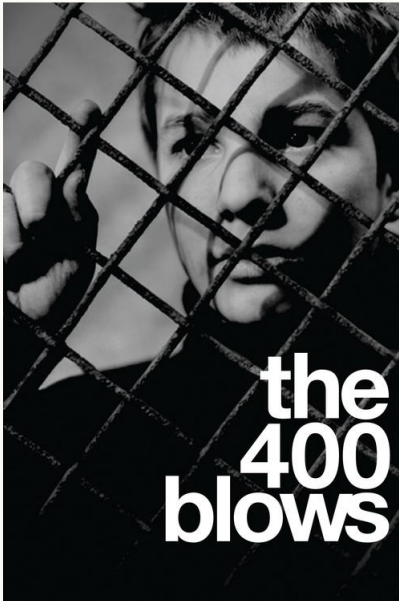




DRAMA

The 400 Blows

1959 · Directed by François Truffaut

French New Wave

Art Cinema

Auteur Cinema

A restless Parisian schoolboy, misunderstood at school and uneasy at home, drifts through streets and cinemas looking for a little freedom. Truffaut's first feature is tender, observant and unsentimental, told from a child's level rather than an adult's.

DIRECTOR	François Truffaut
YEAR	1959
RUNTIME	1h 39m (99 min)
COUNTRY	France
GENRES	Drama
CAST	Jean-Pierre Léaud, Claire Maurier, Albert Rémy, Georges Flamant, Patrick Auffay
MUSIC	Jean Constantin
IMDB	8.0 / 10 (134,367 votes)
ROTTEN TOMATOES	99% (critics)
TMDB SCORE	8.0 / 10 (2,394 votes)
WHERE TO WATCH	Stream (US): HBO Max Amazon Channel, HBO Max Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 The film that launched the French New Wave

Truffaut's first feature, made after years as a sharp critic, was the breakthrough that put the New Wave on the world map in 1959 and won him Best Director at Cannes.

2 A child's point of view, without sentimentality

Childhood is rarely shown this honestly. The film trusts small gestures, bad choices and silences over speeches, and Jean-Pierre L  aud's performance gives it a rawness that still feels unforced.

3 Cinema that feels like real streets and real time

Location shooting in Paris, light equipment and a mobile camera make the city a living presence. It is a good way to see how the New Wave loosened film grammar.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of the French New Wave and the model for the personal, semi-autobiographical debut. It showed that a small, observant, low-budget film could carry as much authority as the polished studio cinema it challenged.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a film about being looked at, judged and misread by adults, while the camera tries to simply look at the boy.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How often the camera stays with Antoine in motion, walking or running through Paris, rather than cutting away for explanation.
- How the adults speak: teachers, parents and officials mostly give orders or accusations, rarely real questions.
- The small pleasures and escapes in the film, from the cinema to a street fair, and how the mood lightens in them.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

Is Antoine really a troublemaker, or does everyone around him simply stop listening long before he misbehaves?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** French production was dominated by literary, studio-bound adaptations. Young directors had few routes in, until cheaper, lighter equipment and new financing made small independent features possible.
- **Dominant styles:** Critics at Cahiers du Cinéma attacked this 'tradition of quality' as stiff and over-written, and championed directors with a personal voice, from Hitchcock and Hawks to Renoir and Rossellini.
- **Director's moment:** Truffaut was a notorious critic, reportedly unwelcome at Cannes in 1958. A year later he returned with his own first feature, which meant his theories were now on trial.
- **Technology:** Fast black-and-white stock, portable cameras and location sound let filmmakers leave the studio. Shot in widescreen, the film still keeps a documentary closeness.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

Zero for Conduct (1933)

Jean Vigo's anarchic school film showed childhood rebellion against institutions and was a clear spiritual ancestor for Truffaut's boyhood portrait.



MOVEMENT

Italian Neorealism

Location shooting, ordinary people and the observation of social reality, especially in films with children at their centre, shaped the film's look and ethics.



