Auteur Theory and the French New Wave
Francois Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows*

*The 400 Blows* is the autobiographical first feature film by François Truffaut, who was twenty-seven years old when he made it in 1959. Aside from its intrinsic value as a moving, psychologically acute portrait of the artist as a young man, *The 400 Blows* is historically important because its instant commercial and critical success helped launch a national film movement known as the French New Wave. The New Wave flourished for a relatively short period, between 1959 and 1963, when certain historical, technological, and economic factors combined to give considerable influence to a number of young French filmmakers who had started out as film critics, theorists, and historians. Aside from Truffaut, the most well known New Wave directors were Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, and Eric Rohmer, all of whom wrote polemical articles on the cinema in the 1950s for the film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, founded and edited by André Bazin. Although the style and content of the films they eventually would make varied considerably, New Wave directors resembled the Soviet filmmakers in the 1920s in that their cinematic innovations were strongly influenced by their theories about film and the nature of the film medium.

A major inspiration for the New Wave critics-turned-filmmakers came from the writings of the French film critic Alexandre Astruc, who published an influential article in 1948 called “Camera Stylo” (Camera-Pen). Astruc argued that cinema was potentially a means of expression as subtle and complex as written language. He argued that cinema too was a language, “a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in a contemporary essay or novel.” Influenced by Astruc, New Wave directors embraced what was then a revolutionary new way of understanding and interpreting films. They promoted in their critical writings what Truffaut called “les politiques des auteurs” (the author policy), which the American film critic Andrew Sarris referred to as “auteur theory.”

An underlying assumption of auteur theory was Astruc’s idea that, despite film’s status as primarily a commercial entertainment medium, it could potentially be an art form as powerful in its means of expression as literature or poetry. In order to propose filmmaking as an art, however, there had to be an artist, a central consciousness whose vision is inscribed in the work. How was this possible in a medium that is basically collaborative, a combination of the efforts of producers, directors, scriptwriters, set designers, editors, cameramen, actors, and others? For the French New Wave theorists, the author of the film (the auteur) was the director.

Traditionally the “author” of the film was thought to be the screenwriter, the author of the script upon which the film was based. The French New Wave theorists disagreed. They believed that the written script of a film is only a blueprint, raw material that achieves meaning or significance only when the words are embodied in images on the screen. As they saw it, since the director is responsible for the images, he oversees the set designs, cinematography, editing, and performances of the actors, and also, in many cases, reworks the screenplay or script. Thus, according to the New Wave critics, it is the director and not the screenwriter whose artistic vision is inscribed onto the film.

Certain directors, to be sure, had long been understood as artists, but only in the noncommercial art cinema of Europe and Japan: filmmakers such as Bergman, Bresson, Ozu, and Murnau, who had a great deal of creative freedom in the making of their works. But the French New Wave
theorists believed that even in that most commercial realm—the Hollywood film factory, where directors were under contract to the studios and thus assigned the works they were to direct—the works of certain filmmakers were always marked by the director's individual themes, psychological preoccupations, and stylistic practices. They singled out and praised such directors as Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, John Ford, and Orson Welles, calling them auteurs, film artists of the highest order.

Proponents of the French New Wave differentiated auteurs from auteurs en scène, directors who faithfully adapted the work of others and did not inscribe their individual personalities or styles onto their films. In Truffaut’s most famous attack on classic French film, an article entitled “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” he especially criticizes the writing team of Jean Aurens and Pierre Bost for being merely literary men and thus disingenuously underestimating the unique power of cinematic language. He praised French directors like Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Abel Gance, and Max Ophuls (who had emigrated from Germany to France), for making visually innovative films in their own distinct styles and for creating their films from their own stories. These directors were true auteurs.

