

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Shoot the Piano Player. 1960

TRUFFAUT, FRANCOIS (1932-1984)

OVERVIEW

Truffaut presented his first feature film in 1960, after a few efforts at smaller cinematic achievements. We know from the film *Les 400 Coups*, (*Wild Oats*), in 1960, that Truffaut there gave us a good, if indirect and often reshaped autobiography in the person of Antoine, a Parisian youngster of the mid twentieth century, whose years as a school boy, big time cut up, and kid of the streets were full of truant fun, misbehavior, lies and punishment. From this project film, in which Truffaut reached far into his own nature, to touch the universal traits of the young kid growing up and cutting up, Truffaut has readied up to deal with a more freely created version of his younger self, one in which cutting up will turn up closer to experimenting with personality, taking risks with one's adult personal life, and at the same time living close to the margins of social life. With the success of *Shoot the Piano Player*, things began to look up for Truffaut, of whose earlier version we know—from the partial self version given us in *Wild Oats*. With a new sports car, fancier clothes, and a more comfortable flat, in a more elegant part of Paris, Truffaut also had a little more cash on hand to help his friends—people like Jean-Luc Godard, who was working many of the same style trends as Truffaut. Truffaut was now able to travel, and on a visit to New York made the kind of contact which was to invigorate his own writing and directing. He still showed the keen sense for the universal in human experience, and the variety of styles available in the visual imagination, for accessing that universality. He was still flexible and involved behind the camera. All that said, however, it remains puzzling and interesting, that Truffaut took a sharp angular direction out from his first feature. He portrayed, in Charlie (acted by the Truffautish genius, Charles Aznavour), the piano player of film number two, a melancholic of nearly midlife, with the self-image of a loser, and a taste for living on the limits. Not to say there is not a bit of that character potential to the introspective Antoine, of the first feature, but that Charlie and Antoine carry their personalities into profoundly different social environments.

Truffaut took a profoundly new direction in *Shoot the Piano Player*. The vogue for the noir detective thriller was hot in the States, as Truffaut discovered when he traveled there after the successes of his first film and Truffaut decided to peel off in a new direction, in this film brimming with dark emotions and a mixture of comedy.

As Truffaut said, of the making of this second film, he wanted to cut loose from the 'linear and realistic' modes of his first feature, and to find all the pleasure spots in his creative life. It seems as though he had good company on this journey, for in both the character, Charley, and in the actor (Aznavour) he found congenial doubles of his own shy personality. (He also had a fellow spirit in his friend Jean-Luc Godard, whose 1961 film *Breathless* copied the same noir style world Truffaut admired). We are not surprised, at film's end, to find Charlie the piano player tinkling away at the keys in the same old bar.

CHARACTERS.

Charlie Kohler/ Edouard Saroyan	The Protagonist
Léna	Charlie's girl friend
Thérèse Saroyan	Charlie's wife
Clarisse	Prostitute Neighbor
Momo and Ernest	Gangsters
Richard, Chico, Fido Saroyan	Charlie's brothers
Lars Schimmel	Charlie's Agent

SYNOPSIS.

The film opens on a dark city street, with Chico, Charlie's younger criminal brother, who has had too much to drink, running into a lamppost, accepting a passerby's help to stand up, and getting caught up in a lengthy discussion about marriage, with the amiable chatterbox who is returning to his house. Truffaut takes this contretemps. as a work point from which to let his whole film build itself. It turns out that Chico's brother is on the run, wanted by two gangsters for money he owes them, and that the melancholy man who is the piano player, in the late night bar, to which Chico escapes, has a secret past which involves him with classical piano music, at which he has had a past life of brilliant performances. A screwy and complex start, which has plenty of fun with us before it ends, and makes the serious point, when it comes to a halt, that it is very hard for a good guy like the piano player to escape his past.

The outflowering development of the theme grows from the initial bar scene, and finds Charlie, the piano player, caught up in a web of erotics, that entangles him with a suicide—his first wife; a new love, the dark underworld of gangsters collecting 'unpaid debts,' the vitality of children, the difficulty of overcoming shyness, and finally the inescapability of his own past, his violence involved gloominess, in which the goofiness of the film's beginning is absorbed.

