

Because of Tenderness: Thoughts on the Performance of Jean-Pierre Léaud



Masculin/Féminin (1966)

by Rhys Graham

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One FEAR AND GALLANTRY

As I watch the face, the hesitant and often mechanical gestures, the clumsy cool of Jean-Pierre Léaud, I recall these words as a way of beginning to think through why this young actor, now old, stands out in the world of cinema performance:

I have in my life just three times seen faces in dark light, at dusk, or at dawn, or against a white pillow in which the fear of life was so profoundly accurate, like an animal's perfect apprehension, that it encompassed the opposite and became the gallantry to break your heart (1)

The extraordinary performances of Jean-Pierre Léaud, particularly as a young man and particularly in the films of Truffaut and Godard, seem to embody this profoundly accurate fear of life and the gallantry to break the heart. For this reason, memories of his performances recall startled close-ups, nervous movement, and outbursts of emotion. Qualities that distinguish him from an army of actors whose skills lie in polish and surface, in concealing vulnerability beneath charm and beauty. Léaud, unlike so many male actors in particular, is at his strongest when his face shows weakness, and his performances seem to be most incisive when he appears most confused. For this reason, he is one of the great performers to act as a medium in communicating elusive and emotive directorial intention to an audience. He brims with the Paris-cool that seems to keep French film of the '60s perpetually in fashion, he wears a scarf like no actor can, but he performs through the most unfashionable of emotions: vulnerability.

Léaud's on-screen life was given birth in the remarkable *Les Quatre Cent Coups* (1959), as the young Antoine Doinel, fictional alter ego of François Truffaut. This

film, which lingered in affectionate close-up on the face of the young actor, introduced a performative energy that was defiant, withdrawn, and, at the same time, fragile and exposed. It is for this role and the subsequent films in the Doinel cycle (*Antoine et Colette* [1962], *Baisers volés* [1968], *Domicile conjugal* [1970], *L'Amour en fuite* [1979]), that Léaud remains best known. Doinel, the hapless romantic frustrated by modern life, has, similarly, become one of the best-loved characters in French cinema.

During the same period, Léaud made a remarkable number of films with Jean-Luc Godard. These roles, as diverse as they are politically intense, are poles apart from Doinel but also exploit the outsider quality that is intrinsic to Léaud. However, where Léaud's performances for Truffaut were that of a lonely, romantic outsider, for Godard, Léaud was a dogmatic and often didactic idealist who also skirted the fringes of life. Truffaut described Léaud's Doinel persona as one who "does not openly oppose society (and in this sense is not a revolutionary), but he is wary of it and goes his own way, on the outskirts of society." (2) Godard, on the other hand, almost always had Léaud play a revolutionary or ideologue, and in many ways, this was closer to the truth of the performer. In a recent biography of Truffaut, De Baecque and Toubiana write:

Both directors used Jean-Pierre Léaud as an actor, but in opposite ways. Truffaut was often appalled or wounded by Léaud's personal choices and his commitment to left-wing militancy. The actor for his part, surely felt closer to Godard, even though, on a human level, he remained extremely attached to Doinel's creator. (3)

Regardless of the personal dynamics, both directors attached enormous importance to Léaud as a principal performer in the early stages of their careers. And despite their passionate fluctuations in relations, Léaud expressed a defining characteristic of both directors: like Doinel, like many of the Godard characters and like both directors, Léaud, Truffaut's biographers explain, "doesn't reject society; it is society that takes issue with his spirit and style of life." (4) These men are all bound up in an energetic verve that is dulled by the constraints of society. Childlike: Truffaut in emotions and romance, Godard in anger and ideals, and Léaud in body and spirit.

