The Topsy-Turvy World of Children in French Film

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Children are able to teach the world about political issues. Their perspective of politics is very different than that of adults. Generally, they are apathetic towards politics, concerned only with their world, which includes their friends, family, and community. I am analyzing four French films, *Les 400 Coups*, *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, *L'Argent de Poche*, and *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*. I will explain, in detail, the political aspects of each film with respect to the children’s’ perspectives in these films.

I will also explain each director’s life and what led him to create each film. The films by Truffaut and Malle are certainly autobiographical pieces. Each director dealt with the issues portrayed in his film throughout the course of his lifetime. Most critics agree that Antoine Doinel in *Les 400 Coups* is François Truffaut himself. They also agree that Julien in *Au Revoir Les Enfants* is Louis Malle, as he experienced the same situation portrayed in the film during his childhood.
The Topsy-Turvy World of Children in French Film

In today's society of high-tech computers and Starbucks, movies play a large role in our lives to teach, entertain and motivate us to change. Political films often try to effect change by sending specific messages to the audience. Change can be brought about in a number of different ways. Some films use humor in the form of satires while other films convey their message by portraying real life stories in a big screen format. French films are no different.

After having watched four French films by three different French directors, I discovered a common theme running throughout these remarkable movies. Political issues come face to face with the views of children. Before and during puberty, children go through many changes in their bodies and in their lives. Emotions are heightened, and reality becomes a blur. Puberty stricken children are the emphasis of these French film directors.

Because of changes in their growth and their lives, children often have a completely different view on political issues. Their views correspond only to what they have experienced and the heartaches that they have witnessed. Children cannot see deep enough into most political issues and therefore get confused and often angry when something goes wrong in their lives. They do not see the light at the end of the tunnel. Politics, according to children, are dealt with using emotion, not intellect.

François Truffaut, Louis Malle, and Jean-Pierre Jeunet use children in their films to show the world a child's perspective on many different childhood experiences ranging from adoption to discrimination. The opinions of these children have often been
associated with the directors themselves, as some critics have supposed that *Les 400 Coups* for Truffaut and *Au Revoir Les Enfants* for Malle are actually autobiographical, since similar experiences occurred to both.

**François Truffaut**

François Truffaut was born an unwanted child into the uncertainty of interwar Europe in 1932. He spent the beginning of his life away from his mother, living first with a nanny then his grandmother. When he was finally taken in by his parents at the age of ten, their home was neither warm nor welcoming. He became distrustful, secretive, and rebellious, though he avoided becoming a delinquent to society because he found his passion in life, which was the film industry. Truffaut and his best friend Robert Lachenay would use the movie theater as a substitute home. Truffaut would sneak in through the emergency exit or the bathroom window and therefore saw his first 200 films without paying for them.

Truffaut spent his childhood as a petit bourgeois, neither rich nor poor. His parents were more interested in pursuing personal activities than they were in their son. This resulted in his being left with relatives or often alone. He was ignored and humiliated but not mistreated or deprived materially. This led in his attempts to escape reality by going to the theater and his rebelliousness. His mother, Jeanine de Montferrand, could not stand noise around the house, so François was not allowed to play there or in the street. He never forgave his mother for treating him as an inconvenience.
The apartment Truffaut moved into with his parents at the age of ten was tiny. He described it as, “very difficult living under the same roof in such a tiny apartment. There was a room that served as a dining room and there was my parents’ bedroom, and a little entrance adjoining the kitchen, which was also a bathroom...Everything was so precarious that my father had built a structure as my bed, in the entrance, that was a kind of bunk which folded up during the day and unfolded at night thanks to a pivoting mechanism” (Baecque, 12). His parents did not comprehend his attitude. They could not understand why he would rather stay at home than join his parents for the weekend while they went rock-climbing. They considered him lazy and attributed his defiance of authority to an adolescent phase he would outgrow. It is interesting to note that while Truffaut was born in 1932, his parents were not married until 1933. Thus the greatest mystery surrounding Truffaut’s life was whether Roland Truffaut was truly his father.

François never asked for anything, but insisted on stealing from his family’s till to gain a sense of independence. He also made up stories, lying compulsively, in an attempt to “settle his score with reality” (Baecque, 13). For Truffaut, school was not a place for learning, but an environment for fabricating lies, creative falsifications. He defied authority constantly, skipping school to read Balzac or Dumas or playing hooky to experience real life. The only value Truffaut found in school was that it was a means to make friends.

After his troubled childhood, Truffaut enlisted in the French army. He deserted and roamed the streets of Paris, searching for a place to stay. Film critic, André Bazin, proving to be the providential friend, put Truffaut up. He was soon discovered and
sentenced to prison. André Bazin secured his release from prison after a long struggle. As Antoine Baecque points out, Bazin's "direct appeals to the military were fruitless; sometimes his efforts even turned against him, for he was seen as an antimilitary, Communist intellectual" (Baecque, 67). With the help of Abbé Gritti, Bazin finally succeeded and encouraged Truffaut's interest in film by going to the theater with him and asking him to share his views on the films they saw.

Truffaut's life was characterized by an inability to establish lasting sexual relationships. He was incapable of fidelity to the women he loved, and he frequented prostitutes throughout his adult life. Truffaut said, "Making films with children is a great temptation before, something of a panic during, but a great satisfaction after. Even when everything seems to be coming adrift, there's always something worth saving, and the child is always the best thing on the screen. A child's truth is something I think I feel absolutely" (Vincendeau). Truffaut was most successful at films about men's need for female affirmation and those concerning children. These values can be seen in both Les 400 Coups and L'Argent de Poche.

Truffaut founded a film club called "The Movie Mania Circle" at age sixteen and began writing harsh reviews of domestic film productions. He later began writing for the Cahiers du Cinéma, bashing the French film industry for modeling itself after the American film industry, an industry placing importance on high production values, popular stars, and box office receipts. Truffaut proposed something new, a cinema of "auteurs," which would recognize the director as the artistic force behind a film and empower him to realize his own vision. Truffaut's "auteur theory" has been accepted
both as a tool of analysis and as a paradigm for filmmaking. Truffaut was also one of the filmmakers involved in the French New Wave.

