

# **The Nouvelle Vague**

*Highbrow, lowbrow, nobrow*

## **Bachelor thesis**

**Name:** Nathalie van den Bovenkamp

**Student number:** 3480186

**Words:** 5559

**Mentor:** Jim Hurley

21 juni 2012

N.O.vandenbovenkamp@students.uu.nl

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## Introduction

Philosopher David Hume wrote his essay *On the Standard of Taste* in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this essay Hume argues that there is a common *standard of taste* through which good taste can be determined.<sup>1</sup> The determination of what constitutes good art however, has not remained unchanged but has transformed over the centuries. For ages there was a great distinction between *high art* for the elite and *low art*, or entertainment, for the common people. Nowadays even the most highly educated people are not ashamed to openly incorporate art forms in their taste range formerly regarded as lowbrow. One could even argue that it is more valued nowadays to have a mixed taste that incorporates elements from different cultural layers. Looking at the cultural scenery there are still ruins recognizable in of old, traditional aesthetic hierarchies. However, the cultural levelling of the last centuries has been dominant in all cultural domains. When it comes to music, listening to the popular Beatles is just as accepted and valued as listening to Bach or Mozart. This evolution in how we think about what constitutes good taste has not come at once but signifies the passage from the modern age to the postmodern age. The fifties were deeply rooted in modern tradition in which there was a definitive hierarchical divide between highbrow art for the developed elite and lowbrow culture for the unknowing masses. The sixties however were the *rites de passage* for postmodernism in which the elitist purist view of art was no longer generally accepted. In the postmodern age art is no longer defined by rigid borders that keep the masses out; culture is accessible to everyone and every cultural expression is accepted.

Amidst this tumultuous era the Nouvelle Vague, or 'new wave' swept over France and French cinema. Movie directors like Godard, Truffaut, Rivette, Rohmer and Chabrol shook French cinema awake by making movies on their own terms; without big budgets, famous actors or screenwriters. They saw themselves as the *auteur*, or 'author' of their own movies, primarily responsible for the narrative, the mise en scène and ultimately, the aesthetic value of their cinema. They defied elitist notions of filmmaking and valued Hollywood as great *auteur cinema*. New wave movies like *A BOUT DE SOUFFLE* (Godard), and *LES QUATRE CENTS COUP* (Truffaut) became film classics which to this day are regarded as great works of art and are an inspiration to contemporary directors like Martin Scorsese, Wes Anderson and Quentin Tarantino who even named his production company 'A Band Apart' after the classic new wave film by Godard *BANDE À PART* (1964). The Nouvelle Vague was not just caught amidst the tempest of modernism evolving into

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Carroll, "Hume's on the Standard of Taste", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art criticism* 43.2 (1984).

postmodernism; it played an active part in this paradigm shift. The extraordinary feature of the Nouvelle Vague is that has performed a narrating role as well as being an active factor in the realization of this new postmodern era in which highbrow and lowbrow distinctions have become obsolete.

In my thesis I will try to explain the way the Nouvelle Vague was a central node in the shift from modernism to postmodernism. In addition I will argue that the Nouvelle Vague has been fundamental in the way cinema and art are valued, and ultimately that the Nouvelle Vague laid the groundwork for the way we nowadays define what constitutes good taste.

### **The Nouvelle Vague; critique and film production**

The term 'La Nouvelle Vague' was initially coined in 1958 by French journalist Françoise Giraud, in the weekly journal *Express*.<sup>2</sup> Giraud used it to refer to the tangible fresh breeze that was profoundly changing French culture, with cinema as an element of this change. Even though the term was initially a journalistic slogan to depict the changes that French society was going through, it soon became indissolubly linked to cinema when *L'Express* applied the term to cinema in 1959. Film historian Richard Neupert states that the Nouvelle Vague was "first and foremost a cultural phenomenon".<sup>3</sup> Neupert embeds the Nouvelle Vague in a broader paradigm shift in the arts that anticipated the paradigm shift in cinema. One of the most important figures of the Nouvelle Vague, François Truffaut stated in 1959 that the Nouvelle Vague "never really corresponded to reality in the sense that people seemed to believe there was an association of young French directors who got together regularly and had a common aesthetic".<sup>4</sup> However, Truffaut's statement should be nuanced in the sense that there was a definite common ground amongst the Nouvelle Vague directors, especially those directors who also wrote film critical essays for *Cahiers du cinéma*. They did share a common aesthetic and history with one another as they all started out as critics who in addition became directors. The term 'Nouvelle Vague' often functions as a portmanteau that links the individual changes in the same era in French cinema together; nevertheless there was a common origin for the prominent figures in the Nouvelle Vague who were all directors as well as film critics and passionate *cinephiles* at heart.

