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NIGHT (1973) and THE 400 BLOWS (1959)**

## **Francois Truffaut's Journey as an Auteur: Exploring Similarities in DAY FOR NIGHT and THE 400 BLOWS**

As an auteur, director Francois Truffaut utilizes similar stylistic choices – such as long takes, wide shots, and an emphasis on point of view – to use film to reflect his own personal oftentimes autobiographical experiences and address themes of secrecy, gender, and the role of art. While DAY FOR NIGHT (1973) and Truffaut's first film, THE 400 BLOWS (1959) were directed decades apart and belong in different genres, they share these similar stylistic choices and themes, representing Truffaut as a recognizable auteur.

Truffaut's childhood was similar to the semi-autobiographic story depicted in THE 400 BLOWS. His father was an architect, and his mother was a secretary at a magazine. He was raised by his grandmother until she passed away when he was eight. At fourteen, he left school and worked for an exporter of seeds. During that time, he established a film club with his friend, called *Le Cercle cinémane*. He met film critic Andre Bazin by attending his film club meetings, and Bazin later arranged a job for Truffaut organizing film screenings at factories. After Bazin became ill, Truffaut worked as a welder. Within this job, Truffaut said he “passed the time by trying to recall the last film I had seen.” (Fox 11) At seventeen, he worked for the newspaper *Elle*. He briefly served in the French army and spent time in a psychiatric hospital before being discharged.

With the encouragement of Bazin, Truffaut wrote and later published his first articles for Bazin's influential film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, where he wrote for eight years, beginning his career in cinema. Here, he established the auteur theory – the idea that film is an art, and the director is the writer and main creative force. His first creative work was a short film, LES MISTONS (1958).

Truffaut's first feature length film, *THE 400 BLOWS* gained international attention and won the best direction prize at the Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for the Academy Award for best screenplay. *THE 400 BLOWS* was created during the French New Wave film movement, and one of the most influential films within the movement. Truffaut grew up watching films from the previous era of French filmmaking, the "tradition of quality" – which Truffaut directly challenges by making films in "a more personal, more individual way." (Fox 52) The French and British "tradition of quality" primarily focused on high production value films that tended to be period pieces and reflected the country's history, or adaptations of novels and plays. While *THE 400 BLOWS* depicts Truffaut's childhood during World War 2, it is not set in the period – this is something Truffaut himself acknowledges later, noting how he did not feel like he could accurately portray a period film at the time. (Fox 64) During this same period, Truffaut also wrote the screenplay for Jean-Luc Godard's influential New Wave film *BREATHLESS* (1960). Throughout his entire career, Truffaut directed 25 films before his death in 1984.

*DAY FOR NIGHT* was created after the French New Wave movement subsided in popularity, but its influence is still evident in Truffaut's directing style which included long takes and a male point of view. The film also reflects and consequently criticizes traditional Hollywood filmmaking. *DAY FOR NIGHT* also includes aspects of postmodernism in its hyperconsciousness of media (specifically films). It was nominated for an Oscar in screenwriting and directing.

Many of Truffaut's films star Jean-Pierre L aud in the leading roles. His first major role was in *THE 400 BLOWS* and he has starred in various films by Truffaut since then, usually as

Antoine Doinel, a character that closely mirrors Truffaut and his experience. In *DAY FOR NIGHT*, he plays Alphonse, one of the leading actors in the movie's film.

Beyond cinema, Truffaut was deeply interested in literature and most interested in French novelist Honoré de Balzac. This interest in literature can also be seen in his adaptations of *FAHRENHEIT 451* (1966), *SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER* (1960), and *THE GREEN ROOM* (1978) among other literary works.

Truffaut's first feature film, *THE 400 BLOWS*, tells the story of Antoine Doinel, a fourteen-year-old that struggles often with his parents, teachers, and skips school, and eventually ends up in jail. Much of the story is drawn from Truffaut's own childhood and he admitted to leaving out events from his actual childhood that may have seemed "unrealistic."

*DAY FOR NIGHT* follows director Ferrand through the course of shooting a feature film, *MEET PAMELA*, and the various issues and setbacks faced on the set. *MEET PAMELA*, the movie's fictional film, tells the story of a young wife who meets her husband's family and has an affair with his father.

In *DAY FOR NIGHT* and *THE 400 BLOWS*, a woman cheating and being discovered plays a significant role in both plots. Antoine discovering his mother cheating impacts their relationship positively, briefly, since she later promises him money for doing well in school – something its clear she would not have done earlier. This brief positive relationship Antoine has with his mother is significant since it shows she is capable of being a good mother at times, but only when it benefits her. Within *DAY FOR NIGHT*, the turning point of the film is when Liliane leaves Alphonse and the film set due to an affair – this later leads to Julie Baker having

sex with Alphonse, despite being married. The plot of MEET PAMELA also involves cheating, offering foreshadowing.

