

The role of cinema in shaping the national identity of France

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The role of cinema in shaping culture

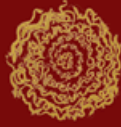
Source - Film Ink (All images used for reference)



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French cinema has been an effective "cultural carrier of memory" in constructing France's national identity, particularly around World War II and the Occupation period. Filmmakers have used fictional narratives to shape and reshape France's collective memory and national identity, reflecting the political and social concerns of the times. French cinema has had a profound and lasting impact on the global film industry, often credited with introducing groundbreaking techniques and unique storytelling approaches that have shaped filmmaking worldwide.

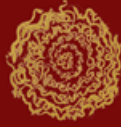


A shot from *The Arrival of a Train* (1896)

Source - IMDB

French cinema's global effect dates back to the late 19th and early 20th century. The Lumière brothers invented the Cinématographe in 1895, a device that could record, develop, and project motion pictures, revolutionizing the way stories could be told and shared. Their iconic film and also the first short documentary film in the world *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* famously caused audiences to react as if an actual train was coming towards them, showcasing the immersive potential of the cinematic experience (Study Smarter, n.d.).





In the early 1900s, the French film industry was the world's most important, with production companies like Pathé Frères, the Gaumont Film Company, and Star Film Company (Méliès' own production studio) dominating the global market. This period saw the rise of "films d'art", which encouraged stage actors from prestigious institutions like the Académie française and Comédie française to move into film acting, lending the medium greater prestige (French & Francophone Film: A Research Guide, n.d.).



A shot from *The 400 Blows* (1959)

Source - IMDB

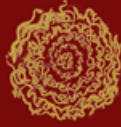
The French New Wave (Nouvelle Vague) was a key movement in the late 1950s and 1960s that defied established filmmaking standards. Directors like François Truffaut (known for the film *The 400 Blows*) and Jean-Luc Godard (known for the film *Breathless*) pioneered innovative narrative structures, visual styles, and a focus on characters' subjective experiences.



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The French New Wave's impact can still be observed in contemporary independent film, demonstrating its lasting legacy. This movement was a reaction against the "cinéma de qualité (cinema of quality)" of the pre-war era, which was often seen as overly literary and lacking in artistic risk-taking (Vaia, Post-war French cinema, n.d.).



A shot from *The Grand Illusion* (1937)

Source - IMDB

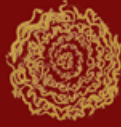
Post-war French cinema moved away from the romanticism and historical dramas of the pre-war period, instead exploring themes of existential crisis, social alienation, and political unrest. This reflected the changing socio-economic landscape of post-war France and the desire for critical engagement with contemporary issues. For example, while pre-war films like *The Grand Illusion* (1937) dealt with themes of war and class, post-war films like *The 400 Blows* (1959) focused on human stories of struggle and identity discovery. The innovative use of techniques like jump cuts, handheld cameras, natural lighting, and location shooting also characterized post-war French cinema. These added a layer of authenticity and personal expression to the films, further distinguishing the post-war era from the more conventional styles of the pre-war period (Vaia, Post-war French cinema, n.d.).



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Shot from *Breathless*

Source: Britannica

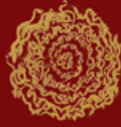
The French New Wave movement, which emerged in the late 1950s and flourished through the 1960s, rejected traditional filmmaking conventions in favor of innovative storytelling and visual styles that often incorporated strong social commentary. Directors like François Truffaut (*The 400 Blows*) and Jean-Luc Godard (*Breathless*) used their films to explore themes of youth rebellion, existential crisis, and the challenges of modern life in France (Vaia, French film cultural impacts, n.d.).



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Shot from *The Mother and the Whore* (1973)

Source - The New York Times



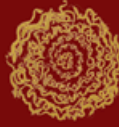
Shot from *La Haine* (1995)

Source - IMDB



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The 1960s and 1970s saw a surge of French films that directly addressed the political unrest and social upheaval of the times. Films like *Z* (1969) by Costa-Gavras and *The Mother and the Whore* (1973) by Jean Eustache tackled issues like the Algerian War, student protests, and the sexual revolution head-on, aligning with global movements for civil rights and social justice. As France grappled with its changing demographics and the challenges of immigration and multiculturalism, French cinema began to reflect these societal shifts. Films like *La Haine* (1995) by Mathieu Kassovitz offered powerful insights into urban disenchantment and racial tensions within French suburbs, encouraging dialogue around social policies and integration (Vaia, French film cultural impacts, n.d.).



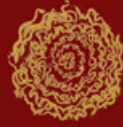
Late Jean-Luc Godard
Source - Little white lies



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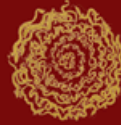
The works of directors like Jean-Luc Godard and Agnès Varda were imbued with existential questions, pushing viewers to engage with complex philosophical ideas about the human condition, morality, and freedom. This embrace of existentialism and intellectual exploration through cinema was a hallmark of the post-war French film industry (Vaia, French film cultural impacts, n.d.). The legacy of the French New Wave movement demonstrates the industry's capacity for innovation and artistic risk-taking. Encouraging emerging filmmakers to push creative boundaries, experiment with new techniques, and tackle bold thematic explorations can further cement French cinema's reputation as a hub of cinematic excellence and cultural influence (Fabien Lemercier, 2019).

The post-war period was a pivotal moment in the evolution of French cinema, shaping its global influence through groundbreaking movements, thematic explorations, and technical advancements that resonate with filmmakers worldwide. French cinema in the 1960s and 1970s was a mirror to the social upheaval and changing values of the era, using innovative storytelling and a willingness to tackle controversial subjects head-on to reflect and influence the broader cultural shifts taking place in France and beyond.



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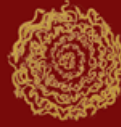


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