

CONSTRUCTING THE GAZE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN DOUCHET

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How does one learn to be a spectator?

'To be a spectator': this goes beyond the mere notion of 'spectacle'. It's a way of being, or more precisely, something which allows a being to be, a sort of halt one imposes on one's own life in order to step back and, in seeing others, to see oneself. It's what we could define as a 'humorous' attitude: to distance oneself from oneself.

I developed this attitude a long time ago. I was a ferocious spectator of puppet theatre as a child, and it was out of the question that anyone might disturb, even for a second, my world, my characters, my show. I've been a keen spectator as far back as I can remember. Of course, I was lucky enough to have parents who took me to shows from an early age. I saw Snow White when I was around eight years old. This was a complete upheaval, but my first real sensations as a spectator date from a little later, around the age of 12, during the Occupation. My parents were living outside of Paris, and I was at a boarding school, with complete freedom on Thursdays and Sundays. Since I had money, I was able to pay my way to shows: to the theatre, always buying an orchestra seat, and the cinema, always going to the biggest first-run houses. The show had to be imposing, absolute, and I didn't really distinguish between the theatre and the cinema. Undoubtedly, I had a preference for the theatre: by the age of 14, I'd seen [Jean] Giradoux and [Jean] Anouilh, which was not very common for a fourteen-year-old kid, especially one who went alone.

Soon, however, the cinema came to dominate my taste. Flipping through the book by [Jacques] Siclier on French cinema under the Occupation, I realised that I had seen practically everything. And when I began to write notes and my impressions, around the age of 16 or 17 at the end of the war, it was mostly about films. It's from this point that the cinema became more important to me than the theatre, on the basis of writing and of certain shocks: *Le Corbeau/The Raven* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, France, 1943), *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Marcel Carné, France, 1945) and, especially, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (Robert Bresson, France, 1945). I saw *Le Corbeau* seven times during the Occupation, and *Les Dames* just as many times, between 1945 and 46. Not only was I a spectator but, by the age of 15, I was in the process of becoming a cinephile.

And how does one become a cinephile?

It's a question of the intensity of the liking for the show. Once this liking has become life itself, then you are a cinephile. At the same time a peculiar ritual, a ceremony, also takes

shape. Every cinephile takes an immense pleasure in this masochistic rite, organised around an ecstatic suffering: his or her position before the screen. They want to shatter this position as a spectator and 'enter into the screen'. But this is impossible, and they stay in their seat. This primitive, indispensable, vital place is a source of suffering.

This is also why cinephilia is based on rituals, to make one forget this primary suffering, to channel it towards conspiracies and cliques, to trafficking in knowledge and erudition.

Which cinephilic rituals pertain to Jean Douchet?

I have to enter the auditorium by the right-hand stairway and aisle. Then I sit to the right of the screen, preferably in the aisle seat, so that I can stretch my legs. This is not just a matter of physical comfort, or the view: I have constructed this vision for myself. For a long time, at the Cinémathèque, I sat in the front row, in the middle, with no one in front to disturb me, in order to be completely immersed in the show, always alone. Even today, it's impossible for me to go to the cinema with anyone, it disrupts my emotion. But, over the years and after many films, I've drawn back a bit, off to the right, and I've found my axis towards the screen. At the same time, I've positioned my spectatorial body with minute care, adopting three basic positions: legs stretched out on the ground, legs draped over the seat in front of me, and, finally, my favourite but the most difficult position to achieve, the body folded in four with the knees pressed against the back of the seat in front of me.

All that is motivated by a particular relationship with the films?

Without a doubt. For example, I've been able to figure out why I began to sit off to the right: the habit of being a spectator obliges me to sweep the screen with my eyes quickly, and I find that a position to the right allows for an oblique angle which facilitates this sweeping vision. It also gives rise to an involvement in the shot--not a critical distance, which would be pretentious and stupid and would destroy the place of the spectator, but rather, sometimes, a certain ambivalence. Everyone makes his or her own choice of space, of point of view, and I believe that for the spectator this choice is just as important as the director's faculty for framing a shot. Everyone has his or her own framing.

It's also a way, for the spectator, to recreate his or her own show...

I've always said that the spectator is a creator. I don't know a true film-maker who isn't also a real spectator, it's a vital link. Even Bresson, who pretends not to have come out of cinephilia, and who absolutely refuses the spectacular, I've seen him many times at screenings of [Alfred] Hitchcock films, leaving a few seconds before the end, of course, in order not to be seen or compromised in this scandal of the pleasure of the spectator.

