

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Wild Child . 1970

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW.

For three hundred years western cultures have wrestled with the problem of their anthropological origins. (Their self-founding thought was developing in a cultural world in which anthropology and archeology were starting to set down some of the landmarks of humanoid development. By the eighteenth century there was substantial popular interest in origin thinking—vide *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)—that is in figuring out what kinds of people we were before we were socialized. The French thinker Denis Diderot (1713-1784) was one of many who were figuring out the ways in which the individual senses, one by one, contributed to establishing the totality of a human being. Like Diderot and Defoe, the author of *Crusoe*, the educationist Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) was ardently investigating the way the human being learns, and in general the psychology of the adult civilized human. The whole turn toward the psychosocial is evident in these few examples, and will by our time have become of dominant interest, drawing into itself the skills required for the sciences and in the higher arts. The work Truffaut creates, in *The Wild Child*, has its foundations in the increasingly empirical studies driving many of the intrepid minds of the eighteenth century.

CHARACTERS

Victor of Aveyron	the wild child
Francois Truffaut	Director of the <i>National Institution for Deaf Mutes</i>
Mme. Guérin	Director's housekeeper
Professor Pinel	Faculty of Medicine
Countrymen	
Assistants	
Gendarmes	

SYNOPSIS

The tale follows the text of an early nineteenth century account of cases of 'wild children,' children brought up 'outside civilization.' Inspired by the narrative of 'the wild boy of Aveyron,' Truffaut narrates that tale. Taken to the Institute for Deaf Mutes, in Paris, this 'wild child' from the woods of southern France is subjected to the efforts of Dr. Itard, played by Truffaut, to 'civilize' the child, as well as to understand him. In energetic good faith, both as a scientist and a humanist, this Doctor-Director, with the aid of his household assistant, who is devoted to the child, undertakes to raise Victor in his own house. The ups and downs, of the relation between the child and his caretaker-investigator is the heart of the story, in the course of which the lad—who is brought from an inarticulate, bestial, and untrained condition to a tentative presentability, agreeing to wearing suits, capable of following elementary instructions, but always in danger of escaping back into the forest—these ups and downs constitute a thrilling tale, enacted before us, celebrating the partly successful, largely humane, efforts of a dedicated scholar, to enrich and understand a barely accessible form of humanity. The contemporary watcher is likely to compare this work, at many stages, with Werner Herzog's *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), another film account (fictional) of a marginalized young man, this time both a victim and a beneficiary of society, on whose behalf scientific and humane efforts are only partly of use.

STORY

Beginnings. The first portion of this black and white film is enthralling forest shadow and light, which takes us back and forth between the hunters who are pursuing the wild child—at first just an animal-human twisting and turning through the underbrush in the scatter of leaves and sunlight. Having been tracked and terrified by hunting dogs, the lad is captured and transported to Paris, where he is lodged in and introduced to the Institute for Deaf Mutes. He is put under the care of the Institute's Director, Dr. Itard.

Progress. By end of the film, Truffaut will wish us to feel that good has been accomplished; as Director, and as principal actor, as the 'scientist at the center of this experiment in rehabilitation,' the Doctor is participating in an Enlightenment effort to raise man up to his true humanity. At the end of the film the boy, Victor, has run away from the Institute, then returned of his own accord, prompting the doctor to embrace him and remark that 'you're no longer a savage, even if you're not yet a man.' This optimistic progress report, rendered under excitement as a top off to the film, and to the account of the experiment, saves us the knowledge that the real Victor never became precisely a success, as a rescue experiment. The real Victor died around the age of forty, never having learned the use of language. He escaped once but was brought back by gendarmes. By the tale's end we begin to reflect that the true protagonist of the film is Truffaut/Dr. Itard, for the theme the doctor places before us is essentially the theme of Truffaut's own early life, as he recounts it in his own film autobiography, *Les 400 Coups*.

Justice. Doctor Itard carries through one brief but meaningful experiment on Victor, an experiment designed to clarify and evaluate the whole mission of this 'story.' We might well wonder at the reason for the Doctor's ardent desire to understand and modify this wild child. Digging into his own past, the Doctor implies that the mission of his story might be to contribute to the civilization of the child. And how can the doctor evaluate the success of that mission? He can test the growth of a sense of justice, in Victor—for that sense might seem a hallmark of the human. In order to make a test, of Victor's sense of justice, the Doctor punishes Victor—locks him up in the closet-- for no reason, thus unjustifiably-- and concludes from the furious outrage of Victor, that the boy's sense of injustice has been violently activated. The boy is on his way to mastering a central human emotion. Yet at the same time—and here enters a kind of justice and balance which surmount the entire film—stunning natural scenery, pressing across the forested background of the Institute, persists onto our eyes throughout the film, reminding us of the splendor of the nature from which Victor is putatively being withdrawn, and which in fact underlies even our scientific efforts to 'civilize ourselves.'

THEMES.

Humanity. Though the film offers us enticing glimpses of wild nature, and ample forested landscape of great beauty, we are left feeling that humanity, and the achievement of it trumps all. The implicit reason for 'rescuing' Victor is to make him into a human being, an achievement of which primary aspects are the acquisition of language (unsuccessful, in this case) and the development of a sense of justice (achieved, in Dr. Itard's opinion.)

Nature. If humanity is self-realization for us, as this film presents it, then nature is the underlying material we humans are, out of which the human can be formed. Truffaut presents nature as a powerful backdrop, in which we are all embedded, and for which we all thirst—as Victor returned to the river to drink voraciously, as he was being taken to Paris.

Terror Victor needs to be weaned away from terror, as he is brought up vulnerable to wild animals and dogs, volatile weather patterns, and without any of the protections, like clothing and cooked food, that humans bring into the world. The closet punishment becomes a constant terror to Victor, but his face softens when Mme. Guérin ruffles his hair.

