There must be something in the air: everyone’s gone nuts for New Wave in this issue. Here, Film Studies teacher Brenda Hamlet provides a cultural and historical overview of the development of the French New Wave of cinema, and its ripples of influence on successive New Waves across the world from the 60s to the present day. And to follow, Jonathan Nunns provides a persuasive argument for why the French New Wave in general, and Godard’s Breathless in particular, are essential viewing for any true film fan.
examples of the ability of cinema to capture what theorist Raymond Williams describes as young people’s ‘changing structure of feeling’ during times of social and political change.

The Birth of the New Wave

The term Nouvelle Vague was, in fact, first used by the French press as a ‘catch-all’ phrase to describe the emerging youth movement in the Paris of the Fifties and Sixties. Set in the context of the hippie movement in America and the Swinging Sixties of Britain, these young Parisians (including the future film-makers) were part of a growing cultural scene challenging the established ‘Old World’ values of their parents’ generation.

Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, Claude Chabrol and Jean Rivette set off a tsunami of independent film-making which not only rocked the film industry to its core, but set off a series of ‘New Waves’ across the globe which still resonate today.

The cultural influence of the Nouvelle Vague is most strongly reflected in the first New Waves of films made during the 1960s in Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, USA, 1969), If (Lindsay Anderson, UK, 1968) and Di Calvacanti (Glauber Rocha, Brazil, 1977). More recently however a second New Wave of contemporary films stretching from Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, USA, 1994) to Darjeeling Limited (Wes Anderson, USA, 2007) are compelling examples of the ability of cinema to capture what Jean-Luc Godard

I knew nothing of life except through the cinema.

There are many reasons to study the Nouvelle Vague film-makers. Pre-empting our 21st century obsessions with YouTube, remakes and sequels, this group of culture-conscious hipsters in the Fifties and Sixties actually had something to say about the importance of cinema as a voice for young people in society. Employing a distinctive new visual language of cool, complete with sampling savvy references to art and pop culture as well as homage, these first time directors,
autobiographical, based on Truffaut's own experiences of growing up in a working-class Parisian family where money is tight and school discipline is strictly enforced. Casting a young non-professional in the lead role, Jean Pierre Leaud's performances as a repressed adolescent are naturalistic and improvised. A major departure from French studio film-making, Truffaut shot the film in black and white film, using documentary-style realism and artistic mise-en-scène to represent the anti-authoritarian themes of his film. Represented as a prisoner in his own society, Truffaut confines his main character Antoine Doinel to the cramped spaces of a small Parisian flat and the barren starkness of an authoritarian classroom. Images such as Antoine being made to stand in the corner of the classroom or staring out from behind a wire fence are unrelenting. Two scenes stand out. Halfway through the film, Antoine's mother says:

Les Quatres Coups
Putting their theories into practice, Truffaut famously won the Cannes Film Festival of 1959 with his debut Les Quatres Cents Coup (400 Blows). This groundbreaking film is semi-autobiographical, based on Truffaut's own experiences of growing up in a working-class Parisian family where money is tight and school discipline is strictly enforced. Casting a young non-professional in the lead role, Jean Pierre Leaud's performances as a repressed adolescent are naturalistic and improvised. A major departure from French studio film-making, Truffaut shot the film in black and white film, using documentary-style realism and artistic mise-en-scène to represent the anti-authoritarian themes of his film. Represented as a prisoner in his own society, Truffaut confines his main character Antoine Doinel to the cramped spaces of a small Parisian flat and the barren starkness of an authoritarian classroom. Images such as Antoine being made to stand in the corner of the classroom or staring out from behind a wire fence are unrelenting. Two scenes stand out. Halfway through the film, Antoine's mother says:

Les Cahiers du Cinema
By this time, Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol and Rivette had already made the first of many films that would push this group onto centre stage of the culture scene. Initially meeting at one of the trendy new cine-clubs springing up around Paris, the group soon began writing for the film magazine Cahiers du Cinema. Reviewing everything from art cinema masterpieces to commercial Hollywood, the group developed strong ideas about the need for a new cinematic language to reflect the unique experience of the individual in society. Rejecting the mainstream approach which tended to construct dominant representations of culture and identity around 19th-century literary adaptations and social stereotypes, the Cahier du Cinema critics began publishing a series of articles which promoted Auteurism: the director as author.