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<sup>2</sup> James Monaco, *The New Wave: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette*. (New York: Oxford University Press 1976), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (Madison: Wisconsin Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Francois Truffaut in Michel Marie, *The French New Wave: An Artistic School* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 9.

The *Cahiers* directors had a very central and exceptional position in the Nouvelle Vague; there was an interaction between their filmmaking and their film theoretical essays. Their movies reinforced their theories and their theories amplified their movies. They were an active factor in changing the landscape of French cinema, whilst narrating and critiquing the new wave at the same time. When thinking about the Cahiers directors, Godard, Truffaut and Chabrol were especially important. André Bazin was the founding father and patriarchal figure of *Cahiers*, laying the groundwork for *Cahiers'* theoretical approach of the analysis of the mise-en-scène.

Contrary to the main consensus that Nouvelle Vague broke with old cinema, French film magazine *Positif* in 1962 states that in fact the Nouvelle Vague “is very vague and not that new”.<sup>5</sup> The antagonism from *Positif* towards *Cahiers du cinéma* and its directors is due to the fact that *Positif* was a politically engaged film journal that was under the influence of the French communist party, where *Cahiers* remained politically neutral.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to the diminishing statement by *Positif*, there was a corner being turned in French cinema; films were being made which broke with old filmmaking conventions and traditional conventions about what constitutes art.

### **Who what where?**

In the 1950's the notion came into being that French film was losing its touch and was no longer good enough to compete on the global market.<sup>7</sup> Cinema was still a lucrative business with films earning steady profits, but according to film critics there was a lack of exciting new film. Film historian Michel Marie calls this groundwork for the Nouvelle Vague “aesthetic sclerosis and a solid economic health”.<sup>8</sup> The yearning for exciting film correlates to the popularity of cinema and the rise of cinephilia. In the fifties the largest preservation of French films, Henry Langlois' *cinémathèque* was relocated in Paris and in addition to the film collection got a viewing room. Audiences now had access to French film history. The emergence of the popularity of cinema and cinephilia can also be seen in the amount of critical film journals like *Positif*, *Le Film français*, *Cinéma 59* and especially *Cahiers du Cinéma* which became very popular with the cinema loving audience. The dissatisfaction of French film critics and cinephiles with their national cinema proved to be a particularly nutritive soil for a new kind of cinema. The extent of

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Temple en Michael Witt, *The French Cinema Book* (Londen: British Film Institute 2004): 185.

<sup>6</sup> Dorota Ostrawska, *Reading the French New Wave: Critics, Writers and Art Cinema in France* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Neupert, xvii.

<sup>8</sup> Marie, 19.

this dissatisfaction is probably best displayed by the amount of movies being made. In 1959 and 1960 more films were being made in France than ever before in the history of sound cinema.<sup>9</sup>

This huge quantity of filmmaking was possible because of the dismissal of traditional filmmaking conventions. Before the Nouvelle Vague filmmaking had only been accessible to the elite because of the high cost. The new directors defied these dominant moviemaking traditions and used the means that were at hand. Inspired by neorealism they shot their movies on location, using unknown or little known actors and affordable production crews.<sup>10</sup> This pragmatic approach to film was perpendicular to the way movies had been made for centuries and meant a fundamental change in the character of the French world of film revising dominant modes of production. As film critic René Prédal points out: “Before the New Wave directors could modify the profound nature of the cinema, they had to attack its structures so as to shake up the system”.<sup>11</sup> The new production modes were not just a necessity for the young directors, they were also gnawing away at the foundations of traditional filmmaking.

