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How the Nouvelle Vague Invented the DVD: Cinephilia, new waves and film culture in the age of digital dissemination

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How the Nouvelle Vague Invented the DVD: Cinephilia, new waves and film culture in the age of digital dissemination¹ Malte Hagener²

The transformations of moving image culture brought about by the shift from analogue to digital have become an accepted fact by now. Many distinguished scholars have elaborated on different facets of these far-reaching changes.³ Apart from these important forays, many discussions of the ongoing transformations of moving image culture focus either on the novelty of the latest equipment or on the synergistic power of industry — both technological and economic perspectives are perfectly valid, but nevertheless limit the scope of inquiry in problematic ways. Whereas the currently emerging configurations of audiovisualcy in the age of digital networks are often addressed in terms of absolute novelty and innovation I want to shift the focus slightly, articulating instead the new in terms of the old.⁴ This essay therefore proposes the argument that it was within the Nouvelle Vague and the French film culture of the 1960s that the DVD was “invented”. Obviously, this is a contrafactual argument, but if we understand the DVD as a discursive construction articulating a specific perspective on film, then the DVD simulates and emulates some key features of 1960s cinephilia that emerged within the context of the new waves. It is important to stress at the outset that I understand the Nouvelle Vague as a broad discursive movement encompassing all segments of the institution cinema rather than five auteur-directors — Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer and Rivette — and their respective films. By arguing for the continuing importance of film history and culture, I wish to underline the fact that technological as well as aesthetic transformations are central to our understanding of media culture.

From Film Culture 1.0 to Film Culture 2.0

The Nouvelle Vague is certainly one of the classic movements in the history of film. The traditional version of film history focuses in rela-

¹ This is a reworked version of my text: “Come la Nouvelle Vague ha inventato il DVD: cinefilia, new wave e cultura del film 2.0” *Bianco & Nero* 561/562, February/March 2008: 77-86. Used with the kind permission of *Bianco & Nero*.

² Philipps-Universität (Marburg, Germany).

³ See, as examples, Mulvey (2006), Rodowick (2007), Casetti (2012).

⁴ A similar attempt of articulating the new in terms of the old, using Tom Gunning’s concept of “attractions,” is being made by Brown (2008).

tion to the French new wave alternatively on the innovation of production (lightweight cameras and location shooting), on stylistic features (jump cuts and freeze frames), on narrational devices (self-consciousness and playfulness) or on socio-cultural aspects (protest movements and May '68). While these perspectives are perfectly valid and legitimate, they nonetheless miss something very important about the Nouvelle Vague, namely that the films were but one element of a movement much broader in scope. Just like the other waves in European cinema that followed the French lead (and like the avant-garde forerunners of the interwar period⁵), the Nouvelle Vague was characterised by an attempt to transform the whole of film culture, not just film style, narrative technique or production methods. Or, as Jean-Luc Godard has put it succinctly, the matter was not “making political [i.e. committed] films, but making films politically”. In this sense, the Nouvelle Vague was a broad cultural formation that created and circulated films as well as discourses, networks, ideas and institutions on a transnational level. The Nouvelle Vague provided many concepts that continue to have an influence on film culture as we still know it today: our categorisation of films relies on the notion of the director as the origin and creator of the film, a conception heavily indebted to the *politique des auteurs* developed and popularised within the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*. This idea was corroborated by the long interview with directors, which could easily run over dozens of pages and even several issues, finding its apotheosis in François Truffaut’s book on Alfred Hitchcock (Truffaut 1966). A further means of honouring the value of the director as creative origin of a coherent oeuvre was the introduction of stylistic analysis and mise-en-scène criticism that took seriously the smallest and most mundane detail of a film. I will return to these issues later and elaborate how they are included in remediated form on DVDs.