The term French New Wave, or *La Nouvelle Vague*, refers to the work by a group of French filmmakers between the years 1958 and 1964. The film directors who formed the core of this group, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer, were all once film critics for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Louis Malle soon became associated with the New Wave movement. Through their writings, the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics paved the way for cinema to become as worthy of academic study as any other art form.

A distinctive philosophy, existentialism, came to be in France in the post-war years. Existentialism stressed the individual, free choice, and a sense of the absurdity in human life. The characters in French New Wave films, according to Stephen Nottingham, are "often marginalized, young anti-heroes and loners, with no family ties, who behave spontaneously, often act immorally and are frequently seen as anti-authoritarian." The French New Wave directors were skillful at examining relationships of all sorts, making their films personal.

**Les 400 Coups (The 400 Blows)**

Many political issues are dealt with in *Les 400 Coups*. François Truffaut is a master of bringing children into films, especially films that involve a broad range of political issues. The audience learns about adoption, adultery, thievery, and divorce from
a child’s perspective. All of these things hurt a child, but an adult sees some of them as the best option for a better future, excluding thievery.

*Les 400 Coups*, co-written and directed by François Truffaut, deals with a young boy who does not understand his parents. Antoine Doinel is a thirteen-year old Parisian whose parents do not show much interest in him; he often skips school to go to the movies or play with his friends. He discovers his mother has a lover, steals a typewriter, is suspended from school...to conceal that he suffers. He eventually leaves home and attempts to fend for himself. This film shows us that the relationship between children and their parents is a difficult one, and that the odds cannot always be overcome.

At the beginning of the film, Antoine goes to school, and the audience sees him getting himself into trouble in all of his classes. He has not done his assignments, and he mocks his teachers. When his teacher tells him to do extra homework after he has disrupted the class many times, Antoine goes home to do his homework. In the middle of writing his sentences, his adoptive father, whom he considers his real father, as he has never met his biological father, comes home. The only thing in life that Antoine wants is the love of his parents, so he strives not to disappoint them. His father would be sorely disappointed if he discovered that Antoine had misbehaved in school, again, so Antoine hides his homework to spend time with his father. Eventually, he is told to go to bed, though the audience knows he has not completed his assignment.

The audience can sympathize with Antoine who only wants to please his adoptive father. A child is always searching for his parents’ love and acceptance, and Antoine did
not want to disappoint his father. As a result, he did not finish his assignment, knowing he would be punished in school, just to avoid the disappointment of his father. As Antoine has never had contact with his biological father, he desperately seeks the love and affection of his adoptive father.

The political issue involved here is adoption. Thousands of babies are adopted each year because their biological parents gave them up for various reasons. Adults view adoption as a joyous occasion because the children who were given up are able to bring happiness into couples' lives; couples who are unable or unwilling to produce their own biological offspring. Children, on the other hand, view adoption as a cruel decision on behalf of those who gave them up. Even though children are happy to have been adopted by parents who are willing to care for them, most search for their biological parents for their entire lives. While Antoine is with his biological mother, he resents his adoptive father because he knows he does not genetically belong to him. All children seek love and affection from their parents, especially when they have been adopted by them. Truffaut does not directly confront this issue in the film. Adoption is only briefly mentioned in the film, and Truffaut's views are not expressed.

This desire to please one's adoptive parents mirrors Truffaut's life. As his parents were married a year after he was born, like Antoine Doinel's parents, no one ever knew for sure if Roland Truffaut was his biological father. As a French New Wave filmmaker, one of Truffaut's strong suits was his ability to examine relationships of all sorts. He portrayed the relationship between Antoine and his parents very perceptively,
demonstrating to the audience just how difficult it was for Antoine to live with his parents, much like it was difficult for Truffaut to live with his own parents.

The next day, his friend René convinces him to skip school and write a note from his parents himself. The boys spend the day wandering through the streets of Paris, finding adventures along the way, and riding amusement park rides. In the middle of the day, Antoine sees his mother with a man who is not his father, and he becomes upset. The mother sees her son and knows he is not at school, but is unsure of how to punish him as he has seen her with the other man. He goes home and attempts to write a letter to his teacher, forging his mother’s signature, but, again, his father comes home and interrupts him, so he hides his paper. Again, he is sent to bed without completing his task at hand.

The audience feels bad for the young boy who has discovered that his mother is having an affair. A child always wants to believe that his parents have a happy marriage, but sometimes he has to face reality; not all marriages are perfect. Antoine loves his mother so much and is disappointed in her when he discovers the affair. He loses his trust in his mother because of the affair, which saddens him because she was his only role model.

The political issue the audience perceives here is adultery. Adults and children view adultery from slightly different perspectives. Antoine sees his mother cheating on his father and is extremely uncomfortable about the situation. He wonders what will come of his family, and he is afraid of losing his father. His mother, the adulterer, is
unconcerned with her husband's feelings or with what might happen to her family. She is only concerned with her own happiness. As her husband is unaware of the affair, it is difficult to gauge his sentiment, though one can assume that he would feel betrayed and be concerned with what will happen to Antoine, even though he is only his adopted son.

Through having Antoine catch his mother in an affair, Truffaut is expressing his personal inabilities. Truffaut had an inability to maintain sexual relationships because he was incapable of fidelity to women he loved. Truffaut also skipped school frequently to experience real life. He is portraying this aspect of his life when he shows Antoine and René skipping school to run around the streets of Paris, visiting a fair and riding the rides. René, Antoine's best friend, is easily interpreted as Truffaut's real-life best friend, Robert Lachenay.

