

*François Truffaut:
A Life in Films*

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The Films in My Life (Les Films de ma vie) holds a special place in the history of film criticism. Initially released in France in 1975, it draws from two decades of film criticism by director François Truffaut, the bulk of which dates back from the second half of the 1950's—before the release in 1959 of his first film *The 400 Blows (Les Quatre Cents Coups)*, the work that essentially kickstarted the French New Wave, at least in terms of its critical and popular recognition. Essays written throughout the 1960's and the first half of the 1970's also testify of Truffaut's willingness to communicate his ongoing cinephilia even as he had become one of Europa's most widely known *auteurs*. Available in English translation since 1978, this seminal collection had until now never been translated into Japanese despite the constant interest, among academia as well as with the general public, for Truffaut's work. The upcoming translation by Dr. Noriko Mizuta will therefore fill an important gap in the appreciation of Truffaut in Japan, both as a director and as a critic.

Probably the most consistently popular of the original founders of the French New Wave, François Truffaut, like many of his European counterparts of the postwar era, came to filmmaking through criticism. Essentially self-taught (he left school at the age of fourteen), Truffaut soon came under the influence of film theoretician André Bazin, whose views on cinema informed Truffaut's own *auteurist* theories. Truffaut's writing for Bazin's magazine *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* would form the core of his reputation as a film critic. Truffaut, however, did not stop writing about cinema after he became a director, and *The Films in My Life* also includes many pieces by Truffaut the renowned filmmaker as opposed to Truffaut the young critic. Among those, we find several career-encompassing essays on some of the directors whose influence is the easiest to detect in his own work as a filmmaker, such as Jean Vigo, Jean Renoir or Roberto Rossellini. If for no other reason, *The Films in My Life* would be a landmark release in furthering our understanding of the intricate network of influences at the origin of one of the key figures in postwar European cinema. But because of its wide scope and of the time span it covers, the book is also a testimony on some of the crucial evolutions in the way films were perceived, appreciated and discussed throughout an era in criticism when modernism was reinventing the rules of filmmaking.

For all its landmark status, *The Films in My Life* is also a remarkably approachable collection of essays, much of which is due to Truffaut's playful attitude towards film criticism, using a dialectic approach to his writing that betrays the influence of Bazin, who, in his own work, would frequently give voice to his potential detractors. Part of what keeps Truffaut's writing so vibrant even to this day is how his intensely personal voice mingles with a variety of other voices. Whether they are dissenting opinions of other critics or testimonies—real or imaginary—from people involved in making films, these voices create a vivid tapestry that brings a whole era to life. Even though Truffaut's theoretical moorings—mainly the *auteur* theory or the *camera as a pen* theory of Alexandre Astruc—come through very clearly throughout these pages, the articles are as far from being rigidly militant as one can possibly imagine.

In addition to Truffaut's playful writing style (a style that is not without similitudes with the highly conversational nature of his films), the selection process also goes a long way towards creating a portrait of Truffaut that somehow departs from the image that has gone down in the history of French cinema, namely that of a brash young critic lashing out at the complacency of French cinema in a series of lapidary exercises in systematic deconstruction, to the point of becoming *persona non grata* at the 1958 Cannes film festival, one year before *The 400 Blows* would triumph there. The decision not to include certain key articles plays an important role here. One of Truffaut's most famous essays, "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema" ("Une Certaine tendance du cinéma français") is the most notable omission. Some inclusions also paint a somewhat different picture: the two articles on Claude Autant-Lara for example, one of the regular targets of the opponents of the *French tradition of quality* (*la qualité française*), include a more nuanced review of his most popular film. It was not Truffaut's intention in compiling these texts, it has to be mentioned, to give a balanced, well-rounded account of his past activities as a critic but rather, as the title suggests, to shed some light on some of the films that structured him as an aspiring director. As an anthology, it is very much coloured by Truffaut's own stance in the mid-1970's when he took upon himself to compile the book and the omissions reflect that stance. Truffaut's trajectory as a filmmaker and his own attitude on the relation between filmmaking and film criticism are instructive in that regard.

