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| **The 400 Blows (1959)** |
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| *The 400 Blows* (*Les 400 Coups*), a black and white French feature film directed by François Truffaut, is one of the most influential works of the French New Wave. Strongly autobiographical, it tells the story of Antoine Doinel, a troubled Parisian boy struggling with an indifferent family life and stultifying school discipline, who is placed in a reform school after he commits a series of petty crimes. Truffaut chose the actor Jean-Pierre Léaud to play Doinel’s character not only in *400 Blows*, but in four subsequent films. Influenced by Jean Vigo’s 1933 short *Zero for Conduct*, the film is notable for its simple, poetic realism and its unsentimental look at childhood, which is a radical departure from the edulcorated symbolism of films like Albert Lamorisse’s 1953 *White Mane*. *The 400 Blows’* use of innovative camera techniques such as long tracking shots, jump cuts, and dissolves reflects Truffaut’s preoccupation with auteurism, in particular with Alexandre Astruc’s notion of the “camera pen” (*camera-stylo*) as the main expressive tool in the director’s arsenal. The film’s social commentary, though oblique, is unmistakable: Truffaut critiques the conformism, rigidity and traditionalism not only of French society, but also of French cinema. *The 400 Blows* is rebellious but hardly optimistic, and its iconic final image, a freeze-frame of Doinel looking directly into the camera, places some of the responsibility for his struggle on the viewers. |
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| Further reading:  (Croce, 1960)  (Nelson, 1985)  (Truffaut, 1971)  (Truffaut, François and Paul Ronder, 1963)  (Léaud)  (Trailer) |