



## In Search of an Alma Mater: Nouvelle Vague and its Relation to the American Cinema

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**ABSTRACT:-** It is commonly accepted that the French New Wave (*Nouvelle Vague*) forms part of the global history of cinema and constitutes a reference point for modern artists and directors. According to many film critics, the particular movement was a milestone and despite its political comments, it was directly related to the American Cinema of that era. Many American film genres, as for example, the film noirs, the historical drama and many others made their entrance in the French society and had an immense success. On the contrary, the American society was also influenced by this new French movement which was closely related to fine art. So, one might wonder: Is the American Cinema the one who influenced the *Nouvelle Vague* or vice versa? This paper shows, through a detailed analysis, the close relation of *Nouvelle Vague* with Hollywood, taking into account aspects of aesthetics and political history.

**Keywords:-** *Nouvelle Vague*, Hollywood, film, aesthetics, cinematography.

### I. INTRODUCTION

*Nouvelle Vague* is a French movement directly associated with the *politique des auteurs* which was born in the fields of Cahiers du Cinéma. The creation of the particular movement is attributed to André Bazin who was profoundly influenced by Leerhardt.

Undoubtedly, *Nouvelle Vague* introduced new production techniques with the use of an advanced technology. Along with the apparition of this movement, many new artists, directors, actors and producers emerged. Moreover, it constitutes a milestone with reference to the way they wrote about films during that era, making the *politique des auteurs* more popular. According to Antoine de Baecque, this "legend" or "myth" was extremely popular. This happens because, even nowadays, many directors find their inspiration in *Nouvelle Vague*'s films. For the following generation of cinematographers and film critics, the black and white shoots of Paris in films such as, *À bout de souffle* [Jean-Luc Godard, 1960] and *Cléo de 5 à 7* [Agnès Varda, 1962]), the sexual innuendos of *Paris nous appartient* [Jacques Rivette, 1960], of *Shoot the Piano Player* (*Tirez sur le pianiste* [François Truffaut, 1960]), of *Les bonnes femmes* (Claude Chabrol, 1960) and of *Jules et Jim* [Truffaut, 1962], or the sincerity of *Les 400 cents coups* [Truffaut, 1959], are a revolution. In other words, the "freshness" and the uniqueness of these films are still remarkable.

From the very beginning of the '60s, a large variety of articles and reviews was written for this new movement. At the same time, three important works appeared dedicated to *Nouvelle Vague*: Michel Marie's *La nouvelle vague: Une école artistique*, Antoine de Baecque's *La nouvelle vague: portrait d'une jeunesse* and Jean Douchet's *Nouvelle Vague*.

Furthermore, Richard Neupert and Vanessa Schwartz underline the importance of associating this French film movement with America. In fact, Neupert divides Paris into "Rive Gauche" and "Rive Droite" and he focuses on the way the American society embraced *Nouvelle Vague*. Particularly, he highlights the importance of Jean-Pierre Mocky's film, *Les Dragueurs* (1959), a film which was neglected by film critics and historians. In 2007, in her book *It's So French! Hollywood, Paris and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture*, Schwartz insists on the profound artistic relations, concerning cinema, between USA and France and she explains the reasons why *Nouvelle Vague* gained transatlantic success. She goes on stating that the presence of Truffaut, Chabrol and Godard as pioneers of Modernism, overshadowed former artistic works such as Varda's *La Pointe-Courte* ((1954) or even later works such as Jacques Demy's films.

In 1959, when the French films arrived in the USA, Time magazine published an interesting article explaining what *Les Vagueistes* means. The New Yorker and New York Times incorporated not only articles containing reviews on *Nouvelle Vague* but also interviews of French directors and actors. In 1962, this

movement was so successful that the magazine *Esquire* presented an article entitled "Paris in the Sixties: The Great Upsurge". According to this article "Nouvelle Vague constitutes a great artistic expression which forms part of the culture and promotes Paris as one of the biggest cities all over the world". Americans want to come in contact with this creative and talented youth and it comes as no surprise that the American obsession with this French cosmopolitan life is apparent during a period when France is associated with elegance.

## II. NOUVELLE VAGUE AND THE AMERICAN CINEMA

It is widely acknowledged that the French New Wave (Nouvelle Vague) introduced a lot of film genres, influenced by the American society, as for example: the musical comedy, the dramatic comedy, the historical drama and finally science fiction<sup>1</sup>. French respect towards the American film industry is even apparent in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

Through the legendary *Cahiers du Cinéma*, one can notice that film critics adored the American Cinema. The majority of articles published during the 50's, concerned Hollywood film productions paying at the same time tribute to actors and American film legends. In December 1955 volume, "Situation du Cinéma Américain", Eric Rohmer mentions that "California has the same significance as Florence had for painters". Despite being skeptic towards this kind of cinema, Eric Rohmer appreciates the classicism of Howard Hawks' films. He goes on describing American cinema as "effective and elegant" (Rohmer, 1955).

