



Rebellion and change through three pairs of eyes

From: The Times [London]: 11 November, 1975

By Melinda Camber Porter

The first films of the Parisian Rentrés, *The Story of O* and *The Beast*, pointed to a revolution in one area of French cinema. But the resulting fuss and furor obscured another enactment of rebellion and a serious attempt to examine this conflict between tradition and change. Godard's latest film, *Numero Deux*, is ironically presented as a remake of *A Bout de Souffle* (1960), aimed as a jibe against his past tradition of making films. Téchiné's third film, *Souvenirs d'en France*, is a more measured study of each generation's rebellion against the immediate past.

Souvenirs d'en France traces the history of an industrial family through three generations and two wars. The nature of change is not only expressed in the consistently excellent reconstruction of costume décor and manner, but also in the changing style of the film. Téchiné masterfully captures the luxurious, melodramatic cinematic images of the epoch. He plays on his modern audience's flippant attitude to an outmoded narrative style and lulls them into a feeling of immunity and safety. Highly charged emotions are conveyed without reference or threat to the present. This distancing in time allows the audience to enter into the emotions world of the first and second generations and to empathize when their world is made redundant.

As the film moves towards the present day, the conflicts and mores come too close to the bone and new distancing is achieved. The audience is obliged to retreat as its world is brought into question. The process of rebellions is turned in on itself. But the cyclic motion of the film, which presents rebellion as a natural and inevitable force, prevents moralizing or blame. Téchiné's coherent work can be seen as a study of the problems of the rejected elders of society, but the beauty of the film lies in the visual and rhythmic sensitivity to the ebb and flow of each rising generation.

Godard, ensconced in his video workshop in Grenoble, announced recently his exile and revolt against past and present traditions in filmmaking. He is also attempting to exile himself from his own past. *Numero Deux* bears no relationship to its "source." Ostensibly, it is another study of the three generations of a family.

But the film seems to be, primarily, an attempt to dislocate words through verbal punning. Each sequence is preceded by a title, rather in the manner of a peep show. At the end of the vignette the title is repeated and transformed letter by letter, into the next title. During this process the links between



words are suggest and dissolved. An attempt, perhaps, to undermine the relationship of words to one another.

Godard says: “My greatest enemy is the written word. Nowadays we begin to learn to read much earlier. Visions seems to be forbidden. In the papers we read about Vietnam, but we are not shown it. It’s a form of censorship.”

Godard’s attempt to dislocate the written word invades the structure and subject of the film; the titles are mainly incongruous with the sequences they introduce. A rupture in the relationship between the young couple is constantly threatened; in certain sequences of video within video the character is separated from himself as his double mimics him in the background. Twice Godard tries to fabricate coordination between the young parents and grandparents. The elderly man sits naked in front of the camera talking about his life, and later on the grandmother washes herself naked, quite as casually as the young couple. These are uncomfortable scenes which break the pattern of fragmentation and division that characterize the film.

In comparison with Téchiné’s historical approach, Godard poses a less satisfying vision of a slice of time, disconnected and fragmented. Godard’s aggressive adherence to change and Téchiné’s calmer analysis of its effects do, however, find a parallel in the erotic revolution. In *The Beast* Borowczyk sets out to facilitate easy access between the world of dreams and consciousness and to make certain public impulses which are normally hidden behind the barrier of a dream. *The Beast* certainly centers on sexual taboos, but the “erotic revolution” serves as a larger aim to break down the taboos surrounding dreams.

Borowczyk explores the Minotaur theme of a woman coupling with a beast in a pattern of striking images taken from varying levels of consciousness: from the stylized dream of a woman being changes by a beast to the brutal scene of horses mating. These two poles of description meet in a witty and incredible plot: a young girl arrives at castle to carry out an arranged marriage with the product of a bestial relationship.

I asked Borowczyk whether the pornographic or erotic were essential to his aims:

“In my view, pornography depends on the quality of the vision. We are accustomed to use the term because, once upon a time, someone applied the word to the code of forbidden terms. It is essentially a legal term. But that which is pornographic in one society is not in another. The term is relative.”

Surely Borowczyk, having lived in France for 18 years, was aware of the meaning the terms has for a



French audience. Was he attempting to violate and revolt against their code of taboos? “One always violates taboos, often without publicizing it. There are many interior protest. That eternal interrogation and hesitation that goes on in our heads is very close to revolt. Even if it is not expressed it exists. And the person who chooses to verbalize the protest is not alone. The act of publicizing one protest is not a revolt against other because it is shared.

“But it is an artist’s privilege to shock and impose. If there is no shock there is no progression. If an artist does not shock (and the pornographic is merely anecdotal on this level) he is for the chopper.”

While Borowczyk is willing to shock and impose on the audience in order to destroy their taboos and traditional codes, Gódard rebels against himself and asks us to watch his personal revolt. Téchiné in *Souvenirs d’en France* reveals the suffering implicit in both processes and offers a humane critique of these and larger forms of rebellion and change.

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Ref: The Times [London], 1975

