The films of François Truffaut

David Walsh reviews a program of the filmmaker's works at the Detroit Film Theatre

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As part of its autumn-winter schedule the Detroit Film Theatre at the Detroit Institute of Arts is presenting all 21 of French filmmaker François Truffaut's feature films, two of his shorts and a documentary about his life and career. The DFT program, part of a national tour of the Truffaut works, is entirely welcome and gives viewers the opportunity to evaluate the work of a significant postwar film director.

Born in 1932, Truffaut first came to prominence in the mid-1950s as an iconoclastic film critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the noted French film journal. Around this publication, edited by André Bazin, gathered a number of those—including Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Erich Rohmer and Jacques Rivette—who would be identified at the end of the decade and the beginning of the next with the movement known as the New Wave (*La Nouvelle Vague*). In 1959, 24 French directors made their first features, followed by 43 more the next year.

A number of Truffaut's works are permanent features of the film landscape of the 1950s and 1960s, including *The Four Hundred Blows* (1959), *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960) *Jules and Jim* (1962) and *The Soft Skin* (1964). I don't know that any of his later films had the impact those did, although *Stolen Kisses* (1968), *The Wild Child* (1970) *Day for Night* (1973), *Small Change* (1975) and *The Last Metro* (1980), among others, certainly found receptive audiences. Truffaut was only 52 years old when he died from a brain tumor in 1984.

As an artist he cuts an odd figure. Despite its many pleasurable and insightful moments, his body of work as a whole fails to leave a deep and lasting impression. One staunch defender (Don Allen in *Finally Truffaut*, 1994) perhaps says more than he wants to when he observes that "A common reaction to Truffaut's films is a sense of anticlimax." Remarkably, another sympathetic critic (James Monaco in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, 1980) expresses the same thought: "It was a critical commonplace in the 60s ... that both reviewers and audiences were always vaguely disappointed with a new Truffaut film."

In fact, when one takes into account Truffaut's intelligence and sensitivity, his encyclopedic film knowledge (he claimed to have seen 4,000 films between 1940 and 1955, many of them repeatedly) as well as his grounding in literature, and his obvious skills as a director, his work does present itself to a considerable degree as a disappointment.

At their best Truffaut's films possess many positive qualities—lightness and informality, tenderness, sensuality, the personal touch. Positive, but perhaps not enough to sustain an artist in complex and difficult times. Particularly when they seem at least as much the result of a conscious plan to exclude certain human problems—specifically the problems of social organization—from consideration as they do the outpouring of a spontaneously lyrical personality. One almost always has the feeling that Truffaut has limited himself to the insubstantial as part of a larger artistic and intellectual scheme. Monaco admits as much, suggesting that we need to accept "Truffaut's intentionally limited spectrum of concerns."

In *The Four Hundred Blows*, Truffaut's first and one of his finest works, he transformed aspects of his own unhappy childhood into fiction. In the film a Parisian youth, Antoine Doinel, tries to get by in the face of his parents' neglect or indifference. Petty crime leads him into trouble with the law and a stay in a detention center. He escapes, and the joyous moment when he rushes, arms open, toward the sea, savoring his freedom, is captured by Truffaut in a memorable freeze frame.

There are some lovely moments in this film. It has the flavor and pathos of life. Here, in beautiful black-and-white, is Paris in the 1950s, family life, adolescence, rebellion. And the grimness of lower middle class existence and captivity in various forms. And the indefinable yearning for something. The film protests against cruelty to children, even cruelty of a largely accidental and unconscious kind. The film is also blessed with an almost flawless performance by Jean-Pierre Léaud as Truffaut's younger self. *The Four Hundred Blows* is an enduring and authentic work.

