

Les Quatre Cents Coups

("The 400 Blows")

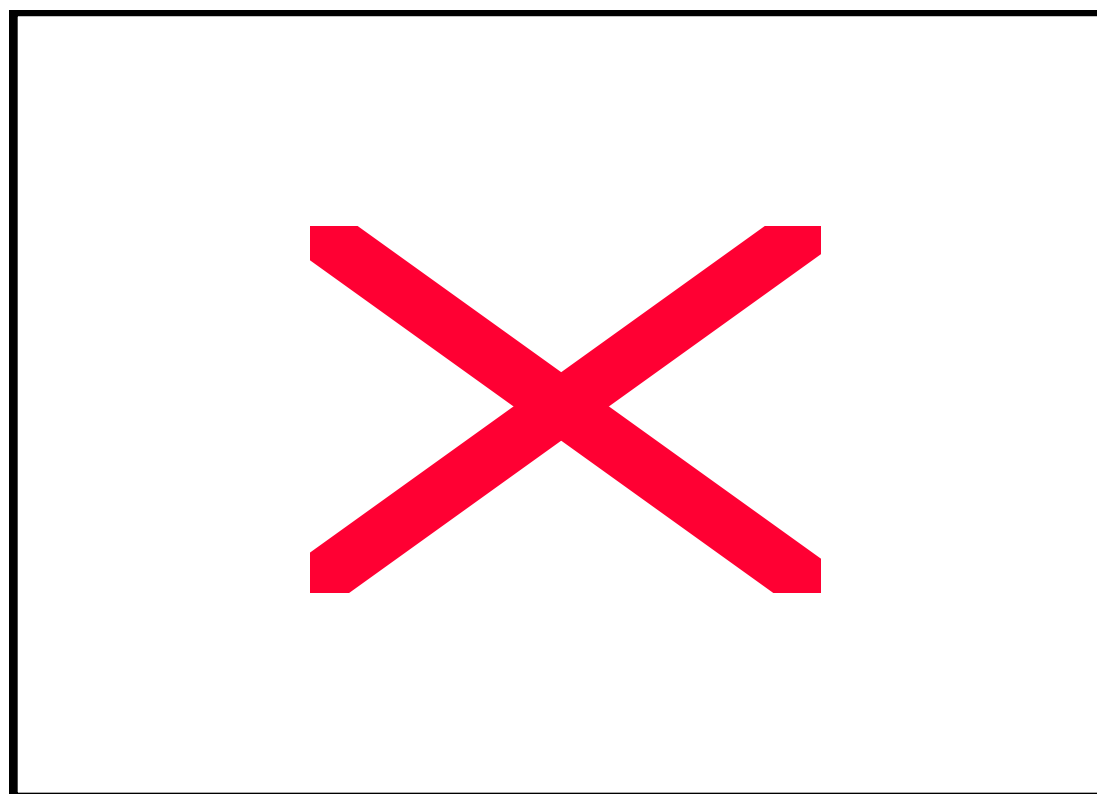
France : 1959 : dir. François Truffaut : Films du Carrosse / SEDIF : 101 min

prod: Georges Charlot : scr: François Truffaut : dir.ph.: Henri Decaë

Jean-Pierre Léaud [d]; *Patrick Auffay*; *Daniel Couturier*; *François Nocker*; *Richard Kanayan*; *Michel Girard*; *Renaud Fontanarosa*; *Henry Moati*; *Bernard Abbou*; *Jean-François Bergouignan*; *Michel Lesignor*

Claire Maurier; Albert Rémy; Guy Decomble; Georges Flament; Jeanne Moreau; Yvonne Claudie; Jean-Claude Brial; Henri Virlojeux; Jacques Demy; François Truffaut

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ € Z ☠	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Not a hardened criminal in the making, but no innocent victim of circumstance either. Truffaut is strangely ambivalent toward his alter-ego Doinel. But the film's strength is precisely that it is not didactic. Source: original still

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
2001 review:

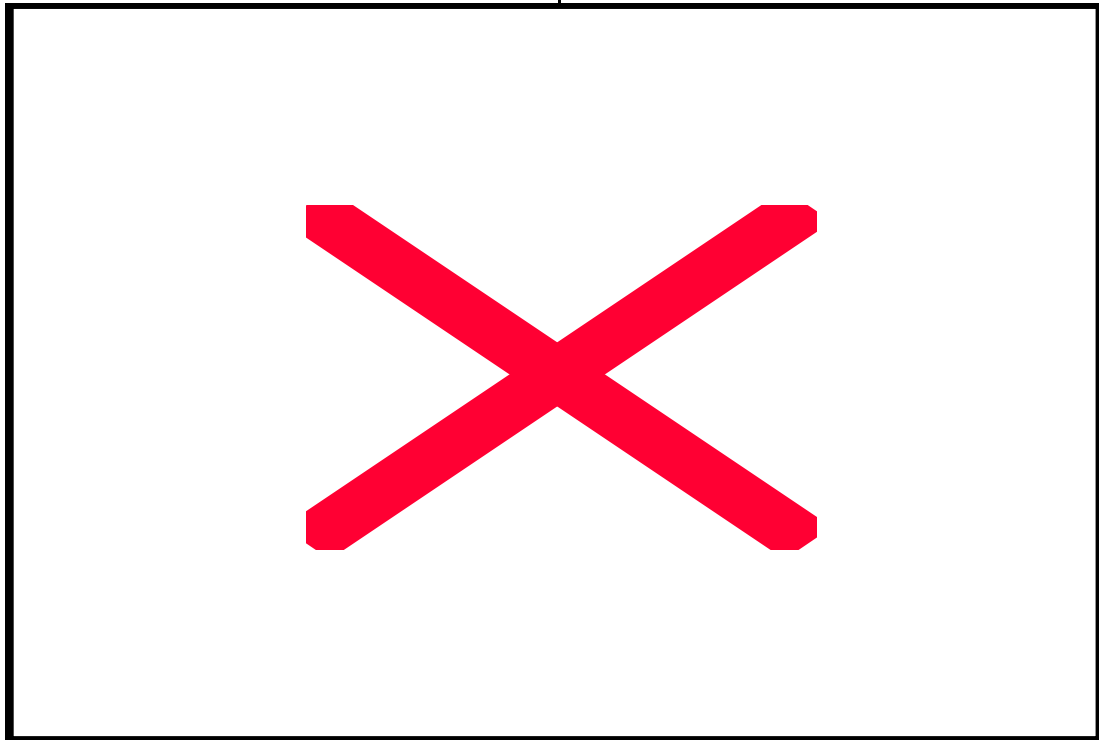
"Captivating study of Parisian youth¹ who turns to a life of small-time crime as a reaction to derelict parents. First of Truffaut's autobiographical Antoine Doinel series: followed

¹ Or "boy", as we say in English...

by the "Antoine et Colette" episode in "LOVE AT TWENTY". Shot in Dyaliscope. **** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"A twelve-year old in a loveless family is abandoned to his fate and can't make his way at



school either. All attempts to win approval

from his parents and teacher have the opposite

Antoine and his partner in crime René, having skipped school for the day, agree to recycle an old sickness note for the schoolmaster tomorrow. In the event Antoine decides (unwisely) to improvise, and the best excuse he can think of on the spur of the moment is that his mother has died...

Source: Indeterminate

effect, so that he's ultimately placed in a care institution. Critic Truffaut's feature film debut took a loose form that avoided sentimentality and was remarkably attentive to all the small nuances in the closed face of the young Léaud. (Truffaut has continued to follow him and his character Antoine Doinel through the years in a series of later films.) ****½ "

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"A 12-year old boy, unhappy at home, finds himself in a detention centre but finally escapes and keeps running. Little more in plot terms than a piece of character observation, this engaging film is so controlled and lyrical as to be totally refreshing, and it gives a very vivid picture of the Paris streets. The film is said to be based on Truffaut's own childhood. Academy Award nomination: Best Script. **"

"The narrative is boldly fluent. Sympathetic, amused, reminded, occasionally puzzled, you are carried along with it. I don't think you will get away before the end." - Dilys Powell

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"A neglected 12-year old (Jean-Pierre Léaud) turns to crime. François Truffaut's first, semi-autobiographical film was a touching rites-of-passage movie which, despite not having much in the way of a plot, won him the Best Director prize at the 1959 Cannes Festival, and the New York Film Critics' award for Best Foreign Film. It teems with a sense of Paris street-life and has an acute sense of the agonies of puberty; it made a child star out of Jean-Pierre Léaud; and it's one of the best films to have come out of the French New Wave. 8/10 "

"Seriously marred by a certain amateurishness in direction and by the sort of over-insistence (due to over-youthful anger, perhaps) on a pathetic theme which stiffens the audience's resistance... but the obvious flaws matter much less and the merits much more."

