

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## FRANCOIS TRUFFAUT

### LIFE

Truffaut was a widely respected film director and theorist, to whom much of the creative thinking behind the French New Wave has been attributed. He directed twenty-five films, garnering many French and international awards for his inventive and fascinating work.

Truffaut was born in Paris on February 6, 1932. His mother was Janine de Montferrand; and his stepfather agreed to accept him as son, giving him his own name, Truffaut. In his early years, Truffaut was regularly passed around among nannies and his grandmother, picking up strongly on his grandmother's love of books and music. He lived with this grandmother until her death, when he was eight years old; then, for the first time, he lived with his parents. His biological father was reputedly a Jewish dentist from Bayonne, but was not heard from.

As a youngster, Truffaut stayed away from home as much as possible, often living with chums. His parents did not accept him as a legitimate child, a fact Truffaut deeply resented. (His best buddy was Robert Lachenay, who was later an assistant on a number of Truffaut's films.) Truffaut saw his first film when he was eight years old, and from that time on became an habitué of the many small theatres around his home. After being expelled from school several times he decided to self-instruct, and to live strictly: three movies a day and three books a week.

Truffaut started his own film club in 1948, making the acquaintance of André Bazin, already an important theorist of French film, and the man destined to support and protect Truffaut as he moved into his career life.

Truffaut joined the French Army for two years, in 1950, when he was eighteen, and spent the next two years trying to get out of the Army. He spent time incarcerated in military prison; Andre Bazin helped get him out. In reciprocation, Truffaut gladly accepted a job as resident critic with Bazin's Cahiers du cinéma, where Truffaut wrote voluminous and unsparing reviews. After creating many shock waves, and forging his own newish auteur theory, he decided to make films, too, and began doing so with two short films.

In 1959 Truffaut made his debut with the feature film, *Les 400 Coups*, an autobiographical document in which Antoine Doinel assumed the role of Truffaut himself; a film in which much that was to develop in Truffaut's work proclaimed itself. From that time on Truffaut was in the public spotlight and commenced a public directorial life which put him before a wide French audience. He was for the most part respected and successful, though life took its revenge, with a brain tumor and a first stroke in 1983, and left him dead at 52 in 1984. Truffaut left behind him a number of testimonies to mortal love: 1957-65, married to Madeleine Morgenstern, two daughters; 1968, engaged to actress Claude Jade; 1981-1984, lived with Fanny Ardani, had one daughter.

### THEMES

**Contents** (Love, Childhood, Sexuality, Death, Anxiety, Transience)

#### Introduction

Truffaut is less theme-driven than concerned with ways of creating films, and with the interface between the photographic processes of film, and the musical, optical, rhythmic pacings of the films which he directed. This bent, of course, belongs to his innovative position within the French new wave of cinema, to Truffaut's involvement with other young theorists of this movement, and to the growing technologies of representation in mid-twentieth century Europe. That is not to say, of course, that Truffaut is only interested in form and style, and not in the content of his films, in which he finds his way into important

themes—see contents, above—of his time. It is more difficult than that to describe Truffaut's implication of form with argument, as in *Day into Night*, *The Green Room*, or even *Les 400 Coups*, in which the camera serves as a kind of mobile writing instrument, and the generated content is both autobiography and the manner in which we can write an autobiography for the eye.

## LOVE

**Marriage.** Marriage is the readiest to hand causeway for love, as society evolves. With the historical evolution of middle-class marriage, in which personal conjugal responsibilities constitute a daily challenge (and promise) to the householder, there is a heavy obligation for disciplining love, putting it to use as part of the human armoire. Here is where the beast of temptation most showily threatens the happiness system of the middle class.

**Destructiveness** Love is no piece of cake, in this historical development. In *The Soft Skin* Truffaut looks adultery in the eye, openly anatomizes it, and leaves us to brood over the harms it can do, and the recklessness with which it can take over lives. Love wreaks its havoc, in *The Soft Skin*, on 'someone who should know better,' a highly educated, thus obviously disciplined, academic and writer.

