DELINQUENTS, SAVAGES, AND LOVERS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CINEMA OF BOYHOOD

Introduces this special issue's theme of "Boys and Cinema," discussing the emergence of a specific, international cinema of boyhood in the early 1960s, and five main themes established within it by the late 1960s.

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In *The 400 Blows* (*Les Quatre Cents Coups*, 1959), a thirteen-year old boy named Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Laud) is growing up in a cramped, squalid apartment in a working-class sector of Paris. His stepfather ignores him, and his mother, who is having an affair with a neighbor, treats him in turns with cool indifference and suspiciously eroticized smothering. At school, he is brutalized by the teacher and bullied by his classmates. Quite understandably, Antoine reacts with hostility and misdeeds: he skips school, tells his teacher that his mother has died, and steals a typewriter from his stepfather's office. These seem like minor offenses, especially when compared to the chicken races and knife fights common among juvenile delinquents in other movies of the period, but nevertheless the adults are horrified. Antoine is subjected to psychiatric evaluation, then sent to a juvenile detention center. Finally he ends up at a work camp near Le Havre, a few kilometers from the English Channel.

Antoine has always wanted to see the ocean. Perhaps he wants to drown, or lose himself in its vastness, or perhaps he hopes to find peace in the one wild space left in France, the only place that has not been cut into cramped apartments and constrained by obsessive, neurotic, small-minded adults. Finally, in the last scene, he gets his chance. He escapes from the work camp and runs headlong for the coast.

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He arrives at a barren, rocky beach, with no sign of human life. It could be a million years before the human race evolved, or a million years after they have all gone extinct. He is alone in the universe.

Most films would end there, optimistic or at least satisfied that the boy has found at least a moment of pleasure. But instead the camera shifts to a reaction shot. We see that Antoine is not gazing out at the ocean in ecstasy. He is staring at the audience, at the adult world that seems to lie on the other side of that vast, impassible expanse. But he is not merely judging the adults for their brutalities and viciousness, as many delinquents in film have done before; he is not merely bewildered by their nonsensical commands, trivial obsessions, and sexual neuroses; he is somber, realizing at last that there is no escape. No matter how squalid and sinister and crazy, the adult world will soon become his home.

Francois Truffaut, film buff turned critic turned auteur, did not intend his first feature-length film to be a colloquy on boyhood; like many young writers and directors, he was transforming his own life into art, and Antoine's boyhood just happened to come first (later films would continue the story seamlessly through Antoine's adolescence and adulthood). His fellow critics extolled *Les Quatre Cents Coups* for its contribution to the Nouvelle Vague school that was currently the darling of French cinema, art, and literature, not as an example of the overcrowded genre of the juvenile delinquency exposé. Antoine's final gaze became one of the great moments of cinema history not because it represented a particularly profound coming-of-age epiphany, but because it illustrated the clash between cinematic representation and reality and forever changed the way filmmakers constructed the boundaries of their fictional worlds (Fabe, 2004, ch.7; Gillain, 2000). But nevertheless *Les Quatre Cents Coups* marked the beginning of a new genre, the cinema of boyhood.

Preteen and adolescent boys had been a box-office mainstay since the days of the silents, of course, in films produced specifically for children and teenagers as well as for adults (Zornado, 2006), but they were usually portrayed from an adult point of view, as cases for professional or emotional intervention, goals for competition, accessories of adult worlds. Some boys, like Junior Durkin in *Huckleberry Finn* (1931), Johnny Sheffield in the Tarzan series (1939-1947), and Georges Poujouly in *Jeux Interdits* (1952), were portrayed as wild creatures of nature, barefoot boys out of James Whitcomb Riley's rural myth, swimming and hunting and staging mock-battles, being grudgingly civilized by school teachers or the girl next door. Others, like Jackie Cooper in *Skippy* (1931), Freddie Bartholomew in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1936), and Emilio Cigoli in *I Bambini ci Guardano* (1944), were portrayed as cooing innocents, crying torrents over sick dogs, melting the hearts of misers and codgers, misunderstanding adult conventions or amazing the adults with their precocious understanding. But however they were characterized, the audience was expected to view them, interpret their actions, love or hate them through an ever-present, often overpowering lens of adult concerns and conventions.

