



FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT: FOR THE LOVE OF FILMS

Shoot the Pianist (Tirez sur le pianiste)

Based on David Goodis' novel *Down There*, François Truffaut's second feature is a breezy New Wave concoction of genre pastiche, playful stylistic tricks and romantic reverie. Aznavour is charismatic as the nightclub pianist concealing a secret past who's tempted to abandon his solitary ways when he falls for a colleague. Sadly, however, his brothers have angered local mobsters... A strain of melancholy pervades the constant narrative invention.

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After the success of *The 400 Blows*, Truffaut perversely wanted to make a film only for cinephiles, adapting David Goodis's tough thriller *Down There* to honour (and play with) the idea of American noir. Part crime melodrama, part romance, spiced with musical numbers, humour and slapstick ('On my mother's life' indeed), *Shoot the Pianist* is Truffaut's most New Wave film – though as DP Raoul Coutard pointed out, Truffaut was a traditionalist in many ways, chiefly interested in the film's emotional through-line and thrown by the new working methods. These required some ingenuity; that inky, atmospheric opening scene, diving like Albert Rémy's chancer Chico between light and shade, is the result of rain blowing reflector lamp bulbs.

The singer Charles Aznavour plays Charlie, the washed-up pianist of the title. Simultaneously tough-talking and timid, hollow-eyed with sadness, he is the most unlikely of noir heroes, his move from high to low art echoed by Truffaut's own genre-slumming. Like Charlie, a protagonist riven with self-doubt, the movie itself looks oddly modern, due to the nimble mix of menace, melancholy and comic anecdote that make it so light on its feet.

Unsurprisingly, the film's protean charms left audiences cold on its release, ensuring that Truffaut achieved his original aim. Watching it back-to-back with *Jules et Jim*, what links the two is a relentless playfulness, as well as a desire to upend ideas of what a thriller or a period literary adaptation should look like – plus those ubiquitous man-to-man chats about love, equal parts worry and wonder, establishing Truffaut truly as the man who loved women.

Kate Stables, *Sight and Sound*, October 2014

François Truffaut on 'Shoot the Pianist'

Nineteen years ago with your second film Shoot the Pianist you took a lot of risks. Many people in England consider it your most exciting film even though it was a commercial flop. With very few exceptions, you hardly seem to have taken a risk since. You now have a solid financial base. Could you not now risk again a new departure, rather than continue, for example, the Antoine Doinel themes and characters, as you do in Love on the Run [1979]?

I think that the charm of *Pianist* arises from the element of chance, and this same element is also present in *Stolen Kisses* [1968]. What these two films have in common is the fact that in each case it is impossible to anticipate what will happen next. And it is true that apart from the Doinel films I always know what is supposed to happen before I begin shooting – at least in general, though of course it is possible to improvise some of the details, because I have confidence in the actors. But during the filming of *Pianist* I

suffered from not knowing what was going to happen to the main character nor what the whole thing was really about. It was a genuine experiment, and it is true that I no longer have the stomach to try something as completely experimental again.

If I were doing *Pianiste* now I would say to myself – Who is that man? What does he want? I would understand the story whereas at the time if I felt like shooting a particular scene I just did it and then followed it with another that was completely different. Though I think this was more acceptable in the climate of the early 60s. I think that if it appeared now it would meet with even greater indifference than it did then. Even so, if there were a thriller that I wanted to film, I would still do it but not with the same naiveté, simply because I no longer have that naiveté. In *Pianiste* there was the element of luck and the charm of Marie Dubois and Nicole Berger and the strangeness of the Aznavour character. It could have been better and it could have been worse, but I'm not sure it could be done again. When I began *La Mariée était en noir* I was convinced it would be like *Pianiste* but better. But it turned out worse, though I think the colour was a factor here. It was a film that should have been mysterious and yet wasn't. Then I thought I had a good chance with *La Sirène du Mississippi* which was a huge flop – I like the love story but the thriller aspect is very slipshod. On the other hand, it is always a little artificial and absurd to take these American stories and import them into France.

François Truffaut interviewed by Don Allen, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1979

Mary Ure, Albert Finney and film critic Louis Marcorelles talk about 'Shoot the Pianist' in 1961

Marcorelles: You get a good deal of improvisation in a film like Truffaut's *Tirez sur le pianiste*. He wants his actors to show their characters through their nerves and their physical reactions as much as their dialogue, and he's not particularly strict about his text. What do you feel about this?

