

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will

## STOLEN KISSES 1968

Francois Truffaut

### OVERVIEW

*The chronicle.* Starting with *Les 400 Coups* (1959) Truffaut sprung loose a valuable film chronicle that traced the evolution of his own personal development from childhood into mature and often troubled relationships. Each film in this sequence—starting with *Les 400 Coups*, and including *L'amour a vingt ans* (*Love at Twenty*) (1962); *Baisers Volés* (*Stolen Kisses*) (1968); *Domicile conjugale* (*Bed and Board*) 1970; and *L'amour en Fuite* (*Love on the Run*), 1979.-- stars Truffaut's discovery and alter ego, Jean-Pierre Léaud, as the irrepresible Antoine, who ages along with Léaud through the intervening years. Clearly Truffaut wants to build a personal edifice that will raise the essential issues of his entire body of work. Also clear: Truffaut values his position as a director for both French and English language films.

*The palette.* It is important to note the elegance of this foundational work in a cinema career. Truffaut has embedded himself, as director, at the frontal edge of his work, yet included himself as his leading work figure throughout. The unity of his whole opus, which spans a wide palette of themes—from Romance to book burning, from elementary education to crime, from film culture society to cutting-up to murder—is reinforced by the self-consciousness of the single director, who allows his curiosity and richness of perspective to permeate his whole opus.

### CHARACTERS

Antoine Doine	, principal figure
Fabienne Tabard	wife of shoestore owner, lover of Antoine
Christine Darbon	Antoine's old girlfriend
Monsieur Tabard	the unloved shoe store manager
Monsieur Henri	detective who takes pity on Antoine
Monsieur Darbon	Christine's dad, gets job for Antoine

### SYNOPSIS

Antoine Doine is emerging from military prison, as the film opens. He has fully discredited himself as an enlistee, and is being 'dishonorably' discharged. After being verbally battered, by his company commander, he runs out to freedom and the nearest bordello. From here on the film is an effort to fill out the character of Antoine, whom we think we have come to know over the course of *Les 400 Coups*, as he sketches the personal outlines of the whole empathetic, sensitive, slightly reckless nature of his master, Truffaut. But we have much to learn about this growth-spurt experimenter, who gets himself fired from four jobs (tv repairman, night watchman, shoe salesman, and private detective) and makes his way into a couple of enticing beds (Christine's, Fabienne's) .

### STORY

*The outset.* *Stolen Kisses* is Truffaut's effort to make fun of himself (Antoine) as a vigorous and curious human being, He flings his heels more than a little in this film, whereas in *Les 400 Coups* his predecessor Antoine is in part self-discovering, but in even greater part on the run from society, which seems bent on tossing him around, ignoring his growth instincts, and inflicting insensitive parents and school colleagues on him, *Stolen Kisses* is about finding yourself in this frequently insensitive world, and making the most of it. Appropriately enough, the film opens dramatically with the release of Antoine from military prison, inevitably discharged from an organization with little tolerance for Antoine's indifference to the rules.

*Adventure.* Upon leaving the prison, Antoine heads first for a whorehouse, then to the parents of his former girlfriend, Christine. The picaresque suite of events then takes over; we should have one sample. Christine's parents, who have always liked Antoine, help him get a job with a detective agency. Through his work there he meets M. Tabard, the owner of a shoe store, whose problem—for which he is seeking a cure—is that no one loves him. Antoine's effort to aid with this cure may accidentally indicate the way to the cure: he is seduced by Mme. Tabard, whose sophistication in and around the bed thoroughly astounds him. Mme. Tabard is the perfect 'older woman' to seduce and indoctrinate Antoine.

*Desire.* From that launchpad, Antoine risks himself forward into further adventures, sexual naturally, since that is the direction of his desire, and the point at which he comes most directly into contact with others. At the same time that we follow this sequence of events, and appreciate the daring with which Truffaut forms and reforms himself, we appreciate the personal courage and humor of this director, who is working through himself at the same time. By and large the adolescence Truffaut works out for and through himself, in *Stolen Kisses*, is much more agreeable than the rough childhood he was obliged to suffer in *Les 400 Coups*. (Recall, for example, the difference between the confinement scenes in Antoine's childhood world, with their bleak lonely cell bars and contrast with those dirty but jovial scenes of the military prison from which Antoine is released in *Stolen Kisses*, and in which our last scene of him finds him reading Balzac's *Le Lys de la Vallée*.)

*Christine* Think of Antoine's pleasure at rediscovering Christine, after a number of years of absence, sexy and in the end playing tricks to get her hands on him. (She has been thinking of him. While her parents are absent for the week-end she messes up the tubes on her television set, and calls the repair shop for assistance.) There's Antoine. Think of the surprising pleasure of entertaining the shoe salesman's fancy wife in bed, and getting moral lessons on life.

## Themes

*Insubordination.* Like a certain comical miscreant on classic American TV, Marine infantryman Gomer Pyle, Antoine should probably not have gone into the military. He was not the type, for he always turned orders up side down, and only at the last second came up smiling. His commanding officer berates Antoine stormily, with every adjective in the book, as he dismisses him from the army. No benefits medals, nothing but a kick in the pants, and Antoine is out of the army and into a creative new world. We can just see him dance across the space that separates him from the harsh world of *Les 400 Coups*.

