A Portrait Of
FRANCOIS TRUFFAUT
An Interview with Francois Truffaut by Suni Mallow

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SUNI MALLOW: Why did you decide to make a film about filmmaking?
FRANCOIS TRUFFAUT: I had every reason in the world to make a film like that. But I think your question should be, "Why did you, Francois Truffaut, wait thirteen years to make a film on filmmaking?" I cannot answer your first question the way I would for any ordinary film publication because your readers are filmmakers and they should know. To the readers of "Filmmakers Newsletter" it is obvious why I made this picture: so the only question is, why did I wait so long to do it.

In my films I have always carefully avoided making any allusions to films and filmmaking, or at best made very indirect allusions to the cinema which could never really bother the viewing public because they look at the films very naively. But I have thought about making a movie about filmmaking for many years. For instance, each time I make a film I think to myself that I must make a film about filmmaking, and I take notes in a little book I keep in my pocket. I especially took notes while I was shooting TWO ENGLISH GIRLS and SUCH A GORGOUS KID LIKE ME.

SM: Then why did you finally find it necessary to let the audience in on the mystique of filmmaking?
FT: Because I thought that, although it is a job just like any other, filmmaking is visually much more interesting than most other occupations. In French films they really do not know how to depict someone's occupation. American directors are far better at that. For instance, when you have a scene with someone working in, for instance, a garage, you see the person working just the way it is in real life. On the other hand, in France they would have a shot of him just coming up from under a car and wiping his hands on a rag, throwing it down, and then the dialogue starts.

You could say that I made DAY FOR NIGHT just as some American directors have made films about hunting or fishing. For instance, a film I like very much is Howard Hawks' HATARI. In that film there are many views of hunting, and although I saw it many times, each time I had the impression that it was exactly like a film about filmmaking. And I am quite convinced that Hawks felt the same way too. You would watch John Wayne leading the expedition into Kenya with his group around him, and in the evening they would stop and have a meal and there would be a little bit of dancing and they would discuss their plan for the next day - which was just like the working schedule for a film. For instance, they would say, "Tomorrow we will hunt giraffe," and then the next day there would be a scene of hunting a giraffe. So although it was indirect, I think that consciously it was very much a film about filmmaking.

SM: When you conceive of a film, do you work initially from a visual concept or from a dialogue/situation one?
FT: That depends very much on the particular scene in the film. When I am writing a script for a film there are some scenes which I can see immediately and which are very clear in the mind's eye, while other scenes are less clear and just come about as I am shooting them.

It has been my experience in films that when I have had something visual very strongly worked out beforehand, it's really been a disappointment. Whereas quite often the things that haven't been worked out visually beforehand, and which aren't fixed in my mind's eye, turn out to be some of the more interesting shots.

SM: Do you ever work out shots or scenes very carefully and very precisely beforehand, the way Hitchcock does?
FT: The only time I ever really worked out anything in great detail like that was in FAHRENHEIT 451. But I don't work like that for my French films. Obviously the form of the film and the script are there beforehand, but I like to work things out as I go. Or, for instance, I like to spend a Sunday working on the script for the next week's shooting.

SM: Then how do you handle your actors? Do you allow them great freedom for portrayal and improvisation, or do you control their every move, perhaps even use them almost as props?
FT: The treatment varies with each actor. For example, Valentina Cortese in DAY FOR NIGHT did some improvisation, but there was none at all with Jean Pierre Au-
one time I would see a version in which it was Audrey Hepburn who got the chicken pox. And a little bit of all of that was put into the dialogue of DAY FOR NIGHT.

SM: What about the scene in STOLEN KISSES where Leaud is in front of the mirror and he repeats names over and over and over. Did you plan that out very carefully for Leaud, or was that his own creation?

FT: That was completely improvised during shooting. You see, I needed the scene because the character has nobody in the film in whom he can confide, yet there was a point in the film where he had to confide in somebody because he didn’t know with whom he was in love. So this was my way of showing that he was torn between the two women.

SM: In DAY FOR NIGHT, did you use different filmic techniques to distinguish the film-in-the-film from the rest of the film? For instance, old-style Hollywood techniques when you were doing “Meet Pamela” and perhaps modern cinema-verite-type techniques for the rest of the film?