Both films draw from Truffaut's own personal experience for the plot. While THE 400 BLOWS is more directly autobiographical, DAY FOR NIGHT also utilizes some real events for the plot, primarily drawn from Truffaut's experiences with directing, especially his self-described tendency towards "improvisation" when directing. (Fox 70) This autobiographical aspect is especially present in how Antoine in THE 400 BLOWS and Ferrand in DAY FOR NIGHT both mirror Truffaut himself, with Truffaut acting as the latter, strengthening this connection.

Within stylistic choices, Truffaut utilizes long takes frequently. In THE 400 BLOWS, Antoine is shown setting the table in a long take which emphasizes the documentary-like style and the mundaneness of his life. Long takes are utilized for a similar reason in DAY FOR NIGHT, when following Ferrand's daily tasks like deciding on wigs, cars, and which prop gun to use all in a single take. The documentary-like style present in both films is directly acknowledged by Truffaut— he described THE 400 BLOWS as a "documentary record" and DAY FOR NIGHT as a documentary as well. This documentary-style is illustrated in some of the other longer takes of daily actions such as Antoine sitting in class in THE 400 BLOWS and Ferrand walking around deciding the lighting and what vase to use in the hotel. Handheld camera, which is more typical in documentaries, is also utilized in both films.

Truffaut utilizes elevated, almost birds eye view wide angle shots to show action in both films. In THE 400 BLOWS, this is used when viewing Rene's home and when Rene and Antoine are walking back with the stolen typewriter. Within DAY FOR NIGHT this is employed in various scenes, such as the pool scene with Stacey and the opening scene showing the set.

These wide-angle shots create a sense of separation for the viewer, and a sense of watching over the action rather than being directly in it. Also, in *DAY FOR NIGHT*, it highlights the complexity of film sets by offering an overall view.

Both *DAY FOR NIGHT* and *THE 400 BLOWS* represent a strong sense of point-of-view – specifically Truffaut’s point of view. In *THE 400 BLOWS*, the story primarily follows Antoine and the audience rarely sees outside of what Antoine experiences. Antoine’s point of view is shown in the scenes in prison, where the camera looks through the chain link fence of Antoine’s cell, and later through the bars of the car transporting him. This is utilized again in the amusement ride scene – bystanders are upright when Antoine is and upside down when he is, showing the viewers directly what Antoine sees.

*DAY FOR NIGHT*, while it depicts a wider cast of characters and occasionally includes their views, primarily focuses on Ferrand’s point of view. This is best illustrated in the repeated scenes where Ferrand attempts to sleep and he hears dialogue lines repeated from earlier in the film, showing his restless thoughts. His point of view is further shown with voiceover and scenes where the camera follows him – usually with long, handheld takes – to show the frantic life of a director. This is shown for other characters as well – when Julie Baker is first introduced, close-up shots of paparazzies are included to illustrate what she sees. This subjectivity is one of the defining characteristics of the French New Wave that Truffaut continues to utilize throughout his career.

Humor is frequently used in both films – while *DAY FOR NIGHT* is more directly comedic, *THE 400 BLOWS* contains many short moments of irony for comic relief. In *THE 400 BLOWS*, a stranger comments on how kids like Antoine are “spoiled rotten” which is ironic since this is clearly not Antoine’s current situation. This dramatic irony is also present when

Rene's father is looking for Antoine, yet Antoine is clearly shown in the same frame as Rene's father. However, *DAY FOR NIGHT* features more directly comical scenarios, such as the scene where the trained cat actor refuses to act as its directed. The presence of comedy – more specially irony – in both films illustrate how Truffaut imbues humor regardless of the plot and genre.

One of the major issues addressed in Truffaut's films is the role of masculinity, sexism, and the male gaze. In the beginning of *THE 400 BLOWS*, Antoine is shown sitting at his mother's vanity and using her hairbrush, eyelash curler, and perfume –this challenges the notion of masculinity and could also represent Antoine's desire to be closer with his mother. Conversely, the male gaze is shown in the opening scene where a pinup picture is followed as it passed around the classroom in a long take, keeping the photo in focus. Within *DAY FOR NIGHT*, Truffaut provides a commentary on sexism within the film industry when Severine acknowledges that she is only cast now as an old and neglected wife while Alexandre, who's the same age, is still playing lovers. This sexism is again shown when Stacey questions wearing a swimsuit, despite her role being a secretary in the film. The male gaze is presented when Alphonse tells Liliane to walk ahead "so I can watch your ass," and the camera follows behind to show this perspective. Truffaut presents these subjects in a critical way, but keeps those criticisms subtle, and it does not remain an entirely central focus of the plot. The male main characters rarely do anything to directly challenge gender roles – it is the viewer that must come to this conclusion.