- The Guardian

"One of the most beautiful films that I have ever seen."
- Akira Kurosawa

"I have never been so moved at the cinema"
- Jean Cocteau

"The first masterpiece of the New Wave"
- Jonas Mekas, **Film Culture**

"**"LES 400 COUPS"** is not a masterpiece. So much the better for François Truffaut! In the first place the word has been so debased that it finally becomes meaningless. Next, and above all, with a masterpiece in his pocket at twenty-seven Truffaut would really have something to worry about - he would have to spend his life trying to shed the burden. **"LES 400 COUPS"** is better than a masterpiece. Together with **"HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR"**, it is one of the two most original films made in France since the war."

- Fereydoun Hoveyda, **Cahiers du Cinéma**

"In every frame... Truffaut's force and intelligence are felt. He has a remarkable control of his medium and of himself." - **Time**

"Stylistically Truffaut has a marvellous command... The images effortlessly carry the narrative... The cinema achieves one of its pure moments of catharsis."

- David Robinson, **Financial Times**

"Time will tell how much Truffaut has to say; in the meantime he, and this movie, bear watching."
- **Playboy**

"A masterly and moving story... [The final freeze-frame is] a tremendous full-stop to a record of childhood unsurpassed by any other I have seen."

- Alexander Walker, **Evening Standard**

"A perfect short story of puberty... all the rapt qualities of adventure and instinct."

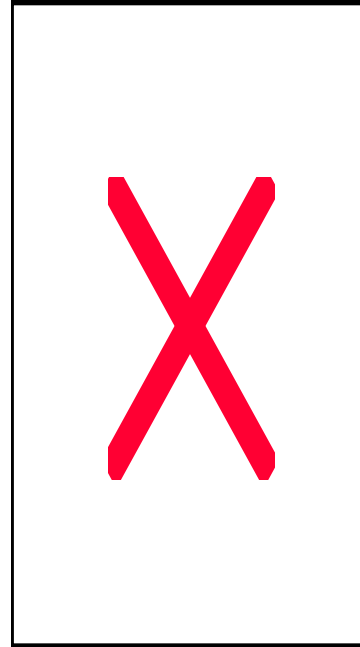
- **New Statesman**, 1961

"One of the greatest movies ever made"
- Rex Reed

"The central artistic idea is freedom, both in human relationships and in film technique... **"THE 400 BLOWS"** ranges from sentimental travelling shots of Antoine's tear-stained face, underscored by Jean Constantin's lush music; to improvised, candid comic scenes in the schoolroom, echoing Vigo's candid work with school children; to a *cinéma vérité* interview

between Antoine and a prying social worker; to agonisingly long, subjective travelling shots as Antoine escapes the reform school and races toward the sea."

- Gerald Mast, **"A Short History of**



the Movies" (1971)

Source: *indeterminate website*

"Although the film is relatively simple, Truffaut effectively uses cinematic technique to express the conflict between a spontaneous individual and a restrictive society... There is continual motion enhanced by a flow of lyrical music, but also periodically interrupted by static scenes in confining places."

- Marsha Kinder & Beverle [sic] Houston, **"Close-Up, A Critical Perspective on Film"**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"Truffaut's stunning feature début is an autobiographical tale of a young boy suffering from parental neglect; he plays truant, runs away and stays up all night, roaming the streets of Paris with a friend, stealing a movie still from front of house, a typewriter, a bottle of milk. He is neither mischievous nor misguided, just a boy, but he lands in reform school. It is a film of a hundred insights, and simply one of the best films about childhood (and Paris, if it comes to that). Jean-Pierre Léaud plays the boy, Antoine; he played him again in some grown-

up manifestations, starting with "BAISERS VOLES". **** "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"Memorable study of an adolescent boy, neglected by his selfish parents, who discovers some unpleasant facts about life. The boy is played with great sensitivity by Jean-Pierre Léaud². The excellent photography and superb editing set the mood for this touching film. **** "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Truffaut's first feature, and although not his best, infinitely better than the self-indulgent, increasingly compromised work he was turning out toward the end of his career. Revealing a complicity with downtrodden, neglected and rebellious adolescence that is intensely moving but never mawkish, shot on location in Paris with a casually vivid eye that is almost documentary, it still has an amazing freshness in its (quasi-autobiographical) account of 13-year old Antoine Doinel's bleak odyssey through family life, reform school, and an escape whose precarious permanence is questioned by the final frozen image of the boy's face as he reaches the sea – freedom or point of no return? Still one of the cinema's most perceptive forays into childhood, and fun for spotting the guest appearances of such Nouvelle Vague luminaries as Jeanne Moreau, Jean-Claude Brialy, Jacques Demy and (in the funfair scene) Truffaut himself."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Poignant story of a boy and the world that seems to be at odds with him is true and touching as few films have ever been. Powerful, tender, and at times overwhelmingly sad, this great film touches all the right buttons without being exploitative. In French with English subtitles. ***** "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

² The only critic here to say a word about the quality of the crucial central performance.