VIRTUES AND LIMITATIONS OF AUTEUR THEORY

The public and many academic critics embraced auteur theory for the simple reason that this approach to understanding and categorizing films was and still is so compelling. General audiences and film specialists alike have strong feelings about certain favorite directors and continue to think about what makes a particular director’s work individual and distinct. This book is itself a testament to the ongoing popularity and influence of auteur theory in academia, because its chapters are organized to highlight the stylistic innovations of individual directors. Nevertheless, auteur criticism came under attack in the late 1960s and early 1970s by academic critics who pointed out its limitations. Auteur theorists, it was argued, had simply revived the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition of viewing the artist as a creative genius who stood apart from society and enriched the world with his unique, often liberating vision.

This Romantic conception of the artist was criticized from a number of perspectives. The idea of the auteur as visionary genius assumes that the artist is a unified subject, who consciously inscribes a profound meaning upon his or her works. This view was seen as hopelessly naïve by psychoanalytic critics, who understand the artist not just as a conscious producer of messages but as someone prone to unconscious impulses as well. Although the artist may intend a certain message or theme, the psychoanalytic critic can read beneath the surface of the text to reveal other themes and preoccupations of which the artist may be entirely unaware. Interestingly, in this regard, until Alfred Hitchcock was confronted with his obsessive preoccupations with guilt and voyeurism in his films by the French auteur theorists, he was largely unaware of them.

The Romantic conception of the artist was also undercut by sociological critics. Claims for the artist as an individual genius, they argued, failed to take into account the effect of society on the artist’s work. While few would deny that the will and talent of the artist play a role in the creation of a work of art, it is true as well that the artist’s products are often determined by historical and social forces that act upon him or her. As Andre Bazin wrote as a corrective to the excesses of auteur theory, “The individual transcends society, but society is also and above all within him.” New theories were called for that locate directors within their historical and social contexts.

The strongest detractors of auteur theory were academic critics influenced by both Marx and Freud for whom this approach to film study was simply irrelevant. These critics were not interested in studying film as an art and in interpreting the artist’s message. They were interested in understanding the process by which a culture’s ideology, be it capitalist consumer values or patriarchal ideas about gender, were reproduced and maintained through mass media. Not surprisingly, these critics did not concern themselves with what makes a director individual and unique. They wanted to know how the operations of ideology spoke through a director’s work in such a way as to maintain the status quo, and how the power structures of society were kept intact by works that reflected a world in which that power seemed natural and hence justified. Feminist critics, for example, thought films helped maintain the power of patriarchy, the “natural” dominance of men over women. From the feminist perspective, it matters little who is directing the film. In every film the same stereotypes of women are regularly found—women appearing as either virgins or whores; the dumb blond; the smart, independent woman who ends up somehow punished by the film’s plot—stereotypes which reinforce women’s subordinate social place.

Roland Barthes’s influential essay “The Death of the Author” challenged auteur theory from yet another angle, by pronouncing the death of the author and the birth of the reader. Once the word is on the page (and by extension, once the image is up on the screen), Barthes argues,
the author disappears behind the text. Meaning is determined not by the intent of the author, but by the mind of the reader or receiver of the text. For Barthes, then, it is the text which speaks, not the author. The author, from this perspective, is a fiction constructed out of traces in the text by the reader. Barthes was far more concerned with the fiction of the author than he was with the author of the fiction.

Despite these critiques of auteur theory, it has nevertheless been highly influential in the establishment of film studies at the college and university level. Because it postulated film as an art form and film directors as artists, the auteur approach established film as a serious object of study. College courses are regularly organized around the works of one filmmaker. Moreover, auteur theory’s emphasis on a director’s individual style and his or her thematic preoccupations was instrumental in encouraging close formal analyses of films, as opposed to far less rigorous, impressionistic forms of criticism that were the norm before. In order to detect just exactly what was individual about a certain director’s style, critics began to scrutinize films minutely, frame by frame, shot by shot, on editing tables, well before video technology made this kind of study even more practicable. A sequence of film got the same kind of minute attention as a line in a poem or a paragraph in a novel. Finally, auteur theory remains an important critical approach to film if only because its very limitations raise so many interesting and important critical questions, opening up new paths for film study.