The core of the Nouvelle Vague is often defined in terms of the *Cahiers directors*; movie directors who were also film critics for *Cahiers du cinéma*. *Cahiers* was originally founded by André Bazin in 1947 under the name of *La Revue du cinema*, which became *Cahiers du cinema* in 1951.<sup>12</sup> The journal was a critical sounding board for movies and for French cinema in general presented by film critics (and directors) for cinephiles. Bazin remained one of the editors of *Cahiers* and “spiritual leader” to the magazine, and arguably to the Nouvelle Vague. The directors linked to *Cahiers* most extensively represent the Nouvelle Vague. Film historian Richard Neupert states that these directors “share all the traits expected of New Wave filmmakers, while many other directors shared only several of those most pertinent traits”.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that other directors should not be counted to the Nouvelle Vague, but the *Cahiers* directors can be seen as the core of the Nouvelle Vague, both in the directing of films and in their film critiques.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Neupert, xviii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> René Prédal in Neupert, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Graham en Ginette Vincendeau, *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, (London: Palgram Macmillan, 2009), 63.

<sup>13</sup> Neupert, 356.

<sup>14</sup> The *Cahiers* directors: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Pierre Kast.

## **Nouveau Roman**

The Nouvelle Vague is a film movement that originated parallel to a literary movement, in which the *Nouveau Roman* took centre stage. These movements were not only parallel to one another but also influenced each other. In her study *Reading the French New Wave* Dorota Ostrawska states that during the Nouvelle Vague film and literature “were locked to such a degree that they became inextricable”.<sup>15</sup> According to Ostrawska the common ground between the Nouvelle Vague film and the Nouveau Roman novel is the *cine-literary narrative*: “highly dynamic structures in which cinematic, or visual elements are found at the basis of narratives in cinema and in literature”.<sup>16</sup> Apart from their shared narrative structures the Nouvelle Vague and the Nouveau Roman also shared a knack for causing controversy. The Nouveau Roman utilised new narrative strategies in which the causality between events were not always made explicitly clear. The authors of the Nouveau Roman called traditional realism in literature in to question, and wrote without a recognizable individual voice. Unlike modernist authors like James Joyce or Samuel Beckett, the Nouveau Roman authors questioned the position of the author. Rather paradoxically, they assumed their position as author by writing depersonalized texts; every novel had a new style. The Nouveau Roman looked closely at reality from an unbiased point of view, leaving the interpretation of the unfolding events and the causality of the events up to the reader. The new novelists did not have any common trait, except for their resistance of traditional literature. The Nouveau Roman caused controversy in the literary world by not abiding traditional narrative structures, but many people who did not support the Nouveau Roman from the start, often found the novels controversially boring.<sup>17</sup>

The Nouvelle Vague consciously incorporated new narrative strategies that were directly linked to the Nouveau Roman. Acknowledging the direct link between literature and film meant a change for the way film was viewed: where literature had always been considered a highbrow artform, cinema had been struggling with its art status fluctuating from art to lowbrow entertainment. The link between cinema and literature meant that cinema had to be taken as seriously as literature.

The connection between literature and cinema is made even clearer by Truffaut’s notion of cinema language and the director as an *auteur*, or author.

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<sup>15</sup> Ostrawska, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Idem, 169.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of art* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 732.

## Discontent

In 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema' François Truffaut positions himself against the classic *Tradition of Quality* in French cinema that had been the dominant highbrow cinema stooled upon French literature.<sup>18</sup> Truffaut argued that the Tradition of Quality was bourgeois cinema and that its *psychological realism* did not -as it claimed- portray the 'real man', but according to Truffaut constituted "anti-bourgeois cinema made by the bourgeois for the bourgeois".<sup>19</sup> He argues that the working man does not want to see himself through bourgeois eyes and will eventually realize that he is being ridiculed.<sup>20</sup> According to Truffaut The Tradition of Quality is steadily pulling down French cinema by its false claim to psychological realism and watering down literature so the signature of the writer is no longer recognizable, and neither is the identity of the director. Truffaut believes that French cinema suffers from a standard of mediocrity in which individual artists cannot be recognized. Both scriptwriters and directors feel as though they have to live up to this meagre standard.