TRADITION

Cahiers du Cinéma criticism

The magazine's attacks on stiff studio filmmaking and its defence of personal directors gave Truffaut the ideas he put into practice.



THIS FILM

The 400 Blows (1959)

NEW AT THE TIME *A first-person, location-shot portrait of childhood by a former critic, treating a boy's inner life with the seriousness usually reserved for adult drama.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in France in 1958–59, in the Fourth Republic's last months, as a young generation grew up amid postwar reconstruction, housing shortages and rigid schooling.

- **Country and moment:** France was rebuilding and modernising after the Second World War, but Paris still had cramped, overcrowded housing. The Algerian War and political crisis brought de Gaulle back to power in 1958, the year before the film's release.
- **Youth and schooling:** Postwar France was newly interested in its young people, and in the strictness of its schools and the limits of family life. The film looks at childhood from a child's point of view, which was unusual for the time.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Truffaut had been a hard-hitting critic at Cahiers du cinéma, and this was his first feature. He drew on his own troubled childhood and adolescence in Paris. Success at Cannes in 1959 made him a leading figure of the New Wave.
- **Society and audience:** Many French viewers had grown tired of the official, polished image of the nation. A new generation of filmmakers and young audiences welcomed a personal, street-level portrait of ordinary Paris life.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Unhurried and episodic. Scenes build a life rather than a plot, but the film is short and never drags.
- **Tone:** Comic, tender and sad by turns, often within the same scene. Not a melodrama, despite the subject.
- **Performance:** Naturalistic, with a very young lead and many non-star faces. Some scenes feel improvised.
- **Format:** Black and white, widescreen (about 2.35:1), shot largely on location in Paris.
- **Language:** French with subtitles. The title is an idiom meaning roughly to raise hell, not a literal count of blows.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

12+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from GB PG and French all-ages (TP) to German FSK 12; 12 suits the subtitles, slow pace and emotional weight, though younger children can watch with you.

Official ratings: US NR · UK PG · Germany 12 · France TP

- **Good for:** A humane, beautifully observed portrait of boyhood and Paris, with playful, mischievous moments. Good for teens curious about classic cinema and the French New Wave.
- **May unsettle, emotional neglect:** A child is often scolded, misunderstood and treated harshly by adults. Quietly sad rather than graphic, but it may affect sensitive viewers.
- **May unsettle, harsh discipline:** Strict, unfair punishment at school and at home, including some physical roughness and humiliation.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Family tension, dishonesty and adult relationships are present, handled without explicit detail.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Black-and-white, subtitled and episodic, with a gentle, unhurried rhythm that younger children may find slow.
- **Explain first:** It is in French with subtitles, so older children will need to read along. Younger ones may need help keeping up.
- **Explain first:** It is set in 1950s Paris, where school discipline and family expectations were much stricter than today.
- **Explain first:** It is black-and-white and unhurried, more a series of moments from a boy's life than a plot-driven adventure.

Talk about it after: *Why do you think Antoine acts the way he does, and how might the adults around him have handled things differently?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film explores how a child is shaped, and cornered, by institutions and adults that care about order more than understanding. It can be read as a plea for attention: Antoine's small rebellions are a search for freedom and for someone who will actually look at him.

THEMES

- **Adult neglect and misunderstanding:** Parents, teacher and officials respond to Antoine's behaviour rather than to him. The film's sadness comes from how ordinary and unmalicious this neglect is.
- **Lies as self-defence:** Antoine lies because truth gets him nowhere. His inventions are clumsy, but they are the only power a child in his position has.
- **Escape through cinema and fiction:** Films, books and street amusements are his refuges. The film shows how stories can feel like freedom, and also how they can get him into trouble.
- **Institutions as cages:** School, the home, the police and the youth system all use rooms and rules to contain him. Confinement is shown in space, through bars, grilles and tight interiors.
- **Freedom and its limits:** Running and moving through Paris and beyond mean liberty, but the film asks what a boy with nowhere to go can do with it.

