

Directing Children in Cinema and the Double Meaning of Self-Consciousness

Angela Dalle Vacche

for Manuela and Carlo Filiaci

A child's eyes register fast. Later he develops the film. ...

—Jean Cocteau¹

I. Children on the Screen

In his essay on “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” French critic André Bazin (1918-1958) writes: “It is not for me to separate off, [. . .] here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child.”² Intriguingly, this sequence of sidewalk, reflection, and childhood suggests an attraction between the lens of the cinema and childhood, the space of the street and reflective thought. This sentence replaces a previous phrasing by Bazin that, in 1945, explicitly referred to the trembling of the leaves during the Lumières’ *Le Repas du Bébè* (1895).³ Eleven years after the publication of Bazin’s “Ontology,” François Truffaut dedicated his very first feature film, *Les quatre cents coups* (The 400 Blows, 1959), to the memory of his mentor who died of leukemia in 1958. Why, between 1945 and 1958, did Bazin make room for a child and eliminate the subtle motions of nature in early cinema? Which particular film or theoretical insight or meaningful event made Bazin change his sentence? Whereas the precise circumstances of this revision remain speculative, it is well-known that the theme of youthfulness punctuates Italian neorealist cinema: the children at Don Pietro’s execution in Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta* (Rome, Open City, 1945); in his *Paisà* (Paisan, 1946),

Alfonsino—a Neapolitan kid in an oversized uniform—steals the shoes of an African-American G.I., and a screaming infant appears in the Po Valley episode; and, finally, the thin adolescent, Edmund Kohler (Edmund Mescke), wanders among the ruins of Berlin in Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* (Germany Year Zero, 1948).⁴

Along with the great Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica is another neorealist “father” figure of the French New Wave.⁵ In *Sciuscià* (Shoeshine, 1946), De Sica explores the friendship of two young boys. *Shoeshine* was mostly shot in a studio: a melodrama with chiaroscuro expressionist lighting, frequent high and low angles, and not much street life. At the same time, *Shoeshine*'s subject could fit Cesare Zavattini's neorealist formula of the found story at the bottom of a daily newspaper. *Shoeshine*'s temporal framework is the immediate aftermath of World War II when, in the chaos of daily life, two kids, caught for a minor crime, end up in a jail filled with harsher juvenile delinquents. Again, in terms of subject—rootless children falling into petty theft—the similarities between *Shoeshine* and Truffaut's *400 Coups* are obvious. *Shoeshine*'s object of indictment is the past in the guise of Fascist authority figures.

In contrast to Rossellini's penchant for improvisation, natural locations, and hardly any script, *Shoeshine* pitches a convoluted plot of adults' manipulations against the two boys' dream of riding their favorite horse into the future. Called “Bersagliere”—the name of an Italian infantry division always on the run—the galloping horse, with the two kids grabbing his neck and holding on for their lives, underlines the power and desire of early childhood's imagination. But this leap of faith into the unknown, or this gesture of belief about tomorrow, does not hold up. At the end of *Shoeshine*, the older Pasquale betrays Giuseppe because he rides the beloved horse with another companion. Even

worse, Pasquale accidentally kills his former best friend. Needless to say, a perceptual trauma, in the guise of a loss of trust, is at the core of *Shoeshine*. Both Italian neorealism and the French Nouvelle Vague are cinemas of children, subjectivity, perception, and self-consciousness. In other words, postwar European films stage the tension between Self and Other through either an irrational fusion or a traumatic gap between individual hopes and life's realities.⁶ As receptive and still unformed as they are, children, much more than adults, are quite inclined towards extreme belief and extreme rebellion. Thus, children either tend to invest themselves in an impossible ideal or they end up in trouble after rejecting all the rules.⁷ Notwithstanding *Shoeshine*'s studio sets and fatalistic trajectory, Bersagliere's speed does anticipate the youthful energy and the accelerated tempo of postwar cinema in France, with unexpected jump cuts, fluid long takes, light cameras, and plenty of arrogance.

Why should one write again about Truffaut's *400 Coups*, a film which is so well-known? In neorealism, issues of perception are subsumed into questions of unity and disunity of the body politic. In *Les 400 Coups*, Truffaut situates self-consciousness in childhood by predicating the rise of this new sense of self on the struggle for authenticity in writing. One can easily note a major qualitative leap as far as subtlety of treatment between Truffaut's *400 Coups* and previous films about childhood, such as René Clément's *Jeux interdits* (Forbidden Games, 1952) and Morris Engel's and Ruth Orkin's *The Little Fugitive* (1953). These two films are important transitional texts, but still classical coming-of-age stories and, as such, they are unable to achieve the daring and loose unraveling of *Les 400 Coups*. In Truffaut's film, after much fun and humiliation, secrecy and selfishness, the acquisition of a child's self-consciousness stems from his

situation in space, and it coincides with his first, serious discovery of boundaries, barriers, and choices.

At the end of Truffaut's film, a memorable long take at eye level shows Jean-Pierre Léaud /Antoine Doinel running free for one minute and twenty-two seconds, after escaping from a juvenile detention center. Truffaut's fourteen-year-old boy is shown in full-length and in profile, so that his posture resembles a typical motion study by Eadweard Muybridge. All of a sudden, this scientific iconography turns into one of the most startling film endings ever accomplished in freeze-frame. Indeed, *400 Coups*' original title was supposed to be "Antoine has run away," but Truffaut went well beyond the portrayal of motion and freedom. For the very first time, he showed to the rest of the world the reflective thought, fear, and loneliness behind a child's face.⁸ Doinel's final and direct address to the viewer across the fourth wall seals a narrative based on silent routines, telling details, and an eloquent use of objects. Thanks to Truffaut's skillful directing, the untrained, yet intuitive Jean-Pierre Léaud develops the character of Antoine Doinel from a schoolboy running carelessly across the city of Paris to a person who learns that total freedom does not exist.

