




# The city of love: Paris



I believe that in cinema, there can  
only be love stories.

Jean-Luc Godard



# Learning objectives




- To define auteurism
- To understand the French New Wave in the context of technological innovation, generational conflicts, and aesthetic concerns
- To advance a coherent reading of a film based on the depiction of urban spaces and the characters' movement through the city




# Introduction



We now move transcontinentally to Paris and the French nouvelle vague (New Wave), a movement that explicitly articulated a theory of auteurism, a film movement contraposed to the studio system. The filmmakers who constituted the movement – François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Agnes Varda, Claude Chabrol, and Jacques Rivette – expressed their understanding of the nouvelle vague through the role of the *auteur*, the director who relies on improvisation in respect of the script and the acting.



The nouvelle vague and Paris are linked to the degree that the relationship appears self-evident, and few scholars have investigated the conditions and implications of that connection beyond the fact that several of the important auteurs of the nouvelle vague grew up in Paris.




The films of the French New Wave favor on-location shooting, enabled by fast film stock that requires less light and by lightweight cameras, a small crew, direct sound, and amateur or lesser-known professional actors to create an experience of authenticity. Just as film noir reworked the Weimar city film, nouvelle vague cites film noir based on their shared concern for the staging of urban space, as the case study of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) will demonstrate.







# The Paris syndrome, or the city of love



In October 2006 a Reuters press release reported the “Paris syndrome,” first diagnosed in the French medical journal *Nervure* in 2004, with symptoms of accelerated heartbeat, giddiness, shortness of breath, and hallucinations. The Paris syndrome apparently affects only the Japanese and only when visiting Paris; women in their early thirties on their first international trip are particularly prone to the affliction.




The Japanese Embassy repatriates about 25 Paris visitors per year who claim to suffer from this condition named after a world city that once was the traveler's dream destination (see "Paris syndrome"). We can assume that the cognitive disjuncture and nervous breakdown result from a kind of culture shock at encountering the real Paris, not the Hollywood notion of romance that conventional feature films associate with the city.




The “city of love” seems a far cry from the dark, urban underside of film noir, but love in the nouvelle vague is not just the romantic love associated with Henri Cartier-Bresson’s black-and-white photos or recent romantic projections onto Paris in contemporary Hollywood films.




Love in the nouvelle vague has rough edges, is fraught with exploitation, disillusionment, betrayal, pain, suffering, and occasionally death. But love is also celebrated as beautiful through a set of aestheticized objects: film, Paris, and woman as object of desire. These (sometimes nostalgic) celebrations are articulated through an aestheticized realism made possible by new postwar technology, especially lightweight cameras.



The tropes established in the Weimar city film and continued in film noir endure, especially that the association with the city connects love to lust, betrayal, and sometimes crime. The interweaving of love and the sensual and visually stunning portrayal of Paris evokes an affective response to the city and suggests a highly emotional relationship between the auteurs and Paris.




The biographical dimension of several of the filmmakers who grew up in Paris – Truffaut, Godard, and Chabrol, for example – differs from the relationship of Weimar filmmakers with Berlin, most of whom had migrated to the metropolis from within Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or the film noir directors' relationship with Hollywood, of whom many were national and transnational migrants.




“No city, perhaps, symbolizes a nation as surely as Paris does France,” posits Naomi Greene. Although Berlin was the capital of Germany during the Weimar Republic, in the city film Berlin signified primarily modernity; Los Angeles is not the capital of the United States, and in film noir it came to epitomize the postwar urban dissolution of social structures.






Greene claims that Paris always had a privileged presence in French cinema, but emphasizes the New Wave's depiction "of post-war social dislocations and anxieties" Specific changes in the city included "the gentrification of working-class neighborhoods; the growth of affluent suburbs as well as the rise of desolate housing projects; the influence of globalization and of the kind of consumerist culture associated with the USA."



Historian Robert Gildea calls the period from 1960 to 2004 one of “anxiety and doubt,” during which the French “have had to come to terms with the legacy of the Occupation, with the loss of empire, with the influx of foreign immigrants, with the rise of Islam, with the destruction of traditional rural life, with the threat of Anglo-American culture to French language and civilization”



# The defining moment of the New Wave




The nouvelle vague was a reaction to the tradition of quality (“la tradition de la qualité”), which was characterized by high production value, primarily literary adaptations, high attendance and earnings at the box-office, and a limited number of filmmakers making most of the films. The French New Wave’s reaction to this studio system in France was part of a general historical shift from studio production to *auteurism* in the 1960s.