Yet, the film culture that developed in the wider context of the Nouvelle Vague was not limited to methods of analysing favoured films and ways of paying homage to favoured directors, but it was a restructuring of the cinema experience as such, often called cinephilia. A cinephile is not just an avid filmgoer, but someone who is emotionally attached to the cinema in specific ways, being drawn to favoured screening spaces and even to specific seats in a given cinema.⁶ Or, as Antoine de Baecque’s authoritative account of the theory and practice of French cinephilia has it, it is both a love and a prac-

⁵ Elsewhere I have argued that the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s is similarly animated by the desire to transform film and cinema culture in its entirety. The avant-garde and the new waves did not just aim at introducing a different film style or an alternative way of telling stories, but they wanted to achieve a complete restructuring of the whole field of cinema and film. See Hagener (2007). See also the essays collected in Hagener (2014a).

⁶ For some of these specific practices and processes see the contributions collected in de Valck and Hagener (2005) and de Valck and Hagener (2008); this lead is being followed by Balcerzak and Sperb (2009).

tice, “un amour et une pratique” (de Baecque 2003, 9). The cinephiles developed rituals and myths tied to actual spaces and persons as much as to imaginary ones; indeed, it might be exactly this intermingling and mixing of real and imagined spaces, of actual and virtual worlds that characterises the cinephile engagement with the multiple dimensions of film. The communities thus established could be actual circles of friends, but it could also be the loose groups of people frequenting a specific cinema that one might have a passing acquaintance with. Cinephiles also invented highly idiosyncratic ways of making sense of film beyond their function as entertainment and mass-market commodity; and these methods often took the form of lists, card indexes or graphic systems. The notion of cinephilia not only describes an affective relationship to the cinema as a medium and an art form, but it also delineates many practices of cinema going and community building that are geared towards creating systematic ways of imposing order on unruly masses of information. In brief: cinephilia was the specific mode of engagement with film characteristic of the film culture developed in the context of the Nouvelle Vague. Cinephilia connected real and imaginary realms (or actual and virtual dimensions), developed systematic (and idiosyncratic) ways of dealing with knowledge about the cinema and took film seriously in its materiality and complexity. This brief outline of the canonical and classical formation of cinephilia will serve as a kind of default value to help consider the practices and rituals of contemporary media culture beyond the discourses of advertising and propaganda (innovative devices, digital quality, sharp images, crystal-clear sound, new experiences, etc.), moving instead to an inquiry into the historical specificity of DVD culture.

While cinephilia has often been pronounced dead, most poignantly by Susan Sontag in her 1996-article “The Decay of Cinema”, I would argue that these premature eulogies are rather signs of the nostalgic and retroactive temporality typical of cinephilia than any indication of the end of the practice. Classic cinephilia was constructed around the visit to the cinema in which the fleeting and immaterial nature of the projected film constituted the central element. Loss therefore was inscribed from the very beginning into the practice as any film projection was a singular and unique act that vanished in the course of its performance. Not surprisingly then, de Baecque’s seminal account of cinephilia opens with a long nostalgic passage on how cinephilia has passed into history with the restructuring of cinemas and the film industry: “les ‘auteurs’ étaient consacrés, les articles écrits, les entretiens enregistrés, les films vus, parfois revus à la télévision. Tout s’était passé avant.”⁷ (de Baecque 2003, 9) Instead of joining this chorus, I propose that cinephilia is far from being laid to rest, but that it has shifted its shape in reaction to

⁷ “the ‘auteurs’ had been acclaimed, the articles written, the interviews recorded, the films watched, occasionally watched again on television. Everything had already taken place.” (Ed. transl.)

the new technological and social possibilities offered by the transformations of digital audiovisuality (Hagener 2014b). The DVD is one element among many others (blogs, databases, video portals, computer games, festivals, streaming, etc.) characteristic of the new forms of cinephilia and film culture, at once more democratic and open, but also more commercial and diversified.