There are troubling aspects, however, even to this film. For one thing, the director can't entirely seem to make up his mind about its overall tone. More precisely, he seems resolved not to imbue it with a tragic or semi-tragic coloring. The work at times has an inappropriate lightness, inappropriate from the point of view of its own internal logic. Antoine's condition is genuinely sad and desperate. Whatever happens to him in the short-term, he has to be scarred by the emotional abuse. This is not my projection; after all, Truffaut called his first feature *The Four Hundred Blows*, not *The Two Hundred Blows and The Two Hundred Amusing Little Incidents*. Too often the director pulls himself up short, as if aware of the natural drift of the work, and undercuts his critique of Antoine's circumstances with a joke, a sight gag, a shrug. At those moments, it seems to me, Truffaut is really saying: "Oh no you don't, you're not going to catch me indicting society as a whole."

Determinism is indispensable in art. Sustained unhappiness which is not shown to be *necessary*, rooted somehow in the structure of things, has a weakened impact because it fails to make a point of contact with the spectator's own, for the most part unconscious intuition that life is wretchedly and potentially tragically organized. Without provoking that convulsive mental state in which one thinks simultaneously, *This had to happen! This shouldn't have happened!*, there is no real tragedy.

Truffaut, for a variety of historical and ideological reasons, chose to reject this sort of determinism. As a result the tragic quality is all too frequently either absent in his work where the need for it is felt, as in certain moments in *The Four Hundred Blows* (and perhaps *The Last Metro*), or, more often, feels injected from the outside, arbitrary, histrionic (as in *Jules and Jim*, *The Soft Skin* and *The Woman Next Door*, among others).

There is another problem associated with *The Four Hundred Blows* that perhaps speaks as well to a larger issue. Truffaut was born as "the result of an unwanted and illegitimate pregnancy" (*François Truffaut*, Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram, 1998) His mother, Janine de Montferrand, came from an aristocratic family; 21 months after her son's birth she

married Roland Truffaut, an architect's assistant. (As a teenager François discovered that Roland was not his biological father.) The future film director spent his early years shuttling between grandmothers. When his maternal grandmother died in 1942, he came to live with Janine and Roland Truffaut in a small Paris apartment. His mother "scarcely tolerated him and his father was kind but weak and preoccupied."

This is the period in his life fictionally worked over in *The Four Hundred Blows*, transposed to the late 1950s when Truffaut was actually shooting his film. In 1942 a more general unhappiness, of course, overshadowed the entire population of Paris. Northern France, including the capital city, was occupied by Hitler's forces. Resistance was met with arrest, torture and, frequently, execution. There were also considerable material shortages and economic hardship.

In retrospect I find it remarkable that Truffaut managed to set his story in the 1950s *without making any apparent allowance* for these facts. It does suggest a special kind of blindness to have ignored the possibility that the conditions of German occupation—carrying with them a continuous threat of repression and brutality—might have added to the tension and psychic discomfort even in a petty-bourgeois household removed from direct involvement in the events, and thus have had an impact on the texture of his childhood.

Instead Truffaut preferred simply to point an accusing finger at his parents, especially his mother, as the source of all his unhappiness. (He chose, in his fictionalized version, to discount entirely as well the intense psychological and social pressures someone like Janine, from a respectable Catholic family, must have come under in 1932 as an unwed mother.) One can find in this an unpleasant dose of self-absorption and self-pity. Beyond that, it reveals a determination to exclude historical and social processes from any explanation of human behavior; more precisely, I would argue, it indicates the director's implicit identification of any consideration of these processes with the official "Left"—i.e., Stalinism—and its artistic crudities.

These two related tendencies—which manifest themselves as the inability to find the right tone, or to integrate successfully conflicting influences and styles: French "poetic realism," Hitchcock, Italian Neo-realism, Bresson, Hollywood *film noir*, etc., and a deliberate slightness and narrowness of subject matter—seem to me to make themselves felt in many of Truffaut's films. (That so many Truffaut commentators make virtues out of these tendencies is another problem entirely.)

