Το Γαλικό Νέο Κύμα (revisited)

It doesn’t matter where you take things from, but where you take them to. Jean-Luc Godard

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Abstract: The proposed paper will attempt to delineate the history and the aesthetic characteristics of the French Nouvelle Vague, the most famous cinematic movement in history. The structure of the paper will mainly evolve around the following questions and topics: where did the name of the cinematic movement “Nouvelle Vague” originate from? What kind of influences “Nouvelle Vague” exerted on other film movements around the world? Which role did the Cinemathèque Française and Henri Langlois, its creator, play in the formation of the aforementioned cinematic movement? What role did the French film magazines of that period (e.g. Cahiers du Cinéma) play in the creation of this new wave? Who are the main representatives of the movement (Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette) and the Left Bank directors: Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, Agnes Varda? Who are the Precursors of the Nouvelle Vague? What are the modernist aesthetic characteristics of this world’s most famous cinematic movement, in terms of form [mise en scene] & narrative structure [montage]? Phenomenology and diffused existentialism in the movements’ themes and characters.

Keywords: Nouvelle Vague, Modernism, Montage, Auteur theory, Camera Stylo

Prologue

“Against modern Cassandra’s foretelling its doom, narrative cinema during its hundred and twenty two years of history –despite the plethora of so many film patterns and styles that coexist in our digital age– presents retrospectively in my opinion, two substantially opposed trends/tendencies, two crucial cinematic paradigms, which define the extremities of the vast domain of its narrative capability: to entertain the public in various seductive or deceptive ways, to appease it giving rise to and strengthening its long cultivated expectations and addictions (Hollywood’s mainstream dominant narrative norm, a Circle of deceit at best according to David Mamet) or raise questions and explore the aesthetic nature of the filmic medium, extending the perception of the public, and the world which both filmic text and people– inhabit and reflect (a tendency Nouvelle Vague massively escalated for the first time, with the old timer, Jean-Luc Godard, attempting it to the present)” (Τερζής 2013, 18).

These two tendencies represent the two poles of the methodological antithetic dipole placed in the core of this paper: Hollywood’s realism of verisimilitude versus modernism of the French Nouvelle Vague.

[1] Jean Seberg in the closing shot of À Bout de Souffle (Breathless, 1960) by Jean-Luc Godard
Introduction

In order to comprehend the innovative endeavor of the *Nouvelle Vague* directors, it would be proper, first to understand the classical paradigm of cinematic narration in its broad lines. Hollywood’s dominant, classical cinema is based on a set of *generic codes* and conventional *narrative devices* which act as *motifs* and *cognitive schemes*, such that we as spectators are taught/conditioned through repetition to understand mainly the story and identify with the positive characters in a more or less passive process. This mainstream narrative orthodoxy is channeled through the *cinematic genres* and aims to bring about clarity and unity through goal-oriented protagonists who function in a godly star system which foregrounds individual problems devoid of any critical social context. They follow a storyline that, except for small gaps and clearly cued flashbacks, orders events in a naive linear chain of *cause and effect*, thus obeying the norms of narrative closure and bringing about a reassuring happy end.

On the contrary, the *French Nouvelle Vague*, this spermatic, modernist pole that paved the way to contemporary filmmaking, concerns films which sparked the desire of a spirit of resistance, rebellion and refusal to the visual conventions and linear narrative structure of Hollywood’s mainstream cinema. These films are part of the modernist movement of 20th century, which fortunately, despite its existing diversities and deviations was to challenge the prevailing perceptions about the nature and purpose of art, to attack complacent preconceptions and redefine the relationship between the artwork and the viewer.

The modernist project as a whole runs through all the arts and does not follow a simple linear and chronological way. Regarding the part of the modernist narrative art-cinema that aspired and achieved to appeal to a broad audience, it found its first samples in the postwar *Italian neo-realism* (1943-1952), continued with the *English Free Cinema* (1956-1963) to escalate aesthetically peaking in the work of the *French Nouvelle Vague* in the 60s. In Europe, the influence of the *Nouvelle Vague* extended to the *Czechoslovak New Wave* films with the subversive satirical bitter humor that often characterizes them, but mainly in the *new German cinema* films, when it begins to wane, in the middle of the 70s.