The nouvelle vague officially lasted for only two seasons, 1959–60, but it had a lasting effect on later French and international films in that *auteur*-centered cinema also developed in the United States, Germany, Great Britain, Brazil, Japan, Poland, and the Czech Republic. But only in France was the nouvelle vague so closely tied to one city: Paris.



So the term 'nouvelle vague' refers to a time frame that was surprisingly short considering the movement's impact. Marie attributes three primary characteristics to it: it was a coherent movement, it lasted a limited period of time, and simultaneous interlocking factors at the end of the 1950s led to its emergence.




The term was originally coined not in relationship to film, but as a “sociological investigation of the phenomenon of the new postwar generation”, and then the French newspaper L'Express applied it to the new films that defined themselves in contrast to the “tradition of quality,” the dominant cinema of the 1950s: 1958 brought Claude Chabrol's film Handsome Serge, followed by his The Cousins (1959), and in May 1959 François Truffaut's The 400 Blows arrived in theaters and was shown at the Cannes Film Festival.




The nouvelle vague relied on a close relationship between criticism and filmmaking – that is, the films were anticipated and accompanied by manifestos by film critics who often became directors themselves, which circumscribed the movement's parameters. Cahiers du cinéma, the film journal with which these critics-cum-directors were associated, was first published in April 1951.






The so-called “cult of the director” refers not only to the participants in the nouvelle vague, but also to the directors that the Cahiers du cinema retroactively identified as auteurs whom they tried to emulate: “Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Becker, Abel Gance, Max Ophuls, Jacques Tati, Roger Leenhardt”




Several of the key concepts of the nouvelle vague were articulated in published articles even earlier than that. For example, according to Marie, Alexandre Astruc's essay "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camérastyle" in L'Ecran français in 1948 initiated the French New Wave and offered the "first affirmation of the notion of the film auteur"




The New Wave valued small budgets, which favored the creative freedom of auteurs. Directors tended to rely on “plan-of-action scripts,” which are “more open to the uncertainties of production, to chance encounters, and ideas that suddenly come to the auteur in the here and now of filming”



This understanding of film-shooting has much in common with Georg Simmel's and Walter Benjamin's understanding of the city, particularly Benjamin's theorization of the flâneur as a figure that is seduced by the city to venture into it. He shared with Simmel the emphasis on chance encounters that for Simmel had to be controlled by exact planning so as to prevent the underlying chaos from erupting.




In contrast, Benjamin's texts about the flâneur situate the pleasure of the city precisely in the chance encounters that are available to the flâneur, the figure that leisurely walks through the city. The many tracking shots of the city seen through the eyes of either the characters or the camera capture the sensation of the flâneur and the ambivalence of post-Second World War modernity, which was also nostalgic for its own past as embodied in the nineteenth-century Parisian architecture and urban planning that dominates the setting of the nouvelle vague films.



The biographical dimension projects subjectivity onto the urban space created in the films. Paris, however, functions also as the capital of France. The biographical relationship with Paris therefore also results from its role as educational, political, and cultural center of the nation. Auteurs imbued the setting with subjectivity, but the relationship between their subjective portraits and the city under investigation was shaped also by the role the capital played for the nation at that historical juncture.




# Urban–rural: old binaries in a new dress




Chabrol's film *The Cousins*, considered to be the beginning of the *nouvelle vague*, relies on character and thematic constellations of urbanity and rurality, sexuality and innocence, decadence and hard work, success and failure, thus continuing the rural/urban split from the nineteenth century. It is the story of 23-year-old Charles, who moves to Paris to live with his cousin Paul and study at the university; and proceeds to introduce him to the world of decadent students.







The Cousins continues the city themes established in Weimar city film and film noir. Neuilly-sur-Seine is presented as a wealthy suburb of Paris – it is now associated with conservative politician Nicolas Sarkozy, current president of the French Republic. Paul takes Charles to clubs where young people hang out, smoke, and listen to jazz, and where women proclaim that they are independent of men.



The seemingly random shots anticipate cinéma vérité (cinema of truth), more closely associated with the films of Jean Rouch. The students' decadent lifestyle contrasts with the subplot involving a bookstore owner who advises Charles that in order to succeed he must work hard.



Greene explains the immense impact of the French New Wave as a generational break: “the young people in New Wave films exhibit a disregard for the social conventions – particularly those governing sexuality – that marked their parents’ generation,” but as a consequence “the characters in these films are often vulnerable and alone,” as is Charles



While walking with Florence and circled by the camera, Charles explains that he has an inferiority complex because he is from a small town in the country. The character of Florence represents the urban love that is detached and immoral, in stark contrast to the invisible mother, the addressee of the letters. The narrative is episodic, similar to the urban experience described by Simmel: scenes show Charles working, Paul playing, and Florence lounging on the balcony.




