

**A LEVEL**  
*Teacher guide*

# **FILM STUDIES**

H410  
For first teaching in 2017

## **European film movements**

Version 2



# 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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# 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



# 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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