Guy Ritchie and the Impact of the French New Wave

The French New Wave, or Nouvelle Vague, was a film movement in France that took place during the 1950s and 60s. It has become known as one of the most influential periods in cinema history as it gave birth to a new style of filmmaking, which proved revolutionary to conventional cinematic arts. In post-WWII France, society was craving new culture and was doused in the same trite mainstream media. Critics and film enthusiasts started experimenting with filmmaking techniques—with influences from Italian Neo-Realism from the 40s and 50s, Soviet-era Cinema, and the American studio film industry. The embargoes that were lifted after the war allowed for a flood of movies from around the world to enter and be exhibited in France—the works of Hitchcock, Ford, Welles, and Fellini encouraged the French critics to apply new styles to the art form. Thinkers like Andrew Sarris, Andre Bazin, and Henri Langlois were the intellectual 'founding fathers' of this movement and subsequently gave birth to "The Auteur Theory."

This theory suggests that the purest, most personal kind of cinema values the expression of the director's unique vision, as the primary signatures of certain directors, like Jean Renoir and Jean-Luc Godard; the advent of this very radical artistic distinction characterized the French New Wave. Looking at the impact of this time period and the Auteur Theory on modern cinema, we can analyze how Guy Ritchie's films serve as direct proof of the impacts of the Movement, i.e., opening filmmakers up to greater appreciation within the industry. The Auteur Theory allows directors to canonize themselves through specific styles, themes, quirks, characters, etc., that can be directly attributed to them. The context of genre filmmaking will be applied to Ritchie's works, mostly crime-thriller-dramadies. This essay will investigate genre as a larger umbrella that categorizes films into several strata.

Since the departure of New Wave Cinema, many filmmakers have sought to develop a signature style and often create it as a persona that manifests itself on-screen, whether directly or indirectly. English film director and screenwriter Guy Ritchie is one filmmaker, who, over the course of his career, has created a powerful directorial and narrative voice for himself and now has a solidified, unique style of his own. Ritchie's recognizable stylistic traits include jump cuts, uneven editing, sped-up shots, handheld tracking shots, and quick action scenes. These techniques are not exclusive to nor invented by Ritchie, but they complement his unconventional storytelling methodology and contain particular quirks specific to his artistic temperament.

Ritchie's narratives are often told in ways that play with temporality and are non-traditional in how they are told. This non-linearity does not come into play only in the sequential structure but also in perspective. His narratives are circular—events are often shown from several different perspectives, and many different groups of characters with different motives and conflicts converge and several different points in the film. This method gives the audience different means to engage with the story, providing signs that may be either identifiable or completely alien; both of which engage and entice. In his 2000 film *Snatch*, Ritchie uses this to significant comedic effect. The scene focuses on three separate groups of characters motivated by different outcomes. The first group we happen upon is Turkish and Tommy in their van. After learning that Boris "The Blade" had sold Tommy a faulty handgun, they are now making their way to him. We then cut to our other two groups. Tyrone, Vinnie, and Sol are staking out Boris' house, observing Avi, Bullet Tooth Tony, and Horace kidnap Boris. What follows is consistent intercutting between the three groups of characters, as Ritchie deliberately and slowly builds tension through dialogue and subversion of expectations through editing. The tension is first released by Sol firing a blank inside the car, shattering the window in the process, and then by

Tyrone, Vinnie, and Sol running over a masked man standing in the middle of a street. Just after this, Ritchie cuts back to a quieter scene of Turkish and Tommy arguing over a milk carton, and as Tommy throws the carton out the window, we hear a car crashing—seemingly unrelated. Ritchie then cuts to Tony, Avi, Horace, and Boris, who has been in the trunk of their car for the entirety of the scene. The crashing of their car breaks the tension here after a milk carton comes flying into their windshield. *Here* is where the temporal experiment that Ritchie employs comes into play. After their crash, Avi and Tony exit their car to find Boris, masked and injured, in the middle of the street. The tension has seemingly died down as the climactic catharsis has been achieved. Then, a car comes barreling down the street and crashes into Boris. The sheer randomness of the crash is enough for the viewer to feel an odd dissatisfaction of established expectations—and this is done entirely through editing. This subversion of temporal expectations and the tinkering with time is what makes Ritchie a stylistic and narrative mastermind. Having been conceived almost entirely under the umbrella of the New Wave and the filmmakers of that time, these techniques and their continual propagation and utilization imply a strong influence on Ritchie and his contemporaries.