The next day, he goes to school and realizes he has forgotten to write a note. When his teacher asks him why he doesn’t have a note, Antoine lies and says, “My mother died.” Taking this as an acceptable excuse, his teacher enters the classroom with Antoine. Antoine's blatant lie is uncovered when his parents show up at his school in the middle of his first class. To avoid punishment, he spends the night in a newspaper factory that belongs to René's uncle. He decides he is running away from home because his parents don’t love him, and he is scared of what they might do to him for having lied about his mother’s death.

Children will many times lie to avoid punishment. The audience understands why Antoine lies about his mother’s death. We understand that he may even wish she were
dead because of her affair and the fact that he caught her. A child rarely wishes his parents dead because his parents are the only people in his life who help him along his path to a good life. It is clear that Antoine wishes his mother dead because he can no longer bear to live with her. In his eyes, having a mother who does not exist would be better than a mother who never pays attention to him. It is sad when his parents show up at the school and he is caught in his lies. Antoine simply wants to have a happy school life because his home life is far from happy.

Truffaut himself lied frequently during his adolescence to escape reality. His home-life was not a pleasant one, and the lies helped him pretend it was. Antoine’s bed in *Les 400 Coups* mimics Truffaut’s bed that his father built for him, a bed that folds up during the day and folds down at night, blocking the entrance to the apartment. This demonstrates that Antoine’s home-life is just as miserable as Truffaut’s home-life was. The crammed apartment also mirrors the tiny apartment Truffaut lived in with his parents.

Eventually his parents find out where he is, but they do not punish him. Instead, they invite him to return home with unconditional love. He returns home for a while, until his teacher accuses him of plagiarizing a passage from Balzac. Antoine decides to drop out of school and run away from home. He lives with René, and they devise a plan to get some money and move to the northern coast. They steal money from Antoine’s grandmother, and steal a typewriter from his father’s office in hopes of pawning it. Their plans go awry when they are unable to pawn the typewriter because they do not have the proper paperwork. Antoine attempts to return the typewriter to his father’s office, but the
night security guard catches him and calls his father. His parents then take him to the police station, hoping to convince him to stop stealing. Antoine tells his parents he would rather stay in jail than return home, so his parents leave him there.

The audience cheers for Antoine when he is stealing money because we feel the best thing for him to do would be to run away with René and live on the coast. His home life is twisted and pathetic, and he would be infinitely happier away from his parents, especially his father. Antoine’s pain is clearly demonstrated when he is caught by the night security guard. He was simply trying to return the typewriter because he knew he was wrong in taking it, and as he could not pawn it anyway, he decided to do the right thing and return it. His father did not see the same thing, though, and he had him thrown in jail in an effort to teach him a lesson.

The political issue involved here is thievery. Antoine and René view the thievery as a necessity for their lives. They do not feel guilty about stealing the typewriter until they learn they cannot pawn it. Most adults, however, view thievery from a different perspective. To an adult, stealing is an unacceptable behavior because it hurts others. The children do not understand the consequences of stealing until they have been caught, and then it is too late. Most adults teach their children that stealing is wrong, but children generally lack the ability to comprehend the ramifications because they are unable to relate to the situation.

Another aspect of the film that mirrors Truffaut’s life is the thievery. Truffaut frequently stole from his family to gain a sense of independence. Antoine and René steal
the money from Antoine’s grandmother, representing Truffaut’s own escapades in stealing from his family. Antoine, much like Truffaut, was distrustful of the people who surrounded him, secretive, and rebellious. While the title *Les 400 Coups* translates to “raising hell” in English, Antoine did not actually raise hell. The adult figures in his life just viewed him as doing such, which made his life that much more difficult.

Antoine is transferred to a juvenile detention center near the coast. His mother visits him only one time during his stay and tells him she wants to take him home but that his father does not want him to return. René also tries to visit him on the same day as his mother is visiting, but the guards will not let him visit Antoine. They can see each other through a window, but they are unable to talk. The next day the boys from the detention center go to a field to play soccer with two guards. Antoine escapes and runs into the forest. He thwarts the guards and successfully escapes. The film ends with him running to the ocean and putting his feet in the water. He is finally happy.

*Les 400 Coups* displays the fact that children are generally good at heart. Antoine only wants his parents to love him unconditionally, but he does not feel he is receiving this love. The father figure in his life is actually the man who adopted him, and he has never met his biological father. Though Mr. Doinel has adopted Antoine, he does not see himself as Antoine’s real father, and he is willing to disown Antoine if he does anything wrong. After Antoine goes to the detention center, it is clear that Mr. Doinel has given up on him. The relationship with his father is the only relationship he has with a parental figure as his mother is never home because she is having an affair with a man from her
office. The only time she sees him is when she comes home late at night. Antoine anxiously awaits her arrival for the kiss she will give him when she believes he is asleep.

Mr. and Mrs. Doinel fight constantly, which upsets Antoine. No child wants to hear his parents arguing, for any reason. Every child wants his parents to be a happily married couple, but that is rarely the case. To an adult, the arguments are a normal part of every day life, but a child’s perception is different. He hears the argument and thinks his parents do not love each other. In Antoine’s case, he hears his parents fighting over him, so he thinks he is the reason his parents are having problems. This belief leads him to leave home because he thinks his parents will be happier that way.

Some people say that stealing is a gesture of hope on the part of a child who feels he or she has been deprived of the care and love to which he or she was inalienably entitled. According to Anne Gillain, “The young robber is not looking for objects but trying to re-establish contact with a maternal figure who failed to recognize his or her needs” (Hayward, 147). Gillain also points out that the only person in the film to be robbed is Antoine’s father, as someone stole his Michelin Guide. She notes that this robbery points to the “obvious failure of his authority and of the law he should represent” (Hayward, 147). Antoine’s father is believed to be an authoritative figure, one who should not be robbed, yet he is the only person who is violated in the film. Since he was robbed, his authority is diminished, and his weak side is visible.

