Interview with Arnaud Desplechin, Part I

Truffaut and His Position

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Paris, June 18, 2010

“Je suis un converti”

q: When did you start watching Truffaut’s films? In your childhood?

d: No. Quite late, quite late. I remember a screening of *Les 400 Coups* [1959] when I was twenty-nine, something like that.

q: Before that you had not seen any of his films?

d: Oh no, I saw all of them, for sure, but they didn’t register with me, since these are films which belong to my father’s generation, not mine. You know, I really hate the idea of showing films to kids. So, sure, they showed Truffaut at school, but it left no impression. ... Perhaps it wasn’t *Les 400 Coups*. It was *L’Enfant sauvage* [1970]; yes. I remember, I saw that one when I was still in primary school. It was part of the social life of every young pupil. So I knew of them early but hadn’t really *seen* them, not till I was twenty-nine. Till then I was stupid. I love to admit I was stupid, because it means that something happened in my life to have changed me. For me at twenty-nine something happened.

q: What were the circumstances?

d: It was at film school. A bunch of us were discussing what it meant to be a director when watching films. We were mainly thinking of Pialat and the films of the generation after the New Wave: Eustache, Garrel, Doillon. As for the New Wave itself, I mean for us it was already just history. Perhaps I remember so clearly this screening of *Les 400 Coups* because I hadn’t seen the film on a screen
since I was twelve. I knew it by heart, but through video. Then came this big-screen experience, and perhaps I was mature enough then to be able to see how each racord, each cut was shocking. There was something brutal and subtle in the filmmaking that I missed before because I thought I knew what cinema was about, yet I was so wrong. After that, from say 1990, I started to see all his films again, and to work on them, and to see how they were made. But I couldn’t see all this when I was young. I just didn’t see it. So, je suis un converti. That’s why I’m such a fanatic. [laughs]

Q: What did you like about the films, what struck you?

D: There was something, in every cut, that allowed each shot to exist of its own volition. Usually when you link two shots, you’re putting them in the service of a story, but here, on the contrary, the shots retain their integrity, their will. Every shot is a unit of thought: “We are going to film that!” You see a woman, you see her face, you see her directly for a certain time. You see the mother. You see the table. You see everything, including the filmmaking. You see the tracking camera. You see all the angles, very clearly. Sometimes it can be extremely subtle, but not in Les 400 Coups, where it is obvious: chaque plan existe comme une volonté. You don’t find that in Pialat.

Q: Nothing is gratuitous?

D: Yes, there is a dramaturgical thought each time. The entire screen is occupied by this dramaturgical thought nothing is given to some vague naturalism, nothing to chance, nothing to the plot. … There’s only cinema, nothing but that. Everything is called for, even the weaknesses are called for whatever is there is wanted, wanted for support, just as beautiful as in Howard Hawks or The Searchers [John Ford, 1956]. All at once, I managed to really sense with each shot how he was going to show this or that. I could see each shot and what he was doing. He would say, “I’m going to make a shot very simple like that.” I could see all the shots individually and as they fit together. Well, I was stupefied, because I had never seen this before.

Q: Why has his work not really been valued at its proper level? It’s underestimated particularly in the US, but also in France, where it is sometimes considered bourgeois, not advanced enough. Why this reaction?

D: The other day I was rereading the book of interviews you assembled, Anne, Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut. It’s like the Bible to me, just as useful as the Hitchcock/Truffaut. It’s so technical. It’s amazingly useful. And you had this great idea to group the interviews around each film and include the years, so the reader can see the development of his thinking: what he thinks of a film he has just made in ’68, then what he thinks of the same film a year later, then later still. It’s so great to have this. There are very few books useful to directors. There’s the big illustrated Scorsese, which is very good. There’s the Hitchcock/Truffaut and then there’s Le Cinéma selon Truffaut. I reread the section yesterday
on Tirez sur le pianiste [1960]. What he says at the outset is magnifique. Going back to the success of Les 400 Coups, he says, “Les 400 Coups belonged to the public who doesn’t really like cinema, to the spectator who goes to the movies twice a year.” Now this is so mean, so mean! “It belonged to the audience of René Clair or of The Bridge on the River Kwai [David Lean, 1957] which is the audience I fear most in the world.” (I too don’t like those choosy guys who just go to the movies twice a year to see a talked-about film. Nowadays they decide to go see, let’s say, the new film by Haneke. This is the audience I myself fear.) And this is what he was thinking about when he knew Tirez sur le pianiste would fail.

He says, “I felt watched by this audience and their expectations; so I was glad to send everyone and his father packing,” which is a joke … “everyone and his brother.” And so he made a film, Tirez sur le pianiste, against the public, which is a sin, and we all know that it’s a sin, but he’s saying, “I committed that sin. I’ve made a film against a sort of audience that I don’t like. The people who don’t really love cinema.” So I guess this is part of my answer, the fact that you have to accept the idea that Truffaut’s work is pure cinema. We know that the audience for true cinema is smaller and smaller. Each year it’s shrinking. Perhaps that’s one reason.

Q: One would have thought that precisely this diminishing group, the elitist cinephiles, rejected Truffaut the most. L’Argent de poche [1976] was very badly received by American intellectuals. They found it a minor film, charming but insignificant.

D: But L’Argent de poche is not an easy film for me. It has this mania for story, actually for a series of small stories. Each shot is a story. It seems to be a realist and naturalist movie, but each shot goes against naturalism and realism. Each shot is an absolute story, as if Truffaut thought, how can I make it shorter, briefer, neater, stronger? And the actors, because he can’t guide them since they’re just kids, turn it into pure life. First Truffaut brings the forms – these short stories which are so neat – and into this neat drawing he welcomes the pure, raw, life, brought by the kids, with all their disorder. Remember the long scene where the boy throws the cat out the window; you can’t direct kids or pets. The way that it’s shot and organized and edited, is like a classical narrative film from 1937 or so, but using very different materials, so there is a strong contrast between the formality of the filmmaking and the material which is used, which is pure life. Organizing pure life into a shape which belongs to the late thirties, we have to admire that; if not we are blind.

