



A CERTAIN TENDENCY OF THE FRENCH CINEMA

by Francois Truffaut - originally printed in 'Cahiers du Cinéma', 1954

It would be nice to think that the meaning of the word 'art' can make men aware of the greatness they do not recognise in themselves. --- Andre Malraux, 'Le Temps do mepris/ Days of Contempt', preface

The sole aim of the notes that follow is to try to define a certain tendency in the French cinema — a tendency known as that of 'psychological realism' — and to suggest its limitations.

Ten to twelve films ...

Although the French cinema is represented by 100 or so films per year, it goes without saying that a mere ten to twelve of them deserve to attract the attention of critics and cinephiles, and therefore the attention of *Cahiers du cinéma*.

These ten to twelve movies represent what has been aptly described as 'the Tradition of Quality': their ambitiousness inevitably elicits the admiration of the foreign press, and they defend France's colours twice a year at Cannes and Venice, where they have fairly regularly scooped up awards such as the Grand Prix and the Golden Lion since 1946.

At the beginning of the talkies era, the French cinema was an honest carbon copy of the American cinema. Under the influence of *Scarface*, we made the amusing *Pépé le Moko*. Then French scriptwriting developed significantly thanks to Jacques Prévert: *Le Quai des brumes (Port of Shadows)* remains the masterpiece of the so-called 'poetic realism' school. The Second World War and the post-war period saw a renewal of our cinema, which developed under the effect of internal pressures; and poetic realism — which could be said to have expired when it closed *Les Portes de la nuit (Gates of the Night)* behind it — was replaced by 'psychological realism', as illustrated by the films of Claude Autant-Lara, Jean Delannoy, René Clément, Yves Allégret and Marcello Pagliero.

Scriptwriters' films



Pierre Blanchard and Michèle Morgan in "La symphonie pastorale", 1946

Remembering that Delannoy once made *Le Bossu* and *La Part de l'ombre (Blind Desire)*, Autant-Lara *Le Plombier amoureux* (the French-language version of Buster Keaton's *The Passionate Plumber*) and *Lettres d'amour (Love Letters)*, and Allégret *La Boite aux rêves* and *Les Démons de l'aube (Dawn Devils)*, and that it is rightly accepted that those films were strictly commercial enterprises, we have to admit that, since the success or failure of such film-makers is governed by the scripts they choose, then *La Symphonie pastorale (Pastoral Symphony)*, *Le Diable au corps (Devil in the Flesh)*, *Jeux interdits (Forbidden Games)*, *Manège (The Riding School)* and *Un homme marche dans la ville (A Man Walks in the City)* are essentially scriptwriters' films.

And is it not true that the French cinema's undeniable progress has been due mainly to a *renewal* of scriptwriters and themes, to the *liberties* taken with accepted masterpieces, and, lastly, to confidence that audiences will be receptive to themes generally regarded as difficult? That is why I will restrict my remarks solely to scriptwriters, those very people who were behind the emergence of poetic realism in the

Tradition of Quality movement, namely Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, Jacques Sigurd, Henri Jeanson (in his second manner), Robert Scipion, Roland Laudenbach and others.

No one is any longer unaware of the fact that ...

After first trying his hand at direction with two now forgotten short films, Jean Aurenche started specialising in adaptations for the screen. In 1936, he and the playwright Jean Anouilh wrote the dialogue of Léo Joannon's *Vous n'avez rien à déclarer? (Confessions of a Newly-Wed)* and Christian-Jaque's *Les Dégourdis de la Hème*.

At about the same time, some excellent little novels by Pierre Bost were being published by the *Nouvelle revue française (NRF)*. Aurenche and Bost teamed up for the first time when they adapted and wrote the dialogue of *Douce (Love Story)*, directed by Autant-Lara.

Everyone now realises that Aurenche and Bost rehabilitated the art of adaptation by challenging the notion of what was generally meant by it; in other words they are said to have replaced the old prejudice that required one to be faithful to the letter by the opposite requirement to be faithful to the spirit — to the point where the following audacious aphorism was coined: 'An honest adaptation is a betrayal' (Carlo Rim, *Travelling et sex-appeal*).

Equivalence ...

