

# Waves on Different Shores: Comparing the New Cinemas of France, Japan and Brazil

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## Abstract

What is the place of “comparative” film historiography? In an era that largely avoids over-arching narratives, what are the grounds for, and aims of, setting the aesthetic, economic or technological histories of a given national cinema alongside those of other nations? In this essay, Prof. Richard Peña (Columbia University) examines the experiences of three distinct national cinemas—those of France, Japan and Brazil—that each witnessed the emergence of new movements within their cinemas that challenged both the aesthetic direction and industrial formats of their existing film traditions. For each national cinema, three essential factors for these “new move” movements are discussed: (1) a sense of crisis in the then-existing structure of relationships within their established film industries; (2) the presence of a new generation of film artists aware of both classic and international trends in cinema which sought to challenge the dominant aesthetic practices of each national cinema; and (3) the eruption of some social political events that marked not only turning points in each nation’s history but which often set an older generation then in power against a defiant opposition led by the young. Thus, despite the important and real differences among nations as different as France, Japan and Brazil, one can find structural similarities related to both the causes and consequences of their respective cinematic new waves.

Like waves, academic approaches to various disciplines seem to have a certain tidal structure: sometimes an approach is “in,” fashionable, and commonly used or cited, while soon after that same approach can suddenly become “out,” unfashionable, questionable in value and even possibly representative of dark tendencies. I think we can trace such a tendency with the whole idea of comparative studies within a discipline: approaches such as comparative philology, comparative zoology and even comparative literature, have all taken on an old-fashioned ring—they seem so “twentieth century,” if not nineteenth. Perhaps it’s an effect of our post-modern age, with its suspicion of master narratives, that the idea of creating structures within which to compare various schools of literature or moments in history that we have seen the decline of comparative studies within the University. The new standard seems to be each to its own uniqueness; attempts to emphasize similarities or even contrasts too often result in misunderstandings or reduction of one of the elements in the comparison.

Yet especially as more and more cinema becomes readily accessible to us, with our university or even

personal media archives resembling small cinémathèques, the idea of creating new histories based on linkages between works previously thought to have little or no connection indeed becomes tempting. Such a linkage I would venture can surely be made among a wide range of works in the late 1950s, early 1960s from an impressive range of national cinemas that became grouped into assorted movements generally referred to as “new waves.” In film cultures as otherwise diverse as France, Japan and Brazil—a list to which could be added at least a dozen other nations—movements of works by young filmmakers not only appeared, but emerged with the expressed intent of challenging what these new filmmakers perceived as a cinematic establishment that no longer represented their rapidly changing societies nor spoke to the young.

One general rubric within which to categorize this development would be to see all these “new waves” as examples of modernist impulse that had begun to affect the cinema in the years after World War 2. First of all, what would we mean by using a term such as modernism? The first point would be that any use of

“modernism” implies a kind of “periodization” in the arts: a conception of film history that would see this modernism as set against approaches to filmmaking that we could call “classical.” The periods in which these approaches occur are not self-contained; “classical” cinema does not disappear simply because “modernist” cinema appears. “Classical” film form, like any use of the term, implies the existence of a set of rules, practices and conventions well-known to both the creators of artworks and their audiences; the effect, impact or even aesthetic value of a given work is perceived within the understanding of the limitations of these rules, practices and conventions. “Modernist” film form emerges as a reaction to the classical: it deliberately challenges the classical by avoiding, subverting or even foregrounding the tenets of the classical form. In a sense, one could say that modernist works are in a sense “art about art,” as part of their aesthetic effect is to make us conscious and aware of the process behind a given work of art.

Why did this modernist impulse in the cinema emerge? One can only speculate on the reasons; none of the reasons I’ll now offer is probably sufficient in and of itself, but hopefully together they provide reasons for this development. The first reason might simply be the awareness of a new generation of filmmakers of the vast changes that had gone on in all other artistic media over the course of the twentieth century. Just think of the number of movements in the visual arts, in Western Europe alone: cubism, fauvism, Dadaism, surrealism, constructivism, abstract expressionism, etc. Or think of the changes in architecture or design styles. Yet the great film industries—Hollywood, Japan, France, Italy, the USSR—in the 1950s were to a large extent continuing to make films in the same way that they had since at least the 1920s. Most technical changes, from the addition of color to the use of widescreen formats, did little to alter or challenge the classical approach to filmmaking. A new generation of filmmakers from around the world was eager to enter into dialogue with artists in a variety of media, to emphasize the connections between their works and those of their contemporaries in other disciplines. When Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni met the American abstract expressionist painter Kenneth Noland, he supposedly told him “Your paintings are like my films. They’re about nothing, with precision.” In France, several exponents of the “Nouvelle

Roman,’ or “New Novel,” teamed up with filmmakers to create original works for the screen, and several of these writers such as Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet later becoming filmmakers themselves.

