Introduction to French New Wave Cinema

Presentation by Chris Schloemp
Information Courtesy of Stephen Nottingham and the Contributing Editors of the Wikipedia
Overview

- Group of French film critics who became filmmakers themselves
- “La nouvelle vague” runs from 1958 to 1964
- Disdained formulaic French films of the 1940s and 1950s
- Forged a new cinema that broke all the rules
- Developed a style that continues to influence films today
Origins at the Cahiers du Cinema

- French film magazine, edited by Andre Bazin
- Most of the New Wave filmmakers began as critics, writing for Cahiers du Cinema
  - Francois Truffaut
  - Jean-Luc Godard
  - Jacques Rivette
  - Claude Chabrol
  - Eric Rohmer
- Others, such as Agnes Varda and Louis Malle became associated with the movement later
Breathless-Jean Luc Goddard
Socio-cultural Context: France, 1950s and 60s

- Europe still recovering from World War II
  - Still rebuilding infrastructure
  - Financially insecure
- France had been an occupied country
  - Tension between resistance and collaborators
- Cynicism about lingering vestiges of empire
  - Algeria and Indochina
- French film industry fell back on traditional narrative forms
- Cahiers critics inspired by other artistic and intellectual movements, such as Italian Neo-Realism and French Existentialism to rebel against these traditions
Influence of Italian Neo-Realism

- Set among the poor and working class
- Long takes
- Location shooting in poor neighborhoods and in the countryside
- Amateur actors, often featuring children
- Mundane scenes of everyday activities
- Economic and moral conditions of post-war Italy
- Defeat, poverty, desperation
- Name recognition: Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica
Shoot the Piano Player- Jean Luc Goddard
Ladri di biciclette
con Enzo Staiola e Lamberto Maggiorani
Produzione P.D.S. Un film di Vittorio De Sica
- French New Wave films deal with the ordinary and the commonplace
  - Most favor Parisian streets and cafes for their mise-en-scene
  - Characters are often down-and-out
  - Children often featured
Influence of Existentialism

- Philosophy that develops in post-war France under Jean-Paul Sartre
  - Stresses individual accountability
  - Views freedom as a necessity
  - Recognizes and accepts absurdity of life
  - Mandates authentic action
  - Refusal to play roles laid out by society
• French New Wave protagonists...
  • Are rebels, loners, and outcasts
  • Have tenuous family ties
  • Behave spontaneously
  • Act “immorally”
  • Are anti-authoritarian
Deliberately conscious of making films that commented on the making of films
Films constantly remind viewers that they are watching a film
Films use technical and stylistic innovations to refashion an audience’s sense of what it means to go to the cinema
Bazin and the Auteur Theory

- Belief that film should represent a director’s unique vision
- Some directors have an identifiable style from film to film
- These directors should be considered the sole author—auteur—of their films
- Term first appears in Cahiers article written by Truffaut, but is heavily influenced by Bazin
Iconoclastic Editing

- These films deliberately break long-held editing conventions, notably...
  - Jump cuts as opposed to shot/reverse shot
    - Godard’s *A Bout de Souffle*
  - Disregard of the 180 degree rule
  - Insertion of extraneous, non-diegetic clips
    - Truffaut’s *Tirez le Pianiste*
  - Long takes
  - Real-time
    - Varda’s *Cleo de 5 a 7*
Amateurs and Improvisors

- Frequent use of non-professionals
- Spectators on set often wander into the shot
- Actors encouraged to improvise lines
- Lines of dialogue overlap and sometimes become unintelligible
- Attempt to get at an authentic picture of life as it is lived
Freedom of New Technology

- Experimentation and improvisation helped by new, cheap film equipment
  - Lightweight, handheld cameras
  - Faster film stock
  - Portable sound equipment
  - Lightweight lighting kits

1962 Éclair NPR
Mobile Camera

- Location filming and available light preferred
- Extensive panning and tracking
- Usually only one camera used
- Long, tracking shots
  - Cinematographer in *A Bout de Souffle* follows characters in and out of buildings while pushed in a wheelchair
- Clever camera placement
  - Inside the carousel in *Les Quatre Cents Coups*
Grounded in Popular Culture

- Characters reference popular entertainers of their time period
  - Jean-Paul Belmondo as Humphrey Bogart in *A Bout de Souffle*

- Homages to Hollywood auteurs, such as Hitchcock

- Jazz music, popular in Paris at the time, featured often in film scores

Belmondo as Bogart

Alfred Hitchcock

Miles Davis
400 Blows - François Truffaut
Lasting Impact

- New Wave techniques in Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)
- “New Hollywood” directors all claim inspiration from French New Wave: Altman, Coppola, De Palma, Polanksi, and Scorsese
- Similar movements in Europe
- “Nuberu bagu” in Japan in the 1960s
Contemporary Influences

- Linklater’s *Waking Life* has a vignette devoted to a discussion of Bazin’s film theory.
- Tarantino dedicated *Reservoir Dogs* to Godard.
- Opening scenes of Wes Anderson’s *The Royal Tenenbaums* mimic the opening of Varda’s *Cleo de 5 a 7*.
- Soderbergh frequently uses jump cuts in the style of Godard.
- *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* borrows heavily from Godard as well.