



# The French New Wave

## Critical Landmarks

Edited by

Peter Graham

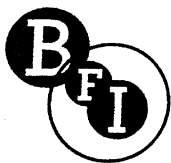
with Ginette Vincendeau

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Introduction: Fifty Years of the French New  
Wave: From Hysteria to Nostalgia

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GINETTE VINCENDEAU



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## Preface to the 2009 Edition

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The original edition of this book, then entitled *The New Wave*, a collection of articles by and interviews with leading members of the Nouvelle Vague, as well as some broadsides from French critics who opposed the movement, was published in an English translation by Secker & Warburg in association with the British Film Institute in 1968. When that edition went out of print, it became clear, with film studies now a fixture in university syllabuses, that a new and enlarged edition of the book could usefully fill a gap. Over the years I realised, after much deliberation, that François Truffaut's polemical article, 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema', which at the time I had decided not to include in the selection, could no longer be omitted. The piece had become so canonical that no anthology about the New Wave could be without it. A note, however: although the piece has already been anthologised in English, I was unhappy with aspects of the various existing translations. As a result, the reader will find here a brand new translation of this now classic article. This new edition also includes three other additional articles, by Raymond Borde, Luc Moullet and Georges Sadoul, all of them discussions of Godard's film *À bout de souffle*, as well as a substantial and comprehensive introduction by Ginette Vincendeau that puts the Nouvelle Vague phenomenon into perspective. I decided to retain the bulk of my original linking commentary (which should be seen in its historical context: it was written at a time when film studies and indeed semiotics were still in their infancy). Otherwise, the changes I have made to the original text of the translations and commentary are minimal.

Peter Graham, March 2009

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# Introduction: Fifty Years of the French New Wave: From Hysteria to Nostalgia

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GINETTE VINCENDEAU

‘Boy Directors, Some Ex-Film Critics, Dominate Entries at Cannes’

(*Variety* reporting on the 1959 Cannes Film Festival).<sup>1</sup>

The French New Wave has cast a long shadow over world cinema ever since the legendary ‘young Turks’ – François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and others – burst upon the scene in the late 1950s and their films entered the cinematic pantheon. Reflecting on the phenomenon barely ten years on in 1968, Peter Graham’s pioneering anthology pinpointed the passionate polemics it generated. In the forty years since the book, and half-century since the New Wave itself, many, many more books and articles on the topic have appeared, as witnessed by the bibliography at the end of this volume. What follows is not yet another history of the French New Wave but a survey of the ways in which it has been received and interpreted down the years. Like all historical phenomena, the New Wave has meant different things to different people at different times, this process of canon formation throwing some light on the fascination the New Wave films have continued to exert on viewers and why it remains such a critical landmark in cinema.

## I – Early polemics

Histories of the cinema all agree that the New Wave represents a radical break: it spread new ways of producing and making films (cheaply, quickly, outside the mainstream), it popularised the use of lighter technologies, made more ‘realist’ aesthetics fashionable, and introduced a new generation of directors, stars,

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Jean-Pierre Léaud (left), Jean Cocteau (centre) and François Truffaut (right) at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival

cinematographers, producers and composers to the world. It also, significantly, transformed the way people saw and analysed films, in particular establishing the centrality of the cinematic auteur as supreme creative force. Behind this consensus, honed over the last fifty years, however, lie fluctuating critical fortunes. While the New Wave was an instant hit with audiences and certain critical factions, others such as the *Positif*-aligned writers who published a violent – almost hysterical – attack in a 1962 edition of *Premier Plan* found it ‘very vague and not all that new’,<sup>2</sup> and the scriptwriter Henri Jeanson sneered about the movement as a ripple ‘in a washbasin’.<sup>3</sup> Why such virulence?

The immediate post-war period in France witnessed an unparalleled flourishing of film culture, out of which grew the *ciné-club* movement dominated by the figure of André Bazin. The vibrant new film culture saw the increased role of the Cinémathèque Française, the explosion of new film journals (*La Gazette du cinéma*, *La Revue du cinéma*, *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, *Positif*<sup>4</sup>) and the popularity of alternative film festivals such as the ‘Festival du film maudit’ in 1949. Shifting factions of young critics coalesced around these outlets, and an eager audience arose, drawn from the new intellectual middle classes. This cinephile ferment was unique to France, as was the level of passion, not to say aggression, in the writing of the new critics, as several articles in this volume illustrate: in particular, François Truffaut’s notorious ‘A Certain Tendency in French Cinema’, Robert Benayoun’s ‘The Emperor Has No Clothes’ and Gérard Gozlan’s ‘The Delights of Ambiguity – In Praise of André Bazin’.

Behind the outspoken debates lay hidden rifts, the product of the trauma of the 1940 defeat and German occupation which left long-lasting divisions in all spheres of life,<sup>5</sup> including film criticism. Already before the war, film writing followed sharp political lines: the communist Georges Sadoul vs. the fascist François Vinneuil (aka Lucien Rebatet) and Robert Brasillach.<sup>6</sup> After the war, broad left–right divisions persisted but were complicated by the fact that Resistance-associated papers such as *L’Écran français* had published a spectrum of positions (including communist writers but also Catholics like Bazin) on the one hand, and on the other by the Surrealist-influenced anti-clerical left-wing writers who would form the bulk of *Positif*, explaining, as Peter Graham notes, the recurring references to religion in their texts. From the start, François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and others

associated with *Cahiers du cinéma* (founded April 1951), while being close to Bazin, positioned themselves further to the right, and in some cases the extreme right.<sup>7</sup> From their mentor's theories on realism and the ontology of the filmic image they retained the moral, even mystical concerns, but stripped away Bazin's political militancy – in part explaining accusations of fascism levelled at them by *Positif* and *Premier Plan*.

