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Anne Gillian, *Truffaut on Cinema*, trans. Alistair Fox. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017. xxvii + 368 pp. List of films, sources, and index. \$38 U.S. ISBN 978-0-253-02656-9

Review by Kathryn St. Ours, Goucher College.

“Cinema is my country, my family” (p. 317). It is with these words that François Truffaut (1932-84) describes his relationship with film, from his beginnings as a freewheeling youngster who, around the age of ten, played hooky to see movies, to his work as an admittedly acerbic movie critic (most notably for *Cahiers du cinéma*), and finally to his cinematic career as an internationally known auteur. Truffaut’s obsession with the seventh art is one of the many leitmotifs of *Truffaut on Cinema*, a compilation of some three hundred interviews granted to the French and English-language press between 1959 and 1984. Originally assembled and published in 1988 by Anne Gillian under the title *Le cinéma selon Truffaut*, these conversations heretofore available almost exclusively in the director’s native language have, after nearly thirty years, been translated into English by Alistair Fox. Although the forty-two black and white photographs of Truffaut and his actors on set that garnish the original text have been eliminated, the translator’s endnotes to each chapter augment the 2017 edition, clarifying for the Anglophone reader many of Truffaut’s literary, historical and cultural references.

The translation is by and large quite good, although not always consistent with standard--albeit colloquial--English. One might “blacken” a person’s reputation or character but “blacken Aznavour?” (p. 79).^[1] “It is not necessary to eschew categories” (p. 116) and “she takes money out of men” (p. 119) sound a bit odd.^[2] Then there is a blatant mistranslation in the interview on *The Soft Skin*: “she says to his lover” (p. 121) can only be right if the professor she is having an affair with has a male companion as well.^[3] Although such problems are minor and do not hamper a smooth reading, they ought to be corrected in any future edition.

The undeniable contribution of their 2017 publication is that Gillian and Fox provide non-francophone Truffaut devotees the long-awaited opportunity to gain insight into his deeply personal relationship with cinema, and to comprehend more fully why he made the kind of films he did. Indeed, in Truffaut’s mind, a normal life and cinema are inextricably entwined. On one hand, the director avows, “It is difficult to talk about something so intimate and personal,” and “it is no exaggeration to say that cinema saved my life,” or that “the neurotic aspect of my love for film is unmistakable” (p. 5). On the other, it goes without saying that for Truffaut, there is no life without cinema; much more than a refuge, it is a way of life. “I am living a normal life when I am involved in a shoot” (p. 311) and, moreover, “I have no particular lifestyle (I don’t

live outside of cinema)” (p. 207). Truffaut’s passion for reading fiction might be explained in similar terms. The choice between the reflection of life to life itself is abundantly clear: “I preferred to see life through books and films” (p. 205). Among the twenty-five movies discussed in *Truffaut on Cinema*, nine are in fact adaptations. And all of his films aim to capture day-to-day existence—in the absence of any form of intellectualization or political agenda—and above all to entertain the audience. We are reminded on more than one occasion of his love for telling a good story, which also explains why he never made documentaries.

However, the target audience for this volume extends well beyond those Truffaut fans eager to partake in a certain degree of intimacy with him. Although obviously serving an essential promotional strategy on the part of the director, these interviews provide priceless information concerning Truffaut’s theoretical reflections on cinema. Cinema scholars will also find illuminating the French auteur’s countless references to other filmmakers and their work. The “List of Films Discussed by Truffaut” provided by Fox rounds out the collection, followed by a compilation of sources for each of the thirty chapters and a detailed index.

Anne Gillian’s final product is a brilliant exercise in organizational structure. How does one coherently put together interviews covering virtually three decades, most of which do not deal exclusively with a particular film? On this basis, she rejects a chronological ordering and opts instead for an arrangement by chapter on each of his twenty-one films plus one more devoted to his four short films. Each chapter, then, consists of a montage of Truffaut’s comments concerning a singular film, along with their corresponding dates at the time of its release and subsequently. So even though the films themselves are presented in chronological order, the comments pertaining to them are not all from the same period. For example, we have the chapter “Stolen Kisses”, which includes a primary conversation from 1968 (date of release), followed by three more from 1970, plus another two from 1974 and 1975. Such a framework makes the book quite reader-friendly. Although this classification leads to a bit of unavoidable redundancy throughout the volume when read in its entirety, the ultimate assemblage of remarks provides a window into the evolution of Truffaut’s esthetic and artistic choices throughout his career.