Even though Truffaut's article is often seen as the real reason for the Nouvelle Vague 'rebellion' against the Tradition of Quality cinema, in retrospect film historians have offered other views on what the Nouvelle Vague was founded on. Serge Daney states in his article 'The New Wave: A Genealogical Approach' in 1988 that the Nouvelle Vague did not derive from the weakness of French cinema, but from its strength.<sup>21</sup> Like an adolescent rebelling against its parents, not because they are not good parents, but because he has to find his own identity. Like Daney, film historian Colin Crisp rejects the notion that the Nouvelle Vague was a radical break with traditional French cinema. In his study *The Classic French Cinema 1930-1960* (1993) Crisp states that the Nouvelle Vague was a "logical outcome and continuation" of the Tradition of Quality.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Ginette Vincendeau gives us the best explanation in her introduction to her bundle of Nouvelle Vague essays, where she states that when Truffaut "rages against the Tradition of Quality because it was a worthy enemy".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> François Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema", in *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, red. Peter Graham & Ginette Vincendeau (London: Palgram Macmillan, 2009), 40.

<sup>19</sup> Idem, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, 59-60.

<sup>21</sup> Serge Daney, 'The New Wave: A Genealogical Approach', red. Jean-Loup Passek, *D'un cinéma à l'autre: notes sur le cinéma français des années cinquante* (Paris, Centre Pompidou: 1988). Translation: <http://home.earthlink.net/~steeve/new.html>

<sup>22</sup> Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema 1930-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 416.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Graham and Ginette Vincendeau, 24.

<sup>24</sup> In Robert C. Sickels, *American Film in the Digital Age* (California, ABC-CLIO, 2011), 100.



Against the Tradition of Quality, which he sees as nondescript cinema, Truffaut positions the *cinéma des auteurs*, based on the *politique des auteurs* as an antidote. The term was originally coined by Truffaut and derived from the idea that the director of a film should be an *auteur*, or author. The director has his own signature that makes his movies recognizable. Truffaut takes the *politique des auteurs* so far that he states that there “are no good or bad movies, only good or bad directors”, the movie directly reflects on its director.<sup>24</sup> According to Truffaut the importance of the movies in themselves diminishes in the light of their directors. He even liked to quote the French novelist Giraudoux who stated: “there are no movies, only directors”.<sup>25</sup> So naturally the Tradition of Quality poses a direct opponent to the *politique des auteurs*; by basing the movies on poor book-adaptations which do not even pretend to keep the original narrative in place, the movie wipes out all *auteurism* from the original book as well as preventing the director of the movie from putting his signature on the film.

### **La politique des auteurs**

In 1957 André Bazin wrote the article “La Politique des Auteurs” in *Cahiers du Cinéma*.<sup>26</sup> In this article Bazin reflects on the *politique des auteurs* and the consensus and disputes about the *politique des auteurs* within *Cahiers*. Bazin nuances Truffaut’s slightly radical idea of the *politique des auteurs*; according to Bazin the notion of an *auteur* with royalties, responsibilities and duties has only existed for a century or so. Before that the work of art took centre stage; if we do not know the artist this does not mean that therefore we cannot appreciate the work of art. However, according to Bazin there is a common longing to discover the identity of the artist; the *auteur* is important. However, Bazin does not completely discard the work of art itself, nor does he feel the *auteur* can ever be disconnected from his society.<sup>27</sup> “The *politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to another.”<sup>28</sup> Bazin uses the terms *auteur* and *genius* as synonymous. Looking at an *auteur* as a genius however, according to Bazin creates a danger of regarding everything a recognized *auteur* makes as a work of genius: “it is always a good method to presuppose that a supposed weakness in a work of art is nothing but a beauty one has not yet managed to

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<sup>25</sup> André Bazin, “La Politique des Auteurs”, in *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, red. Peter Graham & Ginette Vincendeau (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 130.

<sup>26</sup> François Giraudoux in Bazin “La Politique des Auteurs” in Graham & Vincendeau, 132.

<sup>27</sup> Idem, 133-135.

<sup>28</sup> Idem, 143.

understand”.<sup>29</sup> Apposed to Truffaut’s idea that the auteur is singlehandedly responsible for the value of the film, Bazin argues that the auteur always functions in a context, and that this context should be considered when thinking about the value of a movie.