What is the nature of children's power on screen and what can adult viewers learn from it? Or, put another way, where does the stubborn strength shared by children and the cinema come from? In *Les 400 Coups*, with his famous sequence of the puppet theater in the Luxembourg Gardens—a long take in close-up of little faces—Truffaut dwells on the spellbound expressions of these miniature theatergoers who confuse the real and the imaginary during a production of *Little Red Riding Hood*.⁹ For this young and happily screaming audience, the cop is as exciting as the wolf. Unaware of the social conventions

defining good and evil, this public is genuinely open and innocently amoral. From thrills to chills and vice-versa, children love fairy tales with extreme ups-and-downs between fear and rescue.¹⁰ This naïve and primitive belief that something can be transformed into its opposite, this perceptual stance of unthinkable reversals is—like cinema—radically modern, due to its sensorial overstimulation. Thus Bazin and Truffaut were, respectively, quick to theorize childhood in relation to the screen and to take children to be the most natural and restless nonprofessional actors available. In other words, thanks to their lack of self-consciousness in front of the camera, children are born actors, so that Léaud's first major performance for Truffaut is comparable to a photographic negative which evolves into a positive image by the end of the film, but one with enough depth to raise questions.

Both Truffaut and Léaud experienced a childhood with no innocence due to family issues, so that it is all the more ironic that their intertwined lives as adults, respectively in front of and behind the camera, relied so much on a cult of innocent youthfulness. Their shared search for a lost utopian origin found an outlet through the screen. In a more general sense, by returning us to the ground zero of childhood through the nonjudgmental vision of the camera eye, the cinema can engender fresh emotions, while it can also open us up to existential discoveries, ranging from curiosity towards otherness to the acceptance of differences. The direction of children in cinema aims at turning spectators into desiring, flexible, and intuitive beings in clear contrast with the mature, well-centered, rational, and all-knowing adults whose skepticism or discriminating eye might impede the redeeming powers of imagination and the healing transformation of memories.

In the wake of Antoine's sprinting all over Paris, the speed of the Nouvelle Vague influenced Spanish film culture, West African cinema, Cinema Novo in Brazil, and various new waves in Eastern Europe, as well as the later magisterial use of children in Iranian cinema. Equally committed to the use of childhood on screen as a way of reinventing film language and using Truffaut's *400 Coups* as inspiration, Victor Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena* (The Spirit of the Beehive, 1973) structures an entire narrative around a little girl's point of view; here, Ana Torrent's innocence mixes with political danger, while the suspense of her accidental discoveries turns into a sense of endless wonder about the mysteries of the world.

II. Children in De Sica's *Shoeshine*

In 1952 Bazin devoted a full essay to De Sica's work with nonprofessional actors. Well aware that *Shoeshine* is not De Sica's strongest film, Bazin writes about De Sica's "inexhaustible affection for his characters,"¹¹ and how this director "infuses into his actors the power to love that he himself possesses as an actor. [. . .] We find in De Sica the humanity of Chaplin, but shared with the world at large."¹² In other words, for the Neapolitan De Sica, the whole world is an extended and warm family. Thus, in *Shoeshine*, little Giuseppe relates to Nannarella as if she were his girlfriend, sister, or daughter. She is not just a favorite playmate, the way René is for Truffaut's Antoine Doinel, but someone the boy protectively accompanies across the street and with whom he plans subsequent meetings, as if there was an emotional commitment between the two. What is at stake here is a trustworthy complicity that is much stronger than just sharing the same shelter. When De Sica's two boys look out of the police van taking them away,

they see Nannarella grow smaller in the distance like an abandoned wife. In contrast, Antoine Doinel's view from the police van yields a deserted, dark, and rainy Parisian street. This lonely point of view suggests a way of looking, ready to become more introspective.

De Sica directs by miming what the children are supposed to do. For the neorealist director, acting is relational and, therefore, social. Before each sequence, De Sica was famous for performing the action in front of the children and for telling them with painstaking precision how to move, as well as when and where to stand in relation to each other. As far as the casting for *Shoeshine*, De Sica started from his observation in real life of two destitute kids:

I met two of them: Little Monkey and Big Hat. Little Monkey slept in an elevator in via Lombardia, but he had a grandmother who loved him very much; it was this family warmth that saved him. Big Hat however was nobody's child, completely alone in the world with his fat head deformed by rickets; later he committed robbery and ended up in jail. At that time they were two young boys—twelve or thirteen years old—and they made up a kind of bizarre association. They worked in Via Veneto (Little Monkey with a cape on and nothing else except for a pair of torn shorts), they shined shoes fast and furiously and then, as soon as they had put together two or three liras, they'd run up to Villa Borghese to rent a horse. Later, in laying out the treatment, Zavattini, would bring the horse character to poetic fruition but, at the bottom of it all, there remained Little Monkey and Big Hat's real and peculiar horseback rides.¹³

Whereas Truffaut's Antoine is an oddball, a lonely and nocturnal *flâneur* who doesn't really do anything for René, his one friend, the boys in *Shoeshine* constitute a kind of family with a singular collective character. One wonders why De Sica did not just cast Little Monkey and Big Hat to play themselves for his film? Bazin's answer to this is that the film needed thought and depth. So the director should choose a nonprofessional performer—child or adult—with an introspective glimpse in mind. Casting does not work when it becomes about matching some actual reality or reinforcing a stereotype. As André Bazin explains:

It is by way of its poetry that the realism of De Sica takes on its meaning, for in art, at the source of all realism, there is an **aesthetic paradox** [emphasis added] that must be resolved. The faithful reproduction of reality is not art. We are repeatedly told that it consists in selection and interpretation. That is why up to now the “realist” trends in cinema, as in other arts, consisted simply in introducing a greater measure of reality into the work: but this additional measure of reality was still only an effective way of serving an abstract purpose, whether dramatic, moral, or ideological. In France, ‘naturalism’ goes hand in hand with the multiplication of novels and plays *à thèse*. The originality of Italian neorealism as compared with the chief schools of realism that preceded it and with Soviet cinema, lies in never making reality the servant of some *a priori* point of view. . . .¹⁴

For Bazin, De Sica's direction begins with his intuitions about nonprofessional child actors and the love and trust he develops with them, which, in the case of *Shoeshine*, created an affectionate atmosphere suffusing the kids in their relation to each other and in their mutual attachment to their horse, Bersagliere.

