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Tavernier, A Filmmaker in his Generation

Acclaimed by many as the leading French *cinéaste* of his generation, Bertrand Tavernier has made twenty feature films since 1973. Along with others such as Doillon, Eustache, and Téchiné, Tavernier established his reputation in the 1970s. An heir of the Nouvelle Vague, he is also an admirer and astute analyst of the French “Tradition de Qualité” that preceded it. He is younger than Godard and Truffaut, but older than Besson, Beineix and the “cinéma du look” as well as than Kurys and Akerman and the multitude of *femmes cinéastes* who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Although most critics assume (either approvingly or not) that he has “returned” to a pre-New Wave conception of filmmaking, I do not believe this to be the case. Tavernier belongs to a no-man’s land (and even more a no-woman’s land) between strong generations of filmmakers. It is not surprising that in his historical films, he is drawn to periods of aftermath and transition, moments characterized by the heady possibility of creating new worlds, but also by a dark cloud of existential doubt.

Tavernier is also an outspoken public figure: his leadership has been felt in his native Lyon, where he helped create the Institut Lumière, and in Paris, where—in person and through his television documentaries—his voice can be heard in debates over cultural issues as in the 1999 “affaire de la critique,” and social questions such as drugs and immigration. He was even interviewed by *Le Monde* about the United States’ impending invasion of Iraq.

The leading *cinéaste* of his generation, then. All right. . . But what exactly is his generation? What world events had a formative impact on his identity as an artist? How does his generational sensibility manifest itself in his films? And how might we locate him in the history of French

cinema? According to Pierre Nora, each age cohort comes to “generational consciousness” as it recognizes the distinguishing features of its own historicity. He considers each generation to be a *lieu de mémoire* or memory site in that it “strikes directly to the vital core of our historical perception of the present.”¹ Nora’s definition reveals its affinity with myth, and it also overlaps with ideology as Althusser theorized it, that is a conceptual grid—a master-narrative, or a set of images for example—that mediates between reality and representations, including individual and collective self-representation. A single film or the entire *oeuvre* of a cinematic *auteur* can thus embody a generation’s consciousness. It can also construct it.

I am finding that Tavernier’s *oeuvre* is strongly informed by four moments in political and cultural history that provide the conceptual grid or canvas on which he paints his stories. In relation to each of these, he speaks in the aftermath. This perhaps partly explains why he is often considered “un grand nostalgique.” In reading his films, it is helpful to think of him as a “four-poster”: post-colonial, post-New Wave, Post-May ’68 and postwar (WWII). Let’s consider each of these briefly in turn.

1) Post-war

Tavernier was born in Lyon in 1941. His father, René, was a poet and intellectual best known for founding the literary journal Confluences during the Occupation and for opening his home in the unoccupied zone as a refuge to fugitive artists, most notably Louis Aragon & Elsa Triolet. It is worth noting that while father-child relations abound in Tavernier’s filmography, mothers are strikingly absent. The city of Lyon, too—associated with his father and the war, but also with trolleys and parks, a certain *pudeur* and a more meditative pace of life than Paris—plays an important role in his identity as a filmmaker. (Lyon is also a “ville gastronomique,” and virtually every film has a meal scene—a set piece in his corpus—most have several.)

At the Liberation. Bertrand is still in Lyon and has just turned 4, but he remembers the sound of celebratory fireworks, which cast a special quality of light over the river. Although his family moved to Paris the following year, Tavernier's identification with his father, his wartime memories, and his personal nostalgia for Lyon are closely bound together at the origins of his vocation. Paris may be the "City of Lights," but Lyon is the Ville Lumière, the birthplace of cinema. The original factory belonging to the Lumière family now houses a cinema museum and research Institut Lumière (Rue du premier film), thanks in large part to Tavernier's lobbying efforts. Three of Tavernier's most intimist feature films—L'Horloger de Saint-Paul, Une Semaine de Vacances, and Autour de Minuit—are portraits of individuals in identity crisis, and each of these characters either lives in or makes a pilgrimage to Lyon to regain a sense of stability and purpose. Two of his documentaries as well are rooted in his Lyonnais identity: the filmed portrait of the city in Lyon le regard intérieur takes the form of an interview with his father, who recounts his war memories. Histoires de vies brisées records a hunger strike in Lyon staged to protest the *double peine* or double jeopardy suffered by legal immigrants convicted of crimes and then deported upon their release from prison.