Jules and Jim (1961), Truffaut's third feature, is habitually referred to as an "acknowledged" or "undeniable" masterpiece. This apparently relieves the given commentator from explaining why it is any such thing. The film involves two men, one German and one French, in love with the same woman, Catherine (played by Jeanne Moreau). Much jockeying for position goes on between the two men, while Catherine flits back and forth between them before finally settling on the German. Years later, when the Frenchman shows signs of finally getting over her, she drives her car, in which he's a passenger, off a bridge.

In my own view, *Jules and Jim* revealed Truffaut's feet of clay. I was bored and irritated by the film when I saw it three decades ago and bored and irritated by a recent viewing as well. For one thing, I've never had any sympathy for the Jeanne Moreau cult. In *Jules and Jim* the most "enigmatic" actress of our time is at her most enigmatic. Women who play at that are just about the least interesting members of their sex.

The most irksome thing about the film, however, is Truffaut's intellectual laziness. Rather than explaining any of the characters' obsessive behavior, he would have us simply accept it as part of the ineffable tapestry of life. Critic Andrew Sarris observed admiringly that the film expressed "a brutal vision of love as a private war fought apart from the rules and regulations of society." Yes, and this is exactly what's wrong with it. Love is very much fought out within and through the rules and regulations of society. It is never, in fact, entirely accidental or inexplicable.

Truffaut's own example stares one in the face. It is fascinating to note that just as his career as a director was getting going in 1957, he married the daughter of one of France's richest and most powerful film distributors. Is this to suggest, as certain of his enemies at the time claimed, that he was an opportunist who married with an eye to the main chance? Not at all. But those qualities an individual finds irresistible at a given moment are inevitably bound up with a host of needs and impulses, including socially-determined ones, which do present themselves for scrutiny.

In any event, these problems (and any serious form of self-criticism) were always a closed book to Truffaut. His vision of love and women remained essentially shallow and adolescent throughout his artistic life. All the "meaningless vivacity" of *Jules and Jim*, as American critic Manny Farber termed it, can't conceal its essential lack of coherence, drama or tension. The violent end, like nearly everything else in the film, is forced and unconvincing.

The Soft Skin is a study in adultery, based at least in part presumably on Truffaut's own experiences, including the break-up of his marriage. An older man, a well-known writer, begins an affair with a young flight attendant. They endure a variety of setbacks and humiliations in their effort to spend time alone together. He falls head over heels in love and begins to reorganize his life. She informs him that for her it was not such a serious thing, and ends the relationship. His wife, who has meanwhile discovered the affair, shoots him in a restaurant. Much of the film, thankfully less grandiloquent than *Jules and Jim*, rings true. At least until the contrived denouement. Françoise Dorleac, a far warmer performer than her sister Catherine Deneuve, plays the flight attendant; she died tragically in a car crash in 1967.

Fahrenheit 451 (1966), based on a Ray Bradbury story, about a future society in which all reading matter is banned and firefighters have the job of burning it, is a serious and moving work. Perhaps his unfamiliarity with the language—this is his only film in English—worked in Truffaut's favor. He has fewer opportunities, fortunately, to demonstrate French flair and sophistication; there is less of the "Pourquoi pas?" attitudinizing. The film is a bit cold, but the director's vision of humane social relations and his commitment to knowledge and books feel entirely genuine. *Fahrenheit 451* is also graced with Julie Christie in a double role.

Truffaut filmed *Stolen Kisses* in February and March 1968, only months before the great general strike. Antoine Doinel makes a reappearance (his third, counting *Antoine and Colette*, an endearing segment of *Love at Twenty* [1962], which included contributions from five directors), now 20 and dishonorably discharged from the army. The film follows his various efforts at work and love. When it doesn't try too hard, *Stolen Kisses* is genuinely charming, although Jean-Pierre Léaud (Antoine in all the films) has already begun to grate on one's nerves. Michel Lonsdale is wonderful as the odious owner of a shoe store (nicknamed "The Dinosaur" by his employees) who hires the services of the private detective agency for which Antoine works to find out why he is so disliked. The remarkable Delphine Seyrig is appealing as his wife who has the most discreet and devastating approach to seduction.