Les Quatres Coups
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Why don’t we have a change and go to the cinema. Later after the movie, Antoine’s father concludes:

(Cinema), that’s a great method of education.

By the end of the film, Antoine declares:

I’m fed up. I want to live my own life.

Running away from the reform school where he has been sent for stealing and truancy, Antoine arrives at the ocean’s edge, waves crashing at his feet. As a visual metaphor, its meaning clearly signifies the importance of the film for its director. Truffaut, like Antoine, arrives at the waters edge, his past behind him and his future linked to a New Wave of film-making.

The final shot, which has become iconic, a freeze-frame of Antoine gazing down the lens of the camera is designed to engage the spectator in the director’s experience of the cinematic world as a gateway to the self. Influenced by Lacan’s theories of personality and development which stress the need to ‘make oneself be seen’, New Wave film-makers used their characters as ‘stand-ins’ for their own voices. Authoring their films in ‘the first person singular’, Truffaut, followed by Godard, constructed new identities for themselves based on the young anti-heroes of the Hollywood low budget film noir and gangster films.

**The Noir Influence: A Bout de Souffle**

Godard most effectively employs this device in his first film, *A Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960). (See page 37 for a further approach to this movie.) Expanding on the themes and techniques introduced in *400 Blows, Breathless* further develops the first-person singular technique constructing a dialogue with audience on the relationship between art and life. The main character Michel Poiccard is a petty thief and small time hustler obsessed with the iconic performances of Humphrey Bogart as the hard boiled anti-hero of the Hollywood film noir. Adopting Bogart’s trademark fedora, skinny ties and characteristic gestures, Michel is a stand-in for Godard, who, like his main protagonist, was a fan of these classic low-budget thrillers.

In much the same way that Michel steals cars and cash to assume a more glamorous identity, so Godard samples characters, camera shots and iconographies from his favourite
are examples of international New Wave styles cutting across first and third world cinemas. Cameron Crowe’s Vanilla Sky (2001), Noam Baumburg’s The Squid & The Whale (2005) and Rhian Johnson’s Brick (2005) are further examples of young and independent film-makers who have found their cinematic voice in the New Wave style.

With the plethora of contemporary examples defining this cutting-edge style, the French Nouvelle Vague is definitely worth a second look. In his book The Film Club (2008), critic David Gilmour tells the story of how watching films helped to reignite his unhappy son’s passion for life and education. A high school drop out, failing every subject in school, Jesse doesn’t see the point of doing anything. David suggests watching films as a way of reconnecting with the world. The first film David shows his son is 400 Blows. Enjoy!

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Jean Luc Godard’s film *Breathless* (A Bout De Souffle in French) is fifty years old now and just got a nice shiny re-mastered DVD release. Your response to this might be ‘ahh magnifique’ as you sit in your Paris café, smoking Gitanes and reading Proust. It might also be, ‘Why should I give a damn about some creaky old black and white French movie? I even have to read the subtitles on the damn thing for Christ’s sake’. Alternatively it might very possibly be, ‘Jean Luc who? Wasn’t he the bald guy from Star Trek?’.
The French New Wave is something you may well be treated to (or have inflicted on you, depending on your perspective), if you are in the A2 year of the WJEC Film Studies A Level and your teacher has elected to have a go with the New Waves option for the World Cinema section of FM4. Trying to explore the whole of the New Wave (or Nouvelle Vague as it is known in French), in a short article is a big ask, unless you’re Brenda Hamlet (see page 32). However, here’s a re-evaluation of one film – arguably, the most iconic of the movement: Breathless.

