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From the Emergence to the Decline of the French New Wave: A Film Practice Movement Continually Generated Within Politics

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Abstract: This article reconsiders the French New Wave's emergence, apogee, and dissipation through a socio-political lens. Rather than a sudden aesthetic rupture, it was a "prepared rebellion." The Occupation and postwar institutional consolidation supplied organizational infrastructure and market preconditions; Soviet montage and Italian Neorealism, mediated by André Bazin's realist hermeneutics, furnished its aesthetic and ethical foundations. Juxtaposing Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, the article traces an internal split over the politics-cinema nexus: Godard moves from making political films to filming politically, while Truffaut sustains humanist narration and a micropolitics that frames auteur cinema as an ethics of communication with spectators. May 1968 marks the turning point—from the Langlois Affair to the suspension of Cannes—when the film field politicized itself, catalyzing political modernism and militant cinema and accelerating both collective fragmentation and the New Wave's 1970s ebb. Its historical significance thus exceeds low-budget practice or auteurist technique: through the interplay of institutions, aesthetic paradigms, and political events, it reconfigured cinema's possibilities as social practice and shaped later European and global film form and thought.

Keywords: French cinema; the French New Wave Movement; the Cahiers du Cinéma Group; politics

1. Introduction

Emerging in the late 1950s, the French New Wave represented a profound transformation in the development of modern cinema. In contrast to the so-called "Tradition of Quality" that had prevailed in the decade following World War II—characterized by relatively high production costs, star-oriented casting, carefully constructed sets, and tightly scripted narratives—the New Wave advocated lower-budget filmmaking, non-classical narrative structures, and an emphasis on the "auteur film," in which the director's personal vision and stylistic identity became central. Although this shift was closely associated with the artistic pursuits of figures such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, often grouped together as directors linked to *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the movement should not be understood solely as the outcome of individual creativity. Rather, as a broad cultural phenomenon that extended beyond the confines of film production, the French New Wave was also shaped by wider social conditions. In the years following the war, collective experiences left deep and enduring impressions on public consciousness, particularly among younger generations, fostering new attitudes toward art, culture, and modes of expression. Approximately a decade after the New Wave reached prominence, French society entered another period of intense transformation

during the events of May 1968, which influenced filmmakers in divergent ways and altered the direction of the movement; subsequently, the New Wave gradually lost its position as the dominant cinematic mode in France. Nevertheless, its long-term impact has remained significant, as later filmmakers across different contexts have continued to draw inspiration from its aesthetic strategies and creative principles. This article therefore examines how broader social factors interacted with the French New Wave at different stages of its development—from its emergence and consolidation to its eventual decline—and how these influences were reflected in the movement's evolving forms and practices.

2. From the Accumulations of the Occupation to the Postwar Emergence: A "Prepared Rebellion"

During the period of German occupation in World War II, cinematic subject matter in France was subject to strict limitations. Under the combined pressures of institutional censorship and the desire to avoid accusations of improper alignment, filmmakers generally refrained from engaging with immediate social realities and instead turned to historical or period-based narratives that were temporally distant from the present. As a result, cinema produced during this period developed a pronounced stylization in both visual composition and narrative content [1]. Period films were marked by highly elaborate settings, and acting styles increasingly shifted away from heterogeneous, everyday performance toward a theatrical mode detached from ordinary social experience. Ornamental dialogue and abstract, poetic language gradually replaced the colloquial realism that had previously characterized depictions of urban working life. At the same time, however, the wartime reorganization of the French film industry and the establishment of archival practices created structural conditions that would later facilitate the expansion of film culture in the postwar era and provide essential groundwork for the emergence of the French New Wave.

