

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Bed and Board

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW

In our survey of the autobiography of Truffaut, as he presents it to us in films he directs—as well as elsewhere, like *Mississippi Mermaid* or *Wild Child* or *Small Change*—we find in him no trace of self-heroizing, of praise or glory, in fact the opposite, a modesty and humor, even in those set pieces in which he depicts himself directing a movie, like *Day for Night*. In the film before us he is still the Antoine Doinel of *Les 400 Coups*, still represented by his own actor-discovery, Jean-Pierre Léaud, who will represent him through a chronological sequence of youth films, between each pair of which enough time has elapsed to let Léaud himself age into the incrementally older new film he is taking on.

CHARACTERS

Antoine Doinel	the protagonist
Christine Doinel	Antoine's wife
Kyoko	Antoine's beautiful Japanese lover
Monsieur Darbon	Christine's father
Madame Darbon	Christine's mother
Opera singer	Neighbor to Antoine and Christine
Opera singer's wife	Neighbor to Antoine and Christine

SYNOPSIS

The film opens onto the small apartment in which Antoine and Christine are beginning their married life. Antoine has a job dyeing flowers, while Christine gives violin lessons; they live in close quarters with a variety of eccentric neighbors—an opera singer, his wife, a café owner—hoping, it seems, for a neighborhood atmosphere. The momentary stability of the neighborhood lasts, for the Doinels, until an inevitable breakdown in communications. Antoine goofs up on his dyeing job, has to look for a new job, and in an hilarious series of contretemps gets hired by an American company, to pilot model boats by remote control. This new activity will put him in close touch with a beautiful Japanese woman, who will prove to be the first major threat to Antoine and Christine. The second such threat is Christine's pregnancy, and her emotional turn away from Antoine, as she seems to want to hold the baby to herself. Gradually the married couple drifts apart, and bring their married living cycle to an end by repeating for themselves the marital rituals that the opera singer and his wife perform. (See bel

STORY

The Beginning. In *Stolen Kisses*, Antoine has learned many lessons in love, including, at the end, the fact that persistence pays off in romance; Christine agrees to marry him. The narrative picks up at that point, in the small apartment where the young couple are just getting used to the routines of marriage. Christine gives violin lessons, Antoine dyes flowers for the commercial trade—at least until he goofs and bleaches instead of dyeing. Both of them are delighted by their loud and outgoing neighbors, who kibbitz loudly back and forth whenever anyone goes in or out. It is the sort of brassy, in your face, 'Italian' urban neighborhood, that the two marriage partners feel they have always wanted. The scenario includes that 'marital ritual' described later, as one of the themes of the film.

The crisis. Not surprisingly, the rapidly growing Antoine, whom we have seen in *Stolen Kisses* twice and vigorously seduced, is about to learn that women are what makes the world go round. Just as he and Christine are settling into their new apartment, the comic job search switch up—the 'comic mix up'

included ahead under Themes—takes place, and Antoine has started down the long road into an affair which will start to tear apart his marriage. In the midst of this crisis, of course, Christine will give birth to a child—which might seem to offer promise for curing a break up, but which in the present case seems, at least temporarily, to have driven the lady into a private, rejective depression.

The resolution. The marriage is intact. Christine's first reaction to Antoine's adultery was savage: when he returned to the flat he found her confronting him quite savagely as a geisha, at an altar ready to sacrifice her victim. However, Christine began to shape a life of her own, the couple stuck it out in the flat, and the 'neighborhood' atmosphere they valued came to their support. Remember the 'marital ritual' scene the singer and his wife performed? Antoine and Christine used to watch that scenario with amusement and disbelief. What could better have topped off the present film than to see the singer and his wife standing at their front door, and watching, roaring with laughter, as Antoine paces angrily outside his front door—he's waiting for Christine to get dressed—then in exasperation grabbing her coat and purse, and tossing them before him down the stairwell, as he charges out. The singer's wife, observing the scene from her own door, expostulates 'now they're truly in love.' And they are.

THEMES

Transience Great literature—*War and Peace*, Shakespeare's work taken as a whole, Dante's *Comedy*—help us to experience and evaluate the whole of human experience. They help us to feel the finitude of the individual in the enormity of the creation. Truffaut and his films, while aspiring to no similarly great vision of the human condition, place us effectively within at least the limits of the human condition. Truffaut can watch us watching Antoine develop, one move and human stage at a time. He can give us the experience of the transitory, and do so with some of that 'divine humor' Homer attributes to the gods, who have the privilege both of universal awe and universal doubt.