The touchstone of adaptation as practised by Aurenche and Bost is the so-called process of equivalence. This process takes for granted that in the novel being adapted there are filmable and unfilmable scenes, and that instead of scrapping the latter (as used to be done) you had to think up equivalent scenes; in other words ones that the author of the novel might have written for the screen. 'Inventing without betraying' is the watchword that Aurenche and Bost liked to cite, forgetting that one can also betray by omission. Aurenche and Bost's system is so appealing in the very formulation of its principle that no one has ever thought of examining in detail how it works. This is more or less what I intend to do here.

Aurenche and Bost's entire reputation is based on two specific points:

1. *Faithfulness* to the spirit of the works they adapt;
2. The talent they put into the task.

That celebrated faithfulness ...

Since 1943, Aurenche and Bost have together been responsible for the screen adaptation and dialogue of the following novels: Michel Davet's *Douce*, André Gide's *La Symphonie pastorale*, Raymond Radiguet's *Le Diable au corps*, Henri Queffélec's *Un recteur de l'île de Sein (Dieu a besoin des hommes / God Needs Men)*, Francois Boyer's *Les Jeux inconnus (Jeux interdits)* and Colette's *Le Blé en herbe (The Game of Love)*.

In addition they wrote an adaptation of Georges Bernanos's novel, *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne (Diary of a Country Priest)*, which was never filmed, a script about Joan of Arc, only part of which has just been filmed (by Delannoy [the 'Jeanne' episode of *Destinées (Daughters of Destiny)*]),¹ and the script and dialogue of *L'Auberge rouge (The Red Inn)*, directed by Autant-Lara.



Francois Boyer's "*Les Jeux inconnus (Jeux interdits)*, 1952

The great diversity of inspiration displayed by the works and writers they have adapted will be obvious to all. Anyone capable of bringing off the *tour de force* required to remain faithful to the spirit of Davet, Gide, Radiguet, Queffelec, Boyer, Colette and Bernanos would, I imagine, need to possess a most unusual mental agility and a multiple personality, as well as a singular spirit of eclecticism.

It also has to be remembered that Aurenche and Bost have worked with a wide range of directors. Delannoy, for example, likes to see himself as a mystical moralist. But the petty vileness of *Le Garçon sauvage (Savage Triangle)*, the mean-mindedness of *La Minute de vérité (The Moment of Truth)* and the insignificance of *La Route Napoleon (Napoleon Road)* demonstrate rather convincingly that he pursued that vocation only intermittently. Autant-Lara, on the other hand, is well known for his non-conformism, his 'advanced ideas and his fierce anti-clericalism; we should recognise that he always has the merit of being true to himself in his movies.

Since Bost was the technician of the duo, it would seem that the spiritual aspect of their joint enterprise was Aurenche's responsibility.

Aurenche both felt nostalgic about, and rebelled against, his education at a Jesuit school. While he flirted with Surrealism, he seems to have been drawn to anarchist groups in the 1930s. That only goes to show what a strong personality he has, and how incompatible his personality would seem to be with those of Gide, Bernanos, Queffélec and Radiguet. But an examination of his work will probably tell us more about this aspect.

Father Amédée Ayffre is convincing in his analysis of *La Symphonie pastorale* and his definition of the relationship between the book and the film:

We find faith reduced to religious psychology in Gide, and religious psychology reduced to mere psychology in the film (...). This decline in quality is now, according to a rule familiar to aestheticians, matched by a quantitative increase. New characters are added, such as Piette and Casteran, who are supposed to represent certain feelings. Tragedy becomes drama, or melodrama. (*Dieu au cinéma*, p. 131)²

What bothers me ...

What bothers me about this celebrated process of equivalence is that I am by no means convinced that a novel can contain unfilmable scenes, and even less so that scenes decreed to be unfilmable are unfilmable by any director. Praising Robert Bresson for his faithfulness to Bernanos, André Bazin concluded his excellent article, 'La Stylistique de Robert Bresson' ('Robert Bresson's Stylistics'), as follows: 'After *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*, Aurenche and Bost are no more than the Viollet-le-Ducs of adaptation.' All those who admire and are familiar with Bresson's film will remember the wonderful scene in a confessional where, as Bernanos puts it, Chantal's face 'began to appear little by little, gradually'.

When Aurenche, several years before Bresson's movie, wrote an adaptation of *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* which was turned down by Bernanos, he decided that this scene was unfilmable and replaced it with the one that follows:

'Do you want me to listen to you here?' (pointing to the confessional).

'I never confess.'

'But you must have confessed yesterday since you took communion this morning.'

'I didn't take communion.'

He looks at her with great surprise.

'Excuse me, but I gave you communion.'

