

CASE STUDY: The French New Wave in the twenty-first century

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Surely the filmmakers associated with the French New Wave of the early 1960s are now figures of mainly historical interest, their principal cinematic achievements firmly in the past? Far from it. With the exception of Francois Truffaut, who died in 1984 at age 52, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer and Rivette from the original 'Cahiers du cinéma' gang, as well as Marker, Varda and Resnais from the so-called 'Left Bank' group, have all continued to make films. Now in their seventies and eighties, all have recently produced work that is as enduringly alive to the possibilities and challenges of cinema as the films of their youth. While Chabrol, Rivette and Rohmer have remained faithful to traditional forms of narrative cinema, Godard, Marker and Varda have continued to be open to new ways of working. To assess them collectively, as 'twenty-first century filmmakers', is to take stock of a set of remarkable achievements. It is also worth noting that a new generation of British and American critics have recently begun to work on these directors, as witnessed by publications such as Catherine Lupton's study of Chris Marker (the first career-length survey in English), Emma Wilson's recent work on Alain Resnais and Douglas Morrey's book on Godard, the latter two published in the excellent 'French Directors' series published by Manchester University Press, as well as the extremely useful work that appears in the pages of the journal *Studies in French Cinema*.

Having made four films since 2000, Claude Chabrol (born 1930) has so refined his glacially controlled examinations of French bourgeois *mores* that he might be considered now as a kind of French Hitchcock, making work for a mainstream audience while using his favoured genre of the thriller to explore cinematic questions of point-of-view and working with first-rate actresses like Isabelle Huppert, as in *Merci pour le chocolat* (2000) and *L'ivresse du pouvoir* (2006). Jacques Rivette (born 1928), too, becomes more 'Rivettian' as the years pass, combining the ludic and the spooky in his recent films *Va savoir* (2001) and the Emmanuelle Béart-led ghost story *L'histoire de Marie et Julien* (2003). Having made two features and a short since the turn of the millennium, Eric Rohmer (born 1920) surprised many accustomed to his defiantly realist, low-budget style of filmmaking when, for his 2001 feature

L'Anglaise et le duc, he opted to use CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) – with a twist, of course. Rather than employing such hi-tech means to render the eighteenth-century locations of the film's French Revolution setting, Rohmer recreated the period styles of paintings and artworks within whose digitally animated *tableaux* his characters circulate.

How useful is it still to consider these filmmakers in terms of their New Wave heritage? I suggest that it remains useful for three reasons that have to do with issues of production, technology and film culture. One of the enduring characteristics of these filmmakers is that they have remained steadfastly independent both in terms of their commitment to personal styles of 'auteur' film-making but also as regards their approach to how their films are made. Whether it has been through a long-term affiliation with a production company, such as Rohmer's with Les Films de Losange, or a more artisanal, 'cottage industry' mode of production such as Godard's company Periphéria based in his Swiss hometown of Rolle, or Varda's Ciné-Tamaris, based in her home on the rue Daguerre in the 14th arrondissement of Paris, they have remained defiantly independent. With such independence comes the liberty to experiment with new filmmaking technologies and new methods of exhibition and distribution. One of the most interesting aspects of recent work by Varda, Marker and Godard is its responsiveness to these aspects of what might be called 'twenty-first^t century cinema'.

Since the multiple-award winning success of her digital video essay-cum-travelogue *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000), Agnès Varda (born 1928) has produced a follow-up film *...deux ans après* in which she caught up with some of the participants of the original film. Both films feature on the Ciné-Tamaris produced DVD, along with a host of what Varda calls 'boni' (the plural of 'bonus'). Through her company, Varda has taken full advantage of the new medium of DVD, releasing restored versions of her own films, such as her New Wave classic *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), and those of her former husband Jacques Demy, such as *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) and *Peau d'Ane* (1970). Among its lavish cornucopia of 'boni', the DVD of *Cléo* features rare and early works by Varda, including *L'Opéra Mouffe* (1958) and *Daguerréotypes* (1978). Varda has recently declared that she no longer intends to make feature films, opting instead to concentrate on making film-installation works for galleries and

museums. Coming from a more traditional fine-art background than the other New Wave directors, she has adapted with ease to this new form, making three installations since 2003 – *Patatutopia*, *Les Veuves de Noirmoutier* and *Le triptyque de Noirmoutier* – and at the time of writing (April 2006), she has recently been commissioned to produce new work for the Fondation Cartier in Paris. Chris Marker (born 1921) perhaps best epitomises the spirit of multiple-media adventurousness characteristic of the most forward-looking New Wave directors and he, too, has been far from inactive in recent years, producing an essay film for French television (*Chats Perchés* [2004]), an installation work for the Museum of Modern Art in New York (*Owls at Noon: The Hollow Men* [2005]) which will form part of the much anticipated sequel to his 1999 CDROM *Immemory*, as well as releasing several DVD version of earlier works, including *La Jetée* (1962), *Sans Soleil* (1982), and *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* (1993). One of the most valuable aspects of the DVD format is that it can provide real research and reference value. For example, the recent Arte DVD releases of classic films by Marker's former colleague Alain Resnais (born 1922), *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1960) and *Muriel, ou le temps d'un retour* (1963), feature a host of rarely seen early works that would otherwise be inaccessible. The DVD of *Hiroshima* includes his magnificent collaborative essay-films made with Marker, *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) and *Les statues meurent aussi* (1953), while the DVD of *Muriel* contains four early short films by Resnais on artists (*Gauguin* [1950], *Van Gogh* [1948], *Guernica* [1950-51] and *Le Chant de Styrène* [1958]).

Last, but by no means least, there is the continuing case of Jean-Luc Godard (born 1930). As well as having recently made several shorts, his last two feature films, *Eloge de l'amour* (2001) and *Notre musique* (2004), were more warmly received by international audiences and critics than anything he has made for decades. And, to celebrate fifty years of his filmmaking, the Centre Pompidou in Paris hosted a complete retrospective of his work between April and August 2006, as well as a new exhibition created by Godard, entitled 'Voyages in Utopia', and screening two new films, *Vrai faux passeport* (2006) and *Deux prières pour cinq refuzeniks* (2006). It is perhaps fitting that Godard's generation, which emerged from and was formed in Henri Langlois's cinema museum in years after the Second World War, now appears to have gone full circle (with cinema itself) *back* to the museum. Clearly, it is still too soon to give a definitive account of the significance of this generation's work for the

simple reason that most of them are still working, but it is surely no exaggeration to say that they have been as revolutionary in terms of cinema in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as the Impressionists were for painting in the nineteenth century.

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