



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 50=

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 Decaë) 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 Doine!*)
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©
100 mins

* Uncredited

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

Breathless (À bout de souffle)

Wed 1 Feb 14:30; Tue 14 Feb 20:50; Fri 24 Feb 18:20

Le Mépris (Contempt) Wed 1 Feb 18:10; Fri 17 Feb 20:50

Daughters of the Dust Wed 1 Feb 18:15; Thu 16 Feb 20:30

Sans Soleil Wed 1 Feb 20:40; Fri 17 Feb 18:00

M (Mörder unter uns)

Thu 2 Feb 14:30; Thu 16 Feb 20:40; Wed 22 Feb 18:00

Moonlight Thu 2 Feb 20:45; Tue 14 Feb 20:30

Blade Runner: The Final Cut

Fri 3 Feb 20:40; Sun 5 Feb 20:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:10

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Sat 4 Feb 12:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:30

La dolce vita Sat 4 Feb 14:15; Sat 25 Feb 19:30

Sherlock Jr. Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

City Lights Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

Goodfellas Sat 4 Feb 20:10; Wed 15 Feb 20:10

North by Northwest Sat 4 Feb 20:20; Thu 9 Feb 18:00

L'Atalante Sun 5 Feb 12:15; Tue 14 Feb 18:30; Wed 22 Feb 14:30

Rear Window Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

Stalker Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

Casablanca Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

Psycho Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Tue 7 Feb 18:00; Tue 21 Feb 14:30; Sun 26 Feb 12:50

The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)

Tue 7 Feb 18:10; Sat 25 Feb 11:50

News from Home Tue 7 Feb 20:45; Fri 17 Feb 18:20 (+ intro)

Rashomon (Rashômon) Tue 7 Feb 21:00; Thu 23 Feb 18:20

The Piano Wed 8 Feb 20:35; Tue 21 Feb 17:50

Wanda Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

Ordet (The Word) Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

The 400 Blows (Les Quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)

Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

Barry Lyndon Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

Some Like It Hot Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

The Third Man Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

Killer of Sheep Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

Mirror (Zerkalo) Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

Pather Panchali Sat 18 Feb 20:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 15:45

The Apartment Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

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