2) Post-New Wave

Bertrand was only 12 when the January 1954 issue of the Cahiers du Cinéma hit the kiosks. That issue, of course, contained the essay "Une Certaine Tendence dans le cinéma français," by François Truffaut, then a young upstart fulminating against the "cinéma de Papa" and sounding his call for an *auteurist* cinema. The most explicit targets of Truffaut's polemic were the popular screenwriting team of Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, who, as a result of Truffaut's attack, temporarily disappeared from view. Tavernier will engage in a sustained conversation with the

New Wave, especially Truffaut, most obviously through his success in staging a comeback for “Aurenchébost.”

Bertrand comes of age in 1961, during the apotheosis of the Nouvelle Vague, the year of L’Année dernière à Marienbad, Jules et Jim, Cléo de 5 à 7. That year also saw a profusion of “films à sketch,” such as L’amour à Vingt ans and Les 7 Péchés capitaux. A few years later, Nouvelle Vague producer Georges de Beauregard, would hand Tavernier his first filmmaking opportunity: an invitation to contribute a sketch to an anthology film entitled Le Jeu de la chance (1964).

3) Post-Colonial

1961 was also, of course, the penultimate year of France’s conflict in Algeria, the year, for example, in which was set René Vautier’s 1971 film Avoir Vingt Ans dans les Aurès, about a group of *insoumis* during the Generals’ putsch. In fact, the Putsch ended on Tavernier’s 20th birthday. (He might have been conscripted, but for his terrible eyesight, which earned him an exemption.)

If there is a primal scene in Tavernier’s career, Algeria is it. Virtually every one of his films includes some reference to France’s colonial past. Often popping up in non-plot elements or peripheral details, such allusions are hardly noticeable unless you’re looking for them. They are hidden in plain view in the way that topical fragments were woven into many New Wave films: a radio report about Algeria during a taxi ride in Varda’s Cléo de 5 à 7; a traffic jam caused by de Gaulle’s arrival in Paris to begin the Evian negotiations in A Bout de Souffle; the protagonist’s colonial military background in Malle’s Ascenseur pour échaffaud; a quick pan over a newspaper article in Chris Marker’s Cuba si!; Antoine Doinel’s military misadventures between the end of Les 400 Coups and its sequel, Baisers volés, and so on. In a manner very similar to these examples, colonial allusions pop up at the margins of Tavernier’s *oeuvre*. But rather than as part of a *vérité*

current-events backdrop, as in the *Nouveele Vague* instances, Tavernier uses such details to bring historical depth and nuance, even motivation to his character portraits. Such allusions also serve as opportunities for acerbic authorial commentary. A few examples:

--A prosecutor (J-Cl. Brialy) in Le Juge et l'assassin, a complacent and naïve former colonial magistrate in Saigon, identifies his Indochinese house-servant as the brother of a hanged a killer that he, the *procureur*, had brought to justice. "Aren't you afraid he'll poison you?" Asks a friend. "No," replies the magistrate, "I converted him first."

--A son in Un Dimanche à la campagne loves his painter father and admires him in a servile way, but is never able to please. M. Ladmiral *père* dislikes the very character traits in which he detects a family resemblance: his son's unwillingness to take risks and his limited imagination that caused him to abandon an artistic vocation and become a bureaucrat "dans une compagnie coloniale."

--Autour de Minuit is loosely based on the friendship of Be-bop pianist Bud Powell and French jazz enthusiast Francis Paudras. Paudras recounts in his memoir (from which Tavernier adapted his film) that he first heard Powell play when he, Francis, was 15. In contrast, the film's Francis recounts that he first heard the musician (become a saxophonist) when he, Francis, was a young conscript on his way to Algeria. The music gave him the courage to jump ship, and he landed in jail.

--La Vie et rien d'autre, set in 1920 near Verdun, contains two significant colonial allusions. The first of these involves a team of explosives technicians responsible for the dangerous job of removing leftover landmines from farmlands. Before we hear from a distance the explosion that will signal their death, a medium shot shows that the *démineurs* are West Africans, no doubt veterans of the colonial brigades that had served as shock troops on all fronts and died in disproportionate numbers.

