

FRANÇOIS
TRUFFAUT

LES FILMS DE MA VIE



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The Films in My Life

by François Truffaut

translated by
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Diversion Books
A Division of Diversion Publishing Corp.
443 Park Avenue South, Suite 1008
New York, NY 10016
www.DiversionBooks.com

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First Diversion Books edition August 2014

ISBN: 978-1-62681-396-0

For Jacques Rivette

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[Films by Franois Truffaut](#)

François Truffaut (1932-1984)

François Truffaut was born in Paris on February 6, 1932. He left school at fourteen to work as a welder and at a variety of other jobs. From his youth, movies were his great interest. Truffaut began a career as a journalist which was interrupted by military service in 1951. In 1953 he returned to civilian life, and with the help of his friend and adviser, the film critic André Bazin, began to publish his sharply critical movie reviews in *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Arts*.

In 1955 Truffaut made his first short film. His first feature-length film was *The 400 Blows*, a partly autobiographical work about a young boy. It was awarded the 1959 Cannes Film Festival Grand Prize for Direction, the New York Film Critics Award for the year's best foreign film, and a host of additional prizes. Other highly acclaimed films followed, at the rate of almost one a year. They dealt with the stronger emotions, and chiefly love, presented in a variety of modes: farcical, lyrical, passionate.

In addition to writing screenplays and directing, Truffaut often acted in films. He continued to write criticism and was the author of *Hitchcock* and *The Films in My Life*, a collection of critical pieces.

Truffaut was a leader of the group of French film makers known as the New Wave, and was one of the most important directors in the history of the cinema. He was, as Vincent Canby wrote in *The New York Times*, "a quiet revolutionary who worked in conventional modes to make most unconventional films." He died near Paris on October 21, 1984.

I believe a work is good to the degree that it expresses the man who created it.

ORSON WELLES

These books were alive and they spoke to me.

HENRY MILLER,

The Books in My Life

What Do Critics Dream About?

One day in 1942, I was so anxious to see Marcel Carné's *Les Visiteurs du Soir*, which at last had arrived at my neighborhood theater, the Pigalle, that I decided to skip school. I liked it a lot. But that same evening, my aunt, who was studying violin at the Conservatory, came by to take me to a movie; she had picked *Les Visiteurs du Soir*. Since I didn't dare admit that I had already seen it, I had to go and pretend that I was seeing it for the first time. That was the first time I realized how fascinating it can be to probe deeper and deeper into a work one admires, that the exercise can go so far as to create the illusion of reliving the creation.

A year later, Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* turned up; it fascinated me even more. I must have seen it five or six times between the time of its release (May 1943) and the Liberation, when it was prohibited. Later, when it was once again allowed to be shown, I used to go to see it several times a year. Eventually I knew the dialogue by heart. The talk was very adult compared to the films I had seen, with about a hundred words whose meaning I only gradually figured out. Since the plot of *Le Corbeau* revolved around an epidemic of anonymous letters denouncing abortion, adultery and various other forms of corruption, the film seemed to me to be a fairly accurate picture of what I had seen around me during the war and the postwar period: collaboration, denunciation, the black market, hustling, cynicism.

I saw my first two hundred films on the sly, playing hooky and slipping into the movie house without paying—through the emergency exit or the washroom window—or by taking advantage of my parents' going out for an evening (I had to be in bed, pretending to be asleep, when they came home). I paid for these great pleasures with stomachaches, cramps, nervous headaches and guilty feelings, which only heightened the emotions evoked by the films.

I felt a tremendous need to enter *into* the films. I sat closer and closer to the screen so I could shut out the theater. I passed up period films, war movies and Westerns because they were more difficult to identify with. That left mysteries and love stories. Unlike most moviegoers my own age, I didn't identify with the heroes, but with the underdog and, in general, with any character who was in the wrong. That's why Alfred Hitchcock's movies devoted to fear, won me over from the start; and after Hitchcock, Jean Renoir whose work was directed toward understanding... "The terrible thing is that everyone has his own reasons" (*Règle du Jeu*). The door was wide open, and I was ready for Jean Vigo, Jean Cocteau, Sacha Guitry, Orson Welles, Marcel Pagnol, Ernst Lubitsch, Charlie Chaplin, of course, and all the others who, without being immoral, "doubt the morality of others" (*Hiroshima, mon amour*).