"This extraordinary film was the first feature from François Truffaut, who was, until its release, best known as a hell-raising critic from the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. "THE 400 BLOWS" is not only one of the foremost films of the French New Wave, but also the first in a Truffaut series that included "Antoine and Colette" (an episode from "LOVE AT TWENTY"), "STOLEN KISSES", "BED AND BOARD", and "LOVE ON THE RUN".

These films all starred the remarkable Léaud as Truffaut's alter-ego Antoine Doinel and span 20 years in this semi-autobiographical character's life. Here Léaud beautifully embodies Doinel at age 12, a child more or less left to his own devices by his mother (Maurier) and father (Remy). He gets into trouble at school, runs away from home, and eventually ends up in an observation centre for juvenile delinquents.

"THE 400 BLOWS" – an idiomatic French expression for the limit of what anyone can bear – is a non-judgmental film about injustice, pain, and the events in a young boy's life that make him the person he is. Neither good nor bad, Antoine is treated with warmth and compassion by Truffaut as a child caught up in a maelstrom not of his own making. The grace and perfection of "THE 400 BLOWS" has made it the standard against which all films on the subject of youth are judged, and Léaud's portrayal that to which all young performers are compared.

The film also features Decae's poetic black-and-white photography, and together he and Truffaut offer a glimpse of the freedom that Antoine's life never really affords. Images such as a line of schoolboys snaking their way through the streets linger like pages from a mental yearbook of schooldays. Best of all, though, is the film's famous final freeze frame, in which Truffaut conveys both promise and sadness, and demonstrates that the cinema offers no easy answers to the problems of living. ***** "

The Cinema Book synopsis and background notes:

"Antoine Doinel is a twelve-year old Parisian boy who comes from a home background of indifference, quarrels and infidelity. One day, when playing truant with his friend René, Antoine sees his mother kissing a stranger.

That evening he tries to forge an absence note to take to school the next day. When his teachers press for a reason for his non-attendance Antoine blurts out that his mother has died. Later, however, both his parents arrive at the school. Antoine decides to leave home and spends the night at a printing works.

Antoine and his friend René are forbidden to come to school for a week. Unable to return home, Antoine hides at René's house until the two decide to steal a typewriter and go on a trip to the sea, which Antoine has never seen. They find the machine impossible to sell, however, and Antoine is caught as he tries to return it. Exasperated, his father takes him to a police station, from which he is sent to a reform school. Antoine's mother tells him that his father is no longer interested in his future. The following day Antoine escapes and runs across the country until he suddenly reaches the sea. (NB: this extract is standard reduced from Scope.)"

"When I was shooting 'LES QUATRE CENTS COUPS' I was horrified to see that my budget – about £20,000 – had gone up to £25,000. I got into a panic, and felt I had involved myself in something that would not easily make a profit. But once it was finished the film more than paid for itself, what with the Cannes Film Festival and sales abroad. In the USA alone it was bought for £35,000."

– interview with Truffaut, in **Graham**, 1968, p9.

"In 1958 Truffaut was banned from the Cannes Film Festival for his violent denunciation of festivals and his uncompromising attitude to most of the films shown there. The following year "LES QUATRE CENTS COUPS" was the official French entry at Cannes and Truffaut won the Best Director award. James Monaco has pointed out that the film's "instant critical and commercial success not only afforded Truffaut considerable artistic independence right from the beginning of his career, but also made it much easier for other Cahiers critics turned film-makers to finance their own projects; at least a modicum of success for the new movement in film was assured." – Monaco, 1976, p13."

"The series of films Truffaut made with Jean-Pierre Léaud playing Antoine Doinel (as a boy, then growing up into an increasingly

conformist young man) are thought to be based loosely on his own life. Truffaut himself endorses this view, and of course he also acts in some of his films.

There are contradictions within this (auto)biographical mode which could be explored. Jean-Pierre Léaud/Antoine Doinel may "stand for" François Truffaut, but other factors intrude to complicate any simple idea of self-expression. "LES QUATRE CENTS COUPS", for instance, owes much to Jean Vigo's film "ZÉRO DE CONDUITE", and the use of camera movement to capture "real space" is reminiscent of 1930s Renoir films. In the late 1950s and early 60s films about young people were prevalent; in fact several of the New Wave film-makers were working in this genre. It could be argued that Léaud/Doinel "represents", therefore, much more than "Truffaut".