The Cinémathèque was founded before the war by figures active in film preservation, criticism, and theory, with the initial aim of rescuing silent films rendered obsolete by the transition to sound cinema. Unexpectedly, it evolved into a crucial site for the education and formation of a new generation of filmmakers [1]. From the wartime years onward, the institution gradually acquired screening venues and organized daily thematic programs, often presenting multiple films in a single day. Owing to its inclusive curatorial orientation, works by a wide range of international directors—many of whom were not yet firmly established in the French canon—were introduced to audiences. This sustained exposure fostered a cohort of young cinephiles who absorbed diverse cinematic traditions and formal approaches. Among the directors later associated with the French New Wave, several spent years engaging intensively with these screenings, accumulating extensive cinematic knowledge and refining their aesthetic sensibilities. Their shared viewing practices also contributed to the formation of a relatively coherent set of critical perspectives and creative principles, which later informed their collective intervention in French cinema.

Beyond exhibition culture, institutional reforms further consolidated the foundations of postwar filmmaking. Wartime administrative bodies overseeing film production were restructured after the war into a centralized national organization, and greater emphasis was placed on professional training and formal film education. In addition, postwar policies regulating foreign film imports and the establishment of an automatic financial support mechanism linked to box-office performance played a decisive role in sustaining domestic production. Together, these measures not only stabilized the industry but also created a relatively flexible environment in which new modes of filmmaking could be explored.

While such institutional arrangements were indispensable, the immediate driving force behind the New Wave lay in the filmmakers' desire to challenge the dominant conventions of "quality cinema." This impulse was not confined to questions of style or

technique but was also informed by broader debates concerning the relationship between artistic form and social experience. Earlier developments in European cinema had already demonstrated how film could move beyond established narrative conventions to engage more directly with everyday life. In the early twentieth century, theoretical and practical explorations of realism emphasized the capacity of cinema to reorganize fragments of lived experience into new expressive structures [2]. Filmmakers experimenting with montage and documentary-based approaches sought to capture ordinary situations, spatial details, and temporal rhythms that had previously been marginalized in mainstream cinema. Through the deliberate reconfiguration of these elements, they aimed to construct alternative cinematic languages capable of addressing contemporary realities.

These realist explorations were later extended and adapted in the postwar context through the emergence of Italian Neorealism. Shaped by material hardship and reflections on recent historical experience, Neorealist filmmakers emphasized location shooting, non-professional performers, and narratives centered on everyday life. At a theoretical level, cinema was increasingly understood as bearing a responsibility to observe and disclose social reality rather than merely to provide polished spectacle. This orientation exerted a notable influence on filmmakers and critics in France, who similarly advocated a cinema grounded in temporal continuity, spatial integrity, and attention to ordinary experience [2]. Within this framework, technical choices such as extended takes and restrained editing were valued for their capacity to preserve the ambiguity and openness of lived reality. These principles were later translated into practice in several key works of the French New Wave, where narrative looseness and documentary-inflected observation became defining features.

From this perspective, the French New Wave did not emerge as a sudden or isolated rupture. Rather, it was the result of a long process of accumulation in which institutional restructuring, exhibition culture, and evolving realist paradigms collectively prepared the conditions for its appearance. The movement's subsequent expansion was thus rooted in foundations laid well before its formal recognition as a distinct cinematic tendency.

3. Divergent Negotiations Between Politics and Cinema: Laying the Groundwork for a Subsequent Split

From the beginning, filmmakers associated with the French New Wave were deeply influenced by Italian Neorealism. Embracing the idea that cinema should engage with lived experience, they directed their cameras toward everyday social environments and ordinary life. Within this context, André Bazin was widely regarded as an important intellectual influence. He emphasized that cinema possesses an educative dimension and therefore carries a particular cultural responsibility. In his view, film has the capacity to move across established boundaries between artistic form and social experience, thereby stimulating reflection and emotional engagement [3]. This understanding of cinema exerted a formative influence on several directors associated with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, including François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Claude Chabrol. By the mid-twentieth century, cinema had thus moved beyond its earlier status as a purely recreational medium and increasingly came to be understood as a form of cultural practice capable of engaging with broader social questions. Alongside literature and painting, film gradually acquired legitimacy as an art form with the potential to reflect social realities and shape public perception.