There is only one evolutionary factor, which concerns the desire and above all the ceremoniousness of the spectator, and that is time. You'd have to be a madman like [Jaques] Rivette in order to continue seeing everything. These days, I'm very selective, I've spaced out my screenings, but I don't think I've missed a film, as a spectator of course. I do miss one thing nowadays, however, and that's the emotional shock of discovery, which a whole cinephilic generation was able to feel. Recently, over two days, I almost recovered this intensity of spectatorship as strongly as in the early 1960s, when I saw back-to-back *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, US, 1992) and *Agantuk/The Stranger* (Satyajit Ray, India, 1991), but this has become a very rare occurrence.

Are there then three characters within Jean Douchet: the spectator, the cinephile, and the critic?

Absolutely, three characters who may not coincide, who may even fight with one another. The most blissful state is that of the spectator, the most painful that of the critic, and the most dangerous that of the cinephile. There one risks getting into the rut of a priori tastes, or of obsessions around the rituals and ceremonies. There is a risk of losing emotion, of shutting

oneself up inside a closed system (become a ritual of high mass), of losing taste (always defending one's cult directors), of losing the truth of the cinema show. For me, however, this show, like all emotional receptivity, is organised into two phases: first, an absolutely intimate reception of the work, the show; and second, a more collective, more gregarious, organisation of the impressions and the emotions produced. It is always necessary to share one's emotions; that's why we speak, have conversations. And here we arrive at the group behaviour that is proper to cinephilia. This is an indispensable moment in the condition of being a film spectator. Critical writing, and the tradition of newspapers and film journals, are also born of the desire to share.

Speaking about criticism, an article appeared in the Cahiers du Cinéma in November 1960 by Jean Douchet entitled 'Hitchcock and His Public'. Taking the example of Psycho (US, 1960), the article demonstrates how artistic creation is founded on the most exact familiarity with the public's reaction, on the film-maker's use of what the spectator wishes to see. In other words, with Hitchcock, the unveiling of a secret. It appears to us that.....this was one of the first texts to consider the spectator as an object of critical study.

It's true that one could go back over film history from the point of view of the relationship between the film-maker and the spectator. The history of cinema is the history of both. [Henri] Langlois, who was everybody's spectator, admirably expressed this concerning the silent film: once the public had understood, the film-maker could try a new form. Langlois even said that this apprenticeship was necessary, that these constant readjustments between the public and the film-maker were vital. 'There wouldn't have been such a thing as cinema if it had been born talking,' he said, an example of his lightning-like intuition. Without that, without these common destinies, cinema would be headed for catastrophe. In silent cinema, the link between the film-maker and the spectator was so close that it was the only time, during the mid-1920s, when a large public accepted avant-garde experimentation. [FW] Murnau, [Fritz] Lang, and [Ernst] Lubitsch, in their silent films, could integrate avant-garde moments, an almost abstract art. It's at that moment that it becomes evident that the public plays an active role in artistic creation.

Let's continue this history of the cinema from the point of view of the spectator..

Beginning in the 1930s, not only is the spectator taken into account by the filmmaker, but all spectators, regrouped into the rubric the public,, are taken into account by the economy of the cinema. This is when people begin to use the generic term 'the public': 'my public wants, my public likes, my public doesn't like...'. This 'my' becomes the property of film producers. Now, once you begin to speak of 'my public', the spectator's independent taste and choice has begun to be denied. The spectator becomes a goose to be force-fed. None the less, this system worked admirably well, giving the producers of major US studios an impressive power. But it also permitted completely personal work, when a studio director came to an agreement with his producer about just who this public was. Hitchcock's conception of 'his public' is pretty much the same as Universal's. But Hitchcock made of this public a sort of homing device, obliging him, in order to satisfy it, to invent extremely personal forms. Universal made of this public simply a means of support. In the same way all spectators, absolutely all, could like Hitchcock, but where he was generally seen only as a good artisan of suspense, cinephiles and critics saw a metaphysical and formal genius. It was the same 'public' but the film-maker and the producer took it into account in different ways; it was the same film, but the spectators could view it according to different registers.

And then?