Truffaut's interest in the theme of individual freedom and spontaneity is manifested in the opposition between scenes on location in Paris, where the camera is constantly moving, tracking and panning, and closed interior scenes where the camera is predominantly static. Motion is used to represent freedom (Antoine and René are constantly running) and stasis to represent confinement, a structural polarisation which runs through the film. Arguably, the presence of structure questions the idea of absolute freedom, since it is only in opposition to confinement that freedom exists (see Kinder and Houston, 1972). This is the question that underlines the final shot of the film: a freeze-frame in which Antoine, free at last from reform school, is left totally alone: the *reductio ad absurdum* of romantic/anarchistic positions."

[no listing in "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "Variety Movie Guide 1993" – how could **any** serious film guide make such an omission?]

The title falls as a non-sequitur on English ears, until one discovers the metaphorical meaning of the French expression. Because it is not at all a tale of child-battering or physical cruelty. Antoine's exasperated schoolteacher keeps him in over break, gives him lines to do overnight, but is scarcely the classroom ogre of many another film. He is struck with genuine compassion for the boy when he learns of Antoine's mother's untimely "death". And nor do the parents treat him cruelly, even when he nearly sets fire to their apartment with a candle in his shrine to Balzac.

Neglect is a kind of cruelty, perhaps, but it does not imply any malice or volition. Antoine's parents (like many parents today, and in every generation) are simply too self-preoccupied to find much time for him. Both of them, Truffaut is careful to show us, express spasms of affection for the boy, and urge him on to succeed at school. His father jokes and banters with him, his mother is very solicitous after he spends a night on the streets, and seems to make a genuine attempt to establish a closer rapport. They could scarcely be called "bad" parents, or his school a "bad" school. The tragedy of Doinel is that, in the absence of any strong guiding light in his life, he begins to cross the line from boyish mischief into calculating delinquency, and expresses a callousness to other people which could all too easily have hardened into a career criminal. He too is not a "bad" person, of course, and how refreshing it is, after decades of inferior American films on "dysfunctional families" and maltreated children, to rediscover this absence of moral polarities. "**LES QUATRE CENTS COUPS**" may be shot in black and white, but it is challenging in its shades of grey.

If there is a *J'Accuse* subtext to this film, it is not directed at callous institutional authorities or the heartlessness of the juvenile court system. When he steals the typewriter from his father's office and is caught trying to return it, Antoine's father is called, not the police. And although the dialogue later makes plain that Remy is not the boy's natural father, what is unforgivable is the way his parents wash their hands of responsibility for him, delivering him to the authorities, as his mother says, "to put a fright into him". Thirty years and more after this film was made, some middle class parents are still doing likewise with their "unmanageable" teenage sons and daughters. Since the later films in the Doinel cycle show the character develop into an averagely well-adjusted adult, this begs the question whether the boy was indeed "rescued" in the nick of time or not. It is hardly the question Truffaut intended us to ask, but his film leaves blank the solution to the conundrum it poses. The boy turns out alright in the end, but is that **despite** being packed off to an "observation centre for delinquent minors"? Or because of it? There is a film missing between the end of "**QUATRE CENTS COUPS**" and the start of "**Antoine et Colette**".

The film is about freedom, we're told, as expressed in the fluidity of the exterior camera as against cramped interior scenes. That is reducing the child to a *motif*, a symbol of something more important than itself. I don't believe that a film-maker with Truffaut's respect and empathy for children saw them as a *motif* in any sense. He does not represent Doinel at 12 as some free spirit chafing against the straitjacket of convention, but as a normal 12-year old whose natural inclination is to slip the leash of adult control whenever feasible. Interestingly, although Truffaut himself would skip school to go the cinema (and who didn't?), the boys in his film spend more time at the fair – the memorable centrifuge sequence – and when they do attend the cinema it does not represent any sort of epiphany for Doinel. He is more inspired by reading Balzac.

I would offer the alternate deconstruction that the camera aims (successfully) to emulate the agitated pace of life at puberty, the short attention span, the constant motion. Truffaut did not need to supplement the excellent editing work with such an intrusive "not a care in the world"

music score, but the film survives this, and the school scenes are every bit as lively as the street footage. His classroom, and the studied rain of derision from the schoolmaster, is very keenly observed, and certainly shows its debt to "**ZERO DE CONDUITE**".

See subject index under **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TITLES, CRIME / DELINQUENCY, OSCAR WINNERS / AWARD WINNERS, PRISON / BORSTAL / APPROVED SCHOOLS, RECOMMENDED TITLES, RUNAWAYS / STOWAWAYS** and **SCHOOL**.