I am often asked at what point in my love affair with films I began to want to be a director or critic. Truthfully, I don't know. All I know is that I wanted to get closer and closer to films.

The first step involved seeing lots of movies; secondly, I began to note the name of the director as I left the theater. In the third stage I saw the same films over and over and began making choices as to what I would have done, if I had been the director. At that period of my life, movies acted on me like a drug. The film club I founded in 1947 was called—somewhat pretentiously but revealingly—the Movie-mania Club. Sometimes I saw the same film four or five times within a month and could still not recount the story line correctly because, at one moment or another, the swelling of the music, a chase through the night, the actress's tears would intoxicate me, make me lose track of what was going on, carry me away from the rest of the movie.

In August 1951, ill and a prisoner of the Service des Détenus in a military hospital (they handcuffed us even when we went to the shower or to pee), I flew into a rage when, lying in my bed, I read in a newspaper that Orson Welles had been forced to withdraw his *Othello* from the Venice competition because, at the insistence of his backers, he wasn't allowed to risk losing to the British superproduction of Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*.

A lovely time of life—when one cares more about the fate of those we admire than about one's own. More than two decades later, I still love movies, but no film can occupy my mind more than the one I'm writing, preparing, shooting, editing. I've lost the film-lover's generosity, so arrogant and overwhelming that at times it can fill one with embarrassment and confusion.

I have not been able to find my first article, published in 1950 in the *Bulletin of the Film Club of the Latin Quarter*. I remember it was about *La Règle du Jeu*. The original version of the film—including fourteen scenes we had never seen—had just been discovered and shown. In my article I carefully enumerated the differences between the two versions, which was probably what led André Bazin to suggest that I help him research a book on Renoir that he was planning.

By encouraging me from 1953 on to write, Bazin did me a great favor. Having to analyze and describe one's pleasure may not automatically change an amateur into a professional, but it does lead one back to the concrete and...to that ill-defined area where the critic works. The accompanying risk is that one may lose one's enthusiasm; fortunately, that didn't happen to me. In a piece on *Citizen Kane* I was at pains to explain how the same film might be viewed differently by a movie lover, a journalist, a filmmaker. This was as true of Renoir's work as it was of the big American movies.

Was I a good critic? I don't know. But one thing I am sure of is that I was always on the side of those who were hissed and against those who were hissing; and that my enjoyment

often began where that of others left off: Renoir's changes of tone, Orson Welles's excesses, Pagnol's or Guitry's carelessness, Bresson's nakedness. I think there was no trace of snobbery in my tastes. I always agreed with Audiberti: "The most obscure poem is addressed to everybody." Whether or not they were called commercial, I knew that all movies were commodities to be bought and sold. I saw plenty of differences in degree, but not in kind. I felt the same admiration for Kelly and Donen's *Singin' in the Rain* as for Carl Dreyer's *Ordet*.

I still find any hierarchy of kinds of movies both ridiculous and despicable. When Hitchcock made *Psycho*—the story of a sometime thief stabbed to death in her shower by the owner of a motel who had stuffed his mother's corpse—almost all the critics agreed that its subject was trivial. The same year, under Kurosawa's influence, Ingmar Bergman shot exactly the same theme (*The Virgin Spring*) but he set it in fourteenth-century Sweden. Everybody went into ecstasy and Bergman won an Oscar for best foreign film. Far be it from me to begrudge him his prize; I want only to emphasize that it was exactly the same subject (in fact it was a more or less conscious transposition of Charles Perrault's famous story "Little Red Riding Hood"). The truth is that in these two films, Bergman and Hitchcock each expressed part of his own violence with skill and freed himself of it.