I was guilty of this elitist view of Truffaut myself. I’m saying that I was stupid; I admit it (which means that I’m still stupid, and will discover in ten years I am stupid now). So I made that elitist mistake, which I think is something that belongs mainly, but not only, to the French. It’s also a generational thing. I know that when I was, say, between fourteen and twenty-five or something like that – let’s say twenty-two – I thought that the New Wave was Pialat and Eustache. … I didn’t know exactly the dates of the real New Wave, or what their goal was; plus
I didn’t know the books – you know, Bazin – and I didn’t know the history of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, because, again, this was not my generation, it was my father’s.

The New Wave and Modernity

q: So your prejudice against Truffaut came from a prejudice against the New Wave?

d: In fact, the reason is even more stupid. We are talking about why Truffaut is ignored and about the received ideas circulating in France, and therefore also in the United States and therefore also in Japan. “How come I don’t feel like seeing a ‘French film’?” The clichéd answer is, “Because it is going to be some New Wave thing.” What people mean by “New Wave” here is: a political subject, social implications, no camera work, and it is going to be boring. But actually, if you take all the New Wave films, there is not a single social topic really addressed; there is only fiction, inspired by Balzac, or by the American detective novel, never inspired by political stuff and not aiming at naturalism, which is their enemy. Even Resnais, who dealt with massive political and historical issues, he’s such a formalist! Why does everyone revert to such commonplace notions, such clichés, when they talk of him?

q: Why is such a well-known movement not better understood?

d: Actually, another thing which misled so many people: the New Wave guys were such cinephiles, which meant that they promoted whoever did the contrary of what they were doing. Sure they liked what they themselves were doing, but they accepted the idea of the opposite and were curious to see the next generation. Truffaut was so generous because he had been raised by Bazin in the idea of loving all kinds of cinema. Godard is bitter, so this question is different in relation to him, but it still operates. What this means is that as soon as new guys arrive on the scene with ideas opposite to the idea of the New Wave, they were still accepted. “I will be modern, I will put modernity in my film,” says Garrel; or “I will be political, I will be social,” says another; or “I will be linked to the new American cinema;” or “I will be linked to the political engagement of British cinema.” Truffaut bankrolled these ideas; he was ready for new blood, new methods. … Why not? He said, “Let’s do it, yeah. This new guy’s a terrific filmmaker. Let’s put *L’Enfance nue* [Pialat’s film produced by Truffaut in 1968] on screen; it will be great because it’s the antithesis of *Les 400 Coups.*” So, fifteen years after the New Wave, I come along in 1975, and I stupidly think these two films are the same because of what I was reading at the time.

q: So there was an amalgam between two generations with divergent aesthetic goals.

d: I was not able to understand that in terms of periods in art, such as you read about in Panofsky or Elie Faure (fauvism, for example), the New Wave is a completely different period from these later filmmakers, whom I guess we could call...
les nouveaux réalisistes – Pialat, Doillon, etc. – though we have no set name for this movement. Anyway, as soon as Doillon arrived, trying to make a small film in the seventies, the former New Wave directors, even Chabrol, immediately said nice things about him. But in fact the generation following the New Wave – I mean Pialat and the rest of them – these people don’t know a thing about cinema. I mean: they play reality against cinema. In their interviews, they were always saying how the New Wave was uninteresting, not really deeply socially involved, etc. That’s what I read when I arrived in Paris, and so that’s what I thought too.

Q: Truffaut actually said that he had no feel for the modern world yet he produced Pialat’s film nevertheless.

D: Yes, it seems strange that he was a producer for Pialat, but actually, it’s not really so strange, quite the opposite. Not being a “modern” himself, he wanted to produce one. It seems to me that none of them, none of the New Wave, was truly modern. Okay, Rivette may claim to be modern, but he gives you bits of Balzac done in crêpe-paper costumes. And Rohmer is hardly modern obviously. And even with Godard, it’s funny, but you get the feeling that their films were not made by young men; they are films created by people very, very distant from Pialat, or from Eustache, the next generation. This is a very French issue. I remember when I was an adolescent and I saw Eustache’s La Maman et la Putain [1973], which is a very Truffaldian film in many ways. Is it modern? You may really wonder. It’s paradoxical. Who would listen to songs by Fréhel3 (as Jean-Pierre Léaud does in that film)? In the seventies I used to listen to the English Mods, angry young men, not Frehel. I find it ridiculous, but this may be a French characteristic, this business of having problems with modernity.

Q: Truffaut often said that he was mixing different time periods in his films. Les 400 Coups are set in the fifties with childhood memories from the forties.

D: Yes. Actually I watched L’Argent de poche last night. It is quite surprising because when the kids go to the movies, they watch newsreels that look like they are from the forties. Plus nostalgia for the silent cinema is embedded in that one kid who has never learned how to speak. You really can’t orient yourself to what you are watching in L’Argent de poche, and don’t really know in what period it was made. Personally this doesn’t bother me because, in any case, there is nothing that’s modern or fashionable in that film. One of the strengths of this film and of Truffaut in general is that he never tries to seem up to date.

This may come from the impact of Bazin’s writings. You obviously know these better than I do. Bazin’s idea of “cinema being committed to reality” is so crucial. But what is reality? Here, as filmmakers, we come to what happens inside the camera, whether you want it or not. Clearly for Bazin, it would be foolish for the filmmaker to try to be “modern” or to “put something really modern” into your camera, because what is in the camera – what will be screened – belongs to
the mystery of the camera itself. So Truffaut accepts being old-fashioned, knowing that the bodies that he’s filming are contemporary bodies. He can’t stop an actor from belonging to his own period, so he won’t try to put himself or his ego in the place of that actor, since the process of cinema is connected to reality as such. If you put yourself between the camera and reality, you will stop the mystery of cinema, which is an idea coming straight from Bazin. So it’s not me, the filmmaker, who should try to be modern; modernity has to exist in the relationship between the camera and what is filmed … accepting the fact that the filmed bodies, their way of acting, their way of moving, are modern by definition. It’s a Bazinian definition of reality.

