

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Day for Night. 1973

Francois Truffaut

### OVERVIEW.

In *Shoot the Piano Player* and *The Last Metro*, Truffaut works through a subtle interest in the relation between art and nature, or art and society. The former film is in part concerned with the double life of a highly talented concert pianist, whom destiny has brought down to cabaret piano playing level; a family involvement with crime has undermined his freedom to soar in his artistic sensibility. *The Last Metro* involves the aesthetics of the theater; sustaining a living drama business during the German occupation, meeting the demands of entertainment and form in a chaotic time. *Day for Night* wrestles with similar issues, of the relation between art and society, art and technology—the machinery of bringing a film to birth-- and the morality of art. The New Wave, as Truffaut gives his birth to it, is very much into asking questions about what it itself is, and we have no reason to know what it is without an introduction to the minds of its auteurs.

These aesthetic issues and more are invoked in *Day for Night*, a movie about making a movie, in fact a movie which is making a movie entitled *Je vous présente Pamela (May I present Pamela?)* which is in process of being filmed in Nice, a pleasantly southern—green, flowery, sunny—cityscape crowded with busy pedestrians and an air of the colorful. A giant red crane—already a fiery glimpse of art—holds and transports the filming equipment, which descends at will into the hotel where the actual shooting is taking place.

The film's director—that is the director of *Day for Night* as well as the director in the film *Day for Night* is Truffaut himself, who within the film is inside the filming hotel, dealing with what is starting out to be a life-art ride through the vagaries of film production. He has, of course a deadline for finishing *Day for Night*, a deadline which must anticipate as many setbacks as are implicit in the title of the film itself. ('Day for Night,' or 'la nuit américaine,' was a current Hollywood technique, by which sequences shot during the day could appear as night scenes through a filter lens. What more forceful revision of natural process could be imagined, and thus what more energetic claim to the right of art to remodel nature and generate setbacks?) The movie itself was soon to assert that claim, and to take its chances on a bumpy ride through human behavior, on which Truffaut would comment that 'the process of film making was like a stage coach journey into the far west. At the start you hope for a beautiful trip. But shortly you wonder if you will make it at all.' This kind of self-reflective observation, on the art work you are making, was of course part of the New Wave in all the arts, flashily on display in the novels of Truffaut's contemporaries, Robbe Grillet and Michel Butor, and in mid-twentieth century painting which, say, would call prominent attention to the materials, methods, and self-reflectivenesses of the work one is painting. Modernism was the larger term for the perspective within all the arts which Truffaut welcomes in the present film.

### CHARACTERS

Julie Baker	lead British actress
Alexandre	temperamental and dumped actor
Sévérine	veteran actress, liable to drink and to philosophy
Alphonse,	played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, the lead youngster of <i>Les 400 Coups</i> , Truffaut's first feature.
Ferrand	the director (Francois Truffaut)
Doctor Nelson	husband of Julie, significantly senior to her
Joelle	script girl who seduces Alphonse

## SYNOPSIS

We are in Nice, and a film company is on the set, preparing to shoot a new film, *Je vous présente Pamela*, which promises not to be great art, but which froths with real life complications. There is much brouhaha of actors arriving and departing, hasty trips to the airport and back to the Atlantic Hotel, where shooting is getting underway, hook ups are being formed, human chaos is beginning announce itself, and the already frazzled director, Ferrand—that is Truffaut himself—is nervously patrolling the corridors, watching while the drama unfolds, and giving directional nudges. Julie, the unstable lead-- that is, Pamela, who is going to fall in love with her new father in law—arrives with her mid life husband, and doctor. Severine, a once great, hits the bottle and tries to cover over blown lines with wise statements about life and art. Alexandre, a live wjre on the set, races back and forth to the airport, hoping to find his boyfriend arriving on the next plane. In he center,yes, frets the director, his mind on fire with deadlines.

## STORY

**Setting** We are in the southern French city of Nice, on site for a film directed by an experienced director—the part is played by Truffaut, who is indeed experienced by this time in his life—who has a mediocre film to direct, a heterogeneous team of actors, coming in from all directions, many of whom are unfamiliar to him. The character of the film created, by all of this one time excitement, is predictably loose; there are some five major characters, a loose plot, and a modest box office anticipated. Oh, and yes, there is plenty of easy sexuality—spouses are absent, and for the most part liaisons are viewed as unimportant matters.

**Episodes** The plot is fragile and easily distracted. It gets made up of episodes: Two of the characters, who will present for the filming the next day, arrive early and plan their evening. One proposes dinner in one of the charming restaurant in the hills above Nice. The other scoffs. We hear this kind of scoff from the cinema world throughout the film. Film is by and large the atmosphere in which these people live. It is more important to them than life. What counts is that there are thirty-seven cinemas in Nice. “Let’s catch a couple of films!” Real life of course intrudes criss cross all over the place. Joelle, Truffaut’s script girl, tells Bernard, on their stroll past the river, that she has to change her clothes; she disappears into a bush and reemerges in panties and bras, offering him a stunning opportunity—which he can barely believe. Alphonse, humiliated when the British stunt expert walks off with his girl, regains his composure by sleeping with Julie—she doesn’t mind—then in a frenzy, the next morning he calls her husband the doctor with the news that he is no longer married.

**Arrivals.** As to a week or two long celebration there is a gradual instreaming of new participants. The Airport and the Hotel Atlantic are the two hubs of the narrative—a quick trip to pick up X, Alexandre’s boyfriend; a ceremonious trip to pick up Julie, who is the lead of course, but who has just come out of a nervous breakdown, and must be cared for, arriving with her distinguished physician grey haired new husband; the arrival of the British stunt man who will leave a few days later having honored his contract, and along with his pay captured the heart of Alphonse’s girlfriend. The airport is bustling.

