

A LEVEL
Teacher guide

FILM STUDIES

H410
For first teaching in 2017

European film movements

Version 1



European film movements

Introduction

Creative communities of filmmakers have flourished in Europe since the earliest days of the Silent film era, contributing both to the production of stylistically innovative films as well as developing a body of critical thought that has helped shaped contemporary film aesthetics. This guide focuses on four such European movements, discussing the contexts from which they emerged, the visual styles they developed and charting the different ways in which their legacies continue to be felt.



Breathless – Jean Luc-Goddard 1960

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Part 1: The silent era

German expressionism

German Expressionism was a creative film movement that developed in Germany during the 1920s. It was an extension of the wider Expressionist movement in the visual arts and the theatre and eschewed verisimilitude in the depiction of external reality in favour of a highly stylised aesthetic that sought to depict the emotional reality of subjective experience.

Expressionism's visual abstraction, extremes of light and shadow and distorted graphical composition became a way of expressing ideas of trauma, destruction and isolation that were prevalent in a Europe still recovering from the desolation of the First World War. The first feature film to adopt what became known as German Expressionism, was *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) directed by **Robert Weine** (1873-1938). Up until this point German cinema had been dominated by historical epics, the large production values of which were made cost effective to German studios due to post-war high inflation when selling to the international market. The film was unique due to its distorted, flat, painted black, theatrical backdrops and the affected, unnatural acting and jerky movement of the actors and proved to be a surprise domestic and international success.

The influence of *Caligari*, with its dark and jaggedly irregular compositions revealing the inner reality of its brooding and disturbed protagonist can be seen in *Nosferatu* (1922) by **F.W. Murnau** (1888-1931) and *Metropolis* (1927) by **Fritz Lang** (1890-1976), both of which can be seen as extending the prototypical Expressionist aesthetic of *Caligari* into even more avant-garde directions. It was during this time that anti-German sentiment created by the First World War began to lessen allowing German culture to become less insular, gaining in popularity across Europe and in America, ultimately seeing both Lang and Murnau lured away from Germany to work in Hollywood while the film movement they helped pioneer was decried by the ascendant Nazi party as a 'degenerate art'.



Nosferatu the Vampire – Shreck 1922

Style

In keeping with its fascination with the more macabre and nightmarish aspects of personal psychology, German Expressionism was primarily associated with the more fantastical genres of horror and science fiction. The distorted, stylised extremes of Expressionist visuals suited otherworldly visions of an imagined past or future, rather than depicting contemporary social issues. Subject matter was chosen to suit the aesthetic style and so often dealt with darker, more disturbing themes such as madness, sexuality and violence. If Soviet Montage is defined by its innovative approach to film editing, the principal mode through which German Expressionism creates meaning is that of *mise-en-scène*. In Classic Hollywood cinema, the actors were the primary means of expression, with the scenery and props only of secondary importance. For German Expressionism, the graphical composition of the shot was paramount, often incorporating stylised surfaces, canted angles and abstracted geometric forms with the construction of artificial sets that loom and jut, accentuating the disturbed internal turmoil of the lead characters.

Due to the need for the viewer to take meaning from the image as a graphical unit, the pace of the editing was predominantly slow, with the camera positioned usually at eye-level which meant that high and low angled shots could be used to heighten the visual distortion of the image at pivotal moments. Actors would mirror the crooked forms of trees, houses were often pointed or twisted and chiaroscuro lighting was applied to create dramatic contrast between light and shadow suggesting the presence of the darkest aspects of human nature. The flat, bold, theatrical quality of German Expressionism with its heavily stylised graphical compositions gave the movement a striking visual aesthetic that made it immediately recognisable and subsequently, often emulated.

