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1

From “Cinéphile” to “Cinéaste”

IMAGINE (or if you are lucky, remember) the thrill of being a child at the movies—especially if you manage to sneak in, and especially if you are playing hooky. François Truffaut's critical writings and films suggest that he has never forgotten the shivers of delight inherent in the early movie-watching experience: the escape into darkness and surprises, the screen that overwhelms with people larger than life, and then the growing realization that film is less a substitute for life than a frame for a more intense and moving picture of it.

Truffaut's early film-going experiences were flavored by what we might call “sinema”: not only were his excursions into the darkness clandestine, but they were accompanied by a growing awareness of sexuality. A fine example of this conjunction in the boy's mind (around the age of twelve) is his recollection of lost panties in the 4,500-seat Gaumont-Palace in Paris during the Occupation. He learned from his friend—whose mother worked at the famous movie theater—that after the last show every Sunday night, at least sixty pairs of panties would be found under the seats: “I hardly need to add that these sixty little weekly panties—we never failed to check the exact number . . . —made us dream in a direction that had little to do with the art of cinema or the ideas of Bazin.”[1]

Nevertheless, Truffaut's first films prove that the kind of experience he recalls here has everything to do with filmic art. His first short film, *Les Mistons* (1958), and his first feature, *The 400 Blows* (1959), both depict the sexual awakenings of young boys. In the former, a group of *mistons* (brats) spy upon the young woman of their dreams, furtively and adoringly sniffing the seat of her bicycle (a moment which Truffaut eternizes through stopped images). We see Antoine Doinel in *The 400 Blows* at his mother's vanity table, toying with her perfume and eyelash curler; later he is fascinated by her legs as she removes her stockings. And a subsequent Doinel

Top: Jean-Pierre Léaud, Jean Cocteau, and Truffaut at Cannes in 1959. Bottom: Truffaut, Léaud, and Henri Langlois during the shooting of Stolen Kisses.

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More information

The fascination with women: *Les Mistons* (top); *The 400 Blows* (bottom).

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Excerpt
More information

ARLANT FRANÇAIS

Antoine and René in *The 400 Blows* with Bergman's Monika.

film, *Stolen Kisses* (1968), is about characters who spend their time spying upon each other. If we consider these themes while recalling the great theorist André Bazin's essay, "Theater and Cinema," in which he says, "Alone, hidden in a dark room, we watch through half-open blinds a spectacle that is unaware of our existence and which is part of the universe,"[2] we can see an aspect of the continuum between Truffaut's film-watching and film-making: the degree to which the movies provide stimulation/sublimation, making the spectator a voyeur.

Inseparable from this identity in solitude is the existence of a *community* of voyeurs—the audience in which strangers are not only aware of each other, but become united in shared emotions. Truffaut tells us that his first memory of the cinema takes him back to 1939 when, at the age of seven, he sees Abel Gance's *Paradis Perdu*. It is wartime both on and off the screen, and the theater is filled with soldiers on leave (accompanied by their girlfriends or mistresses). The coincidence between the situation of the characters and that of the spectators is so intense that everyone is crying—hundreds of white handkerchiefs dotting the darkness—and the little boy is engulfed in the "unanimité émotionnelle" that washes through the audience.[3]

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Excerpt
More information

Among experiences such as these, Truffaut became a cinéphile—a passionate lover of film—thus illustrating Jean Cocteau's maxim, "A child's eyes register fast. Later he develops the film." A neglected child whose only real home was the movie theater, he would see favorite films as many as ten times, even memorizing the soundtrack. He kept a diary in which he listed all the films he saw, with stars next to those seen most often. (Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game* accumulated twelve.[4]) And then in 1947, at the age of fifteen, he started a ciné-club "with the pretentious but revealing name of 'Cercle Cinémane' " (*FV*, 15). This enterprise was doomed to failure because it was in competition with the ciné-club of Bazin, but it did give him the opportunity to make the latter's acquaintance. Their meeting has tremendous resonance for both personal and film-historical reasons. Although Bazin was only thirteen years older than Truffaut, he became a substitute father to the boy. When Truffaut was arrested because of his club's unpaid bills (and like Antoine in *The 400 Blows* was locked up with thieves and prostitutes and then transported by police van to a delinquents center), Bazin negotiated his release and assumed responsibility for him. And most significantly, he channeled Truffaut's passion into profession by inviting him to write about film. Truffaut says of this period, "It was the first happy time of my life . . . watching films, talking about them, and to top it off, I was getting paid for it!" (*FV*, p. 30).

