Good example of cahiers du cinema and the french new wave research paper

War, World War 2

The mid-20th century saw a number of developments and changes in the way cinematic language and technique was being utilized in film. Given the huge economic and social impact of World War II on all of Europe, particularly France, new ways of expressing the anxieties and concerns of the people had to be created. The French New Wave (or nouvelle vague) was born as a result of this post-war reconstruction and reflection, allowing European cinema to transition from dark, serious looks at the gritty realism of life (as evidenced by Italian neorealism) to worlds of stylized editing, frenetic energy and a sense of kineticism that borrowed liberally from Hollywood cinema while elevating its material and style into something much more significant. The “ New Wave” cinematic and narrative experience reflects the social, cultural, economical and political international gap between the pre and post World War II.

Cahiers du cinema and the New Film Critic

In order to facilitate this fundamental change in the way Europeans made films, they had to change how they thought and talked about film as well. For instance, the French New Wave and its objectives were heavily influenced by the French film magazine Cahiers du cinema, which was founded in 1951 by Andre Bazin, Joseph-Marie Lo Duca and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze (Bickerton, 2009). Cahiers became an incredibly influential focal point for some of the most adventurous and challenging film critics in Europe to talk about film in very radical ways, cultivating a community that included the likes of Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut and more (many of whom would become influential directors within the French New Wave movement). With the creation and publication of Cahiers du cinema, the new film critic

was being developed, with their goals being to discuss films in light of their mise en scene, their artistic statements, and overall filmic quality to find the ‘ truth’ of a work. Film critics looked at films from a much more literary eye, finding the poetry within scenes and discussing subtext and themes, elevating the level of discourse in film criticism substantially. Furthermore, Cahiers du cinema helped to establish a greater love for world cinema as well, extending the discussions of films outside of the American Hollywood system and allowing European directors and independent works to gain greater notoriety and popularity.

One of the most significant elements of Cahiers film criticism was the ‘ auteur theory’ – the notion of films as the singular work and direction of the film’s director, focusing on directors as the central creative force behind a film. Auteur theory focuses on the shifting of the director’s consciousness of how films are created and role in constructing a creative art. By focusing on auteurs, it was possible to cultivate a much richer sense of film discourse, as they could be compared and contrasted, celebrated or condemned – Cahiers du cinema was chiefly responsible for the championing of Hollywood directors like Howard Hawks and Nicholas Ray, as well as European directors like Max Ophuls, Jean Cocteau and Roberto Rossellini. By thinking of the text and subtext of these films as the product of the director’s mind and style, connections between films and filmmakers could be made to lend a more cohesive thesis to a director’s body of work (Thompson and Bordwell 382).

While many Cahiers du cinema writers and future French New Wave directors celebrated the work of select Hollywood directors, it was mostly as a way to single out specific talents within a system they thought was largely

worthless. When developing the French New Wave and its tenets, they focused on the rejection of Hollywood stylized films, refocusing their energies to a new prescient of budget quality filmmaking. Their stories would be more intimate, focused on young people in culturally relevant situations, with smaller budgets and a greater eye for a singular auteur vision. Instead of having flashy visuals or standard narratives, French New Wave would have the bravery to have unconventional narrative style, and treat time/space/character differently than in Hollywood films. Granted, this was not a completely unified movement – Nouvelle Vague directors like Jacques Demy, for instance, would find himself striking a happy medium between the low-profile black-and-white cool of traditional French New Wave (Lola) with bright Technicolor musicals in a similar manner to the " Tradition of Quality" the French New Wave was ostensibly rebelling against (Hill 2008, 27).

France's Dilemma After World War II

The French New Wave did not spring from a vacuum – rather, it was a direct response to the condition of France after World War II, with a variety of economic, social and political factors coming into play to create this environment. After World War II, France was weakened economically, militarily and psychologically. France had just finished living under the bootheel of Germany from 1940-1944, with blackouts imposed by the occupying forces, gas shortages, and a strict curfew (Goslan 73). In addition to this, censorship and propaganda was rampant in occupied France, leaving the people with little control over their lives as their country was ravaged by the Germans. During this time, the movies were one of the only escapes

they could be afforded, but even then their choices were limited by German regulations, leaving them with a dearth of good cinema to choose from. (Thompson & Bordwell, 2010). As a result, France post-liberation was eager to create and absorb new films, with works by Marcel Carne (Children of Paradise) and Rene Clement (The Battle of the Rails) becoming incredibly popular, and Hollywood movies becoming all the rage within France.

