

## The French Nouvelle Vague (New Wave)

The French New Wave of the late 1950s, one of the key movements of post-war European filmmaking, forever altered long-established notions of cinema style, themes, narrative and audience. The New Wave (or Nouvelle Vague) showed the vibrant realism of Paris' streets and its inhabitants at a time when many Hollywood films were still formulaic and studio-bound. A Hollywood film of the time would more than likely have included a linear narrative and uncomplicated shots and edits (such as a typical shot-reverse-shot); a film from the New Wave, however, would astonish you with extended shots, handheld footage, naturalistic performances, on-location shooting, whip-pans, socio-political commentary and ambiguous or unresolved endings. Today, its impact can still be felt in the work of many contemporary directors including Martin Scorsese, Bernardo Bertolucci and Quentin Tarantino.

So, why all the fuss? This quote from a 1961 French arts television documentary sums up the aims and ideals of the French New Wave perfectly:

'Today's young filmmakers are trying to make a different type of film and put an end to boring films. They deal with today's problems, not those of the past. Their style is fresh and shocking, doing away with the dull and outdated. But what is all this commotion... What is it all about? The cinema. Who is it about? About the young cinema'<sup>1</sup>

The French New Wave was born out of the dissatisfaction that many young filmmakers and critics felt towards the existing, outmoded, French cinema of the time. While cinema was the most popular entertainment option in France in the 1950s (it was, after all, not long after the war and television had yet to fully impact upon society there), serious art critics found the films on offer to be unchallenging, stolid and without vision. Critics of the existing order, including Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, believed an auteur cinema, in which the director's vision was paramount and personal, should be developed. They wanted to make films in which social and political issues could be explored – films that felt 'raw' and new. Taking matters into their own hands (and a dash of inspiration from the Italian Neo-Realist movement), Truffaut, Godard and several others set about changing cinema forever. The New Wave was born.

Three of the most crucial films of this movement – Les Quatre Cents Coups (The 400 Blows, 1959), À bout de souffle (Breathless, 1959) and Jules et Jim (1962) – share the stylistic hallmarks of the New Wave. Keep an eye out for the following idiosyncrasies as you watch the films:

- To simplify transportation and filming, basic sound recording was used whilst shooting meaning that many of the main actors had to re-dub their dialogue in post-production. As a result, many fluffed lines remain in the final cut.

---

<sup>1</sup> A quote from 'Portrait of François Truffaut' (1961), a documentary available on the DVD of The 400 Blows

- For a sense of immediacy and urgency, many scenes shot on the streets were unrehearsed and unannounced. As a result, you'll notice many members of the public looking at the camera and the characters as they pass by. No need for extras here!
- Many sequences rely on natural lighting and there are scenes and even shots that last for many minutes.
- Scenes jump to and from different points in time, skipping over establishing or linking material that the Hollywood movies would have used to make the narrative explicit. Even more startling is the lack of establishing shots in the films: this style of filmmaking was intended to grab the audience's attention, and can be slightly confusing the first time you see it.
- Lots of the main characters seek solace or refuge in the cinema, a reference to the director's love of the movies.

Imagine the impact these ingredients would have had on an audience of the late fifties. The combination of all the elements above will have been unsettling, challenging and exhilarating to an audience used to formulaic narratives, pacing and camerawork. You can see evidence of the New Wave in all areas of cinema today. Movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Husbands and Wives* (1992), *Goodfellas* (1990), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Clerks* (1994), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Elephant* (2003) and even *Cloverfield* (2008) would not have been the same without it. We hope the screenings you are about to see are as affecting for you!

## **CASE STUDIES**

### **Les Quatre Cents Coups** **(400 Blows)** [1959, Subtitled]



**Directed by:** François Truffaut

**Certificate:** PG

**Running time:** 92 mins

**Suitable for:** GCSE, A Level French, Citizenship, Media/Film Studies

**Keywords:** representation of youth, crime, French New Wave, Truffaut

#### **Synopsis**

Closely based on the childhood experiences of its director, The 400 Blows charts the disintegration of young Antoine's home-life, his confrontational behaviour at school, his descent into crime and his eventual incarceration in a detention facility. Finding escape only in the cinema and literature, Antoine finally reaches a literal crossroads at the exhilarating and unforgettable climax of the film, which is topped with one of the most celebrated and haunting final freeze-frames in cinema.

## Characterisation

It could be argued that the adults in the film are stereotypical. The stern teacher; the absent father etc. But there are some unusual representations to be found...

1. The mother's attitude towards her son reverses dramatically on a couple of different occasions. Cast your mind back to these moments in the film: did you find this characterisation plausible?
2. In what ways was the father's treatment of his son beneficial or disruptive for the family? Use specific examples from the film to support your answer.

## Wider Contexts

Antoine's experiences in the film are modelled on the real-life experiences of Truffaut and some of his friends. Truffaut skipped school to go to the movies, was expelled and spent time in a detention centre.

3. With this in mind, how does the film confront the following socio-political notions:
  - a) Authority
  - b) Liberalism
  - c) Tradition

## Filmmaking techniques

Films that belonged to the New Wave movement typically favoured expression and meaning over story or narrative and revelled in their abandoning of glossy mainstream mise-en-scène.

4. Did you find yourself more engaged with Antoine's story, or with the mise-en-scène?
5. Did the calculatedly shoddy aesthetics of the film – obvious over-dubbing, hand-held camera, arguably intrusive score, varying acting ability – distance you from the experience or engage you further? Explain your responses with reference to particular aspects as well as your overall impressions.