Q: There are some allusions to social or political events in Truffaut’s film. At the beginning of Baisers volés [1968] you see the closed doors of the Cinémathèque which alludes to André Malraux decision to fire Henri Langlois in 1968. In L’Amour en fuite [1979], Antoine Doinel and his wife illustrate a new law regarding the divorce par consentement mutuel.

D: Yes, I remember, I had just moved to Paris when I first saw L’Argent de poche, and was upset by one thing, which is still a problem to me. I felt ill at ease with the way that poverty is shown. The way one of the kids is dressed: is he a North African or a Gypsy? At the time, I thought Truffaut’s film seemed so Giscardien. And at one point you can hear the voice of Giscard d’Estaing coming from the TV people are watching. Today, with a little more knowledge about the France I was living in, I know that Giscard was the first to recognize the rights of families to be reunited, the families from North Africa. This is stupefying since it means that for twenty years before that time men had lived as bachelors in awful conditions. I recall as a child of thirteen or so seeing Giscard d’Estaing on TV arriving in some camp where Harkis were living in caves it’s incredible to think they had been living that way for twenty years. All this is forgotten now, but in 1974 people were living in caves right in the middle of France. No electricity, no water, just these holes in the rocks where they had been living since they had first come over.

Q: L’Argent de poche was shot in ’74, the same year?

D: Yeah, the same year. That’s when le regroupement familial (the family reuniting act) was finally voted in. It was done with Giscard d’Estaing as president and Jacques Chirac as prime minister. So Truffaut brings this up in his way in this film that I thought, “It’s so unpolitical, it’s not radical enough, etc.” Yet it’s the only film where you feel this major social event, even if it’s just acting. As a filmmaker I say “acting,” but if I were a philosopher I would say it’s acknowledging the fact that this year, in 1974 at last, something like one of the worst injustices that France committed stopped. And this is signaled in the film both in the movie theater with the documentary about France, and in the voice-over on the radio. It says that it’s better when a father is allowed to see his wife and his kids rather than having them split on two sides of the Mediterranean.
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q: Few viewers, even in France, would probably catch this allusion. It is quite “indirect,” to use a word Truffaut liked.

d: That’s Truffaut’s way of putting reality in his film, as if saying, “I’m doing the film this very year. This is it. It’s not me speaking as an artist this is not my opinion.” So in a way, being old-fashioned and trying to describe his own childhood, he is describing France at that moment, in 1974. This allows such a reality to enter into the screen and get into the plot. Because he thinks that since you can read this in the newspaper, he better add this voice at the editing table. So what’s the real news in France that year? Well, he may not be showing us anything about strikes, but these things between Algeria and France, it is a very subtle, nice, and moral way of showing all this. You hear Giscard say, “Le peuple Algérien a à faire avec” … and later you notice that the hairdresser is named Fatima. So you get to see in a very subtle, wise way a sort of network that tries to take on some of the relationship of what it is to be French and North African at the same time. But me, I couldn’t see it at the time, because I would have preferred something more radical.

Les 400 Coups

q: The consensus about Truffaut is that he makes films of the past in the present because of his autobiographical inspirations. It starts with Les 400 Coups, of course.

d: Autobiography is certainly part of it, but the film mixes in Hitchcock’s life as well! The famous story of Hitchcock’s father bringing his son to the police station when Hitch was five. … That’s what strikes me at the beginning of the scene in Les 400 Coups, when the father takes his own son to jail. We see angels rotating in two large store windows because it’s Christmas time. It’s like a sort of odd fairy tale, because of these department store windows. So is it a

Figure 1.1 Les 400 Coups (François Truffaut, 1959, Les Films du Carrosse).
fairy tale or not? I love the father’s character, how nice he is. There’s nothing really mean about him. Truffaut must have asked himself: so how can I tell this story without being judgmental about my characters? If there’s something awful, it’s just because of the plot, because what’s happening to the young boy is awful; but there is no general evil, certainly not in this man who is really lost, though he’s sure he is doing the right thing. So it’s not just a mean father putting his son in jail. Sure there is Truffaut’s personal involvement since he is using part of his life, but there is also a strong cinephilic commitment because he’s doing it à la Hitchcock. After that opening the jail scene becomes so simple, just a documentary … plus.

q: Like Jacques Demy playing one of the policemen?

d: Yes, another small “plus,” is the fact that those policemen are playing a board game with horses, and because of that, all the characters become something like merry-go-round figures: then, you have these three prostitutes, and then later, as Antoine’s being taken away, he notices a sort of merry-go-round in the street fair. The first thing is to accept these characters as they are. It took me a decade to understand what Hitchcock and Rossellini meant when they said, “We are not psychological.” And Truffaut at the same time was saying that he was deeply interested in the psychology of his characters. But not to be psychological means simply to use characters as they are, as Truffaut uses the cops, who seem so nice, all of them; it’s their job which is terrible. The boy is handed from one cop to the next (“He’s yours, he’s yours”); after that the prostitutes enter, then he sleeps. Next the cop says, “Le carrosse est arrivé.” He uses this word “coach” because of the three prostitutes. Forget psychology. You have these pure shapes, these three prostitutes, just like in a fairy tale, the three witches, the three fairies … something like that. So in a way, what I mean about not being psychological is that each character, if the dialogue is good, utters a sort of absolute truth.

You find the same formal composition at the beginning of La Sirène du Mississippi [1969]. There again you have three ladies, as in many fairy tales, and one man. While Belmondo is in front of a mirror, getting ready because he’s about to get married, there is a cut to three women working there. The first asks, “Is what they say true: they say he has never seen his bride?” And the next adds, “He doesn’t even know what she looks like.” And the third answers, “Of course he does; they must have exchanged photos.” It’s a scene that seems totally realist, but the storytelling lets you really feel the rigor of the writing, since the form is so strong. Truffaut gives you “the three” just to make it more legible, more neat. He doesn’t want to impose his point of view [on] the audience, saying “Look how clever I am because in a way it’s a fairy tale,” and so you don’t notice the shape of it.