Ritchie's films are often set in England, the country he was born and raised in, and follow criminals, gangsters, and eccentric groups of characters. The criminal underworld of England seems to be the prominent backdrop for most of his works. He uses his childhood experiences and the people and places he grew up around as substantial influences within his films. Many facets of British middle-class culture impact the way he tells his stories. This includes, in context, crass humor, quick and witty characters paired with self-deprecating dialogue, dingy settings, and dysfunction among different elements of the story. Ritchie's stylistic choices in all his films serve the thematic aspects of the narratives: greed, money, power, shame, and crime. In

his essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, T.S. Eliot elucidates his belief that artists must always learn from those that came before them; that interpretation of art and the creative landscape is a process that derives from comparison and contextual positioning (Eliot 37). In this way, the creation of art must also acknowledge itself as a process that includes the conscious thought that no work created is wholly isolated from another artist's work, and this intertextuality is ever-present in Ritchie's work. Looking closely at his style, Ritchie's filmmaking qualities can be attributed to influences from directors such as Quentin Tarantino and Edgar Wright, and inversely, these two directors have always been heavily influenced by the innovations of the Nouvelle Vague. Tarantino's use of the jump cut and minimal continuity editing, and Wright's bare bones approach to dialogue are all reminiscent of the techniques filmmakers in France fought for all the way back in the middle of the previous century. *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Tarantino's apparent *magnum opus*, is popularly known for its unconventional story structure and nonlinear storytelling, with emphasis on reassembly of events that serves to tell the story in a more engaging manner. Ritchie uses this technique in almost all of his works. His films emphasize on, and draw attention to, non-linearity and temporal experimentation. The car crash scene mentioned earlier is one of the most prominent examples. More specifically and perhaps critically, Ritchie showcases strict adherence to formalism in his films, not hiding the fact from the viewer that they are, in fact, watching a *film*.

Vachel Lindsay, a prominent American poet who also wrote extensively on the cinematic arts, is popular for advocating for film being categorized as art during the genesis of the form. In his book titled *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915), he claims that within the cinematic arts "the soundest actors, photographers, and producers will be those who emphasize the points wherein the photoplay is unique" (Lindsay Ch.12). This could not be more apparent anywhere else than

in Ritchie's work. He makes it a point to constantly remind his audience that they are watching a film. Bringing it back to the New Wave, one would be hard pressed to find a completely *realist* film that was part of the movement. Ever-present are non-continuity editing and spatio-temporal 'play' in those films, and one of the most guilty of this is *Breathless* (1960) by Godard. *Breathless* is a film that is characterized by its whiplash-like editing and temporal structure, and more relevant, its continual fourth wall breaks. In this vein, Lindsay maintains that a film should draw attention to how it is *sui generis*, and Ritchie expands on this and uses it to his advantage A particular scene that jumps out, in accordance with this notion, is a bare-knuckle boxing scene from his 2008 mystery, *Sherlock Holmes.* The fight starts out by being filmed relatively conventionally—shot, reverse-shot, audience reaction shot, back to a two-shot of the actors. Then, at a highly emphasized moment in the fight, Ritchie switches the temporal quality of the scene and puts his protagonist in a state of wakefulness through just cinematography and sound design. Holmes begins to move in slow motion as he narrates his each move, carefully crafting the perfect attack combo to deliver to his opponent. Ritchie slows down time and ascribes an almost superhuman quality to Holmes, which complements his overall characterization in the film as an otherworldly genius. The sound design of the scene forces the audience to hyper-focus on the more minimal aspects of a physical fight—each punch is amplified by the sound of a fast breeze and an intense thud; each block and headshot is paired with sounds of ringing, bones cracking, and a general aura of impending doom that fits perfectly in with the setting. Ritchie uses the environment to his advantage in scenes like this. *Snatch* contains similar scenes, given that the key premise of the film relies heavily on illegal bare-knuckle boxing. After the gruesome murder of his mother by Brick Top, the head gangster and key antagonist in the film, Mickey has to perform to Brick Top's liking in order to keep his family and himself safe. To do this, he must

“go down in the fourth round” and in turn, take brutal punishment during the fight in order to play in favor of Brick Top. Every punch and block that he lands or takes from his opponent is enunciated by the immaculate sound design. Ritchie uses sounds of cars passing on a highway, metal scraping against each other, and sounds of animals grunting to emphasize the impact of the blows. Again, all of these choices he makes are part of a conscious decision on his end to remind his audience of the fact that his “photoplay is unique”; and this falls under the umbrella of his directorial style, and speaks to the New Wave’s influence as a whole.

The French New Wave was innovative in its effort to subvert standard genre filmmaking techniques. Instead of conforming to established genre standards such as crime, romance, or drama, New Wave filmmakers frequently mixed aspects from other genres to produce hybrid films that could not be categorized. Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless,* mentioned prior, for example, blended aspects of film noir with romance, whilst François Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* (1962) combined romance, drama, and horror. This experimenting with genre cinema opened the way for a new generation of directors challenging the conventions of standard Hollywood storytelling. Ritchie’s style functions under this category of new-age, contemporary genre filmmaking, and he usually participates in the Gangster/Crime film, with not-so-subtle hints of comedy and drama: the crime-thriller-dramedy.