Chantal quickly moves over to the prie-dieu she occupied that morning.

'Come and see.'

The priest follows her. Chantal points to the missal she left there.

'Look in the book. I may no longer have the right to touch it.'

The priest is very intrigued. He opens the book and discovers stuck between two pages the host that Chantal had spat into it. He looks astonished and shaken.

'I spat out the host,' Chantal says.

'I can see,' the priest says in a flat tone of voice.

'You've never seen anything like that, have you?' says Chantal, fiercely and almost triumphantly.

'No, never,' says the priest, remaining apparently very calm.

'Do you know what needs to be done?'

The priest closes his eyes briefly. He is thinking or praying. He says:

'It can be repaired very simply. But it's a horrible thing to have done.'

He goes over towards the altar, carrying the open book. Chantal follows him.

'No, it's not horrible. What is horrible is to receive the host in a state of sin.'

'So you were in a state of sin?'

'Less than other people, but they don't care.'

'Don't judge them.'

'I do not judge them, I condemn them,' Chantal says with virulence.

'Keep silent before the body of Christ!'

He kneels before the altar, takes the host out of the book and swallows it.



Bresson's version of "Le Journal d'un curé de campagne", 1951

In the middle of the novel there is a discussion about faith between the priest and an obtuse atheist called Arsène. The discussion ends with Arsène saying: 'When one is dead, everything is dead.' In the adaptation, the discussion, which takes place on the very grave of the priest and is between Arsène and another priest, *brings the film to a close*. The sentence 'When one is dead, everything is dead' was supposed to be the last line of dialogue in the film, one that carries weight, the only one perhaps that the audience will remember. In his book Bernanos did not conclude with 'When one is dead, everything is dead', but with 'What difference does that make? Everything is grace.'

'Inventing without betraying,' I can hear you saying. It seems to me that in this case there is rather little invention and a great deal of betrayal. Let's look at just one or two more details. Aurenche and Bost were unable to make *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* because Bernanos was still alive, whereas Bresson said that he would have taken greater liberties with the book if Bernanos had still been alive. So Bernanos hampered Aurenche and Bost because he was alive, but hampered Bresson because he was dead.³

The mask ripped off ...

A simple reading of that extract reveals:

1. A constant and deliberate determination to be *unfaithful* to both the spirit and the letter;⁴
2. A very marked predilection for profanation and blasphemy.

The same unfaithfulness to the spirit also mars *Le Diable au corps*, a love story which becomes an anti-militaristic, anti-bourgeois film;⁵

La Symphonie pastorale, which becomes the story of a priest in love, turning Gide into a kind of Béatrix Beck; *Un Recteur de l'île de Sein*, ambiguously retitled *Dieu a besoin des hommes*, in which the islanders are portrayed like the 'cretins' in Luis Bunuel's *Las Hurdes (Land without Bread)*. As for a fondness for blasphemy, it is constantly in evidence, to a more or less insidious degree, depending on the subject, the director or even the film star.

I need only cite the confessional scene in *Douce*; Marthe's funeral in *Le Diable au corps*; the profaned hosts in this adaptation of *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* (a scene transferred to *Dieu a besoin des hommes*); the whole script and the Fernandel character in *L'Auberge rouge*; and the whole script of *Jeux interdits* (the fight in the cemetery).

Aurenche and Bost would seem ideally cut out to be authors of *out-and-out* anti-clerical films, but since movies portraying men in cassocks are in fashion, they agreed to go along with the trend. But as it is incumbent upon them, or so they believe, not to betray their convictions, themes such as profanation and blasphemy and dialogue full of *double entendres* pop up from time to time so they can prove to their chums that they know how 'to pull the wool over the producer's eyes' while at the same time satisfying him, and how to do the same to an equally satisfied general public.

This device is nothing less than a smokescreen; and recourse to it is necessary at a time when we constantly need to pretend to be stupid in order to work intelligently. But while it is fair enough to 'pull the wool over the producer's eyes', surely it is going a bit far to rewrite Gide, Bernanos and Radiguet in this way?

Truth to tell, Aurenche and Bost go about their job like scriptwriters all over the world, just as Charles Spaak and Jacques Natanson did before the war. In their view, every story must include characters A, B, C and D. Within that equation, everything is articulated according to criteria known only to themselves. People jump into bed with each other according to a well-organised symmetry, some characters are written out, others are thought up, and the script gradually departs from the original and becomes a shapeless but brilliant whole: a new film, step by step, ceremoniously enters the pantheon of the Tradition of Quality.

