

he never made a better film than *The 400 Blows*.

The film begins with shots of Paris under the credits and then takes the viewer into a classroom full of high-spirited boys who are taking a quiz under the watchful eye of their teacher (Guy Decombes). The boys begin surreptitiously passing around a picture of a woman in a bathing suit. When the picture teaches Antoine, he keeps it long enough to draw a mustache on it. The teacher sees this and punishes the boy by denying him recess. Thus is established the theme of the film—Antoine's difficulties with authorities. Indeed, this quite minor misconduct and its punishment lead indirectly to a sequence of progressively deeper transgressions that eventually bring about Antoine's incarceration in a center for delinquent minors.

The sequence takes Antoine from the incident in the classroom to truancy to running away from home to stealing a typewriter from his father's office. (Ironically, he is not caught when he steals the typewriter but is caught when he later tries to return it.) The story of *The 400 Blows* is not, however, that of a boy becoming a criminal; it is the story of the gradual disintegration of a boy's life as he tries to cope with a world that seems to have no place for him. It must be pointed out that an important virtue of the film is the tone with which this circumstance is handled. It is neither sentimentalized nor overly clinical. A few critics did fail to notice this and made the mistake of attempting to see the film as a sociological study of the causes of juvenile delinquency rather than as a drama of one boy's adventures.

Crucial in this boy's story is his home life. He and his parents live in an apartment in a Paris tenement. The apartment is so small that Antoine must sleep on a makeshift bed in an entryway. Antoine's mother (Claire Maurier) is a rather shallow and selfish woman, who concentrates on her own pleasures rather than on her husband and her son. In fact, the viewer learns as the film progresses that her husband (Albert Rémy) is not Antoine's father—he married her after Antoine was born out of wedlock—and that she did not want to have a child but was persuaded by her mother not to have an abortion. Antoine himself knows these facts; he has apparently learned them through many arguments that he has heard or overheard in the small living quarters. The husband is weak and seems to derive his main pleasure from the automobile club, of which he is secretary. Although Antoine's home life is not satisfactory, neither is it sordid or always unhappy. One evening, after Antoine has accidentally set fire to a curtain, all three go out to a film (an important and frequently used device in this and other Truffaut films) and enjoy themselves immensely.

The parents finally abandon their effort to cope with Antoine when he is caught with the stolen typewriter. They tell the authorities that they cannot do anything with the child and ask that he be put in an institution. Antoine is first put in jail and then sent to a center for delinquent children "for observation" until it can be decided what to do with him. One day while play-

THE 400 BLOWS (LES QUATRE CENTS COUPS)

Origin: France
Released: 1959
Released in U.S.: 1959
Production: Robert Lachenay and Jean Lavie for Les Films du Carrosse
Direction: François Truffaut
Screenplay: François Truffaut and Marcel Moussy
Cinematography: Henri Decaë
Editing: Marie-Joseph Yoyotte
Art direction: Bernard Evein
Music: Jean Constantini
Running time: 98 minutes

Principal characters:

Antoine Doinel Jean-Pierre Léaud
 René Patrick Auffay
 Mme Doinel Claire Maurier
 M. Doinel Albert Rémy
 Teacher Guy Decombes
 School director Robert Beauvais

In the short period from 1958 through 1960 a number of new, young French directors released their first films. Although they were quite different from one another in both style and subject matter, they had enough in common that they were considered part of a movement, which was called the New Wave. The chief characteristic that they shared was a reaction against the smoothly crafted but impersonal films of the French cinema of the 1950's.

It is arguable that the best of these films was *The 400 Blows*, directed by François Truffaut. (The title was translated literally as *The 400 Blows* by the film's American release, although a more accurate and idiomatic rendering would be "Living It Up" or a similar phrase.) The film is the story of a few weeks in the life of a thirteen-year-old Parisian boy, Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud). The plot, which is loosely based on events from Truffaut's own adolescence, details Antoine's troubles with his parents, the school authorities, and the law.

When the film was released, it was immediately successful, winning the Grand Prix de la Misc-en-Scène for direction at the Cannes International Film Festival and the Best Film award at the Brussels Film Festival. In the decades since that first film Truffaut directed nearly one film a year and became one of cinema's major directors. Many critics believe, however, that

ing soccer at the center, Antoine suddenly leaves the field and escapes through the hole under the fence. He escapes from his pursuers and runs and runs until he reaches the sea. He has before expressed his desire to view the sea, but once he reaches it he does not know what to do. He turns toward the camera and the image freezes, ending the film.

Much has been written about that last image, and few interpretations agree. Truffaut's own words, however, describe it best: "My film could end on neither an optimistic nor a pessimistic note. I avoided solving the problem by dramatizing it." The image is often cited in film histories as the first example of the now commonplace final freeze-frame.

Not the least of the virtues of *The 400 Blows* is the quality of the acting. Virtually all the roles are well-acted. Claire Maurier and Albert Rémy ably portray the parents, making it evident that they are neither heartless nor cruel, only unable or unwilling to give Antoine more attention or understanding. The focus of the film is Antoine, and in choosing and carefully directing Jean-Pierre Léaud, Truffaut assured the success of his film. Frequently child actors tend to appear either too cute or too wooden. Under Truffaut's direction both of these dangers are avoided. Both Léaud and Patrick Auffay, who plays the important part of Antoine's friend, René, appear natural and real. In fact, Léaud went on to play the same character in four subsequent films by Truffaut, films that took the Antoine Doinel character through adolescence to adulthood. The other Doinel films are *L'Amour à vingt ans* (1962; *Love at Twenty*), *Baisers volés* (1968; *Stolen Kisses*), *Domestic Conjugal* (1970; *Bed and Board*), and *L'Amour en fuite* (1979; *Love on the Run*).

The dominant theme in *The 400 Blows* is escape and confinement. This theme is both literal and figurative and, although it applies chiefly to the protagonist, Antoine, it also applies to many of the other characters. Antoine is literally confined in the schoolroom and in the cramped quarters of his parents' small apartment. Then, after being caught with the typewriter, Antoine is placed in a detention cell that is best described as a cage. When that cage becomes too crowded, he is moved to an even smaller one that holds only one person. When he is let out of the small cage, it is only to be transferred to a police van that takes him and other prisoners away. He is then seen looking forlornly through the bars of the rear window of the van. In this sequence, Antoine's earlier feeling of being restricted by society and his parents is made starkly literal.

In a sense that is less important to the film, Antoine's parents feel confined—by their jobs, their apartment, their none-too-happy marriage, their lack of money, and their responsibility for Antoine. Their escapes are not much more successful than those of Antoine, and in one scene they intercept. One day when Antoine has escaped by not going to school, he sees his mother with a man who is not her husband. From this and from arguments

between the parents the viewer learns that her escape is having affairs. The husband's escape is his automobile club, and ultimately the two escape their responsibility for Antoine by having him put in the center for delinquents.

Truffaut has perhaps best explained the essence of his style in *The 400 Blows*. He said that it stressed spontaneity and a surface truth (as well as the underlying truth) while avoiding "the ficy perfection so common in French films." The film is by no means amateurish or inept; it simply puts the acting and the interest of the human drama ahead of a technical precision that would take the life out of the film. In this, his first feature film, Truffaut succeeded so well that *The 400 Blows* is now recognized as one of the landmarks of world cinema.

Timothy W. Johnson