

fresh film festival

Study Guide

estival



fresh film

Les Quatre Cents Coups

aka The 400 Blows

Francois Truffaut, France, 1959, 94 mins

Brendan Maher

Les Quatre Cents Coups (1959)

Cast

Jean-Pierre Leaud	Antoine Doinel
Claire Maurier	The Mother
Albert Remy	The Father(adoptive)
Guy Decombe	The French teacher
Georges Flamant	Mr. Bigey
Patrick Auffrey	Rene
Daniel Couturier	Boy
Francois Nocher	Boy
Richard Kanayan	Abbou
Renaud Fontanarosa	Boy
Michel Girad	Boy
Henry Moati	Boy
Bernard Abbou	Boy
Jean-Francois Bergouignan	Boy
Michel Lesignor	Boy
Robert Beauvais	Director of the school

Crew

Writer/Producer/Director	Francois Truffaut
Original Music	Jean Constantin
Cinematography	Henri Decae
Editor	Marie-Josephe Yoyotte
Set Decoration	Bernard Evein
Production Manager	George Charlot
Assistant Director	Philippe de Broca
Second Assistant Director	Robert Bober
Second Assistant Director	Francis Cognany
Second Assistant Director	Alain Jeannel
Sound	Jean-Claude Marchetti
Sound Assistant	Jean Labussiere

Production Companies	Les Films du Carrosse/SEDIF
Runtime	94 min
Country	France
Language	French (English Subtitles)
Color	Black and White

Les Quatre Cents Coups/The 400 Blows

Francois Truffaut's debut feature film 'Les Quatre Cents Coups' was released to worldwide acclaim in 1959. Truffaut had made three short films before that and had also worked as a film critic for the influential French film magazine 'Cahiers Du Cinema'. Truffaut's critical viewpoint of cinema is reflected in the film and the film is considered to be the first in the new film movement in France which became known as the "Nouvelle Vague" or the French New Wave. Despite the fact that in his later years, he played down the autobiographical nature of the film, Truffaut did say that nothing in the film was an exaggeration. Indeed the film mirrors events in Truffaut's life as a thirteen year old, with an unerring accuracy. Truffaut's critical understanding of film-making, on the other hand, stylises events from his own life into what was, at the time, a new but cohesive film-making experience.

Les Quatre Cents Coups/The 400 Blows

Director: Francois Truffaut

France/1959/94mins

Introduction

Before we go to a film, we receive information about that film from various sources. This information can come from cinema or television trailers for the film, from reviews, information from your friends etc. Generally, we all know the title of the film we are going to see (!) and will see a poster/video cover for the film before we watch it. These two pieces of information - one literal and the other visual- are very important and conjure up preconceived notions of the film before we watch it. Next we will look in more detail at the title and the poster image.



Title

Les Quatre Cent Coups means in english: 'The 400 Blows'. The phrase is a French one meaning 'to raise hell' which would suggest to us that the character in the film will be rebellious or out of control, and think little of the consequences.

Discussion:

- (1) First of all, what do you think of the title? The director has chosen a well known French phrase about youth. Why has he done this?
- (2) When you look at the film, try and see if the main character is actually raising hell and whether he is aware of the trouble he causes. Are the incidents that occur an accurate reflection of the changes caused in the process of growing up?

Task:

- (1) Antoine in the film must deal with a range of occurrences which force him towards adulthood. Write a brief autobiographical essay in which you recount one incident which caused you to look at life in a new light . The incident does not have to be of epic proportions but should suggest growth on your part and an understanding of change.



Image

The image (left) is one which has been used on posters for the film and also on the cover of the video. The image gives us a clearer picture of the film. We are now sure that the film will be about a youth. However the image also suggests something else. The character in a close-up looks through a wire mesh towards his right.

Discussion

- (1) Our view of the character is hindered by the wire mesh. What does this mesh suggest to you?
- (2) What does the expression on the character's face say to you.