The early film criticism of the *Cahiers du cinéma* group was controversial in other ways too, explaining the extreme reactions against what might seem at first sight 'just' film criticism. Astruc's '*Caméra-Stylo*' and Truffaut's 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema' became the aesthetic manifestos of the *politique des auteurs*; this is why both are included in this volume, even though they are not, strictly speaking, 'about' the New Wave. The *politique des auteurs* as a set of ideas (rather than a 'theory') was iconoclastic in at least three ways – as an attack on mainstream French cinema, as a defence of Hollywood, and as a radical rethinking of the place of cinema within culture. 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema' is extremely partial,<sup>8</sup> but it targets two key French genres of the time, psychological dramas and costume films, and the directors (Yves Allégret, Jean Delannoy, Claude Autant-Lara, René Clément), scriptwriters (Jean Aurenche, Pierre Bost, Henri Jeanson) and stars (Michèle Morgan, Jean Gabin, Edwige Feuillère) associated with them. Truffaut's insolent oedipal rebellion against the '*cinéma de papa*' attacked the hegemonic 'well-made films' that displayed the craft of the French film industry, then in its heyday, turning in the process the word quality, as in 'Tradition of Quality', into a term of abuse. From French production, only an elite band of great directors such as Jean Renoir found grace in Truffaut's eyes, along with a tiny selection of figures, such as Jacques Tati, Robert Bresson, Jean-Pierre Melville and Agnès Varda, who worked independently outside the mainstream.

The young critics' defence of American cinema was also daring, if paradoxical. Having disparaged French genre cinema, they chose Hollywood models among ... genre film-makers. But in doing so, the 'Hitchcocko-Hawksians', the 'Mac-mahonians'<sup>9</sup> (worshippers of Raoul Walsh, Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger and Joseph Losey) and the fans of Nicholas Ray flew in the face of both Bazin's humanist theories and communist criticism, which for different reasons (moral for the former, political for the latter) privileged films



with a social content. One way to achieve this was through the emphasis on *mise en scène* as ultimate source of meaning, which enabled them to bypass social, political and moral concerns. This is the gist of Claude Chabrol's 'Little Themes', also in this volume. Another strategy was to weld these ideas to those of Astruc and Bazin who had earlier, in different ways, propounded romantic notions of the director as artist, the great figures being able to express their world-view within, or against, the 'system' – Astruc in the '*Caméra-Stylo*' article, Bazin in his defence of directors such as Orson Welles and William Wyler.<sup>10</sup> These directors' genius was deemed to be expressed through *mise-en-scène* choices such as long takes, elaborate camera movements and depth of field, their tools akin to a writer's pen or a painter's brush. The power and

Agnès Varda (standing), Alain Resnais (left), Silvia Montfort and Philippe Noiret (right) on the shoot of Varda's *La Pointe courte* (1954)

historical legacy of the *politique des auteurs* was also reinforced by a peculiarly French law (of 11 March 1957) which gave the director unprecedented powers, concurrently diminishing the role of producer or scriptwriter.<sup>11</sup>

Commenting on the animosity between *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif*, Michel Ciment, long-time editor of the latter, admits that the '*politique des auteurs* divided the two camps before 1959'.<sup>12</sup> With hindsight, though, we know that *Positif*, like *Cahiers*, would be one of the prime defenders of auteur cinema (albeit with variations in the directors championed) and that the impact of the *politique* would be long-lasting and universal, relayed in the UK by *Movie* and in the US by Andrew Sarris. Starting with Astruc's literary model in the '*Caméra-Stylo*' article, the *politique des auteurs* was the prime force in lifting the cinema off its industrial background and separating it from popular cinema. In the process, it claimed a new cultural legitimacy for film, promoting it fully to the realm of art. Much later, historians like Noël Burch, Antoine de Baecque and Leila Wimmer<sup>13</sup> would analyse these tactics as an archetypal search for cultural 'distinction', following the work of Pierre Bourdieu. At the time, the critical manoeuvres were both overshadowed and extended by a momentous move on the part of the young critics: they started directing films.

The transition to film-making altered the critics' place within the industry and the French cultural scene – epitomised by Truffaut's being banned from the Cannes Film Festival in the wake of 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema' and then taking it by storm in 1959 with *Les Quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*). Nevertheless, the old antagonisms remained and the attacks against the New Wave films in this volume and elsewhere had more to do with the authors' political positions and friendships (Truffaut's admiration of the fascist Lucien Rebatet, Godard's connection to the right-wing writer Jean Parvulesco, and Chabrol to Jean-Marie Le Pen<sup>14</sup>) than, in most cases, the films' contents. Although Michel Ciment claims that the journal was not opposed to the New Wave *en bloc*,<sup>15</sup> he admits that there was still 'ferocious hostility from many *Positif* writers towards key New Wave directors' (especially Godard and Chabrol).<sup>16</sup> The three texts on *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*) reproduced in this volume are a fair indication of these debates. Among them, Sadoul's piece also illustrates the fact that by the time the New Wave films came out, they paradoxically garnered the approval of communist critics. While noticing the

lack of social anchorage in the films, and the privileged background from which most film-makers came, Sadoul embraced the New Wave, saluting it as a 'breath of fresh air' in French cinema.<sup>17</sup> As Laurent Marie explains, this change of line coincided with the beginning of de-Stalinisation: film contents no longer reigned supreme and style could be considered. The communist agenda concurrently also shifted to a nationalist defence of French cinema (in the context of the threat from Hollywood) and the 'wish to inscribe the new generation within the national patrimony'.<sup>18</sup>