**Affair.** Casual love affairs are enough to drive a good-natured spouse crazy. Love can break up suburban marriages. Love (and the loss of it) can bring eccentric visionaries to their knees, and cut them off from life (*The Green Room*). Love can separate dear friends like Jules and Jim (Jules and Jim) by drowning one of them in the lake, victim of a volatile lady, while the other waits lovely on the shore. *Mississippi Mermaid* and *The Story of Adele H.* both show us the extremities of romantic love, and its proximity to the loss of all that makes love possible: stability, confidence, and mutual purpose. Those films instruct us the hard way, forcing us to reimagine the extravagant gestures we can make, to put ourselves in the hands of one another—just where we can be crushed.

**Grace.** Well, is this the kind of downbeat view of love we expect from such a brilliant French director as Truffaut, a guy so prone to the ladies that it was a studio joke that the Director would regularly fall in love with his leading principal lady? Where is gallic gallantry, and the 'je ne sais quoi' joys of the Parisian soulscape? The answer is that there is precious little of that commercialized romance in the living lore of the French streets. True enough, your French girlfriend may do wonders for your testosterone while you are in Cannes, but just jilt her, and wait her for her pearl handed pistol to send you fed ex to Beulah land. The answer, of course, is that there is nothing downbeat about Truffaut's depictions of love, for they are invariably springboards to adventures in the human condition, adventures which give life its **sauce**.

**Affairs.** The affair would be the taste test for the sauce. Of course affairs abound in Truffaut's urbane cosmos. Remember when Truffaut the teen age kid—in *Les 400 Coups*—comes around the corner in downtown Paris, and sees his mom making out? Bummer! The silence following that glimpse is eloquent. Truffaut excels at giving the scene just the degree of exposure required. Jules and Jim sail innocently into a love trio which will inevitably founder. One of the men, Jules, will inevitably marry Catherine, the other will chafe—but without a better resolution than that to offer—and in the end whim and irritation will deposit two bodies in a lake. Affairs—a widespread middle class western playground in the western mid-twentieth—provided the danger, erotics, and imagination zap required by Truffaut's cultural moment which had lost its faith, consigned its values to the pocket book, and entrusted its need for mystery to game playing at the expense of one's mate. Followers of American literature, from the time, will recognize the works and obsessions of such fiction workers as John Updike and Leslie Fiedler, chroniclers of failed marriages in American suburbia.

## CHILDHOOD

**Innocence.** While Truffaut's films are for adults, even for sophisticated ones, he is often drawn to the more innocent world of the child. (Be it noted, though, that one of Truffaut's favorite authors—the inspirer behind *The Green Room*—was Henry James, for whom the sinister potentials of childhood were a meaty

theme.) In certain of his most touching films—*Les 400 Coups*, *The Wild Child*, *Small Change*—Truffaut takes us inside aspects of the child's mind, indeed of his own mind as a child, which the very adult dynamics of his main film line conceal.

**Autobiography.** *Les 400 Coups* comes first to mind, his first feature film (1959), his most searching inquiry into himself—although he acts often in his own work, thereby telling all, in his fashion—and one of his liveliest narrative lines. The film is autobiographical: Truffaut's attempt to capture his uncomfortable and on the whole loveless childhood, squeezed into a small flat with two parents who had plenty to do without him, a furtive life on the streets in which he did poorly as a student, and had few friends. Innocent of himself, unprepared to understand the social world. The kind of only occasional familial love, which young Truffaut comes by, is an occasional night out at a local restaurant. His innocence keeps him from expecting much more.

