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## The 400 Blows: Describing the Problem That Should Never Be Ignored

Francois Truffaut, director of the film *The 400 Blows* (1959), concerns himself with the delinquent child abandoned by the education system and even the family. As a French New Wave director, Truffaut's motive is to represent the real-life drama of an iconoclastic protagonist who searches for love and meaning to his life. The hero ultimately sinks to a life of crime and recidivism however, Truffaut traces for us the stages of his fall and brings to the fore, the underlying reasons for this social deviant.

The prevailing approach to *The 400 Blows* is an ideology in which the underlying principle is Hollywood hegemony. Truffaut's approach is ideology because the themes and concerns revolve around a delinquent child, his family and his school. This movie gives a searing critique against the home, educational and penal institutions. These units are geared toward the development and growth of the individual but in particular circumstances, these systems can be very self-defeating since a child is neglected and resorts to crime. The ideological principle that is represented only in its absence is Hollywood hegemony. Hollywood hegemony advocates a more glossed, superficially perfect portrait of society: a comfortable middle class American family with a good child and responsible parents. However, since this film takes after the Italian Neo-realist tradition, the spectator observes and understands the characters' trials, fears, depression and desperation.

"Antoine's condition is genuinely sad and desperate" (*The Films of Francois Truffaut, David Walsh Reviews*). Antoine attends a boy school where he is the black sheep of the class. In the class, he helps circulate magazines displaying pictures of nude and lewd women. He cheats in class, earns low grades, defaces the walls of the classroom, skips school, fabricates and forges parental letters for his teacher and wanders about the city with his best friend during school time. Because Antoine is disruptive during class, he poses a threat to the martinet teacher, Mr. Sourpuss who in turn constantly kicks him out of class. For almost every grievance in class, all fingers point to Antoine and he is the object of constant censure. Antoine is the product of a flawed education system for although he attends school, he is not improved by it. However not only is there fault in the school institution, but the origin of his delinquency stems from the home. One gets the feeling that not only his teachers but his parents expect him to be a failure and have already given up on him.

From birth, Antoine was unwanted. He is a "bastard child" - born to a poor, single mother who in desperation marries another man to sustain herself and her son. "Truffaut preferred simply to

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point an accusing finger at his parents, especially his mother, as the source of all his unhappiness" (*The Films of Francois Truffaut*). Antoine's mother, Mrs. Doinel is resentful of her son because she is trapped in an unhappy marriage and cannot be with the man whom she truly loves. The resentment is mutual for Doinel tells his teacher one day that he was absent because of his mother's death. During the heated debates between his parents, Antoine always hears his mother wishing that she were rid of him. Mr. Doinel tries to understand his son but the stresses of work and the shaky marriage with his wife overwhelm him. The unhappy marriage, parental negligence, inattention, and loneliness contribute to Antoine's refractory nature. When Mrs. Doinel tries to have a t?te-?-t?te conversation with her son, we learn that neither she nor her husband ever finished school. This piece of information does not bode well for their son, Antoine, who sooner or later will either drop out or be expelled from school.

Although the movie centres on a delinquent child, the spectator discovers that the delinquency is spawned by the delinquency of the parents. Antoine's parents belong to the poor middle class of French society therefore the economic pressures play a role in the parents' inability to adequately take care of Antoine. His living quarters are in the basement of the house and after school he meets an empty house so he is left to his own devices. On one of his rampages in the city, Antoine spots his mother kissing a man who is not his father. This discovery shocks him and as a result, in his esteem, his mother sinks further into scorn and contempt. Antoine's mirror takes the form of another well-off school friend, Fran?ois, whose mother drinks and whose father gambles. When Antoine runs away from home, both he and Fran?ois smoke, drink and gamble in the basement, imitating what they see their parents do. The boy's father is cognizant of his wife's infidelity because she is never home. This small, unhappy family demonstrates at the same time that in both the upper and lower classes, there are juvenile delinquents and hardened criminals in the making. At school during one of Antoine's English classes, the French boys must repeat the sentence, "Where is the father?" This question resounds in the movie which has as one of its themes, the delinquent parenthood. Truffaut indicates that one of society's perennial problems is the absence of the father figure who not only provides but supports and loves his family. In the film, the fathers are bodily present but the mind and heart are not focused on the home. Rejected by both the school and home institutions, Antoine is literally cast out into the streets like a vagabond.

