

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Les 400 Coups (Wild Oats) 1960

TRUFFAUT, FRANCOIS. (1932-1984)

OVERVIEW

The film in question was first produced in 1960. It was the first feature film of Francois Truffaut, and the launching pad for the film movement called *The New Wave* (late 1958-1960's) in France. Broadly described therefore, the presentation of this feature, by a young man in his late twenties, made a large noise in the still only nascent world of international film. Much of Truffaut's life, and indeed the cultural life of his century and his time, was implicit in the making of this popular new theatrical form of expression.

The cultural milieu of France, Western Europe, and America was at this point still stridently post war, economically, politically, and artistically in search of adjustment to the poverty, political uncertainty, and confrontational environment among states which had not long before been armed enemies. An older late nineteenth century world, still marked by agricultural values and needs, religious assumptions, and social values inherited from eighteenth century Europe, was half visible in the rear view mirror, but in the face of the New World, deeply post War convulsive, the only way to go forward was to innovate, and just that was what 'the West' attempted to do.

The stage begins to fill with new concepts—The New Deal pushed forward by Franklin Roosevelt, the flowering of Marxist ideology stemming forcefully from the Soviet Union the development of Labor Parties at the forefronts of Western societies, the inventive Cold War, in which so many new national values were formulated; the notions of internationalism which—in travel, foreign policy, and cross cultural scientific exploration—gave the first dangerous promises of the globalism in which we are currently trying to find our way; and above all, for what concerns the world of artistic expression, the flourishing of new art styles—twentieth century abstract expressionism—Braque, Picasso, Kandinsky; of experimental prose and poetry—Yeats, Eliot, Mann, Kafka; of the new music of Stravinsky, Berg, and of a critical awareness, like that of Theodor Adorno, to keep us abreast of the unfamiliar ways in which we can take the measure of our cultural development. Twenty five years into the post war world, the newest of major art forms, *cinema*, arrives at its own brand new contribution, a reformulation of the social expressive world as radical as the new verbal of *Ulysses*, or the new sociology of Karl Marx.

CHARACTERS

Antoine Doinel

Julien Doinel, Antoine's stepfather

Gilberte Doinel, Antoine's mother

Sourpuss, School teacher

René Bigey, Antoine's best friend

Monseur Bigey, René's dad

English teacher,; professeur de gym; school director

Inspector, examining magistrate, commissioner, night watchman

Woman looking for her dog

Man trying to pick up a woman

Friends and fellow directors, including Truffaut

Folks on the street

SYNOPSIS

Les 400 Coups is an autobiographical film into which Truffaut interweaves many details and much of the meaning of his adolescent and teen age years. He projects that experience into 13 year old Antoine

Doinel, whom, as director, he has chosen for similarity to himself, (The role of Antoine is played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, who will star in the next five Truffaut films.) Truffaut pans across what to him seem crucial formative events: rare moments of joy in the cramped family flat he shared with his mother and stepdad; his own habitual truancy, his refusal to fit into classroom discipline., his petty thefts—as of a typewriter from his dad’s office, from which he wants to get cash to pay the bills for his cinema club; a series of efforts, by his frustrated stepdad, to release the youngster into police custody, or, finally, to have him confined in a psychological detention center. The pain of this adolescence is relieved by Antoine’s gradual realization, that the larger world is where his heart and ambition will have to lie, and where he will one day discover his personal identity. Antoine gives us this perspective onto himself in a final scene, which follows on his escape from the detention center, and which concludes with a frozen shot of the young man turning to face the audience with an ambiguous gesture of defiance and humor.

STORY

Apartment. Antoine’s mother and stepdad share with him a small dingy third story flat in the heart of Paris. There, when he is not in class, Antoine tends to spend his afternoons, occasionally with his best friend, otherwise alone in fantasy, reading, and the routine of unsupervised youngsters throughout the world: he sets the table for dinner, while waiting for his parents to return from work; wanders into his mom’s bedroom, to sniff a drop of perfume or try out a powder puff on his cheek; indulges in petty theft from the cash stored in a secret corner. A bored kid in a small flat acts out the universal adolescent experience.