**Mischief** The autobiographical figure at the center of *Les 400 Coups*, Truffaut himself, belongs to the childhood figures who populate *Small Change* and *The Wild Child*, different as those two figures are. The mischief wrought by Truffaut the kid—an occasional small scale robbery, lies when needed—Is replicated in spades by the school-scorning youngsters we see at their desks in both *Small Change* and *Les 400 Coups*. The most telling of scenes will be the circulation of girlie pictures, while teacher's back is turned. Truffaut himself commits infractions like explaining his school absence by the death of his mother, who then, not too surprisingly, appears the next day at school.

**Being wild.** *The Wild Child* can hardly be described as a film about childhood in a broad sense. It is about a child human born in the woods in southern France, and brought to Paris by a friendly and curious anthropologist--Truffaut himself, naturally, once more probing childhood—and about the far more than mischievous nature of the *wild one*, refractory to the basic eating, cleaning, learning protocols of the acculturated child—though at the same time living a perceptible learning curve, and familiarizing himself even with the affections, which had played no part in his earlier childhood.

**Love and Childhood** If childhood is a time of love, you would hardly find proof of the fact in Truffaut's films, where kids make their ways on their own, and often at their own expense, while lovers pass through the romantic stage brusquely, on their ways to the bedroom.

## SEXUALITY

**General.** Sexuality, love, and childhood belong together, one begetting the other, and while one must work to find the whole in Truffaut's opus—I suggested at the start that Truffaut is a theorist of film style more than a. thematist—the textures of this whole filmic life intersect at many points. Truffaut does not explore the sexuality of the young person, nor does he look into the sexuality of his lovers—they mate, for sure, their faces contorted with the labors of orgasm—though we see bodies in contact. Nor are we invited to think of the whole life cycle, which grasps the genesis of the child, the growth of his/her sexuality, and the return of that growth-stage onto a new generation. May we say that Truffaut is a brilliant pointillist of the human condition? Like Seurat, with his light flecked riverscapes, Truffaut isolates formative elements of the human condition and sets them on fire individually.

**Intercourse** Think of films like *The Soft Skin*, *The Woman next Door*, and *The Last Metro*, all of which wade into the optics of intercourse. In *The Soft Skin* the writer is turned on by a glimpse of the stewardess' slipping skirt, as she changes outfit for the landing in Portugal. From this glimpse to a hotel bedroom, bodies clamped together, is but a step. But it is the act which does the trick, the act ripe with our survival written all over it, though for all that it has only haltingly installed itself among our crowning achievements. *The Woman Next Door* targets intercourse from the first traded glimpse between the two lovers; to the sprawled painting body things, white necks exposed in passion, and a soft field of white awaiting the fatal bullet. *The Last Metro* signs off with intercourse, as the theater owner and her fascination actor screw themselves to the floor, pouring into one another the infinite making power of semen.

**Browsing** There is copulative sexuality in Truffaut's films, and there is the daily browsing of one another that we carry through life, part of our aliveness to which Truffaut is tirelessly aware. The subtlety with which Truffaut can herald the shock and pleasure, of such browsing, strikes us as his first feature, *Les 400 Coups*. Antoine, moody and sensitive on the streets, is walking with his friend, in the heart of noisy, brusque Paris, when he comes around the corner of a metro stop and sees his mother and 'some guy' making out in the shadows. He is shocked. His alienation from his parents is considerable; now it is shocking. The sharp edge of sexuality. *The Woman Next Door* works the same territory, as the scene in *Les 400 Coups*; when the couples discover that they are neighbors the electricity of shock transects the two former lovers: can fate have dealt them this dish? There are many softer and less startling registers of sexual browsing., and Truffaut is a master of detail.

