RE-RELEASES

The 400 Blows

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

One of the greatest films about childhood, Truffaut's partly autobiographical first feature is also profoundly moving. Forever in trouble at school – when he's not playing truant – 13-year-old Antoine Doinel finds life no easier at home; besides demanding he help with housework and shopping, his parents frequently bicker with one another. Eventually there's a tipping point... Eliciting a memorably affecting and naturalistic performance from the young Jean-Pierre Léaud, and achieving a documentary-like authenticity by shooting in far-from-glamorous Paris locations, Truffaut leavens Antoine's faltering progress through a painful pubescence with moments of irreverent humour and exhilarating energy. Never sentimental, it's nonetheless a heartbreakingly plausible portrait of adolescent individuality under threat from adult conformism.

Geoff Andrew, BFI Programmer-at-large

A contemporary review

That there's a Chaplinesque pathos about François Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups* isn't surprising; for like Chaplin's tramp, Antoine Doinel, the protagonist of this film, tries to live a way of life that quickly brings him into conflict with society. Antoine presents positives similar to Chaplin: he's a bit of a dandy, full of tricks and affection, with a lovely appreciation of life, and yet a sense of its absurdity also. But for him, the conflict with society is more than a matter of pathos; for Antoine is only 12-and-a-half years old, and his history presents in an extreme form that most tragic experience of adolescence, the loss of spontaneity. In a series of incidents of ever-increasing significance, Antoine is shown as the victim of such irresponsible people as his parents, the masters at his school, and various social workers who have to deal with him. The more he tries to evade their tyranny, the stronger is their hold over him. The prison of his home and of his school leads to a cage at the police station, and eventually to the barred windows of an Institute for Juvenile Delinquents.

This is a deeply ironical film. For instance, Antoine's downfall is precipitated by his admiration for Balzac, one of the most eminent critics of society, and confirmed when he tries to return a stolen typewriter; and this irony takes on an increasing resonance because Antoine doesn't realise the ambiguity of social morality. At one moment, a morality picked up from films lets him down in life; at another, his parents punish him viciously for what is really a trivial offence, though they in turn are amused by the way in which a friend has fiddled his tax returns. The irony that envelops the film is truly Balzacian, involving a whole society; so that Antoine's schoolmasters and parents, especially his mother who could easily have been portrayed as a villain, are seen as victims of misunderstandings and misfortunes similar to his. And it is for this reason that Paris, which plays such a great part in this film from the credit titles onwards, is more than a stage setting. This grey Paris of dawn lights or drenched with rain (so beautifully photographed by Henri Decäe) is essential to the action; and it is significant that the most moving moment in the film comes when Antoine is driven away from it in a police van. This city, which has condemned and almost destroyed him, is the place he most loves.

Truffaut has said of his film that it should be judged not by its technical perfections but by its sincerity; but of course a man's sincerity can only be

judged by his technique. It is in fact through the success of his technique that Truffaut catches so much of life's richness. How can one define it? Best, I think, by comparing it with the technique used by Alain Resnais in *Hiroshima mon amour*; for Resnais, in his brilliant film, uses an approach which is the most complete antithesis of Truffaut's, and in doing so brings up the most serious issue in film aesthetics. With Resnais one is always aware of art. Experiences, through subtle montage, are always wrought into aesthetic patterns so that (especially in his treatment of the bombing of Hiroshima as an allegory) one admires his wit but suspects his morality. With Truffaut, however, art conceals art; sequences are neither broken down and manipulated into aesthetic effect, nor is their moral complexity tampered with. The control of the film lies rather in the playing of complete sequences one against the other, like tesserae in a mosaic. For instance, before the tense scene in which Antoine is caught returning the typewriter, we are shown actuality shots of children absorbed in a Punch and Judy show, their faces gleaming with excitement. The point is clear – Antoine is a child like them – yet it doesn't hinder our involvement in the action. Here, as in life, we only realise the complexity of an event after we have lived through it. It follows then with complete rightness that the closing shot of this film should be ambiguous.

The camerawork shows this admirable tact also. The camera trails after Antoine as he empties his garbage can, for instance, or drinks a bottle of milk, never forcing us into an immediate judgment. The most audacious of these shots is one that already has become classical, a one-and-a-half minute travelling shot at the close of the film as Antoine runs away from the Institute across the countryside and down to the sea. It is clear that Truffaut has learnt much from the theories of André Bazin, to whose memory the film is dedicated.