If one was to break down Truffaut's directing career prior to the publication of *Les Films de ma vie* into different periods, it would be tempting to see *The Soft Skin* (*La Peau douce*, 1964) and *Day for Night* (*La Nuit américaine*, 1973) as the two points of transition. The first trio of feature-length films that Truffaut directed are usually considered to belong squarely to the New Wave in its narrowest sense, although if we look a bit closer, film number two, *Shoot the Pianist* (*Tirez sur le pianiste*, 1960), is the one that adheres closest to the aesthetics we traditionally associate with the movement (with

non-linear narration, digressions and frequent breaks in the continuity), while the pre-*Breathless 400 Blows* is usually considered part of the movement by virtue of its director (a *Cahiers* critic) and of the bluntness of its portrayal of youth and, generally-speaking, for its rough naturalism more than for the kind of disruptive self-referentiality found in more radical New Wave films. Comes film number three, *Jules and Jim* (*Jules et Jim*, 1962) and we find a literary adaptation—an apparent paradox considering the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics' former stance on the subject—brought to the screen through a dizzying array of film techniques, old and new. What is uniquely Truffaut's in those three initial films is that he could manage the feat of being formally, narratively and socially subversive without ever giving the impression he was even trying to be, which is a testimony to the sheer elegance with which he approached his subjects, an elegance that lent even more power to the gravity and seriousness that would inevitably take over as the films headed towards their conclusion. Learning from his idol Jean Renoir ("the greatest director in the world"), Truffaut's mastery of the different changes of tone in his early films is one of the many reasons they still feel so vibrant today. Those films were also marked by their volubility, by the importance given to the spoken word, with both characters and, in the case of *Jules and Jim*, voice-over narration, providing a highly literate counterpoint to the visuals.

With *The Soft Skin*, Truffaut produced the kind of low-key, obsessive cinema he would occasionally return to (*The Story of Adele H* [*L'Histoire d'Adèle H.*, 1975] being a prime example of that), in sharp contrast to the kind of ebullient work he is more famous for. It is a film that is notable for its relative opacity, its refusal to verbally probe into its characters' relationships and psyches, a decision which in itself introduced another dimension to Truffaut's artistry. If the irrepressible verbal flow of the earlier films felt as though Truffaut's argumentative art criticism had found another medium of expression, it is perhaps not surprising that the shockingly quiet, bluntly sensualist compositions of *The Soft Skin* came after Truffaut's series of interviews with Alfred Hitchcock, a director whose ambition was not to film slices of life but rather "slices of cake". As such, it opened a period of diversification in his career, one that ran through the 1960's until *Day for Night*, with Truffaut tackling a variety of styles and genres, experiencing varying degrees of popular and critical success, setting a pattern for the rest of his career: the money made by the success of one film would finance another, more confidential effort, thus imposing a rather hectic work pace. It was a period during which the highly eloquent, witty writing style of *Jules and Jim* would be just as prominent, but intercut with more austere efforts such as *The Wild Child* (*L'Enfant sauvage*, 1970). Along the way, Truffaut made a few films for which he expressed regrets and the dogmatic stance of his youth regarding *auteur* cinema gradually started to mellow somehow. In 1973, *Day for Night* found him reflecting on his own activity as a director, not without a healthy dose of irony. The film essentially depicted the act of creating a work

of cinema as an inherently noble pursuit, whatever the quality of the resulting film. Uncharacteristically, after bringing Truffaut international acclaim, *Day for Night* was followed by a two-year hiatus at the end of which *The Films in My Life* was first published in French.

Beyond its success, the film is also remembered for the spectacular epistolary argument it caused between Truffaut and fellow New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard over what Godard perceived to be the insincerity with which the world of filmmaking was presented, as well as its defence of an overly conservative form of cinema. The fight was so severe that the two would never reconnect. In our current, post-modern society in which artistic currents have long merged and dissolved into each other, it is perhaps difficult to imagine a day and age when matters of film form and aesthetics could break long-lasting friendships and create feuds so deep, antagonisms so irreconcilable. Certainly in French artistic life precedents abound of aesthetic rifts breaking into palpable verbal and sometimes physical hostility, whether we go back to the quarrel of the Ancients and the Modern, the battle of *Hernani* surrounding the reception of Hugo's play or the premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. In the late 1950's and 1960's, cinema as an art form had reached a level of maturation that had turned it first into an aesthetic and then gradually a political battleground. In this highly ideological context, the Truffaut-Godard feud is one of the markers of a rescinding of this polarisation between *auteur* and genre cinema that had started so vehemently in the mid-fifties, with Truffaut's alleged conservatism twenty years later feeling more prescient in retrospect. Between those two extremities lies the body of critical work included in *The Films in My Life*, as well as the development and maturation of Truffaut's artistry as a filmmaker.