Key scenes

The classroom punishment and the Balzac incident

Antoine's trouble starts in a petty, unfair way, setting the pattern: an adult misreads a child's sincerity as defiance. Later, his love of Balzac turns against him, showing how little room school leaves for real enthusiasm.

The rotor ride at the fair

A rare moment of pure physical joy, as bodies are pinned to the wall by spinning force. It offers an unsupervised, childlike release and contrasts with the cramped interiors elsewhere.

The interview with the psychologist

Antoine speaks directly, in one steady take, with the questioner largely off screen. The scene works through its simplicity and Léaud's apparently spontaneous answers, and gives the child a voice the adults never allowed him.

The final run to the sea and freeze frame

After a long escape, Antoine reaches the water and turns to the camera. The freeze leaves his future unresolved and turns the audience into the one adult who must finally look at him.

Filmmaking

- **Camera movement:** Henri Decaë's camera follows Antoine in long travelling shots through streets and corridors. A famously long tracking shot of a running boy gives the end its force and its sense of exhausted freedom.
- **Performance:** Jean-Pierre L  aud, about fourteen, was chosen after auditions and brought restless, unguarded energy. Truffaut let him shape scenes, and much of the film's authenticity comes from this looseness.
- **Location and realism:** Shooting in real Parisian streets, apartments and schools gives the film a documentary texture, while the framing and rhythm remain deliberately composed and personal.
- **Structure:** The film is built from small episodes rather than a conventional plot. Their accumulation, with comic bits and sudden grim turns, conveys how trouble builds in a child's life.
- **Music and tone:** Jean Constantin's gentle score supports the film's mix of melancholy and playfulness without turning events into melodrama.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Antoine Doinel, about thirteen, lives in a cramped Paris flat with his mother Gilberte and stepfather Julien. At school he is punished for small offences by a harsh teacher, and at home he is mostly treated as an inconvenience. With his friend Ren   he skips class, wanders the city and goes to the cinema.

His troubles deepen when a piece of writing inspired by Balzac is taken for plagiarism. Fearing punishment, he tells a teacher that his mother has died. The lie is soon exposed, and he runs away, spending nights in the streets and a printing works. He briefly sees his mother with a lover, and later she is unexpectedly kinder to him, but the change does not last.

Antoine and Ren   steal a typewriter from Julien's office. Antoine cannot sell it and tries to put it back, but he is caught. His stepfather hands him over to the police, and he is sent to a centre for young offenders on the coast. There a psychologist questions him, and he tells her of his life. His mother visits only to say she will not take him back.

During a football game, Antoine slips under a fence and runs. He races across fields and along a road until he reaches the sea. He steps into the waves, turns toward the camera, and the image freezes on his face.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **Dedicated to Bazin:** The film is dedicated to Andr   Bazin, the critic who had been Truffaut's mentor and adoptive father figure. Bazin died as shooting began in late 1958 and never saw the film that made Truffaut a director.

- **Critic becomes filmmaker:** Truffaut had written fierce criticism at Cahiers du Cinéma, attacking the French 'tradition of quality'. His own debut was therefore a test of those arguments, and its success gave the New Wave critics credibility.
- **Drawn from his own youth:** Much of Antoine's story echoes Truffaut's childhood: an unhappy home, school troubles, time in a youth institution and a lifelong love of cinema. The film reshapes these experiences rather than documenting them exactly.
- **Finding Léaud:** Truffaut cast Jean-Pierre Léaud after auditioning many boys. His energy and insolence suited the part, and the psychologist scene relied on his largely improvised answers. The role began a lifelong association with Truffaut.
- **Cannes in 1959:** Truffaut had been seen as an unwelcome critic at the 1958 festival. In 1959 the film was shown in competition, won him Best Director and brought immediate international sales.
- **Myth:** The title refers to four hundred beatings Antoine suffers. **Reality:** Faire les quatre cents coups is a French idiom meaning to lead a wild, unruly life. The English title is a literal rendering and loses that meaning.
- **Myth:** The film is a straightforward record of Truffaut's own childhood. **Reality:** It draws heavily on his experiences, but incidents were invented, combined or altered, and Antoine is a fictional character, later developed across several further films.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

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MOVEMENT

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THIS FILM

The 400 Blows (1959)



MOVEMENT

French New Wave

Its success opened the door for Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette and others, proving that small personal films could succeed with audiences.