Bazin was already known as one of the most sensitive and articulate of film critics, one who addressed himself to the aesthetic potential of the medium within the context of ethical concerns. Truffaut declares in his Foreword to the second volume of *What Is Cinema?*,

> André Bazin wrote about film better than anybody else in Europe. From that day in 1948 when he got me my first film job, working alongside him, I became his adopted son. Thereafter, every pleasant thing that happened in my life, I owed to him. (II, v)

Truffaut would be deeply influenced by Bazin's generosity of spirit, critical intelligence, and focus upon the director as the dominant creative force in film. A humanist in the best sense of the word, Bazin wrote with informed affection about everything from deep-focus photography to the entomology of the pin-up girl. His predilection for the former offers a clear picture of how his sensitivity to

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Excerpt
More information

film technique relates to his fundamental respect for human beings. Whereas the Soviet theorists and filmmakers had given cinematic primacy to montage (editing, cutting, or the creation of meaning through the juxtaposition of shots)—particularly insofar as it lends itself to manipulation and didactic intent—Bazin emphasized deep-focus photography, which maintains the integrity of the shot and restores faith in the camera over the cutting room. Bazin in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" was among the first to comprehend the impact of this technique upon the spectator's response. Composition in depth is seen as egalitarian in the sense that everything in the frame exists with equal clarity, thereby giving the spectator a choice: our eyes are free to roam from foreground to background and around. It is closer to the way we perceive in off-screen life, and it reintroduces ambiguity into the structure of the image.

Whether celebrating masters of depth-of-field, Orson Welles and Jean Renoir, or tempering the dominance of Sergei Eisenstein, Bazin (like Truffaut after him) was evolving what he called "an aesthetic of reality," an approach that recognizes film's unique capacity to capture and reproduce "real" experience. This was not merely an adherence to realism, but to a process that transcends mimesis, and presents "common" individuals and events in all their generally ignored complexity and beauty. In his article, "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," for example, Bazin claims that faithfulness to everyday life is the basic material of the aesthetic of Italian film. Particularly in the work of Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, he finds "a revolutionary humanism," rooted in the portrayal of ". . . concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity." Bazin applauds the way that people in neorealist art are individuated and that "nobody is reduced to the condition of an object or a symbol that would allow one to hate them in comfort without having first to leap the hurdle of their humanity."[5]

Truffaut not only worked as an assistant to Rossellini in 1956,[6] but his critical writings also seek out the "ring of truth." He praises directors such as Jean Renoir and Ingmar Bergman for the overwhelming reality of their characters and fluid emotional situations, for their presentation of the intimate relationships among love, pain, celebration, and loss. In *The Cinema of François Truffaut*, Graham Petrie's impression of the director's art weaves these Bazinian influences together:

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Excerpt
More information

> The sensitive viewer of a Truffaut film will find himself making constant and subtle re-adjustments of his standard assumptions and preconceptions; he will emerge with a new awareness of the incongruous rhythms of life, of the inextricable mingling of beauty and sadness in evervday experience, but he will feel that he has discovered these for himself.[7]

Bazin founded *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1950—the first major magazine to treat film (the medium, the directors, and the individual motion pictures) with the seriousness, respect, and passion traditionally reserved for the other arts. It brought together the leading French critics/film enthusiasts of the time—Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette—and became one of the two focal points of the movement known as the New Wave. The other center was the Cinémathèque under the direction of Henri Langlois, where the film fanatics spent the better part of their waking hours under the spell of motion pictures from every nationality and period. They devoured the silents, the talkies, the German Expressionists, the Italian Neorealists and, most ravenously, the American studio films that had been banned during the Occupation. Here they learned to love directors like Howard Hawks and John Ford, the American masters who were virtually ignored in this country until the French critics made a case for their artistry in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The Cinémathèque made them aware and enamored of genres—Westerns, musicals, gangster films, "film noir" (detective/psychological/thrillers)—and of the Hollywood studio system: the genre conventions and production methods were seen as necessary limitations that defined the possibilities of personal expression for American directors.