A second allusion is more indirect. A bereaved wife laments that she would have done anything to prevent her husband's departure, even lie down in front of the train taking him off to war. That this remark's buried context is Algeria is revealed in the central incident that organizes another film:

-- La Guerre sans nom, Tavernier's 1992 documentary and the only one of his films to take the Algerian war as its primary subject. The incident alluded to in the earlier film was a protest demonstration that took place in Grenoble on May 18, 1956, when wives and girlfriends, parents and neighbors blocked the railroad tracks in an attempt to prevent the departure of train convoys full of conscripted soldiers leaving for Algeria. This event serves as the point of departure for four hours of interviews with Grenoblois veterans. This is the only time Tavernier has placed his own contemporaries front and center.

4) Finally, Post-1968

Just turned 27 in May 1968, Bertrand is of an age with the likes of Régis Debray (b. 1940), Serge July (1942), and Bernard Kouchner (1939). He is four years older than Dany Cohn-Bendit. Already beyond his student years, having survived an ultra-brief attempt at law school, Tavernier's sympathies nevertheless lie with the rebellion. (In fact, his sympathies always lie with rebellion.) His contribution to the "Events" was confined, as far as I have been able to determine, to participation in the February riot outside the Cinémathèque, from which he emerged with a bloodied face. Nevertheless, his films are suffused with the spirit of those rebellions, which must have struck an already strong chord. His downplaying of story in favor of everyday life, his critique of institutions and of capitalist consumerism, his anarchist streak, and his virtual obsession with generation gaps are further testimony to his post-1968 generational consciousness.

In 1981, Bertrand, aged 40, shared high hopes for the newly elected socialist government, the first in his lifetime. Since then, his disappointment is more and more visible in his films, a disappointment that shows up in a shift in genres. He turns increasingly to social pseudo-documentary in films like L627, L'Appât, and Ça commence aujourd'hui and to documentary proper in La Guerre sans nom, De L'Autre Côté du périph' and Histoires de Vies Brisées to address directly issues relating to crime, education, poverty, the still-unresolved anguish of colonial war veterans, and the living conditions of immigrant populations. At an age when many filmmakers are resting on their laurels or repeating the formulas of the past, Tavernier has virtually launched a new career, defying once again any attempts to place him securely within a generation.

Tavernier's specific historical consciousness can be recognized in terms of a series of repeated figures used to represent intergenerational relations. His choice of genres and *mise-en-scène* time and again foreground failed communication and attempts to reestablish connection. His characteristic emphasis on periods of transition and on characters who are at odds with their historical moment can be a source of epic comedy, as in the case of the thoroughly modern Héloïse d'Artagnan, of tragedy (Conan the warrior in peacetime, or the enlightened pre-revolutionary Regent), or of intimist pathos, as in the case of the clockmaker and his son. Moreover, the picture is often complicated by blurring of frames: intradiegetic drama is often entangled with extratextual themes, so that fiction comes to look a lot like documentary.

In several films, a woman protagonist takes time out to visit her aging father: Death Watch; Daddy nostalgie; Une Semaine de vacances, La Fille de d'Artagnan

[clip from each]

Each of these scenes marks a woman's moment of reflection in the midst of crisis, her *prise de conscience* of herself as an adult. Tavernier's ability to adopt varying vantage points is integral to the

moral complexity of his meditations on generational authority. Spectators adopt the paternal point of view in Un Dimanche à la campagne, Autour de Minuit, and Daddy Nostalgie, while also sympathizing with a daughter who tries—and ultimately fails—to reach a father too absorbed in artistic pursuits to notice the daughter's need. Héloïse is the only daughter to succeed in making the connection with her father, and La Fille de d'Artagnan is Tavernier's only comedy.

Relations between fathers and sons form a second important—but different—figure. More overtly sociological, more distanced and intellectualized, Lyon le regard intérieur purports to be a documentary about a city but in fact takes the form of an interview with the filmmaker's father. Another example can be found in Un Dimanche à la campagne, whose aging painter is able to enjoy and identify with his daughter's rebellion, while his rapport with his son is more conflicted; he resents his bureaucratic and complacent son, who reminds him of his own sacrificed creativity.