Here, it would be proper to additionally mention the influence of the *French Nouvelle Vague*, both to the *Brazilian Cinema Novo* (which had already assimilated the characteristics of the *Italian neo-Realism*) as much to the *Portuguese Novo Cinema* (an extension of the *Brazilian Cinema Novo*) that flourished from the early 60s to mid-80s, under the ideals of the revolution of the *Carnations* (1974). The *French Nouvelle Vague* had similar effects to the *independent US cinema*, the *Nuevo Cine Argentina*, the *Cuban revolutionary cinema*, to the birth of *African cinema* and to the renewal movements in countries as different as, in this case, of Czechoslovakia and Japan.

But, to return to the *French Nouvelle Vague*, its representative films are diverse in their manifestations, complex in form and demanding in viewing. It is natural not to be very popular as they are opposed, sometimes completely, and other times partly to everything our commercial cinema accustomed us to expect from a movie. But popularity is a relative thing. When

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[2] Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg in *À Bout de Souffle* (Breathless, 1960) by Jean-Luc Godard
modernist cinema was at its peak in the 60s, it caused great excitement to the restless inquiring minds, excited film criticism at high degrees, while it was able to have commercial success at the same time. As a whole these films, giving primacy to filmic style over content, present more or less as their common characteristics, the unconventional choice and handling:

[1] of their themes and subject matter,
[2] its fictional (often anti-hero) characters,
[3] its mode of production
[4] and most importantly, its narrative form and cinematic language, effecting to the opening of their audiences’ perception (viewer’s film).

1. Factors that played crucial role in the birth of the French Nouvelle Vague

The French Nouvelle Vague was born out of the synergy of several deciding factors in action: most notably, the dissatisfaction that many serious art critics and aspiring young filmmakers felt towards the existing, outmoded, so-called tradition of quality of post World War II French cinema, which seemed all the more isolated from contemporary life. It was during a time when ciné-clubs, like Cinematheque Francaise¹ and new film journals, like Cahiers du Cinéma, found the stagnated films on offer to be unchallenging, stolid and without vision, so they were looking for a personal, exciting raw and modern cinema. The already established critics, including Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard of Cahiers du Cinéma, envisioned an auteur cinema, in which the director’s vision was paramount, personal and should be developed addressing the social and political issues of their time. They were inspired by their mentor Andre Bazin, and in particular by Alexandre Astruc's manifesto, originally printed in ‘L’Ecran français’ on 30 March 1948 as "Du Stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo" (The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: The Camera-Stylo), which outlined some of the ideas that were later expanded upon by Truffaut, Godard and the rest of the Cahiers du Cinéma critics. Alexandre Astruc argued that “the scriptwriter directs his own scripts; or rather […] the scriptwriter ceases to exist, for in this kind of film-making the distinction between author and director loses all meaning. Direction is no more a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing. The film-maker/author writes with his camera as a writer with his pen. In an art in which a length of film and sound-track is put in motion and proceeds, by means of a certain form and a certain story (there can even be no story at all – it matters little), to evolve a philosophy of life, how can one possibly distinguish between the man who conceives the work and the man who writes it?" (Astruc 1968, 22). Astruc envisioned a modern cinema which “should be in the process of becoming a new means of expression on the same level as painting and the modern novel. He envisioned a camera-stylo

¹ The same people, who grew up reading the French film magazines, founded the first film-clubs, not only in Paris but throughout France, most notably the Cinematheque Francaise, which was founded in 1936, but practically opened to the public in 1948 by its co-founders: Henri Langlois and Georges Franju; a small fifty-seat Cinematheque, with a selective program, literally, a paradise for the most fanatical and serious cinephiles. Langlois, who sought to establish a film training area in the Cinematheque Francaise, used to screen in the same evening, films of a different kind, style and country of origin, foreign movies without subtitles or silent films without background music, constantly aiming to turn public attention to the cinematographic techniques and the linking elements that were at work in these, otherwise, completely different movies.
cinema, as a narrative form in which a filmmaker could express his thoughts, however abstract or complex they might be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he did in the contemporary essay or novel” (Marie 2003). Taking matters into their own hands, Truffaut, Godard and several others set about changing cinema forever. Andre Bazin and Henri Langlois, founder and curator of the Cinémathèque Française (where most of the Nouvelle Vague filmmakers educated themselves) were the dual father figures of the movement. Apart from the additional role which the Cinéma vérité anthropological films by Jean Rouch have played in the filmic style of the movement, the beginning of the Nouvelle Vague was to some extent an adventurous exercise by the Cahiers writers in applying Alexandre Astruc’s philosophy to the world by delving into filmmaking themselves.