**Softness.** While we are still waiting to find out the identity of the Mississippi Mermaid, the protagonist is taking his breakfast in the sun. He hears his new wife call, from upstairs, and goes up to see her. She is on the stairway landing, and turns toward him as he climbs up. What does she want? She is having trouble with a couple of the buttons on the back of her blouse. The plantation owner gives the necessary assistance, in the course of which the lady introduces his fumbling fingers to her nipples. (Truffaut's touch, for the anatomy of sexual browsing, works wonders for the texture of his film; is film not a step up on the arts of language, when it comes to the tricky passages of illusion?) Examples multiply. Think of the soft sexuality of the first glances exchanged, in *Fahrenheit 451*, between Guy Montag (taking the bus home from work) and the innocent girl who turns out to be his next door neighbor. The two understand each other. Think of the easy rolling sexuality among Jules, Jim, and Catherine, in the early Belle Epoque days Jules and Jim unfolds. Like kids, the threesome skates tri sexually through the bosky parks of central Paris. By almost a similar rhythm the persistent Antoine drifts through *Stolen Kisses*, to a comfortable fond unity with his prospective wife, Christine.

## DEATH

**General.** Truffaut makes it abundantly clear that his world is saturated by international conflict, by personal frictions, and by the problem of meaning. Films like *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Green Room* show Truffaut at grips with the human future, and the existential setting of man, embedded in death and loss. We are for the most part viewed as losers having as much fun as possible along the way. When we see the professionals of salvation, the priests, we are encouraged to lose heart. *The Green Room* abets our suspicions, that the Church does not 'want to grow with the times.

**Backgrounding** War as background is powerfully factored into *Jules and Jim*, perhaps his only film in which Truffaut summons up his era or 'our time.' He makes it clear, in *Jules and Jim*, that World War I, The Great War, was out there around the edges of the Belle Epoque, and that our happy trio were enjoying themselves at the price of international conflict. We get the gravity of the war background—rumbling tanks, steel helmets- gray marching boots- - and are ready, by war's end, for the rough dénouement of the present film. The filmic techniques, by which this backgrounding is laid on us—Pathe News type shots, from the evening news of the moment, rumble in us as we watch Jules and Jim live their portions of the war, dying in advance as they see their 'belle époque' exploding behind them.

**Puncture.** Private death punctuates, and inflects several of Truffaut's finest works, and helps us understand that film is a broad language in which many of life's inquests can formulate themselves. Three Truffaut films rely on the language of death to make bullet sharp statements: *The Woman Next Door*, *The Bride wore Black*, and *Soft Skin*. In each of those instances the killing bullet was the only language that could, so to speak, 'complete the sentence.' Mathilde had no place to go, in herself, after the forced separation of herself from her lover. ' She had to commit the fatal murder which takes her whole case off the table, cancelling the rest of her life. Julie, the bride who wore black, was plucked out by evil chance for the murder of her fiancé, and found herself with no language except murder, down to the last detail, in which to declare her bewilderment and fury. Pierre, the prominent writer in *The Soft Skin*, is all about death from the moment he dates the airline hostess in Lisbon. He is a man of language, for sure, and yet

once hooked on a smiling mistress, he is doomed: a bullet is the only language that can ‘complete the sentence.’

**Inundation.** *The Green Room.* If there is any *Summa Theologica* in Truffaut’s work, it will be this film, which not only coasts thoughtfully along the coasts between life and death, but brings the Catholic Church into its limits, as a legitimate part of our historical apparatus for facing some meanings of death. Like Truffaut himself, the newspaper editor Julien finds himself in midlife, thinking back constantly onto the death, eight years earlier, of his beloved wife, and furthermore finding that all his friends are dying around him. His recourse is first to build a sacred chapel—the Green Room—in his own house, and then, when that structure burns down, to establish a candle lit prayer sanctuary on the grounds of the parish church, where lasting prayer can be offered for all the world’s dead. That Julien eventually dies of a broken heart does not break the wholeness of his venture, which is to save, and to translate the memory of the living into the awakened presence of the dead.

## ANXIETY

**General** We know the tenor of Truffaut’s childhood, from his first feature film, and we know the perils of the world he grew into, war surrounded, suspicious of ideas/books, riddled with fraud, jealousy, gossip, mockery, violence; it is hardly to be wondered, that the human figure of Truffaut’s world lives immersed in anxiety. Who more than Truffaut himself, who though an atheist longed for a Catholic mass funeral?

