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FEATURES

Truffaut

An ambivalent reputation

Despite a certain amount of popular success for his films, and a comparatively high prestige as *Cahiers* spokesman in the 50s and Hitchcock interviewer extraordinary in the 60s, François Truffaut has hardly ever received the kind of critical attention which his films deserve. The somewhat cultist adulation showered on *JULES ET JIM* stands in odd contrast to the general hostility and indifference which greeted his later work. Ever since *LA PEAU DOUCE* nobody seemed to care much for the films he made, though there is no evidence that he has undergone a 'decline' - a reason too often invoked when a director's work begins to become difficult.

The fact that, in a sense, his early films have been over-praised and his subsequent ones dismissed, makes it more than likely that Truffaut has been the victim of a misunderstanding which, ultimately, includes his early films as well. Recently, however, there has been a change, and in *Movie No 17 Robin Wood* makes an attempt to see Truffaut's work in perspective. He does so in the context of a comparison with Chabrol which unfortunately yields little more than a piece of typical Leavisite critical wisdom to the effect that Truffaut is profound on the surface but shallow underneath, while Chabrol appears cynical, misanthropic and nihilistic, but is really serious, sympathetic and mature in his attitudes. This approach seems to me the more perverse for being argued at great length, and although some of the points (especially where deduced from less debatable criteria) offer valuable insight into Truffaut's work, Wood appears to have missed out one whole aspect of the films which is crucial to Truffaut's evolving concept of his art - the increasingly 'thematic' use of apparently formal elements, such as narrative technique, plot construction or - on a less important scale - the use of geometrical compositions (particularly verticals) as a correlative and comment on the action.

The yardstick by which Truffaut's work is most commonly measured is a double one. His alleged romantic vein (*LES 400 COUPS*, *JULES ET JIM*) is taken to be a legacy of Renoir (in comparison with whom his films are found wanting - Wood complains of over-indulgence and misplaced generosity towards the characters) while his predilection for a cinema of 'suspense' (*LA PEAU DOUCE*, *THE BRIDE*) brackets him with Hitchcock (whom apparently he doesn't understand). From this are derived two basic charges: of sentimentalizing his characters and of having replaced suspense by contrivance.

The Truffaut hero

Early in his career, Truffaut was once asked what he considered to be the recurrent 'theme' of his films, and he replied that he preferred to tell stories about characters who are 'dans le pétrin' - in real trouble.

This answer is less flippant than it seems at first glance, and I think it provides a key to much of what his films are about. For curiously enough, unlike his opposite number in a Hitchcock film, the Truffaut hero never really stops to think how he got into trouble, nor does he make any determined efforts to get out of it. Whenever the situation forces him to make a move, it inevitably aggravates his position. Already *LES 400 COUPS* illustrates this. The film proceeds on the motto 'from the frying-pan into the fire' - treated simultaneously under its comic and tragic aspect. The principle is

most graphically demonstrated in the episode where Antoine, the protagonist, wanting to pay homage to his admired Balzac, lights a candle in the window, and inadvertently sets the curtains on fire. Throughout the film, a dramatic escalation is at work, situations get progressively out of hand, and the hero is rendered powerless in the face of the consequences which his - almost invariably well-intentioned - acts provoke.

This often gross discrepancy between intention and effect, impulse and implication is to become characteristic of almost all male protagonists in Truffaut's work. As has often been remarked, what characterizes the Truffaut hero is his apparent indecision and passivity. This seems to me to have a quite specific functional purpose within the films as a whole. Indeed, it is such a generalized condition that its immediate effect is to draw attention to the rift that appears between the experience of an emotion, and the way it manifests itself objectively. Truffaut's art for example consists in making us see helplessness often as something other than cowardice - call it generosity, sensitivity, absence of guile or calculation - but just enough as a flaw to create a distance which demands an act of conscious reflection on the part of the spectator. At every turn, our judgement is called for, and the lack of moral initiative in the hero solicits our critical participation. Frequently Truffaut presents us with a scene from which a relatively straightforward emotion can be deduced, only to follow it up with one that makes both hero and situation appear in an ambiguous light. For example, in *LA PEAU DOUCE*, we see Françoise Dorleac dance in front of Jean Desailly, obviously in a display of love and tenderness. Truffaut then superimposes in medium close-up a page of ads on which are listed the hotels of the district and Desailly briefly glancing at them. What appears, within the context, as a genuine enough feeling on the part of both of them is thus immediately related to - and usually enclosed in - a world where hotel rooms change their occupants every fifteen minutes.