Though Antoine’s parents do not get divorced in the film, it is an important issue because of the chance of divorce. Divorce is another issue that children view much
differently than adults. Adults decide to get a divorce because of a myriad of reasons.
Sometimes a couple is no longer in love. Sometimes they have found love elsewhere and can no longer be with their current partner. Sometimes they argue too often and believe it is simply not worth it and divorce is the best option. A child, however, only has one view on divorce. He sees divorce as his parents giving up on him and leaving him. He does not want to choose between parents when custody becomes an issue. He simply wants his parents to stay together and work through all of their problems. No child wants to only have one parent. In Antoine’s case, he has already lost one father, whom he never knew, and he cannot bear the thought of losing another father, even though he does not always believe his father loves him.

Nearly every scene in the film can be easily related to Truffaut’s life. Antoine’s infamous bed, shown multiple times in the film, is exactly the same as the bed Truffaut was forced to sleep on as a child. Antoine was frequently left home alone, or with a neighbor, because his parents were more concerned with personal matters, which was exactly the case in Truffaut’s life. Truffaut’s parents believed rock-climbing was much more important than caring for their son, and they would often leave him with either his grandmother or a nanny. Truffaut’s passion in life was the theater because he found it to be an escape from reality. Antoine frequents the theater in the film, so he can escape reality. After he accidentally ignites a fire in the apartment, his parents take him to the theater instead of punishing him. Everyone needs a break from reality, which can always be found in the theater.
L’Argent de Poche (Small Change)

As we saw with *Les 400 Coups*, Truffaut is an expert at dealing with political issues from a child’s perspective. In *L’Argent de Poche*, Truffaut deals with child abuse, child neglect, a child’s struggle to receive love and affection from his parents, and the trials and tribulations involved in puberty. A child views all of these issues differently than an adult. While most people would agree that child abuse and neglect are bad things that happen every day in the world, the adults who participate in these activities view them as necessary to ensure that their children behave properly. All children seek the love and affection of their parents, and all people go through puberty during their lifetimes.

*L’Argent de Poche* deals with many issues facing children. In the town of Thiers, summer of 1976, teachers and parents give their children skills, love, and attention. A teacher has his first child, a single mother hopes to meet Mr. Right, and another mom reaches out to Patrick, a motherless lad who is just discovering the opposite sex. Patrick befriends Julien, a new student who lives in poverty with his mother and has a terrible secret. Bruno, another young man in the film, shows his friends how to chat up girls. Sylvie, the only girl with a major part, stages a witty protest against her parents. Everybody goes to the cinema. At camp, Martine, another young girl, catches Patrick’s eye. A teacher explains: "Life is hard, but it’s wonderful."

All of the boys in the film attend the same school, which is set to become co-educational the following year. The teachers at the school are concerned that bringing
girls into the classroom will provide far too great a distraction for the boys. One female teacher is already having trouble with the boys in her class who sit in the rear of the classroom masturbating. She is worried that girls would do the same or, at the very least, see the boys doing the activity.

As everyone knows, puberty is a natural part of life. *L'Argent de Poche* simply demonstrates the struggles children face during puberty. Everybody goes through puberty, and each person deals with it in his own way. The young boys in this woman’s class choose to masturbate, which obviously distracts the teacher. She cannot decide if she should put a stop to this behavior, or if she should just accept it as a way of life.

A child, however, views puberty differently than an adult, who has already experienced these changes. A child is scared by these changes, while an adult knows that it happens to everyone. As a result, the child masturbating in the classroom does not see this is an unacceptable activity, he simply views it as a part of life. An adult, however, is offended by public masturbation.

The female teacher’s best friend at the school, a male teacher, explains to her that girls in the classroom will help calm down the boys and make them reluctant to do such things. He also moves into the apartment building where one of his students lives with his mother and younger brother. His wife is pregnant, and the children in his class anxiously await the arrival of his son or daughter. The day the baby comes, the teacher is late to school, and the boy who lives in his building announces to the class that his baby
has arrived! The children are so excited they cannot calm down when another teacher enters the room to tell them to be quiet and that their teacher will arrive shortly.

Children are always excited by any event. In general, children look for any distraction they can to avoid participating in the learning process. In this case, the birth of their teacher’s son is the best distraction. They ask the name of the boy, his weight, his height, his eye color, and they are able to ask him where babies come from. One can learn that children are easily excited, but that there is not much that can be done about it. Adults are also excited by most events, but they understand that there is a time and a place for this excitement and that school is not the proper time or place. Adults know how to calm down, and they do not want to avoid participating in the learning process.

One student, Patrick, is discovering the opposite sex, but he is too nervous to do anything about it. Patrick’s home-life is anything but pleasant as he has no mother and his father is in a wheelchair. He meets his friend Laurent’s mother Mrs. Riffle and becomes obsessed. He does everything he can to spend as much time with her as possible. He helps Laurent study after school, hoping Mrs. Riffle will invite him to stay for dinner. He buys her roses and takes them to her, though she tells him to thank his father. Patrick’s mother is not in his life, so he is desperately searching for a mother figure, and he finds one in his friend’s mother, though he confuses his feelings for lust.

Young children, especially boys who do not have a mother figure in their life, will constantly search for one. Patrick does just that. He sincerely wishes Mrs. Riffle would just embrace him as her own son. As a result of his obsessions, he lusts for Mrs. Riffle.
When he brings her red roses, she is painting her toenails. He sees only her legs when he enters the room, and they frighten him as much as seduce him. Anne Gillain points out, "Directing his glance towards the 'mystery' of female sexuality, [her legs] generate anxieties" (Hayward, 148).

As we discovered with *Les 400 Coups*, children always seek the love and affection of parental figures. As Patrick does not have a mother, he is constantly seeking for a woman to fill that void in his life. Mrs. Riflle is the perfect person because she is willing to accept Patrick. Patrick’s father is handicapped and cannot do everything Patrick wants him to do, so Patrick is just trying to find a normal parental figure in his life. Any child would do the same. Adults, on the other hand, view the situation differently. Mrs. Riflle feels bad for Patrick because he has no mother and his father is handicapped, but she is not willing to adopt him, nor does she have any physical interest in Patrick.