Legacy

German Expressionism was hugely influential amongst contemporary international filmmakers who looked to Germany whose film industry was superior to Hollywood in terms of technical and artistic sophistication. Alfred Hitchcock worked in Germany in the 1920s as an assistant director on a German-British co-production and began to incorporate expressionistic set-design in his own work, principally in his next film, *The Lodger* (1927) and throughout his career, particularly in *Spellbound* (1945) as well as the distorted, fragmented visuals of Scottie's psychological distress in *Vertigo* (1958). It was in the horror genre that German Expressionism found its earliest and most lasting foothold in terms of its adoption into the Hollywood vernacular, with expressionist use of *mise-en-scène* evident in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) and *Dracula* (1931). This cross-fertilisation has extended throughout the history of the horror genre, particularly with the use of chiaroscuro lighting and claustrophobic interiors to unnerve the audience as in contemporary horror *The Babadook*, in which the gothic home and the children's picture book that fills it with the threat of nightmarish violence are both seeped in the foreboding *mise-en-scène* of German Expressionism.

Film Noir took much of the Expressionist style but wrenched it out of the realms of fantasy of horror and sci-fiction, using it to depict brooding tales of murder and psychological pathologies. Fritz Lang's 1931 *M* is often cited as the first film to have combined the two and began a period of darkly stylised Hollywood filmmaking that finds its most vivid expression in Charles Laughton's homage to German Expressionism, *Night of the Hunter* (1955). Its influence can also clearly be seen in a more contemporary auteur Tim Burton's work from the *Metropolis* inspired Gotham cityscapes of in *Batman* (1989) to the use of symmetry and juxtaposition in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990).

Metropolis – Fritz Lang 1927



Soviet montage

Context

The school of filmmaking that historians call Soviet Montage was a style of avant-garde cinema that developed in Soviet Russia during the 1920s. It was a response to two socio-economic imperatives driving the emergent film industry in the decade following the First World War and the October Revolution. The first was ideological and saw Soviet filmmakers tackle the challenge of developing new approaches to cinema that could adequately articulate the contradictions of Capitalist social structures and illustrate a more radical and revolutionary Socialist aesthetic. The second was commercial with the economic need for the centralised State-run film industry to be able to generate export revenues through the creation of a critically successful national cinema that could find box-office success with international distribution abroad.

Two key figures in the Soviet Montage school of filmmaking associated with documentary and with fiction film respectively, were **Dziga Vertov** (1896-1954) and **Sergei Eisenstein** (1898-1948). From 1922, the documentarian Dziga Vertov produced a series of monthly cinematic newsreels entitled *Kino Pravda* ("Film Truth"). These sought to communicate in stark detail the new national life of the country under Communism to a mass audience of ordinary Russians, culminating with the reflexive and formally inventive documentary, *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929). Sergei Eisenstein on the other hand, was a director with a background in the theatre and and was famous both for his influential historical dramas as well as his theoretical writings on film art. Eisenstein's cinema had a sweeping socio-political scope and a radically new approach to creating meaning through editing. Films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) sought to depict what he saw as the epic heroism of the masses through the startling juxtaposition of disparate imagery in dynamic and unexpected ways.

Style

In terms of genre, Soviet Montage was a form of propaganda cinema that prioritised social conflict over personal stories, and consisted primarily of historical drama films set in the recent Revolutionary past or documentaries that foregrounded the newly formed Communist society. As such, Soviet Montage filmmakers tended to eschew the science fiction and supernatural genre tropes of their German Expressionist



The Battleship Potemkin film poster – 1925

contemporaries in favour of narratives that dealt almost exclusively with the history of class struggle under the Tsar or else on contemporary social problems. Montage films see characters as social agents defined by class interests and less as psychologically motivated individuals, with their narrative crises and resolutions being driven by conflicting social forces as depicted through a radically dynamic approach to editing and visual composition.

