



## André Téchiné: The Subtle Exploration of Identities

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Review: Bill Marshall (2007) *André Téchiné*

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Although André Téchiné (b. 1943) may only be known to arthouse cinephiles outside France for films such as *Les Roseaux sauvages/Wild Reeds* (1994) or *Les Voleurs/Thieves* (1996), his *oeuvre* consists of seventeen feature films extending from the late sixties to the present<sup>1</sup>. Many have been presented at international festivals and awarded prizes. Since *Les Roseaux sauvages*, the majority of Téchiné's films have had a UK and/or USA release, but the early films are not so readily available.<sup>2</sup> This is a pity because, here is clearly an important *auteur* of contemporary French cinema, yet one who remains strangely more absent from the limelight, than some of his contemporaries, such as Bertrand Tavernier or Claude Miller. Even in France, his films have not received the attention they deserve from the public and the critics: to date one book has been published in the *Cahiers du cinéma* collection, only covering the first part of his career up to 1987 (Philippon 1988).

Bill Marshall's full-length monograph in English devoted Téchiné's entire filmography (apart from his latest film, *Les Témoins/Witnesses*, released in 2007) aims to address this relative lack of critical attention.<sup>3</sup> Published by Manchester University Press in the now well established 'French

<sup>1</sup> Two short films made in the 1980s are also analysed by Marshall: *La Matiouette* (1983) and *L'Atelier* (1984).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, some major early films such as *Hotel des Amériques* and *Les Innocents* and more recent ones like *Loïe* are not available in English.

<sup>3</sup> Let us note that a chapter was devoted to Téchiné in Jill Forbes's book *French Cinema after the New Wave* (1992), and that an essay was written by the American critic Kent Jones, currently only available in Spanish (Jones 1997).

Directors' series edited by Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram, it provides an overdue examination of the work of a director who, until now, has mainly escaped scholarly attention. A well established British scholar specialising in French and Francophone cinema, Marshall has written a thought-provoking study that elicits rich threads of discussion and opens the way for future areas of academic investigation. The book is accessible for the general reader interested in French cinema, and it offers a valuable academic tool for scholars and students.

Marshall has realised the need to offer introductions of lesser known films to the Anglophone reader, prior to his own in-depth discussions of the films. His approach successfully combines a clear and comprehensive context to Téchiné's films with enlightening detailed textual analyses. Marshall uses a range of perspectives ranging from political contexts to cultural studies, gender and film studies. His account offers a thematic approach, including chapters probing issues of realism, families, sexual identities and itineraries of Frenchness. He also discusses the ways in which Téchiné's films are both 'emotional and intellectual' (151), interrogating the use of time and space, the question of memory, as well as the evocation of the real and virtual/mental worlds (41).

Since Téchiné claims that 'he makes every film against the previous one' (113), one of the merits of the structure of Marshall's study is to acknowledge the diversity of the filmography, while using a comparative approach with a view to extracting the coherence of the work, its motifs and its singularity. However, this does not mean that the reader interested in the analysis of a particular film, cannot find the relevant section(s) easily. The book is divided into clear sections, which are organised around specific themes. This does justice to the strong motif-based coherence of Téchiné's filmography, in a more powerful way than a strict chronological approach.

Since Téchiné's career is closely linked with the French New Wave, it may not be surprising that Marshall initially adopts an auteurist approach in his study, even if this is not always stated explicitly. In true auteur tradition, Téchiné has played a strong creative role in the writing of all the screenplays, the castings and the editing. Consequently, his films are linked by a personal style and thematic correspondences. These motifs include personal relationships, family conflicts, sexuality, questions of Frenchness and identity, geographical and spatial movements, and patterns and correspondences between the films are established. However, Téchiné is often considered an eclectic director whose films are difficult to categorise. Marshall's inquiry underlines the multi-stranded ('pluralist') nature of his narratives and his intricate plots, with bizarre turns of events and multiple points of view. For example, the story developed in *Les Voleurs* is transformed by a plurality of time frames and narrative voices.