Jean-Luc Godard regarded Alfred Hitchcock as one of the greatest auteurs of all times. Hitchcock had always been highly regarded as a solid lowbrow entertainer and as “the master of suspense”, however he had never been seen as a true artist. Godard however was a great fan of Hitchcock as an auteur whose cinematic signature was recognizable and unforgettable. Godard stated: “there are ten thousand people who haven’t forgotten Cezanne’s apple, but there must be a billion spectators who remember the lighter of the stranger on the train”.<sup>30</sup> Surmounting Godard, Jacques Rivette wrote in *Gazette du Cinéma* that “Hitchcock is the only director to have understood that the cinema can evoke a Dostoevski-like world, which is a purely moral world”.<sup>31</sup> By claiming that Hitchcock was the artistic equal of highly valued directors like Renoir or Bresson, *Cahiers* was inundated with critique, but the seed they planted flourished in the global film world and proved how influential these young critics actually were. The *politique des auteurs* was not in its most extreme form a general accepted notion, but the idea that the movies directed by an auteur were art, did resonate in the film world and went directly against the grain of traditional notions of cinema as an artform.

The *politique des auteurs* regarded ‘genius directors’ as auteurs, or authors. In line with this thinking, *Cahiers* critic and director Alexandre Astruc calls the age of new cinema influenced by the Nouvelle Vague directors, the age of the *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen).<sup>32</sup> He argues that before the Nouvelle Vague cinema had been a ‘show’, displaying only one kind of cinema. The *caméra-stylo* is not restricted to one kind of cinema, but functions as a real pen that is capable of writing anything. The auteur utilizes his camera-stylo by writing *film language*. This language particular to cinema incorporates traditional art elements such as music and narrative, but also visual and spatial movement. The assumption that cinema uses language just as literature utilizes language meant that the *politique des auteurs* lifted cinema to the same plateau as literature.

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<sup>29</sup> Idem, 145.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, in “The artist Behind Norman Bates”, *Eye* 41.11 (2011).

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Rivette, “Under Capricorn d’Alfred Hitchcock”, *Gazette du Cinéma* 4 (June 1950).

<sup>32</sup> Alexandre Astruc, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra Stylo” in *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, red. Peter Graham & Ginette Vincendeau (London: Palgram Macmillan, 2009), 32.

<sup>33</sup> Dwight Macdoanald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962), x.

The *politique des auteurs* proved to be an assault on traditional hierarchies of value. The genius director was no longer just a solid craftsman or an industrial foreman, but was regarded as an artist who was able to imprint his individual signature on each work. Movies by auteurs were no longer considered products of an industry, but works of art that were able to carry the individual worldview of an artist and like other artforms had a meaning more profound than just entertainment.

Outside France the *politique des auteurs* found great resonance with popular film critic Andrew Sarris who wrote for the popular free New York weekly *The Village Voice*. Sarris translated the *politique des auteurs* into 'auteur theory', and reviewed films from this auteurist point of view. Sarris defines auteur theory in three premises; the first premise of the auteur theory is the "technical competence of the director". The second is the "distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value", and the last premise is "the interior meaning of the cinema as an art: interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material."<sup>34</sup> According to this auteur theory, Sarris states that not the individual movies of an auteur should be emphasized, but the body of the directed work. Sarris' interpretation of Truffaut's *politique des auteurs* makes the author theory slightly more approachable and concrete. It can also be seen as playing a part in how we view movies and directors nowadays: we approach a movie from its auteur context and value a movie in the same way.

However, Sarris' auteur theory was met by strong criticism especially by film critic Pauline Kael. In her article "Circles and Squares" Kael attacks Sarris' auteur theory rather viciously and accuses it of being "a rigid formula".<sup>33</sup> Kael proves her point by attacking all three of Sarris' premises. According to Kael the premises that Sarris offers are empty of any pragmatic meaning that actually can be utilized when determining the value of films. She states that when looking at movies from an auteurist point of view one loses sight of the real value of a movie and gets blind-sided by the 'mystique' of the director, which really does not mean anything. Kael argues for not looking at movies solely with the director in mind, but looking at movies without a rigid theory to determine the worth of the movie. Kael's criticism on Sarris can be seen as the same pitfall Bazin talks about. When viewing movies from the auteur theory the movie should still be considered in its own right as well as from an auteur context.