Tasks

- (1) Still photographers and film makers frame images in a certain way in order to give the viewer information. The character in the image is framed in a close-up. After watching the film, imagine if you had to design the poster using the same material i.e. the character behind a wire mesh. Could your poster evoke different meanings if we saw the character in a long shot behind the mesh, or perhaps if the poster depicted only a pair of eyes looking through the mesh. What meanings could you conjure up with a new poster?
- (2) When you see this image during the film, try and remember the context it is in i.e. what is going on during the scene, what has happened during the previous scene and how does it affect our knowledge of the characters. Is the image actually in the film or is it specially constructed to give us information about the film as a whole?
- (3) Does the poster image make you interested enough to want to go and see the film? Can you give reasons for this? If your answer is no, what other information would you need to encourage you to go see the film?
- (4) You now have received information from the title of the film and from an image relating to the film. After watching the film, do you think that the the title and the image successfully represent what you have seen.



The 400 Blows - Historical Context

The film is set in 1959 in post-war France. Antoine Doinel is 12 and so, would have been born two years after the Second World War. France at that time would have been completing its rebuilding programme following the devastation of the war. While the film was made after the introduction of rock and roll (around 1955) it does not reflect the upsurge of teenage activity that was depicted in American films of the period such as 'Blackboard Jungle', 'Rebel Without A Cause' or 'Rock Around the Clock'. Instead, Antoine undergoes a more private rebellion of his own.

With regards to the historical context of the film, we must try and understand the film in terms of its place in film history and the section on the French new wave film movement 'Le Nouvelle Vague', later on in the guide should be read.



Watching the Film

The Director Francois Truffaut



Francois Truffaut (in photo, on right) was born in 1932. Truffaut's parents were both avid mountaineers and indeed had met at the French Alpine Club. They would often leave the young boy alone to go rock-climbing in Fontainebleau outside Paris. *Les quatre cents coups* reflects this neglect in that both parents are absorbed in their own personal activities to the detriment of the boys upbringing. Truffaut shot some of the exteriors in his childhood streets along Rue Des Martyrs and in the Rue Navarin in Paris. The cramped apartment interiors are also reflective of his family homes in the centre of Paris.

Truffaut's mother worked as a secretary for a magazine and it is said displayed little interest in her son. This neglect caused Truffaut to retaliate by dodging school and running away from home. Truffaut's great passion was the cinema and he developed an encyclopaedic knowledge of film spending much of his time in the various cinemas of Paris.

In the film, Antoine is sent to a reformatory school because of stealing a typewriter. Truffaut's delinquency mirrors this as his home life deteriorated between 1942 and 1947. Truffaut's father had his son arrested for stealing money (the money was for the setting up of a cinema club). The outcome was that Truffaut was sent to a centre for delinquents - '*a maison de correction*' - at Villejuif. The centre was also part of an insane asylum.

Truffaut enlisted in the army (1951) to go to fight in the French war in Indochina, but went absent without leave (AWOL) and was faced with a further period in jail. A friendship he had struck up with film critic Andre Bazin saved him. Bazin and his wife sheltered him in their home and it was at this point Truffaut began to write film articles. By 1954 Truffaut had become a renowned film critic with Cahiers Du Cinema and formulated his theories which would lead to the development of the French New Wave - Le Nouvelle Vague. Cahiers Du Cinema under Bazin's editorship became the focal point of the New Wave. Truffaut wrote a famous article criticising the French cinema that had gone before, entitled 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema'.

Truffaut began his directing career with short films - 'Les Mistons' aka 'The Mischief Makers' and 'Une Visite'. Subsequent to his success with his debut feature - Les Quatre Cents Coups, the director went on to have a long career in film-making. His films have become classics of the cinema - Jules Et Jim (1961) depicted a love triangle between two men and a women and made actress Jeanne Moreau an international star. 'L'Enfant Sauvage' (1970) traces the development of a boy, who lived in the woods all his life and his reintegration into society. 'Le Nuit Americaine' (1973) aka 'Day For Night' is a detailed and sometimes humorous depiction of the trials and tribulations of the film-making process. Truffaut also acted in this and other films and was hired by American director Steven Spielberg to play the role of the scientist in 'Close Encounters Of The Third Kind'. Truffaut died in 1983.

Les Quatre Cents Coups/The 400 Blows - Story

At a school in Paris, a class is completing an exam. We see Antoine Doinel, a twelve year old-boy who is caught passing a photo around class. Antoine is regarded as a trouble-maker by the teacher. After school Antoine goes home to his parents cramped apartment. Both are out working. Antoine sets the table for dinner.

