

Raoul Coutard

Innovative French cinematographer who worked on landmark New Wave films

The Guardian Domestic edition · 10 Nov 2016 · James S Williams

Raoul Coutard, who has died aged 92, was one of the great modern cinematographers and the principal lighting cameraman of the French New Wave. In that era of portable cameras and fast film stock, his simplified approach to filming and imaginative use of natural light broke with traditional aesthetics, in particular the polished images of the 1950s *cinéma de qualité* in France. He was identified most with the director Jean-Luc Godard, and Coutard's direct and unorthodox, yet highly inventive, photography became a pure expression of New Wave values.



With a background in reportage photography, Coutard was exactly the person Godard needed to film on the fly in the Paris streets and to do things differently on his debut feature, *A Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960). A raw, newsreel quality was achieved by using fast photographic film, which Coutard shot on a new, light *Caméflex Eclair* 35mm camera, using only natural lighting, and which he then specially processed to increase its sensitivity. Established cinematographers immediately frowned upon his rough, ragged and restless style with its high contrasts of black and white, but the effect was revolutionary.

Coutard photographed nearly all of Godard's work of the 60s and the high rate of production was ensured by Coutard's efficiency. Coutard acknowledged it was a strange and unique collaboration: he said he was a "fascist of the right" while Godard was a "fascist of the left". Yet Coutard understood quickly how best to accommodate Godard's idiosyncratic method and moods. He relished the challenges of experimentation, whether being pushed along by Godard in a wheelchair dolly for *A Bout de Souffle* or, as in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), employing a new process called *Techniscope* to create luxuri-

ant, saturated colours. *Weekend* (1967), their last project together before Godard abandoned mainstream “bourgeois” cinema, took long tracking shots almost to the point of no return.

Coutard stumbled into cinema by chance. He was born in Paris into a communist family and had originally planned to study chemistry, but in 1945 he joined up with the French Far East Expeditionary Corps and participated in the war in French Indochina. There, he learned his craft as a military stills photographer and established himself as a photojournalist, becoming head of photography at the magazine *Indochine Sud-Est Asiatique* and freelancing for *Paris Match*, *Radar* and *Life*. He also accompanied ethnologists on expeditions, photographing in colour the different landscapes and peoples of the region that he grew to love.

After working on a number of official documentaries in Laos and Vietnam, he was approached by the war correspondent Pierre Schoendoerffer to shoot a feature film in Afghanistan called *La Passe du Diable* (*The Devil’s Pass*, 1958). Coutard had never used a film camera before and later claimed he only agreed to the commission because he assumed he would be shooting production stills. So began his film-making career and a long collaboration with Schoendoerffer that included *La 317ème Section* (*317th Platoon*, 1965) and the navy drama *Le Crabe Tambour* (*The Drummer Crab*, 1977), for which Coutard was awarded a César.

It was Schoendoerffer who introduced Coutard to the film producer Georges de Beauregard, who, in turn, introduced him to Godard in the late 50s. Throughout this period, Coutard also collaborated with François Truffaut on landmark New Wave films such as *Tirez sur le Pianiste* (*Shoot the Piano Player*, 1960), *Jules et Jim* (1962), and *La Mariée Était en Noir* (*The Bride Wore Black*, 1968). With the exception of the last of these, where they struggled over the photography, this was a far more straightforward collaboration.

For *Jules et Jim*, which integrated newsreel footage, freeze-frames, photographic stills, panning shots and wipes, Coutard used the latest technology to create a beautifully fluid style. He worked equally successfully with, among others, Jacques Demy (*Lola*, 1961), Jean Rouch (*Chronique d’un Été*, 1961) and Costa-Gavras (*Z*, 1969).

The 70s were, by comparison, lean years, but by this stage Coutard was also directing. *Hoa-Binh* (1970) revolved around a key episode of the war in Indochina, focusing on the effects on children. It won the Prix Jean Vigo and received an Academy Award nomination for best foreign language film in 1971. It was later followed by the action thriller *La Légion Saute sur Kolwezi* (*Operation Leopard*, 1980), an account of the French military intervention in Zaire, and, in the same vein, *SAS à San Salvador* (*Terminate With Extreme Prejudice*, 1982).

In each case, Coutard’s director of photography was Georges Liron, who had been his camera operator during his collaboration with Godard and with whom he served as co-cinematographer on Peter Lennon’s 1967 documentary, *Rocky Road to Dublin*. For this controversial study of the state of Ireland still under the sway of Gaelic and clerical traditionalism, Lennon chose Coutard because of his free, open style.

Coutard was reunited with Godard in 1982 for *Passion*, a film about light and pictorial representation, and the dazzling *Prénom Carmen* (*First Name Carmen*, 1983). The renewed collaboration was set to continue, but what Coutard termed a banal dispute involving Godard’s partner, Anne-Marie Miéville, meant they did not work together again. Nevertheless, Coutard always spoke with admiration and affection for Godard.

During the 90s, Coutard began working with Philippe Garrel, on films such as *La Naissance de l'Amour* (The Birth of Love, 1993) and *Sauvage Innocence* (Wild Innocence, 2001), where he returned to the New Wave method of the single take to create a sparse black and white style. His three films for the director Guillaume Nicloux achieved a similar detachment and rigour, notably *Faut Pas Rire du Bonheur* (1994) with its sombre long takes of a nocturnal Paris.

Coutard's innovations in style across around 80 highly diverse films were rapidly assimilated, and his influence can be seen in the work of Hollywood cinematographers such as Conrad Hall, László Kovács and Gordon Willis.

His greatest legacy is perhaps the personal example he set of adventure and adaptability. A modest and private man, he was most proud of the international award he received in 1997 from the American Society of Cinematographers. Raoul Coutard, cinematographer and film director, born 16 September 1924; died 8 November 2016