That the New Wave films immediately provoked huge enthusiasm is manifest in their significant critical and/or box-office success<sup>19</sup> and in the enormous amount of press reaction they elicited. Film journals published special issues, including of course *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif*, sparking off lively debates that went beyond the French borders. A typical example is the winter 1959 issue of *Film Quarterly* which includes two radically different views of the New Wave, one by theoretician Noël Burch and the other by historian Eugen Weber, and is introduced by a note indicating that 'The two articles differ markedly in their basic assumptions and their evaluations of the intentions and merits of these film-makers. We present them both in the hope that [...] a useful critical debate will ensue.'<sup>20</sup> The prominence of the films was underpinned by a sense that the movement was significant to French society beyond 'mere' cinema. The label *Nouvelle Vague* notoriously came from the pen of journalist Françoise Giroud writing in the fashionable news magazine *L'Express* in 1957,<sup>21</sup> designating a sense of renewal, of a new generation emerging from the devastation of the war. Giroud's insight found an echo in the interest the films elicited in terms of their portrayal of a changing France, in particular young people's new moral and sexual codes. For instance, *L'Express* in October 1960 published an enquiry into the identity of 'Mademoiselle Nouvelle Vague',<sup>22</sup> while in 1962 sociologists Evelyne Sullerot and Edgar Morin pondered the sociological origins of the New Wave, in the first issue of a journal destined to become influential (*Communications*). André S. Labarthe, in the first 'book' (it is a short pamphlet) on the topic, saw the coherence of the New Wave in terms of its mix of documentary and fiction.<sup>23</sup> And Jacques Siclier reflected in 1961, apropos of *À bout de souffle*, 'In the audience's mind, the "New Wave" was defined, then, by particular kinds of characters and a non-conformist



universe.<sup>24</sup> Antoine de Baecque echoed this feeling much later when he characterised the New Wave as ‘the first film movement to have stylized, in the present, in the immediacy of its history, the world of its contemporaries’.<sup>25</sup> The New Wave films thus provided a snapshot of the country as it was experiencing the first phase of its post-war economic boom, known as the *trente glorieuses*, under a new political regime with General de Gaulle in power since 1958, and as it tried to free itself from the shackles of a conservative, Catholic and patriarchal dominant culture. Their modernity also chimed with other intellectual concerns. As Guy Gauthier has recently noted, the desire for change was reflected in a series of searches for ‘the new’, for example in terms of new theatre, new criticism, new novel (*nouveau roman*), new *chanson* and new realism in painting.<sup>26</sup>

However, just as the French New Wave was becoming a critical sensation abroad (the British film critic Raymond Durgnat published a book about it in 1963<sup>27</sup>), the honeymoon was already over in France. After spectacular early successes, film-makers like Truffaut and Godard made unpopular second films (*Tirez sur le pianiste* [*Shoot the Pianist*], *Une femme est une femme* [*A Woman Is a Woman*]) and a violent backlash unleashed what Antoine de Baecque has called a ‘paternal punishment’.<sup>28</sup> The hostility was no longer confined to the pages of *Positif*. A number of directors whom Truffaut had targeted in ‘A Certain Tendency in French Cinema’, such as Jean Delannoy, never forgave him, and nor did the scriptwriter Henri Jeanson. The hallmarks of New Wave cinema – spontaneous dialogue, freewheeling photography, iconoclastic editing, nonchalant performances – now, in turn, became terms of abuse – as summed up by a journalist who railed against the ‘improvised kind of filmmaking of this “New Wave” we’re tired of hearing about’.<sup>29</sup> Even Jean-Pierre Melville, hailed as a precursor with his thriller *Bob le flambeur* (*Bob the Gambler*, 1956) – to which Godard pays tribute in *À bout de souffle* – became embroiled in a famous polemic against Truffaut,<sup>30</sup> and he decreed in 1967 that ‘The New Wave was an inexpensive way of making films. That’s all.’<sup>31</sup> This was not just sour grapes. A key fact is that these arguments took place against a backdrop of dramatically declining audiences. From 354.7 million spectators in 1960, French audiences went down to 184.4 million in 1970. Seen as the white hope of French cinema in 1959–60, the New Wave was now accused of having

precipitated its downfall: 'what they called the New Wave contributed enormously to the deterioration of French cinema'.<sup>32</sup> These feelings were widespread; for instance, as Richard Neupert discusses, the American trade magazine *Variety* quickly turned to negative views: 'By 1960 nearly every article in *Variety* speaks of the New Wave in the past tense.'<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, despite this downturn, in the long run the romantic glamour of the young rebels would prove a winning formula, and their fusion of criticism with film-making would both legitimise the critical positions and enhance their films' exposure and status. Colin MacCabe may overstate his case in declaring *Cahiers du cinéma* 'the most significant journal of the twentieth-century',<sup>34</sup> but the fact remains that its writing significantly shaped the field, contributing in the process to the establishment of film studies as an academic discipline and to some of its priorities. For a long time film historians took Truffaut's polemical cracks in 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema' at face value (forgetting that he quickly recanted, as can be seen in the 1962 interview reproduced in this volume). Thus, 1950s French mainstream cinema is routinely disparaged as 'moribund', and this has for a long time precluded research into popular French genre cinema. Historians like Richard Abel have rightly pointed out that the New Wave was in effect a 'second wave', coming after the 'first wave' of the 1920s,<sup>35</sup> and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith is keen to reposition it in the context of other cinematic 'waves', especially in Europe.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, one has to agree with Serge Daney that, at the turn of the 1960s in France, 'something unique took place with the New Wave'.<sup>37</sup>

## II – New Wave: diverse or unified? The rise of auteur studies in the 1960s

As soon as the canonical films of 1959–60 came out (*Le Beau Serge* [*Bitter Reunion*], *Les Cousins* [*The Cousins*], *Les Quatre cents coups*, *Hiroshima mon amour*, *À bout de souffle*), the notion of the New Wave as a 'movement' was both self-evident and problematic. In their introductory chapter on French cinema from 1960 to 2004, Michael Temple and Michael Witt ask the rhetorical question, 'Does a New Wave Really Exist?',<sup>38</sup> citing a survey conducted by the newspaper *Le Monde* in August 1959 which contained interviews with

Roger Duchesne (left) in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le flambeur* (1956)

directors such as Astruc, Chabrol and Vadim. Unsurprisingly, since artists detest being labelled part of a movement, all replied 'No'. In his memoirs, Chabrol denied there was such a thing as the New Wave, saying, 'In 1958 and 1959, myself and the whole *Cahiers* team, once we started making films, were promoted like a brand of soap,'<sup>39</sup> and many have echoed the feeling that the New Wave was nothing but a marketing 'gimmick'. Yet, who was 'in' and who was 'out', how they could be classified and according to what criteria, what they had in common, as well as when the New Wave started and when it finished, has exercised virtually every single critic or scholar writing on the movement.