Let me also cite the example of Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*, which is still discussed as if it were a tragedy about unemployment in postwar Italy, although the problem of unemployment is not really addressed in this beautiful film. It shows us simply—like an Arabic tale, as Cocteau observed—a man who absolutely *must* find his bicycle, exactly as the woman of the world in *The Earrings of Madame de... must* again find her earrings. I reject the idea that *The Virgin Spring* and *Bicycle Thief* are noble and serious, while *Psycho* and *Madame de...* are "entertainments." All four films are noble and serious, and all four are entertainments.

When I was a critic, I thought that a successful film had simultaneously to express an idea of the world and an idea of cinema; *La Règle du Jeu* and *Citizen Kane* corresponded to this definition perfectly. Today, I demand that a film express either the *joy of making cinema* or the *agony of making cinema*. I am not at all interested in anything in between; I am not interested in all those films that do not pulse.

The time has come to admit that it seems much more difficult to be a film critic today than it was in my time. A boy such as I was, who is learning on the job to be a professional writer and who is working by instinct rather than out of any real cultural base, probably would not be able to get his first articles printed.

André Bazin could not write today that "All films are born free and equal." Film production, like book publishing, has become diversified and specialized. During the war

Clouzot, Carné, Delannoy, Christian-Jaque, Henri Decoin, Cocteau and Bresson addressed the same public. This is no longer true. Today few films are conceived for the “general” public—people who wander into a movie theater by chance, attracted simply by the stills at the entrance.

Today, in America, people make films that are directed to minorities—blacks, Irish; there are karate films, surfing films, movies for children and for teen-agers. There is one great difference between the productions of today and those of former days: Jack Warner, Darryl Zanuck, Louis B. Mayer, Carl Laemmle and Harry Cohn loved the films they produced and took pride in them; today the owners of major companies are often disgusted by the sex-and-violence films they throw into the market so they won't be left behind by the competition.

When I was a critic, films were often more alive though less “intelligent” and “personal” than today. I put the words in quotes precisely because I hold that there was no lack of intelligent directors at that time, but that they were induced to mask their personalities so as to preserve a universality in their films. Intelligence stayed behind the camera; it didn't try to be in evidence on the screen. At the same time, it must be admitted that more important and profound things were said around the dinner table in real life than were reflected in the dialogue of the films that were being made, and that more daring things took place in bedrooms and elsewhere than in the movies' love scenes. If we had known life only through the movies, we could quite believe that babies came from a kiss on the lips with the mouth closed.

All that is changed; not only has cinema caught up with life in the past fifteen years, sometimes it seems to have gone beyond it. Films have become more intelligent—or rather intellectual—than those who look at them. Often we need instructions to tell whether the images on the screen are intended as reality or fantasy, past or future; whether it is a question of real action or imagination.

As for erotic or pornographic films, without being a passionate fan I believe they are a form of expiation, or at least in payment of a debt that we owe for sixty years of cinematographic lies about love. I am one of the thousands of his readers who was not only entranced but helped through life by the work of Henry Miller, and I suffered at the idea that cinema lagged so far behind his books as well as behind reality. Unhappily, I still cannot cite an erotic film that is the equivalent of Henry Miller's writing (the best films, from Bergman to Bertolucci, have been pessimistic), but, after all, freedom for the cinema is still quite new. Also, we must consider that the starkness of images poses far more difficult problems than those posed by the written word.

As film production has continued to diversify, criticism has tended to specialize; one critic understands and is skillful at analyzing political films, another, literary films, a third, plotless

or experimental films, etc. The quality of films has indeed progressed but sometimes less than they aspired to. There is often a large gap between a film's intentions and its achievement. If the critic considers only a film's intentions, he will praise it to the heavens; if he is conscious of form and demanding about its execution, he will criticize the achievement in proportion to its ambitions, which he may find pretentious.