Some Cultural Background
A New Wave is a new approach to an existing art form. It is often iconoclastic in that it seeks to overturn the old conventions and forge a new way to make art. It is often centered on a small group of enthusiastic (possibly obsessed) creative types who, if successful, go on to change the medium. People like Vincent Van Gogh, Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso did this for painting. Of course, this can be done in other art forms too, such as film.

So why did the French New Wave get started?
French cinema was in the doldrums after World War Two. In the process of getting back on its feet after the Nazi occupation of France, French cinema played safe with lots of studio-based period dramas and adaptations. Potentially pretty dry stuff. At this time, a group of would-be writers and film-makers got involved with a Parisienne film magazine known, then as now, as Cahiers Du Cinema (think of a French Sight and Sound and you’re in the right area). Amongst them were the key figures of the soon-to-be New Wave, including Jean Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, Claude Chabrol and Jacques Rivette. To cut a long story short, they helped reconfigure how people came to think about cinema, redefining it for the first time as art. They invented the Auteur theory, crediting the director as the key creative influence on a film (that’s why pretty much every movie you see includes in the credits the words ‘A film by ...’). They then spent much of the 1950s writing about film for Cahiers, dismissing the French films which went before as dreary, while going into raptures over the distinctive and personal Hollywood work of Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford. They gained a kind of critical mass by the late Fifties, when the French government became concerned about what it saw as the cultural invasion and domination (call it hegemony, if you like) of French cinema by Hollywood films. Perhaps they were right to be worried; after all, what are British cinemas full of these days? British movies? I think not. Anyway, the French government started giving out grants to help new film-makers get their first feature off the ground. First Truffaut and then Godard took advantage of this and they set out to create something really different ...

So what is so different about Breathless?
Synopsis
Godard’s first film is essentially a crime/romance. Petty criminal Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) steals a car in Marseilles and heads for Paris to collect on a debt and to convince his on/off American girlfriend Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg) to leave for Rome with him. En-route, he is flagged down by the police, kills one of them and goes on the run in Paris, whilst romancing Patricia and trying to track down the money which represents his way out of the jam. So far, it’s quite a conventional sounding film.

Analysis
Godard loved American films and Michel, his anti-hero in this film models himself on movie tough guy Humphrey Bogart, smoking constantly and adopting his mannerisms. Michel is a gangster who learned to be a gangster from the movies. So what’s so different about this?

Godard’s film subverts many of the established rules of film-making. Early on, Michel breaks the fourth wall by looking down the lens to speak directly to the audience, so reminding us that we are watching something constructed and made up. In the same scene, sound discontinuity is used, Michel points a
gun, but doesn’t fire, yet we hear the shots on the soundtrack. A lot of effort is expended in this film on reminding us that we are watching a film, something which is totally at odds with the classical narrative style, which attempts to create a seamless world where the audience can suspend its disbelief. Godard’s editing follows this subversive path as well, famously employing jump cuts in scene after scene. These edits, cutting on the same angle, clearly show the constructed nature of what you are seeing, an effect earlier editors would have studiously gone out of their way to avoid.

All this playfulness with the nature of cinema is at odds with some of the realist qualities of the film – but then it’s in keeping with the New Wave to be contradictory. Totally unlike the studio based work of the despised ‘Cinema Du Papa’ (the New Wavers’ derogatory term for the work of the previous generation of older film-makers), Breathless was shot on location on Parisian streets so real you can almost smell the coffee and croissants! This was made possible by new, lightweight, hand-held cameras, developed for the shooting of newsreels during World War Two. The ‘on the hoof’ style included a famous sequence in which Michel and Patricia walk down the Champs Elysées, shot by a hidden camera lens projecting from the back of a post office van – a situation where the only people actually acting in the scene were the two stars, Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg. The rest of the scene was just real-life Paris in the raw, going about its day.