Ure: I think it works. I felt *Tirez sur le pianiste* was a remarkable personal statement, which every great film has to be; and it gave me the feeling of a progression in the cinema, some kind of advance.

Finney: I agree that Truffaut's feeling about his subject emerges very strongly, and of course this is what should happen. You ought to feel that the director is cajoling you, or bullying you, or seducing you into his attitude. At the same time, the conception of some of the performances seemed a bit untidy: they didn't communicate to me, and I felt that perhaps because of this freedom and improvisation they weren't always certain about just what they meant to communicate.

Ure: But it was such a relief to find a film that didn't give you everything on a plate, all neatly worked out with a beginning and a middle and an end, and all technically perfect... You don't sense that Truffaut has a cameraman saying 'You can't do *that*; it's too difficult,' and a producer saying 'You can't shoot *that*; it'll be too expensive.' You feel he does exactly what he wants; and if we had more directors in England who were in love with their subjects, and who felt that they had this kind of personal freedom, I think our cinema would be a very different thing.

Marcorelles: In fact Truffaut's film was shot entirely outside the studio, on a small budget and with complete freedom. I was there, for instance, when he did one of the scenes between Aznavour and Nicole Berger, and he was alone with just the two actors and the cameraman.

***Sight and Sound*, Spring 1961**

SHOOT THE PIANIST (TIREZ SUR LE PIANISTE)

Director: François Truffaut
Production: Films de la Pléiade
Presented by: Pierre Braunberger
Production Manager: Serge Komor
Production Administration: Roger Fleytoux
Production Secretary: Luce Deuss
Assistant Directors: Francis Cognany, Robert Bober, Björn Johansen
Script Girl: Suzanne Schiffman
Adaptation: F. Truffaut, Marcel Moussy
Dialogue: François Truffaut
Based on the novel Down There *by:* David Goodis
Director of Photography: Raoul Coutard
Editors: Claudine Bouché, Cécile Decugis
Art Director: Jacques Mély *
Original Music: Georges Delerue
Sound: Jacques Gallois *

Cast

Charles Aznavour (*Charlie Koler aka Edouard Saroyan*)
Marie Dubois (*Lena*)
Nicole Berger (*Theresa*)
Michèle Mercier (*Clarisse*)
Serge Davri (*Plyne*)
Claude Mansard (*Momo*)
Richard Kanayan (*Fido Saroyan*)
Jacques Aslanian (*Richard Saroyan*)
Daniel Boulanger (*Ernest*)
Claude Heymann (*Schmeel*)
Alex Joffé (*passer-by*)
Boby Lapointe (*singer*)
Catherine Lutz (*Mammy*)
Albert Rémy (*Chico Saroyan*)

France 1960
80 mins

* Uncredited

FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT: FOR THE LOVE OF FILMS

Jules et Jim (Jules and Jim)

From Fri 4 Feb

Philosophical Screens: Jules et Jim

Thu 10 Feb 20:20

The Representation of Women in Truffaut's Films

Fri 18 Feb 18:20

THE LITERARY TRUFFAUT

Anne and Muriel (Les Deux Anglaises et le continent)

Sat 5 Feb 12:20; Thu 17 Feb 17:50 (+ intro by actor Kika Markham); Tue 22 Feb 20:25

Fahrenheit 451

Sat 5 Feb 20:45; Sun 13 Feb 12:40; Sun 27 Feb 18:40

The Story of Adèle H (L'Histoire d'Adèle H)

Wed 9 Feb 20:55; Sat 12 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 18:20

The Green Room (La Chambre verte)

Thu 10 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:40; Wed 23 Feb 20:40

THE HITCHCOCK TRUFFAUT

Shoot the Pianist (Tirez sur le pianiste)

Tue 1 Feb 20:50; Fri 11 Feb 18:30; Sat 26 Feb 13:20

The Bride Wore Black (La Mariée était en noir)

Fri 4 Feb 20:45; Sun 13 Feb 18:00; Sun 27 Feb 12:10

Finally Sunday! (Vivement dimanche!)

Sat 5 Feb 17:50; Sat 12 Feb 12:30; Sun 27 Feb 15:00

Mississippi Mermaid (La Sirène du Mississippi)

Sun 6 Feb 12:40; Fri 18 Feb 20:35; Fri 25 Feb 18:00

La Peau douce (Silken Skin)

Sun 6 Feb 18:20; Sat 12 Feb 17:20; Sat 26 Feb 15:30

The Woman Next Door (La Femme d'à côté)

Tue 8 Feb 20:30; Mon 21 Feb 18:10; Thu 24 Feb 20:30

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