**Society.** *Point Counter Point.* In 1928, with *Point Counter Point*, Aldous Huxley wrote a perfect introduction to modern anxiety. This novel, concerning high London society, moral disintegration, and the vacuous chit chat of a cultural group cut loose from value, foreshadowed the social pointlessness of the entertainment industry, which was to be the growth matrix for Truffaut, in the social scripts he created in the twenty years between 1960-1980. The glassy tinkle of chatter, the empty insides of parties, the Emmies and Oscars of fine gowns: all of that vapid to and fro is the living air breathed in a critical film like *Day into Night*, where we see the birth of a film out of the vapidness of its society. Anxiety is the oxygen of this film about ambition and jealousy, while this same kind of frivolous milieu takes its toll on the worlds depicted in *Jules and Jim* (the easy go, easy come of the pre-war Belle Epoque), in the fatuous literary conference to which Prof. Pierre is invited in *The Soft Skin*, or in the middle class pool parties which seem the life blood of the social world of *The Woman Next Door*.

**An individual.** *The Green Room*, once again, takes first place in Truffaut’s efforts to characterize ‘being in our time.’ (The phrases Truffaut’s own visual language obliges us to use are redolent of the existential thinking dominant in mid-century philosophy throughout Europe at just the time of Truffaut’s apex as a Director). Truffaut builds this film around the sense of presence and absence, and the histories formed in the gap between those two conditions, just are the setting for both historicism and vision in Existential thought.

## TRANSCIENCE

**General.** Transience trumps, in the inventory of Truffaut’s themes, though none of them is not in itself already an anticipation of the transient. This is not a fatuous declaration that all passes, inside the literary text. Some texts congeal around the depth and grandeur of their ‘timeless presence’—texts like *Hamlet* or *Lear*, or *Oedipus the King* or *Antigone*. Classical tragedies, from the Greeks through Eugene O’Neill, are characteristically arranged around an argument or point, which they are a construction of, so that when the play ends the point ends. A modern tragedy like Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, is constructed around incompleteness and waiting, the very title of the work.

**Les 400 Coups.** Truffaut made his feature film début with a masterpiece of transience. Childhood is in any case a time of change and passing—we gasp at the developmental speed of the infant or small child, who is crawling today, climbing tomorrow, starting to speak next week, and erotic by ten. Truffaut, like Sigmund Freud, was a master of the analysis of this transient condition, and of the meaning of it. In the

thirteen-year old Antoine Doinel Truffaut sees the whole person, the image of the one-day- soon-to-be-completed life, adumbrated and total, yet at the same time the limited figure struggling to adjust to even the minimum requirements of his society. It is as though, to the speed with which one stage follows another, must be added the factor of compaction, which dictates that each stage of personal growth contains all the others operatively inside it.

**The Opus** Truffaut's gift for recreating this head over heels temporality, inside us, this transience, is at its best in *Small Change*, *Jules and Jim*, and *Stolen Kisses*. The schoolchildren in *Les 400 Coups* are mischief makers, like those in *Small Change*, but with a difference. Neither group brings any social advantages to learning, neither works off a youthhood of learning or even curiosity, but the kids of *Small Change* find some occasion to laugh, enjoy the surprises of youth, and in the end even to imagine the pleasure of puppy love. If transience is an enemy of experience, destructive to the moment, then *Small Change* deserves credit for putting up barriers against the transient. The same accolade should apply then to the Belle Epoque cheeriness, of the first part of *Jules and Jim*, or to the fortuitous and benevolent discoveries of sexuality, that provide the element of good time lived in Antoine's lucky *Stolen Kisses*.