Okay, people will say ...

People will say: 'Let's assume that Aurenche and Bost are unfaithful. But would you also deny that they are talented?' True, talent has nothing to do with faithfulness, but I cannot conceive of a valid adaptation that was not written by a *film-maker*. Aurenche and Bost are basically men of letters, and my criticism of them here is that they look down on the cinema because they undervalue it. They approach scripts the way people do when they think they can rehabilitate a delinquent by finding him or her a job; they always believe they have done 'all they can' for a script by embellishing it with subtleties, with the art of nuance that is the tenuous merit of the modern novel. One of the major failings of those who attempt to explain what the cinema is about is that they believe they are doing it a service by using literary jargon. (The work of Pagliero has prompted references to Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, that of Allégret allusions to phenomenology.)



anti-militaristic sentiment in "*Le Diable au corps*", 1947

Aurenche and Bost actually water down the books they adapt, as equivalence always tends to encourage betrayal or timidity. Here is a brief example: in Radiguet's novel *Le Diable au corps*, Francois meets Marthe on a railway platform, when Marthe jumps off the train while it is moving; in the film, they meet in a school that has been turned into a hospital. What is the purpose of this equivalence? To allow the scriptwriters to bring in certain anti-militaristic elements which they have added to the work with Autant-Lara's agreement. Now it is quite clear that Radiguet's idea is an idea of *mise en scène*, whereas the scene thought up by Aurenche and Bost is literary. I can assure you that such examples are legion.

They will one day have to ...

Secrets are kept for only a limited length of time, recipes are broadcast, and new scientific discoveries are the subject of announcements by the Académie des Sciences. Since adaptation, if we are to believe Aurenche and Bost, is an exact science, they will one day have to explain to us what criteria, what system and what internal and mysterious geometry of the masterpiece they are adapting govern the way they cut, add, multiply, divide and 'rectify' it. I have posited the idea that these 'equivalences' are no more than timid devices aimed at getting round difficulties — using the soundtrack to solve problems with the images and resorting to a form of *tabula rasa* so that nothing is left on the screen except sophisticated framing, complicated lighting and 'sleek' photography, all of them elements that keep the Tradition of Quality alive. It is now time to start examining the full range of films for which Aurenche and Bost wrote the dialogue and adaptation, and to identify the persistence of certain themes which may explain, without justifying it, the two scriptwriters' constant *unfaithfulness* to the works they use as a 'pretext' and an 'opportunity'.

Here, briefly summarised, is what the scripts produced by Aurenche and Bost boil down to:

La Symphonie pastorale: He is a Protestant minister, and he is married. He loves someone else — something he is not allowed to do.

Le Diable au corps: They go through the motions of love — something they are not allowed to do.

Dieu a besoin des hommes: He gives mass, blesses and administers the last rites — something he is not allowed to do.

Jeux interdits: They bury someone — something they are not allowed to do.

Le Ble en herbe: They love each other — something they are not allowed to do.⁶

It could be argued that I am also describing the original book. I do not deny that. But I would simply point out that Gide also wrote *La Porte étroite (Strait Is the Gate)*, Radiguet *Le Bat du Comte d'Orgel (Count d'Orgel's Ball)* and Colette *La Vagabonde (The Vagabond)*,

and that none of those novels appealed to Delannoy or Autant-Lara. It should also be noted that scripts I see no point in discussing here tend to support my argument, such as *Au delà des grilles* (*Beyond the Gates*), *Le Château de verre* (*The Glass Castle*) and *L'Auberge rouge*.

We can see how adroitly the champions of the Tradition of Quality choose only those themes that lend themselves to the misunderstandings on which the whole system is based.

Under the cloak of literature – and of course quality – audiences are served up their usual helping of gloom, non-conformism and facile audacity.

Aurenche and Bost's influence is enormous...

Writers who took up dialogue for films all followed the same rules; between the dialogue he wrote for *Les Dégourdis de la 11ème* and *Un caprice de Caroline chérie* (*Caroline Chérie*), Anouilh injected something of his own universe into some more ambitious films – a universe of mercantile vulgarity combined with, in the background, Scandinavian mists transposed to Brittany (*Pattes blanches/ White Paws*). Another writer, Jean Ferry, followed the same fashion: the dialogue of *Manon* might just as well been written by Aurenche and Bost: 'He thinks I'm a virgin, and in civilian life he's a professor of psychology!' There is nothing better to be expected of the younger generation of scriptwriters. They have simply taken up the torch, while being careful not to break taboos.



