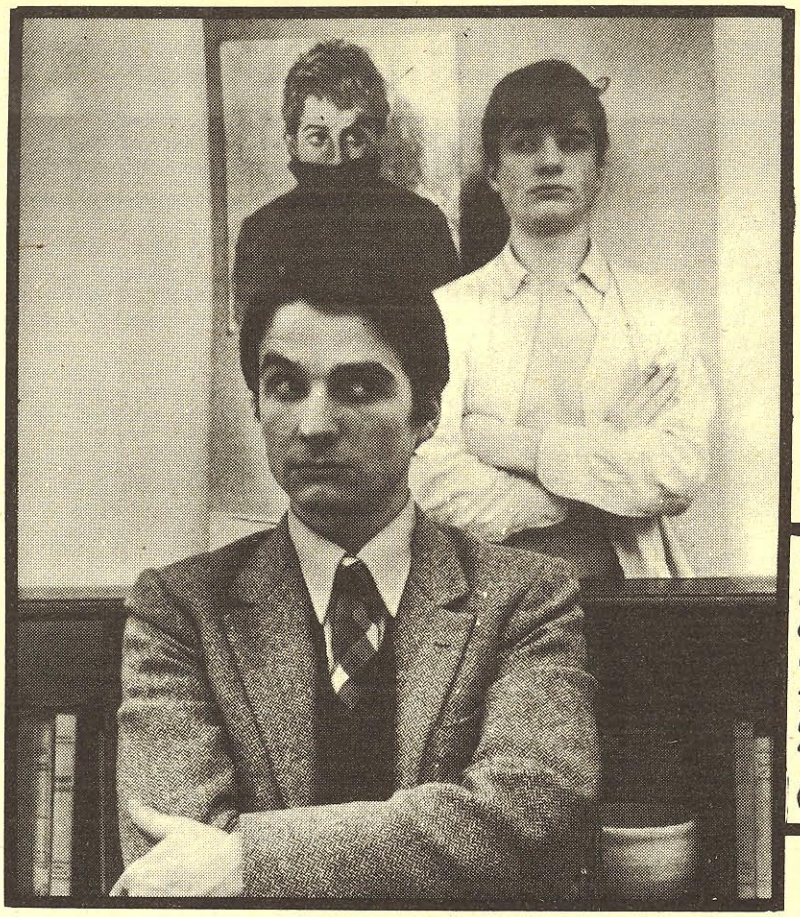

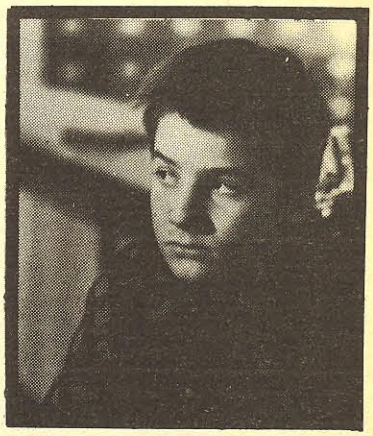

"Stolen Kisses" is the third installment of the continuing adventures of Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Leaud) who began his career in "400 Blows" at age 12. (Photo above.)

'Stolen Kisses'

Continuing Adventures of Antoine Doinel

PAUL SHRADER

Francoise Truffaut's "Stolen Kisses" is so good, so impeccably crafted, that it catches us by surprise. Recent movies have conditioned us not to expect well-made films. Excitement over increasing directorial freedom has, with the average viewer, paradoxically brought a disregard for precision. Individual statement is somehow more important than basic craft. Second-rate directors are praised for breaking rules they never mastered. Pretention passes for Art, and skill is called hack-work. We have come to the point where *doing the expected well* is unexpected.

So when Truffaut constructs a film like the Golden Mean, we think it fell from the sky and suspect it of superficiality. But this is nothing new for Truffaut. In the mid-fifties, his fellow critics at "Cahiers du Cinema" were using their rediscovering of the French experimental cinema of the Twenties to promote the new formalism of Renais and Hanoun. Only Truffaut suggested that they linger on the period in between, the era of the "well-made film" of Jean Renoir, a period sign-posted by improvisation and natural human loyalties. Now, in the Sixties, when his fellow directors are grasping at many straws—becoming political, surreal, gory, relativistic—Truffaut again demonstrates that there is still life in the old tradition. It is not the life of the tradition itself ("The Two of Us" didn't succeed), but it is the life only a master craftsman can bestow.

"Stolen Kisses" is the third installment in the continuing adventures of Antoine Doinel, one of cinema's most endearing personalities. We first met Antoine (Jean-Pierre Leaud) at twelve years of age in "400 Blows" (1959): an impetuous, baffled child who insisted on living his own life in an adult world. He stole a typewriter to escape to the seaside, and his father turned him into the police. He was last seen running on the beach, frozen like a figure on The Grecian Urn, perpetually going nowhere. By 1962 Antoine and Jean-Pierre Leaud were twenty-years old and Truffaut featured them in "Antoine and Colette," a twenty-minute sketch in "Love at Twenty," an omnibus film (other directors: Wajda, Ophuls, Rossellini, Ishihara). With a customary lack of diplomacy, Antoine, now living alone, falls madly in love with Colette, who regards him as a friend. Colette is amused but not charmed by Antoine's awkward advances, and scuttles him for Albert, a more conventional suitor.