So in Les 400 Coups, when the cop says, “Le carrosse est arrivé,” he means that, in a way, this is a fairy-tale coach plus a paddy wagon. So even if the kid is crying in that paddy wagon, these may be fake tears (he’s not using Cassavetes-type acting), because it’s magical at the same time. And the music is so obviously
there to underline everything. His final ride in the city turned out to be a good ride, since for once, as a kid, he can see Paris. And, it’s night, so you have the street carnival, and you have the images of the prostitutes, nudes. It’s something magical, with the neon, the street lamps; it’s something desirable in a way, like a dream. Is it awfully sad, or is it magic? “It’s both,” is Truffaut’s answer. Here you can even start to feel a connection to Bresson, because each shot is pure; this is not realism, it’s not the capturing of reality, not recording reality. It’s all about making a film, which means to organize the space.

Q: The camera is never still.

D: Never. It’s always tracking. Just like the tracking in The Wrong Man [Hitchcock, 1956], when Henry Fonda goes inside the jail while outside there’s this same sort of tracking. This paddy wagon scene comes from a film lover; it’s a bit of Bresson.

Q: What do you think about the striking shot in the jail sequence of the policeman in silhouette at the end of the corridor? It’s rare for Truffaut to give you a kind of postcard shot. But It’s so very beautiful.

D: It has to be frightening too. I guess that, while not wanting to describe the cops as bad cops, he shows you that, within the system, they are pigs. Come on, the boy’s twelve, he’s being put in jail. So once at least Truffaut has to film the fact that this is absolute terror, and that inadmissible violence is being done to this kid. He’s not asking the actors to impersonate the violence of the scene, but as a filmmaker he organizes the violence and shows that it’s something you have to condemn, the violence, that is, not my actors. He chooses an actor to play the cop who is well known in France, because he has a face which is quite terrifying, but he’s really nice. There is always this kind of contrast in Truffaut that I so love because he’s putting the burden on his own shoulders. “I have to do it, if I want to say something to the audience, then I have to say it; I won’t ask an actor to express something that is my job to express.”
Since I have a young kid these days, I can reconnect with my own perception of life from, let’s say, two to ten years old. Sometimes you have this image when your parents or some adults are driving you in the night, and you catch glimpses of things, often just the lights, shapes. Truffaut uses this kind of perceptual memory, reconnecting with his own perception of the forbidden world, the world of adults (prostitution, the street carnival), which is both desirable and dangerous at the same time. It’s a dream and a nightmare. C’est magnifique.

Q: And it comes with this strange graphic effect of the camera staying the same distance from the paddy wagon, looking at his face, while still moving around. It’s almost as if it were done in a studio with a rear projection, providing a very strange feeling, maybe a Hitchcock-type of rear projection.

D: Truffaut saw so very many films, he knows you can be moved by a scene that uses rear projection. Look at American cinema. You are not obliged to go out onto the Parisian streets all the time. Just making it for real won’t help you, because everything must come from the conception of the shot. Then after that, if you have the money, you say let’s go into the studio and do it with rear projection, and if you have no money, you say let’s do it in the street and just move the camera slightly, the thing will work, if the emotion is real. And so they grab images of Paris, and that’s enough. It’s so clever. No, clever is the wrong word: it’s so moving.

Q: It’s all about trying to organize emotions in a sequence.

D: Yeah, and to have a lot of different colors of emotion, and to jump from the emotion to the idea. It’s more than the kid crying in the paddy wagon because he will be taken far from Paris, or because of his father. It’s not just to make us cry it’s to make us think about it, to realize that the system shouldn’t be like this, or that the paddy wagon he’s riding in is also a carriage from a fairy tale. So the sequence is between ideas and feelings, and that is something which exists only in films. I don’t know exactly if it’s emotion or thinking. It’s ideas on screen, it’s mise-en-scène.

Q: What about the script construction? It is very linear, very classical. We follow the character from beginning to end.

D: Not really linear. It’s more like Bergman’s Summer with Monika [1953]. We always imagine that something like two-thirds of Monika takes place on the island, which is wrong, because it’s a three-part movie with three different genres. The beginning part is like a French film, with two young workers and the bad capitalist. They are bored with their parents and authority and capitalism … so, it’s a French film. Even the style – the lighting, etc. – is what you could call réalisme poétique (Carné, that sort of film). Then you have the second part that we all remember, going to the island, which actually is just a third of the movie. And after that, you have a sort of prequel of what that Bergman will do later: a bitter endless domestic dispute. The woman is double-checking on the husband after the birth of their
kid. And so you have modern life, which is a film quite different from the two others, very dreary, very dark, very brutal, as you know, like *Scenes from a Marriage* [Bergman, 1973] or *Passion of Anna* [Bergman, 1969], that kind of dark, dismal film. … Look at the set, just a naked wall, and a face, the woman, saying to the man, “I despise you,” in a very crude way. So we really have three tales. One social tale, one utopia on the island, and the last part, a sort of existentialist kind of novel.

**Q:** And how does *Monika* relate to *400 Coups*?

**D:** Because you have several tales in one film. And you can see that Truffaut thinks, okay, maybe it’s too cheesy, the relationship between the boy and the young bloke in school. But not at all, it’s a little novel, filmed that way. I haven’t seen the film in ten years, but there’s the scene in René’s large attic bedroom when the two of them escape from school one afternoon. And then you have his relationship with the mother, and it’s very different, it’s really crude and he adds the father into the mix with the two of them. Then the school is something else. Finally there’s that last part of the movie, a sort of cry for freedom or something like that. The middle part of *Monika* was sort of a cry for freedom too. I can see that Truffaut knows *Monika* by heart, saying, “I will do this part that way, this one I’ll do this way, this one is like that.” I can always see the solution to the mise-en-scène that he’s finding to tell the story in a very straightforward way. The beauty is to see in short segments how the man is finding a way of going straight to the point, but in a cinematic way.

