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cécile decugis

biography

Cécile Decugis came to Paris in 1944, having spent the Second World War in the Alps. In 1952 she began university, leaving before the end of the year: "I had thought of studying history of art at the Louvre but my mother did not have a lot of money at the time so I could not afford it." Instead Cécile went off and managed to get a job as an apprentice editor. "In those days it was far from the era of video – every time you made a cut in the film a quarter of a frame was lost. It was the job of one assistant to actually cut the film for the editor, add black to replace the quarter lost and then join it up again." During this period Cécile would often go to the cinema, particularly the celebrated Cinématèque Française in rue de Messine which projected an innovative programme covering the history of cinema. Cécile began to cut short films including François Truffaut's first film **Les Mistons** (1957). She then worked as an assistant editor on his **Les Quatre Cents Coups** (1959) and **Tirez sur le Pianiste** (1960). During this period she was introduced to Truhaut's friend Jean-Luc Godard and edited his debut feature **A Bout de Souffle** (1959). These films formed the foundation of the French *nouvelle vague*, or New Wave, and are often credited with changing the style of editing. Cécile went on to work with Eric Rohmer on **Ma Nuit chez Maud** (1969) right through to **Les Nuits de la Pleine Lune** (1984), including films such as **Pauline à la Plage** (1982).

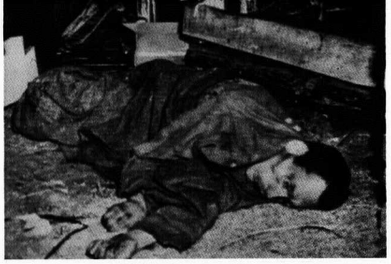
interview

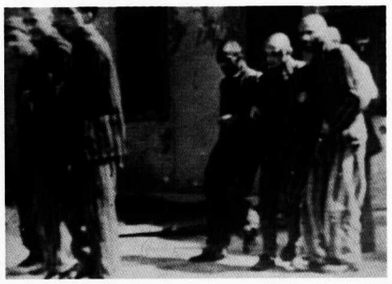
When I started working in the cutting rooms during the early 1950s it was the era of the classic French film directors like Clouzot and Clément. In those days I mainly worked on short films, but then in 1953 I got a job as a trainee editor on the feature **Madame de...**, which was directed by Max Ophüls. I learnt a lot on that film. As the trainee I learned how the cutting room worked and how to make splices and organise the bins full of film. Around this time a friend introduced me to Claude de Givray who was a scriptwriter and a close friend of François Truffaut. This friend also knew Godard. My first work for this group was cutting **Les Mistons** for Truffaut. Truffaut was 27 and, although he may not have made a film before **Les Mistons,** I would not have described him as an inexperienced director. He was already working as a critic and knew everything about cinema. **Les Mistons** tells an enchanting story about the mischievous adventures of a group of kids. As well as filming the story, Truffaut also recorded a half-hour of the kids who appeared in the film as they talked

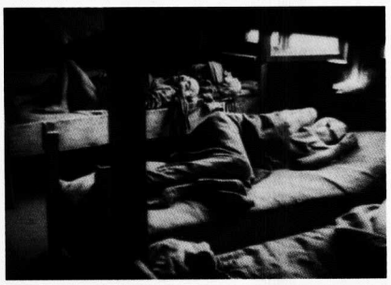
naturally among themselves. He found this recording very moving. In the film we worked to cut little snatches from it under the images. I think he was disappointed with how this worked in the end because it was difficult to recapture the vibrancy he felt while making the recording. Often it is difficult to recreate in the cutting room what the director felt at the time of shooting. In any case Truffaut's universe was already clear from **Les Mistons** and he just burst on to the scene with that short film.

Truffaut rarely came into the cutting room because he did not like it very much, whereas you could not imagine a film of Godard's being edited without him being present. Rohmer was there all the time because he did not like you to work on a scene or even a shot without him being present. I remember that Ophüls rarely came into the cutting rooms when I was on **Madame de...**. Each day after shooting we would project rushes at night. Once or twice a week the editor would also show Ophüls a sequence that he had recently cut. He would then talk with the director and take notes on what changes would be made. This is obviously a much longer way of working when you are taking notes rather than the director being there. I remember particularly on **Madame de...**, there were two endings: one where Danielle Darrieux died and another where she did not. Finally they picked the one where she did not die. When there are two possible endings to a film everyone gives their opinion, which can make it rather complicated. I remember that we endlessly screened **Madame de...** during the evenings and at weekends, trying to pick an ending and to work out how we would get there.