The French Nouvelle Vague broke out in France in 1959, was developed in the 1960s and began to decline in the early 1970s, leaving an indelible modernist influence to world cinema. Main creative force at the heart of this movement was the core of the film critics at Cahiers du Cinéma: Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, which, almost simultaneously in 1959 —except for Rohmer who delayed with La Collectionneuse (Album lovers, 1967) and Chabrol who preceded with Le Beau Serge (The handsome Serge, 1958)— turned out their first feature films, in an innovative radical course for some of them until today (Jean-Luc Godard).2

Next to them, it would be improper not to mention the directors of the so-called Left Bank: 3 Alain Resnais, 4 Chris Marker, 5 Agnès Varda, Jacques Demy and Henri Colpi. With them there were linked in a wider circle: Alain Robbe-Grillet, 6 Marguerite Duras, 7 Louis Malle, Jean-Pierre Melville, 8 Jacques Rozier, Armand Gatti, Jean Eustache, and last but not least, the lone, independent Robert Bresson.9

2. La Nouvelle Vague Revisited
But, where did the name Nouvelle Vague, originate from? The term seems to be coined by the writer Françoise Giroud, who first used it10 in her article entitled “La Nouvelle Vague: portraits de la jeunesse” (The New Wave: Portraits of Youth) published in the liberal weekly magazine L'Express, on October 3d, 1957.11 (Monaco 1976, VII). That particular article and the book that

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2 A unique worldwide example is the case of the ingenious Godard, who is often considered the most radical of the Nouvelle Vague directors, constantly experimenting on new areas, continuing deservedly so far to make mainly unique film-essays [a film genre he invented long ago with his Masculine-Feminine (Male-Female, 1966)]; although more enigmatic now days in his explorations of the nature of contemporary life, but still faithful to the dictum of his youth: “Let's write old verses on new forms”. J.L. Godard
3 James Monaco claims that Godard was the first to initiate the term: La Rive Gauche de la Nouvelle Vague (Monaco 1978).
4 “I don’t believe that there are old movies. You do not say, I’ve read an old book by Flaubert or I’ve seen an old play by Molière”. Alain Resnais
5 “Long time ago, I betrayed Gutenberg for McLuhan”. Chris Marker
6 “A new form will always look pretty much lacking of form, as it is subliminally compared with the dominant forms” & “Memory belongs to the imagination. Human memory is not like a computer which records things; it is part of the imaginative process, on the same terms as invention”. Alain Robbe-Grillet
7 “It’s afterwards you realize that the feeling of happiness you had with a man didn't necessarily prove that you loved him”. Marguerite Duras
8 “At birth man is offered only one choice, the choice of his death. But if this choice is governed by distaste for his own existence, his life will never be more than meaningless”. Jean-Pierre Melville
9 “An old thing becomes new if you detach it from what usually surrounds it” & “My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper; is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but, placed in a certain order and projected on to a screen, come to life again like flowers in water”. Robert Bresson
Giroud published next year entitled “La Nouvelle Vague: portraits de la jeunesse” (The New Wave: Portrait of Youth) had nothing to do with Cinema, but both were intended to explore the fresh, untamed spirit of the French youth, which had just begun also to be sensed in French cinema. Eventually, in the spring of 1959, the term Nouvelle Vague was used to characterize the first French feature films, which were distinguished for their freshness of style and innovative boldness, creating thrilling emotions in the festival of Cannes in the same year. Quickly the term was released and turned into an international key phrase, which overcoming the limits of cinema was to characterize every cultural phenomenon that seemed revolutionary or simply new.

The film that first brought international attention to this cinematic movement and won the Best Director Award at the Cannes festival in 1959 was the Les Quatre Cents Coups (The four hundred blows, 1959) by Francois Truffaut. Alain Resnais participated also in the festival with his Hiroshima, Mon Amour (Hiroshima, My Love, 1959), winning the prize of the International Association of Critics. He had already acquired a reputation as a documentary filmmaker with Nuit Et Brouillard (Night and Fog, 1955), the first documentary about the Nazi concentration camps. This first fiction film by Resnais which stood out for its high aesthetic (the innovative use of the flashback) and had as its theme the exploration of time, memory and the horror of war, was highly acclaimed and became an international success thanks to its aesthetic and structural cinematic originality.