As early as February 1958, in an article entitled '40 under 40: The Young Academy of French Cinema',<sup>40</sup> Pierre Billard tried to identify a 'young' generation purely on the grounds of age. His results are limited, as his criterion means that, for instance, a genre director like Henri Verneuil is included in the 'new generation' while many key New Wave directors are absent, since they had not made their first feature yet. More reliable criteria have included the large number of first features made at the turn of the 1960s (reportedly 160 between 1958 and 1963), or the prominence of low-budget films.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, a clear consensus emerged rapidly, enshrined in Jacques Siclier's 1961 book *Nouvelle vague?* and in the special issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* of December 1962, namely the supremacy of *Cahiers*, or 'Right Bank' group, organised in a set of concentric circles: Chabrol, Godard and Truffaut at the centre, immediately surrounded by Rohmer and Rivette, and then by Pierre Kast, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, André S. Labarthe, Jean Douchet and Alexandre Astruc. Siclier's table of contents, for instance, divides the New Wave into precursors, the *Cahiers du cinéma* team and 'a few others'.<sup>42</sup> Always apart – and always marginalised in collective accounts of the New Wave – is the 'Left Bank' group of Varda, Marker and Resnais. Still further afield are the precursors (Jean-Pierre Melville, Robert Bresson, Louis Malle), the 'satellites' (Jean-Daniel Pollet, Jacques Rozier), the 'unclassifiable' (Jacques Demy), the 'commercial' (Roger Vadim), the novelist-turned-film-maker (Alain Robbe-Grillet), those connected to documentary and cinéma vérité (Jean Rouch, Pierre Schoendoerffer), the 'godfathers' and 'uncles' in Serge Daney's expression,<sup>43</sup> while Raymond Durgnat names thirty-five directors whose films

Corinne Marchand (left) and Agnès Varda on the shoot of Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962)

were made between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, casting his net very wide indeed to include figures such as Peter Brook, Jacques Baratier and Jean-Pierre Mocky.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, the wider the group, the more diffuse the common traits, and reputations have waxed and waned (for instance, debates at the time almost inevitably include Marcel Camus's 1958 *Orfeu Negro* [*Black Orpheus*], now largely forgotten). Hence the tendency to reframe the concept to a small unit such as the *Cahiers* Young Turks. In 1976, James Monaco wrote the transparently named *The New Wave: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette*, in which he argues that its defining feature is the *cerebral* nature of its films: 'all of them see film essentially as a phenomenon of intelligence'.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, the book immediately breaks down into individual directors, with a clear pecking order: there are five chapters devoted to Godard, four to Truffaut and one to each of the other three. This hierarchy is confirmed by a



quick (non-exhaustive) poll of the number of books in French and in English devoted to New Wave directors up to the present day: Godard and Truffaut win hands down, with over twenty books each, whereas for the others the numbers are in single figures and often extremely small. Two small but notable exceptions must be mentioned. Of the 'Left Bank' group, Resnais has been the most frequently studied, right from the beginning – because of the complex, literary and cerebral nature of his work. On the other hand, a pioneering figure like Chabrol, despite being always considered part of the inner circle, is relatively little studied, no doubt because of the heterogeneous nature of his work after his early New Wave trilogy of *Le Beau Serge*, *Les Cousins* and *Les Bonnes femmes* (*The Good Time Girls*). It will be observed that all the discussions above are based on directors, and indeed the canonisation of the New Wave as a group of directors has remained hegemonic, although over the years, some widening to other categories of personnel eventually took place. Gradually, work on producers (Anatole Dauman, Georges de Beauregard, Pierre Braunberger, Raoul Lévy), cinematographers (Raoul Coutard) and critics (Bazin) emerged, in the form of memoirs or biographies (often hagiographies). The same is true of actors (Jeanne Moreau, Anna Karina, Bernadette Lafont) until the 1990s, when star studies begin to develop more rigorous approaches to the analysis of stardom and performance in French cinema.<sup>46</sup>

The emphasis on directors continued, nevertheless. Even Michel Marie's ambitious concept of the New Wave as an 'artistic school' in his 1998 book – a 'school' on the model of art history, with a body of theories, manifestos, a coherent group of artists, promotional strategies, etc.<sup>47</sup> – privileges directors. Back in the 1960s, the accent on directors continued with an instant search for 'heirs' – Jean Eustache, Philippe Garrel, and then André Téchiné were seen in this light, as 'a generation of sons both inspired and crushed [by the New Wave]'.<sup>48</sup> More fundamentally, the 1960s, in the wake of the New Wave, was to be the era of auteur studies, and in 2002, Richard Neupert still justified the organisation of his book *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* as follows: 'The bulk of the book remains organized around directors, since this was an auteur-centered era.'<sup>49</sup> Other examples abound. Freddy Buache's survey book *Le Cinéma français des années soixante* (whose cover features stills from four

New Wave films) is almost entirely organised around directors – New Wave stalwarts like Godard, Truffaut and Chabrol, and a few new figures (Alain Cavalier, Pierre Etaix); only half-a-dozen pages, entitled ‘In the Tradition’, are devoted to popular cinema. This is a particularly clear example of perhaps the most enduring legacy of the *politique des auteurs*, namely the split between auteur cinema (worthy of interest) and popular genre cinema (beneath contempt). In terms of French (and European) cinema, this has underpinned a huge number of books, film festivals and film courses, and the perception of the public ever since. This is not to say that there were no challenges. Quite early on, Penelope Houston in the UK and Pauline Kael in the US, took the *politique des auteurs* to task in a number of ways, including along the lines of sexism – dissenting voices that are, as Leila Wimmer points out, interestingly gendered.<sup>50</sup> However, it would take decades for these gender concerns to resurface. In the more immediate period following the New Wave, other challenges would take precedence.