For both Vertov and Eisenstein, cinema could celebrate Proletarian collectivity both through the use of non-professional actors and real locations but also through the development of radically experimental theories of film editing in which it's understood that the way in which shots are juxtaposed can create entirely new meanings independent of the separate images filmed. In the writings of Eisenstein and Leftist film-theorist **Lev Kuleshov**, the juxtaposition of two shots to suggest a third meaning echoes the dialectical approach of Marxist thought in which a thesis and its antithesis combine to create a new synthesis. It was through the use of a variety of experimental techniques of cinematic compression and decompression, such as the use of jump-cuts and elliptical editing, non-diegetic inserts and overlapping editing as well as a keen eye for the often shocking possibilities of integrating archive footage with distinctive and graphically composed contemporary imagery that Soviet Montage filmmakers sought to create their own radically new form of revolutionary cinema.

Legacy

In many ways, Soviet Montage can be seen as an avant-garde alternative to the style of *continuity editing* as was being developed in the popular narratives of early Hollywood cinema as well as Europe's other more commercial national film industries. Fundamentally, the purpose of continuity editing is to make the transition from one shot to the next as seamless as possible, in effect to keep the audience as unaware as possible of the shift from one image to the next and to create the illusion of time unfolding smoothly. In contrast, *montage editing* calls attention to itself both in terms of the sheer number and the often shocking nature of its cuts. For filmmakers like Vertov and Eisenstein, montage editing enabled them to stimulate their audiences into new associative leaps that would radically change the meanings of the original shots being linked or juxtaposed through "collision" and which violently disrupts the temporal flow and spatial unity of the scene. Through compression and decompression actions take up far less or far greater screen time than in reality while through cross-cutting, actions in different spaces can appear to occur simultaneously or can be

made to echo or undercut each other in more abstract, thematic terms.

Despite its oppositional stance towards classical continuity, the lessons of Soviet Montage have been incorporated by countless Hollywood filmmakers over the years. It is instructive to look at the work of Alfred Hitchcock - for whom, "*all moviemaking is pure montage*" - to see how the formal innovations of montage editing can be brought to bear not in service to the naturalistic evocation of class struggle but in the creation of heightened filmic suspense. The shower scene in *Psycho* for example, where skillful montage editing enables the sensationalist "illusion" of highly stylised screen violence all through the suggestive juxtaposition of shots in which the knife is never shown actually touching the body. Ultimately though, and in stark contrast to its radical roots in the Socialist avant-garde, the most visible contemporary media forms in which montage editing is still most prevalent are the music promo and the film trailer, in which jump-cuts and dynamic editing are used to sell pop stars and summer blockbusters.



Dziga Vertov

Part 2: The sound cinema – Italian neo-realism

Context

Italian Neo-realism was a truly post-war cinema movement, one that emerged from the particular socio-economic conditions prevalent in Italy at the end of the Second World War characterised primarily with the Allied Occupation of Italy and the dismantling of the former Fascist state. Into an economic climate of privation and poverty and a cultural landscape seeking a clean break from the authoritarian ideology and Fascist aesthetics of Mussolini, the directors most closely associated with Neo-Realism such as **Roberto Rossellini** (1906-1977) and **Vittorio de Sica** (1901-1974) each sought to fashion a new kind of cinema that could speak directly to the experiences of ordinary Italians. With the wartime collapse of much of the Italian film industry's infrastructure, it was no longer technically possible to continue making the kind of studio-bound bourgeois chamber comedies or sprawling historical epics that had dominated Italian cinema before the war, even if such a polished but politically-compromised style of film production had not been an ideologically and aesthetically anathema to the Left-leaning Neo-realist directors.

Instead, Rossellini and de Sica took to the war-scarred city streets and poverty-stricken backwaters of the Italian countryside to create films that put the lived social conditions of the poor and oppressed centre screen. *De Sica's Bicycle Thieves* (1948) was filmed entirely on location in the backstreets and tenement apartments of post-war Rome and with a cast of non-professional actors that were essentially playing versions of themselves. While, Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) is a Resistance movie that is at once, a document of the impact of the German and subsequent Allied Occupation on the city and its inhabitants, a hymn to the courage of both the Communist and Catholic resistance during the war, and a testimony to the tenacity and ingenuity of neo-realist filmmaking, shot as it was in secret during the Occupation on whatever scraps of film stock could be found.