A second reason might be the belief that the classical form of cinematic narration—an approach to storytelling in the cinema that had dominated much of world production since at least the 1920s—was insufficient to truly capture and express a contemporary sense of the world. Among the principal characteristics of this classical approach to storytelling were the use of a clearly expressed linear narrative, in which each event proceeded chronologically from the one before it, with any deviations being clearly marked; the focus on strong, central protagonists, whose aims and motivations were known; and the creation of a clear space/time continuum within which the action of the narrative could take place. For these emerging modernist filmmakers, this model of cinema could only express a world ruled by certainty; the modernists were interested in the ambiguity, the illogic, and the essential haphazardness of the world. Rather than clear narratives, modernist narratives were fragmented, elliptical, repetitious or inconclusive; memories, dreams, fantasies or documentary asides might readily interrupt the narrative flow. Modernist protagonists were often opaque, unknowable; their reasons for performing the actions they undertake are sometimes as mysterious to them as they might be to the spectator. Rather than encourage identification with the protagonist, modernist narratives often create a critical distance from them. Finally, rather than clear space/time continuums, modernist space and time is again often fragmented, forcing the spectator to continually reassess where or when the action is now taking place; moreover, the line between what might call the physical world and the world as perceived by the protagonist is often crossed, so that each image might as easily be a rendering of the protagonist’s psychological experience of the world, rather than some physical, objective depiction of that world.

One might say all of these modernist techniques render films that are more abstract, less “realistic,” and in a way that is true. But it could be equally argued that in fact the depiction of fragmented experience, of the ambiguity of intention, and of individualized perceptual experience actually evokes a kind of higher, more intense sense of reality, one that might arguably

be closer to our everyday lives than the symmetry and logic of the classic film narrative. Just like the French Impressionist painters, with their wavering images of moving trains or boats, attempted to paint the actual experience of a world in motion, the modernists attempted to make films that in their way more fully corresponded to the experience of the world by a new, postwar generation of filmgoers.

Beyond dialogue with the other arts and the desire to tell new kinds of stories in new ways, there were of course other sources of inspiration around the emergence of film modernism, but I will just mention one more. Modernism in the cinema, as in the other arts, implies a much greater sense of self-consciousness on the part of the artist: making viewers aware how films are made by proposing alternative approaches inevitably reveals the presence of the artist creating a given work. A film looks or sounds a certain way because an artist wanted it to sound or look that way. Thus, it is no accident that the emergence of film modernism at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s coincided with the diffusion of the *politique des auteurs*, “the *auteur* theory” as it became known in English, a critical approach to cinema that saw at least all important films as the expressions of single, unique artistic visions, almost always defined as that of the director. The notion of the director as expressive artist became as important for a film’s identity as the presence of star actors or the film’s association with a certain genre.

Moving beyond this general outline of the modernist impulse that inspired new wave movements around the world, what were some of the particular aspects of the three new waves under discussion, those of France, Japan and Brazil? Let’s begin with France.

The term “nouvelle vague” or “new wave” is of course most directly identified with the French cinema, yet while the work of French filmmakers such as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais proved enormously influential, it’s important to see all these new waves as being more simultaneous than consecutive; that is, other new waves did not spring out of that of France. Other filmmakers were surely inspired by and influenced by the French, but the modernist impulse was much more universal than the product of one nation.