The absence of Patrick’s mother mirrors Truffaut’s life. While Truffaut knew who his mother was, he never spent much time with her. He desperately searched for his mother’s affection, but she found other things in her life more important. She would not even allow him to play in the house or in the street because she could not tolerate the noise children made.

All of the boys are going through puberty, which results in their masturbating in class and gaining an interest in the opposite sex. An older student, Bruno, shows his friends how to talk to girls. Bruno and Patrick go to the movie theater with two girls, and
Bruno proceeds to kiss one of the girls, while Patrick sits nervously next to the other girl. Then the girl sitting next to Patrick and the girl sitting next to Bruno switch places. Bruno proceeds to kiss the other girl. Then Bruno places himself between the two girls and alternates between kissing both of them while Patrick, finally at ease, sits back and enjoys the film. In the end, however, Patrick goes to summer camp where Martine falls for him. He kisses her in the stairwell during lunch.

Another result of puberty is an increased desire in sexual intercourse. When Bruno is showing Patrick how to talk to girls, he is not truly showing him how to talk to them. Bruno is giving Patrick a lesson in how to kiss a girl, but Patrick is not ready for this lesson. Patrick, like most twelve-year old boys is still shy around girls. He is not comfortable with the idea of kissing the girl in the theater. Besides, Patrick thinks his heart lies with Mrs. Riffle, not the young girl in the theater. As can be seen in Truffaut’s life, the theater is an escape from reality. Patrick, Bruno, and the two girls go to the theater to escape the harsh reality that is their lives. With this scene, Truffaut is again demonstrating his personal inability of fidelity to the woman he loves. He shows Bruno kissing multiple girls, an activity Truffaut participated in himself.

Patrick befriends Julien, a young boy who lives in poverty and hides a nasty secret about his mother and grandmother. Julien is also a thief. He steals whatever he desires because he wants to impress the children at his school in an attempt to make friends because nobody but Patrick likes him. He even sneaks Patrick into the theater, in an attempt to impress Patrick. This correlates with Truffaut’s life because Truffaut admitted that he saw his first 200 films without ever having paid for them. He either
snuck in the emergency exit or through a window in the bathroom. In _L'Argent de Poche_, Julien sneaks Patrick into the theater by letting him in the door adjacent to the bathroom, exactly the same way Truffaut entered the theaters himself.

The terrible secret that Julien is hiding is that his mother abuses him. One day the boys are told to undress in the courtyard preparing for their medical exams. Julien refuses to undress, and the other boys mock him. As a result of his failure to undress in front of everyone, his teacher escorts him to the front of the line and straight into the doctor's office. Julien still refuses to undress, so the nurse and the doctor hold him down and forcefully undress him. They discover he has bruises and scrapes all over his body. His teacher informs the school administrator of the problem, and the administrator takes the police straight to Julien's house. At the house, Julien's mother and grandmother are arrested, while the townspeople stand by and watch in awe. They feel nothing but pain for the young boy.

The audience sympathizes with Julien as he steals from people throughout his village. Most people understand that the young boy only wanted to impress his friends, so it was not necessarily terrible that he was stealing from the local villagers. The audience also sympathizes with him because we see how terrible his home life is, long before the school discovers he is being abused. The audience sees Julien suffer as his mother locks him out of the house and forces him to find a ladder to climb in the window. The audience sympathizes with Julien when he is embarrassed that Patrick has followed him home because he is ashamed of his house. To complicate his embarrassment, his mother screams at him while Patrick is talking to him near the house.
The political issue dealt with in this situation is child abuse. Child abuse is a serious problem in the world, and it often goes unnoticed. There are four different perspectives to child abuse. An abused child does everything he can to please his parents, hoping that this may result in a stop to the beatings. He also believes he is the epitome of evil because that is what his parents tell him he is. A friend of an abused child does not understand why anyone's parents would ever harm their children, regardless of the situation. An abusive parent believes his child is the epitome of evil in the world and beats him, hoping he will no longer be such an evil entity. Most adults view child abuse as the worst thing that could ever be done to a child.

A young girl, Sylvie, rebels against her parents. They make her put on her "Sunday's best" in order to go to a fancy restaurant. She wants to take her purse, but it is tattered and dirty. Her parents will not let her take it, offering one of her mother's nicer purses. Sylvie refuses her mother's purse. Her parents then leave her at home to fend for herself while they go to the restaurant by themselves. In retaliation, Sylvie locks the front door and hides the key, then screams out the window, "I'm hungry!" She continues screaming until all the people in her building hear her and come to their windows to listen to her. She explains that her parents left her alone and went to the restaurant without feeding her. The neighbors feel badly for Sylvie, so they rig a rope that will go from one apartment to hers and deliver food. She is sent a basket full of food, and she enjoys it herself, mocking her parents in the process.

The film proves that children are much more clever than adults believe them to be. The audience is amused by Sylvie's cunning. She is able to convince all of her
neighbors that her parents are neglecting her, and they give her a basket full of delicious food. Child neglect is also a political lesson visible here. While Sylvie is not exactly neglected, she convinces her neighborhood that that is the case. Child neglect is often considered child abuse, and shares the same perspectives noted before. In this scene in the film, Truffaut is portraying his own life, in that his parents also frequently left him home alone with only pre-cooked food in the refrigerator, just like what Sylvie’s parents left for her. Truffaut, like Sylvie, was always given the option of leaving with his parents, but he almost always refused, which he demonstrates in this film.