In the seventies and eighties there was a lot of criticism on auteur theory; the influence of the director would have been greatly exaggerated by the supporters of

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<sup>34</sup> Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares" in *Auteurs and authorship: a film reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). 47.

auteur theory, because every director would have been strictly tied to the wants of his production studio. When Barthes suggested the “death of the author” it seemed as though auteur theory might have become obsolete. However, auteurism was more nuanced and never claimed that the director was singlehandedly responsible for his films, but that he provided a certain recognizable signature. Looking back, it is apparent that auteur theory has defied the test of time and that the auteur is, in fact, still very much alive. Its effects can still be recognized today in slogans as “From the director that brought you ...”. The signature of the auteur has not only been generally accepted, but is nowadays also recognized as a marketing tool.

### **Highbrow, lowbrow, nobrow**

It is hard to imagine nowadays that cinema was only a few decades ago considered as lowbrow entertainment for the commoners, frowned upon by traditional aesthetics. However, this was very much the case in the era of the Nouvelle Vague. In 1963 well-known film critic and social critic Dwight Macdonald wrote cultural criticism for inter alia *The New Yorker* and *Fortune*. His main focus was the rise of mass media and in particular the “vulgarization” of the cultural scene.<sup>34</sup> In his study *Against the American Grain* Macdonald states that he only sees two logical solutions for the demise of highbrow culture: “(a) an attempt to integrate the masses into high culture; or (b) a contrary attempt to define two cultures, one for the masses and the other for the classes.” Macdonald argues for the latter.<sup>35</sup> Reading this study currently, it is hard not to feel offended by Macdonald’s elitist view of culture in which the masses should have no business interfering with art. However, Macdonald’s point of view originates from centuries of a modernist static divide between highbrow and lowbrow culture.

According to Macdonald mass-culture is not even culture but cult; “it is not just unsuccessful art, it is non-art. It is even anti-art”.<sup>36</sup> He states that masscult is not even entertainment, “for this implies life and hence effort, it is merely distraction”.<sup>37</sup> The choice between highbrow and lowbrow culture for the masses has led to a “middlebrow compromise called ‘Midcult’, according to Macdonald.<sup>38</sup> Macdonald parted ways with *Film Quarterly* when renowned film critic Andy Sarris was of the opinion that Hitchcock was “at the summit of his artistic powers” with *The Birds* (1962). Macdonald’s strong antagonism towards popular culture can be understood in light of the upheaval of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup> Idem, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Idem, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Idem, 34.

traditional values of high and low culture. The sixties made everything available to everyone; in earlier times filmmaking and culture criticism was reserved for the elite, but now all these ignorant fools were playing on their land and not by their rules.

The great distinction between highbrow and lowbrow can also be seen as the supposed divide between the arts and 'entertainment business'. Hollywood was seen as the prime example of the entertainment industry. After all, Hollywood was based on a Fordist assembly line model, so how could this industry produce art? Before the *politique des auteurs*, directors were looked upon as contract employees. Just as the rest of the film crew they were hired and assigned to projects by the head office. Even the directors who were praised at their craft had to produce within the producing studio's style or genre. From the point of view of the highbrow *Macdonaldian* cultural critics, the film industry did not contain artists, but craftsmen. So they could not possibly make art, just entertainment.<sup>39</sup>

The young directors of the Nouvelle Vague however, continued to look for auteurs in Hollywood, because if they could find artists in such an industrious setting than "surely cinema was an art".<sup>40</sup> With their notions of auteurism and regard for popular culture the Nouvelle Vague directors were landscaping the cultural scenery. They wanted to bridge the gap between high art and low art, and make a new-leveled cultural domain in which there were no longer traditional borders between 'high and low' cultures.

### **From modernism to postmodernism**

Truffaut argues that cinema of the Tradition of Quality is 'bourgeois realist cinema'. In their article "Postmodernism and the Cinema" media scholars Val Hill and Peter Every state that modernist film attempted "to position the spectator in a world that was kept firmly within the parameters of capitalism and patriarchy and heterosexuality".<sup>41</sup> The Nouvelle Vague directly opposed these modes of modernist realism and wanted to make movies "that spoke to and for the proletariat, the colonized and women in a way that did not partake of the bourgeois realist narrative structures".<sup>42</sup> The Nouvelle Vague reacted against modernist cinema with its emphasis on the bourgeois and the divide between the elite and the proletariat. Very much aware of the modernist conventions of the Tradition of Quality the Nouvelle Vague directors reacted by inclining postmodernist

