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"THE 400 BLOWS."

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Identifiers-Francois Truffaut, \*The 400 Blows

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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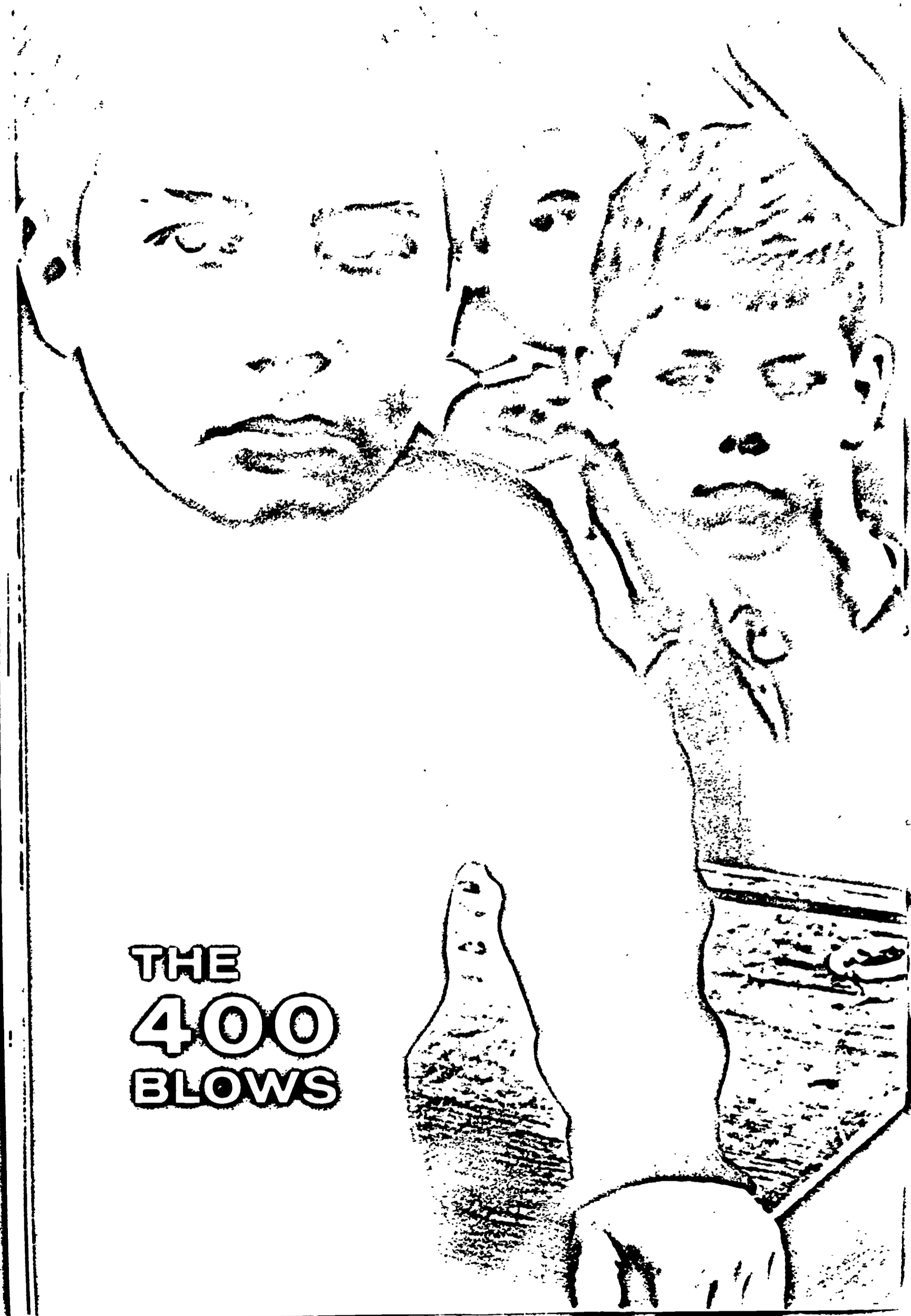
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**THE  
400  
BLOWS**

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 Hollywood films. *The 400 Blows* was the first of the New Wave films; it introduced a great new directorial 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 films made in this country.

From the opening credits to the final haunting still of young Doinel's face, *The 400 Blows* reflects the tragic, hapless existence of a young Parisian boy. One teacher who viewed the film with me wondered 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 absence 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 unwanted 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 reform 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, cluttered apartment Doinel and his parents occupy 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 hockey, the main footage is devoted to shots of him spinning in a whirling cylinder 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, indifferent sea.

When the background music and the visual images 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 narrow 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 psychologist 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 analagous to Doinel'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 effective?
4. **SHOTS OF DOINEL** behind various grills, gratings, 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 psychologist?
6. **ONE PERCEPTIVE TEACHER** noted that the final still had the quality of a newspaper photograph. Does this impression suggest any further 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 Goodby*** chronicle the drift into delinquency of two adolescents in vastly different circumstances. 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. 58th St., New York, N.Y. 10019. Contact Craig Oscarson for special classroom rates. INFOCARD 21

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