Although not transparently so, Tavernier's generational portraits have an autobiographical dimension as well. He frequently enlists his own children in key roles. Daughter Tiffany first appeared as an unidentified little girl in the opening shots of L'Horloger. Then, in Des Enfants gâtés, she plays the child of a documentary filmmaker undergoing a change of heart. Son Nils Tavernier plays a pupil who provokes a teacher to doubt her vocation, leading to her breakdown in Une Semaine de vacances; later, he appeared in the role of a feudal lord's son humiliated and violated in La Passion Beatrice, and then as Héloïse d'Artagnan's poet-suitor and partner in adventure. As a real-life young man emerging from a bad patch of adolescent drug involvement, Nils served as advisor for L627, about a drug police squad. As an adult, he is listed as co-filmmaker of the documentary De L'Autre Côté du Périph. Meanwhile, Tiffany and her husband—a teacher and poet—conceived and wrote the script for Ça commence aujourd'hui, a semi-documentary set in a school in a depressed mining town. Clearly Tavernier's generational themes—like most of his

filmmaking choices—spill over into or devolve from personal experience. He is not simply a father and a filmmaker, but a father-filmmaker.

As all these examples show, generational relations are always anchored in social contexts, sometimes even functioning allegorically. As one father puts it in Une Semaine de vacances: “Les enfants ne ressemblent pas à leurs parents. Ils ressemblent à leur époque.” This is especially prominent in the case of artists: family generations serve as a figure for thinking about the history of aesthetics: be-bop musicians, filmmakers, a painter, each seeking to push beyond predecessors in order to define a new generation of artists. This is, of course, the dynamic Harold Bloom outlined in *The Anxiety of Influence*. It is also the script played out by Truffaut’s oedipal diatribe against the “cinéma de papa” in the persons of screenwriters Aurenche and Bost.

Parents and a children who “ressemblent à leur époque” are at the heart of Tavernier’s first film, L’Horloger de Saint-Paul, where many of these generational figures and all the formative historical moments I listed are in evidence. The film is adapted from Simenon’s L’Horloger d’Everton, whose protagonist discovers his teenage son has murdered a man. In the course of the drama, this father draws continuities between his son’s act of violent revolt and his own and his father’s moments of sexual rebellion. At the end, he assembles into a single picture frame photos of the three generations of fathers and sons.

Tavernier was no doubt drawn to the novel for its generational portraits, and yet he makes sweeping changes that bear his own personal and generational signature. He retains the central figure of the father (Michel Descombes, played by Philippe Noiret) coming to terms with his son’s crime, but he transfers the setting from 1950s Connecticut to 1970s Lyon. Tavernier narrows the focus to the father-son duo by eliminating other characters and at the same time opening out Simenon’s private, domestic frame to anchor his story in public places and events, making his story

both historical and collective.

The opening credits unfold against a tracking shot of a car in flames, viewed from inside a train by a little girl (Tiffany). **[clip]** The suspenseful musical score announces a gangster movie perhaps, or a political thriller, and the burning car evokes both the Events of May '68 and films made in reference to those events. Allusions to 1968 are contained in a discussion among friends of recent election results (a conversation which also provides an excuse for a meal sequence) and in lines like “C'est la mode de brûler les voitures” and “On étouffe dans ce foutu pays.” Behind the scenes as well, L'Horloger evokes a post-1968 sensibility in its self-conscious emphasis on process and collectivity. With this his first feature, Tavernier assembled a team of professionals he enjoys working with who will remain with him for numerous future films: Noiret; Aurenche and Bost, with whom he co-wrote the script; cinematographer Pierre-William Glenn; composer Philippe Sarde; new actress and fellow Lyonnais Christine Pascal. Moreover, Tavernier seems often to choose team members whose political and social commitments correspond with his own.

As part of their investigation, police detectives in L'Horloger search the homes of the murder victim and the suspect. The dead man—one of Tavernier's very few unambiguously evil characters—Significantly, he never even appears!—was a “flic d'usine,” who apparently molested Bernard's girlfriend and then found a pretext to fire her. His apartment is decorated with pornographic pictures and souvenirs from Indochina and Algeria, and we learn that he is a veteran of both colonial wars. Among his effects, the police find an army pistol and a poem by Claudel praising the parachutistes. On the other side of the ledger, the press paints Bernard, the young suspect (and son of the protagonist), as a dangerous political activist, because his room sports an ecologist poster.

The press is only one of the institutions working to recuperate the crime by means of an

explanatory narrative. Surely young Bernard Descombes' violent act was a "crime passionnel," pleads the defending attorney. A journalist waxes psychological: the absence of a mother (and Michel's failure to remarry) are surely responsible for the young delinquent's behavior. No, no, according to television reports, the crime was "un geste politique," and Bernard a dangerous "gauchiste." Were there economic reasons, perhaps? A man on the street sides with the consumerist *société du spectacle* when he emits the opinion that "Tuer un homme, il a peut-être ses raisons, mais brûler une voiture, alors là . . ." Meanwhile, the young man refuses to explain himself other than to say that the man he killed was "une ordure," and he has no regrets.