Furthermore, those readers especially interested in the wider issues surrounding Truffaut’s take on the film industry from the sixties to the eighties will appreciate Gillian’s inclusion of several non film-specific chapters. Opening the volume, we have “Childhood”, a series of interviews that remind us that *The Four Hundred Blows* is somewhat autobiographical. Truffaut grows up in post-war Paris, a victim of neglectful parents, starts a short-lived cinema club, spends some time at a reform school, and is virtually adopted by André Bazin after deserting from the army. Chapter two deals with the French New Wave, a handful of thirty-year olds seeking to bring veracity to films. The like-mindedness of Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer or Rivette, claims Truffaut, was in their shared refusal of studios, starlets, melodrama, and simple linearity. The seeds of the so-called politics of the auteur planted in the first two chapters come to fruition in chapter three, “The Auteur Theory”. This segment offers a very down-to-earth explanation of Truffaut’s trademark, in contrast to the more abstract renderings of Alexandre Astruc or Antoine de Becque. Simply stated, a good filmmaker has a ubiquitous vision, despite a career beset with occasional flops. The repeated and patient viewings of a filmmaker’s films opens the door to his or her consciousness, revealing the thread that runs throughout the entire oeuvre. In addition to these first three introductory chapters, Gillian includes three overviews, in chapter fourteen (1959-68), chapter twenty-one (1969-74) and chapter thirty (1975-1984).

The interviews they contain help to contextualize Truffaut's production and are replete with commentaries concerning other directors, films and literary works that influenced him.

Anne Gillian had a personal relationship with François Truffaut, owing especially to their correspondence from 1979 to 1984, the year of his disappearance. This insider status allows for a well-informed assessment of the man's life and work in the two prefaces introducing the 1988 and 2017 editions of *Le cinéma selon Truffaut* and *Truffaut on Cinema* respectively. The original preface explains Truffaut's relations with the press and his decision to submit to carefully prepared interviews despite a natural shyness. In the end, he felt that interviews could contribute to the creative process by enabling him to cast a critical gaze on his own work. The second preface, five times longer than the first, is necessarily more illuminating as far as Gillian's assessment of Truffaut's life in film is concerned. She avails herself of quotations from several of his letters, underscores the recognized indebtedness to the truffaldien craft of young directors such as Xavier Dolan or Arnaud Desplechin, and cites the author Patrick Modiano who, like Truffaut, seeks to reveal what is behind appearances by means of a clairvoyant fiction.

Unfortunately, I find somewhat excessive Gillian's decision to espouse the would-be psychoanalysis of Axelle Ropert who, on the commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of Truffaut's death (at the Cinémathèque in Paris) explains Truffaut's failure as an actor—his constantly fearful look—in terms of the “primal sense of terror” (p. xv) experienced during his formative years. Irremediably affected by a feeling of homelessness, cinema became a safe space for him. By the same token, Gillian's discussion of Truffaut's use of a few visual signs or objects gives pause. Commenting specifically on *The Woman Next Door* (but also vitally important in *The Soft Skin*), she concludes “the raincoat, an everyday object, signals sexual violence” (p. xxii).

Be that as it may, Anne Gillian brilliantly seizes upon Truffaut's fundamentally liturgical rapport with cinema as hypnosis, the experience of pure emotion within an altered state of consciousness. “My religion is cinema,” declares Truffaut (p. 339), while lamenting his failure to “portray love except in a religious way” (p. 260). For Gillian, however, there exists an organic connection between Truffaut's own passion and the ravages of passion in his films. “The cult of the absolute” (p. 289) or “love stories that go to an extreme” (p. 314) speak to the director's uncanny ability to “access a perception of reality” and to create through visual means dramatic effects “that shirk the categories of language” (xix-xx). This is nothing less than the universal language of the sacred that will continue to elevate the films of French icon François Truffaut.

NOTES

[1] “J'ai noirci Aznavour” (p.106 in the original).

[2] “Il ne faut pas fuir les catégories” (p. 151 in the original), and “Elle reçoit de l'argent des hommes” (p. 156 in the original).

[3] “Elle dit à son amant” (p. 158 in the original).

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