His parents come home - his father's mood is jovial, but his mother is sharp with the boy. Antoine goes to bed in a sleeping bag in a passageway between two rooms.

Next day Antoine ditches school and heads off around the streets of Paris with his friend, Rene. They go to a funfair. Later, while walking in the street, Antoine sees his mother with another man. Both are shocked but Antoine realises that he won't get into trouble for failing going to school. That night, Antoine hears his parents fighting about him. We find out during the argument that Antoine's father is actually his step-father

A schoolmate arrives at Antoine's flat in the morning and asks his father whether Antoine was sick - as he had missed school. His father is surprised. When explaining to a teacher, his absence from

school, Antoine blurts out a lie - that his mother is dead. The teacher is shocked and even more shocked when mother and father arrive at the school later. Antoine's father hits him in front of his classmates.

Antoine leaves a note at home saying he has left home and wanders the streets for the night. He goes into school in the morning. His mother collects him from school, hugging him. She tries to make amends and they talk.

Antoine is the cause of a fire at home and again he is in trouble. To try and calm the situation, the family go to the cinema and have a happy time. At school, Antoine is accused of copying an essay and is sent to the headmaster. He runs off. His friend Rene, is also expelled for arguing with the teacher. Both boys hide out at Rene's house.

The boys decide to steal something which they can pawn for money. They go to Antoine's father's office and rob a typewriter. The man they try to sell it to double-crosses them and they have to retrieve the typewriter. They decide to return it to the office. However, Antoine is caught by a security guard.

Having had enough, Antoine's father decides to bring him to the police. He asks the police to find a juvenile home for him, claiming that they cannot control him at home. Antoine is charged with vagrancy and theft and locked up for the night. In the morning he is sent through darkened Parisian streets to a reformatory school in the country.

The boys at the reformatory school lead a regimented life. Antoine is taken to a psychologist and questioned about his feelings for his parents. On visiting day Antoine is happier to see his friend Rene than his mother.

While playing football one day, Antoine sneaks away and begins to run. Chased by a staff member, he hides and escapes into the country. He runs and runs arriving finally at the beach. Standing at the edge of the water he turns and looks back at the camera. The film freeze-frames on his face.

Looking at the film: Style

"The 400 Blows is a film about freedom. It could I think convey this idea to an audience of deaf illiterates in any part of the world, because its construction is very nearly as absolutely visual as that of a silent film".

The above quote was made by critic Arlene Croce and gives us pointers to the style of the film. Freedom relates to restriction and how restriction does not allow us to achieve our goals because outside forces compel us along a path we do not wish to take. The film-maker must visually show this restriction in order to reinforce the story he is telling.

Truffaut goes about this task immediately. Over the opening credits the camera is driven through the streets of Paris and in the distance over the buildings we see the Eiffel Tower. The Tower is symbolically kept at a distance due to the buildings which restrict our view. Truffaut sets up an initial visual metaphor of restriction.

Truffaut shoots all the scenes of Antoine's home life in a cramped apartment. Again there is restriction but Truffaut also suggests that Antoine is in the way of his parents - he sleeps, not in a room of his own, but in a space underneath a stairs -his parents must pass through his space to get around the house. Antoine's space is invaded .

Thus to give his character freedom, Truffaut must give him space. When Antoine escapes from the

detention centre at the end of the film, he runs to open space - his freedom. Truffaut however, leaves his audience with a question. Antoine reaches the beach and the open sea. What seems like freedom may be false because at the edge of the water there is no other place to go. Instead Truffaut freeze-frames the film in a classic ending as Antoine looks back at the camera (and us) as if to question his future - *where does he go to from here?*

Task

- (1) Look for other visual images of restriction in the film. Do the images re-enforce Antoine's lack of freedom at certain points during the film?
- (2) What does the ending suggest to you. One critic suggests that at the end of the film, 'you are no longer looking at the film - the film is looking at you'. What do you think this means?

Style 2

Truffaut presents Antoine's world in a distinct manner. What happens seems to be of little importance. There are no great musical flourishes or knowing close-ups to suggest that Antoine is in trouble. The film operates at an even pace and Truffaut matter of factly presents the story to the audience, not attempting to appeal to the audience's emotions. How and why is this done?