Often, however, there is no mediating lens in the cinema of boyhood. The boy, usually prepubescent or in early adolescence, lives in a world of his own. He may occupy the same physical space as the adults; he may interact with them regularly;

but he really inhabits an unknown territory, a world that the adults may have known once but cannot ever know again. His thoughts are not their thoughts; his loves are not their loves; his actions seem sometimes alien, sometimes bizarre, sometimes hilarious, sometimes threatening. Often during the course of the movie he acquires knowledge, of sex or death, that sets him on the inevitable road to adulthood, but he is not there, not yet. The film of boyhood is no *Bildungsroman* that traces the young man's journey from innocence to experience, childhood to maturity; it begins and ends in the boy's world.

There appear to be no, or few, examples of a comparable cinema of girlhood. Some preteen and early teenage girls do appear in boys' movies, as sidekicks or nuisances or objects of desire, and some appear in adult movies, to be coddled or rescued or fought over, but they rarely appear in starring roles of their own. When movies are devoted to them (e.g., in *National Velvet*, 1944; *A Little Princess*, 1995; *El Laberinto del Fauno*, 2006), their interests, activities, desires, and goals are not portrayed as significantly different from those of older teenage girls and adult women (Gateward & Pomerance, eds., 2002; Goldstein & Zornow, 1980). Perhaps real-life girls are always expected to inhabit the adult world, be concerned with fashions and table manners, read about marriages, play at games of childcare and household management not much different from the gender-polarized roles their elders expect for them in adulthood. Boys, however, are encouraged to be pirates and spies, conquer vast territories, or jet off to Venus, to play at activities that have nothing to do with the futures as householders and salary men that the adults have planned out for them. So the cinema of boyhood is about boys.

Within a few years of *Les Quatre Cents Coups*, the new cinema of boyhood was well-established, not only in France but in Britain (*Lord of the Flies*, 1963), Spain (*Crónica de un Niño Solo*, 1965), Germany (*Der Junge Törless*, 1966), Czechoslovakia (*The Valley of the Bees*, 1967), and Japan (*Shonen*, 1969). But the surge of interest cannot be attributed to a single text, however influential. In a greater sense, this was the era of the child. In 1960, the first of the postwar Baby Boomer generation was just entering adolescence. In the United States, children under the age of eighteen occupied two out of every three houses; 31% of population was under the age of fifteen, and 12% was under age five. There were more elementary and high school students, more elementary high school teachers, more pediatricians and childcare specialists than ever before in history, and the number was increasing every year. Bestsellers like Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (1946) and Pat Boone's *Twist Twelve and Twenty* (1958) emphasized the strangeness and inscrutability and terrifying vulnerability of the child; a single poor parenting decision, a word spoken or left unspoken, could result in an adulthood of neurotic inefficiency, criminality, or pure evil.

Childhood in general was perilous enough, but male childhood was even more problematic. Many of the social changes of the postwar period, such as suburbanization, the glorification of the nuclear family, and the rapid expansion of white-collar employment, were muddying old indicators of masculinity or rendering them obsolete, creating a crisis of boyhood that lasted until the aggressively androgynous youth counterculture grew up and promoted the "new" sensitive man of the

1970s (Cohan, 1997; Cuordileone, 2005; Kimmel, 1995, pp. 140-146). Parents, teachers, and counselors worried about boys much more than the girls, since there were many more possible transgressions, many more ways to send a male child on the road to languid effeminacy on one side and hyper-aggressive violence on the other (Martin, 1996). Eerily effeminate or monstrously violent boys were proliferating in movies and on television: aliens in *Village of the Damned* (1960), a preteen murderer in *Let's Kill Uncle* (1966), a boy with an erotic obsession for his father's new wife in *What the Peeper Saw* (1972), a bullied psychopath in *Twisted Brain* (1974), the son of Satan in *The Omen* (1976), and, most ominously, a boy who could destroy the world with a glance ("It's a Good Life," *The Twilight Zone*, 1961). The cinema of boyhood arose in response to the contradictions of postwar masculinity, its promise, and its terror.