It used to be much easier to achieve unanimity among both critics and the public. Out of ten films, only one had artistic ambitions, and it was hailed by all the critics, though not always by the public. The other nine were pure entertainment and the critics would praise two or three, for the demand (both for pleasure and quality) was greater than the supply. Today almost all films are ambitious, and their producers are often unconcerned about profits because those who think only of profits (I speak of Europe) have turned to other activities such as real estate.

So today the critic's function is delicately balanced, and frankly I am not sorry to have moved to the other side of the barricade, to be among those judged. But what is a critic?

They say in Hollywood, "Everyone has two trades—his own and reviewing movies." We can either rejoice in that or complain about it. For some time I have rejoiced, for I prefer this state of affairs to the solitude and indifference in which musicians and painters live and work.

Anyone can be a film critic. The apprentice supposedly need not possess a tenth of the knowledge that would be demanded of a critic of literature, music or painting. A director must live with the fact that his work will be called to judgment by someone who has never seen his film of Murnau's.

Every person on the editorial staff of a newspaper feels he can question the opinion of the movie columnist. The editor-in-chief, who shows careful respect to his music critic, will casually stop the movie critic in the corridor: "Well, you really knocked Louis Malle's last film. My wife doesn't agree with you at all; she loved it."

Unlike the American reviewer, the French critic counts himself a man with a mission to dispense justice; like God—or Zeus, if he is an unbeliever—he wants to humble the powerful and exalt the weak. First, there is the typical European phenomenon of a distrust of success. In addition, the foremost concern of the French critic to justify his function in his own eyes induces in him a strong desire to be useful. Sometimes he manages to be so.

Today, since the "new wave" and its extension, good films come not only from five or six countries but from everywhere in the world. The critic must strive to give the widest possible exposure to all important films. One film may be showing in twenty theaters in Paris; another in a studio with ninety seats. One film has an advertising budget of \$100,000; another with

have one-tenth of that. The situation creates great injustices, and it is understandable that critics take this fact into account so seriously, even at the risk of irritating people in the movie industry.

I am very familiar with the French critic as protester, off to tilt at the windmills of the Gaumont Théâtre chain; the constant spoiler who breaks up the game. I know him very well: it was he, or at least one of them, from 1954 to 1958, always ready to defend the widow Dovzhenko, Bresson the orphan. I had noticed, for example, at the Cannes Festival in 1954 that the flower vases placed in front of the screen to add a festive air were arranged to offer the best effect for the official spectators in the balcony, but that they blocked the subtitles for the mere movie lovers in the first ten rows of the orchestra. That was all I needed to call the directors of the Festival a lot of bad names. They grew so tired of my incessant attacks that eventually they asked my editor-in-chief to send another reporter the following year. I was back in Cannes in 1959 for the Festival, but I was seated in the balcony for *Les Quatre Cent Coups (The 400 Blows)*. From that perspective I could appreciate unreservedly the lovely effect of the flowers in front of the screen...

Since I've been a director I have made it a point not to go too long without writing about films. Doubling in brass as a critic-movie-maker has given me the boldness to examine the situation from the heights, like a Fabrice who might have had the luck to fly over Waterloo in a helicopter.

American critics seem better to me than the European critics. But, even as I advance such a hypothesis, I ask the reader to keep me from bad faith. By a simple law of life, we quite easily adopt notions that serve our purpose. And it is true that American critics have been more positive about my films than my compatriots have been. So watch out. In any case, I shall push the point forward. The American critic is usually a graduate of a journalism school and more visibly professional than his French counterpart. You can see it in the methodical way he conducts an interview. Because of the wide distribution of American newspapers, the American critic is well paid. That is a not inconsiderable point. He doesn't feel that he has to live by his wits. Even if he doesn't publish books, or have a second trade, he can manage, and he doesn't feel as if he belongs to a different social class from those in the film industry. As a consequence, he is not tempted as a matter of course to distance himself from a mammoth production like *The Godfather*, to identify himself automatically with the marginal author who is struggling against the disdain of the large Hollywood studios. Having a certain peace of mind, he is able to simply relate what he sees. In France it has become customary to see the director attend press screenings of his film and wait calmly at the exit after the showing. The

would be unthinkable in New York; it would have the makings of a public scandal.