Jean-Luc Godard often commented that he saw his filmmaking activities as a mere extension of his film criticism. In Godard's case, the connection between these two facets of his work is, time and time again, made explicit: from the overemphatic music blaring and interrupting actors at the most inappropriate moments in *A Woman Is a Woman* (*Une Femme est une femme*) or *Contempt* (*Le Mépris*) to Anna Karina waving scissors at the camera as if to cut the scene that she is in (*Pierrot le fou*) and including the voice-over narration by Godard himself commenting on the action in *Band of Outsiders* (*Bande à part*), the list goes on. Godard's very filmography seems intent on commenting upon itself, with the candy-coloured, hyper artificial and intentionally shallow *A Woman Is a Woman* being followed in close sequence by the formally restrained, bleak and at times hyper-naturalistic send-off *My Life to Live* (*Vivre sa vie*). Brutal collusions between *hyper-fiction* and *hyper-realism*, radical genre excursions and, generally, self-reflexivity throughout each of his films: Godard is probably the director that best exemplifies the concept of critic and film fanatic turned director.

Although certainly as much of a film lover as his colleague, Truffaut by contrast integrated his cinephilia within his work in a less intrusive fashion. Stories, classical narration, mattered to him. Cinema and arts in general in Truffaut's world were not just powerful means of escapism, they were vital principles that would dictate one's conduct and life choices. An obvious parallel can be made with the director's own life, as it was André Bazin who rescued him from prison after his attempt to desert the army, providing him in the process with his first opportunity to make a living through film criticism. In Godard's cinema, cinephilia works at both the diegetic and extra-diegetic levels: it is both within the story and above it. To a large extent, *Breathless's* Michel Poicard behaves the way he does out of admiration for Humphrey Bogart's tough guy characters (diegetic cinephilia); in the same film, Patricia eyeing Michel through a rolled-up poster mimics the "love at first sight through the barrel of a gun" scene in Samuel Fuller's *Forty Guns* (extra-diegetic cinephilia: the character played by Patricia does not intentionally imitate the film, the parallel is created by Godard via the subjective shot through the rolled-up poster and the cut to the shot of Michel and Patricia kissing).

Examples of both techniques are also to be found in Truffaut's cinema, notably in his early films, although they are not nearly as extensively used. Of course, borrowing from other films is as old as cinema itself but where Godard and Truffaut distinguish themselves from their peers is in the way they make those references transparent to the avid cinephile, influencing generations of future directors in the process, from Brian De Palma to Quentin Tarantino. The most striking example of extra-diegetic cinephilia in Truffaut's cinema is all the more telling that it is integrated with an earlier, diegetic quote: it is of course the final shot of *The 400 Blows* with the young Antoine caught in freeze-frame, staring at the camera, at us. This shot breaks the fourth wall and plays as a commentary on the story itself, with Antoine suspended in time, at a crossroad in his life, his future entirely uncertain. In itself, the shot would not necessarily be described as cinephiliac had it not been preceded by another shot of Antoine stealing a photo of Harriet Anderson pinned at the entrance of a movie theatre. That photograph is a promotional still from Ingmar Bergman's *Summer with Monika* (*Somaren med Monika*, 1953). The most famous, iconic scene from that film is of course the extended take of Anderson staring at the camera, a rarity and a landmark in the cinema of the time, to which Truffaut's final shot therefore explicitly refers to. Both shots happen at a crucial moment in the main protagonist's life, since Monika in the film is on the verge of abandoning her husband and their newly-born child. Truffaut's use of both intra and extra-diegetic cinephilia is thus strongly tied to the narrative, which in that case is also tied to Truffaut's real life. In that light, the ending, although still perfectly open, suggests that the young Antoine over the course of the film has somehow managed to integrate his escapist tendencies into his real life, to take a little from the world of cinema and make it his own, a reading which of course is rich with autobiographical resonance.