In its own way the film expresses something of the spirit of 1968, at least refracted through the prism of Truffaut's particular concerns. During filming he was involved in organizing protests against the DeGaulle government's efforts to remove Henri Langlois, the legendary director of the French Cinémathèque. After leading the successful struggle to retain Langlois, Truffaut played a major role in closing down the Cannes Film Festival in solidarity with the striking workers and students. (After an early flirtation with the political right, Truffaut moved leftward in the 1960s and early 1970s. He then settled back in the reformist milieu, eventually sympathizing with elements within the Socialist Party and the CFDT trade union.)

The Wild Child (1969) was Truffaut's last film of the 1960s and perhaps his last film of genuine interest. The child of the title is Victor of the Aveyron, an historical figure, who was found in the forest in France around 1800. Unwanted by his parents who apparently left him to die, Victor grew up like an animal. At the beginning of Truffaut's film peasants hunt him down; he is naked, filthy and unable to speak. Dr. Itard (well played by Truffaut) takes on the challenge of educating him. Itard's difficult and frustrating effort to lead Victor intellectually out of the woods is conveyed with sensitivity and compassion.

Truffaut made the film at least in part to argue against various forms of libertarianism and anti-intellectualism so much in vogue in radical circles in France and elsewhere at the time. In *The Wild Child* he suggests that civilization, despite its discontents and its costs, has a value, as do education and rational thought. Victor is not deaf, but when he first lives with Itard, he doesn't respond to the sound of human voices. They have no significance for him. As he learns something about the society of human beings and implicates himself in its activities, he sees and experiences the world differently. I think Truffaut's purpose here is entirely legitimate and the work, despite being saddled with a self-consciously Bressonian austerity, still retains its essential eloquence.

Truffaut made another 11 films, but they are of steadily declining interest, in my view. The last two episodes of the Antoine Doinel cycle, *Bed and Board* (1970) and *Love on the Run* (1978), are quite weak, the latter pretty insufferable. *Love on the Run* is French filmmaking at its worst—pretty, trivial and pleased with itself. *Two English Girls* (1971), which owes something to the history of the Brontë sisters, and *The Story of Adèle H* (1975), based on the life of Victor Hugo's daughter, are overwrought and unmoving contrivances.

By the time he made *Day for Night* (1973), a story about the making of a film, Truffaut could pose as a serious question, "Are films more important than life?" The film manages to treat in a cliched fashion nearly every one of the least important and least interesting aspects of artistic production. I would urge anyone who cherishes this amusing and complacent little work to compare it with R.W. Fassbinder's *Beware the Holy Whore* or Abbas Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees*, films that actually say something about art and life and society. *The Last Metro* is a sincere effort to deal with the Second World War and the German occupation of Paris, but it seems fairly slight and uninvolving.

The Woman Next Door and *Confidentially Yours* (1982), despite the radiant presence of Fanny Ardant, with whom Truffaut was now romantically involved, are distinctly "off." The latter, Truffaut's last film, is quite odd. A supposed *film noir*, *Confidentially Yours* fails on nearly every level. Not only is there a lack of chemistry between Ardant and Jean-Louis Trintignant, playing the boss whom she clears of a murder charge, the two don't appear to be performing in the same film. All in all, Truffaut artistically came to a sad end.

It might be useful to place some of Truffaut's shortcomings in their historical context. In his case, this amounts to asking: what sort of social and intellectual circumstances encourage an artist to restrict himself to the insubstantial, and even make it possible for that self-limitation to appear as a liberating stance?

For artists the situation in France was difficult in the 1950s as it was for artists everywhere. The type of anticommunist witch-hunts that took place in the US did not occur there, but the Cold War had divided cultural life and opinion into hostile camps, the Stalinist faction, claiming to speak for "the people" and "progress" and defense of the "socialist" bloc, and the pro-imperialist "democratic" camp.