In each national cinema under study, one can cite inspirations for the emergence of new waves both

within individual film industries and with regards to contemporary political and social events. In France, a new group of filmmakers, many of them part-time writers for the journal *Cahiers du cinema*, set themselves in opposition to what François Truffaut had called in an article for that journal the “Tradition of Quality:” big-budget, star-driven adaptations of French or world literary classics. This tendency in French cinema had in fact helped revive the industry in the early 1950s: these films came to symbolize French culture and history, and thus were readily exported around the world, giving the French a major export film industry for the first time since the 1910s. Yet by late 1950s these films were producing diminishing returns; moreover, their featuring of elaborate sets and costumes branded the films as old-fashioned, especially when compared to the vibrant, much lower-budget, shot-on-location genre films regularly produced by Hollywood. These American films took advantage of much of the latest film technology, from light, hand-held cameras to direct sound with magnetic tape recorders; even when set in the Old West, many of these films simply had a vibrancy seen as lacking in the commercial French cinema.

Inspired by American films by directors such as Samuel Fuller, Budd Boetticher, Robert Aldrich and Nicholas Ray, along with a few others such as Roberto Rossellini, the filmmakers who would form the core of the “New Wave” took many of their techniques and practices and tried to push them even further: shooting their films as often as possible without artificially created studio sets, using natural light as much as possible, featuring for the most part unknown actors or even non-actors. The French New Wave would also emphasize the role of chance, of including the sights and sounds of the world over which they had little control. Although some filmmakers such as Claude Chabrol always used detailed scripts, others such as Jean-Luc Godard and Jacques Rivette preferred to merely sketch the outline of a film’s action, and then construct their stories based ideas or incidents that occurred during the shooting. In Godard’s *VIVRE SA VIE* (*MY LIFE TO LIVE*), a conversation between the fictional character Nana, played by Anna Karina, and the philosopher Brice Parain was included after the film crew ran into Parain in a Paris café.

Let’s look now at another sequence from *VIVRE SA VIE*. This is the opening of the film, in which the

character Nana meets her husband Paul, who she has recently abandoned, in a café.

This sequence actually opens the film. Almost as if in an ironic reference to the literary adaptations of the “Tradition of Quality,” Godard divides his film into 12 chapters, announcing, in the manner of a 19th century French novel, the major events of the upcoming installment. Indeed, *VIVRE SA VIE* is full of references to Zola’s novel *Nana*, although in no way could be seen as an adaptation. Godard places his two protagonists in almost contiguous frames; until the very end, when Nana’s hand reaches over to touch Paul, they never really share the same space. The mirrors in the back-ground give us some sense of their facial expressions, as well as their spatial positions, but one immediately feels frustrated: we become aware of Godard deliberately shooting this scene in a manner that does not give us full access to his characters. He also seems to repeat dialogue, having a line spoken at the end of one shot re-appear in the next, creating a sense of overlapping time between shots.

As opposed to studio sets, Godard filmed in an actual café, and moreover included the full soundscape of the bar; the bartenders pass back and forth, situating this fictional encounter within the confines of a physically authentic world. There’s a remarkable casualness to this sequence, a distance the filmmaker assumes that deliberately undercuts the emotional charge of the scene. Godard once said that the ultimate value of the French New Wave was to do away with the distinction between fiction and documentary; *VIVRE SA VIE* is a good example of his assertion of this claim.

*VIVRE SA VIE* is almost an anti-Tradition of Quality work; it seems as if Godard takes every aspect of that type of cinema and turns them on their respective heads. Yet the film is also reflective of what had been a monumental political event in France, and that is the creation of the Fifth Republic in 1958. Created after the collapse of the Fourth Republic due to the internal crisis brought on by the colonial war in Algeria, the Fifth Republic was France’s confrontation with its new historical reality. Although the Fourth Republic had ushered in some important social improvements, it was created after World War 2 from the position of France as a great colonial power. The Fifth Republic began a reckoning with that past, but

more importantly a hard realization of France in the 1960s actually looked like and how French people truly lived. Created literally in the first years of the Fifth Republic, the New Wave, although emerging for a variety of reasons, nevertheless seemed to perfectly embody the spirit of that moment, a cinema dedicated to capturing a very contemporary French reality.

Let’s move on to the case of the Japanese *noberu bagu* or New Wave. Unlike the simultaneous French movement, the Japanese New Wave actually started with the support and encouragement of the Japanese film studios. Japanese cinema had become a worldwide phenomenon in the 1950s thanks largely to period films by Kurosawa Akira, Mizoguchi Kenji, Kinugasa Teinosuke and a number of other filmmakers; yet already by the mid Fifties, studios noticed that their audiences, while still large, were progressively becoming older. After the great success of the film version of Ishihara Shin-taro’s *SEASON OF THE SUN*, directed by Furukawa Takumi, the studios thought they knew the answer: youth-oriented films. Thus, studios such as Shochiku and Nikkatsu began promoting their assistant directors to full director status, in the belief that these younger artists would have greater contact with then current Japanese youth culture.