Two

TECHNIQUE AND EMOTION

In 1965, Godard was still full of admiration for Truffaut, and in a small piece for *L'Avant Scène du Cinéma* entitled 'Studying François', he wrote of "a rather solemn, romantic and charming face" (5) that could equally have described Léaud. He then continued on to write an elegant and understated explanation of Truffaut's work:

How is it that shyness and tenderness go hand in hand. that technique is the sister of emotion. and rigour of freedom? (6)

In many ways, it is an admiration of this intermingling of technique and emotion that remained the common bond between Truffaut and Godard even as their close friendship developed into open hostility. And long after their camaraderie turned

sour, it was Léaud who remained their point of connection. While he performed as a conduit for their narratives, thoughts and emotions, he also functioned as a sentimental conductor of the energy that had once passed between Truffaut and Godard and made the *nouvelle vague* so incredibly influential. And most of all, these words of Godard continued to be embodied by Léaud in a series of performances that so easily combined technique and emotion.

One can only wonder how strange it must have seemed for Truffaut and Godard to look back at this shared world of performance while their non-existent relationship was mediated by this young actor. What is particularly interesting is that both directors expected Léaud to bring 'himself' to the role - this elusively charismatic romantic - while they moved to different creative positions, each accusing the other of a personal or political betrayal.

For the character of Antoine Doinel, Truffaut increasingly encouraged Léaud to own the Doinel persona. Although Léaud resisted this, it was a natural extension of an intimate mentorship that in some ways echoed André Bazin's adoption of the young Truffaut. This influenced Léaud's performance to the point where the autobiographical character, by *Baisers volés*, is equal parts Léaud and Truffaut. In fact, De Baecque and Toubiana write, "increasingly, the character's gestures, attitudes, anecdotes, and even memories belong to Léaud himself. Truffaut was fully aware of this and encouraged it, never curbing Léaud's inspirations and improvisations." (7) A large part of this, they go on to explain, can be attributed to the fact that Léaud still lived in the "bosom" of Truffaut's filmmaking circles. "He was lodged, most of the time, two flights above (Truffaut's) company's offices, on rue Robert-Estienne, in an apartment rented by Truffaut on the fifth floor of the building. Except for periods when they were filming separately, Truffaut and Léaud would see each other regularly. There wasn't a single screenplay, a single film, television or theatre project offered to Léaud that wasn't first examined by Truffaut, whose opinion the actor always sought." (8)

Léaud's performances for Godard were often a way of freeing himself of the burden of the Doinel persona that saw him recognised worldwide. Whereas it was Léaud's emotional performance that made his work for Truffaut so outstanding, it was his uncanny ability to make a mechanical physicality appear full of grace and fluidity that distinguished his work with Godard. Godard's philosophy in performance direction, he once explained, is to "bring at least 50 percent of the actor into the picture. Not his private life, but his way of thinking, his way of speaking. I don't want to teach him or to oblige him to do things he doesn't want to do. I may teach him things he doesn't know, but I don't want to force him. I'm not a gestapo, I'm a director." (9) This, in the case of Léaud, often involved a sort of 'performed' performance; a verbally and physically precise sense of movement and interaction.

There is undoubtedly a certain style of performance that became synonymous with Godard but which was best expressed by Léaud. Over-performed dramatic gestures, a gun suddenly raised, a kiss suddenly stolen, a hand raised in defence, a body twirled in deference, relentless gazes, poised sadness and explosions of joy, anger or frustration. It is this distinctly 'performed' performance which came to resonate in directorial quotations in Bertolucci's films up to 1970 and the work of Hal Hartley, among many others.

Watch Marcelle Clerici (Jean-Louis Trintignant) raise his gun at the doorway of the ministry in Bertolucci's *Il Conformista* (1970). Although there is no target, he points in one direction, then another, then another, all the while aware of his own posing, his body in space and the overstated drama of his actions. This gesture recalls one of many of Godard's gun-slinging characters, Léaud among them. This is made more meaningful by the fact that it was in this film that Bertolucci symbolically killed off his self-confessed oedipal attachment to his creative mentor - Godard. This symbolic death is expressed in Clerici's shooting of his old professor who, by no coincidence, lives in an apartment which shared Godard's address. This death, too, is performed in a series of gestures and poses that resonate in every moment of Léaud's performances for Godard.