Although the New Wave emerged after World War II, many unresolved social issues continued to inform cultural discourse in France. The long-term effects of the war, ongoing reassessments of social structures, and debates surrounding national identity remained part of the broader environment in which New Wave filmmakers worked. For directors committed to cinematic renewal, such issues were difficult to overlook. Nevertheless, disagreements soon arose regarding the degree to which film should directly address social and political questions, and how much interpretive or critical

responsibility cinema ought to assume. These differences were especially evident between two central figures of the movement, Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, and they would later become a major factor contributing to their personal and professional estrangement.

From an early stage, Godard displayed a strong interest in contemporary social issues and consistently sought to challenge established cinematic conventions and dominant cultural norms. In his early critical writings, he argued that cinema should not shy away from engaging with major social institutions and historical experiences, praising films that incorporated documentary elements and direct observation of social reality [4]. This orientation was evident from the outset of his filmmaking career, as he pursued forms of expression that disrupted conventional narrative structures and questioned established modes of representation. Later commentators have observed that, in his subsequent work, Godard's objective shifted from simply producing films with social themes to rethinking filmmaking itself as a socially engaged practice [5].

Godard's creative development can be broadly divided into phases corresponding to the evolving intensity of his engagement with social questions. His early success *Breathless* (1959), often regarded as a landmark of the New Wave, does not explicitly address contemporary events at the level of narrative. However, its characters' fragmented conversations-interwoven with references to literature, advertising, and popular culture-and the protagonist's restless, nonconformist demeanor already signal a departure from mainstream cinematic values. From the early 1960s onward, Godard's films increasingly foregrounded social tensions and ethical dilemmas. Certain works encountered institutional resistance due to their subject matter, which addressed sensitive historical experiences and forms of organized conflict. By the mid-1960s, his films adopted an even more confrontational style, combining formal experimentation with a critical examination of everyday life and mass culture [1]. During this period, he increasingly rejected conventional storytelling techniques and emphasized reflexive strategies that drew attention to the constructed nature of cinematic representation.

Following the events of May 1968, Godard further distanced himself from mainstream production structures and experimented with collective modes of filmmaking, producing works intended for limited and specialized audiences. Throughout this phase, he consistently maintained that visual form and social meaning should be understood as inseparable [6]. Under this guiding principle, his films extended beyond aesthetic exploration and increasingly functioned as sites of cultural inquiry, reflecting his sustained effort to redefine the relationship between cinema and society.

In contrast, François Truffaut adopted a markedly different position regarding the relationship between cinema and social engagement. Whereas Godard progressively foregrounded social critique, Truffaut largely refrained from sustained involvement in contemporary political debates. With the exception of his participation during May 1968-an intervention primarily aimed at defending the autonomy of cinema and the film community rather than articulating a broader social agenda-he remained focused on artistic and personal concerns. Correspondingly, Truffaut's filmmaking retained a more intimate and humanistic orientation. Two recurring thematic axes-education and art-structure much of his work. His breakthrough film *The 400 Blows*, inspired by his own childhood experiences, traces the growth of a young boy within institutional and familial settings. Although the film touches upon broader social conditions, it does not foreground them explicitly; instead, it emphasizes individual experience, emotional development, and a persistent affirmation of personal freedom.

This emphasis continued in Truffaut's later works. In *The Wild Child*, dedicated to Bazin, he articulated an approach centered on interpersonal relationships and everyday moral choices rather than abstract social structures. This orientation reflects a form of attention to small-scale human interactions and ethical questions, often described as a focus on the personal and the immediate rather than on large-scale social analysis [1].

Across his films, Truffaut consistently explored the tension between social norms and individual sensitivity, maintaining a human-centered perspective throughout his career.

Despite these differences, the core figures of the New Wave shared formative experiences within film culture and supported one another during their early professional development. Notably, the screenplay for *Breathless* was originally written by Truffaut and later passed on to Godard, a gesture that testifies to their early collaboration. At the same time, this collaboration also revealed underlying divergences in aesthetic priorities and creative methods. Such differences were emblematic of the New Wave's emphasis on freedom and experimentation, allowing multiple approaches to coexist within the movement. However, they also foreshadowed the internal tensions that would later contribute to both personal ruptures among its leading figures and the gradual fragmentation of the movement itself.