Allégret's "Manèges", 1949

Sigurd, one of the latest to have appeared on the 'script and dialogue' scene, works with Allégret. They have together given the French cinema some of its darkest masterpieces: *Dédée d'Anvers* (*Woman of Antwerp*), *Manèges*, *Une si jolie petite plage* (*Such a Pretty Little Beach*), *Les Miracles n'ont lieu qu'une fois* (*Miracles Only Happen Once*) and *La Jeune folle* (*Desperate Decision*). Sigurd very quickly got the hang of the formula: he must have an admirable ability to synthesise, for his scripts oscillate ingeniously between Aurenche and Bost, Prévert and Clouzot, in a slightly more up-to-date version. Religion never plays a central role, though blasphemy still gingerly shows its face, as when some choirboys or nuns enter the frame at the most unexpected moment (*Manèges*, *Une si jolie petite plage*).

The callousness which, it was hoped, would 'turn the stomachs of the bourgeois' can be seen in such neatly crafted lines as: 'He was old — time for him to pop off' (*Manèges*). In *Une si jolie petite plage*, Jane Marken envies the prosperity of the seaside resort of Berck-Plage, which derives from the tuberculosis sufferers who live

there: 'Their relatives come to see them, and that's good for business!' (This is reminiscent of the prayer in *Un Recteur de l'île de Sein*.⁷)

Roland Laudenbach, apparently more gifted than most of his colleagues, worked on some of the films that were most typical of that state of mind: *La Minute de vérité*, *Le Bon Dieu sans confession* (*Good Lord without Confession*) and *La Maison du silence* (*Voice of Silence*). Robert Scipion is a gifted man of letters. He has written only one book, a selection of pastiches. He is notable for being a daily habitué of the cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and for his friendship with Pagliero, who has been dubbed the Sartre of the cinema, presumably because his films resemble articles in Sartre's review, *Les Temps modernes*. Here is some dialogue from *Les Amants de Bras-Mort* (*The Lovers of Bras-Mort*), a populist movie whose central characters are bargemen, like the dockers in *On homme marche dans la ville*:

'Friends' wives are there to be slept with.'

'You do what's in your interest; to do that, you'd climb on anyone's back, quite literally.'



Pagliero's "Les Amants de Bras-Mort", 1950

In a single reel towards the end of the film, within the space of less than ten minutes, we hear the words 'whore', 'tart', 'bitch' and 'bloody stupid'. Is that realism?

We miss Prévert...

Looking at the uniformity and unrelenting vulgarity of scripts nowadays, we find we miss Prévert. He believed in the devil, and therefore in God, and if it was purely his whim to burden most of his characters with all the sins of creation, there was always room for a couple for whom, like some latter-day Adam and Eve, the story would take a turn for the better once the film was over.

Psychological realism, neither real nor psychological ...

There are only seven or eight scriptwriters who work regularly for the French cinema. Each of them has only one story to tell, and as each of them can dream of nothing but becoming as successful as the 'two greats', it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the 100 or so French films made each year tell the same story: there is always a victim, usually a cuckold. (This cuckold would be the only attractive character in the film were he not always infinitely grotesque, like the character played by Bernard Blier in *Manèges*.) The cunning of those close to him and the mutual hatred of the members of his family prove the undoing of the central character, thanks to the unfairness of life in general and, as local colour, the nastiness of other people (priests, concierges, neighbours, passers-by, the wealthy, the poor, soldiers and so on). During the long winter evenings, why not have fun trying to come up with the titles of French films which do not fit into this formula and, while you're at it, find the one whose dialogue does not contain the following remark, or its equivalent, made by the film's most abject couple: 'They're always the ones that have money [or are blessed with luck, love or happiness]. When it comes down to it, it's all so unfair.'

That school of film-making, which aims for realism, always destroys it at the very moment when it finally captures it, because it is more interested in imprisoning human beings in a closed world hemmed in by formulas, puns and maxims than in allowing them to reveal themselves as they are, before our eyes. Artists cannot always dominate their work. They sometimes have to be God, or else His creature. We are all familiar with the genre of modern play whose central character, a normal human being when the curtain rises, ends up a legless and armless cripple by the time the final curtain falls, after losing successively all his limbs with each new act. We live in strange

times, when any old failed actor uses the term 'Kafkaesque' to describe his marital problems. This type of cinema comes straight out of modern literature, half Kafkaesque and half Flaubertian! The authors of any film shot in France nowadays imagine they are doing a remake of *Madame Bovary*.