Other key differences included what, at the time, seemed a very modern and racy attitude to sex and a determined unwillingness either to write off Michel as a villain or to judge him as a bad guy (hence anti-hero). The film’s narrative was deliberately non-classical, providing an abrupt ending that was very much in keeping with the gangster genre, but hardly typical of a romance. Not following an obvious act structure, Godard’s film was happy to drift away from the main storyline to spend time with the characters, most famously in a long extended scene in Patricia’s hotel room, which is much more about the couple’s strange relationship than the core narrative of Michel as a cop-killer on the run.

So What?
‘That’s all very nice thank you, but it’s still a 50-year-old, black and white film. Why should I care about that now?’

Well, one of the reasons why Breathless doesn’t look especially original today, is because its innovative ideas and techniques have been so widely taken up and used by later film-makers. So you will certainly have seen the techniques before. It’s why Psycho for instance, terrific as it is, doesn’t look as fresh now as it did in 1960 (made coincidently, the same year as Breathless).

With that film, Hitchcock effectively invented the slasher movie, and lesser talents have (with honourable exceptions) been copying him ever since. So influential was Godard and the rest of the Nouvelle Vague, that many other film-makers internationally were inspired by them to take a new direction in their film-making. Ironically, since American cinema had so influenced the Nouvelle Vague, many film-makers chafed at the constraints of the Studio System and longed for creative freedom. The first major film of the New Hollywood (the name for the American New Wave of the 1970s), was Bonnie and Clyde (1967) which overturned the conventions of Old Hollywood. Both Godard and Truffaut collaborated on the script with the screenwriters David Newman and Robert Benton. Later films inspired by the French included Easy Rider and The Last Picture Show. The influence of the New Wave can be seen in the early films of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and, in particular, Martin Scorsese. Look at the superb Taxi Driver now, one of the key American films of the 70s, and notice the hand-held location filming and the anti-hero, see the jump cuts as Robert De Niro asks the camera, ‘You talking to me?’

So what now? That was still a long time ago. Perhaps the key modern film-maker (apart from the marvellous Scorsese, I hasten to add) influenced by the New Wave, particularly...
Godard, is Quentin Tarantino. Tarantino, a magpie for cinematic influences, openly acknowledges his debt with the name of his production company A Band Apart, named after the 1965 crime film Bande À Part directed by Godard himself. If you’ve seen Pulp Fiction you might remember the Jack Rabbit Slim’s scene. As gangster John Travolta pulls up at the restaurant in his convertible with moll Uma Thurman, she says to him ‘Don’t be a square daddio!’; drawing a rectangle in the air with her fingers which then actually appears on screen in front of her, reminding us it’s only a movie. Later in the scene, Thurman and Travolta sit in their booth sharing an awkward silence and the narrative begins to drift; Godard-like, in favour of characterisation over story. This scene’s homage or show of respect, famously culminates with the dance competition in which Thurman and Travolta, whose dancing is cool rather than good, win a prize and directly reprise a scene from Bande À Part where the leads dance cool, rather than dance well, in a French café/bar. Check out the two scenes on YouTube; they are both well worth a look. And check Matt Freeman’s Quentin Tarantino article on page 48.

Worth a View?  
That one has to be up to you. They are of their time, and Breathless is certainly eccentric and quirky. Looking at them now you can enjoy them and appreciate what they made possible and what they inspired; alternatively, you can reject them as being too old and too self-consciously arty and pleased with their own cleverness to be any fun. However, if you enjoy and value film, you would do well not to dismiss them, even if you don’t like them. They are the origin of so much of the cinema that we value today.

Consider that, as you sit down to watch Inglourious Basterds or Goodfellas or Raging Bull or Pulp Fiction – and that’s only the very tip of the cinematic iceberg inspired by the French New Wave in general and Breathless in particular.