Truffaut's heroes are romantics, and they cultivate spontaneity. Yet their desire to live an emotion as fully as possible, and to explore private fantasies tends to engross them in a 'closed' universe. This often leads, by its exclusiveness, to a behaviour that all but degrades their romanticism and makes them appear as cruelly inadequate, and indeed sentimental. This is undoubtedly the case of the hero in *LA PEAU DOUCE*, but Montag, the protagonist of *FAHRENHEIT 451* displays the same characteristics, though in a different situation. Almost by accident, he discovers the joy of reading books, and Truffaut dwells at length on the peculiar emotion aroused by this discovery, when he shows Montag sitting in the kitchen, laboriously, but lovingly reading line by line a page from *David Copperfield*. Montag forgets the world around him, and his duty as a fireman. But what is conspicuously absent from the film is an outright conflict of loyalties, and Montag never becomes a conscious rebel until the very end, where he escapes to the book-people as if for asylum.

Society as the causal chain

Truffaut's heroes are thus eager to maintain the status quo as long as possible, and their acts are guided almost solely by the nostalgic intuition that only a world which permits no change would enable them to live their essentially solipsistic pleasures. But this is precisely where Truffaut's perspective differs from that of his heroes. For they are placed within a universe whose rigid causality is profoundly inimical to the desire for stability and subjective expansiveness. Truffaut

likes to depict an emotional entanglement by paralleling it with a purely functional causality which obliquely comments on the characters' predicament. For example, in *LA PEAU DOUCE* Desailly's love affair with Dorléac is throughout orchestrated by a series of mechanical processes - shifting gears, traffic lights, the clock of a petrol pump. Furthermore, there seems to be a geometrical opposition of particular significance. Whenever he feels puzzled, helpless, unsure Desailly glances horizontally (the opening scene in the Airport lounge, or at the petrol station where his eyes distractedly follow two lorries passing in opposite directions). Whenever an emotion is generated, or tension accumulates, we see him in a vertical movement, he is, as it were, 'carried away'. (Most notably the lift scenes in the Lisbon hotel.) A similar opposition can be found in *FAHRENHEIT 451* between the fire-station pole and the monorail. Means of 'transport' play an important part in Truffaut's films, especially when used to define a character's autonomy (or lack of it) vis à vis his own actions. In general, a horizontal movement confronts the hero with others, or the world around him, a vertical movement confronts him with himself. Lifts and stairs in particular are used as the barometer of an emotional intensity (we remember J. P. Léaud's panicky descent down the stairs after his encounter with Delphine Seyrig in *BAISERS VOLEES*).

Associated with this is the emphasis given to a displacement in height, which significantly alters a given situation, often in contrast to a journey. *LA PEAU DOUCE* is virtually built on an opposition of aeroplane (associated with Dorléac) and car (Desailly), and the separation scene in the film derives much of its force from the skilful use of the location: the desolate openness of the unfinished flat on top of the apartment block, followed by the high angle shot of Dorléac driving away in a taxi below. In *TIREZ SUR LE PIANISTE*, Aznavour's glamorous past culminates in the tragic-grotesque scene where he is rushing up the stairs while his wife throws herself out of the window. The situation is inverted in *LA PEAU DOUCE* when Desailly tries to phone his wife, while she is descending in the lift determined to shoot him. These are dramatic devices perhaps inherited from American slapstick and situation comedy, but we can see how Truffaut has wholly appropriated them for his own thematic purposes.