Bazin's belief that the film should try to capture the ambiguity and multiple levels of meaning one finds in the best novels is amply carried out here; but always in terms of the immediate, of the subtle, significant detail. With the most delicate of touches Truffaut builds up a picture of Antoine's home, of its disorder and his neglect; or, more amusingly, the bizarre home of René, Antoine's friend, with its stuffed horse and its multitude of fat, purring cats. Relationships are caught in a simple, startling action; Antoine's affection for his mother is shown briefly in the fond way he handles the perfume and brushes on her dressing-table. But Truffaut's most impressive accomplishment is to catch the improvised quality of life; and this, one suspects, is why he is so much at home with children. The scenes in the classroom are both tender and funny; without knowing it, one boy systematically messes up an entire exercise book, whilst another one only finds inspiration for his essay as the master tells the boys to stop writing.

It is because of this talent for improvisation that Truffaut manages to bring out such a magnificent performance from his Antoine (Jean-Pierre Léaud), of whom Truffaut has said: 'I encouraged him to play by ear. He performed freely, reacting in his own manner and responding in his own words.' The success of this method is most apparent in the weakest part of the excellent script (by Truffaut and Marcel Moussy), when Antoine is questioned by the analyst at the Institute. In fact the boy's naturalness and charm, and Truffaut's lightness of direction, make this scene wholly successful; and it is finally, indeed, through Truffaut's lightness of touch and zest for life, and through Léaud's realisation of Antoine's stoicism and almost cockney resilience, that this film never becomes portentous or depressing. It is, truly, a film that speaks up for life.

Eric Rhode, *Sight & Sound*, Spring 1960

THE 400 BLOWS (LES QUATRE CENTS COUPS)
Director: François Truffaut
©/Production Company: Les Films du Carrosse
Production Company: SEDIF
Production Manager: Georges Charlot
Unit Manager: Jean Lavie
Assistant Unit Manager: Robert Lachenay
Administration: Roland Nonin
Secretary: Luce Deuss
1st Assistant Director: Philippe de Broca
2nd Assistant Directors: Alain Jeannel, Francis Cognany, Robert Bober
Script Supervisor: Jacqueline Parey
Screenplay: François Truffaut
Adaptation: M. Moussy, F. Truffaut
Dialogue: Marcel Moussy
Director of Photography: Henri Decaë
Camera Operator: Jean Rabier
Camera Assistant: Alain Levent
Stills Photography: André Dino
Editor: Marie-Josèphe Yoyotte
Assistant Editors: Cécile Decugis, Michèle de Possel
Art Director: Bernard Evein
Properties: Raymond Le Moigne
Laboratory: GTC
Processed by: C.M.C. (Paris)
Music: Jean Constantin
Sound: Jean-Claude Marchetti
Assistant Sound: Jean Labussière
Sound Studio: S.I.M.O.
Thanks: Claude Vermorel, Claire Mafféi, Suzanne Lipinska, Alex Joffé, Fernand Deligny, Claude Véga, Jacques Josse, Annette Wademant, École Technique de Photographie et de Cinématographie, Jean-Claude Brialy, Mademoiselle Jeanne Moreau
Dedicated to the Memory of: André Bazin

Cast
Jean-Pierre Léaud *(Antoine Doinel)*
Claire Maurier *(Antoine's mother)*
Albert Rémy *(Antoine's father)*
Guy Decomble *(teacher)*
Georges Flamant *(M Bigey, René's father)*
Patrick Auffay *(René Bigey)*

the children
Daniel Couturier, François Nocher
Richard Kanayan *(Abbou)*
Renaud Fontanarosa, Michel Girard, Henry Moati, Jean-François Bergouignan, Michel Lesignor

with
Luc Andrieux
Robert Beauvais *(schoolmaster)*
Bouchon
Christian Brocard
Yvonne Claudie *(Mme Bigey)*
Marius Laurey
Claude Mansard *(examiner)*
Jacques Monod
Pierre Repp *(English teacher)*
Henri Virlogeux *(nightwatchman)*
Jeanne Moreau *(woman with dog)* *
Jean Douchet *(lover)* *
Bernard Abbou *(child)* *
Jacques Demy *(policeman)* *
Philippe de Broca, François Truffaut *(men at funfair)* *
Jean-Claude Brialy *

France 1959©
94 mins

* Uncredited

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Sun 9 Jan 18:20, Mon 24 Jan 20:40
BFI Course: François Truffaut
Every Tue from 18 Jan-22 Feb 18:30-20:30

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Love on the Run (L'Amour en fuite)
Wed 5 Jan 20:40, Sat 15 Jan 15:30, Mon 31 Jan 20:40

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