Style

Italian Neo-realism was in many ways a generic melding of the tools and techniques of documentary cinema with the concerns and characters of the social problem film. Where Soviet Montage focussed on characters as purely representative of economic classes, the Neo-realist filmmakers sought to create characters that would embody broader social problems to the extent whereby individual personality is secondary to the character's role as an everyman figure buffeted by relentless socio-economic travails. If Soviet Montage eschews character psychology entirely, Italian Neo-realism adopts instead an approach to character and milieu that is as much sociological as it is psychological. The majority of Neo-realist films take a real event or actual incident as the germ of their narrative, exploring the themes and ideas inherent in that element of reality in a quietly contemplative, unemphatic style. It can be argued that through open-ended narratives as well as elliptical and episodic storytelling, Italian neo-realism can be seen almost as having adapted the visual tools of temporal decompression as developed by Eisenstein to the formal structuring of film narrative, so as to better echo the more open-ended, unresolvable nature of real lived experience.

Tied to this narrative concern with documenting life as lived in post-war Italy, the realism of Italian Neo-realism borrows equally famously from the improvisatory aesthetics of documentary filmmaking. The playing of characters by non-professional actors, the shooting of scenes in real-life exterior locations without the use of artificial lighting and the improvising of dialogue and performance in situ all give Neo-realist films an ad hoc, naturalistic style that brings to mind the immediacy of documentary. It should be noted however, that this drive for capturing authentic experience without reliance on artifice was often at odds with certain technical limitations imposed upon Italian Neo-realist directors. For example, de Sica's non-professional actors are dubbed in post-production since on location sound recording was not possible, while the duration of shots was often dictated more by the length of available film stock and the limited ability of non-actors to sustain their performances than by purely artistic criteria.

Legacy

According to Martin Scorsese, Italian Neo-realism was able to "dissolve the barrier between documentary and fiction and in the process permanently changed the rules of moviemaking." The critical success of Italian Neo-

realist films on the international arthouse circuit gave filmmakers in other European countries that had suffered similar conditions as Italy a model for a kind of naturalistic filmmaking practice that could be applied to their own domestic stories. And so it is possible to see examples of Spanish, Greek and Eastern European films within a neo-realist mode, as well as to see traces in its humanistic attitude towards narrative and theme in the British social-realist tradition of the 1950s and 1960s.

It is also possible to see the influence of Italian Neo-realism on the early filmmaking efforts of the young *Cahiers du Cinema* critic-turned-director Jean-Luc Godard. With its reliance on natural lighting and eschewing of traditional studio sets in favour of filming inside actual apartments or on the streets of Paris, Godard's debut film *À bout de souffle* (1960) has many of the visual trappings of a film like *Bicycle Thieves*, but filtered through Godard's genre love of the Hollywood b-movie. Even the film's ostensive crime story is refracted through the elliptical plotting of Italian Neo-realism, with its narrative digressions and longueurs.



Bicycle Thieves – De Sica 1948

French new wave

Context

The French New Wave is unique in European film history as being a creative movement that sprung directly from a preceding critical moment. Unlike Soviet Montage and German Expressionism that both took their cues from developments in the theatrical and visual arts, the French New Wave was a school of cinema that looked at film history and film criticism for its inspiration and approach. **Francois Truffaut** (1932-1984) and **Jean-Luc Godard** (1930 -) were critics for the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* during the 1950s and through their reviews of the many Hollywood genre films only then being shown in France due to the wartime German Occupation they began to develop a brand new way of looking at cinema. For the critics of *Cahiers* it was possible to discern within the popular genre entertainment put out by big Hollywood studios a “cinema of auteurs”, films that expressed the artistic vision of the directors that created them. The films of the French New Wave therefore emerged as a practical illustration and application of the ideas and theories put forward in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinema* by first-time filmmakers that helped forge the romantic image of the passionate and playful young director seeking to make uncompromisingly personal films.