In this final scene, it is as though Truffaut was sharing a secret, a secret he is confiding to those willing to delve into their memory of an older and seemingly unrelated film, those willing to possibly watch Truffaut's own film several times to spot such little details and soak in it deep enough to connect shots separated by almost forty minutes of film: it is a secret shared by Truffaut with his own kind, he who wrote in "What do Critics Dream About?" ("À quoi rêvent les critiques?"), the introductory essay in *The Films in My Life*, that he came to start really thinking about film and how they were made after accidentally having to watch Marcel Carné's *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942) twice.

Whereas Truffaut would only occasionally resort to extra-diegetic manipulations and mostly in his early films, in Godard's cinema the technique is used extensively. It functions mainly in two ways. The first is to add a playful, ironic note: in the above mentioned quotation of the Samuel Fuller film for example, the barrel of the gun has been replaced by an art poster—a reproduction of a painting by Auguste Renoir—and the predatory lover gazing at his/her prey is no longer male but female, and she will end up causing his death. There is obviously behind those substitutions a certain humour which is transparent to the cinephile equipped with the appropriate reference, invisible and non-intrusive to the casual viewer. The other function is to denounce the inherent manipulation at the heart of the medium. As we have already mentioned, the excessive use of extra-diegetic music (or music whose status is rendered uncertain by frequent cuts in sound) in *A Woman is a Woman* for example works as a critical commentary on the use of music in films in general. The effect of such a "commentary" is jarring, possibly disorienting, especially for the casual viewer. What is more, it makes the presence of the director palpable, inescapable, as though he were another character, hovering over the ones we see on screen.

All of this points to a major difference in how the two directors chose to expand upon their years of film criticism through filmmaking. Truffaut's cinema is character-driven, and as such, as a director, he does not place himself above his characters, resulting in a non-judgemental stance that is the hallmark of his treatment of such *risqué* topics—at the time—as polyamorous relationships. It also means that Truffaut's cinephilia—and in broader terms, his love of arts—is ported to the characters themselves. Whether it is the character of the prostitute in *Shoot the Pianist*, who, upon bedding a client, offers a pithy but highly cogent review of the latest John Wayne vehicle that she has just seen, or the main characters of *Jules and Jim* who are not only constantly verbally reviewing books, theatrical plays, music, but also commenting on their own life as it unfolds, turning it into artistic expression as they are living it (a famous example of that being the scene during which Catherine throws herself in the river Seine while Jim is already writing in his mind the next entry about the incident in his diary). Art is integrated within life even in the most trivial or incongruous of situations.

With New Wave cinema (and Truffaut is probably the most instrumental director in that development), maybe for the first time in the history of the medium, characterisation and therefore identification with the characters depend as much on their fate and active role in the plot as they do on their outlook on art, human relationships, and a myriad of seemingly more trivial concerns.

Another hallmark of Truffaut's cinema, which is not limited to his early films, is also how the characters seem to be the critics of their own lives and more specifically relationships, drawing upon the smallest of details to extrapolate theories. Listening to them, and notably to Truffaut's alter ego Antoine Doinel played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, one cannot help but see connections with Truffaut's conversational style in his critical work. Truffaut's modernism is therefore based on a more subterranean integration of art and life that resists glib categorisations and sweeping discourses on self-reflexivity. Critical distancing is an essential entry point into many of Truffaut's characters, rather than being the overarching principle that regulates his work. Rather than making his work hermetic, it is a factor of endearment that works towards stronger characterisation and identification.

More than being a mere collection of disparate articles, *The Films in My Life* therefore works as a first stepping stone in a career that, instead of blurring the boundaries between criticism and filmmaking as that of Godard would do, integrated criticism within the narrative imperatives of popular cinema. In organising together the articles he chose to include in this collection, Truffaut opted for a fairly straightforward solution. Each chapter is dedicated to a director, with usually one to five film reviews grouped together. Although the articles under each entry might have been written over a long period of time (with a twenty year gap in the case of Hitchcock for example), it actually reinforces the *auteurist* approach of the classification, as it makes the inevitable echoes among the articles seem all the more genuine. Some of the selections are also textbook examples of the *auteur* theory, with Truffaut finding the individual characteristics of an auteur in both the certified classics and the minor genre excursions, praising for example the insidious eroticism of Joseph von Sternberg's direction as he stages the airplane scenes of the anti-soviet propaganda vehicle *Jet Pilot*.