What the Hollywood filmmakers generally complain about in the New York critics is that they give preference over domestic productions to little films from Europe that in their original subtitled versions will generally reach only students and cultivated people in the major cities.

There is some merit to the complaint, but the preference is quite understandable. And indeed, many American moviemakers benefit from the reverse impulse when they arrive in Europe, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere in this book when I recall the fanaticism of us French movie lovers displayed when the first American films reached us after the Liberation. It is still true today, and I believe it is a normal reaction. We always appreciate better what comes to us from afar, not only because of the attraction of the exotic but because the absence of everyday references reinforces the prestige of a work. A new movie by Claude Chabrol will not be seen in the same light in New York as in Paris. The Paris critic brings impressions with him that are extrinsic to the film. Writers will refer to the filmmaker's appearances on television, the critical and commercial success, or lack of it, of his last film, gossip about his private life, maybe his politics. Six months later, the same Chabrol film will arrive in New York unencumbered by these peripheral considerations, and the American critics will judge the film and *only* the film. We don't have to look any further for reasons why we always feel better understood outside our own country.

"People of the world are so imbued with their own stupidity that they can never believe that one of their own has talent. They appreciate only people of letters who are not of the world." So Marcel Proust wrote to Mme. Straus.

What this amounts to is that if we are uninvolved with the artist, we judge with considerably more sympathy what he does rather than what he is; more exactly, if we are involved, what he is—and what we know about him—intrudes itself between his work and our judgment. It must also be added that a film seldom arrives all on its own; it is part of a larger environment, maybe a style, or a seeming series. If three films come out in Paris in the same month, and all are set in the same period—for example, the Occupation—or in the same place—Saint Tropez—woe to the one that follows the first two, even if it is the best of the lot.

By the same token, I had to live in America for a while to understand why Alfred Hitchcock had been so underestimated there for so long. From morning to night, on American television, there is murder, brutality, suspense, espionage, guns, blood. None of these gross and manipulative productions approaches a fraction of the beauty of a film by the maker of *Psycho*, but it is the *same material*, and so I can understand in that violent atmosphere what a breath of fresh air an Italian comedy, a French love story, a Czechoslovak intimist film must be.

No artist ever accepts the critic's role on a profound level. In his early period he avoids thinking about it, probably because criticism is more useful to and also more tolerant of beginners. With time, artist and critic settle into their respective roles; maybe they grow to know each other, and soon they consider each other, if not exactly adversaries, in some simplistic image—cat and dog.

Once an artist is recognized as such, he stubbornly refuses to admit that criticism has a role to play. If he does admit it, he wants it to draw closer to him, to make use of it. He is wrong. The artist reproaches critics with bad faith, but he is often guilty of the same bad faith. I found the repeated attacks of General de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou on the press too awful not to apply the lessons to artistic criticism. The most regrettable ploy of the public man consists in trying to have it both ways: "First of all, I despise the press; secondly, I don't read it."

The susceptible person is so eaten up by egoism that he would likely be unsatisfied even with a favorable review, if it also showed indulgence to others. There is no great artist who has not given in, at one time or another, to the temptation of attacking criticism of his work, but I believe that this has been held to be a fault, a weakness, even when it comes from Flaubert: "There has never been a good review since the day the first one was written." (Cited from Ingmar Bergman, who once slapped a Stockholm reviewer.)

It took a certain daring for Sainte-Beuve to write, as Sacha Guitry reminds us, "Monsieur de Balzac seems determined to end as he has begun: with one hundred volumes that no one will read." But we see how time has dealt with Sainte-Beuve and Balzac.