Although they initially seem to defy generic classifications, several films explore the conventions of melodrama - flamboyantly in *Rendez-vous* (1985), more intimately in *Ma Saison préférée/My Favorite Season* (1993), but adding a modernist touch. Some of Téchiné's films, such

as *Le Lieu du crime/Scene of the Crime* (1986) or *Les Voleurs* incorporate the conventions of the crime thriller. As Marshall rightly notes, in Téchiné's cinema, genre mixing results in a unique blend of art-house and popular elements.

Téchiné spent his childhood in the South West of France, and his rural background has proved a significant inspiration for the settings of several of his films.<sup>4</sup> However, these settings are often stylised and acquire more symbolic functions, as the studio-like filming of Biarritz in *Hotel des Amériques* (1981) illustrates. In addition, Téchiné's films often question the distinction made between Paris and the *Province*, particularly regarding the mobility of his characters between the two spaces. As a young man, Téchiné came to Paris to study cinema. After he failed the entrance examination to the IDHEC cinema school, he learnt about cinema on the job, mainly through his association with the New Wave circles - he wrote for *Cahiers du cinéma* and worked as an assistant for Jacques Rivette.<sup>5</sup> This move to the city is an aspiration shared with the protagonists of many of his films.<sup>6</sup>

Téchiné made his directorial debut in 1969 with *Paulina s'en va*, starring a well known avant-garde actress: Bulle Ogier. It was only several years later that he was truly discovered with *Souvenirs d'en France/French Provincial* (1975) and *Barocco* (1976). Starring Jeanne Moreau and Marie-France Pisier, two actresses associated with the New Wave, the former is a compressed history of a small-town family from early in the century through the Resistance and on to May 1968 which explores the link between private life and historical forces. *Barocco* brings together Isabelle Adjani and Gérard Depardieu, and mixes genres and styles. For all its 'baroque' spectacle, it introduces themes that Téchiné will rework in his later films, such as the link between identity and performance (central to *Rendez-vous*) and the tension between seduction and alienation - a key-motif in most of his films (22). The early films also include the big-budget, 'transnational' costume drama *Les Soeurs Bronte/The Brontë Sisters* made in 1979. Although Téchiné's early films are very different, Marshall concludes his first chapter by noting that they are marked by an examination of genre, in which distancing and formalism take precedence over contemporary realism and narrative. These films have certainly influenced other directors in the 1980s - *Barocco* for instance was an important influence for Leos Carax and the emergence of *cinéma du look*. However, from 1981, Téchiné's cinema took new directions.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, *Souvenirs d'en France* was filmed in his childhood village, *Le Lieu du crime* in the same area, *Ma saison préférée* in the Toulouse region and *Les Roseaux sauvages* in Villeneuve-sur-Lot.

<sup>5</sup> Téchiné wrote in *Cahiers du cinéma* between 1964 and 1967 (his first review was for Truffaut's *La Peau douce* in 1964). His own career as director has been followed closely by *Cahiers* with numerous feature articles and interviews published over the years on his films and his work as a director. The negative review of *Alice et Martin* in 1998 was an exception (99).

<sup>6</sup> Many of his films include a character who escapes to Paris (see Nina in *Rendez-vous*, Pierre in *J'embrasse pas*), or more generally who moves for the country to the city (see *Alice et Martin*).

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<<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n3/vanderschelden.pdf>>.

*Hotel des Amériques* represents the turning point in Téchiné's filmography and a new departure in his career. Unlike the formalist early films, it marks the start of an evolution towards more naturalism, enhancing what Marshall considers to be a move toward 'new realisms', which is the object of the second chapter of his book. From 1981, Téchiné becomes closer to his characters' emotions, and draws on 19<sup>th</sup> century literary narrative techniques (e.g. the Balzacian hero or the novel of education), as *J'embrasse pas*, particularly, illustrates. The division of his complex narratives into clear sections, sometimes named chapters, as in *Ma saison préférée*, reminds of literary structuring. This is identified as a so-called 'novelising approach' by Marshall (37), who links Téchiné's films with a number of international authors, including Balzac, William Faulkner and Bertold Brecht.

Téchiné's cinema is highly intertextual, especially in the early films, and Marshall's book forges numerous links with literature, cinema and philosophy. For instance, the early films – especially the bourgeois family of *Souvenirs d'en France* – are associated with motifs and characterisation recalling Brechtian distancing (17). Faulkner's influence is traceable in Téchiné's fragmented narratives, and his taste for melodramas, which raise questions of sexual desire and race (see *Les Innocents* and *Les Voleurs*).