Marriage The neighbors of Antoine and Christine are a middle-aged opera singer and his wife. We have made that clear. They have a ritual, which comes to function throughout the narrative. The singer, dressed in tux and ready to perform on stage, steps out in front of his third-floor flat, and paces up and down impatiently, waiting for his wife, who is 'always late'; after a couple of minutes, the singer picks up his wife's purse, which is beside him on the stairs, throws it down the stairwell, and storms down the stairs. This act of make believe fury triggers his wife's instant response; she races out the door, and scrambles to keep up with her husband, as he bustles onto the street level.

Extra-marital Affair Antoine happens to recover the necklace of a beautiful Japanese girl, and takes it to her house. She invites him in, they become lovers, and eventually Christine finds out. She goes her own way. They will rediscover each other later. Antoine and the Japanese girl will tire of one another. She will tell him to 'drop dead.' The affair is about to be forgotten.

Neighborhood Antoine resented the small confined apartment in which he was brought up (not to mention the lack of familiar warmth around his step dad and mom.) Open alleyways, kids running this way and that, dogs barking—all this went into establishing the neighborhood feel Antoine wants.

Comedy Comic, even slapstick, themes make their ways through this film. We have noted the ritual *stich* of the opera singer and wife, and should add the comic episode that first leads to a hook up with the beautiful Kyoko. Antoine is sitting in a three chair queue outside the office of an employment agency. A sallow chap with a letter in hand is first in the queue. A secretary emerges from the Agency, takes the letter from the chap, and returns to the office, remarking that 'it will be just a minute.' At that point, the sallow guy steps into the men's; at just that moment another girl emerges from the office, assumes the letter had been from the one person remaining in the queue, and asks Antoine to come in. He enters, quickly sees the advantage of pretending that he is the one about whom the (extremely laudatory) letter has been written. The impressed office boss treats Antoine like royalty. By the end of the day, he has a good job piloting toy boats.

CAHARACTER ANALYSIS

ANTOINE Antoine is again the main character, Truffaut's consistently reliable choice for star performances, and the alter ego through which Truffaut directs his own autobiography into existence. Antoine is still the joyous lover of Christine, whom we meet at the end of *Stolen Kisses*, but with the present film Antoine is slipping into his strong neighborhood-loving role, and seems to have found just the kind of milieu he wants—neighbors yelling local news out their windows, married couples carrying out comical routines on their ways to work, the banter of the close winding streets. We feel temporarily heartbroken, fearing the break up of Antoine's marriage, but we see that the irrepressible, in this kid of the city streets, is going to break forward into new life forms, and that he will bring social vitality along with him. Remember the Fonz?

Comical. Antoine can make us laugh, and does so several times in the present film. Often his eyes carry the wonder, the suspicion, the humor to which at the moment he gives no other play. When he first delivers the soaked bracelet to Kyoko, she invites him in. They negotiate a rendez vous, and then she steps away into an adjoining room, where she carries on a rapid, muttered conversation in Japanese. That's when Antoine rolls his eyes in a humorous curiosity, embracing the entire unlikelihood of the situation in which he finds himself.

Gentle. Antoine and Christine spend much of their film time in bed together, often magazine reading. Before the emotional shock of his affair, she fixated on Nuryev, he on pages about Japanese women, but later they turned to reminiscence filled chit chat, like memories of their first kiss, or thoughts on how they feel about their bodies. We never see them making love.

Sociable. Antoine seems at his happiest—and he is usually ebullient—when dining together with Christine's parents. They give him that family sense which he misses, as does his boss Truffaut, who also misses it.

Fallible. From the time we first know Antoine, in *Les 400 Coups*, he has been no perfectionist. He has been at trouble in school, in trouble with the law, on the outs with his parents and teachers. We should not be surprised at the ineptitude with which he loses his flower-dying job or struggles to understand the post partem depression of his wife.

Jubilant. Antoine has always wanted joyous parents, teachers with some élan, comrades—he has had a couple—who are fun and not just furtive accomplices in some young kid scheme to make a buck or get into a film.

Parallels. While Antoine and Christine are not Immortal lovers they are tender, jovial, able (to a degree) to overcome the wounds they impose on one another, sociable—they care about giving in a community through their married love, caring toward their offspring. Do they not share with Romeo and Juliet the wonderful belief in the greatness of one another? Do they not share with Austen's Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett the reserved attention to one another that puts its dignity on the line before the punishing reality of the human condition? Can they not emulate the spiciness and long haul patience of Pip and Estella in *David Copperfield*?