

Document Citation

Title	Who is to judge Truffaut?
Author(s)	Andrew Sarris Andrew Sarris
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1981 Feb 11
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	47, 554
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Le dernier métro (The last metro), Truffaut, François, 1980

Who Is To Judge Truffaut?

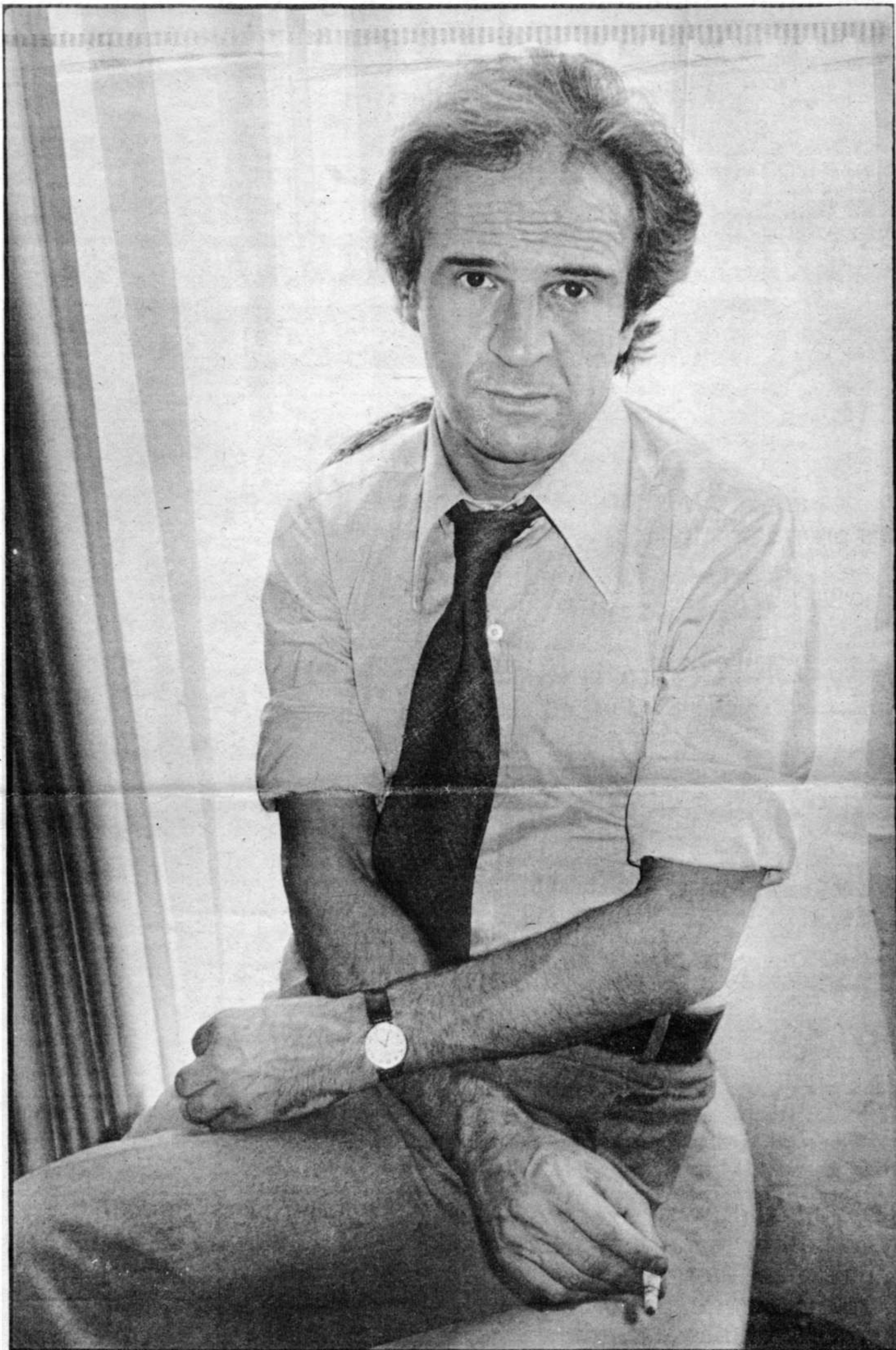
By Andrew Sarris

THE LAST METRO. Directed by Francois Truffaut. Written by Truffaut, Suzanne Schiffman, and Jean-Claude Grumberg. Released by United Artists Classics.