4. May 1968 and the New Wave: Dissipation After Its Apex

During the 1960s, France experienced a noticeable shift in cultural attitudes, particularly among younger intellectual circles. New ideas questioning established norms and traditional cultural authority gained visibility, and accumulated social tensions gradually surfaced in public discourse. These developments reached a critical point in May 1968, when a series of large-scale social events brought unprecedented attention to issues of institutional reform and cultural autonomy. As these dynamics unfolded, the cultural sphere, including cinema, was inevitably affected.

Several months prior to these events, the dismissal of Henri Langlois from his position at the Cinémathèque triggered widespread debate within the film community. For filmmakers who had received their formative education through the Cinémathèque's screenings, this decision was perceived as a threat to cinematic heritage and cultural independence. A public response followed, involving demonstrations that ultimately resulted in Langlois's reinstatement. This episode marked the beginning of intensified demands for reform within the film world. Subsequently, a group of New Wave directors intervened at the Cannes Film Festival, publicly calling attention to the broader cultural climate and suspending screenings as a symbolic gesture. Their action received support from internationally recognized filmmakers, leading to the early termination of that year's festival and, in the following year, to the establishment of a new parallel section dedicated to directors' work. These developments illustrate the considerable cultural influence exercised by New Wave filmmakers at the height of their prominence. Although this moment of collective action was relatively brief, its impact on cinematic institutions proved lasting.

In the period following 1968, the relationship between cinema and broader social concerns underwent a noticeable transformation. Filmmakers increasingly sought to align cinematic form with explicit thematic intentions, giving rise to works that emphasized direct engagement with contemporary issues [1]. At the level of artistic practice, some directors advocated integrating modernist theory into film production, combining experimental aesthetics with analytical perspectives drawn from social and theatrical theory. This tendency was most evident in the later work of Godard, who undertook the most pronounced shift among New Wave figures. Having already demonstrated a strong commitment to formal and thematic experimentation, he pursued an increasingly rigorous alignment between cinematic technique and social inquiry [1]. As a result, his films were often produced outside conventional industry frameworks and intended for limited audiences. This deliberate distancing from mainstream production effectively repositioned him at the margins of the commercial film system.

Godard's approach also intensified personal and professional tensions within the New Wave. His uncompromising stance led him to openly criticize former collaborators, including Truffaut, whose films he regarded as insufficiently aligned with the evolving priorities he advocated. This confrontation became a direct cause of their definitive break.

In contrast, other New Wave directors such as Truffaut, Chabrol, and Rohmer gradually moved toward more conventional production models. Truffaut's later films, in particular, displayed a renewed emphasis on polished narrative structure and emotional accessibility, qualities reminiscent of the cinematic tradition he had earlier criticized. These divergent trajectories reshaped the internal coherence of the movement and contributed to its gradual decline during the 1970s.

Although the cultural events of the late 1960s generated significant debate and theoretical reflection, later assessments have noted that the intervention at Cannes remains one of the most visible demonstrations of the New Wave's collective influence [7]. Paradoxically, it was precisely after this moment that the movement began to lose momentum. Growing divisions among its filmmakers, the emergence of new critical frameworks, and increasing scrutiny of New Wave aesthetics themselves all contributed to the gradual fading of a cinematic tendency that had once symbolized innovation and renewal, as it slowly receded from the center of the film market.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this article has traced the development of the French New Wave from the historical conditions that preceded its emergence through to its gradual decline after the late 1960s. What initially appeared to be a transformation confined to cinematic form and cultural practice was, in fact, closely intertwined with broader social and institutional dynamics. The French New Wave is widely recognized as one of the most influential cinematic movements of the twentieth century, and its innovations in production methods and film language continue to shape contemporary cinema. However, an approach focused solely on stylistic technique is insufficient to capture the movement's deeper historical significance or the expressive ambitions that motivated its practitioners. By situating the New Wave within its wider cultural context, this study has sought to retrace the pathways through which its leading figures redefined the possibilities of cinema and expanded its role as a modern art form.

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