After World War II, there was a polarization among the French about France's future. The provisional government of the French Republic, led by Charles de Gaulle, was extremely controversial, as it was difficult to find ways to address the issues of the French wars in Algeria and Indochina. This led to many different changes of government, and a Cabinet that was difficult to handle. This extended to French society as well; with the effective destruction of French society and culture under the German occupation, it was difficult to decide whether or not France was able to view itself in a positive way, or what direction it should even take (Godlan 79). De Gaulle's imperialism and colonialism was met with strong opposition within many parts of France, and people became tired of the old traditions and institutions. This left France with a dilemma about whether or not to return to the old ways they missed before World War II, or step forward into a new age with a new identity. With the help of social and artistic movements like the French New Wave, France went about reclaiming its identity by largely taking the latter approach – figures like Antoine Doinel in The 400 Blows became somewhat revolutionary characters symbolic of France's desire to shuck the old ways of patriarchal authoritarianism for a more egalitarian sense of freedom.

The French New Wave and Italian Neorealism – The 400 Blows and Rome, Open City

The French New Wave was not only a reaction to post-World War II France, but of one of the first major film movements that came after the war – Italian neorealism. Pioneered by directors such as Roberto Rossellini, Italian neorealism carried a unique ability to capture the trials and tribulations of the working class during times of great strife. Some stylistic tendencies of the French New Wave saw their start in Italian neorealism, including shooting outside of the studio and featuring naturalistic, non-professional actors in their films. While both movements have their stylistic similarities and differences, they both also show the impact of war and occupation on their respective countries.

When comparing an Italian neorealism film like Roberto Rossellini's Rome, Open City to a French New Wave film like Francois Truffaut's The 400 Blows, many of these parallels can be easily seen. The tale of working class struggles in 1943, Rome, Open City follows a communist engineer called Giorgio (Marcello Pagliero) and the people who try to help him, including Aldo Fabrizi's Don Pietro. Truffaut's The 400 Blows, meanwhile, follows juvenile delinquent Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Leaud) as he leads a troubled life of escapism and adventure, with his parents and the authorities struggling to figure out what to do with him. Both of these works are seminal examples of their respective movements, and evince their fundamental approaches and characteristics.

Both Italian Neo-Realism and French New Wave sub- consciously use ideological and political narratives in order to promote a particular political

agenda or social ideal. Rome, Open City fully embraces the anti-Nazi sentiments of post-WWI Italy, as the horrors of an occupied Rome become increasingly clear over the course of the film. The embattled Marcello, a Communist attempting to lead the resistance against the Gestapo, works to fight the Nazis on his home turf; Aldo Fabrizi collaborates with the resistance by helping them hide their bomb equipment' and Anna Magnani, a pregnant widow, prepares for a tragic wedding under dark circumstances. The overall goal of Rome, Open City is to showcase a city rife with darkness and dread, all as a result of the restriction of freedoms and liberty that the Nazis caused in their occupation. The poverty and hardship of the Roman people during the occupation was thrown into sharp relief in Rossellini's picture, hoping to act as a cautionary tale to ensure that these circumstances did not occur ever again.

The 400 Blows, meanwhile, has less to say about the war itself and more about the lack of direction the next generation after the war meant to fight. As previously mentioned, the French after World War II were somewhat directionless and aimless, the new generation of children growing up after the war having no rebellions left to fight. This is personified in the antics of young Antoine Doinel, a delinquent who seeks escape from his squabbling family and neglectful father in petty thievery, hooky and pranks. Young Antoine represents the soul of young France, wanting to find a direction but instead being given proclamations from authority figures who cannot quite seem to figure out what to do with him. To that end, Antoine must find his own freedom (as evidenced in the final shot, in which he escapes from the troubled youth center and runs unceasingly down the road and to the sea, all

in a single take. This is the social ideal that Truffaut advocates for France; a sense of long-awaited freedom and direction that they are otherwise not afforded due to generational resentment and lack of conflict in post-World War II France.