In the early 1950s, before the New Wave, the means of shooting were different. They recorded on optical sound, which was a lot less flexible. The shoot would be a lot less spontaneous and much more planned. While people did shoot on location it was much more limited. With the new, lighter models of camera it was much easier for the New Wave to shoot on location – in apartments and on the streets – and be more spontaneous. This became the trademark of that kind of film-making. New techniques allowed a new aesthetic. Particularly before magnetic sound the quality of sound in exteriors was very bad. For this reason we would post-sync the dialogue in post-production by bringing in the actors. This was one of the reasons that a lot of shooting was done in the studio. Even exteriors would be shot in the studio against a back-lit transparency. A lot of lines were post-synchronised in **Les Quatre Cents Coups**. **A Bout de Souffle** was completely post-synchronised. During the shoot they started recording sound, but soon they gave up on it. In this film Godard picked the shots that he was using and he post-synchronised the entire take which took a fortnight. The actors were able to find the same spontaneity and professionals checked that the recording would match the lips, so it worked very well. The dialogue seems natural because we worked a lot on the sound, reconstituting all the elements that make up the soundtrack. So everything that you see, the police, the cars, everything had its own sound reconstructed. What you hear is the sound of the street and that was part of the search for what is real and natural which was such an important part of these films. It is very difficult and a huge amount of work to recreate what is natural,







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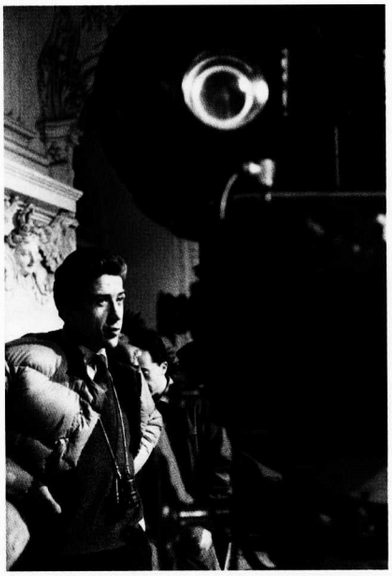

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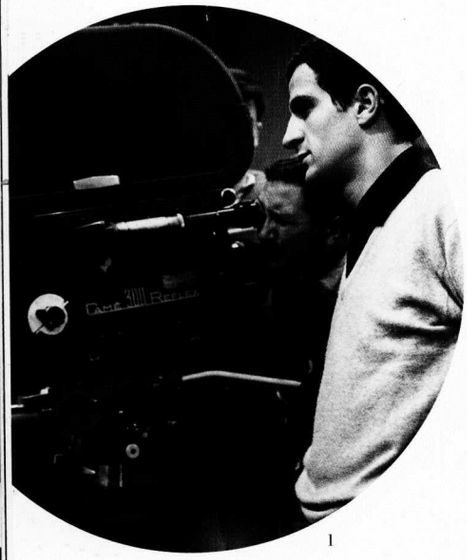
Another of the New Wave directors Alain Resnais (3), used editing to intermingle past with the present, thus exploring our memories and perception of events. The documentary **Night and Fog** (1955) contrasted the past and present in Auschwitz through inter-cutting (1). **Hiroshima, Mon Amour** tells of a French woman who has a Japanese lover. This Japanese lover reminds her of a German soldier who was her first love during the Second World War. As she watches her Japanese lover in bed his hand is inter-cut with the hand of the German soldier she remembers (2).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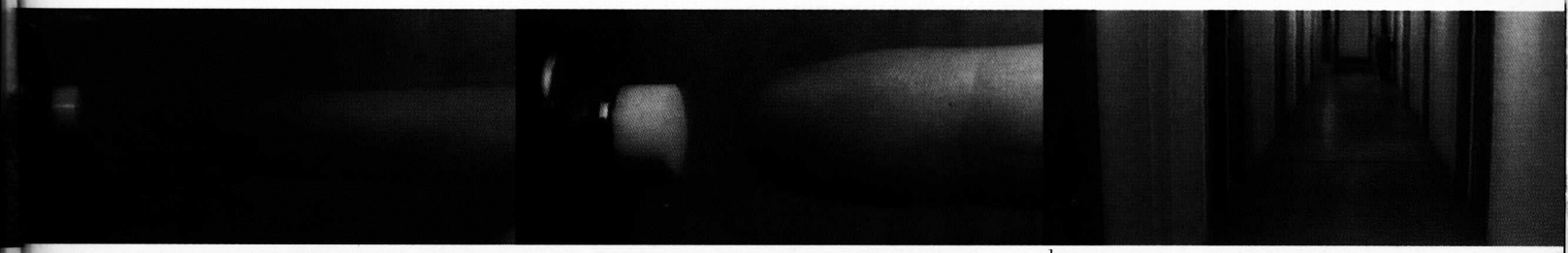
A jump-cut is when two shots are joined without any continuity – there is an obvious jump. This kind of cut became more widespread and accepted after the films of the New Wave. (7–9) Towards the end of **Les Quatre Cents Coups** the young protagonist, Antoine, is questioned by the psychologist in the reform centre. We never see the psychologist or hear his questions. Antoine's answers are just cut together and since they are all shot from the same angle there are "jumps" as you watch them. The New Wave film-makers shot in real locations with a small crew. Their production sound was often poor and as a consequence their early films contained a lot of post-sync. However, the film-makers tried to recreate the realistic sound of the street. All the sound in **A Bout de Souffle** was replaced – recreating the immediate sound of the street (2–3). In **Tirez sur le Pianiste** some scenes were post-synchronised and others were not (4). There is a three-minute scene in the bedroom when Nicole Berger tells Charles Aznavour that she has cheated on him. Truffaut wanted to post-sync the dialogue but the actors insisted that they could not recreate the performance (5–6).

