

Paradoxes of the Nouvelle Vague

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ABSTRACT

This essay begins at the start of the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* and with the film-making debut of five of its main members: François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette and Jean-Luc Godard. At the start they have shared approaches, tastes, passions and dislikes (above all, about a group of related film-makers from so-called 'classical cinema'). Over the course of time, their aesthetic and political positions begin to divide them, both as people and in terms of their work, until they reach a point where reconciliation is not possible between the 'midfield' film-makers (Truffaut and Chabrol) and the others, who choose to control their conditions or methods of production: Rohmer, Rivette and Godard. The essay also proposes a new view of work by Rivette and Godard, exploring a relationship between their interest in film shoots and montage processes, and their affinities with various avant-gardes: early Russian avant-garde in Godard's case and in Rivette's, 1970s American avant-gardes and their European translation.

KEYWORDS

Nouvelle Vague, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, François Truffaut, radical, politics, aesthetics, montage.

In this essay the term 'Nouvelle Vague' refers specifically to the five film-makers in this group who emerged from the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*: Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut. Considering each of their respective careers, it might seem awkward to group them together like this, but not if we take into account that they started out at the same time, sometimes closely collaborating with each other, sharing their dislikes, their reference points (namely Hitchcock, Hawks, Lang, Renoir, Rossellini) and the same claims. What brought them together at the beginning wasn't wanting to create a *tabula rasa* out of the past, but the opposite: a need to be part of a continuum, to explore some avenues that were barely known or neglected by the 1950s mainstream film industry (as Chabrol used to say, 'following the old ships that no one else was following any longer'). The 'young Turks' from *Cahiers du cinéma* did not include the avant-garde in any significant capacity within the critical selection they first used to situate themselves within film history. Their references – whether cinematic, literary or musical – were essentially classical, the opposite of the film-makers from the 'rive gauche', like Alain Resnais, Chris Marker or Jean-Daniel Pollet, whose works were in sync with the *nouveau roman*, the magazine *Tel Quel* and with music and image-based experiments that intermingled in the 1960s.

The years from 1963 to 67 represent the end of the *Nouvelle Vague*'s 'state of grace', after a fruitful 'misunderstanding' between the film industry and these young iconoclasts. While there were obvious correspondences between the five film-makers' first films, formally as well as economically, their paths grew apart more and more, until eventually they sometimes became opposed. When the recognition and success of the *Nouvelle Vague* died down and each of them had to choose a way of making a living, Truffaut and Chabrol were the most loyal to the American cinema they had loved and to the 'auteur theory'

that had emerged from it: they considered that cinematic form should be explored as a kind of contraband, using the classic art of *mise-en-scène* rather than a revolutionary or modernist position. They therefore rejected any kind of marginalisation to remain great 'midfield' film-makers (Jean-Claude Biette's expression, about Chabrol), taking the risk of accepting unlikely commissions (Chabrol) or alternating between dry, dark films and other lighter, more optimistic ones (the Jekyll and Hyde side of Truffaut that Daney used to talk about). In France this was possible because the film industry has always been strong, and because of this, it has always been perceived as something to take over from within, or by enclosing it.

Rohmer and Rivette searched for an independence both more complete and more humble than Truffaut's, an independence that would let them continue being 'amateurs', something that Jean Rouch had himself extolled. This financial independence paralleled an economy of technical and formal means. Formally, what can be referred to as Rivette and Rohmer's 'modernity' is mainly an extension of Bazin's theories and of the cinema of Renoir and Rossellini: it rests on the idea of film as above all an art of recording. Therefore, if anything needs to be revolutionised it shouldn't be an imaginary, pure form, or any abstract theorising, but, more concretely, the way films are made. This is something that can come up as the main issue during the film shoot, with the actors and the light. After the commercial failure of *The Sign of Leo* (*Le Signe du lion*, 1959), Rohmer had to wait for *The Collector* (*La Collectionneuse*), in 1967, to receive some recognition, an audience and the financial stability he would manage to keep until the end, which allowed him to not be an outsider, while also not compromising in any way to the industry (one of the things he was proudest of for a long time was not asking the CNC for any support¹). In that respect, he was the most strictly faithful to the main claim of the *Nouvelle Vague*,

1. Centre National du Cinéma.

which Truffaut had signaled as having an ethical, rather than aesthetic, aim: transforming the means of production, freeing the cinema from technical tedium, allowing film-makers to 'point themselves to the subject' (as the impressionist used to say) almost as freely and weightlessly as a painter.

