Reading the French New Wave: Critics, Writers and Art Cinema in France

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Reading the French New Wave: Critics, Writers and Art Cinema in France

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reviewed by ANNE M. KERN

In Reading the French New Wave: Critics, Writers and Art Cinema in France, Dorota Ostrowska sets out to reveal the extent to which the histories of avant-garde film and literary movements in France during the 1950s and 1960s are inextricably intertwined. The murky relationship between the *nouveau roman* and *nouvelle vague* has been addressed by other scholars, but Ostrowska approaches the subject from an innovative angle: instead of training her eye on the films and novels themselves, her focus is on the contemporaneous critical discourse generated around literary and cinematic production. This wide-ranging, ambitious study gathers together an array of figures that helped to shape French literary and cinematic developments in the latter half of the twentieth century, including such unexpected protagonists as Jean-Paul Sartre, Gérard Genette, the Surrealists, Alfredo Bioy Casares, and Jorge Luis Borges.

*Reading the French New Wave* is presented chronologically from 1951 to 1967, with special emphasis on Holocaust survivor, critic, novelist, and filmmaker Jean Cayrol, to whom Ostrowska devotes an entire chapter. Some of the most famous members of the *nouvelle vague*, such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, appear only marginally in the book. This is a deliberate strategy on the part of the author, whose focus is on figures such as Cayrol whose ties between the *nouveau roman* and *nouvelle vague* are clear, and on figures who meditated directly on

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one medium from the vantage point of the other (e.g., director Eric Rohmer, who thought film might eclipse the novel and attain the status of “new visual literature”).

One of the merits of Ostrowska’s study is her insistence on looking beyond the few names and concepts that have come to be associated with these movements; as she highlights in the introduction, the most intense phase of the nouvelle vague (from about 1959 to 1962) comprised dozens more directors and critics than the eight or so filmmakers normally associated with the term. The author carefully weaves each strand of her historical narrative in order to define a very specific, yet stubbornly elusive concept: the “cine-literary,” in which cinematic and literary elements “are presented as equivalent to each other and hybrid in nature.”

Ostrowska begins by painstakingly outlining the historical conditions that brought the two movements into being. The author’s overall strategy is to be synthetic and recursive; she stops to summarize within chapters as well as at the end of each one, which is particularly helpful given the range of material she covers. She connects theoretical developments of the cinematic and literary avant-gardes from the 1920s to those of the 1950s (e.g., photogénie and roman pur) and adumbrates the creation of the journal Cahiers du cinéma in 1951, foregrounding the nouvelle vague’s filmmaking as it emerged out of the crucible of Cahiers’ critical practice. Ostrowska contends that far from being truly emancipated from the language and concepts of literature, the Cahiers critics in the 1950s created a taxonomy of cinema based heavily on literary comparisons and antecedents. The theoretical terms developed by them (écriture, mise-en-scène, politique des auteurs)—many of which have been foundational to cinematic discourse—are also derived from literary references. “This created a paradoxical situation,” she explains, “where the definition of pure cinematic form was based on a literary framework.” At the same time, the novelists and critics associated with the nouveau roman—including Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Jean Cayrol—drew on many of the same inspirations as the Cahiers group: American authors such as William Faulkner and John Dos Passos, the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, and the interconnection between artistic production and strong critical practice.

Though filmmaker Alain Resnais has mostly abstained from writing about film and has never fit neatly into the nouvelle vague mold, Ostrowska locates a kind of apotheosis in his partnerships with nouveau roman writers. She laments that Resnais’s cooperation with Cayrol in Nuit et brouillard (1955) made little impression on the emerging nouvelle vague; it wasn’t until Resnais collaborated with Marguerite Duras in Hiroshima, mon amour (1959) that the Cahiers critics took notice, hailing the film as “a great step forward.” In 1961, Resnais would team with Robbe-Grillet to make L’année dernière à Marienbad, also deemed a revolutionary film by Cahiers; Robbe-Grillet’s ciné-roman based on Marienbad is examined at some length by Ostrowska. Resnais’s Muriel, ou le temps d’un retour (1963) was scripted by Cayrol, and bore the distinct stamp of Cayrol’s critical work.

3 Ibid., 11.
4 Ibid., 23.
5 Ibid., 52.
Jean Cayrol is a privileged figure for Ostrowska. His critical writing reflects the crisis shared by both the literary and film avant-gardes: how to depict reality in a postwar context. “They do not focus on conveying some external verisimilitude but on the workings of the mind,” Ostrowska explains. Further, “[l]iterary descriptions, like cinematic images in modern cinema, highlight the tension between the subjective and objective.” Cayrol’s insistence on a radical rupture with earlier conceptions of realism was directly informed by his experience as a Holocaust survivor. His creation of “Lazarean” fiction, a dreamlike “cinematic state of mind” which allows a camp prisoner to survive an unimaginable external reality, also radically alienates him from the outside world. Cayrol observed that “post-war French culture and society itself had echoes of the prison-camp”; Ostrowska links this distanciation to the shift away from linear storytelling chronology and toward the more abstract characterization prevalent in postwar narratives.

It is narrative that is raised repeatedly in the book as the common denominator between literary and cinematic production of the nouvelle vague and nouveau roman. In the last chapter, Ostrowska registers the growing importance of structuralism and semiotics to literary and cinematic narrative analysis from 1963 to 1967. Importantly, she highlights a general shift away from cinephilic criticism and toward more academic, theoretical discourse in the pages of Cahiers. She glosses Roland Barthes’s semiological study of narrative cinema and credits Christian Metz with dispelling the myths of cinephilia. Other critics, including Jean Ricardou, Claude Ollier, and Noël Burch, are also evaluated. Thus, she concludes, “[i]t is theory, rather than literary criticism, which now offers a framework for understanding cinema.”

The book closes just before May 1968, when political exigencies pushed questions about the relationship between literature and cinema into the background. In the end, one wishes there had been room within the parameters of Ostrowska’s study to embed her discussion of critical discourse in a broader framework of cultural production and historical specificity. To cite one example: the absence of any discussion of director Agnès Varda, who has described her own filmmaking practice as “cine-écriture” (an approach that invites comparison to Ostrowska’s “cine-literary”), seems a missed opportunity. Nevertheless, Dorota Ostrowska’s careful excavation of the metatextual stratum of a key phase in France’s film history provides a valuable resource for scholars of the period, and challenges us to search beyond facts accomplis.

6 Ibid., 132.
7 Ibid., 105–106.
8 Ibid., 104.
10 Ostrowska, Reading the French New Wave, 125–126.
11 Varda has recounted that artists from both movements gathered at the Studio Parnasse to see and discuss La Pointe-Courte, her debut film based on Faulkner’s Wild Palms and deemed “truly the first film of the nouvelle vague” by historian Georges Sadoul, at its Paris premiere in 1956 (La Pointe-Courte. Dir. Agnès Varda. DVD. Criterion Collection, 2008).