FILM

Stolen Kisses (1968)

Truffaut and Léaud returned to Antoine Doinel as a young man, continuing a cycle that grew with the actor.



FILM

Breathless (1960)

Godard's debut used a story idea by Truffaut and carried the New Wave's loose, street-level energy into crime fiction.

Reception and reputation

The film was a surprise success at Cannes in 1959, where Truffaut won Best Director. Critics praised its candour and freshness, and it sold widely abroad and found large audiences in France. It quickly became the emblem of a new generation of French filmmakers.

It remains one of the most loved films about childhood and the best entry point to the New Wave. Its reputation has been steady, though attention has shifted from its novelty of style to its emotional honesty and the humane intelligence of its observation.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 1 nomination (Best Story and Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen). Cannes 1959: Best Director (Truffaut); also in competition for the Palme d'Or.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Freeze-frame image:** Antoine's run to the sea, ending on a frozen close-up of his uncertain face, is among cinema's best-known final images. It is often used as shorthand for youthful escape and an open future.
- **Face of rebellious youth:** Jean-Pierre Léaud's Antoine became a lasting emblem of the misunderstood adolescent. His image, on posters and in retrospectives, is often used to stand for the restless young generation of postwar France.
- **A phrase lost in translation:** The French title comes from the idiom "faire les quatre cents coups", meaning to lead a wild, unruly life. The English title translates it literally, so many viewers meet the phrase first as a puzzling title.
- **Classroom staple:** The film is widely screened in film and French-language courses. It is also used in discussions of childhood, schooling and juvenile justice, and as a record of everyday Paris streets in the late 1950s.

Its lasting influence

It set the template for the personal first feature and for coming-of-age cinema that takes a child's perspective seriously. Truffaut and Léaud revisited Antoine Doinel in four more films, creating one of cinema's earliest long-running character studies across a lifetime.

WHAT NEXT?

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Le Beau Serge (1958)

Claude Chabrol's debut is often counted as the first New Wave feature. It shows another young Cahiers critic turning to personal, regional filmmaking.

JUMP FORWARD

Breathless (1960)

Godard's debut takes the New Wave's freedom further, with jump cuts and street shooting. It shows how different the movement's voices were.

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Jules and Jim (1962)

Truffaut's most celebrated early follow-up moves from childhood to adult love, with the same fluid camera and mix of joy and sadness.

SEE WHAT INFLUENCED IT

Zero for Conduct (1933) **COMING SOON**

Vigo's short school rebellion film is a key ancestor of Truffaut's treatment of childhood and institutions.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Bicycle Thieves (1948)

Another street-level film built around a child's gaze and an unforgiving society, from the neorealist tradition that influenced Truffaut.

FULL CAST AND CREW



François Truffaut
DIRECTOR



Jean-Pierre Léaud
ACTOR
as Antoine Doinel



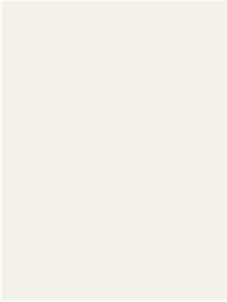
Claire Maurier
ACTOR
as Gilberte Doinel



Albert Rémy
ACTOR
as Julien Doinel



Georges Flamant
ACTOR
as Mr. Bigey



Patrick Auffay

ACTOR

as René



Jean Constantin

COMPOSER

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