# The neighborhood: affective urbanity



Films such as *The Cousins* rely on a sense of urbanism in which conventional mores and social ties between friends and family have disappeared. However, in the films of the *nouvelle vague* we also find that the city, or more precisely the neighborhood, appears as the setting for affective relationships substituting for conventional family structures: coffee-houses, bars, and the street become home to young boys, as in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, 1959).




The city as a whole offers a liberating education to the young main characters of the film, and the film celebrates particularly the neighborhoods Truffaut knew as a child. The 400 Blows depends on the tension that arises between the human drama in the interior, domestic space and the exterior context of the city, which manipulates love.



Much has been made of the biographical dimension of *The 400 Blows*, casting the figure of Antoine Doisnel as the alter-ego of Truffaut, steeped in the urban environment of Paris. The beginning of the film favors the city over the individual in an extended sequence showing Paris; continuous traveling- and tracking-shots center on the Eiffel Tower and move through the area of the Cinémathèque Française.






The lightweight camera made these kinds of location shots possible, and they announce and celebrate location shooting in contrast to studio filming. The three-minute opening consists of five shots edited together with the camera tilted slightly up, moving along façades of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century buildings. According to Andre Bazin, too many edits in a scene makes a film seem artificial, and this opening shot includes only a limited number.




Open windows: permeable interior and  
exterior spaces



Truffaut continued the topic of love in the city in the short film *Antoine and Colette* (1962), part of an international episodic film entitled *Love at Twenty*. Léaud continues to play Antoine and grows up with him, mimicking the conventions of a long-term documentary. Antoine has returned to Paris and lives in a small room in the Hôtel de la Paix (at the Rue Forest), next to the Gaumont Palace movie theater; his window overlooks the Boulevard de Clichy.




He works at Phillips, making records. During a classical concert at the Salle Pleyel he falls in love with Colette and subsequently moves into a room in the Hôtel de l'Europe, across the street from her family. He is invited to eat and watch television with her parents while she goes out with other young men.



Antoine and Colette concludes with a sequence of photos by Henri Cartier-Bresson and the title song *L'amour à vingt ans*. The black-and-white photos show various couples kissing and in love in Paris, shifting from the individual narrative of Antoine to the paradigmatic representation of Paris expressed by Cartier-Bresson as a city of young love. Truffaut's portrayal, however, shows us a frustrated love fed nostalgically by affection for Paris.



# The street: love and detection




The New Wave, observed Éric Rohmer, “was born from the desire to show Paris, to go down into the street, at a time when French cinema was a cinema of studios”. The next installment of Antoine’s story, *Stolen Kisses* (1968) begins, like *The 400 Blows*, with the conjoining of a personal inscription by Truffaut and the city of Paris.




The very first shot shows us an unknown street with the first credit item, the production company, written across it: “Une Production/ Les Films Du Carrosse/ Les Productions Artistes Associés.” Then the title of the film appears, followed by “Dedicated to Henri Langlois, the Head of the Cinémathèque Française,” and a clearly centered shot onto the Cinémathèque Française with a handwritten sign announcing that the date of reopening will be announced in the press.






At that point Henri Langlois, the Head of the Cinémathèque Française, who had built an unrivalled film collection by hiding films from the Nazis during the German occupation and had created an intellectual and artistic center for the nouvelle vague in the Cinémathèque, had been fired, which led to an outraged protest by the filmmakers and intellectuals associated with it.




The camera zooms back and, after the cut, a traditional establishing shot of Paris shows the Eiffel Tower dominating the skyline. Truffaut's name is written across this image, again aligning his name with the dominant signifier of the city. While the camera pans to the left and down, the nostalgic chanson about remembering love from the credit sequence ends, and we hear the real sounds of the city streets. The camera moves towards a small, barred window, and we hear a neutral dialogue before a second cut deposits us in the interior setting, a military jail.




# Reversing the gaze: the female flâneur



The observation just made about *Stolen Kisses* is echoed by Emma Wilson's general comment that "the Parisian landscape of the nouvelle vague is a space largely of male subjectivity and of amorous encounters". In Chabrol's and Truffaut's films, the city is gendered as male: men inhabit the city and actively move through it, while women serve as objects of their desire.



At the same time, the status of women was changing and female characters were portrayed as sexually liberated and thus often as sexualized, sometimes as dominant characters in contrast to earlier representations in French cinema that emphasized traditional feminine qualities.



Whereas in Benjamin's theory of the flâneur and many of the Weimar city films seductive commodity and object of desire are collapsed in the figure of the prostitute, Varda's film pries that conflation apart and allows us the pleasure of the chance encounter in the city.