STORY.

Midnight. The film opens onto a skidding scenario of city midnight, screeching tires, dark flashes of light from a light pole, and a guy scrambling out of his smashed vehicle. He is helped to his feet by a passerby, who engages him in long reflections on love and marriage. Chico, still in accident mode, makes his way to a brightly lighted bar, fleeing—as we now see—a couple of gangsters who are trying to collect payback on robbery proceeds.

Piano player. As it happens, Charlie, the older brother of Chico the one who is fleeing, is the piano player in the bar. (He is being played by Charles Aznavour, a mournful/tragic actor, who gives us instant insight into the comic-tragic tone of the film.) He is once more to be the victim of his family, whose underworld connections have caused him much loss in the past; he is in an earlier life a renowned classical pianist, with a beautiful wife, but he has been brought down by his family, and cannot escape its connections. He is inevitably involved, in the bar scene which he is playing for, with the obligation to help his brother escape.

Romance. At the end of the night in the bar, Charlie walks home with Lena, the waitress who is in love with him. He is shy, reluctant—for example—to put his arm around her, but they do go home together and make out. The next morning the pair of them are snatched up by the two crooks of the previous night, who drive off with the couple into the midmorning traffic. There follows a goofy conversation, in which the two 'crazy crooks' banter unexpectedly about everything but the topic at hand, payback. A cop stops the car en route, and the two captives get away, go back to Lena's flat, and there Charlie tells her the story of his life, his piano career, his tragic involvement with his first wife, and the suicide of his beautiful wife. When we learn that Charlie's first wife had betrayed him with Lars, we realize why she had never been able to give herself truly to Charley, and how deeply that betrayal destroyed both members of the marriage, hers by suicide, Charley's by loss of trust, and eventual giving in again to the family doom which appears to have cut him off from further relationships with women.

Prospects. Deeply in love with each other, Charlie and Lena determine to leave their jobs and start on a new life together. The couple return to the bar, as they arrange their new life, but the jealous bartender attacks Charlie, and, in a fateful brawl, Charlie stabs and kills him, and is now himself a murderer, caught up in the same circle of crime as two of his brothers.

Finale. Meanwhile, Charlie's younger brother, Fido, is kidnapped by the two gangsters, Momo and Ernest. Charley by now a profound loser, realizes that he can never escape his past. He makes his way to his brother's hideout in the snowy woods. When the crooks arrive a shoot out takes place, and the rest is tragic history. Lena is dead, and Charley will return the next morning to work at the bar.

THEMES

Crime Charlie has been at the height of the urban artistic scene. Though his way is opened by the venality of his wife, we assume Charlie is the real thing, a true artist. He could have made it on his own. However, he has a dooming family background, tainted with crime; he has sought refuge in a honky tonk bar, but he does not escape his heritage, for his brother, on the lam, finds him out, needs his help. From that point on Charlie is wound up in the network of incidents involving his brothers and eventually himself, an unintentional murderer.

Love Charlie's wife, Therese, catches the eye of Lars, the musical impresario, who holds the key to a future for Charlie. Therese sleeps with Lars, and lo and behold Charlie finds himself onstage before a loudly applauding audience. Therese is reluctant, hates what she is doing, but out of love, of a sacrificial sort, she sells herself.

Guilt. Therese suffers guilt after sleeping with Lars, and though she is proud of Charlie, she is ultimately so depressed by guilt that she cannot value her life, and kills herself, by jumping off a balcony.

Jealousy. Plyne, the restaurant employee at the bar where Charlie plays, is desperately jealous of Charlie, whom he views as a rival for the affection of Lena, the bar girl in the place. He tries to kill Charlie, but is himself killed by Charlie.

Past-memories. Both Charlie and Therese, his wife, are haunted by the memories of their past together. Her sense of guilt, at sleeping with Lars, brings her to kill herself. Charlie has a fleeting stage life to lure him toward his past; as well as the torture of recalling his wife's suicide.