What Truffaut presents us with in *LA PEAU DOUCE* is not only a sentiment, an aspiration severely at odds with a segmented, mechanical reality (the effect is to enclose and constrain the affair, and to make us feel how ignominiously Desailly is suspended in his world of efficiency, speed and suaveness). We also have the critique of a kind of irresponsible spontaneity, where immediacy and impulse are the masked forms of a foreshortened, myopic vision of reality, a retreat into a 'self' which doesn't exist anymore. *FAHRENHEIT 451*, among other things, is a film about the decay and *reductio ad absurdum* of an individualist cult of feeling and sensibility, with Julie Christie pathetically stroking her furs and Truffaut making it patently obvious how a totalitarian régime establishes itself, thrives and survives on a subtly enforced domestic privacy, individualist comfort and middle-class values of propriety. Generally, however, Truffaut restricts himself to presenting the world of automatic consequences and functional mechanisms as an ironic counterpoint to a seemingly subjective *crise de conscience*, leaving the precise causality between the two open, though decidedly implied. The level of interaction joining individual and society - the properly political and ideological dimension of his films - is excluded, not because Truffaut can't see clearly what's wrong with his heroes, but because it is precisely the exclusion of a commitment that transcends the level of introspective sensibility which is the critical focus of his pictures. Whereas Hitchcock's films (*NORTH BY NORTHWEST*, *VERTIGO*, *REAR WINDOW* and *TORN CURTAIN* in particular)

dramatize the shipwreck of the creative intelligence and the impotence inherent in an individualism of action, Truffaut's is an individualism of susceptibility and intuition.

The idea of the hero being caught up in mechanisms - social, psychological or other - which elude his grasp and yet are nevertheless put in motion because of a sometimes desperate obstinacy to regard only the subjectively experienced as real, undergoes a considerable change in Truffaut's later work, so much so that we can speak of a double perspective. It announces itself in *LA PEAU DOUCE* and *FAHRENHEIT* as a Hitchcockian play on audience-identification and a psychologically revelatory suspense. There is, for example, a definite Hitchcock logic in the way Desailly is progressively humiliated by the actions he takes to keep his moral balance.

Having arrived at Rheims, where he is to give a celebrity lecture, he leaves his girl-friend at the hotel. During the dinner with the local bourgeoisie, the waiter suddenly comes up to him. 'There is a young lady urgently wanting to see you.' Panic spreads on his face, lest there should be a scandal. He at first refuses to see her, but the waiter insists. Finally he goes outside. But it isn't his girl-friend who is waiting, merely a student who wants his autograph. Smiling, relieved, he joins the party again and engages in an amiable conversation with the hostess. The suspense is of the same nature as that in parts of *MARNIE*, yet the subtle betrayal implicit in his amiability at this point adds a special dimension and neatly prepares us for the subsequent episode where he has to watch helplessly as Françoise Dorléac is molested by a man in the street. At one point, one sees her wandering up and down in the foyer of a cinema between two posters - one advertising Cocteau's *TESTAMENT D'ORPHEE*, the other something called *PEAU DE BANANE*. It's tempting to see this as an emblematic reference to Desailly himself, the ironic trajectory of a transcendental romanticism.

A Documentary Cinema

In the more recent films (*THE BRIDE*, *BAISERS VOLEES*), however, the double perspective of Truffaut's vision is essentially established by the way he uses plots, characters and situations as elements of a 'secondary discourse'. What one notices, especially, is the progressive identification of the *mise-en-scène* with the mechanical and hostile causality operating within the universe depicted by the films. *THE BRIDE WORE BLACK* and *BAISERS VOLEES* are in this sense what Rohmer used to call 'documentary cinema', where the situations and predicaments of the characters appear as part of a cinematic problem: in Truffaut's case - how do you tell a story with a narrative continuity and a 'central' hero/consciousness if it is precisely the absence of a consciousness or a central emotional identity which is your subject?