By the late 1960s, five main themes were established in the cinema of boyhood. *Les Quatre Cents Coups* itself belongs to a long tradition of movies centering on adult intervention into boyhood, often in orphanages, boarding schools, or juvenile detention centers, where boys are neglected or brutalized by the adults and can survive only by forming their own alliances and strategies of resistance (*If....*, 1968; *Die Letzten Jahre der Kinderheit*, 1979; *Pixote*, 1981; *Borstal Boy*, 2002). They can also form complex, well-organized subcultures that were practically invisible to adults, with distinctive rules, protocols, punishments, rituals, and mythologies (*A Separate Peace*, 1972; *The Lords of Discipline*, 1982; *Wild Reeds*, 1994; *El Espinazo del Diablo*, 2001; *Ondskan*, 2003). More often, however, the adult intervention comes in the form of relationships with fathers, big brothers, teachers, priests, gangster mentors, and other representatives of the adult world.

Peter Lee (*this issue*) looks into the prehistory of the boy film, feature length American films of the 1920s and 1930s, where boys were defined primarily through their relationships with their fathers and peers. By interrogating the roles of Jackie Cooper, "America's boy" and undoubtedly the first preteen superstar in the cinema, he demonstrates the central paradox of the boy during the prewar period: juvenile male identity required both embracing parental models, becoming "a chip off the old block," and rejecting parental models for peers or older adult pals, "finding your own way in the world."

Saayan Chattopadhyay (*this issue*), similarly, analyzes boyhood in popular Hindi cinema through the lens of changing family dynamics. During the middle and late twentieth century, instead of embodying the family, the boy was expected to be his own person, a unique individual—indeed, he is often an orphan or otherwise deprived of a "normal" family life. He is no longer submissive to traditional ideologies, yet he is uniquely able to represent Indian nationhood in the global arena.

Ann Kordas (*this issue*) moves away from strictly fictional narratives to discuss the social guidance films that formed a regular part of every American child's education during the 1950s and 1960s. In these films, boys were taught "proper" behavior in fictionalized scenarios (how to ask girls on dates, how to avoid peer pressure) in order to inoculate them against what political commentators, psychologists, parents, and practically every other representative of adult society considered the two greatest scourges of the time, Communism and "being a sissy." Boys were per-

ceived as psychologically fragile; the slightest word, or the slightest word unspoken, could send them careening toward an adulthood that was not only self-destructive but treasonous.

A second theme removes the boys from the adult world altogether. Typically the boys are lost in the wilderness with little or no adult supervision. There they revel in their natural state freedom (*The Genesis Children*, 1970; *Journey to an Unknown World*, 1971; *Children's Island*, 1984), revert to savagery (*The Lord of the Flies*, 1963; *Class Trip*, 1998), or struggle mightily to find their way back home again (*Walkabout*, 1971; *Pathfinder*, 1986; *Les Aiguilles Rouges*, 2006). Native Americans and colonial natives often appeared without an initial loss (*Tschetan, Der Indienerrjunge*, 1972; *Blauvogel*, 1979). Sometimes adults accompany the boys and are intimately involved in their welfare; sometimes adults are present but irrelevant, so the boys are alone for all practical purposes, immersed in struggles, conflicts, journeys, and miseries of their own (*Le Guerre des Boutons*, 1961; *Bless the Beasts and Children*, 1971; *Army Brats*, 1984; *Je Suis le Seigneur du Chateau*, 1989; *Io Non Ho Pauro*, 2003).