### The 1970s: the New Wave vanishes

The ‘Cinémathèque affair’ of February 1968, during which Culture Minister André Malraux sacked its director Henri Langlois, is often thought of as a precursor of the May ’68 events. After an outcry by New Wave film-makers, Langlois was reinstated. In May, the union of film technicians gathered film personnel under the banner of the *États généraux du cinéma* (Estates General of the Cinema), the Cannes Film Festival was boycotted, and solidarity with students and strikers was expressed. This gave the impression that New Wave film-makers were at the forefront of political struggles. Yet, in retrospect, May ’68 marks the swansong of the New Wave rather than a new beginning. Things had moved on.

May ’68 introduced a break with New Wave issues and concerns, with the rise of the political agenda. *Cahiers du cinéma* moved violently against its own earlier aesthetic approach, as well as against Hollywood.<sup>51</sup> In terms of the film-makers, a parting of the ways took place. Some became ultra-politicised and/or experimental – Godard, Marker – or worked collaboratively, in a challenge to individual authorship – the Godard–Gorin collaboration, the *Loin du Viêt-nam* (*Far from Vietnam*) portmanteau film (1967, which included Godard,



Varda and Resnais but also Claude Lelouch). Others, on the other hand, like Rohmer with *Ma nuit chez Maud* (*My Night with Maud*, 1969) or Truffaut with *La Sirène du Mississippi* [*sic*] (*Mississippi Mermaid*, also 1969), turned their backs on politics. The New Wave had fragmented, and its aesthetic concerns were off the critical agenda. We see this clearly reflected in publications: after the first spate of works in the 1960s (Labarthe, Siclier, Durgnat, Graham), books and articles on the New Wave become thin on the ground. Between 1968 and the 1990s, publications generally identify the New Wave as a *landmark* but do not significantly analyse it *per se*. They examine what came before (Bazin's essays, *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague* published in 1983) or after (Claire Clouzot's *Le Cinéma français depuis la nouvelle vague* in 1972). Only one book on the New Wave proper came out in the 1970s (by James Monaco), but as discussed above, it focuses on a collection of individual filmmakers rather than an overview of the movement. New excitement came from developments such as avant-garde group Zanzibar films<sup>52</sup> and the rise of

women's cinema, while trends in literary theory (Roland Barthes) and philosophy (Michel Foucault) were dealing severe blows to the notion of the auteur.<sup>53</sup>

Critical interest in the New Wave, such as it was, came in the guise of opposition. Philippe Pilard's discussion of the New Wave and politics in late 1969 indicted its detachment from current events and history.<sup>54</sup> Jean-Pierre Jeancolas's retrospective assessment in 1979 was severe ('the New Wave replaced the underground and killed any manifestation of it in France for a decade'<sup>55</sup>). Even more severe condemnation came from abroad. In 1971, the British Marxist scholar Terry Lovell wrote a critical account of the apolitical nature of characters in New Wave films, in which she argued that 'The lack of any social dimension is characteristic of the typical New Wave film. Its heroes are neither personally nor socially integrated, and are dissociated from their social roles.'<sup>56</sup> Then, in a celebrated two-part article, John Hess published a long, sustained attack on the apolitical nature of the *politique des auteurs* in the American journal *Jump Cut* in 1974.<sup>57</sup> In some ways, Lovell's and Hess's arguments were similar to those made by Borde *et al.* in *Premier Plan* ten years earlier. True, but while Borde, Gozlan and Benayoun's rhetoric was underpinned by left-wing militancy and fuelled by personal hostility to the film-makers, Hess and Lovell's analyses were couched in terms of more systematic Marxist theory. Meanwhile, the era saw the rise of academic film studies which, in their initial phase, were influenced by the work of Christian Metz, and dominated by semiology, structuralism and psychoanalysis. Whether from the Anglo-American or the French camps, auteur studies were, temporarily, off the map. They would resurface in the 1980s, with the arrival of a new generation of film-makers, critics and scholars, especially as film studies fully entered the academy.

### The academic turn (I) – rebuilding the canon

After the fallow 1970s, a reclaiming of the New Wave slowly gathered momentum through the 1980s, and especially the 1990s, reaching a peak around the fortieth anniversary in 1998. The effect was to put it back on a pedestal, albeit in historically more informed ways. For, if the fierce attacks against New Wave cinema in the 1960s were underpinned by falling attendances and a sense



of the vulnerability of the French film *industry*, by the 1980s and 1990s, the debate had shifted to more fundamental interrogations about the 'end of cinema'. Against a background of the 'contamination' of cinema from advertising, television, video and computer-generated images, the New Wave cinema, in its heady celebration of 'pure' cinephile pleasure, seemed like the perfect antidote. Four authors emerge from the bulk of new writing on the movement: Serge Daney, Jean Douchet, Michel Marie and Antoine de Baecque. From different institutional perspectives (Daney and Douchet are critics, Marie and de Baecque academics), their four-pronged movement gave the New Wave pride of place again.