Bazin's emphasis on De Sica's warm personality is not enough to explain the casting of Franco Interlenghi in the role of Pasquale, before looking for the right kid to play Giuseppe. According to Rinaldo Smordoni (Giuseppe), Franco was chosen not only because he came from a poor neighborhood and played in the street, but especially because he looked handsome. By casting against the physiognomic type of the destitute, De Sica's plan was to make his appealing screen presence clash with his character—a hungry kid—and his role as the accidental killer of Giuseppe. And in fact, suspended between his good looks and evil actions, Interlenghi would move on to a lifelong acting career.¹⁵

Smordoni, also a street kid from the neighborhood, was cast after Interlenghi and put on trial for a while in order to establish how much visual chemistry he had with his peer. It is, however, by paying attention to the discreet pictorial compositions of De Sica's images that it is possible to make sense of Bazin's definition of neorealism as that which *only* knows "*immanence*." Immanence, here, means that depth must come out from what reverberates on the surface and through the actors' bodies when they are together within the same shot. Thanks to the casting of *Shoeshine*, ethics and aesthetics intersect in De Sica's direction of actors. De Sica discovers and develops his characters through his nonprofessional actors' innate behavior, just as their fictional roles grow out of relational situations rather than clashing physical types. Enough trust or love had to exist between

the director and his performers, so that appearance would not be in conflict with immanence, that is the feeling of a spiritual match between the external and the internal registers. The director's love had to be reciprocated by his actors, who appreciated his kindness for years after the shooting. It is worth noting that during the shooting, the children stopped attending school, and that De Sica encouraged them to play together in whatever free time they had. This carefree approach made them bond even more.

Because attraction between the two boys needed to be subtle, it was important to engage two actors who looked way more attractive than the scruffy Little Monkey and Big Hat, without even worrying who would impersonate whom. This was to avoid caricature or the grotesque potential of a naturalistic approach based on the mere flat transfer of reality. For the surrogate street-family to look believable, the casting required kids whose physical pairing could slip from street brotherhood to family with barely a hint of sensual intimacy. De Sica gives us a medium shot of the boys sleeping together in Bersagliere's stable, and another medium shot of Giuseppe lying next to Pasquale on a rough mattress as they wonder about their future after the arrest. In a word, De Sica underscores the boys' familiarity with one another when they are in constricted spaces. Their ease with such physical proximity is a by-product of the crowded, chaotic spaces of daily life in general in post-WWII Italy. De Sica knew this would be the case. Neorealist casting is not concerned with a naturalistic accuracy; instead it aims to increase an intuitive grasp of the Real under the surface of appearances.

III. *Les 400 Coups*

During the months of September and October 1958, François Truffaut (1932-1984) published his casting call in *France-Soir* and then auditioned several hundred children. Jean Domarchi, a critic at *Cahiers du Cinéma*, recommended the son of an assistant scriptwriter, Pierre Léaud, and the actress Jacqueline Pierreux. During the casting interview, Truffaut was struck by the fourteen-year-old's emotional intensity and his extreme self-confidence, so that he chose Jean-Pierre Léaud over twelve finalists. Clearly, this kid was a nobody who wanted to become a somebody. As soon as Léaud had seen the announcement in the newspaper, he ran away from his boarding school and rushed to Paris half-knowing that this would be “the” turning point in his life. It was the intuition of a calling. Truffaut and Léaud clicked. It was “love at first sight.”

The younger the children are, the more they can be the way animals are, in the sense that neither children nor animals are conscious that they exist. Very young children live fully in the present tense, without having yet experienced any sense of becoming in time, or choosing in space.¹⁶ Instead of relying on overall pictorial compositions the way De Sica did, Truffaut worked with minutiae, and made sure that his child actor would use every part of his body, from the way he sits like a pile of dirty clothes at his school desk, to his bent neck suggesting guilt when the teacher grabs him by the collar of his jacket.

As an unwanted child, Antoine Doinel is scarcely present to himself, because he does not know what he is: Antoine has no self-awareness, while Léaud is not self-conscious in front of a camera. From pretending to be innocent to pretending to be someone else, an adult instead of a child, a female instead of a male, the step is short. Two well-known episodes stand out: Antoine playing with an eyelash curler in front of his mother's vanity mirror; and Antoine trying to help a pretty woman capture her dog in

the street, until a flirtatious adult male replaces him. Role-switching here fuses itself with playacting in such a way as to convey the character's yearning for an ideal yet impossible self. These superficial metamorphoses, however, signal his failure to achieve that sense of self-esteem and responsibility which would lead to real change and maturity. But no child can achieve these two goals without love, and Antoine receives neither care nor affection. The theme of being absent to oneself climaxes when Truffaut turns Léaud /Antoine into a cinephile. We see him sneaking into the dark of the movie theater, a safe environment where he can match his absence from himself with moving images that are, like him, absent presences. Without an authentic life, Antoine finds one at the movies.

Truffaut often shrouds his actor's physical behavior in emotional complexity, as in one long sequence when Antoine sets the dinner table in silence. A well-known devotee of Alfred Hitchcock's mental image, Truffaut has learnt to turn his framing into a thinking space inclined towards a spectator who is often, but not always, more knowledgeable than the character. In this sequence, and in order to channel the spontaneous plasticity of his nonprofessional performer, Truffaut relied on a charged *mise-en-scène* of objects and on Léaud's way of handling things in the confined space of the Doinels' lower-middle-class apartment. After setting the table, Antoine clumsily pushes aside the tablecloth to do his homework. The elongated Cinemascope frame increases the sense of clutter, and it focuses the drama instead of distributing it. Léaud is so self-absorbed into a mindless routine of self-alienation, that he performs within this small space and right in front of the filming camera as if he was not even there. He is completely indifferent to what is around him. Nothing ever matters to anyone about what he does. Except that, in the eyes of his neglectful parents, everything the child touches is

either stolen or filthy. The dirty dishes and silverware feel contaminated by his presence, like the curtains on which he wipes ink from his hands. Other props convey Antoine's sense of himself as abject, most memorably the greasy, smelly paper at the bottom of the trash which he disposes at the bottom of the back stairs.