NEW WAVE THEORY IN PRACTICE

The New Wave theorists eventually succeeded in becoming filmmakers for a number of reasons. First of all, as was not the case in America, where the film industry was almost totally dominated by Hollywood, in France there were encouraging precedents for independent film production. Renoir, for example, was successful enough to form his own production company in the late thirties. The turning point for the New Wave came when Roger Vadim’s independent production And God Created Woman became a huge international success in 1957. Vadim’s success gave hope that filmmaking outside the established studio system in France could be commercially viable. It was in this context that Truffaut’s father-in-law, a well-known film distributor whose films Truffaut scathingly reviewed, finally made him a proposition, saying, in effect: “If you know so much, why don’t you make a film?” He advanced him about 100,000 francs. With this money, along with government subsidies and the financial backing of friends, Truffaut made Les Quatre Cents Coups (The 400 Blows). In 1958, Truffaut was banned from the Cannes Film Festival for his violent denunciation of festivals and his uncompromising attitude toward most of the films shown there. The very next year The 400 Blows was the official French entry at Cannes and Truffaut won the prize for best director. The 400 Blows, which is as fresh and moving today as when it first came out in 1959, wonderfully illustrates what was new about the French New Wave.

In The 400 Blows, true to the spirit of Alexandre Astruc’s conception of the camera stylo, Truffaut creates a film language to translate subtle nuances of feelings and ideas into film, thereby demonstrating that film can be as emotionally and intellectually evocative and complex as a work of literature. The film itself is not a literary adaptation. Truffaut himself wrote the story and adapted it for the screen, with the collaboration of Marcel Moussy, who helped in the creation of the dialogue. The story of the film was patently autobiographical, based on Truffaut’s own childhood experiences. Not all New Wave films, nor all of Truffaut’s films, were autobiographical. Many of them were even based on literary works. Most New Wave films were personal, however, in that the directors usually worked from their own screenplays, and the films reflected their own personal styles and thematic preoccupations.

The “400 blows” of the film’s title comes from the French idiom “faire les quatre cents coups” which means “to raise hell.” While The 400 Blows is certainly about a child who raises hell—rebelling against authority by playing hooky and stealing—the title has a double meaning. It not only refers to the exploits of a hell-raising adolescent rebel, but also alludes to the blows dealt the child by his insensitive, neglectful parents and the bullying school and state authorities—the kinds of blows to a young person’s psyche that could well cause a child to become alienated and raise hell. This is a subject about which Truffaut knew a good deal.

A short biographical sketch reveals the extent to which The 400 Blows was based on Truffaut’s life. Truffaut was born out of wedlock in Paris in 1932 to a seventeen-year-old mother who had little interest in raising a child. First, she turned him over to a wet nurse and, subsequently, to his mother. He returned to live with his mother when he was eight, after his grandmother died. In the meantime, his mother had married Roland Truffaut, an architect who was not Truffaut’s biological father but who gave him his name. (Truffaut never met his real father, who was later revealed to be a Jewish dentist.) An unwanted child, neglected by his parents, Truffaut took refuge in reading and the cinema.
Antoine Doinel, the protagonist of *The 400 Blows* (played by Truffaut look-alike Jean-Pierre Léaud), has the same life history as Truffaut. He too is born out of wedlock and his parents find him a burden. Just as Truffaut did as a child, Antoine plays hooky from school with his best friend (called René in the film and played by Patrick Auffay), sneaking into the cinema and committing petty thefts. Fittingly, Robert Lachenauer, the real René, worked with Truffaut as an assistant on *The 400 Blows*.