Michel Descombes' spiritual drama culminates in his decision to stand unconditionally by his son without seeking to understand him. His only statement from the witness box is "Je suis entièrement, totalement solidaire de mon fils." It is not gratuitous that Descombes makes his living repairing clocks; he fixes time, one might say, mending generation gaps. The film's interest and its novelty, coming from a very young filmmaker sympathetic to the goals of the *soixante-huitards* (Tavernier was 31 when he began work on the film), is to be found in its empathy for individuals among the police and the parental generation who refuse to assume a position of power, but rather question their own assumptions and authority. The spectator is induced to identify with the father, for example, but not against the son. Instead, the father learns from his son, and even comes to appreciate and to recount his own small acts of rebellion. Visiting Bernard in prison, the father reports that two thugs from the murdered man's factory had trashed his shop. A companion memory from the war also resurfaces: **[clip]**²

What is remarkable about this film is that the lines of authority and transformation go in both directions. It is clear that memory of his own wartime rebellion helps the father understand his son's crime, and conversely, his desire to reestablish connection with his son has allowed him

finally to give a positive evaluation to his own act of rebellion against authority and even to repeat it. At the beginning of the film, Descombes had insisted on waiting for a green signal before crossing an intersection. Later, he urges his friend to run a red light in pursuit of the pair of vandalthugs. Neither action-adventure nor gangster-thriller, L'Horloger is an understated essay on the slow and subterranean *politique du quotidien* in early 1970s France.

Simenon's novel had engaged the sexual transgressions of a third generation, and Tavernier makes passing mention of a third generation as well, albeit in a very different way. [clip]³

I haven't yet verified the historical accuracy of this incident, but it is plausible that sulphur and phosphorus would have been rationed in Lyon during the Commune, the period into which generational chronology would place this great uncle. The "folkloric" imagery indeed nicely matches the iconography of the Pétroleuses and evokes a moment of collective revolt and individual civil disobedience in the Lyonnais past. With these sequences, Tavernier brings together generations of rebellious Descombes in the historical context of 19th-century revolutionary movements, World War II Resistance (of a sort), and May '68.

Pierre Nora's investigation of generational consciousness, mentioned earlier, emerged from his reflections on Mai '68 and his observation that the Events lacked any "triggering trauma" that would have precipitated the gesture of revolt. He concludes that the Events of May represented "the enactment of a revolutionary memory without a revolutionary opportunity." However, the iconography and discourses surrounding the Events show, according to Nora, that the generation of May was forging its own collective identity by looking backward to earlier revolutionary moments. The most prominent of these is the Revolution of 1789, in which Nora locates the origins of the very concept of generation. "The Revolution," he writes, "was intrinsically generational, nowhere more so than in its ambition to be a historical, initiatory rite of passage from

the night of despotism to the bright day of liberty.” In his view, two essential changes in temporal perspective define that passage: first, “the past is no longer the law.” Second, the essential paradigm shift of the revolution occurred with the Tennis Court Oath, which Nora describes as “the triumph of fraternal solidarity over paternal judgment.” It was this switch from vertical obedience to horizontal identification that made possible “an egalitarian world in which “generational consciousness was born.”

It seems to me that Nora describes quite accurately the voyage that Michel Descombes undertakes in L’Horloger de Saint-Paul.⁴ While initially sharing confidences with the investigating policeman (Jean Rochefort), who is also a troubled father, Descombes will ultimately decide he can’t continue to dance with power while siding with his son. He looks backward (albeit dismissively) to the Commune and forward to his grandchild, and ultimately, in his own quiet way, makes two significant gestures that in effect reenact the paradigm shift of the Revolution. When he rebuffs the policeman’s consolation and camaraderie, he throws off his final allegiance with institutions of law and authority. (Nora’s “The past is no longer the law.”) And when he rejects all recuperative explanatory narratives to declare instead his solidarity with his son—*Je suis entièrement, totalement solidaire de mon fils*—he literally enacts the “triumph of fraternal solidarity over paternal judgment.”