## CHARACTERS

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Open or closed to new experiences  
 Agreeable or disagreeable in social relations  
 Conscientious or unconscientious  
 Rational or emotional

#### 1 Open

*Antoine* (*Les 400 Coups*) is the child of a small apartment in a big city, With parents who are as cramped as he is open for life. Despite a childhood of much rejection, and low expectations, his natural vitality brings him hopeful into the teens.

*Antoine* (*Stolen Kisses*) is a thematic character for Truffaut, and is usually upbeat and open. In this film Antoine is the beneficiary of kisses and affection from two ladies, who indoctrinate him in love, and bring out his high spirits.

*Jules* (*Jules and Jim*) is married to Catharine after the war, but finds that they have grown apart. Catharine is whimsically turned on by other men. Jules makes the decision that he and Catharine should divorce. He opens the way for Jim to provide Catharine the love she needs.

#### 2 Closed

*Pierre* (*The Soft Skin*) is a brilliant but vain professor and editor. He falls for an airline hostess, whose erotic is too much for him, and overnight he can think only of his upcoming rendez-vous with this doll. He can't see the larger picture of his value world.

*Adele* (*The Story of Adele H.*), the daughter of Victor Hugo, knows only one love, the British naval officer whom she follows to Canada, and then to the Caribbean. He tries seriously to get away from her—even in his onward posting and after his marriage, but she sticks to him like a leech.

#### 3 Agreeable

*Antoine* (*Bed and Board*) is a married man now, and survives an affair his own, to a Japanese woman), before discovering how much he enjoys a settled marital relation to Christine. He is fun to be around.

*Jim* (*Jules and Jim*) is the max in good nature, as he, Jules, and Catherine begin to bond. He has his own girlfriends, he is crazy about Catherine, and he joins in whatever fun around Paris the trio can devise.

*Charlie*. (Shoot the Piano Player) is on the whole good natured about the succession of events which pour onto his life, once he has gotten drawn back into the crime world. He takes it as it comes.

*Catherine* (Jules and Jim) is by turns either whimsically dangerous or full of high spirits, that allow her to play with the boys like a happy child.

*René* (Les 400 Coups) is Antoine's best friend, often as a fellow mischief-maker, but nonetheless a gas to be around.

#### 4 Disagreeable

*Sourpuss* (Les 400 Coups) is the classroom teacher of Antoine and his age cohort. A classic schoolteacher grump, working only by the rules, squashing imagination.

*Daxiat*. (The Last Metro) is the Nazi inclined journalist, who does his best to take over the theater of Mme. Steiner.

#### 5 Conscientious

*Truffaut* (The Wild Child) enacts the role of the anthropologist and supporter of the 'wild child.' He treats the boy with discernment and respect.

*Mme. Jouve* (The Woman next Door) is the proprietress of the condo complex at which the principle players enact their sexual dramas. She is mellow and thoughtful.

#### 6 Unconscientious

*Pierre* (The Soft Skin) gives no thought to his family, whom he has left only an hour before, simply because his eye has caught the lovely legs of the stewardess, on the plane to Lisbon.

#### 7 Emotional

*Catherine* (Jules and Jim) is open to her emotions, plays with Jules and Jim like an enthusiastic child, but is dangerously whimsical, as the deadly denouement of the film reveals.

*Montag* (Fahrenheit 451) is constitutionally turned off by the authoritarian, idea-crushing, society in which he is brought up. Ultimately he has to strike out onto his own.

*Mathilde* (The Woman next Door) is emotionally unstable, and cannot resist returning to her old boyfriend, when he moves in next door. She proves to be suicidally emotional at the end.

#### 8 Rational

*Ferrand* (Day for Night) is the director, and shaper, of the events of this film about making a film. He is necessarily supervisory, and on the whole maintains a rational structure of action.

Three photos



[scene from Les Quatre Cents Coups](#) 1959. Mischievous schoolkids



[Jean-Pierre L aud and Claude Jade in Baisers vol es](#) 1968. Explosion of young love





[Oskar Werner and Jeanne Moreau in Jules et Jim](#) 1962. Love as fun