**Q:** There’s a tension between recounting a story which is a line that goes somewhere and the fullness of each shot being sufficiently autonomous. We know Truffaut doesn’t want his films to stop moving. When he was planning *Fahrenheit 451* [1966] they wanted to bring Richard Avedon to show him how to work with color. He said, “Avedon’s a still photographer, I don’t want a still photographer to show me how to do color because cinema’s not part of plastic arts, it’s dynamic, it’s a flow.” And his hatred of Antonioni … he doesn’t want things to sit. You say, I think rightly, that each shot in *Les 400 Coups* goes right to the heart of what’s supposed to happen then, but that moment also has a place within the larger project too, within the story. So how do you go from each shot being perfect in itself to Truffaut never wanting the film to slow down?

**D:** Many of his films, not all of them, but many, have great shifts. They don’t have just one story; I mean, they’re going here and there. And so in *Les 400 Coups*, you follow this young guy, but you have several stories, and the film has at least three parts. *L’Histoire d’Adèle H.* [1975] has just one point, one obsession, and there are other films too where you have a straight line: *La Chambre verte* [1978] is a bit like that, or *La Femme d’à côté* [1981], which is a straight journey. But in most of his films you can see how he loves to jump around, like in all the Doinel films. And in *Jules et Jim* [1962] and *Les Deux Anglaises et le continent* [1971] you have chapters. He loved novels, so sometimes he made films like novels.
Tirez sur le pianiste

Q: What about the abrupt change of style in *Tirez sur le pianiste*? You mentioned that the film was “made against” a certain type of audience. Tell us about the big transgressions: the mirror, where you see the caricature of the two gangsters, and the scene when one of those gangsters says, “May my mother drop dead,” and you see it happen. These are huge transgressions against the story, and Truffaut risks it even before Godard does. *A Bout de souffle* [Godard, 1960] doesn’t go this far. With *Les Carabiniers* [1963], Godard began to sabotage his plots, but Truffaut started earlier.

D: Yeah, he loves to do that; although later Truffaut would say that he interrupted the story line too often with such scenes, that he went too far from time to time. Let’s look at the scene that really exemplifies that kind of break; it’s when Charlie and Lena are being followed by the two gangsters at night after work. Charlie’s feeling is so important for Truffaut, it’s so full that he needs to add a voice-over to underscore this. So is this meant to interrupt the story for us? On the contrary, it’s another layer of storytelling, because the guy is full of Murnau’s movies and Renoir’s silent movies. Then come the close-ups, and after that the extreme close-up, and you see Charlie counting with his fingers, and then he’s doing a mime face, and the girl is laughing. In this quick flow of shots next comes the wonderful poetic idea which belongs to silent movies: the mirror with gangsters framed in it. After that the couple escapes, and then you have the wonderful gesture where she touches Charlie’s shoulder. Touching the shoulder, yeah, but what does it mean? She’s okay to go a little bit farther, but how far does it mean, the shoulder? And because Charlie is thinking about this, you have the voice-over during the tracking shot, but when the camera tracks back to a wider shot the girl has disappeared just like in a fairy tale. He gives us one line of monologue about jazz musicians because he’s a pianist and it’s over. Amazing scene: every ten seconds, a new idea, I mean it keeps going like that. The craft here is just amazing. So in this film those little transgressions are supposed to deliver more cinematic thrills, not ruin the storytelling, and Truffaut was desperate when it didn’t work. All the interviews about *Tirez sur le pianiste* are heartbreaking because he’s really hard on himself: “Where did I fail?” Yet today we want to say, “Nowhere, you failed nowhere.”

Q: Truffaut is so rambunctious in *Tirez sur le pianiste*. He jumps from comedy to melodrama in a single pan. Remember the little boy and the two gangsters in the gas station, where the boy drives the car? It’s hilarious, but then the camera pans and you see Charlie and Lena heading to the mountains in another car. This pan connects the joke with a very deep feeling, made deeper by the song on the radio and by the alternation of black and white as the sun glints off the snow on the windshield.

D: Truffaut always gives you more stories rather than less. I like to quote a line that I read in the files at the BiFi, where he writes, “Please, not an idea in four
minutes, but four ideas in one minute.” And he delivers four ideas; you can count them on your fingers. As the first sequence closes, you have Aznavour at the piano, and the bar owner arrives and you get four topics of conversation including the revelation that “the girl is in love with you.” They talk about the quality of girls, about the barman’s being ugly, until the voice-over returns when Charlie gives his wonderful line, “Scared. I’m scared; shit, I’m scared.” Now all this is done as a single scene, with some shot-reverse shot but mainly in one continuous take. Had this been shot by Antonioni you would have had one scene too but only with the guy saying, “I’m scared … actually perhaps I’m scared,” and it would take four minutes for him to get to the point of saying that. But in Truffaut inside this single scene, you actually have four or five or six scenes. So that’s what amazes me, how he fills the screen with ideas, just like Hitchcock always said to.

Q: Like the silent inserts of the barman, Plyne, while the gangsters explain how he gave them Charlie’s and Lena’s addresses.

D: Something struck me in one of Truffaut’s interviews you edited, Anne. Talking about Tirez sur le pianiste, he worries that he made a mistake in the way he treated the barman. Worrying about the audience, which is an obsession of a pure filmmaker, he says, “I was too nice to Plyne.” When Aznavour kills him the audience is upset with the star and when that happens Truffaut realizes that the bastard in his movie does not do his job. He thinks about this years after the film’s release, still trying to understand. In another interview, this one from 1961, just after the film came out, he talks about the importance of showing a type of woman rare in French cinema in those days. Speaking about Marie Dubois he says, “I want women who come from real life, not stars.”

Q: What about the raincoat she wears?