A third theme, of a heterosexual romance, is far less common, appearing mostly in clichéd scenes about perusing pornographic magazines or visiting prostitutes, to assure audiences that the boys are in fact heterosexual. Since heterosexual bonds are ubiquitous in the cinema of adulthood, it is difficult to make them appear adequately alien for a cinema of boyhood; also, in real-world discourse, heterosexual "first love" is often characterized as the dividing line between childhood and adulthood, so it cannot occur in a film devoted entirely to the world of the boy. When a heterosexual romance does appear and is integral to the plot, not a set piece, the object of the boy's desire is usually an adult woman, not a female child, to emphasize that his heterosexual exploration has propelled him into the world of adulthood (*Private Lessons*, 1981; *Bandidos*, 1991; *Malena*, 2000; *Tadpole*, 2002). A preteen or teenage girl might also appear in a sort of triad with two boys, as if she exists only to provide a conduit for the expression of homoerotic desire (*Blue Jeans*, 1976; *Colegas*, 1982; *Y Tu Mamá También*, 2001; *Glue*, 2006).

A far more common theme is the exploration of homosocial or homoerotic bonds. This is a special favorite of the cinema of boyhood, perhaps because adult audiences find it so unusual; homosocial bonds are diminished in the cinema of adulthood, and the homoerotic is utterly alien, appearing only in some camping stereotypes and, very recently, in minor characters whose romances are only hinted at, such as the next-door neighbors in *American Beauty* (1999) or the understated gay romance in *The Full Monty* (1997). Typically two boys develop a strongly erotic bond, but lack the vocabulary or the cultural concepts to define the depth of their emotional commitment. Therefore, audiences can celebrate their love, even in the most homophobic of cultures, even when sex is involved, since they are presented as not "really" gay, merely swept away by strong emotions that will inevitably dissolve into childhood memories (*This Special Friendship*, 1963; *You Are Not Alone*, 1978; *Beautiful Thing*, 1996; *The Mudge Boy*, 2003). Less commonly a boy and a man fall in love, but again with the certainty that no two people of the same sex have ever desired each other before during the entire course of human history (*Ernesto*, 1979; *Sapore del Grano*, 1986; *For a Lost Soldier*, 1992; *Return to Innocence*, 2002). In

the few cases where the adult actually is aware that gay people exist, he merely befriends the boy (*Whole New Thing*, 2005; *The Blossoming of Maximiliano Oliveros*, 2006).

In the world of boys' film the pal, or the group of pals, has a symbolic importance nearly as great as the father, a bond that replicates both the emotional intimacy of romance and the homosocial camaraderie of the battlefield or workplace. However, when the boys are nonwhite, therefore stereotyped as either silly or dangerous, the group of pals takes on a far different symbolic meaning. Richard Mora's study of the Chicano gang in American film (*this issue*) identifies several demonizing discourses: inhuman savagery combined with superhuman toughness, unbridled sexual desire, a treacherous inability to form true friendships.

The fifth theme is the boy as monster: "a bad seed" who deceives, perverts, and destroys (*Diabolique*, 1955; *Eyewitness*, 1960; *Let's Kill Uncle*, 1966), or an actual monster, as in the fad of "I Was a Teenage..." films beginning with Michael Landon's iconic performance in *I Was Teenage Werewolf* (1955), and more recently in the feuds between the teenage vampires and werewolves in the *Twilight* series (2008). Simon Bacon (*this issue*) analyzes teen vampire movies of the 1980s, most notably *The Lost Boys* (1987), to demonstrate how these movies reified anxieties over the place of the teenage boy in society, as neither child (innocent and not responsible) nor adult (experienced and responsible), or perhaps as both at once. However, he argues that the "normal" teen protagonist is not necessarily traumatized by pals who plan to bite him on the neck. In a dismal Reagan-Thatcher dystopia where parents are absent or dysfunctional, AIDS has summarily ended the Summer of Love, and the future looks bleak, the teen vampire becomes not a destructive demon but a prophet, exemplifying the potential for social and political change.

There are many other themes, of course, and they are constantly changing and intermingling as thousands of filmmakers from England and Spain and Kazakhstan and Mongolia explore their own worlds of boyhood. They may produce comedies, dramas, adventures, or romances, independent films or big-budget blockbusters. They may portray the boys as curmudgeons, saints, demons, intellectuals, athletes, or insipidly ordinary. But they have one thing in common: whether it is fondly remembered, nightmarish, vaguely familiar, or utterly bizarre, the world of boyhood will be nothing like the world of everyday adult experience.

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