Truffaut ran away from home at age eleven after an outlandish excuse for playing hooky backfired. He claimed he was not in school because his (adoptive) father had been taken away by the Germans, something that had actually happened to his uncle the week before. He was exposed when his father came to school to pick him up that day. (In the film, Truffaut makes the lie even more outrageous by having Antoine claim that he was not in school because his mother died.) Although his father tracked him down and returned him to school, Truffaut was so oppressed by the school authorities, who seemed to watch his every move, that he ran away again, living on a series of odd jobs and minor thefts, including the theft of a typewriter. It was during this period of his life that Truffaut started a film cub and met André Bazin, who was running a rival film club. Although Antoine Doinel plays hooky from school in order to see movies, Truffaut’s systematic and scholarly interest in film at that age is not reflected in *The 400 Blows*.

Truffaut’s adoptive father eventually found him and turned him over to the police, which also happens in *The 400 Blows*. Truffaut shares with Hitchcock the childhood trauma of having his father instruct the authorities to lock him up in jail for his misbehavior. But whereas Hitchcock was locked up for five minutes, Truffaut spent two nights in jail before being sent to an Observation Center for Delinquent Minors. The most poignant moments in *The 400 Blows* are those in which Antoine is being turned over by his father to the police, booked for vagrancy and theft, locked up in a holding cell with prostitutes and thieves, and transported by paddy wagon to the central prison in Paris.

At the end of *The 400 Blows*, Antoine makes a wild dash for freedom from the Center for Delinquent Minors. During a soccer game, he escapes through a hole in a fence and runs to the sea. He has achieved his goal of finally getting to see the ocean, but at the same time he realizes he is trapped. As he wades into the water, he sees he has nowhere else to run. This is where we leave Antoine, on the edge of the ocean, at the conclusion of *The 400 Blows*. In real life, Truffaut was rescued from the authority of the state by André Bazin who, though only thirteen years older than Truffaut, became his substitute father, taking him under his wing and giving him his first paying job writing about film. Truffaut writes: "From that day in 1948 when he got me my first film job, working alongside him, I became his adopted son. . . . Thereafter, every pleasant thing that happened in my life I owed to him.”

In addition to its highly personal content, *The 400 Blows* exemplifies New Wave policy in its allegiance to the image. As I noted above, the New Wave theorists believed that cinema should not be a transparent form through which other arts, such as novels or plays, are transmitted, but a unique aesthetic system in its own right whose essence was visual. In the introduction to his extended interview with Alfred Hitchcock, Truffaut praises Hitchcock’s “unique ability to film the thoughts of his characters and make them perceptible without resorting to dialogue.” *The 400 Blows*, which also resembles *The Bicycle Thief* in this regard, is filled with long passages in which images rather than words tell us everything we need to know.

For example, Antoine Doinel’s unhappiness in his home, his feeling of being an unwanted outsider whom his parents would like to get rid of, is given poignant visual expression when he is shown fulfilling his nightly chore of taking out the garbage. Truffaut’s camera follows Antoine carrying the garbage down four flights of stairs to the basement of the depressingly shabby apartment complex in which he lives. His inner feelings of bleakness are manifest when the light in the cellar goes off just as he is depositing the garbage and, at that moment we hear an infant crying. While the infant’s cry is realistically motivated, because we can interpret the sound as coming from one of the apartments, the cry, in conjunction with Antoine’s act of throwing out the garbage, also expresses Antoine’s bleak feelings of being an unwanted child. He is aware, as we learn later during his interview with a psychiatrist, that his mother had wanted to throw him away (by having an abortion). The light going out in the cellar foreshadows the light that will soon go out of his life when his parents in essence throw him away by signing him over to the state authorities.