Viewed from this angle, *THE BRIDE* is not what it appears to be. Generally considered a failure because it has all the signs of a Hitchcock thriller, though not only throwing away the suspense element in the plot, but more seriously presenting us with a character - Julie Kohler - for whom we do not feel the supposedly typical Hitchcockian sympathy-in-crime. But if we can accept that despite its evident homage to *MARNIE* in the first five minutes, it is primarily a Truffaut film, its structure and method come to make more sense. Indeed it appears as an unsentimental and bitter *JULES ET JIM* revisited, but whereas previously Truffaut had been an accomplice of the men in their fascination with the mysterious Cathérine, in *THE BRIDE* he looks at the men with the eyes of the disenchanted Cathérine. The woman who contrives a double suicide is reborn as a murderer and the murders she commits are only so many potential and inevitably disastrous marriages.

In all of Truffaut's early films, the women, infinitely stronger than the men, often assume the role of the 'given', and appear as more honest, more clear-sighted but for that reason more 'external'. Where women are mysterious for Truffaut, they are so because they seem to be the instruments of a rationality-within-irrationality to which they adapt themselves and which excludes the men. Therefore women often come to be identified with a kind of 'fatality' - Jeanne Moreau in JULES ET JIM totally deciding the fates of her suitors, Desailly's wife in LA PEAU DOUCE 'avenging' not only herself but also Françoise Dorléac (in the scene where the wife is picked up in the street, she tells the man more or less what Dorléac tells Desailly at their separation). The men in Truffaut's films are invariably guilty. Partly because they believe in spontaneity, in emotional impulses, in 'instinct' when the world in which they find themselves constantly humiliates them, and partly for believing these values to be self-evident; they never seem to attain a consciousness sufficiently wide to take in the social dimensions in which these values appear as their opposites - unfreedom, self-deception, willingness to be manipulated. Their pathos generally derives from the fact that our society does feel ambiguous about these values, and that in Truffaut's case, the punishment which the men receive seems to exceed their crime - or, to put it in another way, that they meet their fate without being prepared for it.

From this perspective, THE BRIDE represents an attempt to dramatize three different 'fields of interaction': the instrumental one (they all took part in the shooting incident), the social one (Truffaut shows them in their respective milieu) and finally, their emotional one (the values that make them susceptible to the kind of person Julie presents herself as). In this gradual unveiling of attitudes, the character played by Jeanne Moreau can only be understood in the context of her function as metteur-en-scene and actress within a spectacle put in motion by her, in view of a goal, a causality. It is THE BRIDE which should be compared with Chabrol's underrated LANDRU, for in both cases, motive and method of the 'criminals' stand in such discrepancy (there seems to be no perceptible i.e. cinematically acceptable, emotional logic) that we are led to see in the discrepancy an oblique reflection of a certain state of society and the human behaviour to which it gives rise.

In THE BRIDE - as subsequently in BAISERS VOLEES - the cinematic world is quite explicitly 'constructed'. The artificiality of the plots, the mechanical nature of the narrative, the essentially 'episode' construction are emphasized to a degree where they become part of the actual subject-matter of the films themselves. To Truffaut applies what Godard said about Hitchcock: 'He displays the threads of his narrative mechanisms so openly that, instead of being gross dramaturgic effects, they are transformed into the columns of an architecture made to brave without fear the scrutiny of our gaze.' For by constructing THE BRIDE on a motivation as inconsequential as a Hitchcockian 'McGuffin', where the plot hinges on something which is deliberately left unexplored, or at least under-explained, Truffaut invites us to judge every situation *qua* situation, rather than as stations in a progressively unwinding intrigue. We are forced to consider the 'episodes' as super-imposed upon each other and not in any sense consecutive. Truffaut here applies what one might call a 'structuralist' approach to the problem of narrative continuity. At times, he quite explicitly reduces causality to its visual essence, to its status as 'contrivance' when, for example, he lets Julie's scarf slowly float down from the balcony of her first victim's flat, while the camera, as the scarf lands on some shrubbery, picks up a plane in the sky in which Julie is travelling to her next victim.