*THE 400 BLOWS* and *DAY FOR NIGHT* both address and question the purpose of art and cinema. While this is a larger theme in *DAY FOR NIGHT*, it's still present within *THE 400 BLOWS*. Within *DAY FOR NIGHT*, the myriad of issues encountered on set call into question

the efforts done for filmmaking and the artificiality of it, despite being an art. This is exemplified best in the final decision to change the film's final scene filmed to be covered in fake snow – in many ways, this creates a symbolic and literal layer of artificiality over the entire production. The efforts of filmmaking and art are again criticized when Alexandre's death is presented in unemotional terms, and primarily discussed in relation to how it effects the movie, rather than creating an emotional death for a main character.

In *THE 400 BLOWS*, questioning of art is shown but is more understated. One instance of this is the taxidermized horse in Rene's house, which is worth a million francs and is presented as work of "art." However, Antoine purely sees the horse for its resale value rather than viewing it as art to be valued. Only viewing art for its commercial value is a theme also addressed in *DAY FOR NIGHT*, as Ferrand is constantly on a rushed schedule due to others' demands – this fast-paced scheduling represents a devaluing of art.

Secrecy plays an important role in Truffaut's films. Truffaut stated how he links films and secrecy – when he was younger, he used to sneak out to watch films in the evenings and skip classes to go. When interviewed, Truffaut said: "I still retain a great degree of anxiety from this period, and films are associated with anxiety for me, with the idea of secrecy." (Fox 3) This theme of secrecy is reflected in both *THE 400 BLOWS* and *DAY FOR NIGHT*. In *THE 400 BLOWS*, Antoine uncovers his mother's secret affair and she later has a conversation with Antoine about her own secrets and gives him one to keep– the promise of 1,000 Francs for doing well on his French essay. *DAY FOR NIGHT* uses secrets for the basis of melodrama which drives the plot – primarily the affairs led by Alphonse, Lillian, and Julie, which are initially secret before being uncovered either by themselves or others incidentally. Both of Truffaut's



films heavily utilize secrecy as a plot device, which suggests that Truffaut believes secrecy is something that complicates life but is almost inevitable.

In both *DAY FOR NIGHT* and *THE 400 BLOWS*, there is a degree of self-reflexivity present. Within *THE 400 BLOWS*, Rene and Antoine see a movie while skipping school, Antoine's mom makes comments on the point of art and movies, and there is a comment made on how a movie Antoine's family watched was not "funny" but had depth. Antoine's father describes movies as a "great method of education." In *DAY FOR NIGHT*, a similar form of self-reflexivity is shown when Ferrand ironically tells Alphonse: "No one's private life runs smoothly. That only happens in movies ... People like you and me are only happy in our work." These instances provide some subtle self-reflexivity which allows Truffaut to show his own views on film, without entirely breaking the audience immersion, while still bringing some awareness of film.

Within *DAY FOR NIGHT*, the entire film is self-reflexive in the way the movie shows the making of films. Self-reflexivity on cinema is shown within the dream sequence of Ferrand as a child stealing the pictures from *CITIZEN KANE*. This also reflects Truffaut's own admiration of *CITIZEN KANE* – he said he has watched the film at least 20 times and credits it as one of his major influences. (Fox 9) A similar scenario occurs in *THE 400 BLOWS* when Rene steals the movie poster with Antoine and runs off. Both scenes acknowledge the influence of former films and reflect how film directors are always "stealing" from earlier movies and creative works. This idea is again shown when Ferrand copies Julie's own words for dialogue to be used within *MEET PAMELA* in *DAY FOR NIGHT*.

While Truffaut's first film *THE 400 BLOWS*, and one of his last few films, *DAY FOR NIGHT*, are from different decades and genres, they share similar themes and stylistic

trademarks that establish Truffaut as an auteur. Both movies tackle issues of masculinity, sexism, the male gaze, secrecy, the purpose of art, and self-reflexivity in cinema. Stylistically, they share the use of long takes, hand-held documentary style, point-of-view shots, and humor. All these aspects establish Truffaut as an auteur that maintains a consistent creative perspective across films.

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