Cinematic quotes and references abound in Téchiné's cinema. Ingmar Bergman's films are often quoted as direct influences in terms of the treatment of relationships and complex plots. For example *Ma saison préférée* is deemed to be the most Bergmanian film in its emphasis on emotional and intense relationships. Téchiné does, however, tend to engage in more popular forms of filmmaking than found in Bergman's cinema. Other citations include the cinema of Douglas Sirk, who in the 1950s addressed the social and political issues of his time while seemingly employing the mainstream conventions of melodrama (excess and irony). Repeated reference is made to familiar motifs in Jean Renoir's cinema.<sup>7</sup> Finally, let us note that the directors of the New Wave are also occasionally quoted, but these constitute more winks to Truffaut, Godard and Chabrol, paying tribute to their work, than direct influences.<sup>8</sup> They illustrate the importance of the notion of spectator pleasure in Téchiné's cinema, underlined by Marshall throughout the book.

More theoretically, Téchiné's cinema is frequently related in Marshall's discussions to contemporary thought. Téchiné was a personal friend of Roland Barthes who appeared in *Les Soeurs Brontë* and inspired the character of Romain, played by Philippe Noiret in *J'embrasse pas*/

<sup>7</sup> For example, Marshall compares certain scenes of *Les Roseaux sauvages* to *Une partie de campagne* (1935).

<sup>8</sup> For example, there are Godardian references in *Alice et Martin*, and Truffaut's name comes back on several occasions in Marshall's analysis book. However, Marshall identifies clear ideological differences between Godard and the early films of Téchiné (17). He also makes clear that a significant difference between Truffaut and Téchiné lies in their approach to relationships and sexuality (see for example the 'defamiliarisation' discussion in this essay).

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*don't Kiss* (1991). Less anecdotal is the connection made between the recurrent use of still photographs in Téchiné's films and Barthes's theoretical writings on still images (Barthes 1984), in relation to memory, time, the past-present relationship and death. Marshall also interprets Téchiné's cinema drawing on concepts borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari's writings on the 'anti-Oedipus', challenging Freudian psychoanalytical conclusions (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), as well as the notion of 'minor' and 'major' cinema in the context of gender and identity issues (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). Marshall also borrows from the work of Michel Foucault to explain the role played by mirrors in Téchiné's films, showing how they 'partake of an interchange of the real and the possible, the actual and the virtual' (92). In addition, Foucault and Guy Hocquenghem are called upon for gender issues, which brings us to the next significant aspect of Téchiné's filmography, namely his exploration of fluid sexual identities.

Although he never made a secret of his homosexuality, Téchiné does not see himself as a gay activist, and he does not intend his films to be perceived as militant. In the 1990s, he tended to be labelled a gay art-cinema director, but Marshall attributes this to some of his key-films, such as *J'embrasse pas*, coinciding with the vogue of 'New Queer Cinema' (81). Marshall also underlines that 'gay' or 'queer' appropriations of Téchiné or his films are quite problematic, partly because his films do not address sexual identity politics in a direct way. According to Marshall, this positioning is to be linked to the Republican tradition and the influence of French gay theorists who are opposed to a 'state system', in which the dominant culture names and identifies difference, a cause defended for example by Foucault or Hocquenghem (1985).<sup>9</sup>

Téchiné's films tend to advocate non-differentiation, rather than the assertion of gay identity. His characters remain ambivalent and undefined, including in their sexual identity, as is for example the case for the character of Marie played by Catherine Deneuve in *Les Voleurs*. Téchiné's characters, therefore are 'unfinished entities', in that they often retain a degree of enigma and some 'capacity for invention and becoming' (82-3). For example, they tend to 'exist liminally, on an undecidable frontier between situation and freedom, place and somewhere else' (36). Rejecting psychological realism, Téchiné focuses on character trajectories and transformations, for which Marshall provides extensive analyses. These include the identification of recurring character types, complex characterisation processes, subtle explorations of unexpected sexual attractions, and representations of the 'plurality of being in the world' (44). This reveals one of Téchiné's priorities, namely the probing of psychological states and social structures,

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<sup>9</sup> Marshall is the author of *Guy Hocquenghem* (1996) a study of the French militant homosexual writer who was known for refusing to fit into the orthodoxies of gay 'identity', including the left-wing social and political settlement that emerged in France after May 1968 and following Mitterrand's election in 1981. Hocquenghem's work was influenced by Deleuze and Guattari.

encompassing family relations as such, with strong motifs like the estrangement from home, the impact of social conditioning, repercussions of historical events, belonging and exclusion.