## Free at last?

At times, Antoine experiences a sense of transcendental freedom even though he is in physically confined spaces; see, for example, the look of ecstasy on his face while he rides on the rotor, or when he is in the cinema.

6. The ending presents us with a dilemma: does the ocean represent freedom, or the end of the road for Antoine? How do you feel about films that feature narrative ambiguity?
7. The freeze-frame at the end of the film is one of the most celebrated in cinema. Why do you think that is? Have you seen any other films that finish on a freeze-frame?

# À bout de souffle (Breathless) [1959, Subtitled]



**Directed by:** Jean-Luc Godard

**Certificate:** PG

**Running time:** 90 mins

**Suitable for:** A Level French, Media/Film Studies

**Keywords:** French New Wave, Godard

## Synopsis

Paying homage to the numerous crime thrillers of Hollywood's Golden era, this film charts the relationship between Michel, a stylish but unpredictable criminal, and his estranged American girlfriend. Again, the notion of escapism through the cinema is key to this most famous of the New Wave pictures.

## The Crime Genre

The narrative of *À bout de souffle* reflects Godard's interest in Hollywood crime movies.

1. What do you know about traditional Hollywood crime films? If you are unfamiliar with the genre, find out a few of the classic titles from this era. In what ways does Godard subvert this most American of film genres?
2. What type of feelings did you have towards Michel? Did you find him exciting? Heroic? Anti-heroic? Flawed? At which moments in the film do you have these reactions towards him? Consider whether your reactions are influenced by narrative, characterisation, dialogue, acting or other factors.
3. How does Michel compare to other thriller protagonists you have encountered on film?
4. How is Patricia, an American, represented and how does her wardrobe and make-up differentiate her?

## A Little Boring?

One of the criticisms of the film is of one or two laborious sequences that slow the pace, namely the long scene in the apartment and the numerous scenes of Michel and Patricia walking through crowded Paris streets.

5. Do you feel these scenes detract from, or enhance the viewing experience?
6. Are these sequences in keeping with the ethos of the New Wave or do you think they are simply misjudged?

## A Hollywood Adaptation

*À bout de souffle* was remade into a Richard Gere movie called *Breathless* in 1983 (widely available on DVD). It was critically slated but is worth watching as a comparison, especially for its surprising ending.

7. In what ways is the later remake similar or different to the original?
8. What does the ending of *Breathless* (1983) share with conventions of the New Wave and how is it unusual for a Hollywood thriller?

# Jules et Jim

[1962, Subtitled]



**Directed by:** Francois Truffaut

**Certificate:** PG

**Running time:** 106 mins

**Suitable for:** AS/A2 Film Studies

**Keywords:** French language, French New Wave, adaptation, Truffaut

## Synopsis

A traditional narrative is given a contemporary, fresh New Wave twist in Truffaut's masterpiece. Lifelong friends Jules and Jim share the love of Catherine (an astonishing performance by Jeanne Moreau), a triangular relationship that will be tested by betrayal, war and questions of loyalty and morality. Again, the surprising ending challenges romantic and liberal ideals.

## **Truffaut: Then and Now...**

Three years after *The 400 Blows*, *Jules et Jim* reveals a lighter side to Truffaut...

1. What themes and issues seem to concern Truffaut in *Jules et Jim*, compared to his earlier *The 400 Blows*?
2. Do you feel Truffaut's attitude towards liberal values has progressed, especially in terms of monogamy and social responsibility?
3. Does the ending of *Jules et Jim* suggest a sense of pessimism in Truffaut? How does this ending compare to that of the other two films?

## **Storytelling Devices**

The film uses a unique narration, taken entirely from the novel the film is adapted from, that objectifies the thoughts and feelings of the main characters. It also uses stock footage of major events such as the war to suggest the passage of time.

4. What effects does the 'narrator' have on proceedings in this case? Does it make you sympathise with one character over another?
5. What are the advantages or disadvantages of the use of stock footage (material shot previously for another programme or feature) in this film?

## **Technical Details**

Many innovative expressions of film language through camerawork are used in *Jules et Jim* that make it feel contemporary, generically subversive and ahead of its time.

6. What effects do the intermittent freeze-frames and crash zooms have as you watch and what purpose do they seem to serve?
7. How does Truffaut establish a sense of geography in his locations and physical distance between his characters through camera movement and shot types? Does he favour close-ups? Long shots? Pans? Establishing shots?



## Further Activities

- Watch a few scenes from a studio-era Hollywood movie such as *The Maltese Falcon* or *Double Indemnity* or even a traditional pre-Nouvelle Vague French film of the fifties. What do the case study films do differently that makes them stand apart?
- Count the number of shots in a typical sequence in one of the three films in this guide, and compare this to another movie of the time, and then again to a more recent Hollywood film. What comments can you make about the rhythm of the edit in each sequence, and the frequency and type of transitions used?
- These three films are each based on age-old narrative frameworks and sub-genres: the coming-of-age tale, doomed lovers on the run and the romantic love triangle respectively. In groups, think of contemporary films that adhere to these narratives and list how the French New Wave films are similar or different in terms of representations of gender, subversion of genre and narrative resolutions.
- PRACTICAL – *À bout de souffle* was remade as *Breathless* and *Jules et Jim* was a clear inspiration for Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*. Storyboard and/or film a teaser trailer for a contemporary remake of one of the three case study films and explain any changes you would make to narrative, character, style, setting and so on in a production log.

Written by Gareth C Evans