Truffaut is equally effective in giving visual expression to Antoine Doinel’s feelings of elation when he and René escape the stifling regime of the classroom when they play hooky. Their elation is expressed not in words but through their movements and the style in which they are photographed. The boys, followed by the camera, run down endless tiers of stairs until they reach the roof where they wade into the sea. Their happiness is captured in a single shot that passes through the shadows of the boys and in the memory of André Bazin, who had died in 1958 at the age of forty.
steps, their arms extended, almost as if they were flying. Antoine and René are again visually associated with birds when a flock of pigeons takes glorious flight as the boys approach it. Truffaut photographs Antoine and René in their all-too-few moments of freedom with a moving camera in wide-angle, deep-focus long shots. Wide-angle lenses tend to exaggerate the distance between foreground and background planes, making the world seem open and expansive, the perfect lens choice, when combined with a freely mobile camera, for conveying a feeling of unbounded freedom.

Once Antoine is caught and jailed, the space around him in the frame shrinks as Truffaut photographs him in tightly framed close shots. Our view of him, moreover, is increasingly obscured as he is photographed through the grillwork of the cagelike holding cell where he must wait before being transported to a more permanent prison. In one shot, his face is enframed by a segment of the imprisoning grid pattern, creating the effect of a noose tightened around his neck. (See figure 36.) In addition, the point-of-view shots (from Antoine’s position) become increasingly obscured by the structures in which he is imprisoned. This occurs, for example, when he is in the paddy wagon on his way to prison. The gleaming streets of Paris whiz by obscured by the vehicle’s steel bars.

Throughout The 400 Blows, Truffaut’s camera stylo visually expresses the film’s over-arching theme—that children’s natural desire for spontaneity and freedom is continually stamped out by social forces that entrap and constrict them. The schoolroom scenes at the beginning of the film convey the tension between regimentation and freedom as the students create little moments of spontaneous pleasure even as they are fixed in the formal rows of the traditional classroom. They secretly pass around a figure of a seminude woman and erupt in suggestive amorous poses behind the teacher’s back while he writes a poem on the blackboard about the love life of a hare.

In one of the most delightful sequences in the film, which we witness from a high-angle overhead shot, a physical education instructor herds his students on an exercise run through the streets of Paris. As the run proceeds, small groups of children sneak away, little by little, until the class of nearly thirty students has dwindled down to two. Even by including this extended sight gag in The 400 Blows, Truffaut does his own kind of breaking away from the conventions of the tightly constructed plot-driven films of the conventional cinema. This sequence does nothing to further the film’s plot. It functions thematically as a visual riff on the subject of childhood rebellion against adult regimentation.

While Antoine and René make plans to steal a typewriter, Truffaut interrupts the narrative flow of the film once again to linger on the rapt faces of young children watching a “Little Red Riding Hood” puppet show. Their feelings of terror, amusement, pleasure, triumph, and surprise are written on their faces for all to see. (See figure 37.) Here Truffaut documents that magical time in children’s lives when they still have the freedom and innocence to express what they feel, before they learn to hide their spontaneity and aliveness. In addition,
this scene exemplifies another feature of New Wave cinema, the appearance of tributes or homages to the cinema of the past which played such a large part in inspiring the New Wave theorists to become directors. In this instance, Truffaut’s study of the children echoes a scene in the pioneering Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera (1928), in which the camera dwells with the same kind of fascination on the uninhibited expressive faces of children watching a magic show.

SEQUENCE ANALYSIS: BAZIN’S INFLUENCE ON TRUFFAUT

Since many of the New Wave directors (Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, and Rivette) wrote for Cahiers du Cinéma, a journal founded and edited by André Bazin, the style of their films was influenced by Bazin’s realist aesthetic, though each of the above-mentioned directors adapted the style in distinctly individual ways. Two sequences from near the end of The 400 Blows demonstrate Truffaut’s adaptation of Bazin’s realist aesthetic for his own artistic ends. The first is a forty-five-second-long take near the end of The 400 Blows depicting the scene in which Antoine escapes from the soccer game, and the second is the even longer take that follows, which lasts seventy-five seconds as Antoine makes his run for the sea.