Téchiné's cinema is set within clearly defined historical, cultural and political contexts that include World War II in *Les Egarés/Strayed* (2003), the Algerian War in *Les Roseaux sauvages*, and May 1968 in *Souvenirs d'en France*. It includes portrayals of the French bourgeoisie and depictions of certain criminal marginal underworlds, underlining the development of hybrid identities in terms of culture, race and gender. More generally, Téchiné's cinema engages with the repercussions of globalisation and changes in contemporary society. Most of his films provide representations of a world in movement, and of journeys of transformation. Marshall's analysis does not really elucidate why Téchiné is so attracted to border-crossing motifs, more particularly to North-Africa, as the plots and settings of *Les Innocents, Loin* (2001) or *Les Temps qui changent/Changing Times* (2004) illustrate. Marshall does, however, rely on the notion of 'dépaysement'<sup>10</sup>, in English 'defamiliarisation', to define a process of moving away from the norm, or what is familiar, thus 'introduc[ing] heterogeneous elements into the doxa' (115). This process of 'defamiliarisation' is applied here to characterisation and gender issues (e.g. the defamiliarisation of heterosexuality), but also to space, engaging with important questions Frenchness, nationalism, and regionalism.

Téchiné's subtle exploration of Frenchness and the North-African connections in contemporary French culture raises important issues of national identity. Marshall rightly argues that many of Téchiné's films challenge the Eurocentrism that is often common to contemporary French cinema by displacing characters to a geographical setting from where they are forced to look across at Europe from the position of an outsider. Films like *Loin* and *Les Temps qui changent* challenge traditional identity markers, that Marshall discusses using a number of notions: 'frontier'/'border' as an inherent part of identity; 'minor culture' which implies undermining dominant models and culture; 'histories of power and discourse' which engage with the debates of post-colonialism and globalisation (114).

The book ends on a consideration of the collaborative nature of Téchiné's filmmaking as an alternative to a purely auteurist approach. He has collaborated for screenplays with writers/directors associated with *Cahiers du cinéma* who emerged in the 1980s, such as Olivier Assayas and Pascal Bonitzer.<sup>11</sup> The most visible collaboration form, however, concerns Téchiné's work with major French actors/stars throughout his career, such as Jeanne Moreau, Isabelle Adjani, Patrick Dewaere, Gérard Depardieu. In particular, Marshall lingers on the special professional

<sup>10</sup> Téchiné also refers to 'dépaysement humain' in a interview given in 1996 to *Cahiers du cinéma* (Téchiné 1996).

<sup>11</sup> They both are established *auteurs* and critics closely associated with *Cahiers du cinéma*. Bonitzer is credited as co-writer in five films, Assayas in three.

relationship developed with Catherine Deneuve who has featured in five of his films - more than any other director. Téchiné has offered her the chance of powerful roles in which she is 'de-glamorised' and challenges her own star persona in 'narratives of transformation, exchange and becoming other' (143). He has also given their first roles to young actors, Juliette Binoche and Élodie Bouchez for example, and to actors who then went on to make their own films such as Gael Morel and Abdel Kechiche.

The main priorities of Marshall's study were not to focus on the production and reception issues around his films, or the place occupied by Téchiné and world cinema. What Marshall's book conclusively demonstrates is that Téchiné 'asks questions about how to live and love in this phase of the Capitalist modernity' and 'examines the relationship between the socio-historical world and what goes on inside people's heads, their desires aspirations and potential'. (151). In so doing, Téchiné has made his place at the crossroads of experimental cinema and popular forms of French filmmaking, engaging with important debates around identity, marginality, time and memory, the real and the virtual. His influence on French cinema in the last thirty years is undeniable, even if some of his major films have failed to meet their audiences.

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