FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT: FOR THE LOVE OF FILMS

L’Enfant sauvage

When Jean-Pierre Léaud turned his accusatory glance on the world in that last frozen frame of *Quatre Cents Coups*, he was asking the question Truffaut keeps returning to in his films. When innocence is sullied by a world with a passion for normality and escape into fantasy offers only an illusory freedom, what then? Antoine Doinel turned his back on the sea and has since opted, via the sentimental education of *Baisers volés*, for a kind of conformity. His is the safe middle course, reconciliation with a world made tolerable by Truffaut’s celebration of the infinite variety of human experience. The other options seem like opposite poles of extremism. Montag, the fireman of *Fahrenheit 451*, hesitantly rejects the comfortable conformity of universal illiteracy and seeks refuge in the rearguard optimism of the book people; at the other extreme, Catherine in *Jules et Jim*, herself the embodiment of fantasy, destroys her lovers’ fantasy with the ultimate *acte gratuit*.

These are all, in their different ways, gestures of innocence, and Truffaut has always been fascinated by innocence. And by children, from the real children of *Les Mistons* and *Les Quatre Cents Coups* to the hopeful nursery of the future at the end of *Fahrenheit 451*. In *L’Enfant sauvage* we have the archetypal innocent, and the systematic corruption of innocence: animal nature-in the shape of a wolf boy – tamed and ‘civilised’ by rational society, in the person of a well-meaning doctor and according to the notions of the time. It is the back-to-nature fantasy in reverse; a detailed, almost clinical examination of the process by which impulse is subdued by education. Here there is no escape into fantasy, since rationalised fantasy is the real world of a being unaware of the options afforded by rationality. Free will means nothing to the wolf boy, as it does to Catherine and Montag and Antoine Doinel, because he is himself already ‘free’. Like Montag, he learns the significance of the written word; but can he, like Antoine Doinel, survive his loss of innocence?

As it happens, Truffaut leaves the question unanswered (at least in so far as he offers no explicit answer himself), preferring simply to present the facts. The case is authentic, based on the reports of Dr Jean Itard of the Paris Institute for the Deaf and Dumb. The time is the end of the 18th century, when the Age of Reason was about to be overtaken by the parallel forces of science and ideology. Truffaut establishes from the start that Itard’s interest in the boy is more out of scientific curiosity than from recognisable humanitarian motives, thus incidentally but adroitly anticipating any charge of sentimentality. The professor of medicine diagnoses a classic case of imbecility; better, reasons Itard, put the diagnosis to the test than simply have the boy exhibited as a freak for the amusement of Paris society. So he takes him into his own home, where with the help of an understanding housekeeper he sets about the task of civilising the savage.

Truffaut's observation of this process is as meticulous and objective as Itard's methods. Each stage in the boy's development is charted in detail and without comment, except for Itard's own comments in his diary, which here takes the place of the actual written reports from which the comments are taken. The boy's muted senses are awakened; he is taught to tolerate the inconvenience of clothes for the convenience of the warmth they provide; he learns the letters of the alphabet and the association of letters and words with the objects they represent: he even begins to respond to a name, Victor. It's an engrossing experiment to watch, and as we watch the temptation is to identify with Itard, his failures and successes, his cool determination to take the experiment as far as it will go. Not that Truffaut's style invites any such identification. As befits the observation of a scientific experiment, the film is sober, unemotional, pared down to essentials.

Style, in fact, is appropriately matched to content, here perhaps more rigorously than in any of Truffaut's previous films. The opening is a freewheeling celebration of the boy's freedom, and at the same time a visual presage of the impending deprivation of that freedom. The camera pans back and forth across the forest, like a nervous intruder as it tracks the boy burrowing in the undergrowth and suddenly shinning up a tree to survey the threat to his territory; then into close-up as the dogs cut off his retreat and the hunters smoke him out from his earth; finally observing with clinical detachment as he is measured and prodded by the doctors to whom he is as yet simply an interesting specimen.

As civilisation finally assimilates the savage, order is restored; the feeling now is of a world where every object has its proper place and function and every man his predetermined destiny, and the camera records this sense of order as a kind of animated still life. The black-and-white photography (Nestor Almendros), at first disconcerting, now seems exactly right for this opposition of culture and nature. As does Truffaut's use of the iris, perhaps a homage to the silent cinema (there are long passages of silence in the film), perhaps a symbol for the boy's innocence or even for the innocence of an early practitioner of the art of scientific observation. At any rate as a device Truffaut uses it imaginatively and with perfect timing to illustrate freedom and constriction – irising out at the beginning from the boy perched in his tree, irising in to his face as he grapples with a bowl of soup under the watchful eyes of Itard and the housekeeper.

Though we watch the boy's taming from Itard's point of view, the focus gradually turns on Itard himself. *L'Enfant sauvage* is in fact as much a study of mentor as of pupil, for beneath that austere, seemingly impassive exterior there is a thirst for knowledge which not even the discouragement of failure can quench. Appropriate, then, that Itard should be played by Truffaut himself (the boy is Jean-Pierre Cargol, in real life a gypsy); and one gradually realises that the film is very much a reflection of its maker, as 'autobiographical' a work as *Les Quatre Cents Coups*. In choosing to play Itard himself, Truffaut pays oblique homage to his own mentor, Bazin. And the film reveals ample evidence of how well this 20th-century wild boy responded to his lessons in cinema: in particular in its echoes of Renoir *père et fils* (the impressionist play

of light and shade in the interiors; the exhilaration of the boy's excursions into the country and the games he plays in the sunlit gardens).

