Francois Truffaut's film classic, "The 400 Blows," can provide artistic material for English teachers who wish to design a unit on the individual and society, on alienation, or on growing up. In the film, a powerful image of the terrifying isolation that the adolescent, Doinel, experiences is presented through repeated camera shots of symbolic barriers in his environment--his cramped and cluttered apartment-home, the drab decay and gloom of the inner city, the selfish preoccupation of his teacher and parents, and, finally, the immense and impersonal ocean. To help students understand this film as art, such questions can be discussed as--(1) how natural background-effects, camera angles, and film sequences establish the sense of Doinel's environment, (2) how images and symbols heighten the effect of the boy's complete isolation, and (3) how the boy's world is brought into sharp conflict with the adult world. (JB)
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THE
400
BLOWS
Will it speak to them? Immediately, that
question comes to mind when you think of pairing
Francois Truffaut's 8-year-old film classic with
American teenagers raised on TV pap and Holly-
wood films. *The 400 Blows* was the first of the
New Wave films; it introduced a great new director-
torial talent to world cinema. The newly-edited
16 mm version retains the rough, authentic quality
of the original which stands in such stark contrast
to the slick film made in this country.

From the opening credits to the final haunting
still of young Doinel's face, *The 400 Blows* reflects
the tragic, helpless existence of a young Parisian
boy. One teacher who viewed the film with me won-
dered if such an agonizing experience would be a
healthy experience for teenagers since there was
no redeeming adult-figure in the film. It is this ab-
sence of decent adult models, however, that gives
extra dimension to Doinel's plight. Truffaut's study
is unconventional because there is no psychiatrist
in the background, no understanding friend, no pet
to silently commune with—nothing.

Doinel is hopelessly alone. His mother is a vain,
vindictive woman who selfishly resents her son.
(At one point he overhears that he was the unwant-
ed offspring of an illicit affair.) His father, with
whom he has some rapport at the film's beginning,
is feeble and ineffective. The school teacher we
meet at the opening of the film is unable to cope
with his students and avoids contact by keeping
them busy. Doinel's classmate is his only friend.
Their relationship ends when Doinel is sent to re-
form school by his unfeeling parents.

To emphasize how inexorably trapped Doinel
is, Truffaut uses scores of shots that communicate
an overwhelming sense of constriction. The cramped,
cramped apartment Doinel and his parents oc-
cupy is revealed through carefully angled shots.
Doinel is seen repeatedly in cage-like or confining
quarters. Even in the sequence where he and his
friend are playing hookey, the main footage is de-
voted to shots of him spinning in a whirling cylin-
der in an amusement hall.

When he has eluded his reform school pursuer
at the film's end and runs down to the beach and
out across the long stretch of sand to the ocean's
edge, he meets the final barrier—the immense, in-
different sea.

When the background music and the visual im-
ages slow to that last wrenching shot of Doinel's
bewildered face, his inner desolation is perfectly
mirrored. Words fail, the camera tells all.

Truffaut's vision would have relevance to the
teenager trying to achieve some sense of self in an
urban ghetto. The drab gloom of the city, the nar-
row littered streets, the run-down buildings, the
filthy, peeling walls in rooms and hallways, and
the stifling lack of privacy in Doinel's home are
all sensitively recorded. A sociologist or psychol-
ologist reviewing the plot of *The 400 Blows* might
dismiss it as another cliché-ridden account of a
boy drifting into delinquency. But it is Truffaut's
sense of environment that transmutes a familiar
story into art. An English teacher designing a unit
on the individual and society, on alienation, or on
growing up, could make good use of this film. The
message of *The 400 Blows* is as old as life, and it
is made without sermons.

CINEMA-Q'S

1. How does the sequence during the opening
credits establish the tone of the film? Are the
opening shots in any way analogous to Doin-
el's life?

2. Cite at least five examples in which Doinel
is caged in different ways. Can you describe
Doinel's expression during these specific shots?

3. In which sequences does Truffaut eliminate
background music and concentrate on natural
sounds? Was his use of natural sounds effec-
tive?

4. Shots of Doinel behind various grills, grat-
ings, etc., are numerous. Can you remember
any instances when mirrors were used? To
what effect?

5. Why was the series of dissolves used when
Doinel was relating his experiences to the psy-
chologist?

6. One perceptive teacher noted that the final
still held the quality of a newspaper photo-
graph. Does this impression suggest any fur-
ther ideas?

7. Can you cite instances in which Truffaut's
use of the camera conveys Doinel's subjective
view of adults?

8. Outwardly, Doinel does not possess any
impressive attributes. Why would Truffaut use
such a figure as his central character?

9. Describe the values of three or four of the
adults to whom Doinel is exposed.

10. Both *The 400 Blows* and *Nobody Waved
Goodbye* chronicle the drift into delinquency
of two adolescents in vastly different circum-
stances. Contrasting the two experiences
should result in fresh and meaningful dialogue.

—by Frank McLaughlin

WHERE TO GET IT

*The 400 Blows* (b/w, 98 minutes)
Rental: Janus Films, 24 W. 56th St., New York,
N.Y. 10019. Contact Craig Oecarson for special
classroom rates. IMPOCARD 21