

CINEMATIC SOCIOLOGY VIS-A-VIS SOCIAL CHANGE: THE AMERICAN RESPONSE TO FILM MAKER F. TRUFFAUT

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the evolution of the theories of the audiovisual and cinematographical reception in the twentieth century and raises several prospective questions in regard to the study of reception and the sociology of cinema. From the perspective of this research tradition, the example of Truffaut's international appeal and more precisely his success in the United States shows how cinema constitutes an important tool to understand, and even anticipate, socio-cultural developments. The character of Truffaut's success in the United States is based on a double feeling of proximity and distance, as much cinematographical as sociological, that forces us to reflect on very current questions such as identity-alterity or the proliferation of micro-receptions. Finally, Truffaut's work meets the difficult challenge of *controlling* its reception while confronting social, political and artistic realities. Thus, his international success questions how much freedom of interpretation the audience possesses, an increasingly pertinent issue in a world more and more ruled by the media. But Truffaut's universality and posterity question social rationalization and defend a differentialist sociology perfectly adapted to our postmodern societies. Therefore, this study allows us to develop several major prospective points about the studies of reception with regards to what will be at stake in the twenty-first century.

I hazard the guess that man will ultimately be known for a mere polity of multifarious and independent denizens. (R L Stevenson. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.)

Paralleling the changes of our times, which impose contrasting views, one may recover perspective by comparative studies, notably those of the reception of the sociology of art. Knowledge of the cinematographic image depends on a complex mechanism of perception. Barthes (1993) thus affirms,

The image is conveyed by something other than itself, and this something cannot exist except by rapport with the society which produces and consumes it.

The cinema presents an indispensable research tool for understanding the concealed facets of society, the germs of cultural evolution. That is why analyzing the reception of a filmmaker in cultural and historic contexts also requires assessing the impact of a production within the dynamic of contemporary cultures. The objective here is to understand the international success of the French filmmaker Francois Truffaut, as exemplified with his reception by the American public and film critics.

Thirty years after his death, Truffaut retains a remarkable fascination with the cinephiles of the entire world. This engagement of books and essays about the New Wave director is an attempt to illuminate and clarify a very complex product and personality. The works of Truffaut constitute a movement both in time and in space. Few are aware that Truffaut is characterized, before all else, for the incomparable foreign popularity of his work. Celebrated

over the whole world, his work is a European rarity which has touched an international public. Since "Four Hundred Blows" in 1959, Truffaut became the one film maker most appreciated in foreign lands having distinctive cultures which were sometimes, as in the United States, judged indifferent to French cinema (Alfonsi 1997).

The many excursions of Truffaut's works into different cultures demonstrate at which point his cinema is multilingual, modern, and containing the germs of the postmodern. Truffaut has long suffered, especially in France, the image of a conformist, as having betrayed the rebellion of the New Wave. This image has left a more ambivalent interpretation of the Truffaut cinema between an apparent conformity and a more violent, more authentic hidden face (De Baecque, Toubiana 1996; Le Berre 1994). Truffaut's work is, in fact, pluralist in the philosophical and sociological sense of the term. It is also enriched in the multiple artistic, social, and political realities. In its reception in various countries is outlined the profile of filmmaker at the heart of new socio-cultural trends. Contrary to the claim that Truffaut creates a mythical cinema, his films are never fully shorn of realism, nor are they immediately assimilable by the public. The viewer must reconstruct this imagery in terms of his own culture. Truffaut's international popularity responds to a quest for both the familiar and the exotic, which complicates all phenomena of reception. Thus one could read in the *Wall Street Journal* (Gould Boyum 1973),

With Truffaut the cultural barriers tend to be at

the same time more subtle and more obvious... we have to experience Truffaut films in our American perspective.

This demonstrates the impact of Truffaut on the American cinephile. Having often applied the lessons of American cinema, particularly the convergence of the three elements, director, film and public, Truffaut always presents a cinema both foreign and novel. Cinematically and sociologically, the French filmmaker owes his success to a double sense of remoteness and proximity.

In the United States, Truffaut's success increased steadily after the release of "Day for Night" (1973), which established his recognition. It was hailed by the major American film critics of New York: Canby (*New York Times*), Kael (*New Yorker*), Read (*Daily News*), Crist (*New York Magazine*), and Winston (*New York Post*). After 25 week's showing, receipts exceeded one million dollars, equaling those of all other Truffaut films released thus far in the United States. In 1974 in a nationally televised ceremony, Truffaut received the Oscar award best foreign film for "Day for Night." Truffaut admitted (1993), "I owe my de facto success to America for some time past, for in France I have received just average box office results." However, the myth of the Truffaut touch is not solely responsible for his fame and following in the United States. The changed horizon effected by the coming of Truffaut's first films, interacting with the social, political and artistic movements of the 1960's was not proportional to the initial negativity of his increasingly familiar work. The critical reaction to his work brought no change in his polemic and overwhelming productions.