For the first time in French literature, the author of that novel, Gustave Flaubert, adopted a distanced, external attitude to his subject matter, which thus became like an insect under an entomologist's microscope. But although Flaubert said, when he started his novel: 'I shall roll them all in the same mud — while remaining fair' (a remark which present-day authors would be only too willing to adopt as their epigraph), he was ultimately forced to admit: '*Madame Bovary c'est moi*'. I doubt whether those same authors would be able to repeat that remark with reference to themselves!

Mise en scène, director, texts

These notes aim to do no more than examine a certain type of cinema, from the sole point of view of scripts and scriptwriters. But I believe it needs to be made perfectly clear that directors are and want to be responsible for the scripts and dialogue they illustrate.



Michèle Morgan in the snow in "*La Symphonie pastorale*"

I referred earlier to 'scriptwriters' films', and Aurenche and Bost would certainly not contradict me. When they hand in their script, the film has already been made: in their view, the *metteur-en-scène* is the person who decides on the framing ... and unfortunately that is true. I have already mentioned the way film-makers are obsessed with sticking in a funeral procession at the drop of a hat. And yet death is always skated over in such films. It is worth recalling the admirable way Jean Renoir treated the death of Nana or Emma Bovary; in *La Symphonie pastorale*, death is a mere exercise for the make-up artist and the cinematographer; compare the close-ups of the dead Michèle Morgan in that film, of Dominique Blanchard in *Le Secret de Mayerling* (*The Secret of Mayerling*) and of Madeleine Sologne in *L'Éternel retour* (*Love Eternal*): it is the same face! Everything takes place *after* death.

Let me finally quote the following remark by Delannoy, which I perfidiously dedicate to French scriptwriters:

When it happens that talented writers, either through a love of money or out of weakness, end up one day allowing themselves to 'write for the cinema', they do so with a feeling that they are somehow lowering themselves. They tend rather to make a curious attempt at mediocrity, careful as they are not to compromise their talent, and convinced that if you write for the cinema you have to ensure you are understood by the lowest common denominator. (*La Symphonie pastorale*, ou l'amour du métier/'*La Symphonic pastorale* or Love of One's Craft', *Verger* no. 3, November 1947)

I must immediately denounce a sophism that is bound to be levelled against me as an argument: 'Such dialogue is spoken by abject characters, and we put such strong words into their mouths in order all the better to stigmatise their vileness. It's our way of being moralists.'

My reply is as follows: it is untrue that such language is used by the most abject characters. True, films in the vein of 'psychological realism' do not solely portray evil people, but so great is the superiority that scriptwriters wish to exert over their characters that those who happen not to be despicable are at best infinitely grotesque.⁸

Lastly, I know of a handful of men in France who would be *incapable* of thinking up abject characters of that kind, characters capable of saying abject things — film-makers whose *Weltanschauung* is at least as valid as that of Aurenche and Bost or Sigurd and Jeanson. I'm thinking, for example, of Renoir, Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Becker, Abel Gance, Max Ophals, Jacques Tati and Roger Leenhardt. And yet they are French film-makers, and it so happens — by a curious coincidence — that they are auteurs who often write their own dialogue and in some cases think up the stories they direct.

I can hear you say too ...

'But why — I can hear you say — can one not admire to an equal degree all the film-makers who strive to work within that Tradition and that Quality which you dismiss so flippantly? Why can one not admire Allégret as much as Becker, Delannoy as much as Bresson, Autant-Lara as much as Renoir?'⁹