But more than any other film of the Nouvelle Vague movement, À Bout de Souffle (Breathless, 1960) by Jean-Luc Godard became a cinematic example par excellence, the iconoclastic, spermatic filmic manifesto of the movement, establishing the international reputation of the director who is regarded as one of the most important filmmakers of the 1960s, and among the most innovative of all times! While, on the level of the plot it is an amalgam of American film noir B movies, aesthetically it is complex and radical as it unfolds on the very opposite of Hollywood’s narrative conventions, presenting almost all the innovative stylistic elements that were to become characteristic of the Nouvelle Vague: jump cuts, breaking the 180° degree rule, references to other movies, (self-reflection, creation of a meta-language commenting on the film) or other forms of art (inter-textuality), use of handheld camera, elliptical narrative, improvised music and monologues addressed to the camera (Brechtian distancing self-reflective technique), frequent changes in rhythm and atmosphere, shooting with natural lighting in real settings outside of film studios.

As Godard once said, À Bout de Souffle was the result of “a decade I made films in my mind” (Godard 1986). This radical and highly innovative film that won immediate critical acclaim and thrilled its viewers with its iconoclastic spirit while it was playing for long in crowded movie houses in Paris, was awarded the Jean Vigo Prize and the Silver Bear for

[5] Jean-Paul Belmondo in the opening shot of À Bout de Souffle (Breathless, 1960) by Jean-Luc Godard

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12 180° degree rule or axis: an imaginary line joining two film characters or even the motion path of a character of a movie, dividing the cinematic space in two. By keeping the camera on one side of this axis for every two-shot in the scene, the first character is always frame right of the second character, who is then always frame left of the first. The camera passing over the axis is called jumping the line or crossing the line; the reverent observance of the 180° rule is often overturned in modernist films (e.g. of Godard and Resnais).

13 It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say, that Godard is the first conscious semiotician filmmaker in narrative film.
directing at the Berlin Festival. The protagonists, Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg became overnight idols, as for Godard, he had made his first step in what it was to be an advanced, modernist re-invention of cinema.

Nouvelle Vague, in the face of its six major directors (Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette and Alain Resnais), was to become an art movement whose influence in world cinema is so deep and lasting as that of Surrealism in almost all arts or Cubism in painting: it rocked the boat with the exuberance and rejuvenation that it brought in all stages of the filmic process. And all this came to effect as a result of a political and economic alliance of a group of directors who artistically had nothing in common except that they were young, French and penniless, as Claude Chabrol and Agnès Varda claimed (a demystifying comment to which we must pay serious attention).

Although most scholars agree that the movements’ prime was between 1958 and 1964, while placing its end in 1974, Nouvelle Vague has never ceased to inspire, as many of the formalist elements and trends that it brought we acknowledge in action even today. But, let us mention some films which occasionally preceded this filmic outbreak at the Cannes Film Festival in 1959.

3. Precursors of the Nouvelle Vague

Although La Pointe-Courte (1955) by Agnès Varda is considered the precursor of the movement, while her admirers gloriously refer to her as the grandmother of the Nouvelle Vague, the film Et Dieu ... Crea La Femme (And God created woman ..., 1956) by Roger Vadim, which glorifies beauty and youthful rebellion, is often referred as the first feature film of the Nouvelle Vague. Roger Vadim –the 28 year-old writer and director of the film starring Brigitte Bardot, his twenty two year old wife, former model and dancer –showed that a low budget film of a director just debuting, could become international success. Although today, it seems outdated, in its own era it has been an inspiration for aspiring youngsters who hoped to make movies in their own way.

Even greater pole of inspiration was the director and film producer Jean-Pierre Melville. His film Bob Le Flambeur (Bob The Gambler, 1956) presenting the decline of a gambler became a milestone for the French version of this kind of a film thriller. In the face of Melville, the critics of the time recognized a pioneer with a cinematic look completely of his own in this boldly stylized and original film, shot both in the streets of Paris and in Melville’s homemade studio.

In contrast to the world of Melville’s tough gangsters were the strange nightmarish films of Georges Franju. Co-founder, along with Henri Langlois, of the famous Cinémathèque Française in 1936 (artistic director of which he was after Langlois’ death in 1977), Franju who had studied scenography switched to directing short films such as Le Sang des diabètes (Blood from cattle, 1949), the first of a series of nine documentaries he directed and produced, which contrasted peaceful scenes from the suburbs of Paris with scenes from a Parisian slaughterhouse.