**Louis Malle**

Louis Malle was born near Lille, France, in 1932, the third child of seven. In 1940, his family moved to Paris where he attended a boarding school with three of his brothers. This boarding school was a refuge for several Jewish students; one of them was Malle’s rival for academic honors and his friend. A kitchen worker at the school with a grudge became an informant. The priest who was the principal was arrested, and the Jewish students were sent to concentration camps. His experiences at the boarding school led him to write *Au Revoir Les Enfants*. Malle considered this film to be his most important and the one he wanted to be remembered for.

After the Second World War, Malle began studying political science at the Institut d’études politiques in Paris. Against his parents’ wishes, he transferred to the Institut des Hautes études cinématographiques. He was almost immediately recruited by Jacques Cousteau as an underwater camera operator, and the two of them filmed *The Silent*
Malle sat on the board of directors of the Société des réalisateurs de films (Society of Filmmakers) in 1968; Truffaut distrusted this organization, even though his friends (Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Pierre Kast, Claude Lelouch, Louis Malle, Edouard Molinaro, and Claude Sautet) sat on the board of directors. Malle moved to the United States in the 1970s, hoping to reinvent himself as a director. The pinnacle of his career is found in Au Revoir Les Enfants, which he created upon his return to France in 1987.

Unlike the other directors associated with the New Wave, Malle did not write critiques for Cahiers du Cinéma. Also unlike the other authors, he came from a privileged background, an heir to the Beghin sugar fortune. Truffaut came from a middle class family, but he was not nearly as privileged as Malle. Malle never experienced neglect or any of the misfortunes like his counterpart Truffaut. The only conflict he had with his parents growing up was the battle over what to study in school. Malle’s parents wanted him to continue his studies in political science, but he preferred studying film.

Au Revoir Les Enfants (Goodbye, Children)

Au Revoir Les Enfants, written and directed by Louis Malle, deals with a French child, Julien, who befriends a Jew, Bonnet, during the Nazi regime in France. During the Nazi occupation of France in the 1940s, the headmaster of a Catholic boarding school hides three Jewish boys among other students by altering their names and identities. Two of the students, Julien and Bonnet, form a friendship that ends tragically when Bonnet and the other boys are discovered and taken away by the Gestapo. Julien does not understand why his friend, the Jew, must leave the school. He sees nothing different
between himself and Bonnet. The main political issue dealt with in this film is racism, as viewed by adults and children.

When Bonnet arrives at the school, Julien is the head of his class. All of his peers look up to him, and his teachers cherish his abilities. Julien, however, only wants to go home to his mother, but this is not allowed. Julien is also a part of the black market, led by the domestic boy who is resentful because he is always caught doing bad things by the woman who works in the kitchen or the headmaster. Julien trades his mother's jam for stamps and other collectibles. Upon his arrival, Julien has nothing but disdain for Bonnet. He joins the rest of his classmates in mocking him, doing anything he can to make Bonnet's life as miserable as possible. Julien and Bonnet, however, begin a friendship that starts shaky but grows stronger as the two share experiences. In the end, the two are best friends, inseparable even.

One day, however, Julien discovers that his newfound friend is a Jew and is being hidden at the school by the priest. Despite his discovery, Julien and Bonnet become even closer friends, and Julien defends him when the other boys continue to mock him. They mock him because he is not as good at sports as they are; they mock him because he is not a quick learner like the rest of them; they mock him for whatever reason they can find to mock him.

At the end of the film, the Gestapo comes to the school to find the Jews because the resentful young domestic, after having been fired, told the Gestapo about the children. The children are taken to a concentration camp along with the priest who kept them in
hiding. He leaves saying, “Goodbye, children.” The rest of the schoolboys are lined up in the schoolyard and forced to watch the arrest of the young boys, their friends, and their priest. This is a painful scene in the movie because the Gestapo forces the young boys to face reality in an attempt to teach them the lesson that Jews are not to be tolerated.

The lesson one can learn from *Au Revoir Les Enfants* is racial tolerance. Julien befriends the Jew because he sees him only as another person. During the time of the film, Germany and the Nazis occupied France, and the French were told to believe that all Jews were bad and should be executed. Children, however, do not see different races as different. The young boy, a Catholic, saw the Jew as nothing more than a friend. Adults should learn this characteristic from children and look beyond the color lines. There is virtually no racism among children, and the same should be true among adults.

The political issue found in *Au Revoir Les Enfants* is racism, notably anti-Semitism. Adults who are racist refuse to sympathize with people who are of a different race than they. A child, however, is blind to color lines until his parents teach him to be racist. Julien is too young to understand why anyone would dislike a person based solely on his race, which is why he befriends Bonnet. During the Nazi regime in France, Jews were banned from all public places and taken to concentration camps. Most children did not understand what was happening at this time, but the adults knew. Some adults, such as the priest at Julien’s school, were not racist and attempted to hide the Jews. Julien’s mother was also not a racist; at least she claimed not to be. On parents’ weekend at the school, Julien’s mother takes Julien, his brother, and Bonnet to lunch. In the middle of their meal, the Gestapo enters the restaurant and attempt to force a Jewish patron out of
the restaurant. Julien’s brother tells his mother that she has Jewish relatives. She says they are Catholic, but that she sees nothing wrong with Jewish people. As the film demonstrates, the Jews who were in hiding were generally discovered by the Gestapo. The children’s lives were disrupted when their friend and priest were taken away, and they did not understand why it happened. They were told that Jews were bad people, but they were never given a reason as to what was so wrong with them.

Louis Malle wanted to make *Au Revoir Les Enfants* long before he completed it, but he could not bear the thought of drudging up his past, especially this event, which affected him so deeply. It pained him throughout his life. This film is an autobiographical piece of Malle’s life. Malle, represented by Julien, was sent to a boarding school that happened to be a refuge for Jewish students. One of the Jewish students, represented by Bonnet, was Malle’s academic rival at the school, and Malle befriended him, just like Julien befriended Bonnet in the film. As in the film, a kitchen worker at Malle’s school became resentful and decided to be an informant to the Gestapo. He told the Gestapo about the Jewish students at the school and that the priest was hiding them. As a result, the priest was arrested, and the Jewish students were taken to concentration camps. The same thing is portrayed in the film. Joseph, the domestic, represents the kitchen worker who informs the Gestapo of the activity at the school.

