, making short films and working closely with Truffaut and Resnais. He became internationally recognised when he began making feature-length films as a key member of the New Wave movement in the early

1960's, but his work entered a period of increasingly experimental political films from the mid-late 1960's. It is his early body of work and his move into a progressively more political cinema that is on display and to be analyzed here. "Godard's early films rethink the relationship between editing and mise en scène, giving greater priority to this than story, dialogue and construction of cinematic illusion" (Andrew quoted in Vanderschelden, I. 2013, page 59); his early films, are perhaps considerably some of the most artistically aware out of the New Wave catalogue of cinema. In other words, Godard created cinema with the intention of disrupting and re-creating the language of cinema. For example, *Breathless/À Bout De Souffle* (Godard, J. 1960), Godard's first feature-length film, "was to start with a conventional story and to remake - but differently - all of cinema made thus far" (Godard in Greene, N. 2007, page 86). *Breathless* "represents alternatives to classical norms" (Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. 1997, page 383) and consequently acts as the focal film for this discussion regarding Godard and the French New Wave. "Breathless, was presented and received, not as the prime example of intertextuality that it was, but rather as the individual, personal tribute of one young author to a production system perceived as a narrative tradition through a succession of *oeuvres d'auteurs*" (authors' works)(Milne, T & Narboni, J. (Eds.) 1972, page vii); Godard is paying tribute to the American and 'traditional' filmmaking production system.