In 1959, at the release of Truffaut's long excursion, "The Four Hundred Blows," the American milieu favored the French director. That film, winning rave reviews, took the prize as best foreign film, earning \$160,000 in eighteen weeks' showing New York. Hollywood had experienced a brutal fall in audience, and grave financial problems at the studios. The foreign marketing thus presented a play of capital. The films of foreign directors such as Truffaut, Felini and Bergman circulated among the best American theaters with a welcome reception. In 1959 there was a net increase in receipts from French films of \$317 million from \$253 million in 1958.

The inversions of the New Wave, notably among the New York critics, created a specific

new type. It created a climate of conversions and challenges characteristic of America of the 1960's, as much in the cultural as in the political domain. There came a dynamic of a will to rebel. It was manifest among intellectuals, and abetted by the Vietnam protest syndrome, signified by the beatnik and hippie movements and the California counter-culture which rejected modern civilization. National interest concentrated on the young, and especially on juvenile delinquents. That spirit, according to *Film Quarterly* (Shatnoff 1963) described Truffaut as "an ex-JD, a slum kid with a slum kid's energy and ability to thumb his nose, and to suffer simultaneously." In this context Truffaut's cinema presents a new vision of things which prides the spectator loose from his habitual judgment, in Hans Jaus's term, a "changed horizon." The fascination of the American critics with Truffaut is well demonstrated by his new delineation of the cinema hero in the film cycle of the protagonist, Antoine Doinel. That character seems more authentic due to the special relation between the director and the actor Leaud, a mutual autobiography of character development.

As described by film critic Canby (1971):

The character Antoine Doinel epitomizes immaturity and rejection of the adult world. Doinel is the eternal adolescent of marginal existence, unready to face the realities of life, at once exuberant and indifferent. This character also creates a rupture of the norms of the American cinema and culture which arouses the interest of American cinephiles. The character calls in question a void in American culture, directed particularly at the Vietnam syndrome, so difficult to understand in terms of good and evil. To the question, 'Why do Americans hate you so much?' Truffaut replied, 'They do not like me. If they do like me, perhaps it is because the public of the campus has had a little too much of the Hollywood heroes; because the Antoine Doinel type, so defenseless in facing life, secretly resembles certain post-Vietnam Americans, fragile and pummeled.'

Doinel is rootless and detached, where the term "detached" is very indicative of the epoch, such as the beat generation or the hippie generation, wishing to bypass the dominant materialism of the time. This cultural detachment is exemplified in the great success of characters portrayed by Marlon Brando and James Dean. It is a condition made up of an

easy-going adaptability, followed at certain times with an explosive surge of internalized passions. In his use of the term "campus" Truffaut stresses that the critics are especially aware of the anti-conformism of the Doinel cycle. It must be remembered that the social and intellectual conflicts about the "American way of life" arise primarily in the universities. Thus, Cary (1969) begins,

In many of its details, "Stolen Kisses" is charming. It is filled with the wry observations and quick jabs of unexpected humor that are characteristic of Truffaut. ... Some admire the film because its point is that nothing really does happen to Antoine.

In fact the university at Berkeley has pioneered the student revolts, in September 1964, against the university system, followed in the spring of 1965 by student revolts at other universities, and in 1967 with demonstrations in Washington against the government. The Berkeley student faction is also largely responsible for the radicalization of the movement in the late 1960's, in a series of political protests fed by the Vietnam controversy. Regarding "Fahrenheit 451" the critic Bluestone (1967) opined,

It is surprising under the circumstances that we know so little about the psychology of institutionalized pyromania. The firemen of the film are an incarnation of men who burn witches (Carl Dreyer's "Passions of Joan of Arc"), crosses (KKK), books (scenes in "Jules and Jim"), Jews (Alain Resnais' "Night and Fog"), to say nothing of the men with napalm and flame throwers in Korea and Vietnam.

The influence of social conflicts in America on the reception of the Truffaut films shows us, contrary to some claims on the French filmmaker, that his works are not in the least disconnected from these social reverberations. They even support the idea of an original creative art. The American critic elevates the reference to the unique style of the filmmaker. He is aware of the thematic leitmotifs. Critic Canby (1975) wrote,

One of the fascinations of the Truffaut career is in watching the way he circles and explores different aspects of the same subjects which dominate almost all films.