An early salvo came from the prominent *Cahiers du cinéma* critic Serge Daney who, in a 1988 article entitled 'The New Wave: A Genealogical Approach',<sup>58</sup> makes the astute point that the novelty and impact of the New Wave derived not from the weakness of a 'moribund' French film industry – as had been argued before, following 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema' – but on the contrary, from its strength. However, his argument, couched as an oedipal rebellion, also displays a strong sense of nostalgia. Daney eulogises about the fact that 'The New Wave filmmakers were able to know personally some of the giants who were in at the start of the cinema' and he subscribes to the romantic view of auteurs as 'loners'.<sup>59</sup> Then in 1997–8, three books came out in rapid succession. In his 1997 concise volume, Michel Marie offered a particularly lucid analysis of the movement in terms of its critical and production context, convincingly arguing for it to be seen, as already discussed, as an artistic 'school'. The following year, Antoine de Baecque published an excellent socio-cultural analysis of the New Wave as the 'portrait of a young generation', identifying the roots of cinephilia in a disenfranchised generation (both writers and audiences) who latched onto the cinema as a substitute for political commitment. However, in concluding that 'we are left with a myth', he himself contributed to an ultimately reverential (re)mythologising of the New Wave – unsurprisingly, since he, like Daney, had worked for *Cahiers du cinéma*. 1998 also saw the publication of the beautifully produced *Nouvelle Vague* by Jean Douchet. The book is eccentric, biased and hostile to academic film studies, yet a valuable resource for its iconography and inclusion of contemporary reviews. A belated contribution by one of the original (albeit

marginal) New Wave critics-turned-film-makers, Douchet's *Nouvelle Vague* is also the clearest manifestation of the creeping nostalgia for the movement forty years on, including for cinephilia itself, as New Wave practitioners were now men and women in their seventies or older, though most of them still making films (Truffaut had died in 1984).

De Baecque and Marie, together with the American scholar Richard Neupert, were instrumental in consolidating the position of the French New Wave in the university syllabus. But none of them challenged the bias towards the *Cahiers* group; even Neupert's excellent and detailed *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* only acquired a chapter on the 'Left Bank group' in its second edition in 2007. And Peter Graham's decision to balance the *Cahiers'* views with those emanating from *Positif* (and in the present edition *Premier Plan* too), thus affording valuable insight into the French debates of the time, was never really taken up. For instance, the volumes of selected *Cahiers* pieces in English edited by Jim Hillier in 1985 and 1992, and continued by Nick Browne in 1989 and David Wilson in 2000, were never matched by collections from 'the other side'.<sup>60</sup> In terms of the directors, the picture is more balanced, and indeed over time the rise of interest in both Varda and Marker as part of the New Wave canon has been noticeable, as seen, for instance, in the series of monographs on directors published by Manchester University Press. Some also extended the range towards the 'Left Bank' New Wave through studies of its links to the *nouveau roman*, such as T. Jefferson Kline (1992), Lynn Higgins (1996) and Dorota Ostrowska (2008) – most of these studies emanating from French and literary studies rather than film studies, as if the *Cahiers* 'inner circle' remained somehow the preserve of *film* studies. And generally these works, too, retain a reverential position. For iconoclastic approaches we need to turn to different paradigms.

## The academic turn (II) – canon-challenging

We have seen how the conjunction of influential critical writing and film-making in a select group of directors produced not only a 'brand' for the New Wave cinema (even though not all films were made by critics and not all critics made films), but also an influential body of writing. This has been dominated – from the passionate debates of the late 1950s to the present day – by the

formal/aesthetic approaches derived from the *politique des auteurs*, despite sporadic politically based attacks such as those of *Positif* and *Premier Plan* in the 1960s, and John Hess and Terry Lovell in the 1970s. The development of approaches derived from industrial history, cultural studies and gender studies have produced more sustained and more profound challenges.

Inspired by the historicist approach developed by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson in their seminal 1985 book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*,<sup>61</sup> the Australian academic Colin Crisp wrote in 1993 a study of the 'classic French cinema' from 1930 to 1960. In a brief chapter at the end of the book, Crisp attacks the idea of the New Wave as a radical break from mainstream French cinema derived from Truffaut's rhetoric. Rejecting the view of French mainstream cinema as in decline, Crisp argues that we should see the New Wave 'not as a displacement of the classic cinema but rather as a logical outcome and continuation of it',<sup>62</sup> insofar as it was a prominent offshoot of existing art cinema, generated by 'a set of processes and mechanisms orchestrated within the classic cinema'.<sup>63</sup> If the argument exaggerates the continuities between the New Wave and mainstream cinema and does little to account for aesthetic differences, it has the merit of suggesting that New Wave cinema should be regarded as part of a continuum and that we should stop fetishising its uniqueness (*pace* Serge Daney). Crisp's study was also part of a larger movement in the 1990s which saw a welcome turning of the spotlight onto French popular cinema. This was concurrently facilitated by the increased availability of films on VHS and then DVD, these new media working hand in hand with new approaches to film history. The study of popular genre cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, especially gangster films and costume dramas, developed, providing at the very least a better contextualisation of the New Wave (in particular, Raphaëlle Moine and Geneviève Sellier's work on costume films, and Vincendeau on the gangster film and stars such as Jean Gabin and the actors of the New Wave<sup>64</sup>).

