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films in focus

by Andrew Sarris

Francois Truffaut's "SUCH A GORGEOUS KID LIKE ME" doesn't really work on any level, but the film does have levels galore. If we were still back in the good old days of the yellow-cover period of Cahiers du Cinema, I

could sum up "Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me" in a cryptically Godardian equation for Truffaut: Alfred Hitchcock plus Jean Renoir equals Sacha Guitry. I would stop right there, go treat my mandarin's migraine, and let my poor readers take a few years off from their other studies to figure out what I meant. Every so often I pick up a particularly tedious film magazine jam-packed with the arcane jargon of structuralism, semiotics, and other forms of academic slush, and I long for the maddeningly elliptical playfulness of the old Cahiers critics. If this were the best of all possible 18th century worlds, I would never bother writing long explanatory reviews. A few well-chosen bons mots amid a glittering gathering would do the trick. And an independent income or a generous patron would do the rest.

Unfortunately, the grubby word-mongering ethos of the 20th century marketplace compels the critic to communicate with an amorphous mass of readers, and thereby to take nothing for granted. As for the mere reviewer, all that is required is a consumer report on the relative value of a cinematic spectacle in terms of the price of admission, baby-sitter, parking lot, gasoline, or cab-fare, eating out, and general dislocation. I am not setting up

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a convenient context for Oscar Wilde's definition of a cynic as one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. I am merely confessing my inability to decree which films should be seen, and which shunned. All I can do is set up priorities on the assumption that no one can see everything immediately. However, my criticism has always been motivated by a moviegoing habit. I would like my readers to see as many movies as I do. Hence, I have never considered my critiques as literary sublimations of the moviegoing experience. Rather, I have attempted to instill guilt and envy and longing in the non-moviegoer. You don't know what you're missing, I say. Let me try to tell you. But you shouldn't need me to tell you, and you shouldn't take anybody's

word for it. You should see for yourself.

With Truffaut the problem of communicating what I feel is compounded by my awareness of his career not only from the beginning, but even before the beginning. It was Truffaut, of course, who first promulgated la politique des auteurs, a critical policy which has been as much misunderstood as maligned. But that was almost 20 years ago, and I can no longer respond to the taunts at auteurism unless I have the time and space (and readers's patience) to fill in the myriad details of auteurism's grand design. The name of the game is now historical context, and, thus, the rules of the game are very flexible.

Where then do we begin in our analysis of Francois Truffaut's "Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me"? The allegedly simple-minded auteurist invented by actually simple-minded anti-auteurists would presumably whimper in ecstasy over directorial figures of style borrowed self-consciously from Hitchcock's "Vertigo," "Psycho," and "The Man Who Knew Too Much" (II), Renoir's "Picnic on the Grass" and "French Can Can," and Sacha Guitry's "Lovers and Thieves." Truffaut's imitation of Hitchcock's suspense montage (close-up of fingers tapping nervously on a table) seems closer to derision than devotion, possibly because the melodramatic issue is too mendacious. As for the obsessional if humorless intensity of a mock-"Vertigo" belltower sequence, Truffaut's treatment goes beyond derision into desecration. The disconcerting lyricism of Georges Delerue's score fudges things up even more by creating a mechanical ambiguity of mood.

Truffaut's Renoir references are lovingly perfunctory in this predominantly perverse enterprise. Loving yes, but still perfunctory. Throughout his career, Truffaut has tended to alternate between Hitchcock projects ("Shoot the Piano Player," "The Soft Skin," "The Bride Wore Black," "Mississippi Mermaid," and "Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me") and Renoir projects ("Jules and Jim," "Stolen Kisses," "Bed and Board," and "Two English Girls") ("The 400 Blows" and "Wild Child" may be designated as Truffaut's Vigo projects, and "Fahrenheit 451" as Truffaut's remake of Fritz Lang's "Metropolis.") Still, the Hitchcock-Renoir-Vigo-et al elements tended to flow together in all his films under the control of a very alert intelligence. From the outset Truffaut was determined to keep up with his audience. He was not bedeviled, like Chabrol, by the demons of abstract form, nor, like Godard, by the siren calls of revolutionary self-hatred, nor, like Resnais, by self-diminishing fragmentation. Like Bertolucci, not so much his disciple as his modish successor, Truffaut has always mistrusted the manipulative powers of montage. From Renoir and Ophuls he learned the lesson of following his characters and his players through their spiritual adventures in space. Truffaut was thus the adopted son of Bazin in the deepest sense. By contrast, Godard was too far into paradoxes and dialectics ever to abandon Eisenstein as one of the terminal points of his style.

Since Truffaut was always so much closer in spirit and style to Renoir than to Hitchcock, the Truffaut-Hitchcock "effects" tended to emphasize the surface trickery of Hitchcock moments rather than the subterranean

tracery of Hitchcock meanings. And never more than in "Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me." But it would be a mistake to interpret Truffaut's failure solely or even primarily in terms of the indigestibility of his influences. The film falls flat right after the first entrance of Bernadette Lafont's coarsely criminal temptress, Camille. Indeed, Vince Canby has gone so far as to put major blame for the debacle on the actress herself. I cannot agree. For one thing, I remember how sensitively and delicately Truffaut handled Miss Lafont's boisterous sensuality more than 15 years ago in "Les Mistons," and how Chabrol treated her with such grace and compassion in "Les Bonnes Femmes," perhaps the most lasting masterpiece of the nouvelle vague. I remember her also in the films of Doniol-Valcroze, and in Chabrol's "Leda" and "Les Godelureaux" and "Le Beau Serge." In a relatively minor way, Bernadette Lafont served as the Harriet Andersson of the Nouvelle Vague. Her libidinous looseness was especially tantalizing in that pivotal period from the late '50s into the mid-'60s before the floodgates of sexual frankness were breached beyond repair. Always, there was something healthy and wholesome and honest about her sluttishness, and she possessed the saintly ability to bounce up from any mattress

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without ever succumbing to the Sin of Despair.

For his part, Truffaut came reluctantly late to the ranks of the sexual revolutionaries, and his heart has never been in it. The sacramental lechery that used to pop up in his work from time to time has now soured into sarcastic prudery. Bernadette Lafont is put through her whorish paces in the grotesque disarray of drooping garters, floppy toplessness, and leggy gaucherie. Unlike Lola Montes and even Bernadette Lafont's saintly slut in "Les Bonnes Femmes," Bernadette Lafont's Camille sells her body without ever suggesting she has a soul. But her performance doesn't go down even as derisive farce simply because Truffaut lacks the amoral dryness of Sacha

Guitry. Nor are his male victims the soulful victims they were in "The Bride Wore Black." The best that Truffaut could have hoped for was a series of serio-comic chuckles. Instead, he has gone for the whopping belly laughs, and he has failed. It may be that he failed to realize that he belongs to that tribe of movie directors chained to the emotional intensity of their camera movements. And I don't think we have reached that stage in film history when camera movement itself has become a subject for satire. There are jokes and there are "jokes," and "Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me" has too few of the former and too many of the latter.

Culture Panel

A panel discussion entitled "What Is Culture? And Do We Have It?" will be presented on Tuesday, May 8, at 8 p. m. at the New York Cultural Center, Columbus Circle, under the auspices of Fairleigh Dickinson University. Panelists will include Richard Clurman, Administrator of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs; Grace Glueck, cultural editor of the New York Times; critic John Simon; and impresario Sol Hurok. The session will be moderated by Lester Markel, former Sunday Editor of the New York Times. Admission is free. For reservations call 581-2311.