Both movements also aesthetically use a sense of stark realism in order to capture the beauty in ordinary life. Italian neorealists like Rossellini work to shoot films in a very direct and open manner, deliberately demonstrating a lack of ‘ flair’ that allows the events on screen to seem more immediate and intense. This realism is helped by the use of nonprofessional actors, which also bucked the trend of using theatrical actors with gorgeous faces and a need to look pretty on screen. This made the performances and presences within the film feel more authentic and real, as the audience gets the impression these are real people they are watching. While Rossellini’s work focuses on the dire straits of the Italian generation during the war, Truffaut proposes new freedoms for the French generation that followed the occupation.

Truffaut and the French New Wave took great inspiration from the works of Rossellini, but brought some of the charm and lightness of Hollywood back into it, with The 400 Blows showing a much more whimsical, fun side to post-War France. While Antoine does have his fair share of problems, Truffaut’s breezy, effortless style indicates that he does deserve the freedom he gets, and that his adventures running around Paris and getting into trouble is something to enjoy. There is a more greater sense of style, with elegant compositions and frenetic movement exemplifying Truffaut’s style. Scenes like the spinning carnival ride, in which the camera stays focused on the

children as they ride around in the machine, or the opening credits complete with romantic music playing as the audience is shown sweeping shots of Parisian streets, showcase a greater sense of hope and freedom than with the Italian neorealists.

Another significant hallmark in both styles is the use of natural locations rather than studios - a move borne out of both practicality and a deliberate desire to create a more realistic derivation from the studio-bound sterility of Hollywood. Until the Italian neorealist movement came along, films were primarily shot in studios, and filmed with professional actors. The goal was to provide a sense of heightened fantasy, that ‘ movie magic’ that permitted audiences to escape the doldrums of their daily lives and be entertained (as people thought they needed in the days of World War II, when their real lives were dirty and gritty). However, Rossellini in Rome, Open City chose to go against the grain by creating a picture whose dirtiness and grit echoed the starkness of WWII-era Italy. All of the scenes are filmed on location, with conversations and events happening on the streets of Rome instead of a fake-looking studio. Truffaut does the same in The 400 Blows, his goal being to show the joys and pitfalls of post-war France, from the trifles of amusement park rides and the movies to the small terrors of a Parisian household or a tyrannical French classroom. Both films focus on a street-level view of their characters, particularly Antoine in The 400 Blows, as he spends his time stealing typewriters and playing hooky on the streets of Paris.

Conclusion

When comparing The 400 Blows to Rome, Open City, not only is it possible to see the similarities and differences between the French New Wave and Italian neorealism, but it is possible to understand the roles of these movements in helping to provide catharsis to some of Europe's most pressing concerns after World War II. The development of the Cahiers du cinema and its role in the development of the French New Wave, in particular, provided critics and filmmakers with a new way of looking at films, at a time when new perspectives were needed to reinvent a country that had lost its way. With the help of the works of Jean-Luc Godard, Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Demy and others, filmmaking moved away from the Hollywood ideal of photogenic movie stars playing out fantastical plots on expensive sound studios, and provided more stylistic, realistic outlets for the common people to explore their social and political ideals.

In this way, the French New Wave transformed the art of filmmaking itself, as well as served an important social role within 20th-century France, allowing the French people to find a direction (or at least explore their lack of direction) through the innate wonder and magic of the art form of film. France after World War II was a nation in search of an identity – torn between the roughness and colonialism of De Gaulle and the desire for greater freedom and liberty held by France's youth, who had survived the occupation or had been born after it. Taking inspiration from Hollywood films, Italian neorealism and their own experiences and perspectives, the French New Wave was an incredible film movement that was borne of the first generation to have grown up on films. Because of that innate experience and literary

perspective, as well as the supremacy and popularity of auteur theory, this allowed important directors like Truffaut and Godard to pave the way for an unconventional, realistic and down-to-earth approach to filmmaking that surpassed the hokey emptiness of Hollywood while finding new ways to tell stories about real people in relatable situations.

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