I would consider an artist courageous when, without disparaging the role of criticism, he could disagree with it even when it favored him. That is opposition on principle; it clarifies. That artist could wait for attacks without flinching, and could respond to them with the same openness. Instead, we note a depressing situation where artists begin the dispute only when they have been disagreed with. Bad faith, if there is bad faith, is never all on one side. When a very gifted French filmmaker presents each of his films as his "first real film," and states that those that preceded it were merely tentative exercises of which he is now ashamed, how is the critic who has supported his work from the beginning supposed to feel?

A simple question to those who rail against unfavorable reviews: Would you prefer to take your chances that the critics will never mention you, that your work will not be the subject of a single printed line? Yes or no?

We must not make exaggerated demands on critics, and particularly we must not expect that criticism can function as an exact science. Art is not scientific; why should criticism be?

The main complaint against some critics—and a certain type of criticism—is that too seldom do they speak about *cinema* as such. The scenario of a film is not *the* film; all films are

not *psychological*. Every critic should take to heart Jean Renoir's remark, "All great art is abstract." He should learn to be aware of form, and to understand that certain artists, for example Dreyer or Von Sternberg, never sought to make a picture that resembled reality.

When I met Julien Duvivier a little while before his death, and after I had just shot my first film, I tried to get him to admit—he was always complaining—that he had had a fine career, varied and full, and that all things considered he had achieved great success and ought to be contented. "Sure, I would feel happy...if there hadn't been any reviews." This remark was undeniably sincere, stupefied me. I told Duvivier that when I had been a critic and had insulted Yves Allegret, Jean Delannoy, André Cayatte, even Duvivier himself, I was always aware, deep down, that I was like a cop directing traffic on the Place de l'Opéra as the shells fell on Verdun.

This was the image that came to me, because the expression "trial by fire" is justly applied to each artist on the day his work, which is part of himself, is handed over to the public for judgment.

The artist, in a sense, creates himself, makes *himself* interesting, and then places himself on display. It is a fabulous privilege, but only provided he accepts the opposite side of the coin: the risk involved in being studied, analyzed, notated, judged, criticized, disagreed with.

Those who do the judging—I testify from experience—are cognizant of the enormous privilege of the act of creation, of the risks incurred by the one who exposes himself thus, and in turn feel a *secret* admiration and respect which would at least partially restore the artist's peace of mind if he could know it. "You cannot write a great article on what someone else has created; that's criticism," said Boris Vian.

In the relations between artist and critic, everything takes place in terms of power, and curiously, the critic never loses sight of the fact that in the power relationship he is the weaker even if he tries to hide the fact with an aggressive tone; while the artist constantly loses sight of his metaphysical supremacy. The artist's lack of perspective can be attributed to emotionalism, sensitivity (or sentimentality), and certainly to the more or less powerful doses of paranoia that seems to be his lot.

An artist always believes that the critics are against him—and have always been against him—because his selective memory benignly favors his persecution complex.

When I went to Japan to present one of my films, a number of reporters talked to me about Julien Duvivier, because his *Poil de Carotte* had remained one of their favorite films over the years. When I was in Los Angeles in 1974, a great Hollywood actress told me that she would give anything to have the music of *Carnet de Bal* on a cassette. I wish I could have to

Duvivier this, while he was still alive.

The artist should also keep another consideration in mind—reputation. He should not confuse the criticism of one film with the reputation it gains over the years. Aside from *Citizen Kane*, all of Orson Welles's films were severely criticized in their day, too poor or too baroque, crazy, too Shakespearean or not sufficiently so. Nevertheless, in the end, Welles's reputation throughout the world is secure. The same goes for Buñuel and Bergman, who were often unjustly criticized both at home and abroad.

Daily or weekly criticism is egalitarian, and this is to be expected. Anatole Litvak is as important as Charlie Chaplin; since they are equal before God, they must also be so before criticism. But time is the element that will put all that right. And movie lovers will come to see films at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Cinémathèque in Paris, as well as at thousands of art and experimental movie houses throughout the world. So things are all right after all, and I shall wind up my defense of criticism by observing that excessively kind notices, coming from all sides and lasting a career, can sterilize an artist more effectively than the cold shower that wakes one up to real life. That must have been what Jean Paulhan had in mind when he wrote, "Bad reviews preserve an author better than alcohol preserves a piece of fruit."