In Hal Hartley's films, particularly *Surviving Desire* (1991), *Simple Men* (1992) and *Amateur* (1994), the stated influences of Godard are physically articulated by characters who swoon, threaten and dance in double takes, and in expressions of clumsy, awkward or raw sentiment. Anger, sadness, fear. This superficial play of emotion and action always taking place visibly, through stiff articulated poses of the character's thoughts and feelings, runs throughout the work of Godard and many of his progeny. Yet, again, it is in Léaud's work for Godard that this style of performance is expressed most lyrically. For it is in Léaud, and not only in his performances, that vulnerability dwells alongside technique, that his motion and emotion are at once mechanical and deeply delicate.

Three

THE SOUVENIR

Truffaut, whose life was so often confused with that of his fictional counterpart Léaud/Doinel, was often encouraged to discuss his affinity with Léaud. Although some criticised Truffaut for refusing to acknowledge Léaud's interest in leftist politics (which Truffaut stubbornly eschewed), there was a certain romanticism common to them both which was clearly the basis of their identification. "It is precisely because of his anachronism and romanticism that I found Jean-Pierre so appealing", Truffaut explained in a foreword to the published Doinel scripts. "He is a young man of the nineteenth century. As for myself, I am a nostalgic. I am not tuned in on what is modern, it is in the past that I find my inspiration; I proceed by personal sensations, which is why all of my pictures. are filled with souvenirs" (10).

This idea of the souvenir is important because Léaud himself, through his strong identification with some of Truffaut and Godard's most acclaimed and best known films, has become the souvenir for filmmakers drawn to a certain energetic sentiment represented by this period in cinema. Long after his attachment to these filmmakers ceased, Léaud would emerge again and again as a note both to the past and to a certain set of emotional attachments to this past. For example, in films such as Olivier Assayas' *Irma Vep* (1996) and Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), his characters resonate with the *nouvelle vague* and the energy and ideas that came to be associated with it. Even Truffaut turned to Léaud to evoke a certain nostalgia for his own filmmaking past in *La Nuit américaine* (1973).

In this sense it is clear that Léaud has come to mean much more in the cinematic landscape than so many actors to come before or after him. From his own,

personally attached perspective, Truffaut goes some way to explaining the outcomes of the iconic allure and sense of permanence that Léaud evokes, especially in the role of Antoine Doinel:

A few months after a picture is finished, the laboratory asks production for permission to destroy all the negative that was not used in the final cut - the doubles, the overtakes, that are stored in cans in the depot. Though I readily grant this permission for my other films, I am reluctant to do so for the whole Doinel cycle: I feel as if the film on Jean-Pierre Léaud, freezing him in each different phase of his physical development, is more precious than it is for the adult protagonists. (11)

In much the same way that Truffaut and Godard represented a generation of filmmakers (*les mistons*) whose foster parent was the silver screen, Léaud is an actor who was raised within the confines of the cinema. He endured adolescence and young adulthood, the frivolity and rebellion of his teens and the seriousness of his maturity, all in front of the camera. He grew up under the watchful eye of a devoted audience and his ever-dutiful filmmaking fathers. Yet, where other youthful actors, in Hollywood particularly, were left behind or thrown to the lions, there was something about Léaud's vulnerability that singled him out. His audience and his carers nurtured him through many roles, caught him when he stumbled, devoted films to stages, feelings and emotions that were his own, and watched him learn and grow. Child actors who grow up on-screen are rarely treasured in the way that Léaud has been. Most are left, sacrificed to the ravages of time. Léaud, however, had in Truffaut and Godard, and has in a generation of filmmakers that followed, an array of custodians who genuinely consider his existence on screen and off as something to be gently held.

Four MASCULIN/FÉMININ

Although there is a general appeal to Léaud that will always remain intriguing, there is one film that, for me, will always shine.