This method makes coincidences lose every trace of a metaphysical or symbolic implication, and by thus dismantling

the ideological fatalism of a well-constructed plot, Truffaut successfully undercuts the sentimental fatalism so often displayed by his early heroes. Cinematic contrivance here cancels out the motivational contrivance of Julie's action, and monomania becomes an aesthetic principle. Julie is Truffaut's 'presence' within the film and eventually becomes that of the spectator, when - on a virtually blank screen - we 'perform' Julie's last murder, bringing the story to its 'happy end'. Only an actress as good as Jeanne Moreau can suggest presence without needing to be backed up by the whole cinematic mechanism of audience-identification.

In BAISERS VOLEES the same approach is evident. Superficially, we see the hero, in pursuit of a girl, and in search of a career, undergo all kinds of adventures of a more or less grotesque or pathetic nature. But the picaresque hero and his romantic quest is treated not as the comic opposition of an unfulfilled subjective impulse in conflict with a hostile, uncomprehending social reality (a possible characterization of Antoine in LES 400 COUPS), but as the almost total absence of a subjective essence (i.e. a body of consciously experienced drives and desires) in an unreal world. Antoine's conceptions of his own self are literary, romanesque (Lamartine, Balzac) and what he is up against is a world of stereotyped forms, conventional attitudes, or individuals who are themselves victims of subjectivist fantasies, neurotics and eccentrics of one kind or another. Where he does encounter something more real - Delphine Seyrig - he can cope with her only by taking recourse to his Balzac.

This situation, a logical development of the kind of rift noticeable in Truffaut's earlier heroes, is however, in BAISERS VOLEES elevated (or relativized) as a cinematic theme, and Antoine Denoel's predicament is distinctly Pirandellian. He is constantly deceived about the kind of play he is in, and - at crucial points - gets his 'roles' severely confused. Having settled himself in what he believes to be a thriller, he discovers that he is in fact playing a part in a slapstick comedy, and seeing himself as a romantic lover, he is suddenly jolted back into a detective story, and vice versa. This situation is already present in THE BRIDE, where the characters are led to believe that they are in a promising love-story when in fact they are part of a revenge drama. In BAISERS VOLEES the detective agency becomes the highly suggestive symbol of a quest which dissimulates identity, thus justifying Antoine in assuming his various parts - social, fictional, emotional. But somewhere in the tangle, the real search of Antoine (for an authentic self) gets lost and is finally submerged in the resigned acceptance of a romance with an utterly colourless girl. As always, there is a causality which overcomes the heroes' emotional ability for commitment.

The 'morality' of Truffaut's films - that the refuge into the sanctuary of subjectivity, the retreat into the emotional sphere falsifies the 'content' and thus the value of these emotions - has in the later films found a properly cinematic expression. The truant-deserter is an almost obsessional figure in Truffaut. But he has been increasingly de-romanticised and the theme of opting out into the realms of the imaginary, into fantasy is more and more confronted with the mechanisms of a fictional universe. The various literary and cinematic genres into which the characters seem to fall are ultimately used to demonstrate the debasement of the intuitive-romantic vision of the world. Truffaut's individualists have been progressively deprived of their emotional substance, and while they are still wondering what kind of consciousness or identity will compensate for the loss, their personalities are little more than a bundle of conditioned reflexes. What under an idealist perspective appears as a tragically doomed innocence and sensibility (LES 400 COUPS) or a shy, diffident reticence (TIREZ SUR LE PIANISTE, JULES ET JIM) reveals itself, more critically, as cowardice and self-deception (LA PEAU DOUCE, THE BRIDE), to emerge in BAISERS VOLEES as the

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propensity for burlesque comedy. It is at this level that Truffaut finds once more Renoir (the precise relation between personality and social role) and Hitchcock (the disappearance of the individual as an autonomous value in the social system). Far from being 'sentimental' or 'contrived', Truffaut's films develop the sentimental and the contrived as a dialectic relationship between 'debased' values for which the cinema is the ideal medium.

T.E.