I reviewed Francois Truffaut's *The Last Metro* in *The Village Voice* of October 15-21, 1980, on the occasion of its being the closing night attraction of the 18th New York Film Festival, and in the context of a Truffaut-Godard feud that had surfaced at two festival press conferences. If my readers and editors were not so vigilant I might be tempted to lighten my work load by reprinting my original review without accreditation or amplification. If I were determined to seem open-minded I would repudiate my earlier reservations about *The Last Metro*, and positively gurggle with quotable blurbs. As a matter of fact, I sincerely believe that *The Last Metro* must be seen by anyone seriously interested in the cinema. One may not be exactly enchanted by Truffaut's canny blend of history and romance in this tale of a theatre troupe's trials and tribulations in '40s German-occupied Paris. But who knows? The film has been a huge critical and commercial success in Paris, and it has been entered as France's entry for the Oscars. Why should it not be equally popular in New York?

I suspect that Truffaut's studio-set stylization of the historical background in *The Last Metro* will encounter more resistance in New York than it did in Paris. Ever since *The Sorrow and the Pity*, it has become fashionable to be skeptical about the pervasiveness of the French "underground" in such '40s Hollywood romances as *Casablanca*. In this respect, *The Last Metro* is closer in spirit to *Casablanca* than to *The Sorrow and the Pity*. David Overbey puts the matter more bluntly in the *Film Comment* of January-February 1981: "Of course, in this period of rising anti-semitism in France, it must be comforting to forget the general collaboration of the occupation and to embrace the myth of a hidden Jew in every French cellar."

For my own part, I would hesitate to raise this kind of issue against Truffaut in a nakedly moral or political form. What the French did or did not do during the Occupation is hardly a subject on which I, a Greek-American from a right-wing background, would care to preach. If I were Jewish, or if my country had ever been



occupied, it might be a different matter. As it is, I begin to wonder if many of the admirers of *The Sorrow and the Pity* are not more exhilarated by the prospect of national guilt and self-flagellation than by the random tales of personal heroism. Heaven knows there is more than enough guilt to go around as far as the Holocaust is concerned, but I am not quite sure what good is done by the continuing merchandising of guilt. At some point in the past three-and-a-half decades, the ultimate "moral" of the Holocaust seems to have been blurred. For some people it is a matter of hating and mistrusting the Germans, or at least the West Germans, through all eternity. For others, it is a matter of saving Israel at all costs. For still others, it is a matter of being resolutely antifascist. Since some definitions of fascism embrace any political movement inimical either to the ideological purity of Marxist-Leninism or to the imperial sway

of the Soviet Union, it has become possible to shed crocodile tears for the victims of the Holocaust in the midst of anti-Zionist diatribes. The very gifted Vanessa Redgrave has made a virtual minicareer out of this gruesome paradox. Worst of all, the Nazis and their millions of victims have become the subject of horror show entertainers, the campy-fetishist cues for sadomasochistic tastes, and the attention-getting focus for political devil worship.