Imagery interspersed in the film includes the Ferris wheel, the music, and Honore de Balzac. The Ferris wheel ride, which Antoine enjoys during his school absence and day of fun, symbolises the confused life that Antoine lives. The revolving ride, in a fast, whirling motion, spins the occupants of the ride at a dizzying speed. This ride physically represents Antoine's life which is spinning out of control. "His actions and reactions are often unsettling, and one can only guess what he'll do next. His attitude is a perfect reflection of the confusion of teenage years, especially in such a complicated life as the one Antoine lives" (*The Four Hundred Blows: A Film Review*). Also, in the few instances where Antoine runs and plays and enjoys his

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childhood, there is the childish, tinkling, fairy-like chime of bells and a baby music box which evoke in the viewer's mind sounds of childish innocence, and frivolity. Unfortunately, to a certain extent, Antoine is robbed of his childhood for he must learn to fend for himself in an outside world too preoccupied in its own troubles than to nurture and care for a child in need. Nevertheless, the only glimmer of hope which is snuffed out for Antoine while at school is Honore de Balzac, a French nineteenth century novelist and playwright with whom Antoine becomes fascinated by his persona and literature.

While studying, Honore de Balzac, a renowned realist French author, Antoine's esteem for this literary giant reaches such a level that he takes a portrait of de Balzac and lights two candles beside it at home: "Honor? de Balzac was taken into a foster home and cared for until the age of four. His mother [...] treated him indifferently. Her lack of affection overshadowed his childhood. Sent to boarding school at the age of eight, Honor? sought a place to escape from the fierce school discipline" (*Honore de Balzac Biography*). Hence one can see the vivid parallel between de Balzac and Antoine as their mothers abandon them and the school system oppresses them and does them a disservice. As a recalcitrant child, we often wonder where did the parents and society go wrong in raising this wayward, iconoclastic, rebel who opposes every authoritative figure in his life. When we delve deeper into his life we make amazing discoveries about his broken home, scholastic failures, and chronic deficiency for love and attention. Antoine's parents make the constant threat of consigning him to boot camp for delinquent juveniles as punishment. Here the viewer is introduced to the French penal system – the place where all the rejects of the school system are abandoned. "Confused and tired, Antoine starts looking for ways out. A day out of school, having fun at a fair, is good enough for starters; but later on, Antoine gives a shot to small-time crime" (*A Film Review by Gon C. Curiel*).

Antoine's resigned parents hand him over to the French judicial system which castigates and imprisons their son. While held captive, Antoine confesses that he was passed around from relative to relative until everyone got tired of him. In the closing scenes of the movie, Antoine's escape from the clutches of the penitentiary can be interpreted as both positive and negative. According to statistics, the majority of those who are released from prison are not rehabilitated and because of recidivism, these juvenile delinquents become hardened convicts and ex-convicts who continue to live in a vicious cycle of returning to jail and being imprisoned again. They cannot be reintegrated within society either because the structure does not fit them or they have no other recourse in the family unit, or the education system. On the positive side, Antoine's escape from prison is a sign of hope and freedom for those who are imprisoned figuratively by the restrictive social systems.

The French New Wave Movement, born of the Italian Neo-Realist Era embraces the spirit of youthful iconoclasm and holds a self-conscious rejection of classical cinematic form. In other words, the Hollywood hegemony is dismissed in favour of a more realist, and critical view of the

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lives of the middle-class and poor masses in society. Francois Truffault himself confesses that the inspiration for the movie was autobiographic for he was a rebellious, iconoclastic youth who never respected authority and who was an outcast at school and at home hardening into a juvenile delinquent. The film is animated by the contrary spirit of Antoine and Truffault. They go against the grain and forge an identity that is totally separate from the rest of the conforming society.

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