



Truffaut and the world of childhood

From: *The Times* [London]: 19 February, 1975.

By: Melinda Camber Porter

For François Truffaut, 1974 was the exception to his working rule: since 1966, when he shot *Fahrenheit 451*, he had managed to make at least one film a year. But he should make up for it this year, which, all being well, will see the completion of two films. The first, *Adèle H.*, is already under way. Truffaut describes it as “an unquestionably sad love story. It’s about Victor Hugo’s second daughter, a young girl who is in love with an English lieutenant who does not love her, or even wish to see her. She follows him everywhere. In general there are two people on the screen in a love story, but here I show only the young girl. It’s like a piece of music with one instrument”. The second film is about childhood and will be a mixture of true stories, culled from newspapers, or provided by friends, and “fictions” that caught Truffaut’s attention.

Truffaut says that he has learnt from experience that the public tends not to like those films of his in which the male character is the centre of attention, especially when they are his own age. He too prefers working with women and children. An apparent paradox, when Truffaut admits that in all his films he is talking about himself.

“I identify with female characters more easily than with male characters, which does not mean to say that my films are feminist.” The identification with children is even more direct. “I am like a child”, he says shyly, “and I often behave like a child with people I don’t know. I am very slow at comprehending what is happening around me and often incapable of dispelling misunderstandings.”

Part of the fascination the cinema exerts over him stems from a wish to recapture happy experiences in his own childhood. On the whole it was an unhappy time, but watching films provided a refuge for him. He says that the shooting of films re-creates the atmosphere of summer holiday camps, one of his few joyful childhood experiences. Whether he refers to these past experiences directly, as in *The 400 Blows*, or to their transposition into the present, as in *Day for Night*, Truffaut almost always manages to incorporate in his films the joy and playfulness he feels on the Set.

“One makes films because one desires to fit things together, to make people meet each other, and to create situations. It’s like a child with a Meccano set, or a child telling himself a story that might perhaps interest others later on. But it’s a game. If someone believes that they have got a lot of important things to tell the public, they shouldn’t make films. They should say them directly.”



I asked Truffaut whether he felt that the indirect communication which he prescribes is akin to lying. "Direct truth is not interesting. If one is alone and is talking to many people, as in a film, lying is necessary. In a conversation between two people you can tell the truth. You can also manipulate the person you are talking to; but conversation should be democratic. In a speech or a film you cannot be democratic because you are outnumbered. Manipulation is necessary. In any case, the cinema is a game for the person making it and the people watching it. Implicit in the rules of this game are the notions of lying and manipulation."

But Truffaut reserves these methods for his films. He is direct and democratic in conversation. Only at one point did a certain unnaturalness appear, and that was when he said: "I prefer working with English actresses because they are more professional than the French and more feminine than American actresses. They also ask brutal and frank questions, which isn't done in France, and this amuses everyone on the set and makes them drop their masks. I think it might be because the English have a better education."

Apart from this sally, the child-like spontaneity prevailed, and one can see how Truffaut's second project will be a further essay in autobiography. "When the public see a child on the screen they have the impression that they are watching the child do something for the first time. There is the impression of spontaneity. There is always a second scenario that is superimposed on the written one. And it is created by the child: the process of discovering life and childhood in general. Because of this one needs few events in a film dealing with children; a script that would be boring with adults is exciting with children.

"When you film an adult you film that particular person. With a child you film that particular child and childhood in general. Children have a wonderful sense of reality and can collaborate enormously, not on the level of ideas, but in the execution and the details. With children one must accept the fact that the script is provisional."

And it was *L'Enfant Sauvage* that gave him two important insights into his work: that he always makes films for very personal reasons, and that the constant theme in his work, if he were to hazard a guess, would be the search for identity. "Even in my latest film, *Adèle H.*, the main character is someone searching for what she is or what she wants to be. Adèle wants another name: she always introduces herself under another name, although she is proud of being Victor Hugo's daughter."

Truffaut's interest in himself does not preclude a sensitivity to his audience. He feels a great sense of responsibility towards the public especially when dealing with general topics, such as childhood. He says



that his main concern is to respect the needs of the public, their desire for enjoyment, without presenting them with a falsified, misleading picture of life as it is.

“In a film the director gives the audience a promise of pleasure. One keeps one’s promise by providing an exultant ending. The laws of a film are closer to those of a concerto rather than a novel. In a concerto there is a final movement that reunites the previous movements. In the last 10 minutes of each of my films there is a rising, mounting curve upwards. And yet this promise of pleasure poses moral problems. For the rhythm, the curve of life is the opposite of this. It progresses towards decadence, decrepitude, illness and extinction. The curve of life is descending and that of the film rising.

“I try to respect both curves in the dramatic progression. One achieves this by a manipulation of elements. For instance the last word in a speech and, the last reel in, a film are the ones that the audience goes away with, remembers and is most affected by. If you conclude a depressing speech with the word “happy”, people will remember that and leave content.”

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Ref: The Times [London], 1975