Masculin/Féminin (1966) remains, in both inexplicable and explicable ways, my favourite Godard film and one of the films I return to over and over again. Made during the incredibly productive period of filmmaking that Godard undertook in the late '60s, there are three things occurring in this film that keep me coming back: vulnerability, energy, and Léaud. In this, his third film with Godard, he plays the role of Paul, a young militant whose interests waver between his on again/off again girlfriend Madeleine (Chantal Goya), his political actions, and a social survey he is conducting into the opinions of Parisians. Increasingly, the world he moves in and his own preoccupations collide with his Marxist-Leninist stance and he resorts to his one over-riding interest: tenderness.

From scene to scene, Paul swings from sullen frustration to absurd anger to thoughtful melancholy to a swaggering joy. These emotions are unpredictable and, in this way, reflect the highs and lows of his peers. Yet, they are expressed with the same love of danger (both physical and emotional) that Godard later reflects upon

in *Prénom: Carmen* (1983). In this later film, a cynical and self-deprecating biographical insight into the director's world, Godard states, "youth will always prefer love to money. Such daring, such love of danger. it can be seen in a look, in a walk, in a smile. It's in all of us. Such violence is a kind of peace."

It is in Paul's look, his walk and his infrequent smiles that Léaud expresses love and longing. He talks of politics but means love and talks of films but means love. He is confused, true, but it is the confusion of one who is desperate to not be alone, who is afraid of life. He declares, "without tenderness you'd shoot yourself". He pursues Madeleine and when she asks, "why do you want to go out with me?", he replies "because you're pretty" then, distracted, he adds, "because of tenderness".

Like Belmondo in *À bout de souffle* (1959), who echoes the gestures of Bogart, Paul affects the actions of the stereotypical heroic lead. He casually tosses cigarettes into his mouth (but misses), he plays the seducer (but is snubbed), he gets into lovelorn fights (only to have his opponent casually suicide in front of him). Like the survey Paul conducts, which he ultimately knows to be a deception, he walks the streets of Paris, playing heartthrob to an unseen audience. Yet it is this very performative style which characterises Léaud. His gestures and movements are excessively self-aware in postures of cool and defiance, and for this very reason betray the emotions and vulnerability beneath.

It is for this that Léaud's Paul is one of the performances that will always entrance me.

Because Paul is always ready, spray can in hand, to daub political slogans. Because Paul declares, "we master ideas which are nothing, but not our emotions which are all". Because Paul bursts into the projection booth at the cinema to object to the cropping of the image. Because Paul shivers when the screen lights up but is always terribly disappointed at the result because it is not the perfect movie that he carries inside. Because of idealism, intelligence. Because of tenderness.

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See also

***Vivre Sa Vie* by Adrian Danks**

***Godard's Histoire(s) du cinéma Parts 1A & 1B: Tales from the Crypt* by Adrian Martin**

***Truffaut's The 400 Blows, or the Sea, Antoine, the Sea* by John Conomos**

***Desire & Despair: the Cinema of Jean Eustache* by Jared Rapfogel**

Endnotes:

(1) Doctorow, E.L., *Loon Lake*, Macmillan, London, 1980 

(2) Truffaut, François, *The Adventures of Antoine Doinel*, trans. Scott, Helen G,

Simon and Schuster, New York, 1971, p 12 

(3) De Baecque, Antoine and Toubiana, Serge, *Truffaut*, trans. Temerson, Catherine, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1999, p 267 

(4) *Ibid.*, p 268 

(5) Godard, Jean-Luc, 'Studying François' in *Godard on Godard*, Narboni, Jean & Milne, Tom (eds.), Secker and Warburg, London 1972, p 211 

(6) *Ibid.*, p 211 

(7) De Baecque, Antoine and Toubiana, Serge, *op.cit.* p 233 

(8) *Ibid.*, p 233 

(9) Youngblood, Gene, 'Jean-Luc Godard: No Difference between Life and Cinema', in *Jean-Luc Godard Interviews*, Sterritt, David (ed.), University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1998, p 33 

(10) Truffaut, François, *op.cit.* p 11 

(11) *Ibid.*, p 13 