Concurrently, sociological and cultural studies approaches to the cinema made a belated entry into the study of French cinema (and into French cinema studies), dealing a greater blow to the hegemony of aesthetic/auteurist approaches and in the process affecting New Wave studies. Two indicative

works here are those of John Orr, whose 1993 book *Cinema and Modernity* features a still from *À bout de souffle* on the cover (and devotes some space to New Wave films inside), and of the American cultural historian Kristin Ross. Her 1995 work *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonisation and the Reordering of French Culture*<sup>65</sup> does not deal directly with the New Wave but usefully charts, among other things, the rise of the new intellectual bourgeoisie that formed its audience, and the socio-cultural import of images of modernity in the films (such as cars and couples). After decades of work concentrating on the aesthetics of *mise en scène* and authorship, it was time for film scholars to begin to pay attention to the films' *contents*. Thus, ironically recalling the early sociological surveys that surrounded the emergence of the New Wave, scholars began to look at the films' representation of modern France and the new social mores (from language to sexual behaviour). If these concerns were in evidence in a number of the Anglo-American works cited above, they took longer to



reach France. One trail-blazing work in this respect, though not directly on the New Wave, was Burch and Sellier's *La Drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français* (1993) in terms of its bold linking of filmic representations with ideology, especially in relation to gender; directly addressing the New Wave are Jean-Pierre Esquenazi's *Godard and French Society in the 1960s* (2004) and Philippe Mary's *La Nouvelle Vague et le cinéma d'auteur: socio-analyse d'une révolution artistique* (2006), both of which reinsert their objects of study into their social context not in terms of a 'reflection' of that context in the films, but of a proper historical understanding of both the films and their critical parameters – for instance, Mary reflects back on the early debates around the *politique des auteurs* as 'the construction of a certain distance from the political, the practice of a "disengagement"' and he gives a historical perspective to the *Positif*–*Cahiers du cinéma* duel in the light of the nineteenth-century artistic and literary debates between the 'social bohemia' of Courbet and Champfleury and the 'art for art's sake' bohemia of Baudelaire and Flaubert.<sup>66</sup> Following the work of Bourdieu and Andreas Huyssen, Esquenazi and Mary, as well as Sellier and Burch, also show the rise of cinephile criticism and New Wave film-making in the light of the break between modernist art and popular culture, as a strategic position to create a cultural 'distinction'.

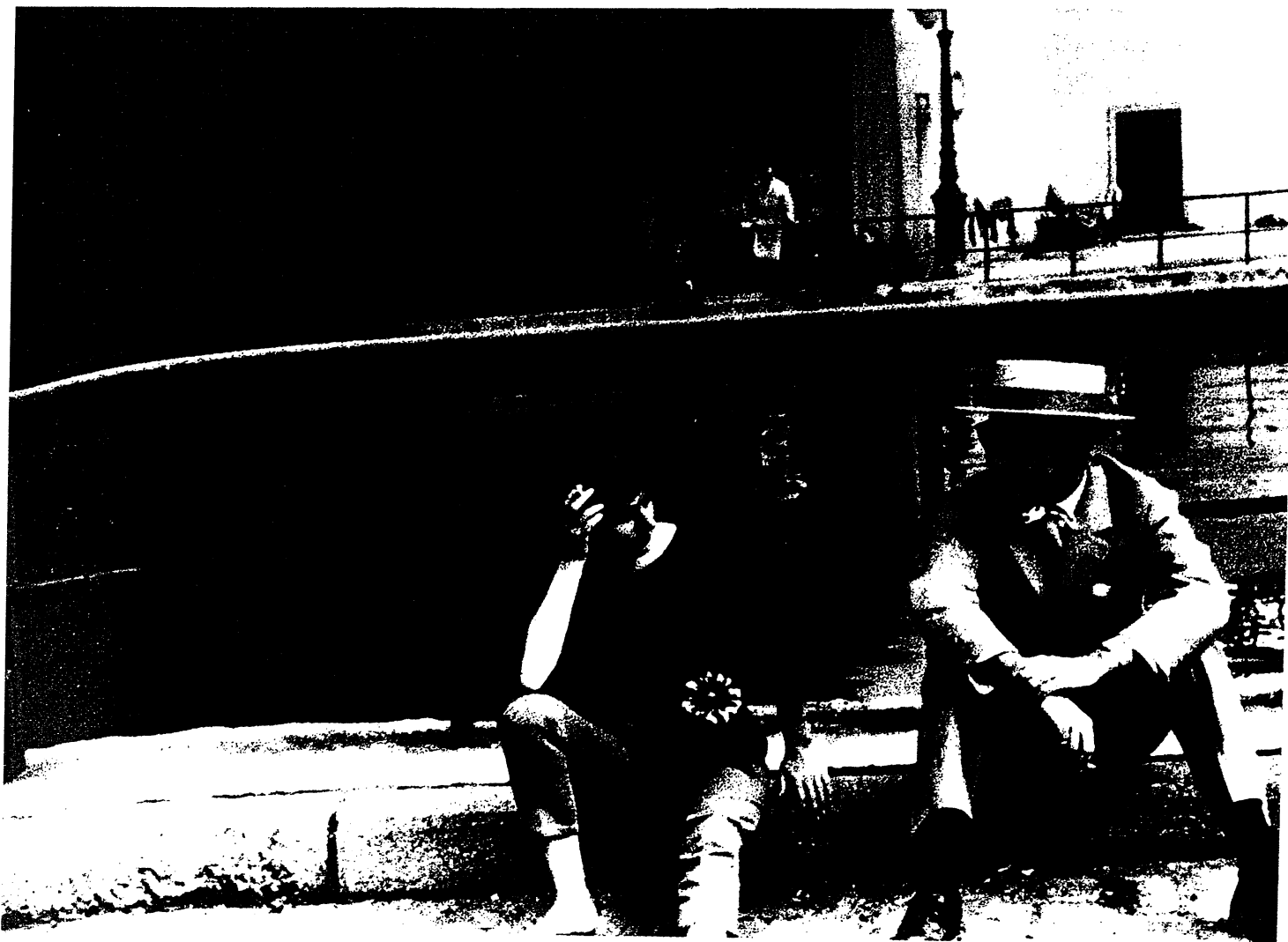
But perhaps the greatest challenge to the orthodoxy of formal/aesthetic analyses of the New Wave has come from gender perspectives. Here, too, Anglo-American works have led the way, as feminist approaches to the cinema have traditionally been resisted in France.<sup>67</sup> In 1980, the pioneer feminist critic Laura Mulvey wrote a chapter on Godard's representation of women in Colin MacCabe's book *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, in which she argued that his attitude was eminently ambivalent, both critical of, and complicit with, patriarchy (she was writing about later Godard, but her argument applies equally to early New Wave films). In 1995, Yosefa Loshitzky also approached Godard's films from a gender point of view, offering a trenchant critique, for instance, of his treatment of the Brigitte Bardot character in *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*). Building on her earlier work on French cinema, Sellier offered, in *La Nouvelle Vague: un cinéma au masculin singulier* (2006), a ground-breaking overall gender critique of the movement, in particular of the links between