Until the day he dies, an artist doubts himself deeply, even while he is being showered with his contemporaries' praise. When he tries to protect himself from attack or indifference, is his work he defends or treats as if it were a threatened child or is it himself? Marcel Proust answered it this way: "I am so convinced that a work is something that, once it has come forth from us, is worth more than we are, that I find it quite natural to sacrifice myself for it as a father would for his child. But this idea must not lead me to address others about what I can, unfortunately, only interest me."

The truth is that we are so vulnerable at the moment that we expose the result of a year's work to scrutiny that it would take nerves of steel to accept a hailstorm of bad reviews with equanimity, even if, in two or three years, our own perspective will bring us closer to the critics' verdict and make us aware that we failed to blend the mayonnaise. I use the word "mayonnaise" deliberately. When I was twenty, I argued with André Bazin for comparing films to mayonnaise—they either emulsified or did not. "Don't you see," I protested, "that all Hawks's films are good, and all Huston's are bad?" I later modified this harsh formula when I had become a working critic: "The worst Hawks film is more interesting than Huston's best." This will be remembered as "la politique des auteurs" (the *auteur* theory); it was started by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* and is forgotten in France, but still discussed in American periodicals.

Today many of these Hawksians and Hustonians are movie directors. I don't know whether any of them think of that ancient argument any more, but I feel sure we've all adopted Bazin's mayonnaise theory because actually making films has taught us a lot:

It is as much trouble to make a bad film as a good one.

Our most sincere film can seem phony.

The films we do with our left hands may become worldwide hits.

A perfectly ordinary movie with energy can turn out to be better cinema than a film with "intelligent" intentions listlessly executed.

The result rarely matches the effort.

Cinematic success is not necessarily the result of good brain work, but of a harmony of existing elements in ourselves that we may not have even been conscious of: a fortunate fusion of subject and our deeper feelings, an accidental coincidence of our own preoccupations at a certain moment of life and the public's.

Many things.

We think that criticism should play an *intermediary* role between the artist and the public and that is sometimes the case. We think that criticism should play a *complementary* role, and that is sometimes the case. But most of the time, criticism is only one element among other elements: advertising, the general atmosphere, competition, timing. When a film achieves a certain amount of success, it becomes a sociological event and the question of its quality becomes secondary. An American critic wrote that "To review *Love Story* would be like reviewing vanilla ice cream." The frankest words about this kind of movie come definitively from Hollywood. When a director has a great success with a film that has been panned, he tells the critics: "Gentlemen, I cried all the way to the bank."

The public's desire to see a film—its power to attract—is a stronger motivation than the power of any criticism. Universally favorable reviews couldn't get people into the theaters. I can see Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard* (about deportation), Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Vida Seca* (about the famine and drought in Brazil), or Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (about a soldier who has lost his legs, arms, sight and speech). These examples suggest two interpretations: The filmmaker is wrong in believing his enemy to be the producer, the theater manager, or the critic; these genuinely want the film to be successful. The real enemy is the public, whose resistance is so hard to overcome. This theory has the merit of being nondemagogic, for it's always easy to flatter the public, the mysterious public that nobody can identify, and it is easy to inveigh against people of wealth who love to produce, distribute, and exploit all the films they are involved with, including the above.

The second interpretation holds that there exists, in the very idea of cinematic spectacle, the promise of pleasure, an idea of exaltation that runs counter to the downward spiral of life that

goes through infirmity and old age to death. I am using shorthand and, of course, oversimplifying: the spectacle moves upward, life downward. If we accept this vision, we will say that the spectacle, as opposed to journalism, has a mission to deceive, but that the greatest of those who create such spectacles do not resort to lies but instead get the public to accept their truth, all without breaking the law that the spectacle must represent the rising movement. Both their truth and their madness are accepted, for we must never forget that an artist imposes his madness on an audience less mad, or at least unaware of its madness.