Canon Formation and Auteurism

Not surprisingly given the logic of capitalist entrepreneurship and the size of the home cinema market⁸, the DVD has after its introduction in the late 1990s quickly differentiated into several distinct segments delineated by price range, extras and release date. DVDs can be classified into standard releases (director's commentary, a few extras such as making-of or blooper reel in addition to the film), stripped-down versions for retail (just the film priced at the lower end of the prize range, trailing the standard version by a couple of months), extended and special editions (often signalled by an unusual packaging such as steel book, furthermore characterised by extensive extras and sometimes even material gimmicks), and boxes which collect several films by topic, genre, star or director or even DVDs included in traditional print magazines (usually a way of marketing films that would stand no chance on their own even at bargain prices). There is another notable market that is interesting when considered in relation to traditional cinephilia: in the cultural sector as a niche market, the Criterion Collection came first as the company began already in the 1980s with publishing highly valued Laserdisc editions for collectors and cinephiles. The company has retained its margin in the shift to DVD, being possibly the single most influential DVD publisher on the market in terms of setting standards of image and sound quality as well as meaningful extras.⁹

Noticeably, Criterion self-consciously models itself on the film culture of the 1960s, but gives it a twist to adapt to the digital environment. For a while, the website of the company promoted itself as an "online cinémathèque," associating itself with the *cinémathèque* as the place at which the films were being watched (the visibly French origin of the term adding another layer of cultural prestige and snobbery, at least in the US). At present, Criterion runs a partnership with Hulu, a large streaming portal where the superior digital transfers from the Criterion Collection can be watched. The marketing and sumptuous extras of the Criterion DVDs and BluRays clearly address an audience familiar with the canon of auteurs. Films can be searched via filmmaker and title, but alternatively films can also be accessed

⁸ Good overviews are offered by Maltby (2004), McDonald (2007) and McDonald and Wasko (2007). A good discussion of the home cinema in a cultural perspective is Klinger (2006).

⁹ On the strategies and concepts of Criterion see Kendrick (2001) and Schauer (2005).

via Top-10 lists compiled by important filmmakers and writers. Lists as well as the logic of the auteur were key features of the Nouvelle Vague and the transformed film culture of the 1960s. The first five releases in the Criterion Collection, films by Renoir, Kurosawa, Hitchcock, Fellini, and Truffaut, further testifies to the dependence on a canon established in the 1960s. Mixed into this pantheon of international art cinema and Hollywood classics are what one might call cult and off-beat films such as John Woo's *The Killer* (Hong Kong, 1989) and *Hard-Boiled* (Hong Kong, 1992), both starring Chow Yun-Fat, Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* (US, 1984), and Hiroshi Inagaki's *Samurai-Trilogy* (Japan, 1954-1956).

Of course, the availability of films in quality editions is a sign of canonisation with all the advantages and problems that come with such a designation of cultural value. While I do not want to debate the merits of canon formation here, what seems more crucial in this context is how the idea of film as a medium and art form with a significant history that needs to be taken account is a product of the 1960s that has come full circle with the DVD. As opposed to the Hitchcocko-Hawksiens of the 1960s, the current cinephile were raised not so much in the cinémathèque, but also with late-night TV and video, as a consequence combining the classic canon with the cult films of the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰ There are however also significant differences between the two phases: while many of the auteurs of the 1960s were declared in retrospect and quite regularly in opposition to the film industry and the actual statements of the directors themselves, the media conglomerates of today were quick to transform this notion into the idea of the “commercial auteur” which in turn helped market films to the consumer.¹¹ A key element in the construction of the commercial auteur, as far as the DVD is concerned, is the commentary track to which I will turn next.