His ability to combine a bitter, imaginative realism (inherited from his surrealist influences) with the expressionism of Lang and Murnau, fully blooms in his films La Tête Contre Les Murs (Head Against the Wall, 1958) and Les Yeux Sans Visage (Eyes without face, 1959).

Three years before the outbreak of the Nouvelle Vague, Louis Malle had become known as an underwater documentarist with Le Monde Du Silence (The Silent World, 1956), which he directed together with the famous oceanographer Jacques Cousteau, winning the Palme d'Or prize in Cannes. It was the only time in the history of the festival where the Palme d'Or was
awarded to a documentary until Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* repeated the feat in 2004. Louis Malle, who after all was a descendant of a rich family, could now raise money to shoot his first film *Ascenseur Pour L’Echafaud* (Elevator to the Gallows, 1957) at the age of 25.

The unique performances of Jeanne Moreau and Maurice Ronet in the leading roles and the evocative music of Miles Davis on the soundtrack gave prominence to this fatalistic film noir contributing decisively to its success. His next film *Les Amants* (The Lovers, 1958), starring Jeanne Moreau again and establishing Louis Malle as an emerging talent, brought even greater critical and commercial success with its frank treatment of sexuality.

Among the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, who had already been baptized in cinema with their short films, Claude Chabrol (who would be destined to be a master of the mystery genre) was the first to make his directorial debut in feature films. With money inherited from the family of Agnès Goute, his wife at that time, he directed and produced the thriller movie *Le Beau Serge* (The Handsome Serge, 1958) starring Jean-Claude Brialy and Gerard Blain, inspired by Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).

Shot with natural lighting in natural sites at Sardent, his birthplace in central France, he managed to annoy the French cinematic establishment, which excluded it from the Cannes’ festival considering that the film seriously deviated from the professional standards. Nevertheless (Chabrol won the Grand Prix at the Locarno festival and the Jean Vigo Prize, while in Cannes, where he showed it on his own initiative), the film found good reception and he collected enough money from sales to shoot his next film, *Les Cousins* (The Cousins, 1959).

*Les Cousins*, starring again Brialy and Blain, actually reversed the plot of *Le Beau Serge*. Filmed in Paris, it found commercial and even greater critical success winning the *Golden Bear* at the 9th Berlin Festival. *Les Cousins* (with Paul Gégauff’s co-operation, Chabrol’s stable, ingenious collaborator for many years in screenwriting) more than his first film, has many of the features that later would be attributed to his personal style, namely Hitchcock’s influences, along with the ingenious representation of the French bourgeoisie and an array of murderous characters with ambiguous motives.

With the profits from these two films, Chabrol set up his own production company supporting the production filmic kick-off of his friends: Jacques Rivette’s *Paris nous appartient* (Paris belongs to us, 1960) and Eric Rohmer’s *Le Signe du lion* (The lion mark, 1959).

4. The Directors of the Left bank (Rive Gauche)

*Cinema is a system that allows Godard to become a novelist, Gatti to make theater and myself to write essays.* Chris Marker
In the early 1960s, the American film critic Richard Roud\textsuperscript{14} attempted to highlight the difference between the five prime film critics\textsuperscript{15} of the French film magazine \textit{Cahiers du Cinéma} (which had already gained global recognition and fame) and subsequent major exponents of the \textit{Nouvelle Vague}, and the group of the \textit{Left Bank directors}, as he colorfully called them (Roud 1983). This group which is also considered part of the \textit{Nouvelle Vague}, embraced intellectuals, writers and directors and specifically had the following filmmakers at its core: Alain Resnais, Chris Marker and Agnès Varda, who had in common their leftist convictions and their involvement with the making of modernist documentaries distinguished for their artistic experimentation. With the group of the \textit{Left Bank} directors we can also associate: Marguerite Duras, Jean Cayrol, Armand Gatti, Henri Colpi, Jacques Rozier, Jacques Demmy and the already acclaimed writer and main exponent of the \textit{Nouveau Roman} (New Novel) Alain Robbe-Grillet, who before engaging in directing his own films, wrote the script of the monumental \textit{L'année dernière à Marienbad} (Last year in Marienbad, 1961) directed by Alain Resnais. The dreamlike images and incomprehensible, experimental labyrinthine structure of this unprecedented film (whose subject was the very nature of cinema in the context of its playful absolute fiction), although it divided the critics, it crowned it with the Golden Lion at the Venice Festival, which it shared equally with \textit{L' Avventura} (The Adventure, 1961) by Michelangelo Antonioni.