French New Wave directors were skillful at examining relationships of all sorts, making their films personal. Malle could portray the relationship between Julien and Bonnet so well because he lived through it. Their relationship is a strong one, and that is
clear in the film. This relationship is also important because it demonstrates the fact that children are blind to racism, until they learn the behavior from their parents.

**Jean-Pierre Jeunet**

Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, for most of their film careers, shared projects. This was the case until after *La Cité des Enfants Perdus*, when the duo split. Jeunet achieved great success when he co-wrote and directed *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* in 2001. Jeunet had established himself as a credible director by 1980, having created many short films. It was at this time that he met Caro, and the two realized their collaborations would be wonderful endeavors into the art of film.

Self-taught, Jeunet started his career shooting television commercials, music videos, and short films. Jeunet is a passionate follower of comic books and cartoons. Jeunet's passion for comic books and cartoons allowed him to portray child-like happiness in *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*. In 1997, Jeunet left France for a temporary career in the United States. He directed *Alien Resurrection*, the fourth film in the series. It was not highly acclaimed, though, and he was forced to return to France to find more work. He then began working on *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*, which was well received around the world.

*Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* was a more personal film than his previous ones, even though he wrote it with Guillaume Laurant. He wrote using issues he had encountered throughout his lifetime, and he shot his story mostly in the Parisian suburb of Montmartre, where he lives. He also recycled some material from his previous films.
Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain (Amélie)

Finally, we move to *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*, co-written and directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Many political issues are dealt with in *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*. The audience can learn about racism, if we search beneath the surface. Though racism is not specifically mentioned in the film, it can be envisioned through a North African young man who works at the grocery store near Amélie’s apartment. We can also learn about the importance of pleasing one’s parents, no matter what we have to go through to attain that happiness. Amélie tries desperately to make her father happy because he has not been happy since his wife died. Finally, we can also learn about the escapades involved in finding true love. Amélie goes through many adventures trying to find her one true love, Nino.

This film shows us that not all adults act like adults all the time. Amélie merely wants to return to her innocent childhood, when her father doted on her every move and before her mother died. She goes through many adventures in her quest to make those around her happy again. When she finds a box of childhood treasures behind a wall in her apartment, she sets out to return them to their original owner. He regains some childlike happiness. Accomplishing this, she begins to secretly intervene in the lives of neighbors and coworkers, helping some find romance, others retribution for past wrongs. Her missions eventually lead her to a quirky man, Nino, with whom she begins a roundabout courtship involving a treasure hunt instead of approaching him directly.
A young man with a handicap, Lucien, works at the grocery store near Amélie’s apartment, and she befriends him. The grocer, Collignon, mocks Lucien every chance he gets, especially in front of his customers. Collignon has no respect for Lucien, even though Lucien is capable of picking out the best fruits and vegetables by smelling them.

One of Amélie’s quests is to humiliate Collignon, in an attempt to convince him to be nicer to Lucien. Amélie finds and copies a key to Collignon’s apartment and sabotages it. She reverses the handles on the door, exchanges his toothpaste for foot cream, puts sugar in his whisky, sets his alarm for hours before he should awake, exchanges his slippers for ones that are too small, and changes the numbers on his speed dial phone. In the morning, Collignon is so confused that he returns home and allows Lucien to run the grocery store for the day. Amélie has done her job, and Lucien is happy.

Amélie sets the example that people should strive to help others, especially those less fortunate. Amélie stood up to Collignon, the bully, when Lucien could not. If all people stood up to people who bully their friends, the world would be a much more peaceful place. The audience should also learn that all people can pull practical jokes, young and old. A person should always remain young at heart. In seeing this film, people smiled at their neighbors in the theater for the first time.

A man, Joseph, who frequents the Two Windmills, where Amélie works as a waitress, is a grumpy man who taunts his ex-girlfriend Gina, another waitress at the Two Windmills. He sits at the same table every day, across the brasserie from the cigarette counter, recording every movement and conversation Gina has while she is at work. Meanwhile, Georgette, the cigarette counter attendant, is a hypochondriac who distracts
herself by inventing illnesses. Amélie devises a plan to unite Georgette and Joseph. She
tells Georgette that Joseph has a crush on her, and she tells Joseph that Georgette has a
 crush on him. Eventually, the two start a relationship by having loud sex in the
bathroom. This brings a smile to Amélie's face. Again, she has made her friends happy.

The lesson to be learned from this is that two miserable people, who seemingly
cannot find happiness, may be able to find happiness in each other. Georgette was
distracted from her invented illnesses because she could now think about Joseph. Joseph
was no longer concerned with every move Gina made because he was concerned with
Georgette. People should also learn that it does not hurt to play matchmaker. While it
does not always work out, some people can find their soul mates with a little
encouragement.

Amélie, the child in this film, views the relationship from a different perspective
than Georgette and Joseph, who are adults. Joseph only wants his ex-girlfriend back, and
Georgette only wants to be loved by someone. Amélie, however, only wants the people
who surround her to be happy, so she convinces Georgette and Joseph that they can find
happiness in each other. If everyone made an effort at making the people around him or
her happy, the world would be a much better place. As it is, however, people are
generally selfish and have no regard for the feelings of those who surround them.

Amélie's father became a hermit after his wife died when Amélie was a young
girl. He had always dreamt of traveling with his wife, but he let his dream slide when she
died. Every chance she had, Amélie tried to convince him to travel, but he always
refused saying he did not think he could without his wife. He treasured his yard gnome more than anything else in his life, and he took great strides to keep it in mint condition every day. Amélie tells her father, “It’s better to help people than garden gnomes.” Amélie stole the gnome from her father’s garden one night while he was asleep, and she decided to play a game with her father. She had pictures taken of the gnome with backdrops from around the world. She then sent the photos to her father, who believed the gnome was traveling around the world, in an odd game. After many photos had been sent to her father, Amélie returned the gnome to the garden and said nothing to her father about it. He said that it simply returned one day. Amélie then convinced her father to travel just as the gnome had, so he did.