Despite his extreme emphasis on detail for *Les 400 Coups*, in his direction of acting, Truffaut encouraged Léaud to improvise and to develop his character out of his ordinary way of being. After all, Léaud's escapades in real life were comparable to Doinel's behavior. Truffaut filmed in the streets of Paris, where fact could blend with fiction and fiction would adjust to fact. The distance between acting and lying may seem tight at first, but sincerity on the screen does not necessarily need to match sincerity in real life. For example, Léaud was a bad student just like Antoine Doinel. Such a lucky coincidence, however, could have easily turned into a naturalist cliché with no depth later on. It was Truffaut's attention to the dialectic of behavior and spoken language that ensured complication in antithesis to stereotyping through physical appearance.

To be sure, one lie after another, Antoine's spiral of deception reaches a grotesque peak when he tells his teacher that his mother is dead. Instead of informing his performer about his lines at the very last minute to keep the delivery spontaneous,¹⁷ for this particular episode, Truffaut told Léaud to think about what he was saying ahead of time. All of a sudden, a child's self-consciousness about lying was useful to make the verbal exchange between the teacher and the pupil look artificial, awkward, yet appropriate, and, of course, memorable. Here the paradox is that the allegedly "spontaneous" child becomes so self-conscious about his acting that his lie comes out as a murderous fantasy against the "bad" mother.

Truffaut relies on handwritten, mechanical, and literary languages to underline Antoine's lack of self-consciousness. As he stands behind the blackboard, Antoine defaces the classroom wall by composing a rhyme to turn his punishment into a self-mocking verse about his own degraded role as a literary author. He can only copy a famous text with his own name in the third person. Here his words come from the alienating point-of-view of an invisible witness, as if he were already dead. Just like a trace pointing only towards the past, the rhyme written on the wall is an action of defacing that he must literally erase. This means that he has to efface his own name after writing about himself as if he were not there. Later on, at home, unable to embrace a minimum moral standard, he decides to imitate his mother's handwriting to produce a false note for the school principal. Yet this time he makes the mistake of copying René's name instead of writing his own on a fresh piece of paper.

These small episodes built on gestures of self-denial underline Antoine's search for self-consciousness and a more personal language with feelings and thoughts. Needless to say, neither the school system nor his family help him in his search: after going to the movies with his parents, he talks by imitating his father's misogynist remarks about women; and when he is at school, instead of his own sentences filled with lies, the only other sad linguistic alternative is a daily menu of mandatory exercises: repeating foreign words, dictation of famous texts, and memorization of poetry. Straight copying or his inability to distinguish between the first and the third person do not lead him out of trouble, until he reads Balzac's *The Search for the Absolute* (1834). This is the story of a chemist who dies before announcing his discovery about the origin of life.¹⁸ Such an extreme title seems to offer Antoine the ultimate solution to all his school difficulties. He

decides to memorize his favorite Balzac passage and use it during his French assignment. Antoine turns mechanical competence into creative performance, but the teacher declares him a plagiarist. Indicatively, when choosing something valuable to steal, it is a typewriter that comes to mind, a mechanical writing machine. After all, writing something based on his own thoughts and feelings is the “absolute” and unattainable goal which the title of Balzac’s short story spells out: when does a child realize about being alive and alone and what is the origin of creativity at the heart of life?

IV. Humans and Insects

In *Les 400 Coups*, Truffaut directs his actors by calibrating stillness and motion, mise-en-scène and chance. Antoine’s challenge is to learn the boundaries between himself and the world around him. As soon as he arrives at the edge of the sea, his linear trajectory curves around, thus allowing Truffaut’s zoom to bounce into the close-up of Antoine’s freeze frame. This ending triggers a series of mutual acknowledgements between actor and character, actor and spectator, actor and director. The freeze frame puts the boy under glass like an insect, while Antoine’s vulnerable expression, defeats Truffaut’s entomological gaze. The relationship between Truffaut and Léaud is not egalitarian, although, from time to time, it becomes dialectical.

More than once, high-angle framing and deep focus turn Truffaut’s children into unpredictable insects running inside the urban network. This happens during the hilarious gym class with the kids disappearing behind the teacher’s back. When René takes his friend home, Antoine looks minuscule next to a huge wooden horse which Truffaut frames from above, to underline the extreme contrast in scale. During a sequence in an

amusement park, Antoine looks like a fly stuck to flypaper inside a spinning rotor where acceleration beats gravity, and exhilaration mixes with pain. He struggles to turn himself upside down, but manages only to reach a fetal posturing. Suddenly the rows of spectators observing him from above are seen from his point of view, from the inside out, until their faces dissolve, disfigured into a dizzying blur. For once relinquishing his directorial gaze, Truffaut himself joins his young actor inside the rotating drum which, looked at from the outside in, resembles the *zoetrope*. Why did Truffaut stage this archeology of cinema and place himself right there on stage within it?

Inside the rotor he gives up the all-knowing gaze of high-angle shots and occupies the same spatial environment as Léaud, for the sake of the equality of bodies, director and actor alike. The laws of physics make no distinction among hierarchies of living creatures: neither age nor power count. Everything submits to this centrifuge in what amounts to an equalizing scientific experiment with director and actor serving as commensurable organisms. All living beings are as important as insects for the span of a sequence, but unequal power relations are unavoidable in daily life, from the classroom to the family and to the street.