Truffaut then grouped the directors under five different headings. "The Great Secret" ("Le Grand secret") concerns directors who started their career during the silent era. The title chosen by Truffaut is revealing on more than one level. Ostensibly, the "secret" in question refers to how distant and mysterious the silent era was for those who had come of age during the sound era. It is a reminder of how difficult it was in those days to see a silent film when you had to wait for an actual screening and could not rely on high quality restoration projects and digital copies to be enjoyed in the comfort of your home. Far from being universally perceived as an important stage in the development of an art

form, with its own masterpieces, silent cinema had for a long time suffered from being seen as outdated, antiquated and uncommercial, with only something like Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* warranting a re-release (with the added attraction of a new soundtrack and audio commentary). In a way, it can be said that the thirty odd years that separated the time when Truffaut started as a critic from the days of silent cinema seem almost like an eternity compared to the relative accessibility these films enjoy nowadays, at the distance of practically a century.

Then there is also the mystery of how those men, who, contrary to Truffaut and his friends, had grown surrounded with other art forms as opposed to cinema, had precisely come to choose the medium for which they were not otherwise predisposed. Considering how the New Wave promoted a return to the sheer excitement of exploring the possibilities of the medium unencumbered by the need to produce polished, technically perfect images, the early or pre-classical era held for those directors an understandable attraction due to its alleged freshness of approach (and in that regard, the article on Abel Gance speaks volumes). The contrast in terms of film self-education and consciousness—or lack thereof—between the two generations is thus a crucial point (explicit examples displaying the fascination with early cinema in French New Wave cinema range from Godard's use of iris shots in *Breathless*, Jacques Rivette's and George Franju's fascination with Louis Feuillade or Agnès Varda's mock-slapstick in *Cleo from 5 to 7* [*Cléo de 5 to 7*]).

For all of that though, the only real silent films that Truffaut is dealing with are those of Abel Gance, with the rest of the section devoted to sound films directed by directors with their background in silent cinema. As such it is probably ironic but not entirely unexpected that aside from the sections on Vigo and Hitchcock (obvious and self-avowed influences), the most illuminating analyses offered here are the ones focusing on Jean Renoir and Ernst Lubitsch, two directors who truly found their own voice with the advent of sound and whose silent films are comparatively obscure. Coming from Truffaut, it is hardly surprising that his inspiration should be at his peak when discussing those two wittiest and most language-oriented of directors, in stark contrast with the uncharacteristically lacklustre capsule review about John Ford, written and added shortly before publication.

Truffaut then devotes two sections to directors who came of age with sound cinema (one each for the American and the French generation). Generally-speaking, it is fairly easy to detect Truffaut's American tropism when it comes to postwar cinema, with regular recipients of New Wave admiration Robert Aldrich, Samuel Fuller, Nicholas Ray or Douglas Sirk receiving their dues. Of the French directors discussed here, two of the most prominent — Robert Bresson and Jacques Tati — are *auteurs* who developed their own system of filmmaking, systems seemingly operating on discrete and

isolated planes of filmic existence that, while admired and cogently analysed by Truffaut, appear to constitute an end in themselves, all influences and permutations bound to die stillborn. More to the point when discussing the porosity with Truffaut's own directorial work are two illuminating essays on Max Ophüls and the often-overlooked Jacques Becker or, as a polar opposite, the scathing criticism of the portrayal of childhood in the Robert Lamorisse's beloved *Red Balloon* (*Le Ballon rouge*), a forerunner of Truffaut's own depiction of a child's life in *The 400 Blows*.

This is followed by a section entitled "A Few Outsiders" ("Quelques outsiders"), covering those directors crossing the boundaries of national cinemas and conventional production models such as Orson Welles, Luis Buñuel or Roberto Rossellini, or operating in relative isolation like Ingmar Bergman. Capping the collection is a series of relatively short articles entitled "My Friends of the New Wave" ("Mes Copains de la nouvelle vague"). Written as the films were being released, the section works as a living chronicle of the movement, bringing the collection to a fitting close.