FT: Very much so. For instance, part of the film is done with the camera handheld, whereas for “Meet Pamela” I never show this; that is, I never show a scene which is shot with a hand-held camera.

SM: Was the fixed camera on that crane we see so often?

FT: No, I rarely used the crane.

SM: A 35mm camera is a heavy piece of equipment to put on a shoulder. What system did you use?

FT: Well, first of all the cameraman was excellent and you could hardly see it move. And then we used the Panavision system, which I think is very fine.

SM: How much of your own involvement do you personally have in the technical aspects of a production?

FT: I don’t look at what I am shooting through the camera very much, however I do talk things over with the cameraman and discuss the lighting and the framing. But I would rather keep my eye on the actors than deal with the camera. And I never cover myself when I shoot. I take it only from one angle and don’t make extra shots from, say, the side. I believe that every shot has only one angle, one lens.

SM: Do you feel the same way about the editing? That there is only one way a scene can be edited?

FT: There are always things that can be changed, and as you work you discover good ideas from what you see in the cutting room.

SM: How closely do you supervise the cutting of a picture?

FT: I work very closely with the editor and look at it continually with him until the end.

SM: For some people the film is made in the camera, in the shooting; for others it is almost entirely worked out in the ed-
Bisset and Leaud in a scene from "Meet Pamela." "Meet Pamela," the film within DAY FOR NIGHT, is the tragedy of a man and his daughter-in-law who fall in love. He is shot by his son and she is killed in an auto accident.


originally for eight weeks, but I had to do it in seven. But I am very much against directors who hide behind the production company or the distributor for errors which have been made in the film; I think the director is totally responsible for the film no matter what.

SM: In the film the ending of "Meet Pamela" is changed because of the death of a member of the cast but also because of financial pressures from the backers. To what degree must you, Francois Truffaut, as a well-known artist and director, bend the content of your films to financial pressures?

FT: Personally I do not often worry myself with this aspect. In fact, I am in complete agreement with these factors and with the capitalist system. Film is an object, and it costs a certain amount of money, so I find it completely normal and usual that concessions should be made for that. The other system is the socialist system, and I do not care too much for that system because you write your script, then give it to the government agency, then wait for many weeks and months to find out whether or not you can even shoot it, then wonder whether or not it will be shown and whether or not it will be exported. That is the socialist system, and there is only that system or the capitalist system. But the capitalist system is to my way of thinking more natural.

In the ending of DAY FOR NIGHT what I hoped to show was that the director of a film is not unhappy with accidents. The accident which occurs at the end and changes the shooting is a good thing; it is stimulating. The scene in the projection room where they are discussing Alexander's death in the picture begins on a sad note because of his death in real life, but as it progresses you can see that the director is excited - he realizes he doesn't need the scene that he had originally intended. When he comes up with the idea of shooting Alexander in the back, he is very excited about the idea and says, "Yes, we'll shoot him in the back. It will be even better that way because it's more cruel!" And the script girl, who is used to working with this director and who knows his character and what he likes in his films, says, "Yes, and we could shoot the scene in the snow!" And I think this excitement and pleasure comes over in the film.

So on the one hand there is the anxiety of the director. For example, on weekends I am very afraid and I don't like the actors to go skiing because they could break their legs. But on the other hand, when something happens which was not planned I simply accept it because the world just keeps going around and the film must keep going forward as if it were something alive. Accidents should be transformed into something good, something favorable and positive for the film, and I hope that I showed
this. So it is for this reason that I don’t like to make plans on the financial side because it is not in my character. One just has to adapt to all these problems. And I think that is the truest aspect of DAY FOR NIGHT, because it shows how I react in the face of these sort of things.

SM: Many directors enjoy that moment when something unaccounted for happens and they have to change the script, but it’s different when you have to change it because the distributors or the backers feel that it will be more viable commercially if it is changed.

FT: No, I don’t like that either. But it so happens that this has never happened to me. American companies are perhaps hard on American directors (I don’t know for sure), but with French directors they are very liberal and very easy-going. This is partially because they cannot read French. I give them a script written in French and a budget and a cast and they either say yes or no. But they have never tried to influence me. For instance, DAY FOR NIGHT was produced by Bob Solow for Warner Brothers, and he is a very nice man. He came on the set several times and he seemed very happy and it was very pleasant.