> “Movie genres are stylistic categories that organize films based on criteria such as the setting, characters, plot, mode, tone, and theme. A film’s main genre category will be based on where the majority of the content lands. A sub-genre is a smaller category that fits inside a particular genre. Often this is a mixture of two separate genres, which are known as hybrid genres. Genres and sub-genres change over time and are informed by one another” (Kyle DeGuzman, *Studio Binder Inc.* 2022)

The conventions that usually fall under the gangster/crime sub-genre include themes of guilt, greed, excess, violent and crude imagery, representations of hyper-masculinity, crass/vulgar humor, rapid intercutting, representations of luxurious abundance, and betrayal. Most of Ritchie's crime films include such conventions that highlight more of his knack for inspiring himself through the work of others, yet putting his own spin on the genre to a point where "a Guy Ritchie film" is a genre in and of itself. *Snatch* can be compared to *Pulp Fiction* in a variety of ways, and the non-linear structure is a stand-out, but there are certain other elements that separate Ritchie from his contemporaries within the genre. His films exhibit a distinctively British sensibility that sets them apart from most films. They are more concerned with the world of crime and the underbelly of society within the UK, a world that had been largely unexplored and mostly alien, at least within popular culture. Stephen Greenblatt, in his essay title *Culture*, claims that every culture and subculture includes a "myriad of signs that excite human desire, fear, and aggression" (Greenblatt 230). Ritchie explores these signs through his character work. Most of his films include large ensembles of characters that all work together, or against each other, in many different ways. The chemistry, or lack thereof, between the different sets of characters often relates to each others' socio-cultural backgrounds and temperaments. For example, in *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), there is a running through line of a conflict between North and South Londoners. This conflict runs in the background as the characters from each region butt heads in different ways—the dialogue and screenplay are dictated by the way each character reacts, and they react in conjunction with their in-group. Additionally, the way each character speaks, communicates, moves, and dresses differs depending on where they are from, and so this acknowledgment of difference adds a deeper layer to his storytelling in the film.

Another interesting aspect of Ritchie's filmic exploration of British culture manifests in the way his characters speak and communicate with each other. The plethora of distinctive regional accents and dialects present in the UK open Ritchie up to the possibilities for exploration of using *dialogue as music*. Ritchie's characters often speak in such a way that the dialogue falls into a certain rhythm that feels characteristic to his writing. The audience can internalize this rhythm by being provided with an interesting plot that is complemented by the off-kilter lines of dialogue, and connect with the characters on both a semantic and syntactic level—leading to higher emotional stakes as the stories play out. This leads to engaging moments of interaction between them and forces the audience to be invested in the trajectory of each narrative element, whether they like the characters or not—there must still be a certain level of identification and connection. In *The Gentlemen*, Mickey Pearson's violent outburst toward Dry Eye during a meeting, and the subsequent monologue, is a prime example of this quality. As he points his gun toward Dry Eye, Pearson delivers a piercing monologue that explains his position amongst the criminal hierarchy and outlines several threats toward Dry Eye. His speech is coupled with various inflections and key words that feel characteristically "Ritchie" and feel powerful; it begins to start playing in the audience's head over and over again. As Pearson deliver the final shot from his gun, the scene cuts back to the both of them at the table—revealing to us that the confrontation did not actually happen, yet, it felt real since the rhythm of speech coupled with the intensity of Pearson's delivery brought us deeper into the protagonist's motivations and interests. Similarly, the way in which Brad Pitt delivers his first few lines in *Snatch*, during his introduction scene, is explained as a typical gypsy accent and manner of speech, but still feels distinctly like a part of Ritchie;s cinematic vocabulary.

All this to say: Ritchie is an Auteur. The French New Wave and the Auteur Theory have had a significant impact on modern cinema, allowing filmmakers like Guy Ritchie to develop and showcase their unique directorial and narrative voice.

Works Cited

Snatch. Directed by Guy Ritchie, Columbia Pictures, 2000.

Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Perspecta*, vol. 19, 1982, pp. 36–37, https://doi.org/10.2307/1567048.

Sherlock Holmes. Directed by Guy Ritchie, Silver Pictures, 2009.

DeGuzman, Kyle. "VIDEO: What Is Genre — The Elements of Genre Explained." *StudioBinder Inc.*, 4 Dec. 2022, https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-genre-definition/. Accessed 5 Mar. 2023.

The Gentlemen. Directed by Guy Ritchie, STX Entertainment, 2019.

Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels. Directed by Guy Ritchie, Summit Entertainment, 2019.

Greenblatt, Stephen. "Culture." *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge University Press, 2010