Of the five, Rivette was the most open to the artistic developments of his time, developments with which even Godard had an ambiguous relationship. What's more, in 1963, the generation of young critics that had arrived at *Cahiers du cinéma* in the early 1960s (such as Jean Narboni, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean-André Fieschi) chose him to replace Rohmer as the magazine's managing editor. Rohmer was seen as too conservative and not open minded enough to the new styles of film-making that were emerging throughout the world. As a film-maker, Rivette from early on takes on the role of inherent outsider to the shooting and narrative styles Rivette was searching for. In 1964 he makes the following statement, distancing himself both from Truffaut and Chabrol's position, but also from Rohmer's classicism: 'I think the beginning of the Nouvelle Vague [...] is a phenomenon of interruption. In the end, it's the party pooper. Which means it will always have something to do with failure or misunderstanding. I don't think there can be real success in the Nouvelle Vague. I think the truth about the Nouvelle Vague is its own failure'.² And after the two consecutive setbacks which were the commercial failures of *Paris nous appartient* (1960) and later the censoring of *La Religieuse* (1966), Rivette became radicalised through *L'Amour fou* (1968), taking further his film shooting experience, opening up to improvisation and changing the duration of his story. Rivette's film shoots have much in common with some of the experiments the theatre was undergoing in the 1960s. He drafted a significant portion of his actors from the *metteur en scène* Marc'O's troupe. To understand Rivette's interest

in the experimental forms which seemed to not have really affected his four comrades, one need just read his answers to a questionnaire in the magazine *Positif* in 1982 (n. 254-255), in which he puts *La Région centrale* (1971) by Michael Snow, *Der Tod der Maria Malibran* (1972) by Werner Schroeter and *Central Bazaar* (1976) by Stephen Dwoskin among the thirty best films made between 1952 and 1982. It's hard to imagine another member of the Nouvelle Vague referring to these films in the 1970s, in a clear break both with classical Hollywood cinema and with the new trends of the 1960s; not even Godard. But Rivette also chooses films that continue being more about the experiential filmshoot process than about the montage, more about recording rather than intervening with the texture of the image. Connected essentially with the theatre, he is not seeking the purity of a certain kind of avant-garde movement, but is always following Bazin's theory, which advocates the fundamental impurity of the cinema.

Godard is the most clearly formalist and revolutionary film-maker out of the five that constituted then the core group of the Nouvelle Vague. For starters, this is because he brings together Bazin and Malraux, Renoir and Eisenstein, Cézanne and Picasso, giving equal place to the montage and the film shooting. Montage lets him not only deconstruct a scene's narration or structure, but above all to develop relationships, combinations. He distances himself from Bazin through the discontinuity of montage, but he finds him in the impurity of collage. The idea of collage, so often called up when talking about Godard, shows to what degree his composition starts from reality and from series of pre-existing images, shaking up the agreed hierarchies: pointing to the truth of the recorded moment, but also to sociological reality; showing images and sounds in art, but also in popular culture or advertisements. In this sense, Godard should be associated more with

2. RIVETTE, Jacques, in VALEY, Robert. *La Nouvelle vague par elle-même*, episode in the series *Cinéastes de notre temps*, 1964.

the happy audacity of Pop Art than with the disembodied braininess of the *nouveau roman*: re-appropriation and *derive* over theorising and the illusion of purity. All this is what sets him in opposition to the cold abstraction of *Last Year in Marienbad* (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961), a beautiful object closed in on itself (which Resnais himself will respond to with *Muriel* in 1963). And this is the reason he is not as receptive to the French avant-gardes from the 1920s or American experimental film than to Eisenstein and Vertov, who will continue being his references in terms of montage. The last point also shows to what degree the conceptualisation of Godard's montage is political, firstly in a general sense (letting all of reality come into it, including elements coming from journalism and sociology), and then, more and more, in an exact way (referencing the wars in Algeria and Vietnam, his characters' leftist politics). Godard's political leaning is progressive and very coherent, but it could be said that the first great rupture takes place around 1966, while he's directing both *Made in USA* and *Two or three things I know about her* (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*). The second rupture takes place after May 1968, when he breaks with the film industry and with narrative films in order to make militant films. Between 1966 and May 68 a turning point takes place during which he makes essential works – the two just mentioned but also *La Chinoise* (1967) and *Weekend* (1967). What happens in these four features? Often, politics take preference over emotions (something which, until then, had only been the case in *Les Carabiniers* [1963]). To put it a different way, these films are a record of what *Alphaville* (1965) had imagined: a society in which political and economic oppression would crush the individual's emotions and would turn the fantasy which til then had lifted up Godard's characters above the evils of the world into something impossible. Because, as the end of *Made in USA* says, 'the left is too sentimental'; it's as if Godard were returning to his previous films from a political, rather than melancholic, point of view. In this way, *Two or three things I know about her* is like a 'cool' remake of *Vivre sa vie* (1962), one in