Chris Marker (always cryptic as to his past and well known for his refusal to give interviews and to be photographed), was a writer, journalist, photographer, documentary film director, film essayist and interactive multimedia artist. He studied philosophy before World War II and engaged with the Maquis in the French resistance. He directed documentaries in the early 50s and in collaboration with his friend Alain Resnais he created the documentary \textit{Les Statues Meurent Aussi} (And the statues die, 1950–1953) which starts as a simple film about plastic arts (sculpture, masks) in the sub-Saharan African countries, only to become progressively a polemic against western colonialism, a factor which undoubtedly contributed to their decline. Although it won the \textbf{Jean Vigo Prize} in 1954, \textit{Les Statues Meurent Aussi} was banned until 1968 by the censors for its criticism against French colonialism. In the following years Marker developed a unique documentary essay style, with the sole exception of his science fiction film \textit{La Jetée} (Station Goodbye, 1962) which unfolds a journey through time using almost exclusively still images. His other best-known films are \textit{Le fond de l'air est rouge} (The depth of the sky is red, 1977), \textit{Sans Soleil} (Without Sun, 1983) and \textit{AK} (Akira Kurosawa, 1985), a cinematic essay on Japanese director Akira Kurosawa.


\textsuperscript{15} The prime film critics of \textit{Cahiers du Cinéma} were: Truffaut, Godard, Rivette, Chabrol with chief-editor Eric Rohmer.
Agnès Varda is the most famous female filmmaker paired with Nouvelle Vague. After *La Pointe Courte* (1954) she directed four short films, of which three were documentaries before she turned again to fiction with *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962). That film, which is a benchmark of the Nouvelle Vague, covering in real-time (from 5 pm to 7pm) the wanderings in Paris of the young pop singer Florence “Cléo” Victoire, while waiting for the results of her medical examination which was likely to confirm a diagnosis of stomach cancer. *Cleo from 5 to 7* handles with great originality and immediacy various existential issues, discussions on mortality, despair and the meaning of life, raising questions about the way we perceive women on the occasion of the “doll-like image”, which the singer realizes that people have about her.

5. **Phenomenology and diffused existentialism in the films’ content and character configuration**

Eric Rhode and Gabriel Pearson in their article, *Film appearance*, Sight and Sound, Autumn 1961, p. 164, present a highly interesting overview about the perceptions of the Nouvelle Vague directors. The representative films of the Nouvelle Vague, besides a new vision of characters and themes they depict with an ever increasingly refreshing look (inspired by phenomenology and the diffused existentialism of their time), also reflect the new aesthetic methods of modernist narrative cinema. Let's summarize some of the premises the authors emphasize more or less in these films, which seem to fit like a glove to Michel’s character in *À Bout de Souffle* and generally relate not only to a new advanced view of fictional characters in cinema, but also to the modern world, where these characters act:

1. A world in which all appearances are equally valid is a world of discontinuity. The self is a series of events without apparent connection; its past and future is a series of actions, but its present is a void waiting to be defined by action. The self is therefore no longer seen as stable. It is without an inner core, without essence.

2. Other people are likewise without essence. Since they too are an infinite series of appearances, they remain unpredictable. Only objects, “things” with an essence can be understood. People remain mysteries.

3. Since there is no longer a stable reality, traditional morality proves too untrustworthy. It seeks to give essence to appearances, order them so that they can be predicted, and so conceal from
men their true condition in a discontinuous world, utter isolation. Each is responsible for improvising his moral imperatives; to accept any one role (i.e., to fix one’s identity as “bandit”, “pianist” or “intellectual”) is an evasion of responsibility and becomes “bad faith”. Such “bad faith” dehumanizes and turns man into an object. Existentially he dies. Conversely, to avoid bad faith, morality must be an endless anguished process of improvisation. One no longer acts to fulfill ideals, like goodness and decency, but to initiate one’s own self-discovery, the only moral goal left. Hence, action is necessarily opportunistic. In consequence, each act is unique and without social precedence, so to others will appear as motiveless, since there is no stable self on which to pin a motive. From this arises the seemingly absurd notion of a motiveless act (l’acte gratuit)” (Pearson, Rhode 1961, 164).

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