Experiment. De. Itard is a scientist, in the experimental, document-filing sense the term was starting to acquire by the eighteenth century in western Europe. Though he became increasingly fond of Victor, he never forgot his mission, which was to understand human development, and the stages of human growth. He was a formative scientist in the sense of his age—the age of Lomonosov, Linnaeus, or Lavoisier. .

Justice. For Dr. Itard the truest test of Victor's growth toward humanity will be acquisition of a sense of justice. The proof of the presence of this sense, from Itard's observation, is that Victor is particularly enraged when he is locked in the closet for no reason, 'unjustifiably.' From this situation we see how deeply the notion of justice was embedded in Victor.

Freedom. From the nimbleness with which Victor flees into the open on several occasions, while making an escape from confinement, we realize how deep is the pull of the wild on the child. In the end, as the Doctor is delighted to discover, Victor returns to the Institute, which he has at last internalized as home. But one feels no reason to count on a permanent return to settled life. He is still a wild child.

Science. Dr. Itard is foremost an experimental scientist. He is granted custody over Victor, on the grounds that he, the Doctor, is the perfect 'expert' to study the present case. Dr. Itard is, in fact, subsidized by the French Academy of Sciences for his research work. He must meet a high standard of accountability.

Speech. The importance of speech and language, for Victor's development, is underlined in the film. Victor was never able to speak, therefore could not grow and develop. Through this sad limitation, Truffaut is enabled to make his strongest points about the essential skills required for the development of humanity.

Children. Children fascinated Truffaut from the start of his cinematographic career. Like his own self-image, in *Les 400 Coups*, Victor is impulsive, vengeful, risk taking, and only limitedly teachable, though containing within himself boundless funds of energy and desire. Though a child he is all humanity *in nuce*.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dr. Itard Dr. Itard is intellectually rigorous, but also intrigued and fascinated with Victor, from whom he hopes to crack open some secrets of what humanity is made of. Itard is a blend of compassionate with pedagogical, and seemingly hopes to bring a better life out of, and for, Victor. For the rest, this conscientious man seems to live for his work, and only raises his emotions when the development of his charge is fostered: when the project as a whole is renewed by the government, or when Victor returns to the Institute after his brief escape. Itard is goal-oriented.

Experimental. Dr. Itard is both compassionate toward Victor, and eager to learn from him, and longs for an experiment that will help to measure the boy's 'humanity,' or manner of learning to be a human being. The Doctor concludes that the boy can be tested by subjecting him to injustice, and seeing whether he rebels with particular force against this violation of his nature. The doctor locks the boy in a closet for a short time with no justification; the boy is furious, outraged, and clearly (as the doctor sees it) shares the universal human trait of abhorring injustice.

Compassionate. Dr. Itard controls his emotions, but is visibly moved when Victor returns, at the end of the film, from a fairly lengthy period of disappearance from the Institute. The doctor seems to feel that at least Victor has come to identify the Institute as his home.

Instructional. Dr. Itard not only wants to learn about the development of Victor, but wants to teach the boy. He wants to show the wild child how to manage in the human world—dress appropriately, eat at the table—but there are strict limitations to how much the doctor can achieve. It seems that the wild child was never able to speak; one theory of this whole tale is that the child was mentally retarded.

Victor Victor is in no position to develop fine tuned skills and emotions, for he is throughout the film still struggling to discipline himself to the broad ground rules of the human community. He is working to survive as a sub-human first of all. If he has preferential desires, which to some extent define him, they will be his desires for freedom from restraint. He has not yet a 'personality.'

Nature. As Victor is being transported from the wild to Paris, the coach makes a detour to ford a river, and the passengers descend. The Wild Child is with them, but is the last one to get back in the vehicle. Where is he? He has run back to the river bank, where he is gulping down huge handful of water. He is thirst incarnate for the lands of wild nature, which he has previously survived and endured in.

Compliance. By and large Victor meets the Doctor's desire to instruct with a willingness to learn. Within the limits of his ability he cooperates with the transformation effected in him by the kindly housekeeper, and by the cool but benign examples of daily living shown him by the doctor. Victor 'learns,' but only in the sense that he learns to comply.

Society. From the time of his arrival at the Institut, after his trip from Aveyron, Victor is incorporated into the community of deaf mute residents. He does not rebel against being socialized, at least on the most basic level.

Parallels Not surprisingly, inquisitive writer-humans have throughout modern times expressed their curiosity about their human forbears, not to mention various distortions of the human possibility, extremities of the human experience. We have written fictions about hypothetical predecessors, about savages of earlier times, about mythical predecessors and daunting anti human humans. The inquiries of Dr. Itard come to us, in the present film, swathed in a tradition of self-reflective inquiries by human writers—those most inward turning analysts of our condition. Examples of such inward-turning analysis follow.

Travelers In 1719 Daniel Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe*, the true story of a shipwrecked sailor who found himself for four years cast away on a deserted island in the South Pacific. European interest in this man's survival, and in his subsequent existence, sparked a still vivid interest in the adventurer's life in extremity. Studies of the nature of the human personality emerged from the findings concerning Crusoe. For an equally sharp study of a marginalized figure, from closer to our time, cf. *Ishi, in Two Worlds* (1961) by Theodora Kroeber.

Figures in Fiction/images drawn from imagination: snapshots of individual on the social fringes:

Melville, Herman, Queequeg in *Moby-Dick*. 1851
 Steinbeck, John, *Of Mice and Men*, 1907
 Hughes, Richard, *A High Wind in Jamaica*, 1929
 Golding, William, *The Lord of the Flies*, 1954
 The Inheritors, 1955
 Gaines ,Ernest, *A Lesson Before Dying*. 1993