D: That, too, I find that it is part of his attitude toward women in film. When an interviewer asked him, “Why did you use an unknown actress for the principal female role?” (since, in fact, Marie Dubois was totally unknown), you can feel the anger of the French film establishment, given the fact that there were loads of young actresses under thirty then. Here’s what Truffaut answered [Desplechin reads from the interview in French]: “Yes, French cinema has at its disposal a wide array of young actresses who are less than thirty years old and whose artificiality is appalling to me; these Mylènes, these Pascales, these Danys, these Pierrettes, these Luciles, these Danicks, are neither ‘real’ young girls, nor ‘real’ women, but ‘broads,’ ‘dames,’ ‘pin-ups.’” Everything he hates. It’s almost a line which could be given to Jean-Paul Belmondo in La Sirène du Mississippi when he’s talking with Catherine Deneuve about parasites. Truffaut goes on: “You have the sense that they have been created for cinema and would not exist if cinema did not exist. That’s why I wanted to take an unknown actress for the main part of Tirez sur le pianiste. Marie Dubois is neither ‘spicy’ nor ‘mischievous’ but she is a young, pure, and dignified woman with whom one could ‘likely’ fall in love.”
What Truffaut says here is right. A sudden freedom comes when you realize that the cinema is not young any longer, that young actresses already know all the film codes. So how can you refresh it? Well, he does it in an old-fashioned way, but which seemed actually quite fresh when the film was released, because Marie Dubois doesn’t possess the codes that the French cinema is trying to impose. In fact there are two codes – how the woman is supposed to look and act and how the man is supposed to look and behave – and Marie Dubois upsets these causing an equality between men and women. Look at their two raincoats; I mean there is something really lovely in it.

Q: But the raincoat makes me think of *Le Quai des brumes* [Marcel Carné, 1938] and Michèle Morgan.

D: Sure but what’s new since the 1930s? Look, he’s a man, she’s a woman; so if a guy tries to impress her, she will try to impress him too. There is a sort of challenge between the two characters. … It’s modern love. … Finally women are allowed to be thinking; plus she’s making fun of him. She has a very childish way of embarrassing him. “She refused me,” he realizes, and then she’s laughing. Usually it’s the man of thirty treating the woman of twenty-three that way, but the parts have changed. She’s got the upper hand.

*Les Deux Anglaises et le continent* and *Jules et Jim*

Q: What do you think of the notion that the second half of Truffaut’s career is a complete betrayal of the first half, that he’s become academic? Is there a transformation or, on the contrary, a continuity?

D: For me, the continuity is total.

Q: But the manner of making films has changed. Instead of natural decors, he’s now working in the studios.

D: Because it’s a lot simpler to construct certain sets than find them. In *Vivement dimanche!* [1983] you have both a studio and not a studio, just like the use of the studio in *Je vous présente Paméla*, the movie being shot inside *La Nuit Américaine* [1973]. There’s mainly studio work in *Le Dernier Métro* [1980] since of course there are sets, but you also find natural decors. At the end of his career, Truffaut was underestimated in the way he did things. I can feel it with people of his own generation; it’s fascinating to talk to Jean Douchet, for instance, who missed the point. Or the woman who edited *Les 400 Coups*. The people who worked with him, sometimes they are so blind. They don’t get it. It’s strange.

Q: Actually it started with *La Sirène du Mississippi* which was a total flop and even more with *Les Deux Anglaises et le continent*. It was a critical and financial disaster.
Today, if there’s a film that you can’t contest, an absolute masterpiece in the history of cinema, it’s *Les Deux Anglaises et le continent*. Do we like it or not? That’s another question. I don’t like Antonioni (just as Truffaut didn’t like him), but I can see when he has made a masterpiece. I remember this line of dialogue, this line – I would cut my finger to write such a line – “Why are you touching me?” “Because you come from the earth and I think I like that.” How great is that! Because it’s so brief, it’s neat, it’s absolute, and it leads perfectly to the following scene. Now that’s good storytelling. But then someone of Truffaut’s own generation says, “Oh no, *Les Deux Anglaises et le continent* is a silly movie; it can’t work because Jean-Pierre Léaud can’t seduce two women; he’s too skinny for that.” This reminds me of this American book I read that claims the French are ridiculous since they seem to like having fat men seduce women, like Jean Gabin when he was sixty-five. In America there are nice thin actors.

The release of *Les Deux Anglaises et le continent* was such a disaster that they took back the prints from the theaters. How heartbreaking it must have been. They cut and pasted right on the positive release prints, and quickly re-released it. They recovered the six or ten prints on Sunday and put it back on screen again the next Wednesday, after reworking it. But it was useless.

How do you explain this terrible failure?

There’s no star in it. It’s too dry. If you love the film you have to do part of the job. The actors won’t do it for you. There’s no movie star doing it for you. I think the three players actually do a great job, but not the job of a movie star. So you, the audience, have to do it. In *Jules et Jim*, he had a star, he had Jeanne Moreau and it was a miracle. I’m not sure that an audience accepts the two male characters because, okay, Henri Serre we know was not that fascinating an actor in those days, and Oskar Werner may have become a movie star in the US, but in France, come on. He was nothing. Remember *Prince of the City* [1981], a strange American film, a film I love by Sydney Lumet? Well in that movie, you have this tough Italian cop with his wife, and they go to the movies. They are in line for tickets, and Treat Williams says, “I can impersonate Marlon Brando or I can impersonate Oskar Werner.” It was so snobbish, that line. I couldn’t believe that a cop would say that. The joke doesn’t work in France, because Oskar Werner was unknown. Anyway, it’s true, these two men don’t have the power of Jeanne Moreau. It’s shocking how strong she is.

*Les Deux Anglaises et le continent* deals with a material that abruptly contrasts with *Jules et Jim*. It gives a harsh depiction of love.

The feelings which are explored are quite uncomfortable. This film comes from 1971, and I try to imagine what it was like not for girls of my age (I was eleven) but for the friends of my older sister. Truffaut gives you what it’s like when you are a woman having sex for the first time: “This is how it is,” he seems to say. I mean, it’s raw and crude: no bullshit, this is what it’s about. And the discussion after that, when one sister, Anne, is speaking about sex and saying,
“So I met that man, Diurka, and he is good for my art, he will help me. Each time he talks, he teaches me things. But in bed, I can say I’m not that fond of Diurka; it’s okay, I mean, it feels safe.” She’s saying such things to her lover, “I feel safe with Diurka”; “We still have good sex, but it’s not that passionate.” Then she takes Léaud by the hand, and says, “Okay, let’s have sex right now because actually I’m leaving Paris in something like half an hour, so we just have enough time,” while the voice-over lets us know that Léaud is not okay with the idea, that he doesn’t like this moment. Yet they do have sex, and in bright daylight. It’s quite shocking, taken as it is in one very long shot, so it feels quite crude. Indeed it’s brutal, the fact of two sisters being in love with the same man. For an audience it can be quite crude.