Analysis and criticism

The Nouvelle Vague was not only a filmic movement, but also a critical initiative that achieved among many other things the careful attention to the details of filmmaking. Whether the classical symmetry of Fritz Lang's compositions, the mirror shots in the films of Douglas Sirk, the eye-level-camera of Howard Hawks, the deep-focus, long take of Orson Welles or the elegant camera movement of Max Ophüls, the critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif* associated specific filmic techniques with a specific expressive value, and — as alluded to in the list above — with a specific authorial signature. Yet, this attention to detail and close readings required a certain work as

¹⁰ The classic case of the postmodern auteur raised on video and late-night-television is of course Quentin Tarantino, an image he has cultivated ever since with appearances at festivals and promotion of off-beat films, auteurs and actors.

¹¹ For more on the commercial auteur see Corrigan (1991), Klinger (1989) and Grant (2008).

the cinema experience was fleeting and temporary; special mnemotechnic practice or access to a viewing table and an actual film copy was needed. It was the arrival of video on the mass market around 1980 that took the difficulty (and some would say: magic¹²) out of the cumbersome and imperfect ways of doing film analysis. Yet again, anyone who has done a close reading from a third- or fourth-generation video copy with cumbersome searching and no acceptable way of fixating single frames, knows how different the experience with a DVD might be, both in terms of image quality and of easy access.

Arguably, the arrival of the DVD has not necessarily led to more and better close readings, quite the contrary appears to be the case¹³, but the sheer availability and possibility offered by the medium allowed for a wider variety of research scenarios. The possibility of switching at will between different language versions, the ease of frame capture, the inclusion of alternative versions and outtakes — all these features, coupled with the sheer availability of films at least carries the potential of a whole new era of film analysis. It is possible that the DVD will give rise to a new wave of close textual analysis that uses the DVD format with a combination of the commentary and additional written and visual sources. Some commentary tracks by film and media scholars such as those of Ginette Vincendeau (Jean-Pierre Melville), Yuri Tsivian (Dziga Vertov), Gene Youngblood (Michelangelo Antonioni) or David Bordwell (Sergei Eisenstein, Yasushiro Ozu) testify to first steps being taken in this direction. Indeed, the commentary track beyond the auteuristic and anecdotal model that has quickly become the standard of recent Hollywood films offers countless avenues not yet explored. It will be interesting to see if the commentary track gives rise to a renewed culture of analysis and close reading.¹⁴

Talking heads and heady talk

Cinephile practice not only partook in the formation and reverie of a specific canon and in the intricate examination of the filmic text, it also revelled in the accumulation of mundane knowledge, not to say useless facts. This acquaintance with the most remote information about a secondary film of a tertiary director anticipate such DVD extras as making-ofs and behind-the-scenes or the statements by creative personnel, endlessly reiterated and regurgitated in forums and discussion lists. Of course, what used to be essentially critical

¹² For the difficulties and some of the inherent problems of film analysis and close textual readings also pertaining to medium specificity see Bellour (1988, 1999a).

¹³ Especially if one thinks of the grand and, to a certain degree “paranoid”, analyses of the 1970s such as Stephen Heath’s texts on *Touch of Evil* (1975), Raymond Bellour’s work on *North by Northwest* (1999b) or the collectively authored study of *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1972). For more on these analyses see Hagener (2014c).

¹⁴ See for example the discussion of some of the questions inherent in the commentary track in Bennett and Brown (2008).

practices outside economic use value (and to a certain degree opposed to this exploitation) have now been transformed into profit-generating marketing ideas, once more underlining capitalism's ability to flip opposition around and use alternative or even oppositional practices for their very own ends. As mentioned above, the will to knowledge in the 1960s often took the form of the long interview discussing the slightest detail of aesthetic composition, shooting technique and production fact. It was this technique of the *Cahiers du cinéma*-interviews (culminating in the Truffaut-Hitchcock book¹⁵ and adapted for a US context by Peter Bogdanovich (1998)) that essentially prefigured the talking heads we find in bonus materials. Yet again, the cinephile practice, self-sufficient for its own ends, has been transformed into a commercial addition that realises the marketing potential of the seemingly authentic words. Today, most comments made on a film are coordinated and orchestrated by a press campaign as closely planned and monitored as any military operation. As John Caldwell argues (2008), there runs a direct line from the Electronic Press Kits, which already mediated the reporting of the media to the bonus features of today's DVDs. Thus, the cutting-out of middle-men (journalists, press agents, cinema and TV programmers, etc.) that is so often hailed as an empowerment of the spectator, looks from another perspective rather like the complete take-over of the public sphere by the media industry.