certainly much more than we had done on the old style films. However, this style did not just come from the cutting rooms and the sound post-production. It was part of a bigger whole. The actors that we were cutting were also part of this. There was a naturalness in the acting and you could hear foreign accents. It was not a question of having the sound of the streets recreated while working with a rigid acting style. It was all part of the one whole.

As with other elements in the production, Godard and Truffaut did not pay so much attention to the pure technique of the sound mix. They were not so much interested in the sound being of a certain standard or in the established norms and conventions, rather they wanted to make it alive. They were against conformity in French cinema. What we cut had to be as alive as possible, appearing spontaneous rather than very worked out. Although often, that which appears most natural can require the most reflection. Truffaut was not so much interested in editing, rather he was interested in the idea of the film in general. He would return from a screening and say "that particular sequence is too long, you need to shorten it." He was fantastic with the overview of the film, but he got bored working with the detail. Godard on the other hand was incredible with cutting. For him cinema defined itself by editing, for Godard cinema is editing.

On **Tirez sur le Pianiste** I remember that we worked very hard – cutting until ten o'clock every evening during the shoot. The style was very different and I was not always sure that it was working. I used to always say to my assistant "let me know if it works." Then when we went to the first screening, Truffaut was very happy. It did not change because there were not many ways to cut it. I hate the term "first cut" because you should always be cutting to make it work, I do not think you should be doing bad cutting. After this "first cut" of course you will make some modifications. In New Wave films the cutting style was not planned in advance. They had a concept of what the style would be and they worked from a script, but they did not know in advance exactly where the cuts would be made. They would have been against being so pre-planned. This is not to say that we were going into the cutting room to find and create something new. The concept of the editing was part of the whole film like the style of the shoot and the acting. The editing does not exist in isolation. Sometimes in the cutting room you discover an innovation or you put right problems with the cut. However, in general what happens in the cutting room is a reflection of the film.

After we had done a cut of **A Bout de Souffle** there was a screening on the Champs Elysées. There were a lot of people present, including Truffaut and Rohmer. Godard felt that the film was not working and so we went back to the cutting room and started to re-cut the film. He used jump-cuts and had little regard for normal rules of continuity and this made the editing style very noticeable. I cannot say why in particular we used these techniques. Godard worked like a painter or a musician searching for what worked and often finding it. He was like an artist adding a blue or maybe a yellow and finding a balance that suited the whole. Of course the style of **A Bout de Souffle** has since become legendary, but before it came



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"**Tirez sur le Pianiste** is a beautiful film by Truffaut. I think one of his best and not because I worked on it. It has charm and it contains three ideas according to the dogma of the time." Among the striking editing ideas is the cut in to closer shots of the timid Charlie's finger as he is at the door of the impresario Lars Schmeel. Charlie is too scared in the end to ring the bell (1). When Charlie is in his bedroom and embraces the girl, the camera moves round the wall and dissolves in and out of past scenes before ending up on the couple (2). "This was rather a long scene and we needed to shorten it and find the right rhythm so that it would fit into the overall film. For this reason we did the long dissolves." In another scene the screen is split into three different images showing different versions of the same event (4). Truffaut at work on another film (3).