References
Much of the spirit that has permeated the career of writer-director Quentin Tarantino has revolved around burrowing deep into the vaults of yesteryear cinema while referencing everything from high-end French New Wave to low-end Grindhouse trash. Matt Freeman explores how Tarantino’s cine-literacy has forever redefined the high/low culture debate…
as one of the key figures responsible for blurring the line between high and low culture, a debate which evolved in the mid-1950s as part of artistic modernism.

It’s difficult to imagine the face of contemporary cinema without the presence of Quentin Tarantino. The fast-talking King of Cool has been hailed as the one of the defining film-makers of the past decade, changing the face of American cinema by speaking to all audiences without regard for the generic division between art-house and mainstream. Tarantino is most often discussed as the child of a new generation of film-makers, drawing on the widest canvas of cinema history with a fan-boy zest, while creating intertextual works that thrive on their simultaneous subversion of, and adherence to, film form. He’s quintessentially postmodern, making movies that are endlessly in debt to those which have come before, while still presenting unique and engaging narratives. He’s also hailed as one of the key figures responsible for blurring the line between high and low culture, a debate which evolved in the mid-1950s as part of artistic modernism.

**Back to the High vs Low Culture Debate – Again . . .**

‘High’ culture is traditionally associated with the refined and well-educated; it is elitism of the highest order. ‘Low’ (or popular) culture, conversely, is more typically seen as being associated with those less educated or from poorer backgrounds; it is, to phrase it another way, for the masses. Ever since prized European film-makers such as Jean Luc-Godard and his colleagues in the French New Wave movement made the love of film a fashionable devotion, we have been encouraged to accentuate the divides between high and low culture. With such passion came a natural need to express one’s love for certain forms of film over others, triggering a cultural divide between film as
art and film as entertainment. Even today we continue to separate ‘art’ of all forms into ‘high’ and ‘low’, whether this is distinguishing musical theatre from opera or blockbuster rom-com from arthouse short. But is high art necessarily superior to low art?

In today’s culture, it seems, very few aspects of contemporary art – be it cinema, television, visual art or music – remain quite so clear cut. The shift from modernism to postmodernism is often held as responsible for this blurring of boundaries. In postmodernism art is held to exist only as derivative from past art and an artist’s influence only extends to other artists. It’s worth noting that we all judge art based on common cultural assumptions – most of us share clashing opinions and values when it comes to art. It seems inevitable that some will find value in differentiating high from low art, while others will revile the supposed loss of originality that comes with postmodernity’s tendency to pile the past onto the present in its depiction of the future. But this is not an article that seeks to judge. All personal judgements can only ever be based upon subjective assumptions that change over time. Rather, this article aims to show that the once divisive line between high and low culture has become blurred, with implications for the future of cinema.

Quentin Raids the Video Store

The cinema of Quentin Tarantino is discussed and enjoyed in a large number of cultural circles, by fans of both high and low art. The Tarantino film is both B-movie exploitation and art cinema – or rather, neither of these. It epitomises what some have called ‘the video store aesthetic’, for Tarantino is a film-maker who, prior to finding success with his debut feature in the early Nineties, worked in a video rental store for many years. Here, where new and old movies were equally available, cinema became for Tarantino a single opus. The Tarantino style blends elements from different genres, different artistic movements, and different periods with absolute abandon.

Tarantino’s tendency toward quotation and intertextual reference is also central to the shift toward an amalgamation of high and low. This aspect is evident in his wide range of influences, spanning the 1970s Blaxploitation flick to the novelistic structure of classic literature. In *Pulp Fiction* (1994), with the iconic Jack Rabbit Slim restaurant sequence between Vincent and Mia, for example, Tarantino makes a visual use of the novelty diner where all of the staff are knowingly impersonating iconic figures of 1950s pop culture, inviting comparison between the scene itself and the film’s entire diegetic world, where various influences come together in a vibrant new playground. ‘It’s like a wax museum with a pulse,’ John Travolta’s Vincent jokes. This is a phrase which one can quite easily apply to Tarantino’s entire approach to film-making.