If the Japanese New Wave began with stories about youth, it soon evolved into a cinema of the outcasts: petty criminals, prostitutes, bored housewives, frustrated college students. If one follows the Noel Burch argument in his classic text *To the Distant Observer*, the great effect of the American Occupation on Japanese cinema was the establishment of the codes of western-style cinematic realism; the Japanese New Wave, as it evolved into this cinema of outsiders, broke with those tenets of cinematic realism that had come to dominate Japanese commercial filmmaking with a kind of pronounced, almost exaggerated sense of stylization for both sound and image. Going back to what they believed were earlier Japanese aesthetic principles and practices, these new Japanese directors would foreground their use of technique: Oshima Nagisa’s *NIGHT AND FOG IN JAPAN (NIHON NO YORU TO KIRU)* contains only 40 shots, whereas his *VIOLENCE AT NOON (HAKUCHA NO TORIMA)* features well over 1000. Imamura Shohei would push the bounds of narrative probability in sequences such as the extraordinary pig run at the end of *PIGS AND*

BATTLESHIPS (BUTA TO GUNKAN) or the final “chase” by Hiraoko of the escaping lovers Sadako and Koichi in INTENTIONS OF MURDER (AKAI SATSUI). Imamura, who had served as an assistant to Ozu Yasujiro, once actually said that when he began directing his own films, “I just tried to think of everything Ozu might do, and I did the opposite.” Stylization would mark the film as a self-conscious creation of an artistic conscience that was behind the work— increasingly a loner who also stood outside the production system.

I’d like now to screen a sequence from one of my favorite Japanese New Wave films, PALE FLOWER (KAWAITA HANA), a 1964 masterpiece directed by Shinoda Masahiro. The sequence, one of the most famous in the film, comes very near the ending, as our protagonist Muraki goes to a nightclub to kill a rival gang leader, with an audience of the mysterious Saeko and Muraki’s sidekick Aikawa. Let’s watch.

Such an extraordinarily beautiful sequence. Now you know where Francis Ford Coppola got his ending for THE GODFATHER. Shinoda deliberately mixes and matches styles here; the opening moments puts Muraki and Saeko on a Tokyo street, full of the sights and sounds of the city. We then suddenly enter the stylized world of the nightclub, with its ornate decorations at colored glass images seemingly derived from Italian mannerist painting. Muraki positions himself near the entrance, and after seemingly making sure that Saeko has a good view, proceeds to the gang boss and stabs him, as the sound of an operatic aria fills the room. Shinoda juxtaposes so many elements: evocations of high culture with the tawdriness of the nightclub, the brutality of the stabbing with the peculiar grace of the gang leader’s tumble down the stairs, the stasis of Saeko and she simple stares with the frantic actions of everyone trying to run out of the club. The extraordinary visual and sound design lift the sequence out the story, making what should be the denouement of the narrative action into a moment of pure stylization.

Just as one can link the emergence of the French New Wave with the creation of the Fifth French Republic, so too the emergence of the Japanese New Wave corresponds to the mounting protests against the revised security treaty between Japan and the US, known as ANPO. Hundreds of thousands turned out to

protest, eventually toppling the Conservative Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi and laying the basis for a student movement that would become a major factor in Japanese politics over the next decade. For many, the ANPO protests came to symbolize a kind of Japanese “Declaration of Independence” from the dictates of the United States, the emergence of a Japan that could say no and promote interests that might conflict with those of the Americans. It’s no accident that so many key New Wave filmmakers, such as Oshima Nagisa and Yoshida Yoshishige, were closely linked with the student movement that came out of ANPO.

