

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Small Change 1976

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW

Les 400 Coups. In two earlier films, *Les 400 Coups* (1959) and *The Wild Child* (1970), Truffaut expressed his deep interest in the world of the child. In the first of those films, indeed the first feature film of Truffaut, we follow the voice curve of the narrator, Truffaut, accompanying us through at least a version of his growing process, through the first ten years of his life. This child bildungsroman is permeated with dark transitions—trouble with the law, indifferent and irrelevant schooling, furtive sneakings in to the many cinemas in his area, and gradually, as he began to break loose from his own family, who paid little attention to him, an engagement with the growing film culture world that was forming in Paris, around journals like *Les cahiers du cinema* or such leading figures as Andre Bazin, who was to serve for a long time as Truffaut's spiritual godfather.

The Wild Child (1970) Truffaut, as the doctor who devotes himself to the wild child of Aveyron, narrates the development of a creature on the distant margins of society. Is it himself? Is he searching for a way to think through his own relation to society? The dramatic presentation is complex, for Truffaut as narrator is both the man experiencing the child and the child himself, going through his growth stages. He is certainly considering the broad question: is the acculturation of a wild child possible? His scope is wide and philosophical and he leaves us with the likely conclusion that acculturation must start early in life, and even at that, as in the case of Truffaut himself, is time consuming, and partial.

Small Change. 1976 By the time of the present film, Truffaut has flattened out his view of childhood and is no longer talking directly about himself and his world. (His first kiss does admittedly serve as the keystone of *Small Change*, but the film itself is almost a sociological look at childhood as it plays out in an average French city, Thiers.) We feel Truffaut intimately there on the screen, but at the same time we know him as the assembler of telling memories, the organizer of a vast photo album inside which his character is inscribed. In fact Truffaut was a collector of childhood anecdotes since the time of *Les 400 Coups*. Some of the events were autobiographical, like Truffaut's first kiss, but by 1972 the collection was a simple synopsis of no more than ten pages. However, in the summer of 1974 he decided to develop the anecdotal project. With his collaborator, Truffaut began formulating a large scale book-sized film script. (The two of them refrained from fixing the text in a standard book form; they wanted a more fluid chrestomathy from which to draw their episodes, and, as we see, they wanted a relatively fluid film experience to emerge, one in which the kinds of openness to real life texture—that we experience abundantly in the New Wave's masters: Herzog, Wenders, Bergman, Godard, Truffaut—would dictate the progress of the 'narrative,' as, for instance, an insert concerning the reluctance of a cat, in Nice, to sip freely from some creamy milk left outside for it, became a six minute vignette show, simply rinsing the script with some of that particularity that in fact our granular daily perception is composed of.

CHARACTERS

Ten talented child actors;
Gregory's Mother;
The Schoolteachers,
Hairdresser;
Patrick's father;
Sylvie's mother;
Police Inspector;
Julien's grandmother

SYNOPSIS

The present film, itself a cross between a classic feature, and an auteur driven documentary, deals with the banalities and conflicts of elementary school life, the randomness of infancy, the loneliness and poverty of certain youngsters, the budding of prepubertal romance, the harsh cropping up of abuse, the ingenuity of childhood pranks. If there is a broad theme, to this panorama of still shots, it is that there is no conceptual theme, no problem to be solved, but a mute request to examine the nature of the human experience as it stumbles its way upward from infancy. The putting together of the film is not random, but belongs to a single imaginative mood. Overlooming the details referenced above, is a fluid sense of a largely goalless drama, open to those who can take advantage, but ultimately fatal to those who simply provide the fodder.

STORY

The random. Truffaut, like Bergman or Herzog, reads his society closely, and takes a keen interest in the ways it is put together. All three of these auteurs are deeply aware of the importance of the random in constructing a coming together and guiding the awarenesses of people. It will be exemplary, for us, as a consequence, to think of the loose connections that hold together the events of the movie. *Small Change* opens with the ultimate in the random; it reminds us of a scene in an earlier Truffaut film, *Day into Night*, which treats us to a scenario of cats who are hesitant to take a sip of carefully laid out milk. We watch the cats accost the milk filled cup, withdraw, circle the slightly dubious object. At the start of *Small Change* we follow Patrick as he and his mother make their ways back from the market, trudge tiredly up their back stairs, and Mom go off to take a nap. All seems well but somehow ominous.

The Danger. While Mom is absent this intrepid just post-toddler of four makes his way through the third floor flat where he and his mom live. He spots a kitty heading toward an open window and he follows it. The kitty jumps lithely up onto the balustrade, then the toddler follows. Meanwhile, for all this is protracted on screen, we are given ample view of a small gathering cluster of locals, who are watching the slow motion scene from three stories below. Our observation oscillates between the watchers below and the slow action at the window above. Suddenly the kitty jumps down, and is quickly followed by the little boy, who has over reached, in his excitement to retrieve the just about to jump kitty. The five minutes occupied by this scene commit our eyes to one complete emotional curve, in the daily life of Thiers. While this is a mere vignette preparing our senses for the kind of 'story' Truffaut will induce us into, in the present film, it is a representative scene, complete in itself, but wanting a context to surround it.