In the sixties a new spectatorial revolution came about. Within this public, there now exist various publics, just as within the cinema there now exist cinemas. This is when we no longer find, apart from a few exceptions, a complete range of spectators in the same movie-house. From now on, such-and-such a film is destined for such-and-such a public, which is targeted, attracted by publicity campaigns aimed specifically at it. Today, moreover, we don't 'go to the

cinema', we don't even 'go to a show'; we 'take in a movie,' that extremely ugly expression which is a manner of saying to the product in front of you: 'I'm not stupid, I know everything is fake, and you, film, I want to take it out on you, I want to tell you how much I'll do as I'm told by everything you say but without believing any of it.' The spectator no longer has any consideration for the film, he or she simply consumes it. Consequently, film-makers can only stand up for themselves by attempting to order the public about. It's no longer trade or commerce but hustling, 'raids' one could say in the language of the stock exchange: the film-makers try to carry out 'takeovers' and the public wants to show that it is smarter, all the while reserving the pleasure of being caught in the trap.

The 1960 article on Hitchcock meant to say all that?

What I wanted to say was that Hollywood's first principle was 'respect the public', and that Alfred Hitchcock was the one who, within this principle, managed to make the most beautiful films. Undoubtedly because Hitchcock had truly made it the basis of the construction of his universe: the hero, the heroine, are the onscreen projection of the spectator's desires and fears. Hitchcock never leaves the movie-house, he takes the world which is in the head of his spectator and puts it on the screen alongside that which is in the heads of his own characters. He doesn't really begin his film until the moment when the camera, placed imaginatively inside the skull of the spectator, has begun to project that spectator's world onto the screen. It's a magnificent idea, very Hitchcockian, and one which absolutely respects the spectator even if it plays with his or her desires and fears. Others have also transformed the spectator into living matter on the level of artistic creation, for example Lubitsch, for whom the cinema was inconceivable without the spectator's gaze: 'I show you this, you have understood, ellipsis, surprise, you didn't understand, but yes, maybe just a little, because here's a new development which puts everything in its place.' The spectator, amazed, becomes intelligent. The spectator was also taken into account outside of Hollywood: the roles of [Jean] Gabin before the war were a projection of the spectator.

This passage from one moment of cinema to another, from Hitchcock to the new cinemas of the 1960s, isn't it the same passage as that which leads from the taking hold of the public by Hollywood to the deviation, the loss, the instability of the spectator inaugurated by the cinéastes?

The real rupture dates rather from the immediate post-war period when, from the screen, film characters began to look at the spectator in a completely new way and to implicate him or her directly in their personal story. The precise origin of this form, the films which introduce this rupture, are *Sommaren med Monika* (Ingmar Bergman, Sweden, 1953), with its long and provocative gaze at the camera by Harriet Andersson, and *Europa 51* (Roberto Rossellini, Italy, 1952), during the camera movement on the mad women of the insane asylum. From this moment film-makers began to work on this figure, which until then had been a taboo. Of course, there had been cases of characters looking at the camera in theatrical complicity in comedy films from before the war, but that was a transference to the cinema of a theatrical convention, the aside, or in the films of Guitry for example, a collusion, or, sometimes, the initial or final greeting.

In Rossellini, the gaze at the camera does not have this element of complicity, but constitutes a revelation. It's the modern truth of the event, the ontology of the gaze, the imminence of the insanity of women confined in an asylum. Monika's gaze is a provocation, another way to enter modern cinema: 'You judge me, but by what right?' Each time, the spectator is *designated* as a spectator but, at the same time, is *implicated* in the truth of the event, is left in his or her seat and propelled towards the screen in an uncomfortable, disquieting, strange way. It's the schizophrenia of the place of the spectator which introduces the deviation, the instability you speak of, this deviation of the subject which is one of the symptoms of cinema's entry into modernity. [Jean-Luc] Godard uses these two gazes, that of truth and that of provocation, incessantly, as does [Francois] Truffaut at the end of *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (*The Four Hundred Blows*, France, 1959). With Hitchcock, the spectator was taken into

account but, once in the movie-house, had nothing more to pay: his or her secret or mysterious desires were on the screen, but the spectator remained comfortably seated, in the fascinating fetal state of classical projection. With Rossellini and Bergman, and then the *nouvelle vague* and the new cinemas, the spectator finds him- or herself in a state of incertitude which is just as threatened as the space on screen. Henceforth the spectator is free to escape, to desert the screen and abandon the movie-house, or to stay, but at his or her own risk, free to detest or to like. These are the films which know that cinema exists and which address themselves to spectators who know it too. The 'spectator's gaze', in Rossellini, Bergman, and Godard, marks the end of an innocence and the beginning of a truth, the spectator's test of truth.

Interview conducted by Antoine de Baecque and Christian-Marc Bosséno, Paris, 13 January 1993.

Translated by Timothy Barnard.