Not surprisingly, the work of Tarantino and his ‘video store’ style have been profoundly popular, and has redefined contemporary American cinema as a form that thrives on its loosening of previously rigid cultural and generic boundaries. Tarantino movies continue to attract high-minded critical attention on account of their postmodernism, rather that in spite of it. In fact, many commentators on contemporary cinema have argued that film-makers such as Tarantino – and indeed his postmodern genre-blending influencers like the Wachowski Brothers, the Coen Brothers and Edgar Wright – have triggered a re-evaluation in how we should perceive cultural influence.

This film-maker’s work, for instance, can be seen to reflect a general mainstreaming of artistic style and aesthetics – often dealing explicitly with the borrowing of images from the mass media. At the conclusion of *Pulp Fiction* (1994) for example, Jules decides that he wishes to ‘wander the earth’ like Kane in television’s *Kung Fu*. Similarly, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) opens with a long and detailed discussion about the erotic subtext in Madonna’s well-known pop song ‘Like a Virgin’, ultimately working to define
each and every character primarily through their relationship to popular culture.

From Highbrow to Nobrow

The result, almost inevitably, is a change in how the new generation evaluate and quantify their art, with less direct reliance on high/low distinctions and a greater leaning towards the notion of one, all encompassing, cultural recognition. This new recognition, for some, at least, has been hailed ‘nobrow’, a recent term coined by John Seabrook in his book Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture (2000) as ‘a postmodern neologism [newly invented term] derived from highbrow and lowbrow.' However, while this new term does indicate and acknowledge an influence from both high and low culture, it’s hard to ignore the irony that nobrow is a validation which operates within the same system of high and low terms that the Tarantino generation are yearning to dissolve.

As blogger and author Stephen Tully Dierks writes when addressing this dilemma: ‘even if you’re rebelling against your parents’ ideas, it’s hard to leave them completely behind’. However, he fails to consider just how radical a figure such as Quentin Tarantino has been in effectively blurring the line between high and low culture, merging the two into one package which, whether progressive or not, imagines all forms of artistic culture – be it high, low, or nobrow – as umbrella terms of yesteryear which now all belong under the recognition of just one classification: pop culture.

Style Over Substance – or a New Creativity?

Many critics resent such a cultural shift, however. They argue that an artwork which is postmodern is not really an artwork at all, since its mosaic of references to past work prevents its maker from crafting or saying anything new or innovative. Such a text, some would argue, is merely an exercise in style over substance. But this is an argument which feels almost as outdated as the former high/low divides, for it ignores the creativity which can be found in a postmodern text. A director such as Ridley Scott, for instance, thrives on film-making where old and new, high and low, are meshed into one. Alien (1979), for example, is a lowbrow horror flick elevated to a higher artistic realm by novelised science-fiction themes; Blade Runner (1982), is a generic cop movie merged with a high-end film noir sensibility.

Indeed, a film-maker such as Tarantino can be seen as a figure who is not degrading, but reclaiming culture. Moreover, the Tarantino style is not simply an art form which creates films about film, as many would suggest. On the contrary, films such as Pulp Fiction (1994), Reservoir Dogs (1992), Kill Bill (2003/2004) and Inglourious Basterds (2009) can be seen to emphasise the human element – these are films which deal explicitly with human themes of guilt, forgiveness and redemption. Without these themes, it somehow seems doubtful that the films would connect so viscerally and compellingly with their audience. And despite the often eye-popping depiction of violence in Tarantino’s works – a debate which should be saved for another article – the director is at heart a moralist, framing his tales around the dual necessities of forgiveness and punishment. That’s the American aesthetic of popular culture, and Quentin Tarantino is one of its most articulate and thoughtful voices.

Matt Freeman is a freelance film journalist and MA student in Film and Television Studies who writes for Film Journal International, GoreZone and Total Film.