Truffaut’s 400 Blows back at the Brattle

The 400 Blows, directed by François Truffaut, starring Jean-Pierre Leaud; at the Brattle Theatre, daily at 4, 6, 8 and 10 pm, through April 13.

The Brattle Theatre is currently rerun-
ing his first great work, The 400 Blows (Les 400 Coups), made in 1958. It is a landmark in film history: it started the French New Wave (Nouvelle Vague), with its use of relatively simple technical means and its solid commitment to reality outside the film studio.

For Truffaut, as for his Italian Noveara-
list counterparts fifteen years earlier (and indeed for any “realist” form of art), a commitment to reality meant an awareness of life-determining mechanisms beyond human control, implying a feeling for the potentially tragic nature of life. In The 400 Blows (which is partly autobiographic), these features are demonstrated in the struggle of a schoolboy with his surround-
ings.

At school, he is severely punished for futile causes and humiliated in front of his classmates, and he is merely an as-
 wanted appendage to his parents’ unhappy marriage. His sincere efforts to adapt to his environment’s standards come to noth-
ing, or even aggravate his situation.

The dramatic content of the storyline and the irresponsible acting are comple-
tiously heightened by the superior handling of the cam-
eras. Truffaut fully exploits his freedom of choice and perspective. From the first moments, during which the camera tours the streets of Paris showing the buildings looming above, to the agitation of the child’s love affair with the city’s art buyers, the film never condenses into a single school.

Essentially all major artists involved in the movement contribute, thus making the section the only one which could claim a certain completeness in its field. The Bos-
ton version of Manet’s Execution of the Emperor Maximilian forms a spiritual opening. At the other end, we find the quinquennial Paul Gauguin is Where Do We Come From? What Are We? (I Am); Is God Tiring? I know of no other exam-
ple where Gauguin has combined his impressions of primitive society with his highly personal palette to create a work as enigmatic and fascinating as this.

Finally, we arrive at the radiantly American division. It starts with a number of sensual portraits, among which the works of Copley stand out. Then we are offered a selection of the donations of Maxon Karolik, who is thus the only Bos-
ton collector to whom more than casual attention is accorded. His gifts come from mainly lesser-known 19th-century Ameri-
cans. At the risk of arousing suspicions of snobbery, I state as my view that the body of this work is to be judged for its histori-
cal and cultural interest, rather than its aesthetic merit — with the definite excep-
tion of the crystalline landscapes of Alpheus Babcock, Fitz Hugh Lane and Maria Johnson Head.

It should be clear by now that this col-
lection is the result of intelligent, rather than random, creation. Probably this was just as avoidable as the concentration on major pieces. But it will be a mere matter of pa-
tience to get the collector who wins the claim.

Downstairs, the Museum has installed a temporary display of its Spanish, Italian and French heroic paintings. It can be seen as an appendix to the Boston Collec-
tors show, with which it shares its pro-
cessional character and the high quality of its works.

Michel Bee

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