In the first shot, Antoine is playing soccer with the other inmates of the center for delinquent boys. When a ball goes out of bounds, the camera follows Antoine who, after rushing to retrieve it and tossing it back into the game, suddenly goes out of bounds himself. The camera pans with him as he runs toward frame left and slips through a hole at the bottom of a wire fence. At this point the camera swish pans right, taking us back to the playing field, revealing that a guard has seen Antoine’s escape. The camera follows the guard as he too slips through the hole in the fence in pursuit of Antoine. At this point the camera swish pans again, this time to the left, until it captures the image of Antoine in extreme long shot running along the edge of a pond. The guard then enters the frame from the bottom corner of frame right and begins running after Antoine, rapidly gaining ground.

In a classically edited film, the action of this shot would be broken down into a number of cuts and there would be cross-cuts between shots of the escaping Antoine and the pursuing guard. Truffaut, by shooting the action in one long take, precisely defines the exact spatial relation between Antoine and the guard, and thus makes the action more compelling. Because in this shot the temporal and spatial dimensions of the action remain intact, we realize that the guard has seen Antoine’s escape as it was happening and that he pursues the runaway without missing a beat. By preserving the actual spatial relationship between pursuer and pursued, we receive a heightened awareness of Antoine’s danger of being captured.

The seventy-five-second tracking shot in which we focus on Antoine as he runs through the country landscape toward the sea also demonstrates Bazin’s idea that some actions need to be represented in real time in order to be dramatically effective. Because we are permitted to see an unedited shot of Antoine running for a relatively long time without showing the least indication of fatigue, we are better able to experience along with him the pure adrenaline-fueled exhilaration of his bid for freedom.

THE FAMOUS FREEZE-FRAME

Antoine’s exuberant run from the repressive reformatory to the boundless realm of the sea culminates in the famous freeze-frame and zoom shot which bring the film (and Antoine’s hope of escape) to an abrupt halt. This film-ending technique, which subsequently became something of a cinematic cliché, came as a shock to audiences in 1959 and maintains its power to unsettle audiences. The use of the freeze-frame and zoom shot here epitomizes another aspect of New Wave style that distinguishes it from classical cinema. In films made in the classical Hollywood style, filmmakers conceal the traces of the cinematic apparatus so as not to interfere with the spectator’s immersion in the fiction. Here, the sudden freezing of the frame foregrounds the film medium, reminding us that films are made up of segments of still frames which present an illusion of animated life only when projected at 24 frames per second. Truffaut, it seems, was willing to take the risk of exposing the artifice of his medium because by doing so he was able to take the medium to new expressive heights. Just as Eisenstein’s animated stone lion violated realism to achieve a poetic effect in the Odessa Steps sequence, the freeze-frame at the end of The 400 Blows abandons Bazinian realism to function as a powerful metaphor for Antoine’s final and definitive entrapment in a system from which there is no escape. Even the word of the title (FIN) functions not just as a word but as an image. Superimposed over Antoine’s frozen face the letters F-I-N resemble the bars that obscured our view of him in the prison scenes, signaling not just that the film has ended but that Antoine’s hopes for escape and freedom are finished too. (See figure 38.)
NEW WAVE SELF-REFLEXIVITY

In fact, the unique visual language of cinema is foregrounded not only in this final shot but throughout *The 400 Blows* in the flamboyance of the tracking and panning shots, high-angle shots, swish pans, lap dissolves, jump cuts, and freeze-frames—all of which draw attention to the filmmaking process. The use of the swish pan in the shot where Antoine escapes is typically New Wave because even as it allows Truffaut to adhere to Bazin’s realist aesthetic by maintaining spatial unity within the shot, it is simultaneously self-reflexive in that the blurry, jerky movement of the swish pan loudly calls attention to the medium. We become aware not just of a tale but of a “teller,” the auteur behind the camera, whose style is every bit as important as the content.