Truffaut himself has never professed to be a "political" filmmaker per se. At the time of the Algerian war he stated in an interview that the only comment he could make on the conflict was contained in *Shoot the Piano Player*, a portrait of a character paralyzed by his reluctance to make moral commitments. In this respect, *The Last Metro* reflects a certain degree of nostalgia for a period and a genre in which the moral commitments of characters

could be taken for granted. What disturbs me the most about *The Last Metro* is that the uneasy mixture of fact and fantasy is never adequately articulated into a coherent whole. Truffaut is trying to establish connections between theatre and politics, between personal relationships and political involvements, between the idealism of the few and the pragmatism of the many. The film is full of carefully planted "touches" that may seem "telling" to Parisians and merely quaint to New Yorkers. Early on in the film, for example, a passing German soldier pats a little French boy's head. The boy's mother drags him off for a politically purifying shampoo. Shortly thereafter, a womanizing actor (Gerard Depardieu) asks directions of this same woman, who is seen through a window in the process of shampooing her son's hair. The mother and the boy are just little bits and pieces of throw-

away exposition, but the anti-German ritual of the hair must reverberate through any French audience with the slightest memory of the Occupation. Collaborationists after the war were punished by having their heads shaven, a traumatic occurrence recalled and reenacted by the Emmanuelle Riva character in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. There is more to Truffaut's ritual, of course, than the ceremonial shampoo. There is also the German's original gesture, a disconcertingly kindly intimation of a shared humanity between the conqueror and the vanquished. Jean Renoir's cinematic hymns to Franco-German camaraderie after both World War I (a *Grande Illusion*) and World War II (*The Elusive Corporal*) are, of course, very close to Truffaut's heart and artistic soul. Furthermore, a people who have known occupation first-hand cannot fail to be

Continued on page 54

SARRIS *Continued from page 47*

stirred by reminders of the emotional complexity of the experience. Feelings of inferiority and self-hatred got mixed up with grudging and guilt-inducing acknowledgments of individual Germans. The great advantage of politically committed people in this situation was their ability to reduce the German physical presence to an evil abstraction.

Truffaut's characters in *The Last Metro* are not, by and large, obsessed ideologues. Even the members of the Resistance among them seem to be driven more by theatrical narcissism than philosophical conviction. *The Last Metro* is not anything like the late Jean-Pierre Melville's *Army of the Night*, a heart-felt fable of Resistance fatalism. Truffaut maintains a discreet distance from the feelings of his characters so as to give them the necessary space in which to act with a degree of self-awareness. Yet if the politics remain muffled and subterranean, both literally and figuratively, the theatrics never take off to the loftier realms of a *Les Enfants du Paradis* or *Golden Coach*. The

actual play in production within *The Last Metro* looks and sounds like a McGuffin for the sexual triangle lurking in the wings of the political melodrama. Again, Truffaut's "touches" invoke memories of '40s French icons like Louis Jouvet, Jean Cocteau, Jean Marais, and Robert Bresson as they interacted with ordinary Parisians in the audience. Truffaut is suggesting that there was nothing wrong with Parisians flocking to theatres for entertainment during the grim days of the Occupation, and there was nothing wrong with the people who supplied that entertainment. Even during the Holocaust.

Ay, there's the rub. Truffaut himself has gone into extensive rhetorical detail on the absurdities and cruelties of anti-Semitism and homophobia. Most of this rhetoric is hurled at the film's arch-villain, a French critic-collaborationist named Daxial, played unsympathetically by Jean-Louis Richard, and reportedly based on a real person of the time. The Daxial character strikes me as too convenient a

diabolical device to concentrate all the poisons of an era into one thoroughly discredited personality. Daxial makes it much too easy for a self-congratulatory euphoria to settle over an audience.

I do not want to be too hard on *The Last Metro*. That it will be one of the better films of 1981 goes almost without saying. Truffaut executes some very graceful maneuvers with Catherine Deneuve in terms of the overall mythology of movies, and it is often a pleasure to watch his critical intelligence at work on the problem of shifting moods. What I find lacking is an inner logic to the movie. Suspended in a limbo between Renoir and Lubitsch, *The Last Metro* seems unable to resolve itself in terms of either historical complexity or dramatic consistency. Hence, when he makes his last joke on the uneasy co-existence of cinema, theatre, and real life, a potentially rich laughter is congealed into a frozen smile of acquiescence with the director's stylistic intentions, though not with his emotional results. ■