Truffaut famously builds his scenes by not resorting to cutting between shots. Instead, he uses single shots e.g. the scene in the flying drum, the close-up of Antoine in the paddy-wagon and the interview with the psychiatrist (which focuses solely on Antoine). Truffaut uses *lap dissolves* in which one image overlaps with the other as it changes, in many scenes. This dissolve is not as harsh as a straight cut and thus holds the original pace within the scenes.

Discussion

- (1) In only one scene in the film, does Truffaut attempt to overtly manipulate the audience. This is in the final shot when the camera freezes on Antoine's face. However, here again Truffaut presents ambiguity - it is difficult to ascertain what exact meaning to construe from this final image.
- (2) Some films, such as 'Ferris Bueller's Day Off' have their main characters address the camera at various points during the film. Why is this done? Does it give us as an audience a better bond with the character? Or can the character be seen to be attempting to win favour with the audience and thus manipulate our feelings.

Task

- (1) Devise a short script in which the main character speaks to the camera at various points in order to explain his or her feelings. Use the subject of 'bullying' as a theme and present the story in two different ways - one from the bully's viewpoint and the other from the person being bullied.

The French New Wave - Le Nouvelle Vague

The origins of the 'Nouvelle Vague' can be identified with film magazine 'Cahiers Du Cinema'. During the 1950's, a group of young film critics emerged, many writing for Cahiers. The writers gave new views on classic Hollywood cinema and derided the efforts of current French film-makers. Truffaut in his famous article 'A Certain Tendency Of The French Cinema' attacked the existing practice of film-makers in utilising books or literature to make their films. Truffaut felt that this weakened the visual quality of film-making, in that the film imagery always was subservient to the written word. Truffaut argued that cinema should be taken out of the hands of 'litterateurs' and given instead to 'auteurs', people who were visually aware and who understood film technique. The Cahiers critics were successful in vilifying films that had been originally regarded as classics such as Rene Clement's 'Les Jeux Interdits' (1952).

Truffaut's 'The 400 Blows', Alain Resnais' 'Hiroshima Mon Amour' (1959) and Jean Luc Godard's 'Au Bout De Souffle' (1960) heralded the cinematic birth of the New Wave. All films were strong on visual style, utilising recently developed lightweight cameras in order to create a fluid motion on screen. Scenes



were shot in long takes, the camera becoming an active element in watching the action. Cinematic words became common parlance - *mise en scene* (the placement/movement of performers or decor before the camera - the totality that the camera sees); *jump cut* (the jarring cut that breaks the natural linear movement in a shot); *montage* (the french term for editing - the positioning of shots with each other) - all these were bandied about by the cafe society that had developed in '60's Europe.

New Wave films tended to overtly suggest to an audience that they were watching a film. They did not hide behind the effort to make the audience believe the story they were watching but instead questioned what the audience was watching. In 'Au Bout De Souffle', the main character has a fixation on Humphrey Bogart, adopting the actor's mannerisms etc. The audience becomes aware that this character is in fact playing a character playing at being Bogart. In 'The 400 Blows', Antoine looks at the camera, thus destroying the illusion that we have control in our watching of his story (the film-maker has the ultimate control).

The Nouvelle Vague slowly came to an end in the late 1960's as it's techniques and viewpoints were absorbed into mainstream cinema. Directors such as Godard, Louis Malle, Alain Resnais and Eric Rohmer continued to make films into the 80's and 90's. The Nouvelle Vague's lasting achievement was to finally bring cinema to be regarded as a legitimate art form. Never before had the cinematic past been unearthed and dissected to reveal the truth as the Cahiers critics believed it to be.

Task

Research another film 'movement'. Find out what characteristics are common to the films that go under this banner. Research one main director associated with the movement. Most importantly of all - rent out a video or go to a screening of one of these films if you get the opportunity. Choose from any of the following : 'Das Neue Kino' (Germany 'New Cinema' - '70's/'80's) The Australian New Wave ('70's/'80's) 'The Fifth Generation' (Chinese Cinema - '80's/'90's)

Final Task

The final shot in the film is, as already stressed, very important. But, what if Antoine had not reached the sea and had not looked at the camera. Continue Antoine's story. Write a short piece detailing what would have happened to him if (a) he had ended up in a small village and was taken in by another couple or (b) if he had been caught and returned to the reformatory school.



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