Classroom. In the classroom of his primary school, too, Antoine proves himself a universal kid, cutting up if a bit shily, with the other boys, Like all such kids Antoine bedevils his grumpy sourpuss teacher, joins the other kids in passing around girly pictures—adding a moustache to one of the sweethearts, and generally stirring up the wrath of Mr. Sourpuss, their choleric teacher. Frequently punished by teacher, Antoine is driven to writing on the wall of the classroom, which brings the intervention of his parents. He is the classic naughty boy.

Peers. Antoine’s peers, one of whom is best friend Rene, enter the film early. Rene is more daring than his poorer, and less confident friend Antoine, and seems to think nothing of lying and stealing, which he passes on as important bad habits for Antoine. Thanks to this youngster’ influence, Antoine drifts into a mindset in which he looks for corners where his family and others hide their change—and feels no hesitancy to grab a handful. It is lithe same slipping moral sense that leads Antoine, on his way to school, to blurt out, to a teacher who inquires into his recent absence from school, that he has been absent because his mother has died. (A lie which brought painful consequences, when Antoine’s parents arrived at the classroom door, a few days later.) Antoine’s peers were out of central casting; subterranean, superficially cynical, eager to risk their own comfort in the staging of a prank, but—as is universally the case—totally chicken when it comes to facing consequences. There is more than a little of us all in these spot-on portraits.

Skipping the school . Antoine and his friends, meanwhile, were earning themselves the reputation of social rejects, sowing their wild oats, sneaking away to play at amusement parks during the day, tricking Antoine’s friends’ parents into letting the kid sleep in their game room, destroying all sense of family coherence. At all these stages Antoine is hardly more than a fleeting guest in his parents’ house. In and out of the local cinemas Antoine is in constant search for his own amusement. In a more moralistic age this behavior might have been labelled ‘the rake’s progress,’ the disintegration of morality within the family.

Dysfunctional Family The second decade of Antoine ‘s preteen development was not so smooth as the first. The family, which Antoine hardly accepted after learning of the disappearance of his ‘true biological father,’ found itself uncomfortable in their cramped flat, and began to chafe at the behavior of their son, who no longer found his young home life free or interesting. For Antoine, who had intermittent good relations with his stepfather, the home apartment thaw began to fade, and Antoine’s private life turned increasingly toward truancy and fun in the city with his best friend. Antoine’s mother, who had any

way never really warmed to him, increasingly turned away from her family. It was the old story of family dissolution, when no unified foundations were there to support the system. We are watching a familiar social reel unwind; one optic onto the universal problem of the family. The family was imploding from inside.

Stealing. To this point Antoine was hardly more than a naughty boy, and as such simply part of that universal type of cut up who is still just fretting against the constraints imposed by his family. His best friend, René, has encouraged the weaker Antoine, leading him into pride at his petty amorality and scorn for social norms. We can see the universal judgement against giving in to temptation leaving Antoine indifferent, and we are struck by the ease with which he drifts into his worst error in judgement, the theft of a Royal typewriter from his father's office. Antoine was making a careless effort to pay off the bills accruing around his newly formed cinema club. In fact he was so infuriating his dad that the man took his son to the police station and eventually had him placed in a reform school for delinquents.

Center for Delinquents The eventual resting point, for this turbulent adolescence, occurs when Antoine's parents have decided that enough is enough, and the boy's mother argues that he should be sent to the Observation Center for Delinquent Minors, a highly regimented camp not far from the North Sea. (Significantly enough, Antoine has longed to see that ocean, and has fantasized about it with his best friend.) *Interrogation.* While at the Center, Antoine is called in for an in depth psychological interrogation, in the course of which he mumbles and rambles, clearly indicating his lack of understanding of his own character development. World wide, adolescent misbehavior is closely related to conceptual failure, to a difficulty in understanding oneself.

Escape Antoine's mother favors the release of her son, but before he returns to society he escapes from the Center, in the course of a football game, and runs away. He evades the guard who is pursuing him, and comes to the shore of the ocean, after a long, slogging run through increasingly wet sandy soil. As he reaches the shoreline he turns toward the camera and stares into it, sharing with us a frozen mixture of humor and defiance. The frozen concluding shot leaves us with confused hopefulness about the boy's future.