Q: And Léaud doesn’t have much heft. He is small and he plays a small man.

D: That’s what all those people of Truffaut’s generation were complaining about, Douchet, that editor, etc. … but for me, it’s not an obstacle, because for me Henri Serres, who plays Jim in Jules et Jim, he has no charisma, and Léaud has a lot of charisma. In the scene where he explains how brothels work he’s so funny and strange that I can buy the fact that the two girls fall in love with him. Plus they are two real girls. … They don’t want to have a rock singer as a lover; this young French guy is okay. And also there’s his fragility, the way he is with his mother, which is quite disturbing too, the fact that he doesn’t dare to confront his mother. Anyway, a lot of things can make an audience back off. There’s a scene that must be disturbing to any audience, a scene of suffering, so tough to take. The girl says, “You know, I was masturbating. …” This makes the audience uncomfortable.

Q: And the visual depiction is pretty direct.

D: Absolutely shocking.

Q: It’s what she’s remembering from her diary, the burst of flowers and the sensuality of all of this.

D: That was his goal, and still the audience didn’t like it. They loved the other adaptation from Roché (Jules et Jim). But to be so very physical about love in this later film, to see people puking, crying, sobbing … to see such fluids is embarrassing; to film the states of the body like the crude image of the young woman puking in front of her sister. This is what love is doing to her, and it’s coming from inside their bodies and transforming them. But it’s great that we have bodies; I mean, it’s embarrassing but it’s great … though perhaps too tough for an audience to take straight.

Q: There are also very lyrical passages in Les Deux Anglaises et le continent, like the two boats leaving the island.

D: Two boats, one going to France and the other one to England, which seems silly, but which is perfect because of the line, “We were free and it was beautiful.” Just these simple images. They are free, so it’s not so sad that their paths are different
Interview with Arnaud Desplechin, Part I

one from the other. Truffaut gives us the separation in a single image instead of the usual tears in the train station when someone is leaving. The director should always find the simplest way to say what he has to say. This is an idea that I worship and is so useful for me. The lovers are splitting. Anne leaves in one boat and Claude – Jean-Pierre Léaud – in the other, but it’s not Sturm und Drang, not at this point in the story. But some of Truffaut’s cohort, his generation, claim that it’s not believable. Jean-Pierre Léaud can’t have two women, it’s just not believable. They must have been blind, they just didn’t see it.

Q: This is what Truffaut called “stylization,” a way of using a few sparse figures to represent reality. It is a codification of reality to concentrate emotion.

D: I’m sure that this appreciation of simplicity will return to cinema, as happens in painting. Remember the obsession of Truffaut’s generation with painting, with the idea that they thought they were doing for the history of cinema something close to painting, up through, let’s say, Matisse. They knew what they were up to. And so perhaps today we can recover that. Though maybe this kind of recognition has passed, or is not taught in the university, because universities and critics are still writing the same things. I read a recent piece of criticism that claimed, “Truffaut is the same as Pialat, but less brutal, less crude, less social.” The writer evidently means, “He’s less good than Pialat.” When people write this for twenty years, the audience starts to become blind because they are exposed again and again to the contrary of the truth. After a while, a sort of blindness comes over all of us in my generation.

If you want to think about film theory, there’s a brief shot in Jules et Jim which is so theoretical it fascinates me. It’s when they are by the sea staying in that large house. Remember when they open the windows and say, “Let’s go to the beach.” There follows a scene with a handheld subjective camera, a very close shot, with jump cuts in it. You can’t quite tell exactly what’s happening in the frame because you can’t see the actors, just their feet, while the voice-over says what they are doing. But that voice-over is absolutely useless in the narrative even if the whole movie is an exercise in storytelling. For throughout, each element is used fully for the following scene or for the plot and for the development of the film in general. Yet right in the middle of that you have this scene, which is pretty long, let’s say forty seconds, where the camera moves around looking at the ground.

Q: Searching for “les traces de la civilisation.”

D: And they find a small broken cup, a box, a shoe, some matches, a cigarette, saying, “Oh, it’s wonderful.” Here is a sort of theory of the film, and of the New Wave itself, indeed of the modern technique of the cinema altogether: to build a film with things that you find in the garbage. This is a sort of plaidoyer pro domo, the scene speaking on behalf of the New Wave and of the modern cinema. Even the way it’s shot, to try to catch actuality – technically, isn’t this a metaphor for the cinema that Truffaut is calling for, suggesting that it’s inferior to make movies out of things that have just been passed down, high-class acceptable
things? No, no, no, cinema is taking a broken lamp and fixing it. Plus, in the movie, this is linked to cubism. You take a broken cup and you put it on screen. Remember, Picasso is quoted so many times in *Jules et Jim*.

**Q:** But still that sequence begins with the triangle of three windows, a very classical shot, a very allegorical shot of the three windows. So you have that also.

**D:** Which is a different kind of cinema, I agree. It’s a different style. But this scene in the forest is so absolute, really with no actors visible, just a voice-over. It’s a sort of homage to cubism, saying that we should be as moral with cinema as the cubist painters have been with their own art. Wow, to make it simple, so that even someone fourteen years old can catch it. The pure pleasure of saying, “Let’s reinvent our lives, with just rags and bones.” Or look at the opening credits of *Jules et Jim*; I’m sure that this editing influenced the American cinema in an amazing way. Because it’s so full of storytelling. You have a complete friendship develop. Each time I see it I find it amazing, the numbers of ideas he packed in.