In conjunction with this defining moment in French film criticism, the directors associated with the New Wave were able to capitalise on the newly established systems of production subsidies and financial advances by the French state keen to arrest the decline in cinema attendance that had become evident during the late 1950s. In addition, the relative youth of the directors associated with the New Wave also allowed them to tap more directly into the newly emerging demographic of film-going teenagers and young people, creating movies that showcased the Parisian youth culture of jazz bars, chic fashion and the café scene. The final element that contributed to the development of French New Wave was technological, smaller light-weight cameras and portable sound equipment that allowed for lower production costs and a more ad hoc, improvisational approach to shooting on the go.



Band of Outsiders – Jean Luc-Goddard 1964

Style

The French New Wave treats generic conventions with a playful irreverence, such as crime in *Bande à part* (Godard, 1964) and *Tirez sur le pianiste* (Truffaut, 1960), science fiction in *Alphaville* (Godard, 1965) and romance in *Jules et Jim* (Truffaut, 1962), the purpose of which was to renew and revitalize popular genre cinema. In many ways, the French New Wave sought to invigorate commercial filmmaking by incorporating the stylistic innovations of earlier avant-garde film movements. With its disjunctive, choppy editing and quirky cinematography the French New Wave learned from Soviet Montage, while from Italian Neo-realism it borrowed elements of elliptical plotting, narrative coincidence and fragmentation, a documentarian focus on the depiction of contemporary reality and a willingness to work with improvisation and the accidents of location shooting. In addition, the French New Wave combined elements of popular culture including pulp novels or Hollywood B-movies with references to contemporary philosophy, avant-garde art and literature.

Unlike any of the preceding movements in European cinema, French New Wave film was reflexive in unprecedented ways. As can be expected of filmmakers with a background in film criticism, the films of the French New Wave were filled with intertextual nods to cinema history, including the use of anachronistic silent movie techniques such as intertitles and iris wipes and cameos by famous directors such as the German Expressionist, Fritz Lang. This reflexivity often serves a distancing function, pulling the audience out of the diegesis and foregrounding the constructed nature of the film as in the freeze frame that concludes Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups* (1959) ultimately withholding any form of narrative resolution.

Legacy

As with Italian Neo-realism the French New Wave served as a model for a new kind of radical filmmaking that could be emulated by young directors within different national film contexts. During the 1960s, cineaste directors across Eastern Europe departed from the traditions of their local film industries to create iconoclastic film movements such as the Czech New Wave and Young Cinema in Poland. In Britain, a similarly youthful cadre of filmmakers took to depicting the trials and tribulations of contemporary youth culture in what became known as the "Kitchen Sink" film, while in America, John Cassavetes pioneered a new form of improvisatory cinema combined with a naturalistic documentary aesthetic termed *cinéma vérité*.

More recently, we can see aspects of French New Wave reflexivity in the postmodern filmmaking of cineaste Quentin Tarantino whose films are filled with playful allusions to cinematic icons and motifs from arthouse fare to the grindhouse circuit, and that combines in a way that flattens the distinction between high and low culture. It is undoubtedly thanks to the auteur theories of the French New Wave that directors working in contemporary genre cinema such as David Fincher, Christopher Nolan and Guillermo Del Toro are now seen as imbuing commercial filmmaking with a distinctive personal vision. In addition, we might also argue for evidence of the *Cahiers* critics' programmatic theories of cinematic renewal, as developed through their writings on the "politique des auteurs" in the kind of critical position laid out in the manifesto cinema of the avant-garde Danish *Dogme 95* movement.



Jean-Luc-Goddard



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