Film criticism in France, during the 50's, was undoubtedly influenced by the sociopolitical reality of that era. So, inevitably, it rarely praised any film originating from USA. For instance, *Ecran Français* was a famous magazine that housed criticism made by André Bazin, Alexandre Astruc and Pierre Kast and showed absolute hostility towards the American film industry. Moreover, other magazines, such as *Positif*, *Arts* and *Esprit*, tended to discredit this kind of cinema.

With regards to the famous article *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*, written by André Bazin, the film critic highlights the predominance of the American cinema with reference to some particular film genres, as for example horror movies, comedies, fantasy and musicals (Bazin, 2005). Not only the technique but also the philosophy of Hollywood fascinated film critics who began to wonder in what way they could ameliorate French film industry. First of all, they took into consideration the social impact that the American films had on the audience. According to Bazin, as far as Westerns are concerned, their success is due to the fact they are directly connected with the American tradition and culture: "an artistic evolution which is in harmony with its audience" (Hillier, 1985). Undoubtedly, this film genre was highly appreciated by Bazin since, according to his words, it constituted a combination of a classic perfection and of the way someone uses to make statements for one's situation" (Bazin, 1955).

Jim Hillier is the one who stated that "the dominant opinion of the film critics, in the fields of *Cahiers*, concerning film genre is not clear" (Hillier, 1985). The meeting point of all these critics was their excitement about Hollywood horror movies and film noir which were praised by Claude Chabrol, in his article "Evolution du Film Policier" (Chabrol, 54:9). In this article, Chabrol underlines that the classic film noir, as for instance *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, *Murder my Sweet*, *High Sierra* and *Out of the Past*, expresses "the sincere feelings and the preoccupations of its creator" (Chabrol, 54:9). When it comes to Nicholas Ray, Rohmer affirms that "he is one of the few directors in Hollywood that preserves his own style, his own view of the world and his own poetry" (Hillier, 1985).

It comes as no surprise that film critics preferred artists like: Billy Wilder, Howard Hawks, Nicholas Ray, Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles who were closely related to film noir. It is no surprise also, that *Cahiers* film critics supported French directors who were associated with American cinema. Critics had created a strong and profound relationship with Becker and Melville who was turned out to be their mentor. It is a fact that Becker's film *Touchez pas au Grisbi* (1954) and Melville's, *Bob le Flambeur* (1956) influenced definitely French New Wave from an aesthetic point of view and they were considered to be pioneers.

Another significant film of French New Wave is Jules Dassin's, *Du Rififi chez les Hommes* (1955). Actually, it constitutes a film adaptation, inspired by Albert Simonin's book, and it shares many similarities with the American film noirs. Jules Dassin was an American film director who began his career by filming commercial movies for MGM, as for example the movie *Nazi Agent* (1942). Furthermore, during the 40's, Dassin came in contact with Mark Hellinger, journalist and producer, and they filmed the drama *Brute Force* (1947) and the film noir *The Naked City* (1948). The criticism concerning the way "social and economic circumstances lead people to particular acts" (Phillips, 2009) resulted in putting Dassin in Hollywood's "black list" and then he was exiled. During the 50's, he came to Europe and accepted to film Pathé's movie, *Du Rififi chez les Hommes*, since Melville had already abandoned this post.

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<sup>1</sup> eg. *Une Femme est une Femme* (1961), *Jules et Jim* (1962), *Alphaville* (1965), *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964), *Viva Maria!* (1965).

*Cahiers* film critics expressed their enthusiasm for the particular movie as they thought that it could "rejuvenate a film genre that was almost forgotten by the audience" (Phillips, 2009). The success of French Crime Cinema was not at all comparable to the American one. Bazin adored its energy and its authenticity, two aspects that came in absolute contrast with French film noirs of that era. In fact many film critics praised the work of some directors for adopting a wide range of realistic elements in their films. For instance, Vadim's, *Et Dieu créa la femme* (1956), was a film that was highly appreciated by *Cahiers* for the way it depicted youth and sexuality. The main reason for this enthusiasm, according to Truffaut, was the depiction of "the young woman in the fields of the French cinema of the era". Truffaut admires Vadim's attempt to "copy real life" but also Bardot's natural playing.

Another reason according to which film critics praised Vadim's film, was that American influence concerned youth and sexuality issues. Furthermore, the depiction of Bardot as Juliette, whose cheerfulness was envied by the men of Saint Tropez, is clearly influenced by the American model and more precisely by the Hollywood way of depicting female sexuality. In *Riding the new wave*, Ivan Jobs mentions:

" The huge success of Bardot was due to her extreme youthfulness. The image of *femme fatale* was not something new in the cinema, taking into consideration Mae West or Marlene Dietrich, but for the first time the spectator faces the combination of *enfant terrible* and *femme fatale*" (Ivan Jobs, 2007). So, despite the fact that, in the first place, one might not find many influences from Hollywood cinema, in the end we come to realize the strong relations between American cinema and Nouvelle Vague.