4

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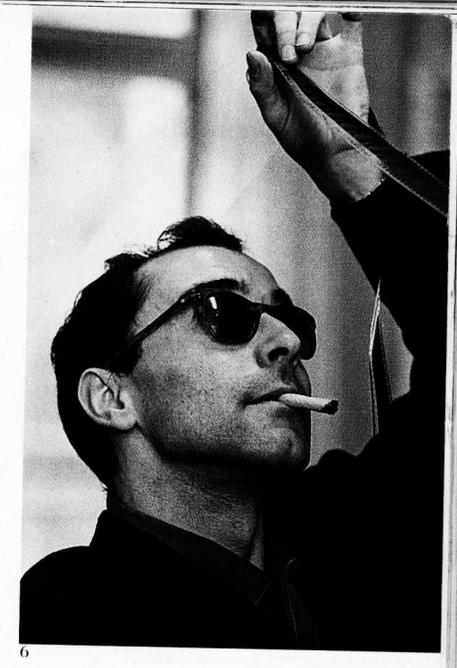

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A Bout de Souffle featured a revolutionary style of editing. When two shots of the one subject are cut together without a change in angle the cut is noticeable and there appears to be a "jump". In **A Bout de Souffle** there were many "jump-cuts". For example, two shots of Patricia riding in the car each with a different background are cut together and appear to jump. Time has obviously elapsed. Also we see Michel talking with his friend – time has elapsed between the start of one shot and the beginning of the next and the cut is not smooth. The film also ignores established rules of continuity (1–5, 7, 8–13). Jean-Luc Godard (6).

1

2

Eric Rohmer (1) let shots play out rather than cutting. This sequence of scenes from **Ma Nuit chez Maud** is an example of how he held on shots. Jean-Louis (Jean-Louis Trintignant) is having dinner with Maud (Françoise Fabian) and Vidal (Antoine Vitez) (2).

out all of Paris was saying that it was a terrible and insignificant film. Many people did not like the New Wave crowd. **A Bout de Souffle** in particular was not liked because it shocked a lot of people – in fact at the time it seemed to upset the whole tradition of French film-making. Many critics were very harsh. People said that the New Wave film-makers were just making a joke. This was not true because they worked very hard and knew very well what they were about. The style may have been modern, but these film-makers were very aware of the tradition of film-making and they admired many of the older French and especially American film-makers. They had reflected on cinema and film-making for ten years before they began making films. There was no doubt that they knew what they were about. When you look at the films of the New Wave it is true you are much more aware of the editing, it is often visible rather than invisible. However, this was not totally new; the editing of Sergei Eisenstein was also very noticeable and visible rather than invisible. Godard in particular was very impressed by the Russian film-makers and their approach to editing. However, it is certainly true that the style of **A Bout de Souffle** was definitely a shock for the public – it was a discovery of something that appeared fresh and modern. Only recently a young 23 year old girl said to me that the characters and their relationships to each other still appeared contemporary. At the same time what appears modern and up-to-date now will be a new and different style from **A Bout de Souffle**. As Cocteau said: "All the revolutionary ideas in art become conformist after 20 years."

Eric Rohmer asked me to cut **Ma Nuit chez Maud**. The style was a lot more classical and structured. In the way that they view characters and French society and what they were saying there is much in common between Rohmer and Truffaut, but the way they say it is different. Rohmer uses long takes that have been worked out precisely in advance. He cut the picture quickly and spent a lot more time on the sound. He actually would go out and record background sound atmospheres himself, recording room sounds in his own house or friends' houses. To any scene he would add two or three very subtle and light atmospheres. They might sound like nothing when you go and see the film, however, they give it a very natural feel. Once a young recorder told him that he was the only director who you would see listening through the room tones and then going out to record his own. He was very pleased when he heard that! The use of sound is a modern innovation: if you are watching a film from 1935 you will accept the lack of sound but if it is a film from the 1970s or beyond it will annoy the audience if the sounds are not there. Kids nowadays all walk around with a Walkman listening to music and they are much more aware of sounds. Although I must admit the modern trend of having music everywhere, whether the restaurant, the car or the supermarket, is appalling. Rohmer is against this lack of silence. All of the directors that I worked with – Truffaut, Rohmer and Godard – maintained their independence and the notion of the auteur. The films that they made are definitely their films – and thanks to their intelligence and their integrity they are also very good and very important films.