SM: Is this the first time you’ve been funded by an American company?

FT: No, I made four films for United Artists with David Picker and in France with Ilya Lopert when he was alive. And it was very easy for me to work with them. The first was THE BRIDE WORE BLACK, then STOLEN KISSES, then MISSISSIPPI MERMAID and the WILD CHILD. The only difficulty I had was in getting them to agree to let me do THE WILD CHILD in black and white. But I was adamant about that, so although it was difficult, I finally won and got them to agree to it.

SM: What was the budget for DAY FOR NIGHT?

FT: $800,000.

SM: That’s certainly not much.

FT: It was enough, because the big set – the Paris street – existed before (it was built for THE MAD WOMAN OF CHÂTEAU-LELOT) and the largest part of DAY FOR NIGHT was shot outside the studio on location and there were no constructions except the two doors in the Valentina Cortese scene.

Also, I worked very quickly and used two or even three cameras. And one of the cameras that you see in the film was actually working at the same time.

SM: Is $800,000 a typical budget for you?

FT: No, I usually work with less. WILD CHILD, for instance, was made for under $400,000. That was a very little film.

SM: Would you ever like to do a multi-million-dollar Hollywood-type spectacle?

FT: No. Definitely no. I don’t think that is necessary. My most expensive film was FAHRENHEIT 451 because it was shot at Pinewood Studios in England and it
used a lot of special effects and we worked very slowly — too slowly. That film cost about one and a half million dollars. But that's much too expensive. And I think Universal lost a good deal of money on that film and that makes me very sad. I don't like to make someone lose money; I want to make everybody happy with my work.

SM: In your book on Hitchcock you mention that French critics often make a pun on the French "la nuit" (night) and say "l'ennui" (boredom). Were you at all conscious of this when you titled the film LA NUIT AMERICAIN?

FT: No, I had forgotten all about that. But "La Nuit Americain" has a double meaning. First, it means "day-for-night." That is, when we shoot a night scene during the day. But it also means the one love night between Jacqueline Bisset and Jean Pierre Leaud. Perhaps it would have been more correct to call it "La Nuit Holly-

wood."

SM: Would you like to work in Hollywood someday?

FT: Maybe yes, maybe no. But at any rate it is too early for that because I would have to speak English much better than I do now.

SM: In America, the director is treated almost like a god: everyone jumps at his slightest whim and they surround and coddle him constantly. But the director in DAY FOR NIGHT was not the center of attention all the time. Is the representa-
tion of the director as modest and kind and self-effacing the way you, Francois Truffaut, actually operate and see yourself as a director on a set?

FT: Yes, although I think the personality must be on the screen, I don't want to be obvious in real life; it is not necessary. I don't like the army, and I don't like the conception of the director as an army general. I don't, for instance, like to give orders. I make my films exactly like I write, but I need some people around me even when I write.

But the director is the only man on the set who has a complete view of the whole film. Everyone else has only a partial view — the lighting, sound, props, etc. Only the director knows what he wants and what exactly the film will be. So he must be like a doctor or a lawyer and be reassuring and helpful. And he must hide his anxiety, his temper, his doubts; he must be kind and pleasant. I know that is not always true and that there are directors who are very excitable and get very angry, but not me.

SM: Why did you decide to play the part of the director yourself?

FT: I didn't want to take an actor for that part and I wouldn't have wanted anyone else to do it. After all, for me it was perfectly natural.

SM: Didn't you find it difficult to both act and direct at the same time?

FT: Not too much. It was far more difficult in THE WILD CHILD because that film was a period film and involved costumes and I was always afraid of making anachronisms with improvisations. But that wasn't the case in DAY FOR NIGHT. Actually it was quite easy for me, except for a few scenes where I had some characters behind me and I was concerned about how they were playing the scene and I couldn't be sure. So in those cases I was a little anxious — but only a little.

SM: What about the scenes where the director is unable to sleep and keeps thinking or half-dreaming about the film. Was that an accurate portrayal of you as a director?