This presented Truffaut and every other French artist, whether they were aware of it or not, with a set of nearly impossible ideological and moral alternatives. Those, like André Breton and a relatively small number of others, who considered themselves opponents of both Stalinism and capitalism were few in number and, by the mid-1950s, isolated and somewhat demoralized.

Truffaut entered into battle as a critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma* as an opponent of what was termed the "tradition of quality" in French cinema, with its somewhat labored "psychological realism," associated in particular with directors Claude Autant-Lara, Jean Delannoy, René Clément and Yves Allégret, and scenarists Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost. In his famous article, "A Certain Tendency of French Cinema" (1954), he criticized this trend for a disparate collection of sins: for its academicism, for its contemptuous superiority toward its characters, for its facile anti-bourgeois views, including a taste for blasphemy and a hatred of family, for its underestimation of cinema as a medium, and more.

To the tedious "tradition of quality," Truffaut posed as a counterweight the director as "author," and "poetic realism." Truffaut praised a group of directors, including Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Becker, Max Ophuls and Jacques Tati, who, he insisted, made cinema, not mediocre literary adaptations. (Truffaut conveniently forgot, however, that much of the1930s' poetic realism he so admired, in the work of Renoir and Jean Vigo, for example—with all its strengths and weaknesses—was bound up with the revolutionary strivings of the time, which reached their high point in the massive general strike of May-June 1936 and which were betrayed through the medium of the Popular Front government.)

The *Cahiers* group was also renowned for its championing of Hollywood directors—denigrated as commercial hacks by most French left intellectuals—including Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, John Ford, Raoul Walsh, Samuel Fuller and others. They were even nicknamed the "hitchcockohawksiens."

Truffaut and the others were no doubt correct in many, although not all, of their arguments, but there is something limited and distorted about the entire debate. Without taking into account the catastrophic role played by Stalinism it is impossible to comprehend how a revolt of younger artists and critics against official culture, or one wing of it, could take the form of a rebellion against the "Left."

The recent biography of Truffaut by Antoine de Baecque and Serge Toubiana (*Truffaut*, 1999) provides some flavor of the confused situation that prevailed in the early and middle 1950s. It is worth citing a couple of paragraphs:

"François Truffaut's writing style, press campaigns, and taste for provocation were typical of the literary right. It's no coincidence, since the papers he wrote for ... his personal contacts, and his pamphleteering style all suggest rebellion against academicism and the culturally dominant left-wing intellectual circles of the postwar period. Polemics raged between the two camps in the fifties, even if the Communist, social-Christian, humanist left vastly outnumbered the right.... Jacques Laurent was the leading [right-wing] 'hussar,' but he founded *La Parisienne* and accepted editorialship of *Arts* under the banner of 'political noncommitment.' He expressed this objective in an editorial in the first issue of *La Parisienne*, dated January 1953: 'Literature has become a means to an end. It is disapproved of as soon as it is anything other than a means'; he wished to sever the ties between literature and politics—that is, between literary circles and left-wing activism.

"This was a cause François Truffaut could identify with. In *Cahiers*, he fought against supporters of 'films with a message,' praising form and *mise-en-scène* [direction] over the screenplay. But this cause was considered reactionary; lack of political commitment was associated with individualism, egoism, formal innovation, dandyism—so many attitudes denounced as impeding the values of cultural, political, and moral reconstruction inspired by the Liberation."

What a mess! It becomes less difficult to see how Truffaut lost his way on some of these issues, or never found it in the first place, and, specifically, why he so persistently associated the analysis of social reality in art with heavy-handedness and worse. As the material circumstances of his life improved, of course, this hostility to making sense of social life

became increasingly anchored in self-interest.

Truffaut's artistic life represents something of a cautionary tale. Whatever the external circumstances, the artist who chooses with a certain degree of calculation to explore only those aspects of life that seem most appealing to him, most likely to yield their secrets, has not studied “the human problem in depth in all its forms” (Breton). Truffaut's films deserve to be seen and their real merits appreciated, but most viewers, if they are honest with themselves, will find on their lips at some point that terrible word: “Disappointing!”