The final new wave I would like to examine briefly is that of Brazil. Mercifully, the critics who named the movement avoided the nautical metaphor, and instead simply called what they perceived as a fundamental change in direction in filmmaking *Cinema Novo*, or simply “New Cinema.” Brazil had a far less developed national cinema than either France or Japan; although the cinema arrived early to Brazil, and despite continuous activity, filmmaking had not developed the infrastructure or production quantity of either Mexico nor Argentina, its two Latin American rivals. There was an attempt to change that in the late 1940s, when a São Paulo industrialist, Franco Zamparo, announced the creation of Vera Cruz Studios, a multi-million dollar, state of the art film studio that was designed to create an international caliber cinema.

Vera Cruz produced 18 films from 1951 to 1954, when it stopped production and filed for bankruptcy. What had happened? There has been much analysis of the failure of Vera Cruz. For some, it was their lack of access to serious distribution and exhibition networks that doomed their box office figures; for others, the fact that so few of their films had any connection to Brazilian history, life or culture.

Whatever the reasons, Vera Cruz certainly raised the production level and standards for Brazilian filmmaking, and installed in the minds of its filmmakers the idea of a national Brazilian cinema in dialog with international cinema. Intensely aware of changes in European, Japanese and US cinemas, Brazil’s Cinema Novo rejected the “studio cinema” model of Vera Cruz and opted instead for a faster, looser approach to filmmaking that depended heavily on the availability of light, hand-held cameras, faster film stock and magnetic sound. The first Cinema Novo films were shorts and documentaries, but by the early 1960s a number

of feature films emerged from those associated with the movement.

Cinema Novo represented a rejection of the idea of creating an industrial, studio-based cinema as had developed in Mexico and Argentina. Cinema Novo had two principal aims: to reveal a Brazil that had rarely, if ever, been seen on screen before, and to create a distinctive way of telling its stories, one that rejected the model of classical film narration both aesthetically and politically.

Cinema Novo was very much in keeping with at least one strain of political and social thought of that time. Beginning in the 1950s, Brazil had become a major industrial nation, with a successful automobile industry and export capabilities in areas ranging from home appliances to pharmaceuticals. This industrial growth brought a sector of Brazil's industrial and financial class in direct competition with especially the United States, which since about 1900 had been the single most important force in the Brazilian economy; Brazil was presented as a nation that had outgrown its formerly subsidiary role, and was now ready to be treated as an equal in economic and political affairs. Cinema Novo was very much allied to this "radical national bourgeois" position, hoping both to be part of that ongoing national dialogue, as well as part of an overall cultural renaissance that included the planning and creation of Brasilia as well as the international musical success of bossa nova.

Yet, just at the moment when Cinema Novo was reaching a level of artistic maturity, the military took power in a coup that began on April 1, 1964, and which would remain under military control for the next two decades.

I would like to show you now a brief clip from one of the great masterworks of Cinema Novo, *EARTH ENTRANCED, TERRA EM TRANSE*, a 1967 film made by Glauber Rocha. The film and this sequence encapsulates much of the achievement of Cinema Novo: it takes place at a political rally organized for Fellipe Vieira, a reformist political candidate in fictional country called El Dorado, by Paulo Martins, a poet who has thrown himself into politics despite his cynicism about its real impact on society. The rally starts to spin out of control, when the sequence you are about to see takes place. Let's have a look:

There's so much to say about this remarkable sequence—and even more remarkable film—that it's difficult to know where to start. One can begin with the extraordinary juxtaposition of a visual style that goes from cinema vérité-style documentary, with dynamic moving camera, and a kind of Brechtian-flavored grand opera, with characters who appear as self-conscious archetypes making direct address to the audience. The visual aggressiveness is more than matched by the soundtrack, which oscillates from Brazilian composer Villa Lobos to Afro-Brazilian religious chants, that lays the sounds of bombs and machine guns over political speeches. This sequence, and indeed the film, gives the impression of a work that's practically being pulled apart by the tensions it's trying to contain, and in this the film itself because a perfect metaphor for Brazil itself, a nation at that moment under military rule but with an already burgeoning guerilla movement. The intense political polarization of Brazil is here transformed into an aesthetic strategy.

The cinemas of France, Japan and Brazil each responded to the respective situations of their national film industries and rapidly changing societies with the creation of new film movements that each in their own ways responded to the perceived limitations of their film industries while reflecting on events and factors that were fundamentally transforming those societies. For me, those "new waves" were aesthetic high points in each of those nation's film histories; together, they form a watershed moment in film history that continues to be both inspiring and influential on filmmakers today. Thank you.