The critics in what was to become the French New Wave noticed thematic and stylistic consistencies among the films of individual directors and elevated identifiable personal signature to a standard of value. They championed the director as the "auteur," the creator of a personal vision of the world which progresses from film to film. Paradoxically enough, their limited knowledge of English made them uniquely equipped to appreciate individual cinematic style: the American films often had no subtitles, thereby inviting a closer look at how meaning is expressed through visual texture, composition, camera movement, and editing. The cinéphiles' exuberant respect for auteurs who were previously considered craftsmen (at best) generated great controversy; Andrew Sarris reminds us how Truf-

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Excerpt
More information

faut was repudiated by non-*Cahiers* people: "Truffaut's greatest heresy, however, was not in his ennobling direction as a form of creation, but in his ascribing authorship to Hollywood directors hitherto tagged with the deadly epithets of commercialism."[8] Truffaut and Company were nicknamed "hitchcockohawksiens" since they championed directors like Hitchcock and Hawks as auteurs of the highest order.

The attention to the director and the renewed exploration of film as an essentially *visual* medium constitute two major foundations of the New Wave. These points of emphasis can be better understood in relation to previous trends in French cinema. Perhaps the most important single document in this regard is Truffaut's famous attack on classic French film, "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français," which appeared in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in January, 1954. The target was what he termed "la Tradition de la qualité," the French postwar films that were adapted from novels and were heavily dependent upon plot and dialogue. These films of "psychological realism" by directors such as Claude Autant-Lara, Jean Delannoy, and René Clément were seen as stunting the growth of filmic art since they did not exploit or even lend themselves to the visual possibilities of cinema. The key figure was the scriptwriter (the director was "the gentleman who adds the pictures"), and Truffaut singles out for blame the successful writing team of Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost since they manifest "1. A constant and deliberate care to be *unfaithful* to the spirit as well as the letter; 2. A very marked taste for profanation and blasphemy." Aurenche and Bost are defined as essentially literary men, and Truffaut reproaches them "for being contemptuous of the cinema by underestimating it." They are also taken to task for giving the public "its habitual dose of smut, nonconformity, and facile audacity," and for manifesting the trait that Truffaut would always manage to avoid in his own films—the desire to be superior to their characters.[9]

Above and beyond these "littérateurs" (whose work is also pugnaciously termed "le cinéma de papa"), Truffaut proposes "un cinéma d'auteurs," praising the directors who often write and invent what they shoot. Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Becker, Abel Gance, Max Ophuls, Jacques Tati, and Roger Leenhardt reveal the limitations of the verbally dominated "antibourgeois cinema." Truffaut's concern with realism led him to denigrate the use of literary dialogue, elaborate studio sets, polished

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Excerpt
More information

photography, and big-name stars. In the same manner that his own films would exemplify, his critical writings paid homage to the directors who ennobled ordinary experience, vulnerable individuals, daily language, and common emotions.

Truffaut's article is credited by Andrew Sarris, the first and most articulate promulgator of the auteur theory in the United States, with the polemical stance of the term "auteur." In the introduction to his seminal book in film history, *The American Cinema*, Sarris lucidly discusses the "politique des auteurs" and Truffaut's centrality to its development: "Truffaut was involved in nothing less than changing the course of the French cinema" (p. 29). This is not to say that he merits unqualified praise: the auteur theory has been abused nearly as often as it has been used fruitfully. Certain directors—such as John Huston—were unjustly accused of mediocrity, and criticism often degenerated into a question of taking sides for or against individual directors. Bazin's article, "On the Politique des Auteurs," warned against the excesses of this principle, the danger of an "esthetic cult of personality." While stressing that we need an auteurist approach in film, where artistic creation is more vulnerable, he concludes with a plea for a more judicious application:

> But its exclusive use would lead to another peril: the negation of the work to the profit of the exaltation of its *auteur*. We have tried to show why mediocre auteurs were able, by accident, to make admirable films, and how, in turn, genius itself was menaced by a sterility no less accidental. The *politique des auteurs* will ignore the first and deny the second. Useful and fecund, it then seems to me, independently of its polemical value, to have been filled out by other approaches to the cinematographic fact which restores to the film its value as an oeuvre. This is not at all to deny the role of the auteur, but to restore to it the preposition without which the noun is only a lame concept. '*Auteur*,' without doubt, but *of* what?[10]

Truffaut is not exempt from this warning. He confesses that after the Liberation, "because of a taste for exoticism, a thirst for novelty, romanticism, evidently also because of a delight in contradiction, but surely through love of vitality, we decided to love everything as long as it was from Hollywood" (*FV*, 293). He is justifiably persuasive when he writes lovingly of Jean Vigo's *Zero for Conduct* or Max Ophuls' *Lola Montes*; he appears on occasion merely idiosyncratic when he waxes eloquent over Samuel Fuller or Robert Aldrich.