which sociological analysis prevails over fantasy. In the same way, in *La Chinoise* it's as if he had preserved the militance of the young characters in *Masculin féminin* (1966), but gotten rid of all their amorous and sexual preoccupations. In terms of *Weekend*, it extends the libertine vein and comic violence of *Les Carabiniers*, to the point of making its characters into grotesque figures, thrashing around in a society that has become absurd: war from now on is everywhere, it's the apocalyptic victory of consumerist egoism over reason, art and emotion, which can only be answered by the cruel and savage poetry of Lautréamont. Formally, it's about granting collage its full political and subversive dimension (which Lautréamont was justly a literary precursor to), something summed up by the lines that end *Made in USA*: 'A film by Walt Disney starring Humphrey Bogart; therefore, a political film'. Continuing to work within the film industry, Godard recycles images and myths to make them clash, and it's through this combination of genres and bringing together such disparate elements that he is political to begin with: placing them in the same shot, showing that Walt Disney and Humphrey Bogart belong to the same world as Mao or a worker from the Parisian suburbs. In these four films he takes the use of vivid colours farther than ever, showing visually how advertising has influenced the world, that the arrangement of the HLM housing estates are like laundry soap boxes, or how maoism is before anything else the colour red of the little book, which can drench the new images with a new blood. He uses this strident hyperrealism to translate a broader 'de-realising' caused by capitalism, television and advertising, but also (in *La Chinoise* and *Weekend*), by abstraction, or even the violence of the leftist theory which Godard films with irony and tenderness in equal measure. These four films represent equally the confirmation of political discourse in Godard's films, of clear and well-formulated theory, and not just commentary, or philosophical digression, driving the film. In *Two or three things I know about her*, the voiceover is for the first time not a narrative or fantasy element; instead, it thinks

up the images and the film as it's made, which became the beginning of the 1970s films. In *La Chinoise*, what interests Godard is the incarnation and recitation of discourse; not so much what the little red book says, more the theatricality that it imposes (something that will also be one of the main issues for the Dziga Vertov Group). In other words: Mao lets him become fully Brechtian. Always being a film-maker above all else, this new formal questioning is what Godard is seeking in order to begin his revolutionary theory: new discourses for a new theatre, new theory for new montages, and the colour red, lots of it. When he embarks into militant cinema after May 68, his main theme will still be film: how to make politically a film, and not just make a film that's satisfied with illustrating a discourse. In a burlesque scene in *Vladimir and Rosa* (*Vladimir et Rosa*, 1970) in which Jean-Pierre Gorin and him mumble through a discussion in a tennis court, he shows the things that will always save him from cold theorising: 1) the flow of words, images and ideas should be as concrete, alive and unpredictable as the back and forth of tennis balls; 2) practice should make theory tremble, and viceversa.

Despite all their differences, this quote from *Bande à part* (1964) connects all the Nouvelle Vague film-makers: 'Everything that is unquestionably new is, by the same logic, automatically old.' And even the most iconoclastic film-makers from this movement will continue to be faithful to the etymology of the word 'radical', despite it being so tainted: 'that which is at the roots'. While making *Out 1* (1971), Rivette is conscious of Feuillade and Renoir, and even in his most revolutionary period Godard refers above all else to the film-makers of the past – Rossellini, Vertov, Eisenstein. Even Jean Eustache and Philippe Garrel, the most direct and talented offspring of the Nouvelle Vague, will both be obsessed by the cinema made before they were born – silent cinema (Garrel) or Hollywood and French pre-war cinema (Eustache). For them, the Nouvelle Vague stands as the extension of an ancient path (one that goes through Lumière, Griffith, Vigo, Renoir, Rossellini) and the possibility of furthering it through the present and for itself. Eustache's brilliant idea starts there: in film, a revolution means to go back to the Lumière brothers always. •

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