The Megaphone. Look at another mini scene, in the course of which Truffaut moves us around in the apartment complex to which Patrick first led us. A little girl of seven or eight lives with her parents in a small flat. She is mad at them. The parents are going out to Sunday dinner with this daughter, and want her to look nice; they emphasize a pretty purse which she should take. Get rid of that dusty old sack, they remonstrate, bringing their emotions to a pitch, around the girl's clutched up negativity. The more the parents insist, the starker the girl's contempt, until Mom and Dad suddenly walk out the door and leave the kid. In a fury of boxed in rage, the girl locks the door behind her parents. Then she seizes a megaphone, which is lying in the corner, and goes with it to the window. She bellows, from the window into the courtyard, that she has been locked in without food, and left by her parents. The consequences for the parents are not good. Emergency baskets of food are pulled up toward the girl's window, the cops are notified. Dad has a ton of explaining to do.

School. The apartment complex serves Truffaut, like the school classroom, as a stage on which to flesh out his sense of 'small change,' the minimum currencies of society-building in a typical French city. We are familiar with this archetypal school room, for we have been there, and, in watching Truffaut, we have watched such a schoolroom in action in *Les 400 Coups*, where Truffaut satirizes the mechanical, lifeless, rightly mocked school routine of this 'ordinary French city.' (The brutality and lifelessness of the 'school system' are met by the laughter of the students, who have no respect for their teachers, especially as Truffaut characterizes his own school days. In *Small Change* the student mockery is still strong. A cut-up is asked a question about the reading for the day. Blank of mind she rolls her eyes—as if thinking deeply—until she can see the school clock through the window, and verify that only twenty seconds

remain, until class is over. She rolls and stalls, and just makes it to relieve time. A stroke of genius for the student team! And yet, as opposed to the grim world of *Les 400 Coups*, there is a freshness to the world of *Small Change*. A youngish woman teacher, a young man: the students see something of the warmth of their own futures, and gravitate toward it.)

Reality. The old school-world Truffaut raised himself in, and excoriates in *Les 400 Coups*, grinds its way ahead as Truffaut steps in this later film into a world trying vainly to keep up with what were once at least old-fashioned values. The same old vignettes of human nature frozen in its mediocrity: there are up-front characters, Patrick and Julien, although they appear chiefly to make the point of the whole, and not to show human development. Julien is there for the honesty of poverty, as a kid obliged to attend school in ragged sweaters, to come to school too hungry to steady; a kid we recognize only too well. There is Patrick, taking more interest in the teacher's breasts than in her assignments. There is a first kiss, an attempted dirty joke, a movie date, and in fact much we expect, wrapped in and among the hard-knuckle lessons on reading, writing, and arithmetic.

THEMES

Stages of Life. The school classroom is a laboratory for one of the main stages of life, the passage from infancy dependence, to learning some of the tools necessary for living in society. Truffaut masters the study of such stages, as, for example, in *Two English Girls*.

Romance Romance, too, is a stage on life's way, and a passage toward love, the mature form of romance. In the present film, the young married couple, who teach in the school, are touching the romantic stage, as their pupils sense, but are not yet advanced enough to love.

Locals. Thiers is a big but a local anonymous city, without marked character. The residents we see, watching the kitten fall from the balcony, are true locals.

Poverty. Patrick's friend Julien is poor, lives in a shack on the outside of town, and in addition is a victim of abuse.

Transience. All education is a process of transience, but the public school classroom, which intersects directly with the development of the citizen, most vividly demonstrates the idea of education as a stage on life's way.

Abuse. Julien, Patrick's friend, lives in poverty and abuse; appears in school in the same raggedy sweater, and falls asleep in the middle of class. When it comes time for the State Health exam, and the kids have to strip, we realize with horror that Julien has been the victim of serious genital abuse.

Minutiae Aristotle, who viewed *Oedipus the King* as the exemplar of great tragedy, of high magnitude and strict form, would hardly have praised *Small Change*. But would we have in his way understood the grandeur of minutiae, which proliferate here—remember the tiny moves of the pussy on the balustrade?

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Main characters there are not: we become familiar with Patrick, whose mother is dead, and who is just beginning to take an interest in women, including his attractively robust young woman instructor, and we see—not hear—a good deal of Julien, who lives on the other side of the tracks, and refuses to strip for the government medical examiners, for fear they will discover the evidence of genital abuse.

The most startling evidence of character in action comes from the input of an anonymous teacher, who clearly speaks for Truffaut, and for all the students he has introduced us to in film:

'If kids had the right to vote, they would have better schools...Time flies, before long you will have children of your own. If you love them, they will love you...each of us needs to be loved.'

Parallels. A master text for the description of a group--a society, a community, a nation—is Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, a fictional study of the occupants of a midwestern city. The major personal types are represented, though they are individually tweaked. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, is a beautiful example of what typically goes wrong with elementary education.