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Excerpt
More information

But in every case, he is seeking the personal touch—the man behind or inside the work—the manifestation of a human sensibility molding an art form to communicate its obsessions. In this sense, Truffaut follows in the footsteps of critic/filmmaker Alexandre Astruc who declared in 1948:

> The cinema is becoming a means of expression like the other arts before it, especially painting and the novel. It is no longer a spectacle, a diversion equivalent to the old boulevard theatre . . . it is becoming, little by little, a visual language, i.e. a medium in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, be they abstract or whatever, or in which he can communicate his obsessions as accurately as he can do today in an essay or novel."[11]

His call for a "new wave" was answered when in 1959, twenty-four French directors made their first feature films, followed in 1960 by forty-three more first features. In the intervening decade (1949-59), Truffaut and his colleagues were setting the stage for the creative explosion of the late 1950s. Astruc had been proposing that direction was no longer a means of illustrating a scene, but an act of writing: "The filmmaker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen."

The New Wave critics were able to apply and develop this notion, partially because of the technical innovations during the fifties. The advent of lightweight equipment made it possible to shoot with a handheld camera that is virtually a fluid extension of the filmmaker's body. Less expensive camera methods introduced a visual freedom (for example, the cultivation of cinematic roughness) that permitted more identification between camera and director—and, consequently, between camera and audience. As James Monaco points out in his excellent study, *The New Wave* (1976), these critics insisted on

> a personal relationship between filmmaker and film viewer. Movies must no longer be alienated products which are consumed by mass audiences; they are now intimate conversations between the people behind the camera and the people in front of the screen. It is immediately clear that the ethics of the *politique des auteurs* owed a great debt to Bazinian moral realism. (p. 8)

The personal relationship finally made creative demands upon the critics, and 1959 boasted Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, Godard's *Breathless*, Chabrol's *Les Cousins*, Rivette's *Paris Belongs To Us*, and Res-

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Annette Insdorf
Excerpt
More information

nais' *Hiroshima mon amour*. (Alain Resnais is generally considered part of the New Wave, with the difference that he did not begin his film career as a critic.)

Bazin's association with both Italian Neorealism and the New Wave symbolizes the intimate connections between the movements, for the French critics/filmmakers made virtues of necessities similar to those of their Italian mentors: young, independent, and without studios, they resorted to on-location shooting, the use of nonprofessional or relatively unknown performers, and an address to daily experience. These traits led to the elements that best characterize most New Wave films: spontaneity and improvisation.

The films of Truffaut and his comrades move according to inner quirks more than rigid plot; an excellent example is his second feature, *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960), whose "storyline" is less significant (or even traceable) than Truffaut's idiosyncratic treatment of characters and events. For instance, the film has a deliberate visual roughness; Raoul Coutard's photography (also crucial to *Breathless*) is grainy rather than polished. The camera is alive and nervous, reflecting the characters' personalities. The style is therefore as desirous of freedom as the individuals. The word that comes to mind is one of André Gide's favorite terms—*disponibilité*—a palpable freedom of the character, camera, and film itself to go where they like. Consider the scene in *Shoot the Piano Player* when Charlie is about to ring Lars Schmeel's bell for his audition. Rather than accompany him inside at this climactic moment, Truffaut follows an attractive young woman with a violin case—someone we do not yet know and will not see again. The camera remains with her as she goes outside, as if she might have some dramatic effect on the story, but when she moves out of the frame, we are left with the sense of a fortuitous encounter, the possibility of an acquaintance that will never be realized. *Shoot the Piano Player* continually surprises us in this fashion, deliberately disrupting tone; it disorients and improvises and flies—in the best tradition of American jazz. The implication in many of Truffaut's films is that both aesthetics and ethics are processes of improvisation: nothing is given, all must be created fresh.

In fact, the connection between the French New Wave and movements in jazz is rich and deep if we consider narrative and melody as analogous processes. There is something basically acces-