*The 400 Blows* is not only self-reflexive in its foregrounding of technique; the institution of the cinema is an overt presence in the film, another common feature of New Wave films. Thus the film repeatedly incorporates the cinema into its plot. It is the place of guilty pleasure where Antoine and René go when they play hooky. The rare moment in which the Doinel family are shown having fun together as a family is when they are playfully discussing a film they have just seen together, Jacques Rivette’s *Paris Belongs to Us*, another landmark of the New Wave cinema. In addition to these literal references to the cinema, there are indirect insider references as well, reflecting Truffaut’s fascination with film history. Antoine, for example, goes for a ride at an amusement park on the "Rotor," a large cylindrical drum which is photographed to resemble a giant Zoetrope, the eighteenth-century animation toy which was the precursor of the cinema. Antoine’s long ride on the paddy wagon recalls Thomas Edison’s (and hence the cinema’s) first movie studio, which was called “The Black Maria,” a slang term for paddy wagon. I have already mentioned the scene of the children at the puppet show, an homage to Dziga Vertov’s *The Man with the Movie Camera*, a brilliant early example of a self-reflexive film.

Truffaut’s use in *The 400 Blows* of cinematic techniques, such as the zoom shot and swish pan, that call attention to the film medium also illustrates how much Truffaut was indebted to “direct cinema,” or cinéma vérité, a documentary film movement that began in the late fifties. Direct-cinema filmmakers utilized lightweight mobile equipment, fast film stock, and the hand-held camera to record events spontaneously, as they were happening. They frequently employed zoom lenses to bring the spectator closer to spatially distant events or used swish pans to follow rapidly unfolding actions. Truffaut adopted direct cinema’s style, techniques, and location shooting partly out of necessity—it was cheaper to make films that way—but the fact that such techniques are associated with documentary truth lends an aura of authenticity to Truffaut’s poetic fictions, just as it does to the Italian neorealist films discussed in chapter 6.

Truffaut employs jump cuts, or deliberately jerky edits, during Antoine’s interview with the psychiatrist to give the interview a documentary quality. Jump cuts during an interview are often used in documentary films to indicate that parts of the interview have been elided and that we are seeing only the significant parts. To add further to the documentary effect, Truffaut directed Jean-Pierre Léaud to improvise his answers to the psychiatrist’s questions rather than having him speak from a script. Truffaut writes of Léaud’s performance: “He instinctively found the right gestures, his corrections imparted to the dialogue the ring of truth and I encouraged him to use the words of his own vocabulary. . . . When he saw the final cut, Jean-Pierre, who had laughed his way through the shooting, burst into tears: behind this autobiographical chronicle of mine, he recognized the story of his own life.”

The scene with the psychiatrist has a particularly disturbing effect because of the way Truffaut uses sound. The psychiatrist questioning Antoine never appears on the screen. We only hear her questions. Her presence as an interrogating voice without a body perfectly captures the cool impersonality of the system in which Antoine has been abandoned. Interestingly, the choice of constructing the scene in this way was not delib-
erate but was due to serendipity. The actress Truffaut wanted to play the part of the psychiatrist (Jeanne Moreau) was not available at the scene was shot and Truffaut could not afford to wait. His solution was to record her questions after the interview scene was filmed and dub Moreau’s voice into the interview scene. This scene, made effective because of Truffaut’s improvised sound technique, marks the beginning of Antoine’s final defeat, which is given powerful visual expression in the final freeze-frame.

The ending of *The 400 Blows*, like the ending of *The Bicycle Thief*, is painful. The pain, however, is made bearable because of Truffaut’s cinematic virtuosity. The skill with which the events are depicted helps to contain the sadness of the story. Or perhaps in the case of *The 400 Blows* the pain is also alleviated because we know subliminally that the boy whose tragic story of freedom lost is told, is a stand-in for the director the film, who opened up new channels for freedom in filmmaking. Far from being punished like Antoine for breaking the rules, Truffaut has become the celebrated auteur whose first film ushered in the cinematic fresh air of the French New Wave.