This haunting asymmetry between self-conscious and mindless beings, humans and nonhumans, teachers and rebellious animal-like children, reoccurs throughout Truffaut's work. In *Jules et Jim* (1962), Jules studies bugs he can fully control, because they are dead and stored in little boxes. In *L'Enfant sauvage* (The Wild Child, 1970), the pedagogue, Doctor Itard (played by Truffaut himself), and his object of study, a wolf-child (Jean-Pierre Cargol) struggle to develop authority and trust from the adult to the adolescent, self-respect and affection from the youth towards a fatherly figure. The

relationship works better outdoors during long walks. On those occasions, the promise of a two-way encounter benefits from a living space that is both natural and open.

Just like freedom, pure love does not exist, or if it does, its reciprocity depends on impurities. In *La chambre verte* (The Green Room, 1978), the protagonist compares mounds of corpses from World War I to piles of dead insects. Julien Davenne, the protagonist of that film, played by the director himself, is a widower. Obsessively attached to the photographic portrait of his dead wife, he builds a shrine around it. Perhaps it is because he feels guilty, having survived the war, that Davenne believes himself worthy of the present only if he links everything to the dead, who, in turn, become idols of perfection. To be sure, he embodies the great divide separating life before and after the first World War, an historical event that marks the triumph of mass culture, the end of the aura, and the advancement of industrial modernity. Most importantly, this divide is about the loss of the sacred, the bankruptcy of everlasting values, and the rise of serialization and doubt about origins, roots, and rituals.¹⁹ While his wife's portrait, set inside a forest of glowing candles, never changes, time goes by and Davenne's health deteriorates. To compensate for a general sense of disappointment about the present and the future, he determines to let himself die an absolute and lonely death of starvation and fever.

La Chambre verte is about a man who gives up altogether on life's imperfections and compromises. From the birth of the rambunctious New Wave cinema in *Les 400 Coups*, Truffaut lands on the worship of the still photograph in *La Chambre verte*. Whereas the movie theater was the site of freedom and belief for Antoine, the shrine to the dead in *La Chambre Verte*, with its stained glass windows and votive candles, has

become but a crypt. There no faithful worshippers come to share Davenne's sterile nostalgia for the past. What happened? The only possible answer is that beginnings are more open than endings. Perhaps death is so difficult because it can only be about a final balance sheet which cannot be changed later on: just in time, or even worse, too late.

The nonhuman nature of temporality haunts Truffaut's cinema: Antoine Doinel is a child-adult who never becomes an adult, while the child-wolf is an animal-child who skipped childhood altogether, who struggles to become an adult. Is not the fugitive child in the freeze frame at the end of *Les 400 Coups* the image hidden inside the photographic portrait of Davenne's wife? Despite his constant running away, Jean-Pierre Léaud's Antoine Doinel remains timeless. Thus, when this character reappears again and again—always through Léaud—in *L'amour à vingt ans* (Love at Twenty, 1962), *Baisers volés* (Stolen Kisses, 1968), *Domicile conjugal* (Bed and Board, 1970), and *L'amour en fuite* (Love on the Run, 1978), the story's external circumstances change, but the actor's basic screen-persona does not. Did this half-filial, half-brotherly bond with Truffaut enhance or limit Léaud's career, considering that the nonprofessional child performer became an international star who worked with Jean-Luc Godard, Jean Eustache, Bernardo Bertolucci, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jerzy Skolimowsky, and Glauber Rocha?

Possibly aware that his attachment to Antoine Doinel had become a bit of an obsession, Truffaut wondered aloud whether he had turned Jean-Pierre Léaud into a puppet:

I felt that the cycle as a whole was not successful in making him evolve. The character started out somewhat autobiographical, but over time it drew further and

further away from me. I never wanted to give him ambition, for example. I wonder if he's not too frozen in the end, like a cartoon character. You know Mickey Mouse cannot grow old.²⁰

Léaud aged physically, or externally, inside Truffaut's cinema, but the director expected his performer to remain a child at heart and preserve an awkward sense of marginality in his acting style. Reflecting recently on *Les 400 Coups*, Robert Lachenay, Truffaut's best childhood friend and the inspiration for the character of René, compared Léaud's Antoine with Chaplin's tramp, Charlot.²¹ This parallel between the tramp and the street kid is something Truffaut also suggests in his essay "Who is Charlie Chaplin?" where he links children's energy to sprinting:

He was a nine-year-old vagrant hugging the walls of Kensington Road, as he wrote in his memoirs, living ' . . . on the lowest levels of society.' [. . .] In his chase films for Keystone, Chaplin runs faster and farther than his music hall colleagues In recent years there has been serious study of children who have grown up in isolation, in moral, physical, or material distress.²²

These two iconic actors—Charlot and Doinel—are special cases in the history of the cinema, because their stardom grew within a serialized saga, which means that their respective fictional characters were intertwined with an episodic permanence, or the paradox of a time that passes but does so without changes. True, Léaud does age as Antoine Doinel, but the child of *Les 400 Coups* is still alive in his older, wrinkled face.

On the other hand, by defying the static view of an icon or myth, Chaplin reinvented his role without ever betraying Charlot, his original character. Taken together, Charlot and Doinel would like to prove that aging happens only on the surface, while their deeper screen-personas or the essence of their innermost being, their souls, in a metaphorical sense, are timeless.²³

It is also true, however, that Chaplin's self-reinvention does not find an adequate match in Léaud's more predictable character. The latter floats in a sort of impure childhood or charming immaturity. From film to film Truffaut's direction of acting underlines Léaud's awkwardness, if not failure, with women, objects, and life in general: from the experience of first love, to marriage, to divorce, and to life alone. According to Bazin, only the present moment counts for Charlot,²⁴ whereas, I would argue, Antoine Doinel, as an adult, is always either too soon or too late. Out of synch with the rest of the world, just like Chaplin, Doinel is creative, witty, intellectual, and sensitive. Yet, in complete contrast to Chaplin, Léaud is never in full control of his roles or in complete charge of his career..An over-achiever, Doinel is more vulnerable than the tramp who gets it wrong, but remains invincible.