Truffaut-Itard also introduces a nice ambiguity about how we should interpret the character. As an 18th-century rationalist Itard is naturally concerned to test his pupil's moral sense; but with Truffaut playing him it's impossible to resist the irony of his pleasure at awakening a sense of justice in the boy. Or indeed to wonder how far one could take a post-Freudian analysis of the housekeeper's role as surrogate mother. It would no doubt be possible to erect a structuralist framework around the film; the dualities (animal-human, reason-impulse, signs and meanings, words and objects) are there for the taking. Simpler, though, to observe what Truffaut means us to observe, in particular the obvious parallel with his first film. As Antoine Doinel was caged – literally as well as figuratively – by the environment which failed to respond to his need for affection, so here the wild boy is forcibly incarcerated in the name of a kind of freedom. Truffaut makes the point by juxtaposing the disorder of nature with the ordered geometry of civilisation: the emphasis on windows and walls as a recurring image, freedom or imprisonment depending on which way you're looking at them.

The end of the film, with the boy returning from a brief sortie into a freedom he can no longer enjoy, seems at first sight to offer a pessimistic gloss on the antithesis Truffaut has proposed ('You are no longer a savage, even if you are not yet a man,' Itard tells him). In fact, Truffaut is unequivocal about whether the boy would have been happier left in the forest. The lessons will continue, Itard says, as the boy shuffles off to bed. It's a romantic notion perhaps; but the alternative, Truffaut implies, would be like the end of *Les Quatre Cents Coups* without a *Baisers volés* to follow. The film, after all, is dedicated to Jean-Pierre Léaud.

David Wilson, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1970-71

Une Histoire d'eau

Truffaut shot scenes of a couple caught in a Paris deluge, on 16mm. Thereafter Godard took over the project, editing the footage and writing and delivering the voiceover.

L'ENFANT SAUVAGE (THE WILD CHILD)
Director: François Truffaut
©: Les Films du Carrosse
Production Companies: Les Films du Carrosse,
Les Productions Artistes Associés
Presented by: Les Artistes Associés
Producer: Marcel Berbert
Associate Producer: Christian Lentretien
Production Manager: Claude Miler
Production Supervisor: Roland Thénot
Assistant Director: Suzanne Schiffman
Continuity: Christine Pellé
Scenario/Adaptation /Dialogue: François Truffaut, Jean Gruault
Based on the memoir and conversations about Victor de l'Aveyron by:
Dr Jean Itard
Director of Photography: Nestor Almendros
Assistant Photographer: Philippe Théaudière
Editor: Agnès Guillemot
Assistant Editor: Yann Dedet
Art Director: Jean Mandaroux
Properties: Jean-Claude Dolbert
Costumes: Gitt Magrini
Make-up: Nicole Félix
Laboratory: Franay L.T.C. Saint-Cloud
Music by: Antonio Vivaldi
Mandolin Performed by: André Saint-Clivier
Flute Performed by: Michel Sanvoisin
Musical Director: Antoine Duhamel
Sound: René Levert
Sound Re-recording: SIS La Garenne
Sound Mixer: Alex Pront
For: Jean-Pierre Léaud

Cast
Jean-Pierre Cargol *(Victor, the boy)*
Françoise Seigner *(Madame Guérin)*
François Truffaut *(Dr Jean Itard)*
Paul Villé *(Rémy)*
Pierre Fabre *(orderly)*
Jean Dasté *(Professor Pinel)*

uncredited
Claude Miller *(Monsieur Lémeri)*
Annie Miller *(Madame Lémeri)*
René Levert *(police official)*
Jean Mandaroux *(Itard's doctor)*
Nathan Miller *(Lémeri baby)*
Matthieu Schiffman *(Mathieu)*
Jean Gruault *(visitor at institute)*
Robert Cambourakis *(countryman)*
Gitt Magrini *(countrywoman)*
Jean-François Stévenin *(countryman)*
Laura Truffaut, Eva Truffaut, Frédérique Dolbert *(girls at farm)*
Guillaume Schiffman, Eric Dolbert, Tournet Cargol *(boys at farm)*
Dominique Levert *(child at farm)*

France 1969©
83 mins

UNE HISTOIRE D'EAU (A STORY OF WATER)
Directors: Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut
Production Company: Les Films de la Pléiade
Producer: Pierre Braunberger
Production Manager: Roger Fleytoux
Screenplay: Jean-Luc Godard
Director of Photography: Michel Latouche
Editor: Jean-Luc Godard
Sound: Jacques Maumont
Cast:
Jean-Luc Godard *(narrator)*
Jean-Claude Brialy *(man)*
Caroline Dim *(girl)*
France 1958, 18 mins

THE RENOIR TRUFFAUT

Une belle fille comme moi (A Gorgeous Kid like Me)
Sat 1 Jan 20:40, Tue 4 Jan 20:40, Sat 22 Jan 18:10
Day for Night (La Nuit américaine)
Sun 2 Jan 18:30, Fri 7 Jan 18:10, Sat 15 Jan 20:45, Tue 25 Jan 20:45
L'Enfant sauvage (The Wild Child) + Une histoire d'eau
Mon 3 Jan 18:10, Mon 10 Jan 20:40, Mon 24 Jan 18:10
The Last Metro (Le Dernier metro)
Sat 8 Jan 17:10, Fri 21 Jan 17:50,
Sat 22 Jan 20:30, Wed 26 Jan 20:30
Pocket Money (L'Argent de poche)
Sat 8 Jan 20:55, Sat 29 Jan 18:00
The Man Who Loved Women (L'Homme qui aimait les femmes)
Sun 9 Jan 18:20, Mon 24 Jan 20:40
BFI Course: François Truffaut
Every Tue from 18 Jan-22 Feb 18:30-20:30

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