Canby has almost always been enthusiastic about these films, always stressing the organization and internal connections of the Truffaut world. The effect is to reinforce the viewer's tendency to develop a perspective of the film, and to be drawn along the author's path.

Can the works of Truffaut become classical, such as an eternal myth by the recognition of the Truffaut touch? Such a myth presupposes that the work is indifferent to social reality, thus excluding any new understanding. But Truffaut's work in no way excludes social and cultural confrontations. He appears as a lucid observer of his epoch, described in the American press as one of the more compassionate, sensitive and insightful modern filmmakers. If the French director sometimes gives the impression of recreating earthly reality, it does not mean that he is beyond the social or political realities of the time. Contrary to what one might think, Truffaut's talent, sometimes called dangerous, never lost its divergent character with the passage of time. His adherence to the anti-conformist style was sustained long after the 1960's and into the 1980's. Such critical analyses increase even the kinds of support in the most popular American reviews, and to be more exact, confer in this dramatic contrast more varied kinds of exploitation, including contrasting patterns of images as well as contrasts in age.

These critical judgments are similarly iterated in the 1980's at the end of Truffaut's career. Canby (1980) described Truffaut's "Last Metro" as

a dazzlingly subversive work ... in the form of a more or less conventional melodrama ... though the film's methods are so systematically unconventional and triumphantly unorthodox.

A year later Canby (1981) wrote,

It is the exhilarating talent of this film maker to be able to define the commonplace in a manner that is not at all commonplace, and thus to find and appreciate the mystery within.... It is typical of Mr. Truffaut's methods that nothing ever happens quite as expected. "The Woman Next Door" is never ordinary or predictable. It is the work of one of the most surprising and accomplished directors of his day.

He referred particularly to the scene with the psychoanalyst. The heroine Mathilde (Fanny Ardant) brusquely cried, "It is just at that

moment that I killed my mother!" The evolution of response of the Truffaut film cult to "Jules and Jim" is also quite revealing. Described in the American press as charming, sick, hilarious, depressing and wise, the film is called an exercise in contradiction.

Thus the Truffaut work is no stranger to social realities which may confront it in the future, and it imposes no limits on the reorientation of the viewer. One cannot anticipate the interplay between a universal cinematic myth and the American culture as a measure of the Truffaut name. His unpredictable effect shows that the universality of his work rests on its capacity to confront simultaneously the social, political and artistic realities of the time. He has succeeded in the challenging endeavor to become enriched in touching on the most diverse social, cultural, and artistic milieus. The international spread of his influence shows that its universal effect is not reducible to the basic principles attached to sociological specifics. Different publics apply their own original interpretation to these films. None the less, the varied confrontation of cultural horizons leads to the responses, and more importantly, to the inherent strategy of the Truffaut work and personality. The filmmaker's success can be traced to the importance he accords to his reception, his agitation of the press, and his urge to play with the public - in short, by posing as the blasphemous author. He is doubtless the only one of his generation to be equally esteemed in Europe and the United States. He has probably exceeded all the great filmmakers by reason of the energy which he has invested personally in the promotion of his films. Truffaut's major success is to have combined the economic market with artistic freedom. This strategy implies neither compromise nor consensus, assuming that the foreign response to Truffaut calls in question certain clichés about his international success.

That is why the spectator must reconstruct the sense of those films into his own culture. This reconstruction allows a play of interlineation permitting Truffaut's work to establish its own benchmarks. These become the stabilizing, affirming elements that sustain this mutual complicity between Truffaut and his public. Finally, his films bring through social, cultural and political realities a cultural identity of reference rather than a barrier that must be surmounted.

In theory we call on the sources of phenom-

enology such as the works of Alfred Schutz or Wolfgang Iser. These theories tie in to that of Karlheinz Steirle, who integrates the action and the locution, as elaborated by Austin with the principle of "the concept of action." In a specifically cinematic perspective we depend on the theories which require interpretative cooperation between film and spectator. It calls for taking into account internal determinants detailed by pragmatic theorist Francesco Casetti, and underscored by Roger Odin's thesis of an active and distinct participation of the viewers.