Farce. Truffaut determined, for his second feature film, to write at his own pleasure—to mingle time sequences, to change paces, to blend comic, even the farcical, with a 'tragical' theme. There is something farcical, in the first place, about the exaggeratedly melancholy appearance of Charlie/Charles Aznavour, the piano player on whom the tragic weight of the story comes down. But the sense of the farcical pervades the film. The two gangsters who kidnap Charley and Lena, as the couple leaves Charlie's apartment on their first night together, discuss everything in the world except the kidnapping business before them. They chatter like standup comedians. Charlie's efforts, to decide whether to put his arm around Lena, diffuse comedy right through the romance. Even Charlie's accidental knife-murder has something in it of farce. Charlie can't even play murderer convincingly.

Romance. Charlie suffers the fate of the shy man who is nonetheless very attracted to women. The scene with Lena, as they leave the café on their walk to Charley's flat, is torture to Charlie, because he can't make up his mind to risk rejection. When Charlie recounts to Lena the story of his own previous life, we realize how profoundly he loved his wife, and how deeply her loss affected him.

Tragedy Is tragedy too strong a word for the tone of this often farcical, self-conscious film, which is sometimes touching, sometimes moving, say near the end of the film, when we see that Charley's plans to develop a new life are doomed, and that he will not escape from the fate he has inherited from his brothers, the fate of criminality. Tragic, but only partially and on occasion.

Art and Commercialism. Charlie has been a concert pianist of some renown, and only after the death of his first wife has he found it possible to remain in the elite levels of performance, to which he is accustomed. Soon after this loss, Charlie finds himself obliged to work on the popular level as a bar room pianist. Though he feels the life of the bar room, he performs there without zest, and in keeping with his new status. He gives us a living awareness of the split between the two kinds of clientele who embrace high and low art respectively.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS.

Charley Charley is the 'main character,' although a passive and kicked around main character. From the start of the film, when brother Chico arrives at the bar, on the run from the two gangsters,

Charley is implicated in the family history of crime. (At one point Charley does some heavy reflecting, and concludes that some Saroyan must have misbehaved big time, in the distant past.) He inevitably finds himself trapped in the implications of the robbery in question, and ends up in the old role of guilty family member, just as fate had gotten him involved in an accidental murder of the bar tender who was jealous of Charley's relation to Lena. Hiding out in the snow covered cabin, Charley realizes that doom is going to swallow his beautiful relation to Lena; a few minutes after the shootout he realizes that he is right, as he handles her lifeless bloody face. We can recall, from a vantage point like this, the moment when first his trembling finger approached the door bell of his music master to be, a figure of greatness and a pathway to ultimate doom.

Shy. Like Antoine, in *Les 400 Coups*, Charlie is sensitive, he is also easy to abuse or ignore, sentimental-romantic, and barely able to assert himself, inside a family which is bumptious and partially criminal. It is not just Charlie's difficulty touching the ladies, taking a chance on their moods, but that in a wider sense he is passive, the guy things happen to, the murderer by accident. It is this shyness which keeps Charley part of his family, which means only trouble for him.

Melancholy. From his face to his behavior, Charley has a melancholy mien. One measures the depth of that fallen mood by the distance Charley has come, from piano stardom, to playing piano in a bar. Charley just knows, deep inside him, that he is destined to be a loser and he puts himself up for exactly that kind of fall.

PARALLELS.

An odd mixture of parallels suggests itself: Orestes (in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*), Goethe's *Werther*, and Aeneas. Virgil goes softly through the relation of Aeneas with Dido, and finds in the latter, as we can find in Charlie, a lifesaving chance for love—for through Dido Aeneas faces the possibility of true humanity through love, whereas Charlie puts his one chance at love and true personhood aside, as had Aeneas, and sails off into the blue of Empire and Conquest. Orestes, too, is doomed like Charlie, to a fated family, and to a loveless doom, though he—unlike Charlie—has a portal to walk through, outward intersocial redemption. Goethe's *Werther* is love stricken, and fully convinced that his salvation lies in Lotte. When he learns that is not true, he gives in to his loss, and takes his life, rather than returning to the honkey tonk piano stool and greeting the new waitress.