FT: No, that is not true. I sleep very well — and especially when I am shooting a film. But it was necessary for the narration — and exactly for the same reason I said before when you asked about Leaud in STOLEN KISSES repeating names in front of the mirror: he has no one to confide in and talk to. In DAY FOR NIGHT, I have people to confide in — particularly the script girl, Joelle, who is very good and very efficient. But it seemed to me correct to portray the director as a lonely, solitary person.

Wherever an actor or a writer or any one participates in a film for the first time, it is always a big surprise to discover to what extent the director is lonely. Everybody has mentioned this particular point to me. And even people who have worked in films before, the day they make a film for the first time, with all the responsibilities it involves, it is a great discovery for them to see to what extent the director has a feeling of solitude.

SM: Why did you have the director wear a hearing aid?

FT: The director is partially deaf and it is a symbol for various things. It is a symbol of my difficulty with the English language. It is a symbol of the isolation of the director and of voluntary isolation from the external world. Also, I really do have trouble with my ears. And I think that the problems of communication interest me very much because I did WILD CHILD where the child is deaf and dumb. And also I wanted to make a little difference between myself and the others and yet I did not want to go through all the problems of make-up. I just wanted to show that Ferrand, the director, is not quite Truffaut. I would put in the hearing aid just before the shot.

SM: One of the director's lines in the film is that film in the studios is dead; films from now on will be made in the streets. Is that your view of the current trend of filmmaking?

FT: No. In France we are slowly destroying the studios to make houses and office buildings, but I still think that films will keep on telling stories and that studios will continue to exist.

SM: Are you very interested in such things as cinema verite techniques?

FT: Cinema verite was in fashion twelve years ago and I think there are things to be learned from it, but I don't like to let

Truffaut with Alexandre Stewart (center) who plays Stacey, an actress who signed for a role in a film without admitting she was pregnant, and Natalie Baye, the script girl who says, "I'd be willing to give up a man for a film, but never would I give up a film for a man."
the actors find their own dialogue. Even if I use words out of their vocabulary, I like to do the dialogue myself. I think cinema verite is very good for films which have a high percent of reportage, but as a film technique it is something which I find interesting for others but not for me.

SM: What are some of your favorite films?

FT: Well, PSYCHO and REAR WINDOW are two. They are very perfect films. REAR WINDOW is a film about filmmaking, as Hitchcock himself explained in the book I did with him. A man is watching life just as he would watch a film. CITIZEN KANE, also, is a film which is very well done. I also liked Dalton Trumbo's JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN very much. It was very odd but very beautiful.

But if I was a big American producer, I would give money to Leonard Kastle to make two or three films because I think HONEYMOON KILLER was one of the best American films in many years. The film is human and very anti-cliche; it is very real and at the same time very strong. And I think the actors in the film are excellent.

SM: If a young filmmaker came to you and asked what he had to do in order to be a good filmmaker, what advice would you give him? Would you, for example, tell him to watch Hitchcock movies? Or go to film school? Or work in Super-8 if necessary just to keep making films?

FT: I don't know. I see nothing wrong with making films in Super-8. But I really can't answer that because I do not like to give advice. Each person must do what is best for him.

DAY FOR NIGHT is a little bit as if you were seeing me. And then there are the books — the Hitchcock book I did, for instance, and the books about me. I don't know why, but I prefer to be known by my work rather than by myself. And I feel the same way about other directors. For instance, when Jeanne Moreau calls me and asks me to join her and Orson Welles for dinner, I always say no. I would prefer to watch CITIZEN KANE one more time. But maybe I am wrong. I don't know.

SM: But you wanted to meet Hitchcock and ask him questions?

FT: Yes, but that was to make a book. And now, of course, I like to see him because the book has helped us to become friends. But usually I do not like to meet the people I admire. It's not that I am afraid of being disappointed; it's just that I like indirect communication. I would rather know a well-known writer by his book than meet him personally. And I feel the same way about a director, absolutely. Many, many students want to meet me but I am very afraid of that. I would rather have them watch JULES AND JIM or THE WILD CHILD. I say to myself that I really have nothing to tell them. I think the best is in my work.