masculinity, auteurism and representation, as reflected in the book's title. She shows how the Young Turks of the New Wave were indeed modern filmmakers who cast new actresses in taboo-breaking roles (doing away with the passé mother/whore stereotypes of mainstream cinema, for instance), yet in their modernist stance they also portrayed women as obstacles to the self-realisation (however suicidal) of the male alter-ego leading characters – as in *À bout de souffle* or *Paris nous appartient* (*Paris Belongs to Us*) – or adopted an 'entomological' attitude towards them as pathetic or comic figures (typically *Les Bonnes femmes*). That these representations chimed with the directors' own stance as breakaway modern(ist) artists against the Tradition of Quality is one of the other insights of gender and socio-cultural approaches to the New Wave.

A welcome by-product of the gender challenge to studies of the New Wave has been to reframe the New Wave canon to incorporate, at last, one of its key figures, Agnès Varda. With the rise of women's cinema from the 1970s, Varda attracted attention as one of the few female directors in French cinema at

Bernadette Lafont (left) and Stéphane Audran in Claude Chabrol's *Les Bonnes femmes* (1960)



that time, and the only one in the New Wave (see Françoise Audé's early study in particular<sup>68</sup>). As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis put it in her 1990 seminal study *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*,<sup>69</sup> Varda has always been recognised as the 'mother of the New Wave' with her film *La Pointe courte*, made in 1954 on location (in Sète), produced independently on the margins of the industry (and edited by Alain Resnais), but despite this tokenistic accolade, she has also been ignored or marginalised in histories of the movement. And indeed, although Varda pays tribute to the New Wave as a group effort with her film-within-the-film in *Cléo de 5 à 7* (*Cleo from 5 to 7*, 1962), in which we see, among others, Jean-Luc Godard and Anna Karina, the reverse, as it were, has not been true. After Flitterman-Lewis opened the way in recognising Varda's films as important explorations of the nature of femininity, more work followed (by Alison Smith, Valerie Orpen, Sellier and a few others<sup>70</sup>), finally giving *Cléo de 5 à 7* its deserved place in the canon of great New Wave films, and acknowledging Varda as one of its most exciting practitioners.

Agnès Varda and Jean-Luc Godard during the shoot of Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962)



### Conclusion

It would be misleading to think that the trajectory I have traced in this introduction is a clear, forward-moving arc. There are contradictions, loose ends, parallel developments and mismatches, and no doubt future generations will move the debate in new directions, and find blindspots in the work so far. Nevertheless, the sheer amount of writing on the New Wave is a testimony to its continuing fascination. Just as Truffaut raged against the Tradition of Quality because it was a worthy enemy, critics and academics continue to explore the New Wave, however critical they may be of it, in large part because the films are still so powerful and seductive, prompting director Martin Scorsese to eulogise, 'The New Wave has influenced all filmmakers who have worked since, whether they saw the films or not. [...] It submerged cinema like a tidal wave.'<sup>71</sup> And while critics and historians, from the *Positif* writers, to Hess, and then to Sellier, Esquenazi and Mary and others, have mounted incisive critiques of the New Wave, the process of celebration continues apace – Douchet's book is one of the



most popular and it was immediately translated into English. In fact, the New Wave has become a topic of heritage in itself and there have been a growing number of films nostalgically celebrating it as a 'golden age' – from Godard's typically oblique *Nouvelle vague* (1990), to Varda's *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), Olivier Assayas's *Irma Vep* (1996), Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003), Antoine de Caunes's *Désaccord parfait* (*Twice upon a Time*, 2006) and almost any film featuring Jean-Pierre Léaud since Truffaut's death, such as *Irma Vep*, *36 fillette* (*Virgin*, 1988) or *Le Pornographe* (*The Pornographer*, 2001). Whether seething with criticism or suffused with nostalgia, these films, and the mass of writing discussing them, all show that the New Wave has lost none of its social, cultural and cinematic relevance, but also that it has truly become part of the national and international<sup>72</sup> patrimony.

## Notes

1. Cited in Richard Neupert, 'Dead Champagne: *Variety's* New Wave', *Film History* vol. 10 no. 2 (1998), p. 222.
2. Bernard Chardère, 'Note de l'éditeur', in Raymond Borde, Freddy Buache and Jean Curtelin, *Nouvelle Vague* (Lyon: Premier Plan/Serdoc, 1962), p. 5.
3. Henri Jeanson, quoted in Christophe Moussé, 'Un adversaire coriace: Henri Jeanson', *CinémAction* no. 104, 'Flash-back sur la Nouvelle Vague' (3e trimestre 2002), p. 90.
4. For accounts of these developments, see, in particular, Michel Marie, *La Nouvelle Vague: une école artistique* (Paris: Nathan, 1997). Published in English as *The French New Wave: An Artistic School* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), translated by Richard Neupert. And Antoine de Baecque, *La Nouvelle Vague: portrait d'une jeunesse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).
5. See Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Translated by Arthur Goldhammer.
6. Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907–1939. Vol. I. 1907–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907–1939. Vol. II. 1929–1939* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).
7. See Antoine de Baecque, *La Cinéphilie: invention d'un regard, histoire d'une culture, 1944–1968* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); Hélène Liogier, '1960: vue d'Espagne, la Nouvelle Vague est fasciste, ou la Nouvelle Vague selon Jean Parvulesco', *1895 (AFRHC)* no. 26 (December 1998), pp. 127–53.