Perhaps the past defeats the future at the very end of Truffaut's career. But what about the freeze frame at the end of *Les 400 coups*, with its epitaph-like impact? Is it about entombment or rebirth? It may be argued that the human face as the privileged portal to the soul is just a Christian trope; but there is no doubt that, in all cultures, language is the gateway to the distinction between Self and Other, reflective thought and moral awareness. It is this kind of verbal consciousness that makes a difference between a human and an insect. So let us contrast the mute timelessness of the last shot of *Les 400*

coups with the equally famous sequence when Doinel answers the questions of an unseen female psychologist. It is well-known that Léaud completely improvised this one and only intensely verbal sequence in *Les 400 coups*. In contrast to the rest of the film, here it is language that links freedom to choice, self-consciousness to boundaries, childhood to maturity, and aging to the future. Animals may communicate with each other in a nonverbal fashion, but they only understand the instinct to survive.²⁵ Whereas whatever makes up the human experience is based on a capacity for language and self-expression, even when the latter is about self-delusion or the manipulation of others.

V. The Search for the Absolute

And it is literature that Antoine, the delinquent schoolboy, yearns for. During his desperate search for a better language, Antoine's discovery of Balzac's *The Search for the Absolute* signals the child's need for some theological grounding. Antoine's trust in the cinema and in Balzac stems from his intuition that there might be something deeper or missing: perhaps not just an identity of his own, but the elusive links across being human, feeling worthy of oneself, and having a soul.

A comparable valuing of interiority, trust, and intuition propels Victor Erice's analogies between childhood and imagination, cinematic illusion and spirituality in *El espíritu de la colmena* (The Spirit of the Beehive, 1973). The whole film is about a love at first sight between a little girl and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as depicted in James Whale's eponymous film (1931). In an interview conducted in 2000, the director explained that he first met little Ana at her school. He asked her if she knew who Frankenstein was. "Yes," Ana answered, "but I never met him in person." After such a

reply, Erice chose her for the role. To this day, he remains in touch with Ana, checking on her from time to time because he worries that performing in his film may have shortened her childhood, in the sense of imposing too much discipline over play.²⁶

During the actual shooting, he felt obliged to give his fictional character Ana's real name, since the six-year-old was so inexperienced that she felt awkward thinking of herself through two different names. Indeed, as the film concludes, she tries to reconnect with Frankenstein's spirit by calling out her own name in real life and in Erice's fiction: "It is me, Ana!" Irrationality and belief coexist with self-consciousness and individuality in her mind. With the window of her room open onto the mysteries of the night, Ana connects with the unknown. Speaking her own name is an assertion not about loneliness or egotism but about the spiritual value of the imagination.

Do these nonhuman, animal-like film characters, Antoine and Ana, have souls? Do they acquire souls through the reality of being "natural" child-performers who do not impersonate, but play themselves inside out on the screen in clear contrast with trained actors developing a role from the outside in? The question of the soul's existence is more than a Catholic or a spiritual issue; it is an aesthetic and a philosophical one as well, because it has to do with the elusive depth of interiority. After all, cinematic projection is born out of still photographs, which are animated into the complexities of life at twenty-four frames per second. No wonder that, as a result of these deceiving, impure origins, the cinema is populated with creatures that share an ambiguous placement between the real and the imaginary, presence and absence. This is why spirits, ghosts, vampires, and monsters punctuate film history, and in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, they compete for attention with insects. The latter are the indefatigable bees of Ana's father, who also

resembles an alien being—obliged as he is to wear a special suit with gloves, a hood, and a screen in front of his face in order to work around his beehives.

In comparison to the bees' frantic motion and deafening buzz, a surreal slowing down of pace occurs as soon as the traveling projectionist arrives in the deserted and totally silent town square to transform the town hall into a makeshift movie theater. Ana's very first screening is such an intense experience that an American horror classic becomes an opportunity to befriend a nonhuman being. Played by the huge Boris Karloff, Frankenstein is a child-murderer and the target of a whole town's revenge. Erice's camera probes the darkness of the hall until it rests on the fully lit screen on which the monster meets little Maria by a lake. Like a child, but playing with his lethal hands, he too cannot quite distinguish good from evil. Intrigued by how a plucked flower floats in the water, he unwittingly kills the innocent Maria, thrown into the lake as if she were another flower.

As the screening of the film unfolds, Ana's father wonders why so much restless work goes on, day after day, inside each honeycomb. His scientific study of insects becomes metaphysical: what is this "spirit of the beehive"? What is the being within tiny creatures, including insects and children, whose endless energy makes them so helpless and so strong at the same time? By raising this question through Ana's father, perhaps the director was inspired by Truffaut, whose *400 Coups* was released one year before Erice graduated in filmmaking and involved himself in Spain's New Wave movement, *El Nuevo Cine*. Should we hear in the buzzing sound of the father's beehive the street anarchy of Antoine Doinel, the boy who sprints across Paris but gets nowhere?

The power of action and the exhilaration of speed cannot by themselves explain the motivation of laborious insects and of disobedient children. Why go on moving, and why turn the cinema towards animals and children to revel in the hypnotic power of their energy? Much in the story of Ana and Frankenstein relates to Truffaut's *400 Coups*, but Erice's film describes an unsettled, isolated family where the gestures of the mother are melancholic but still nurturing, while the resilience of the father is protective, although severe. Despite this fundamental difference in terms of parental figures, one particular sequence with Ana and her sister, Isabel, seems to derive from Truffaut's film, because it cites Antoine's creative behavior with found objects. After one night alone in the street, at dawn, he is so famished that he steals a bottle of milk. Eager to get rid of the evidence, he throws the bottle down the sewage system through a grate at street level. The noise of the glass shattering allows him to experience an unusual range of sounds. In a similar fashion, Ana and Isabel play a special game that involves placing their ears on the iron surface of the railway track. They listen to the rumble of the quickly approaching but invisible train. An acoustic dimension of hidden spaces fills the mise-en-scènes of both films with magic and wonder.