THEMES

Dysfunctional Family. Antoine resents his stepfather, and Antoine's mother resents her son; the result is that the three uncomfortably assorted family members spend little time in pleasure together. They do not actively hate one another, and on very rare occasions go out to dinner as a threesome, living proof that they can have fun together, but when it comes to dealing with Antoine's dysfunctional relation to school and society, in short *authority*, the parents of Antoine have only brief occasions of *gemuetlichkeit* with the biological offspring of Antoine's mom. Stepfather, an engineer with higher professional skills, has accepted Antoine as his own, but never truly has his heart in it.

Judicial system. We see early on that Antoine's parents are prepared to turn to the 'authorities,' as a recourse in dealing with their son. Antoine appears twice behind bars, in the paddy wagon carrying him back from a night in a detention cell, with other losers of the night, and once from a solitary detention center to which his dad has consigned him, thanks to the local police. At both times we pity the young guy who, though defiant against authority—as Truffaut will be when he strides into his own role as an 'authoritarian' film director—is passing through a humiliating rite required of all who learn the hard way from their society.

Alienation. The anxiety which pervades Antoine's teen age years is familiar and visible to all. School has more or less abandoned him, the juvenile support and detention system has turned a deaf ear to his social maladjustment—the kind of erroneous behavior that led Antoine to steal a typewriter from his father's office, then to be unable to return it without incriminating himself.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Antoine Antoine Doinel, a thirteen year old boy, was Truffaut's choice from among a variety of candidates for the lead role, in this film, the candidate who seemed best able to 'be himself,' and 'sound like himself.' (And, incidentally, to most remind Truffaut of himself.) Antoine is a life-enjoying cut up and follower—his goal in life is increasingly to live and make it through; and, though he suffers the usual and much worse in the way of teen age transitions., he makes it through to his early teens with a kind of inner freedom still intact. (The obstacles on his way include the indifference of his parents, who feel no desire to share their cramped apartment; the absence of his real father, who left home when Antoine's mother was nineteen; the disadvantage of a rigid, humorless middle school education, with an abundance of punishment, both psychological and corporeal; exposure to the criminal justice system and at film's end in *Les 400 Coups*, a prolonged psychological investigation at the 'observation center' from which Antoine finally escapes, and in which he makes it abundantly clear that he does not yet understand his relation to his society.

Follower. Acting out in the classroom. At the beginning of the film, when Antoine is acting out in the classroom of Mr. Sourpuss, we can see the marks of the *follower* on our young protagonist. He observes what the other guys are doing, and mimics them. Antoine is a youngster of strong abilities and tastes, but they are private to him.

Mischievous Early in the film we meet the confident adolescent Antoine, caught on camera in his grade school classroom, deeply interconnected with his fellow students. He is unmistakably recusant, mocking the humorless Mr. Sourpuss, and sketching a charcoal moustache on Ms. TeenAge Sexy. He is the epitome of the crowd-following naughty boy. We will see him later, hurrying to complete a school assignment, plagiarizing from Balzac. He also lies and steals.

Lonely . After a night in jail, crowded in with thieves and sex workers, Antoine is transported back to the detention center, where his parents have arranged for him to be held. As spectators we watch the young guy looking out toward us through the bars of the wagon, onto the still dark city. There is, in this painful vignette, something of the mysterious lost child we see at the end of the film, when Antoine turns toward us in freeze frame, and stares.

PARALLELS

Teen age boys in literature are common, perhaps because the biosocial transition in question—bubbling with hormones and obscure fears and loves—exposes the young person to a wide and visible range of emotions, social adjustments, and self-protective actions. One may think of the passages crossed by Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, by Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, by young Werther, even by Telemachus, as he sets off for Sparta to consult with Menelaus and Helen. No one, from this absolutely heterogeneous list, was less socially oriented than Antoine, whose parents rarely came together to appreciate him, who were seriously impatient with his constant infractions—truancy, teacher-mockery, petty theft, and yet were quite clueless when it came to procuring help for Antoine.