### III. AESTHETICS OF NOUVELLE VAGUE

It is acknowledged that the majority of the artists who belong to the Nouvelle Vague shared the conviction that the cinema should portray the "objective truth". For instance, in *Le Petit Soldat*, Godard plays with the notion of "cinematographic phenomenology" which means that the human face is able to portray, according to Amédée Ayfre, the human behavior (Hillier, 1985). In the particular film, Anna Karina is actually Veronica Dreyer whose surname is used on purpose (an implication for Carl Theodor Dreyer whose film *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* is known for the close-ups of the Maria Falconetti's sad face).

Despite the fact that Jean Luc Godard still plays with cinematographic notions, the whole issue that the cinema can portray the "objective truth" is doubted. So, Rouch and Morin's beliefs concerning the "cinema-truth" (*cinéma-vérité*) and that the cinema can show clearly the daily life, become important issues of discussion. Their contribution to the history of cinema is that they persuaded us that the cinematographic truth is not at all simple (De Baecque, 2008).

As de Baecque highlights in *L'Histoire Caméra*, Nouvelle Vague's realism lies in the technological revolution while returning to a more primitive cinema (De Baecque, 2008). Similarly to Hollywood's Film Noirs, Nouvelle Vague directors used a variety of refined direction techniques as well as a wide variety of narrative and cinematographic strategies like portable cameras. The notion of direction, which according to Hillier played an important role in *Cahiers* and constituted the main means of expression, forms an integral part of Nouvelle Vague's aesthetics (Hillier, 1985). In fact, Hillier makes use of Fereydoun Hoveyda's definition of "direction": it is the technique that a director invents in order to express his ideas and to establish his work (Hillier, 1985). As a result, direction is strictly related to the notion of "technique" and to "art".

On the other hand, many critics stated that Nouvelle Vague had no connection with the "engaged cinema". But, according to de Baecque, in many of these films where the daily life of young people is depicted, there is an extended use of political comments. Actually, he states that:

*Les courts-métrages de la Nouvelle Vague proposaient une expérimentation inédite, dans laquelle la forme même des films (leur tournage, leur technique, en un mot le regard qu'ils imposent) devenait un moyen d'enregistrer à l'écran de la politique. Une manière de filmer, de repérer des lieux, de faire bouger les corps saisissait la politique précisément là où ne pouvait la capturer le cinéma à l'ancienne: dans la jeunesse d'une époque vue à travers un style personnel* (De Baecque, 2008).

According to De Baecque, the way directors filmed the youth, the form of their films along with the techniques they used (for example, the lightning, the places chosen for shooting, the whole style etc) are crucial elements of engaged art. Particularly, he believed that the artists of this movement wanted to portray the difficult situations related to that era which concerned political issues as for example, the war in Algeria or even the Americanization of the Parisian urban environment.

It has to be underlined that the film noirs depicted the dark side of the American society through a combination of expressionistic techniques used. Jules Dassin's *The Naked City* is an illustrative example of a film portraying urban environments under destruction (Dimendberg, 2004).

Moreover, the film *Cléo de 5 à 7*, contains a thorough critic of the introduction of American models in French society. Cléo's world is moving around narcissistic delights as for example, the glory and the materialism. Even her house represents the American way of life. While she has gained the glory as a pop artist, she slowly acquires the image of an American star and the superficial element of her personality becomes

obvious. It is remarkable that the news concerning the war in Algeria follows the radio commercial of an American shampoo that many American women adored. According to Kristen Ross, Varda uses this device in order to highlight the "dirty war" in Algeria along with the American consumerism (Ross, 1996).

What's more, we have to mention that Rohmer's film *Le Signe du Lion* constitutes a clear example of a film that depicts the parisian urban environment in a society that is being transformed into a modern one based on the american standards.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It is widely approved that Nouvelle Vague has been influenced by the American Cinema but on the contrary it had a definite impact on American Cinema and society. It constitutes a milestone in Post-War European cinema and it was born out of the dissatisfaction of the youth towards the French cinema of the era. Undoubtedly, it offered magnificent shots of Paris while trying to depict reality as it really was. Certainly, it was influenced by Hollywood but Nouvelle Vague moved forward, adopting new cinematographic techniques and film language. After all, for many critics, all these French films pay homage to Hollywood. It is an influential movement who left its mark to American directors such as, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, Quentin Tarantino, Wes Anderson and many others. It even affected the shot length we used to have. Nowadays, the shot length has become even shorter than in Nouvelle Vague films. All the directors and actors who sprang from this key movement gained international success and still form an integral part of the global history of cinema and of global cultural heritage.

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