How can one be that clipped and that lyrical at the same time? In this scene, there is a frenzy of activity which shows incredible passion for filmmaking. A sort of mad passion, you know, an obsession. Once again, we sense a gap between what the New Wave wants to do and how they can do it, especially for Truffaut and Godard more than the others. For Truffaut, the lack of money makes him free. It gives him this contrast: direct storytelling without any direct dialogue because he can’t afford sync sound. As a storyteller, he says, “Okay, my two characters are leaving for Greece, and, wham, here they are.” Immediately in Greece, you have that “travelling compensé,” which is a nightmare to do technically, the adjusted tracking shot invented by Hitchcock in *Vertigo* [1958].

**Q:** You mean the sweeping camera around the statue?

**D:** No, it’s the shot just before, with the tracking forward and the zoom backward, so the perspective enlarges, making the face of the statue become the face of the whole world. This shot conveys absolute passion, but it doesn’t spoil the film, and it doesn’t become a spectacle like *Doctor Zhivago* [David Lean, 1965] either. It’s still straight and clipped. You can imagine Oliver Stone and Scorsese going crazy looking at this. A couple of generations learned from this film, much more than from Godard, for sure. The opening sequence establishing the friendship, it’s so fast, the very image of speed.

### *La Politique des Auteurs*

**Q:** Can we take up the issue of influences, of auteurs?

**D:** One thing that bothered us a lot here in France around, let’s say, the eighties, is the fact that the American “author theory,” which to me was uninteresting, had nothing to do with the *politique des auteurs*. So when today someone young goes
to see a Godard film, he might think before buying his ticket, "It’s good because it’s by an auteur," which is absurd; to Bazin it is completely absurd, and it has no meaning. Do you say of the Lumière films they were made by Lumière? No, they were made by guys whom they just sent out with their cameras. There’s a confusion between the two things here. When the ego of the director is the show that you are paying the ticket for, this is not at all the same thing that Truffaut was doing for a living, which was politique des auteurs, different from this American idea that the only thing valuable in a film would be the director. You don’t have this exactly in Truffaut. The film is there first for him.

Q: Could you comment on Truffaut’s definition of “auteur”? You have Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray, or in France, Renoir, Cocteau.

D: And Guitry. It took me a while to understand his taste in auteurs, like his passion for Sacha Guitry, which is a very French thing that even I will never understand because he’s not part of my generation. I remember Truffaut speaking on TV, explaining his disdain for René Clair. Which is strange for me because actually, I don’t know René Clair, since he was not shown on TV when I was a kid. Truffaut was trying to tell some journalists – intellectuals and writers, not really film lovers – why pure mise-en-scène is so important. Truffaut said, “You know, in a René Clair movie,” and he quotes Clair against himself, which is to my mind a sin, to say bad things about a director when you are a director. But Truffaut comes from a different generation, and he attacks Clair because Clair left France for America, for his supposed love for American films. Truffaut goes on to say, “In each of Clair’s films, he uses stupid tracking shots and this tracking is only to prove that he’s the director of the movie.” But, with Sacha Guitry, you realize that when he needs a close-up, he asks the actor to walk forward right to the camera, and this amounts to a tracking shot too. It’s not the camera that tracks, but Guitry’s method achieves the same effect, since for me as a spectator, I see someone moving from the wide shot to a close-up. And Guitry always does this at the right point in the story. Truffaut goes on saying, we New Wave guys, we were constantly thinking about mise-en-scène, and we had this idea that to be an American film director, it is not enough to simply to add useless tracking to a scene. No, no. It’s to track at the right moment. This is why he can consider Renoir an American director when he’s making Le Crime de M. Lange [1936], but never René Clair. American cinema to him has this strange transparence and this is the way he wants to treat the couple in Tirez sur le pianiste. The street may look fake behind them as they walk, because with so little money it has to be lit with a single very harsh lamp. Needing to open the lens, the shot looks like a rear projection. Although it’s all a real street, he shoots in a French way, so that saving on the cost of shooting becomes a sort of ethic. Now I can see what amazed him in Sacha Guitry.

Curiously, one of the very last texts that he published in Cahiers du Cinéma has this photo of Guitry who truly represented that strong conception of mise-en-scène that Truffaut wanted to maintain.
Mise-en-scène, and nothing else, defines the *politique des auteurs*.

The moment the New Wave critics saw this concept of mise-en-scène emerging, rising on the screen at the Cinémathèque, they fell for it immediately. So there’s Guitry, and then later there’s Rossellini, and of course Hitchcock. Truffaut thinks, what has René Clair to do with Rossellini? Nothing. Yet Bazin taught us that Rossellini and Hitchcock are the same. So anyone who says that Rossellini is nothing and that Hitchcock is everything, he’s a fake, a phony, he’s not into pure mise-en-scène, because the cleverness of Hitchcock amounts to the same gesture as the sincerity of Rossellini. All this is a very complicated issue that does not really belong to my generation. I understand it from time to time through some bit of film I come upon when watching older movies.

**Notes**


3. Fréhel (1891–1951) was a popular singer before World War I. She left the stage because of alcohol and drug abuse but had a revival in the thirties and even played in a few films, among them Julien Duvivier’s *Pépé Le Moko* (1936) where she sang the nostalgic “Où sont-ils donc?”

4. La Bibliothèque du film, part of the Cinémathèque Française in Paris.

5. “Le cinéma français dispose d’un lot de jeunes comédiennes de moins de trente ans dont l’inauthenticité me paraît consternante; ces Mylènes, ces Pascals, ces Danys, ces Pierrettes, ces Luciles, ces Danicks ne sont ni de ‘vraies’ jeunes filles ni de ‘vraies’ femmes, mais des ‘pépées’, des ‘souris’, des pins up, on a le sentiment qu’elles ont été créées par le cinéma pour le cinéma et qu’elles n’existeraient pas si le cinéma n’existait pas. C’est pourquoi j’ai voulu prendre une inconnue pour le rôle principal de *Tirez sur le pianiste*. Marie Dubois n’est ni ‘piquante,’ ni ‘mutine’, mais c’est une jeune fille pure et digne, dont il est ‘vraisemblable’ qu’on puisse devenir amoureux. ” François Truffaut, quoted in Gillain, *Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut*, p. 113.