*Authority* From his childhood on, from his nostalgia for the real father he never knew, his scorn for his step dad, Antoine inherited a contempt for authority and authority figures. By the time of *Stolen Kisses*, Antoine had learned a lot about how to deal with such authority as *Les 400 Coups* served up, say in the virtual penitentiary regime of the Psychological Observation Center, at which Antoine spent the last days of that first film.

*Seduction* Antoine attracts both Fabienne and Christine, and both, we sense, because of his combustible innocence. Antoine truly seems to play without a game plan, and to embrace what life in his twenties brings. We all know what a cougar, of television fame, is: the Antoinettes of the world are their favorite dish. The literary master of this gender-reverse delectation, is Stendhal, in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, *The Red and the Black*, whose Julien Sorel calculatedly makes his way upward through society by offering himself to the ladies as an ingénu.

*Love* Throughout *Stolen Kisses* we are, of course, in the hands of Truffaut himself, who is both creating a fiction about Antoine, and at the same time telling us a story about himself. Truffaut is nothing if not crafty in the post modern sense, which is forever on the look out for the ways in which we create and recreate ourselves, dissolving the stable identity of self postulated by earlier ages and earlier fiction techniques. Working as a crafty fox within this framework for defining the self, Truffaut gives us glimpses of sexual love, of teasing love, of familial love (Antoine with Christine's family), even the love that he the director bestows over his creation and the big created world behind it. (Remember the school teacher

Truffaut creates for the classroom in *Small Change*, the one who perorates on the vital importance of 'loving our children'?)

#### *Maturity.*

Does Antoine mature through this film's discovery of the world? The theme is given a crowning position at the conclusion. Christine and Antoine are fusing into one another, able by now to enjoy slow ambling walks in the city park, their hands intertwined. They are being followed. Christine draws attention to the young man's gait, and pulls Antoine over to sit on a park bench to let the fellow pass. He does not, but walks straight up to Christine, and in a formal declaration professes his eternal love for her. Antoine remains silently at attention, patient and understanding. When the speech fades the romantic couple, rising, declare that the guy was nuts, but say so in the way Antoine understands: everyone is different, unique, to be heard out. It is the lesson Fabienne Tabard taught Antoine, as she gave true value to her beautiful lesson between the sheets.

#### *Transience.*

Without knowing and naming transience, Truffaut builds the stuff of passing into his several part film autobiography, of which the present is part two. We live part two with the awareness that a future set of developments—marriage then divorce—is going to exist as a replacement and reinterpretation of the earlier parts. Anthony Powell's *A Dance to The Music of Time* or Virginia Woolf's *The Years* carry out the same existential analysis in literature.

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Antoine** Antoine, the dynamic center of Truffaut's four part autobiography, is both a passive character, because he is constantly the learner, the seduced, and at the same time he is electric with curiosity, resilient in comebacks—as when thrown out of the army—and in short the beneficiary of a youth (*Les 400 Coups*) which has readied him to stare back at life—remember the final camera freeze—when it is punching hardest. It becomes evident to Antoine that women represent the dominant openers and developers in his life, and that they trend toward him in order to give of themselves.

*Reading.* Antoine is reading Balzac's *Le lys dans la vallee* (*The Lily in the Valley*) as he is released from the military prison, at the outset of the film. Plagiarism of a Balzac novel plays an important role in demystifying the work style of Antoine, in *Les 400 Coups*.

*Whorehouse.* Immediately on leaving the prison, Antoine heads for the nearest whorehouse. His needs are pent up and obvious. He acts on them immediately.

*Workready.* It is striking that Antoine is immediately ready to accept the night watchman job that Christine's dad procures for him. On the job—in the hotel, in the shoe store—Antoine is an active worker, and reliable. It is just that things keep *happening* to him.

*Perceptive.* Antoine has a fine sense of compliance, which he can employ strategically when it is needed. When he is booted out of the army, with a thousand aspersions cast on his character, Antoine knows how to sit by patiently, let the words roll, then calmly make his departure, without any response.

*Patient.* As he sits on the park bench with Christine, listening to the stranger proclaim a lifelong love for his own girl, Antoine indicates a new maturity. He is still, evaluative, and patient.

#### **Parallels.**

Antoine finds himself seduced on more than one occasion, in *Stolen Kisses*. (In fact, the question of who seduces who is moot, in these subtle interplays, but from whichever direction the seduction is initiated, English literature is likely to produce a parallel. In Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* the heroine is too fascinated to remain indifferent to the naked body of Leander, who has just swum the Hellespont to meet her. Who seduces who? Defoe's *Moll Flanders* is equally flattered by her master's servant and by the guineas he rattles in her face. Who and what seduces who and what? Fielding's *Tom Jones*—a jolly good

image of Antoine, by the way—saves Mrs. Waters from a rapist, then repairs with her to a local inn. Contrary to expectation, she quickly wins his fancy. Hardy's Jude the obscure is brought out into the world of letters and self-expression, by a seduction which makes of him a less working-class figure than fate had at first designed him to be.