I simply cannot bring myself to believe in a peaceful coexistence between the Tradition of Quality and a *cinéma d'auteur*. Basically Allegret and Delannoy are no more than *caricatures* of Henri-Georges Clouzot and Bresson. It is not out of a desire to shock that I disparage a cinema which receives such high praise elsewhere. I remain convinced that it is the overlong persistence of *psychological realism* which causes audiences to be bemused by films as novel in their conception as Renoir's *Le Carrosse d'or* (*The Golden Coach*), Becker's *Casque d'or* (*Golden Marie*) and even Bresson's *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (*Ladies of the Park*)¹⁰ and Jean Cocteau's *Orphie* (*Orpheus*). Long live audacity indeed, but we still need to be able to detect where it really is. As the year 1953 comes to a close, if I had to draw up a list of the audacities of the French cinema, I would not be able to include the vomiting scene in *Les Orgueilleux* (*The Proud Ones*), Claude Laydu's refusal to pick up the holy water sprinkler in *Le Bon Dieu sans confession* or the homosexual relationship between the characters in *Le Salaire de la peur* (*The Wages of Fear*). My preference would go to Monsieur Hulot's way of walking, the maid's soliloquies in *Rue de l'Estrapade* (*Francoise Steps Out*), the *mise en scène* of *Le Carrosse d'or*, the direction of actors in *Madame de ...* (*The Earrings of Madame de ...*) and also Gance's experiments with polyvision. You will have realised that these audacities are the work of men of the cinema, not scriptwriters, of directors, not men of letters.



director Robert Bresson

I find it significant, for example, that some of the most brilliant scriptwriters and *metteurs-en-scène* of the Tradition of Quality school failed when they tried their hand at comedy: Ferry and Clouzot in *Miquette et sa mère* (*Miquette*), Sigurd and Boyer in *Tous les chemins mènent à Rome* (*All Roads Lead to Rome*), Scipion and Pagliero in *La Rose rouge* (*The Red Rose*), Laudenbach and Delannoy in *La Route Napoléon*, Aurenche, Bost and Autant-Lara in *L'Auberge rouge* or even *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* (*Keep an Eye on Amelia*).

No one who has ever tried writing a script can deny that comedy is by far the most difficult genre, the one that demands the most effort, the most talent and the greatest humility too.

Bourgeois all of them ...

The dominant feature of psychological realism is its determination to be anti-bourgeois. But who are Aurenche and Bost, Sigurd, Jeanson, Autant-Lara and Allegret if not bourgeois? And who are the 50,000 new readers created by a film adaptation of a novel if not bourgeois? What, then, is the worth of an anti-bourgeois cinema made by bourgeois for the bourgeois? It is well known that workers do not particularly appreciate that kind of cinema even when it attempts to find an affinity with them. They refused to identify with the dockers in *Un homme marche dans la ville*, or the bargemen in *Les Amants de Bras-Mort*. Perhaps parents, when making love, should tell their children to go out on to the landing, but they do not like words like that put into their mouths in a film, even when they are spoken in a 'kindly' way. While members of the public like to slum it using literature as an alibi, they also like to do it using social issues as an alibi. It is edifying to examine which films are put on in which districts of Paris. It emerges that working-class audiences may prefer naive little foreign films which depict men 'as they should be' rather than as Aurenche and Bost believe them to be.

As one might pass on a good address to a friend ...



Autant-Lara's "Le Blé en herbe", 1954

It is always a pleasure to wind up a discussion: that way, everyone is happy. It is remarkable that 'great' *metteurs-en-scene* and 'great' scriptwriters all spent a long time making minor little films, and that the talent they put into making them was not enough to set them apart from the rest (those with no talent). It is also noteworthy that they all espoused the quality ethos *at the same time*, just as one might pass on a good address to a friend. Remember that a producer — and even a director — earns more money making *Le Blé en herbe* than *Le Plombier amoureux*. So-called 'courageous' films have turned out to be very profitable. A case in point is Ralph Habib, who, after suddenly ceasing to make semi-pornographic films, shot *Les Compagnes de la nuit* (*Companions of the Night*) and claimed to be walking in Andre Cayatte's footsteps. So what is there to stop people like Andre Tabet, Jacques Companeex, Jean Guitton, Pierre Very, Jean Laviron, Yves Ciampi or Gilles Grangier switching overnight to intellectual films, adapting literary masterpieces (there are still a few left) and, of course, littering their movies with funerals?

When that day comes, we shall be up to our necks in the Tradition of Quality, and French films, trying to outdo each other in their 'psychological realism', 'harshness', 'rigour' and 'ambiguity', will be nothing more than a long-drawn-out funeral procession, which will be able to emerge from the Billancourt film studios and take a short cut to the cemetery that seems to have been specially located next to them so as to speed up the journey from producer to gravedigger.