Yet, even though the DVD is surely a commercial product a long way from the practices of the 1960s, there are nonetheless certain similarities that deserve attention. It is curious to notice how the wordy voice-over, either spoken by the director or the protagonist — say, in Jean-Luc Godard's early short *Une histoire d'eau* (France, 1961) or in Jean Rouch's *Moi, un noir* (FR 1958) — can be seen as early configurations of the commentary track. In fact, *Moi, un noir* anticipates in its making the actual production of a commentary track: Jean Rouch shot his "ethno-fiction" about two young men in the slums of Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) who call themselves Edward G. Robinson and Eddie Constantine respectively, named after the Hollywood actors, without direct sound. After having edited the film, he invited Robinson into a studio to provide the film with a voice-over in which Robinson partly gives an account of his life (that we see in the images), partly also fantasizes about the goings-on, thus adding a layer of reflexivity to the film that points forward to the most creative of DVD commentaries. Similar things apply to *Une histoire d'eau* whose punning title already requires spoken language to be realised. Over images shot by François Truffaut, the protagonist freely recounts an invented story that sometimes also diverges from the images we see, making apparent the distance between image and sound track. Besides their chatty style (which is a rather superficial similarity), my main argument would be that most DVD commentary

¹⁵ The reasons behind as well as the genesis of the book are detailed in de Baeque (2003, 119-133).

tracks treat the film at hand not anymore as a fiction film, but read it as a kind of documentary of its own making. In discussing how a certain scene was shot, what problem arose or just giving anecdotal information, the commentary requires a completely different frame of mind on the part of the spectator who is not any longer interested in immersing him-/herself in a fiction, but rather wants to know more about the production of the fiction. It is this separation of image and sound that is prefigured in the Nouvelle Vague — similar strategies can be seen in many early Godard- and Resnais-films as well as in essay filmmaking such as Chris Marker or Harun Farocki — and that is a mainstay of today's commentary tracks. Again, my argument is not that the reflexive and thoughtful use of sound in the 1960s is identical with the reflexive and commercial use of today, but rather that the strategies themselves are similar while the transformed contexts have a decisive effect on the technique.

“YouTube, will you marry me?”¹⁶

One of the key contents on DVDs are trailers; even those editions that contain no extras whatsoever often include at least the trailer to the film, perhaps the most generic addition to any DVD. A trailer is a condensed mini-version of the film itself, typically introducing the main plot by showing scenes from the whole of the film without giving away the final act. Unlike a film which is the product one has to pay for, the trailer comes free of charge: it is shown before other (related) films in the cinema, it is (legally) available for download on the Internet, and it is included on DVDs. So, while the trailer is on the one hand a purely secondary addition to the film for the explicit purpose of promoting it, the trailer has also led an existence of its own, being appreciated as an ephemeral element of film culture that nevertheless exhibits its very own brand of aesthetics. This growing interest in the trailer — visible in publications over the last couple of years¹⁷ — demonstrates how what used to be ephemeral and fleeting is now a central component as trailers are accessible on film websites, YouTube, and on DVDs. While the popularity of the trailer appears paradoxical — why would one include advertisement to the product one has just bought? —, its ubiquity testifies to the robustness of its form: not only does it provide the memory of the film before one has even seen it (future past), it also retrospectively allows the spectator to return to the point in time when one had the first contact with the film via the trailer (past future). These time frames are typical of the twisted temporalities of cinephilia in which loss is always already anticipated and memory can be achieved prospectively.

¹⁶ Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* [television programme]. Comedy Central, US, 30/07/2008.