But all this may seem rather grandiose for the modest likes of Michel Descombes, who resembles his son in his aversion to heroic explanatory narratives. Perhaps another rapprochement is more appropriate. When he refuses to call the police but instead chases the two vandals from his shop and tosses them in the Saône, or when, after a lifetime of obedient rule-following he urges his friend to run a traffic light, or when he reevaluates his wartime act of insubordination, one might say he answers the question “*Qu’est-ce qu’un homme révolté?*” And the answer to that question

was: “Un homme qui dit non. Un esclave, qui a reçu des ordres toute sa vie, juge soudain inacceptable un nouveau commandement.” (That was Albert Camus, of course.) By portraying his “homme révolté” as a man who has learned revolt from his son, however, Tavernier makes a powerful statement.

Five years later in Une Semaine de Vacances, lycée teacher Laurence agrees to dine with the father of a student. Joining them at the table is . . . Michel Descombes, who gives news about his son in prison “5 ans déjà.” Descombes is still living his modest liberation from paternalistic authority: he indicates he has parked his car over there, “là où c’est interdit.” The two fathers sympathize about their troublesome offspring. (The other father, Michel Galabru, is the one who believes that children resemble their times more than their parents.) Nevertheless, he laments with affectionate perplexity that his son, like himself, is somewhat of a “cancre.” (Dictionaries usually translate this word as “dunce,” but Jacques Prévert’s poem of that title conjurs more of a dreamer, somewhat of a cut-up, another modest “homme révolté.”) L’Horloger is dedicated to Jacques Prévert, that patron poet of *cancre*s, that celebrant of a healthy dose of rebellion and even anarchism. Prévert also wrote for some of the filmmakers of an earlier generation targeted by Truffaut’s 1954 polemic (Claude Autant-Lara, for example, Jean Dellannoy, Yves Allegret) as well as others Truffaut didn’t target (Renoir, Carné, Bunuel).

At the time L’Horloger was released, the press and public were enthusiastic, as was the jury of the Prix Delluc, which awarded to the debut film the coveted prize described as the “Goncourt du cinéma.” One stated reason for this enthusiasm was Tavernier’s gesture of bringing back scriptwriters Aurenche and Bost, a gesture which some saw as a definitive end to New Wave experimentation and preciosity and as a slap in the face to Truffaut. Academic critics eventually made the same assumptions about Tavernier’s motives but evaluated his gesture negatively: as a

retrograde return to pre-New Wave filmmaking. It's true that Tavernier did consider Truffaut's methods mean-spirited and dishonest, and Truffaut himself later admitted it wasn't his proudest moment. (He had flattered Bost into confiding in him and even showing him a manuscript in progress, then published his scathing attack.) Tavernier went on to become close friends with the pair of scénaristes. He later adapted a novel by Bost in Un Dimanche à la campagne, and Jean Aurenche (played by Denis Podalydes) is one of the protagonists of Tavernier's 2002 Occupation saga, Laissez-Passer.

Despite his championing of the screenwriting pair that an earlier generation of filmmakers had rejected, Tavernier was far from hostile to Truffaut. After all, both were fanatic cinéphiles and aficionados of American movies; both started as critics at the Cahiers du cinéma; both experiment with genres and foreground in their films questions of interpretation and filmic self-consciousness. As a lycéen in 1959, Tavernier had even requested a day excused from school to watch the filming of Les 400 coups.⁵ Twenty years later, in Une Semaine de Vacances, he engages a friendly intertextual dialogue with Truffaut. The star of that film is Nathalie Baye (the teacher Laurence), whom Truffaut had "revealed" to the public in La Nuit Américaine eight years earlier, in 1972. (In fact, the same week Tavernier accepted the 1974 Prix Delluc for L'Horloger in Paris, Truffaut was in New York receiving the Best Foreign Film Oscar for La Nuit Américaine!)⁶

Many scenes in Une Semaine de vacances are set in a school, reminding us that school was also a prominent venue in Les 400 Coups and Argent de Poche (1975). In fact, Laurence's discussion with her class about L'Avare must be considered an overt allusion to a class discussion of that very Molière play in Argent de Poche. The two films differ in perspective, however. We could say that Une Semaine de Vacances is Argent de Poche or Les 400 Coups seen from the teacher's point of view.