Given the word "spirit" in Erice's title, many details explore the tension between religion and science, humans and animals. For example, a puppet monkey sits next to a Catholic religious image on Ana's night desk, a lit candle in between. Surrounded by such things, Ana interrogates her sister about the stuff of which Frankenstein might be made: after all, he does seem to have arms and legs like everybody else. By contrast, in *Les 400 Coups*, Antoine is stripped of human dignity by police procedures of anthropometry, a nineteenth-century discipline developed in the wake of Darwinism. An

object to be catalogued through fingerprints and mug shots, the child becomes as vulnerable as an insect under foot. Who or what should be treated as human? The norm stems from artificial constructs and stratified knowledge that stands in the way of new perceptions. In Ana's classroom, the teacher invites one student to stand on a stool and place a pair of cardboard eyes on a male silhouette made of movable anatomical components. Perhaps a monster, perhaps a father figure, this image of masculinity is unfinished, and so open to the children's creative imagination.

The movie theater is also a site of imagination in both *Les 400 Coups* and *Spirit of the Beehive*, operating differently in each. Whereas Antoine must sneak into the theater, Ana experiences the cinema much more openly. Truffaut shows the posters and the box office of the movie theater in Antoine's neighborhood, but he does not film a projected movie. Whereas Erice manages to film Ana with a handheld camera from the floor, recording the exact moment when she "meets" Frankenstein for the very first time. Her expression and posture in the theater are different from Antoine's. Amidst an audience of both old and young spectators, she sits on the edge of her chair, her body leaning towards the screen and her mouth slightly open. By contrast, Antoine is shown alone in an empty theater, his expression disclosing just a hint of awe and guilt towards whatever moves on the screen in front of him. Truffaut allows us no glimpse of the images running on the screen, making the cinema appear more forbidden than fascinating. Antoine imitates the gangsters and the tough guys he has seen on screen whenever he argues with his peers, while Ana aims to become neither Frankenstein nor one of his victims. She simply wants to see him again and again. And the more she wishes to do so, the more she calls for him in her own name.

After encountering the spirit of Frankenstein at the movies, Ana happens upon a wounded soldier inside an abandoned shed. Chased there by the local police, this fugitive may be a fleeing Republican fighter still wandering in the countryside, despite the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939. This second encounter is one that occurs in real life with a persecuted, yet dangerous man. It binds her even more to her first fictional friend, the cinematic monster. To be sure, she is convinced that this mysterious bleeding man is the “spirit” of Frankenstein who has come back to her. Ana’s fusion of soldier and monster is encapsulated in the silent gesture of her offer of an apple. Erice claims the sacred to be nothing but the power of objects to transfigure themselves into signs of something else. As an object, Ana’s apple is so steeped in her daily life that it becomes unforgettable in its modesty. Traditional symbol of temptation shared by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, here the apple is a simple offer that escalates to the rank of a spiritual gesture.²⁷ For while the conflicting factions and ideologies of the civil war are irrelevant to her, Ana’s offer of an apple is a gift which links one person to another, one spirit to a child.

Ana’s belief in the screen spells out the power of children’s imaginations to turn the most stereotypical images—the clichés of the Hollywood horror genre—upside down, and to make us all look at a monster in a desiring way. Through Ana’s eyes, Frankenstein becomes a friend worthy of care and respect. This is exactly why André Bazin, in his “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” wrote:

Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have

covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love.²⁸

When directed with the care and respect of Truffaut and Erice, children exhibit their natural lack of self-consciousness, ignoring the boundaries between the real and the imaginary to forge new and unexpected bonds of togetherness—just as it happens in photography, the child of the encounter between light and matter. Erice brings us close to an intuition of the sacred through a little girl. Through her, one recognizes one's own minuscule yet indispensable role in a broad, unknown universe. Far from cosmic fusion, extraterrestrial or out-of-body experiences, this sense of profound belonging is also a form of moral responsibility, where self-consciousness may become self-esteem and reciprocity. These are exactly the qualities of individual and social awareness missing for too long from Antoine Doinel's life of abuse and neglect. He has no links to anyone or to anything. Perhaps this is why Truffaut underlines Antoine's self-containment in the photographic ending of *Les 400 Coups*, where his special isolation refuses the mediocrities of adulthood, but also cuts him off from change and motion. Similarly unique, but with an opposite valence, Ana's apple in *Spirit of the Beehive* constitutes a sacramental gesture of communion.

It is telling that in the postwar Italy of *Shoeshine*, animal locomotion is all that the children can find to let them experience the speed of the modern and the dream of freedom. But freedom comes at a destructive price, for in De Sica's narrative, it takes a deadly fire during the projection of a film to allow Giuseppe and Pasquale to escape from the prison. A double-edged trope of authority and rebellion, fire erupts from Antoine's

shrine for Balzac: a symbol of the boy's desire for seriousness and depth in a world of superficial compromises. In contrast, for Erice, fire radiates hope. Isabel and Ana keep a box of matches in secret and, in the evening before they fall asleep, they enjoy lighting a candle in their room. *The Spirit of the Beehive* may have been overseen by a director in a fatherly role, yet even this form of adult power seems weak in comparison to the hopeful warmth projected by his child protagonist. This is also why Erice's film is shot in a cinematography of warm light with golden and nurturing tones, evoking the miracle of the honey produced by thousands of busy and mindless bees.

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May 2012

¹ Jean Cocteau as cited in *François Truffaut*, rev. and updated ed., by Annette Insdorf (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 19.

² André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *What is Cinema?* vol. 1 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), p. 15. Hereafter cited as “Ontology.”

³ André Bazin, “Ontologie de l’image photographique,” in *Les problèmes de la peinture*, ed. Gaston Diehl (Lyon: Confluences, 1945), pp. 405-411.

⁴ On Truffaut and *Germany Year Zero*, see: Pasquale Iannone, “Germany Year Zero,” *Senses of Cinema* 51 (2009), p. 1. Worth noting is the fact that Bazin introduced Truffaut to Rossellini in 1954 and that Truffaut worked intermittently as an assistant director with Rossellini between 1955 and 1956 for a documentary titled *India*. Due to this choice of topic, Truffaut introduced Rossellini to Jean Renoir who had shot *The River*, near Calcutta, in 1950.