¹⁷ Hediger (2002), Kernan (2004). See also Gray (2010).

As I have pointed out in relation to the audio commentary, the separation of image and sound track is a central element of the logic of the DVD, which is, in turn, also paramount for the trailer, quite unlike classical filmmaking in which sound, montage, *mise-en-scène* work together in order to construct a homogeneous and unambiguous space-time-continuum. In this vein, it has been argued that the films of Jean-Luc Godard are all similar to trailers (and vice versa) (Hediger 2004), turning the trailer into a prototype of the emergent film culture focused around the Internet (YouTube, blogs, IMDb) and the DVD in which images and sounds become autonomous and can appear and reappear in ever different contexts. Films are not anymore bound and self-contained works whose borders are clearly delineated and stable, but they are textual nodes, instable and dynamic which can transform into different forms — from film to computer game, amusement park ride or installation art.¹⁸

This form, it could be argued, comes full circle with the audiovisual essay, which has spread in the past couple of years on various sites of the Internet, most notably on Catherine Grant's Vimeo channel "Audiovisualcy".¹⁹ The audiovisual essay (or videographic film studies) uses the primary material, the films itself, to rearrange and reframe it for analytical purposes. The montage of the existing material, as well as the hands-on logic of participatory culture come together in this new configuration which offers new avenues for film analysis, but also for specific forms of cinephilia.²⁰

Conclusion: The late (capitalist) triumph of the Nouvelle Vague

For the longest time, film was simply a means of entertainment: the cinema offered films that would be consumed in a non-discriminatory nature: the decision to watch or not to watch a specific film was often not dependent on the merits of any given film, but rather on extraneous factors such as social circumstance and temporal availability. At least until the introduction of video, most people (those not living in Paris, New York, London, Berlin, San Francisco and a few other centers of film culture) simply did not have a lot of choice as to which films they would be seeing. Choice became an issue for anybody with an interest in film with video, then with the DVD, accompanied by the more general spread of information about the cinema. Interviews, background information, filmographies — these and other elements introduced by French cinema culture are by now mainstays of contemporary film culture. So, the DVD offers a particular paradoxical configuration: on the one hand, access is made easier and the threshold of participation is much lower making the digital film culture a truly democratic one, on the other hand, all this is structured in economic terms; not only

¹⁸ See Hagener (2008).

¹⁹ <http://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy>. Accessed December 10, 2013.

²⁰ See Keathley (2011) and Grant (2013).

does the access depend on financial means, but the viewer is targeted as a consumer.

The discourse of new media is by and large characterised by its constant emphasis on novelty and innovation, which makes a lot of academic work on the digital divide indistinguishable from blurbs and other advertisement texts. By following the lead of industrial propagandists we blind ourselves for the ways in which current media culture is using earlier models and configurations instead of radically reinventing itself. The DVD as a new product was able to shape its specific textuality in just a couple of years by using templates and models from cinema culture already proven and tested. Throughout this essay I have argued that many features typical of the current textuality of the DVD can in some way be related to ideas and concepts first seriously elaborated within the Nouvelle Vague. Put differently: the multiplied textualities and dispersed status of current media artifacts can be understood as a late (and late capitalist) triumph of the French cinephilia, even though many traditionally minded cinephiles would disagree with this specific mode of adaptation. As the cineastes of the 1960s wanted to rebuild the world according to the logic of the cinema, their conception of the cinema was immanent, seeing no outside to the inside of film. Today, this idea has come full circle as we are always already in the cinema, even if we do not visit this place anymore — whether in the museum or in the train, on handheld appliances or giant outdoor screens, or wireless on the move. This would then be the ultimate (and ironic) triumph of classical cinephilia: that cinema has become so ubiquitous that it is hard to find in our media-saturated environment places that are not related to it, fulfilling the ultimate avant-garde dream of overcoming the distinction between art and life, yet permeated by the logic of commercial globalised media conglomerates.

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