The sociology of the cinema, far from confining itself to examination of the world of art, comprehends social history and social evaluation as well. Thus it develops perspective through analysis of contemporary societies. The sociology of art can even generate prospective analyses which inscribe the elan of futurology. Thus the foreign reception of Truffaut from the 1950's to the 1990's similarly explains the heritage of the French filmmaker. His work demonstrates particular adaptations to our post-modern societies that impose their contrasting viewpoints. More generally, this research illustrates the contemporary evolution of these entities as becoming more and more multiform and complex. This implies no cultural trend toward uniformity, but a continuing expansion of micro cultures.

Today, in a world increasingly media molded and media led, can the spectator exercise freedom of interpretation? Such is the question posed for the foreigners' reception of Truffaut. In fact the contrasting communication of the film and the viewer, which Michael Pecheux terms the "inter discourse," is less programmable than one might believe. By what he stirs with his cinema, his urge to play with the public, and his relations with the media, Truffaut knows how to blend the doubt and the certitude so as to impose no strain on comprehension. His films put to the test viewpoints that are too logical and too uniform. It is because his work rests at the heart of genuine questions in this end of millenium era, where the problem of identity-otherness becomes more obvious. Consider the reception of Truffaut films in Asia. They were marked by cultural contrasts, comparing them with the Japanese noh theater, Thailand's law of karma and China's Confucian world view. Nevertheless, the public appreciates Truffaut's ability to simplify the cultural relations involved in regard to his films. Public or critical resistance to

certain films in these counties, or their success seems due to actual correspondence with the national culture. Thus, despite its Japanese references, "The Green Room" was not a success in Japan. Inspired by the Japanese approach to death and disaster, Truffaut hoped to catch the Japanese interest with a promotional campaign. On the other hand, equally without intent, "The Green Room" was a spectacular success in New Zealand.

Man has always sought a universal understanding for the rationalization of human society. That assumes a world which is predictable, measurable and controllable. Such systematization is the goal of modern capitalism, which should support a free market, unfretted by irrational constraints. But, under this philosophy, what becomes of human passions, rivalry and contradictions? Any creation of an identity or a special right is also a creation for an opposition. If globalization imposes intercultural barriers, man will evolve only confrontation and dissociation.

Our postmodern societies, marked by the surge of technology and the complex effects of mass media, are generating a striking combination of values and life styles. The reaction of those striving for difference can be drawn by a "thirst for the infinite," to use Emile Durkheim's term, and that is an infinite which our modern civilization assumes the right and the duty to exhaust. These social phenomena, deemed accessory and superficial - sentiments and impressions - are the core of communication. The association of these various human intellects, rational and practical, but also creative, emotional and intuitive, become ever more effective in the complex postmodern societies. As underscored by Georges Braque, "I like the rule which modifies the emotion; I like the emotion which modifies the rule." We rejoin thus the phenomenology of the comprehensive social theorists, Weber, Simmel, Schutz, and Gurwitsch, and more recently, the French sociologist, Michel Maffesoli.

The sociology of art, at the heart of sociological, artistic, ethnographic and cultural approaches, is singularly adapted to contemporary societies, as they become more heterogeneous and more fragmented. Even the "information highway" imposes displacements and virtual encounters which generate multiple identities and complex influences. These connections which unite individuals to the community modify both. We think differently about the institutions by living together.

Multiplying the horizons of discourse constitutes a new challenge for theoreticians of response and the sociology of art. More than ever, as Cicourel and Cicourel (1981) have noted,

A micro sociology cannot pretend to study social interaction as a self-sufficient local product any more than macro theoreticians can ignore micro structures.

The case of Truffaut's international success interrogates the limits of interpretation of a work. What are the initial restrictions, the presumed phenomena which the viewer may not exceed? Apart from that, this study affords a point of departure for a method of sociological analysis and assessment: the analysis of specific or deviant responses. This method is incorporated in my actual preoccupation, of which a part is focused on the interplay of new technology and the cyberculture. It inclines toward the social and the illogical or irrational responses of spectators of the cinema. What are the conditions of acceptance or nonacceptance of these spectators? How can some responses oppose the presumably inevitable progress toward a global society which becomes both predictable and rational?

In the first place, such an approach requires defining the institution which marshals production of the film, and which may or may not find the link between product and public. In addition, one must fix the nature of the correspondence between the context of the response to the film. It then remains to determine the mutual ties that connect the two contexts. How and to what extent can these assessments deviate from their logical paths? How can postmodern societies, through a fragmentation of conflicting identities, permit antisocial acts? And how do these same societies rationalize marginal actions, almost resulting thereby, as Bruno Latour (1991) says, in a "universe of interconnections." These questions constitute a new direction in sociology, to the intersection of the arts, theory and social change.

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