**Self-reference.** Ferrant, the director, takes care not to dominate, but to add himself appropriately to the figures in upon whom the film streams. In one case the mail brings Ferrant a parcel of many classic books on the prominent directors of the New Wave: Luis Bunuel, Ingmar Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Bresson...(One has to think of the way Truffaut himself started his career, by publishing provocative and radical film critiques for the *Cahiers du Cinéma*). Dreams also find Truffaud in the hotel. He is haunted by the nighttime memory of walking along city streets with a rake like-instrument in hand, with which he drags classic screen shots from under a steel fence, adding them to his stolen collection.

## THEMES

*Art and nature.* Nature can to a considerable degree be bent to the demands of art, which then uses nature for its own purposes. The independence and self-sufficiency of nature is evident enough; the universal emotions of the animal man—his feeling of betrayal, or lust, or wisdom, or confusion, or boredom—all counter posed against the hard to win struggle to impose form, plan, schedule, deceptions and artifice in the interests of entertainment.

*Order* The imposition of order through art requires discipline and program, for which the director (of a film) is responsible. This interweaving of order with chaos requires one guiding vision to keep it on track. That's where Ferrant comes in.

*Wisdom.* In a group of seasoned actors, at various stages in their careers, there are always some who have aspired to wisdom, along with age. It is the veteran actress, Sévérine who most floridly fits this personal description. She is profuse with commentaries on the nature of life, love, and survival.

*Logistics.* Here is the directorial function again. A movie will only come to fruit if its director sees the large picture of the detailed events in it. Ferrant directs *Day for Night* conscientiously, if—and this seems the general opinion held by the actors—a little compromisingly, a little too leniently. That lenience it is which gives the present (mediocre) film its air of having been carried out loosely.

*Sezuality.* There is a diffuse sexuality throughout the film. Alphonse is so upset, when his girlfriend runs off with the stuntman, that he just pops in bed with Julie the next night, makes an exasperated call to Julie's husband the next morning, and feels better. Alexandre in search of support in adopting a young gay male, peddles his proposal as if he were investing in stock. It is as though sexuality grows routine, is rapidly undertaken, and rapidly forgotten.

*Real world.* Just outside the hotel, bustling through the southern Mediterranean streets, is a colorful world of small motor vehicles, street vendors, outdoor café awnings, and crisscrossing pedestrians on their ways to work or to a coffee. Truffaut keeps both worlds—city; screening--buzzing simultaneously, the steambath of personal emotions inside the hotel, the flow of busy life outside in the 'real world.' 'All the world's a stage,' as Jacques puts it in *As you Like It*, and we feel the similarity and the difference in the pulses that beat at different poles in this 'world.'

*Pirandello.* In *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) Luigi Pirandello dramatizes the evanescence of the world of theater, in which characters appear to fill out the wholeness of a drama, then to drop back into their boxes of imagination, to be summoned again as needed. The dominant awareness, in this view of theater, is of the evanescence of the figures who constitute a play. The awareness of that evanescence penetrates the entire drama of *Day for Night*.

*Day for Night.* Truffaut's text for the present film is brought up and explained, in the course of the film's dialogue. The phrase describes an American cinematic effect, by which the effect of darkness is achieved by filming in broad daylight, but with a darkened lense over the open camera. What does this mean? A muffled light pervades the back and forth motion of the human comedy. The very diurnal course of life is inverted by the power of art.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Ferrand (Truffaut), the director of the film, is very conscious of his role. In the course of filming he receives a large packet of books about New Wave directors; it includes the story of himself, a self-interested tribute to his long exposure, as editor of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, with the intricacies of film theory. We should not take Truffaut's directorial moves lightly, for he carefully means what he says. When he chooses *la nuit americaine* (*Day for Night*) as his title, he implies the capacity of film to transform art, to use technique for the purpose of transforming the day itself. The idea of the present film seems to have sprung from the insight Truffaut experienced in directing *Fahrenheit 451*. The point of that film, he thought, was that it is good to love books, for they enlarge our minds. The idea of *Day for Night* is that it is

good to love films, perhaps to love film above all the other arts, because of its collective nature. Loving films brings us together. Truffaut's favorite movie about making a movie—and they abound-- was *Singing in the Rain*, for in that film everyone gets involved in the making of the film. Even more than as an artist, Truffaut developed personally by discovering the broadest values of the arts.

*Theft.* As a director, Truffaut is haunted by a recurrent dream, in which, as a little boy trudging through the streets, he steals precious stills of *Citizen Kane* from under the iron fence surrounding a cinema. From early on, Truffaut is preoccupied by the importance of cinema for society and life.

*Myth.* Truffaut used international actors—British, American—for this wide-implication film, for he felt that the French film world did not have the 'mythological dimension' requisite for the global points envisaged in *Day for Night*.

**Parallels** To direct a film crew, to lead a military operation, to coach a football team: all three activities put the 'leader' in a unique position. He (usually) is faced with the problem of occupying a big picture perspective: he knows more than any of his employees (followers, assistants) about the larger context into which he is directing their efforts. But he must teach himself how to make his followers feel that they are doing the work in question on their own volition. This is hard. There comes to mind one parallel, to the work Truffaut (or a great film director) takes on himself. I suggest the *Meditations* of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, 161-180 A.D. Marcus shunned poetry and fine thought, in this notebook on how to govern, but he was skilled at finding the point of a military operation, and explaining it to his followers in such a way that they thought the idea came originally from them.