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<sup>39</sup> Grant, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>41</sup> Val Hill and Peter Every "Postmodernism and Cinema" in *The Routledge companion to Postmodernism* red. Stuart Sim (London: Routledge, 1998), 102.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem.

elements in their movies such as their self-awareness of their cinematic qualities and their references to other movies and imitations of popular culture. These celebratory imitations of previous works of art being celebrated in new works of art have become known as *pastiche*. This referencing to other popular *signifiers* is now seen as one of the main defining elements of postmodernism. According to French philosopher Jean Baudrillard this web of references has become so dense that we live in a *hyper-reality*: a reality indissoluble from these references, or *simulations*.

The Nouvelle Vague was a movement that accords with the transition from modernism to postmodernism. However, the Nouvelle Vague had an active part in changing cinema into what we have in mind when we think about cinema today.

### **Conclusion**

Godard states that he does not believe in the strict divide between high art and low art; he thinks from a Hegelian point of view. He utilises a dialectical approach in which high and low art combined make for a new *meta art* which transcends the separate arts.<sup>43</sup> This meta art can be seen as a more positive approach to what Macdonald rather ironically calls *midcult*. In meta art high culture and low culture interact with one another and thus create a new realm of art and culture, independent of the traditional notions of high and low. Specifically applied to film Godard's notion of meta art appears when we look at films by Martin Scorsese or Quentin Tarantino. Both directors are highly valued directors, both critically acclaimed as well as box office hits. Both directors are also auteurs with a significant style that is recognizable and translates from movie to movie. They are both rooted firmly in popular culture, and implicitly and explicitly celebrate cinema history. Tarantino often uses cult genre films as inspiration for his films, *DEATH PROOF* (2007) is a homage to the seventies *grindhouse* genre and Tarantino has stated that he used spaghetti westerns for the format of *DJANGO UNCHAINED* (2012). Furthermore Tarantino is also known for his non-linear storylines. All these stylistic traits can be directly traced back to the Nouvelle Vague. Nowadays the highly controversial elements of the Nouvelle Vague have been institutionalized to such a degree that we automatically want to know who the director of a movie is to anticipate whether we like his auteur signature.

The midcult that Macdonald talks about would now be considered an untenable elitist notion. The postmodern age has not led to a vulgarization of culture, but to a new

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<sup>42</sup> In Richard Roud, *Jean-Luc Godard* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1967), 12.

<sup>43</sup> Roger Ebert, " 'Citizen Kane' Fave Film of Movie Elite", *Chicago Sunday Times*, august 2002.

form of culture in which high culture and low culture interact with one another and are dependent on one another. A clear example of how our view of what constitutes 'aesthetically good film' is the *Sight and Sound* film poll. Every decade *Sight and Sound* magazine publishes a film poll based on what a group of international film professionals vote the greatest film of all time. Popular film critic Roger Ebert stated that the poll is: "by far the most respected of the countless polls of great movies –the only one most serious movie people take serious".<sup>4445</sup> In 1952 the classic neorealist film *BICYCLE THIEVES* (1948) by Vittorio de Sica won first place. The movie represents the traditional 'art' film, originated from the respected neorealist movement. However, in 2012 Hitchcock's *VERTIGO* (1958) was voted as the greatest film of all time, an unimaginable feat for the director who was formerly regarded as Hollywood's prime entertainer. With this triumph the general acceptance and recognition of Hitchcock as an artist has been established once and for all. So not only has the Nouvelle Vague's take on what constitutes good movies left its mark; its work is still in effect. Only recently has Hitchcock been recognized not only as a true artist, but as the artist with the most excellent masterpiece.

Godard talks about highbrow art and lowbrow art interacting into a meta art. I would like to extend Godard's notion of meta art into *meta culture*, a new transcending culture in which there is no distinction between highbrow and lowbrow. We place an artform in its auteurist context, and we judge it by whether we like it or not. The scope of our taste is not defined by any restrictions about high or low, but is limitless and flexible according to our likings. In this post- Nouvelle Vague age, everyone is invited and anything goes.

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<sup>44</sup> Roger Ebert was the first critic to win the Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

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