It might help to cite an example. Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* was a worldwide success though it had all the elements of failure, including the sight of the slow torture of a woman dying of cancer—everything the public refuses to look at. But the film's formal perfection, especially the use of red in the decor of the house, constituted the element of exaltation—I would even say the element of pleasure—so that the public immediately sensed that it was watching a masterpiece. And it made up its mind to look at it with an artist's complicity and admiration that balanced and compensated for the trauma of Harriet Andersson's cries and her groans of agony. Others of Bergman's films, no less beautiful, were treated coolly by the public—and perhaps all they lacked were the red walls. For an artist like Bergman there will always be a core of faithful viewers in every great city of the world—an encouragement for him to continue his work.

Now, I must come to the content of this book. It contains a selection of articles I have written since 1954 for various newspapers and magazines. In the period between 1954 and 1958 there are, first, articles I wrote as a journalist and then articles I wrote as a director. The distinction is important. Once I became a director, I did not criticize my colleagues' work but only wrote about it as desire and opportunity dictated.

This book contains about a sixth of what I have written. The choice can be criticized, but it is my own. I have included very few bad reviews, even though I had the reputation at the time of being the "demolisher of French cinema." What purpose would be served by publishing diatribes against forgotten films? Let me quote Jean Renoir: "I considered that the world, and especially the cinema, was burdened with false gods. My task was to overthrow them. Sword in hand, I was ready to consecrate my life to the task. But the false gods are still there. My perseverance during a half-century of cinema has perhaps helped to topple a few of them. It has likewise helped me to discover that some of the gods were real, and had no need to be toppled."

I have preferred to publish favorable or enthusiastic articles, even when they are less good, about films that are still shown or that were made by important directors.

Some of these articles have never been previously published; happily, I have always written for my own pleasure or to clarify my ideas. Others are syntheses of different texts on the same film because at a certain time I wrote regularly, under my own name and various pseudonyms, for a number of publications: weeklies such as *Arts*, *Radio-Cinéma*, *Le Bulletin de Paris*; monthlies such as *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, *La Parisienne*; and a marginal daily, *Le Temps de Paris*. It was the first happy period of my life; I was going to the movies and talking about them, and somebody was paying me to do it. I was finally earning enough money to do nothing from morning to night but what I enjoyed, and I appreciated it all the more because I had just gone through seven or eight years of trying to find enough money to eat every day and pay my rent.

Part One, “The Big Secret,” is devoted to directors who began with silent films and continued into the era of talking pictures. They have something *extra*. Jean Renoir, in *Ma Vie et mes Films*, describes the fascination this generation holds for its juniors. “I am pursued by the insistent questions of young colleagues for whom everything that preceded the talking film seems as distant and mysterious as the movement of the great glaciers in the prehistoric period. We elders enjoy a respect analogous to what the modern artist feels in front of the graffiti of the caves of Lascaux. The comparison is flattering and brings us the satisfaction of knowing that we weren’t wasting film.”

Some texts in this chapter are obituaries and have not been previously published: Carl Dreyer, John Ford. About Ford I have had a complete turnabout. When I was a critic, I hardly liked anything of his and I wrote two or three vicious articles about him. I had to become a director and watch *The Quiet Man* on television to realize one day how blind I had been. Then I saw, or saw again, many of his films, and today I have the same respect for Ford as I have for Jean Giono.

The articles on Jean Renoir and Luis Buñuel are also previously unpublished. The long piece on Jean Vigo was intended as a preface to an edition of his complete works—this has not yet been published. The article on Frank Capra was written for an American collection.

In “The Generation of the Talkies” (Parts Two and Three), once again I had to make a choice. In order not to disappoint those who like negative reviews, I kept a few in Part Three that seemed well thought through: *Monsieur Ripois*, *Le Ballon Rouge*, *Arsène Lupin*—though today I prefer the articles that are full of praise. They are infinitely more difficult to write and more interesting after the passage of time. When I was enthusiastic about a film, I often wrote

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