In fact, even before 1980, Tavernier was already echoing the elder filmmaker. Like Les 400 Coups, L'Horloger is an intensely personal first film, featuring an “autobiographical actor” (Léaud, Noiret) who would return in the same role in a subsequent film. (Doinel, Descombes). In both debut films, the anecdote is intimist, but family drama reflects historical realities. Both foreground relations between generations, although Truffaut, filming before ‘68, shows children becoming progressively alienated from teachers and parents, whereas fifteen years later, Tavernier traces a rapprochement. According to some reports, Truffaut had even thought about adapting Simenon’s L'Horloger d'Everton, using father and son actors Pierre and Claude Brasseur.⁷

One can understand why critics have so resolutely insisted on pitting the two filmmakers against each other, and on concluding that Tavernier has “returned” to an earlier generation of values. It seems to me, however, that rather than assigning Tavernier to one generation or another, his work is more interesting if we recognize it as a sustained exploration of relations between generations, both in families and in cinema history and perhaps in history *tout court*. In the 1950s, Truffaut saw the generations—of young people, of filmmakers—as divergent and hostile in “Une Certaine Tendence” and in Les 400 Coups; Twenty years—a generation—later Tavernier brings them back together.

Tavernier does obviously rely on film greats of the past, but he avoids repeating history. Pressed to explain himself on the question of Aurenchébost, Tavernier pointed to their modernity, their youthful spirit, and the talent demonstrated in their many outstanding filmscripts. He points out sarcastically that unlike some, they didn’t wait for 1968 to put political content in their films.⁸ It is also possible that he saw parallels between the way Aurenche and Bost had been excommunicated from the cinema since the beginning of the New Wave on the one hand, and on the other, the blacklists of McCarthyism, to which he gives careful attention in his encyclopedic 1995 guide, 50

Ans de cinéma américain. If one look at the list of filmmakers for whom he subsequently screened retrospectives or organized comebacks or whom he praises (and even some of the personalities he engaged to work with him), one finds a systematic effort to reverse the injustices of that era. In any case, Michel Descombes' triumph over generation gaps is echoed in Aurenche and Bost's return to the screen (and their first Delluc). Both within his first film and outside it, Tavernier reconnects generations, showing that rebellion, solidarity, influence, and even memory are a two-way street. In L'Horloger and throughout his career, Tavernier does not simply portray a postwar, post-New Wave, post-colonial and post-'68 "generational consciousness." He is actively engaged in constructing it.

¹ "Generations," in Realms of Memory, trans Arthur Goldhammer (Columbia U Press, 1996-98), 498-531.

² He had refused to risk his life carrying out a commanding officer's frivolous order and had feared throughout the Occupation that he would be punished for this minor act of insubordination.

³ Asked by a journalist about a trinket in his son's room—a sort of bread board with a sword attached by a hinge—Descombes has this to say:

DESCOMBES. "Oh! ça, c'est un souvenir de famille. Ça date du temps où on faisait des

allumettes de contrebande. C'est le frère de mon grand-père qui avoait bricolé ça pour en faire. On mettait une petite bûche de sapin, là, et on la coupait dans ce sens-là sans aller jusqu'au bout. Après, on la coupait dans l'autre sens. Ça faisait un betit buisson d'une centaine d'allumettes qu'on trempait dans le soufre d'abord, puis dans le phosphore, et ça valait un sou. ou bien cinq ans de prison si on se faisait pincer."

COSTES. (journaliste): "Votre grand-oncle s'est fait pincer?"

DESCOMBES. "Oui, parce qu'il avait du phosphore aux clous de ses souliers. Il ne se rendait pas compte qu'en marchant ça faisait des étincelles. Alors, les gendarmes l'ont repéré et l'ont foutu en prison."

The journalist immediately jots down these details, while Michel tells him the incident is sans importance, and in any case, he doesn't want to publicize this "crime" because "ses filles habitent encore dans l'Ardèche." The journalist has already formulated an explanation, however, and wants to run with his story. "Un hors-la-loi, c'est passionnant, pour un gamin, c'est folklorique. C'était le héros de la famille." Descombes demurs, remarking that "Je crois que Bernard n'aime pas beaucoup les héros."

⁴ Or, as one critic described the film, "C'est la montée d'une histoire d'amour paternel qui se transforme en fraternité." *Humanité Dimanche*, 23/1/74.

⁵ Antoine de Baecque & Serge Toubiana, François Truffaut, trans Catherine Temerson (Knopf, 1999), 131

⁶ *Combat*, 14/01/1974.

⁷ *L'Aurore*, 15/01/74. See also Dominique Maillet, Philippe Noiret (Editions Henri Verrier, 1989), 171. Not confirmed in Truffaut biography.

⁸ Jean-Luc Douin, Bertrand Tavernier (Eds Ramsay, 1997), 120.