The audience learns that it is always important to cherish our parents. She went through a lot to have the photos taken of the gnome and sent to her father, hoping he’d follow the gnome’s example and travel himself. Amélie had tried every other way she knew how to convince him to travel, but it took kidnapping the gnome and taking pictures of him in foreign lands to do the trick. It is important to ensure that one’s parents are happy most of the time, and Amélie teaches us this valuable lesson.

Finally, Amélie’s missions with the man who collects photos from the photo booths, Nino, lead her to love. She first sees him in a metro station after she’s spent the night there because she missed the last metro the night before. He is searching for photo clippings that have been discarded near the machine because he has a collection of such photos that he has carefully arranged in a scrapbook he always carries with him. She finds his book after he drops it one day, and she decides to make a game out of returning
the scrapbook because she is enamored with him. She sends him running all around
Sacré Coeur trying to get the book, and he finally gets it, but not before she runs away.

Amélie is uncertain as to how to approach Nino in the beginning. She is also
afraid of having her heart broken. She discusses her situation with a man, Raymond
Dufayel, who lives in her building who is also known as the Glass Man because he never
leaves his apartment because of his illness. He just stays inside and paints the same
picture over and over. He tells Amélie, “So, my little Amélie, you don’t have bones of
glass. You can take life’s knocks. If you let this chance pass, eventually, your heart will
become as dry and brittle as my skeleton. So, go to him, damnit!” She takes his advice
and takes a picture of herself, writes on it, cuts it up, and discards it near a photo
machine, hoping Nino will find it. Eventually, he finds her and the movie ends with the
two of them riding his motorcycle around Paris. She has done herself a favor in the end
and found love. While Amélie goes about it in a roundabout way, she teaches us
that we should go through trials and tribulations to find our soul mates. Amélie
demonstrates the importance of working for what we want in life. If Amélie had simply
returned the scrapbook to Nino, she never would have met him or fallen in love with him.
Too many people take the simplicities of life for granted. We should all strive to be as
ambitious as Amélie to get what we want out of life.

Another issue that is not directly dealt with in the film, but some critics argue
should have been, is racism. Lucien is North African, though this is not mentioned in the
film. French critics said the film does not show life today, as it does not confront racism
in France. This is a true statement. Racism in France is certainly a big political issue
facing the people today, an ongoing political battle that may never be solved. As noted with *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, children view racism from a very different perspective than adults. French children see nothing wrong with North African people until their parents teach them that they are bad. Some French adults, however, view the North African people who have moved to France to be the bane of their existence. They see nothing good about the African people and want nothing more than for them to return to Africa. Jeunet notes that the reason racism was not mentioned in *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* was because it was not meant to be a political film. It was a film about happiness and returning to childlike happiness, not racism.

Concerning racism, Jeunet chose to leave this political issue out of the film, though it could have been mentioned. Jeunet knows of the racial tensions that exist in France today, but he wanted his film to be naïve and tender. Jeunet only wanted to portray childhood innocence and child-like happiness. Jeunet admits, “I was born in 1953 and I have retained a nostalgia for the France of my childhood, or rather for its images, its fashion, its objects.” Had he wanted to delve into the issue of racism, he easily could have with Lucien, the North African grocer, but that would have ruined his film. He did not want to portray strong political issues, creating a light-hearted film, which led critics to say it was not true to French life today. One politician, Kaganski, attacked the film, saying it portrayed Montmartre as a “white supremacist village,” likening it to a “video clip for the National Front” (Vincendeau).

Jeunet could easily relate to Amélie’s life because he lives in Montmartre, the same area where she lives. It was certainly easy for him to depict life in that
neighborhood in Paris. While the film is not biographical, Jeunet made a personal film for the first time, even though he co-wrote the screenplay. Jeunet wishes he could return to his childhood innocence and child-like happiness, which he was able to portray in the film. It is obvious that Jeunet wishes to return to his childhood because he follows comic books and cartoons, two things that are generally linked to children. He said, "The principle was to do as in Disney cartoons, a different idea in each shot, both visually and in the dialogue" (Vincendeau).

French film critics attacked *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* because they claimed it did not hold true to Parisian life today. The Communist daily *L'Humanité* reviewed the film and said it is "situated in a postcard Montmartre presumably aimed at seducing the American audience fond of the picturesque." Another negative review named it "Eurodisney in Montmartre." Despite these attacks, the film was an unprecedented media phenomenon. It was seen by more than six million people during its first seven weeks in the theaters (Vincendeau).

Children view everyday issues through their kaleidoscope of feelings, which change everyday due to hormonal shifts and growing pains. Pubescence becomes a difficult time in most people's lives and especially so in the lives of children that experience abuse, physical or emotional. These children reach out in ways that adults often do not understand for their lack of childish reasoning. Children often become angry or hurt because their parents do not understand them as we have seen with many of these French films.
Within these four French films, we find how children view political issues differently from adults. The emotions of our youth guide them to make decisions where as the adult counterparts use their knowledge and experience to thoroughly think matters through. These differences inspire our filmmakers to bring to light children’s viewpoints on various issues in the political arena.

Truffaut, Malle, and Jeunet employ different techniques to pry into the minds of children. Truffaut and Malle rely on their past experiences to recreate for us the harsh conditions that they had lived through while Jeunet explores the life of a young woman trying to return to childhood. These adventures lead the viewer to reexamine many issues that we deal with in everyday life through the eyes of the child we see on the street corner. We may never know the mishaps and hardships this child goes through, but we could at least try to be more conscious of the ways that children differ in their thinking and emotions.
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