⁵ One of the links between Truffaut and De Sica is the latter’s film *I bambini ci guardano* (The Children Are Watching Us, 1944), which deals with the impossibility of divorce in Catholic Italy and a child caught between his two alienated parents.

⁶ In *Art and Illusion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969, 2nd ed.), Ernst E. H. Gombrich writes: “In the world of the child there is no clear distinction between reality and appearance. He can use the most unlikely tools for the most unlikely purposes—a table upside down for a spaceship, a basin for a crash helmet. For the context of the game it will serve its purpose rather well. The basin does not represent a crash helmet, it is a kind of improvised helmet, and it might even prove useful. There is

no rigid division between the phantom and the reality, truth and falsehood, at least not where human purpose and human action come into their own. What we call culture or civilization is based on man's capacity to be a maker, to invent unexpected uses, and to create artificial substitutes." (p. 99)

⁷ Besides neorealist cinema and the Nouvelle Vague, children's perception is an important topic in Stan Brakhage's "From *Metaphors on Vision*," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1978), pp. 120-128, where the American avant-garde filmmaker eulogizes the primitivist fantasy of an "untutored eye." On Brakhage and how he differs from Bazin's use of childhood in his "Ontology" essay, see: Marjorie Keller, *The Untutored Eye: Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell, and Brakhage* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986). Also worth checking is William C. Wees, "Review of *The Untutored Eye*," *Film Quarterly* 2:3 (1989), pp. 62-63.

⁸ Notwithstanding the fact that Truffaut's inspiration for *Les 400 Coups* is autobiographical, it is important to be aware that a large debate on children was going on in postwar France. The fifties bear witness to Gilbert Cohen-Seat's *Filmologie* movement, a way of studying cinema open to child psychology and other kinds of scientific approaches. Involved with *filmologie*, Henri Wallon was a prominent specialist on the child's perception and juvenile delinquency.

⁹ Historically this theater is associated with *Grand Guignol* which started in Pigalle around 1897 and specialized in naturalistic horror shows or amoral entertainment for the masses. This was Jean Renoir's favorite form of theater, and Truffaut includes this kind of episode as an homage to one of his artistic mentors.

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- ¹⁰ Paul Thomas, “Small Change,” *Film Quarterly* 30:3 (Spring 1977), p. 43.
- ¹¹ André Bazin, “De Sica: Metteur en Scène,” *What is Cinema?* vol. 2, p. 69.
- ¹² Op cit, pp. 72-73. On De Sica’s legacy in recent Italian cinema, see: Silvia Francesca Caracciolo, “Il Nuovo Documentario Italiano: Il Caso Fabio Caramaschi” (Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 2009-2010). In her thesis, Caracciolo discusses Caramaschi’s direction of child-actors in *Residence Roma, questo albergo non è una casa* (2001), *Dietro Palla o Dietro Porta* (2004), and *Solo Anadata: Il Viaggio di un Tuareg* (2010).
- ¹³ Vittorio De Sica, “Gli anni più belli della mia vita,” *Tempo* 16:50 (Dec. 16, 1954), pp. 18-22. Excerpt reprinted as “Nella Basilica di San Paolo,” *Tutti di De Sica*, ed. Orio Caldiron (Rome: Ernesto Carpentieri Editore, 1984), pp. 8-13. For this citation, see p. 11.
- ¹⁴ André Bazin, “De Sica: Metteur en Scène,” *What is Cinema?* vol. 2, p. 64.
- ¹⁵ He is one of the protagonists in Federico Fellini’s *I Vitelloni* (1953).
- ¹⁶ On children and cinema, see: Béla Balázs, “Bambini,” in *L’Uomo Visibile*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Turin: Lindau, 2008), pp. 217-219; Ugo Casiraghi and Davide Turconi, eds., *L’Infanzia nel cinema: bambini e ragazzi sugli schermi del mondo dai Lumières a Ferreri* (Ferrara, 1980), n.p.; Pol Vandromme, *Le Cinéma et L’Enfance* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1955); Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and the Cinema* (London: Reaktion Press, 2008); Richard Ford, *Children in Cinema* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939); Emma Wilson, *Cinema’s Missing Children* (New York-London: Wallflower, 2003).
- ¹⁷ This last-minute method is part of the self-reflexive narrative of Truffaut’s *La nuit américaine* (Day for Night, 1973), a film about making a film.

¹⁸ This episode in *La Comédie Humaine* ends with Balthazar Claes who dies before speaking out the solution to the scientific mystery he had worked on all his life.

¹⁹ The loss of the sacred is a theme running throughout in Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).

²⁰ Bert Cardullo, *Five French Filmmakers: Renoir, Bresson, Tati, Truffaut, Rohmer; Essays and Interviews* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), p. 123.

²¹ Robert Lachenay on *Les 400 Coups* (Criterion Collection, Blu-ray release 2009).

²² François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p. 61.

²³ Ivone Margulies, “Bazin’s Exquisite Corpses,” *Opening Bazin: postwar film theory and its afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 186-99.

²⁴ André Bazin, “An Introduction to the Chaplin Person,” in *What is Cinema? André Bazin*, trans. and ed. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: Caboose, 2009), pp. 25-35. The second section of this essay is titled “What makes Charlie run?”—a sentence that supports the idea that Chaplin is a precursor of Truffaut’s Antoine Doinel, always on the run.

²⁵ Akira Mizuta Lippitt, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wild Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

²⁶ “Victor Erice in Madrid, an interview with the director,” on *The Spirit of the Beehive* (The Criterion Collection, DVD release 2006).

²⁷ On the sacramental use of objects in Rossellini’s *Open City*, see: Jonathan David York, “Open Spaces, Liminal Places: The Deployment of the Sacred in *Open City*,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 10:3 (Summer 2010), pp. 16-24.

²⁸ André Bazin, “Ontology,” p. 15.