The trouble is that, if you keep on repeating to audiences that they identify with the central characters of films, they will end up believing you; and the day they realise that the roly-poly old cuckold whose misadventures are supposed to prompt sympathy (a little) and laughter (a lot) is not, as they had thought, a cousin or a next-door neighbour, but *one of them*, that the abject family portrayed is *their* family, and the religion ridiculed is their religion, they may well feel ungrateful towards a cinema that made such efforts to show them life as it is seen from a fourth-floor fiat in Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

True, I have to admit that some strong feelings and a good dose of prejudice have gone into my deliberately pessimistic examination of a certain tendency in French cinema. I am told that without the celebrated 'school of psychological realism' we would never have been graced with *Le Journal d'un cure de campagne*, *Le Carrosse d'or*, *Orphée*, *Casque d'or* or Tati's *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (*Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*). But the auteurs who wanted to educate audiences should realise that they may have diverted them from their original course into the more subtle channels of psychology. They have shepherded them into the first form celebrated by Marcel Jouhandeau in his book, *Ma classe de sixième*. But you cannot go on repeating a year for ever! (*Cahiers du cinema* no. 31, January 1954)

Notes

1. An excerpt from Aurenche and Bost's dialogue for the 'Jeanne' episode of *Destinies* was published in *La Revue du cinema* (no. 8, p. 9).
2. *La Symphonie pastorale*. Characters added to the film: Piette, Jacques's fiancée, and Casteran, Piette's father. Characters cut out: the minister's three children. There is no mention in the film of what becomes of Gertrude's death. In the book, he takes holy orders. The 'Symphonie pastorale operation': 1) Gide himself writes an adaptation of his novel; 2) His adaptation is regarded as 'unfilmable'; 3) Aurenche and Delannoy in turn write an adaptation; 4) Gide turns it down; 5) Everyone is reconciled when Bost joins the team.
3. When the man who was lined up to produce *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* expressed surprise that a character called Dr Delbende had been left out of the adapted version, Aurenche (who was supposed to direct) replied: 'In ten years' time, a script might be able to retain a character who dies halfway through the film, but as far as I'm concerned I don't feel I could do that.' Three years later, Bresson kept the character of Dr Delbende and allowed him to die halfway through the film.
4. Aurenche and Bost never said they were 'faithful'. It was the critics who did so.
5. *Le Diable au corps*. The gist of what Autant-Lara said in the course of a radio programme that André Parinaud devoted to Radiguet was: 'What prompted me to make a film based on *Le Diable au corps* was the fact that I saw it as an anti-war novel.' During the same programme, Radiguet's friend, the composer Francis Poulenc, said that when he saw the film he saw no connection with the book.
6. *Le Blé en herbe*. Aurenche and Bost had already prepared their adaptation of Colette's novel in 1946. Autant-Lara accused Leenhardt of having plagiarised *Le Blé en herbe* in *Les Dernières vacances* (*The Last Vacation*). Maurice Garçon arbitrated and ruled in favour of Leenhardt. Aurenche and Bost filled out Colette's plot by adding an extra character, Dick, a lesbian who lived with Madame Dalleray, a woman known as La Dame Blanche. A few weeks before shooting began, the Dick character was written out of the script by Ghislaine Auboin, when she 'reviewed' the adaptation with Autant-Lara.
7. Aurenche and Bost's characters like to talk in maxims. For example, in *La Symphonie pastorale*: 'Ah, children like that should never have been born', 'Not everyone is lucky enough to be blind', and 'A cripple is someone who pretends to be like anyone else'; in *Le Diable au corps* (when a soldier has just lost a leg): 'He may be the last to have been wounded', 'A fat lot of use that is to him' [literally in French, 'that gives him a fine leg']. *Jeux interdits*: Francis: 'What does it mean, putting the cart before the horse?' Berthe: 'Well, it means what we're doing [they are making love]'; Francis: 'I didn't realise that was what it was called.'
8. *Psychological realism* was in fact created at the same time as Charles Spaak and Jacques Feyder's *poetic realism*. Perhaps we ought one day to stir up an ultimate controversy about Feyder, before he sinks permanently into oblivion.
9. 'Taste consists of a thousand distastes' (Paul Valéry).

10. Aurenche worked on *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, but had to part company with Bresson because of a creative incompatibility.

further reading...

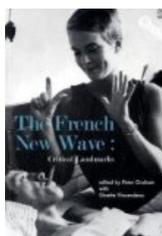
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This translation is from "The French New Wave", edited by Ginette Vincendeau and Peter Graham. This book is a wonderful anthology of writings by critics and filmmakers associated with the Nouvelle Vague, is a great read, and has many more seminal writings. We highly recommend it!!



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