"Stolen Kisses" opens with Antoine's dishonorable discharge from the army, in which he enlisted, it is hinted, because of the Colette fiasco. Antoine's personality (shy and compensatingly forward—the Chaplin formula) brings him more success this time: he has two loves to chose from, Christine (Claude Jade), and old girlfriend and Madame Tabard (Delphine Seyrig), the wife of a wealthy shoestore owner. "Stolen Kisses" alludes to both previous Doinel films (just as "Love at

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Twenty" flashbacked to "400 Blows"). In "400 Blows" Antoine constructed a bedroom altar to Balzac, and nearly set the house afire. In "Stolen Kisses" we first see him in the guardhouse reading Balzac's "Lily of the Valley," and he later has a pre-coital discussion about the novel with Madame Tabard. In "Stolen Kisses" Antoine also happens unto Colette and Albert from "Love at Twenty" who are now parents.

Through out "Stolen Kisses" it is apparent that Truffaut has inherited the intuitive art of Renoir: he makes films with the back of his hand. When I say "Stolen Kisses" is constructed classically or traditionally, I don't mean it is in any sense Aristotelean. But rather that Truffaut uses fundamental techniques to reinforce fundamental values. He exploits the commonplace: the camera angle, the situation, the character.

Truffaut takes everything a scene has to offer—and no more. If the scene is simple (Antoine's shaving) he comes in hard and quick; if the scene is intricate (Antoine's coffee with Madame Tabard), he stands back and lets it reveal itself. In every case he evokes the correct response from a situation, and leaves the viewer set up for the next scene. This is the sort of direction one reads about in textbooks: the director takes you where he wants, when he wants, no questions asked.

Twice he makes the sort of "heavy" statement that lesser directors have been praised for cramming right in your face. But Truffaut foils them precisely. When a friend tells Antoine that "Sex is one way to compensate for death," they are walking, backs to us, down the stairs to the Metro. When Madame Tabard informs Antoine that her father, on his deathbed, said, "People are wonderful," Truffaut undercuts the line with a musical fillup, giving it a lyrical casuality. (The identical deathbed pronouncement was used in "Joanna"—and we barfed.) Truffaut gets the statement across without ever lessening his grip on the viewer.

When a film is so flawlessly constructed, one can only fall into the trap of citing examples. So I'll specify two of my favorites: (1) Immediately after his discharge, Antoine threads his way across traffic to rush to a brothel. The camera pulls back to reveal that the street is actually a traffic circle and Antoine is now threading his way through the same cars on the opposite side of the circle. (2) When Antoine first sleeps with Catherine the camera sleuthfully sneaks up two flights of steps, wanders into the wrong bedroom, corrects itself, and finds the couple. (Truffaut didn't write that

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book about Hitchcock for nothing!)

Forgive me if I seem to be foaming at the mouth over "Stolen Kisses," but it is so rare to see a comedy that is genuinely funny. TV camerawork and canned laughter have so corrupted our sensibilities that we no longer expect a comedy to be funny. On TV there are no nuances, no little touches, everything must be bold and forthright. Eve Arden walks on stage and ten thousand howling voices burst out in uncontrollable hee-haws. I've been to many "comedies" lately where the audience sat stone-faced through the entire affair, and then walked out as if nothing unusual had happened. They really didn't expect to laugh; it was like tube-time without a machine to do the horse-laughing for them. (And with comedies like "Skidoo" and "Candy" who needs tragedies?)

The few funny screen comedies we see are writers or actors vehicles, not directors. The film I laughed with most last year was "Hot Millions," a Peter Ustinov writer-actor creation; the year before it was "The Russians Are Coming," an Alan Arkin production. But "Stolen Kisses" is a director's comedy. Truffaut's direction brings credit to everyone involved. The actors look like natural comics, and the writers sound like born humorists. But it is Truffaut's sure hand which extorts the laughs.

Truffaut's comedy, like Renoir's, is so valuable and purgative because it is so human, so near to tragedy. In "Stolen Kisses" Truffaut returns to the realistic style of "400 Blows," but this time for laughs. ("400 Blows" was originally scripted by Truffaut as a comedy, and perhaps should have remained so. In retrospect it is a little too fond as a tragedy.) The most lovable of Antoine's cohorts, the scruffy Harry Max, with no forewarning dies of a heart attack. We are stunned; we don't know what to make of it. Then Truffaut steps in to deliver the gag line and it becomes a comedy. But we are that close to not laughing. The comedy is also made bittersweet by a sinister middle-aged man who is seen three times following Christine (accompanied by an ominous boom-boom on the soundtrack). This is meant to hold back the comedy—a potentially dangerous character has not yet joined in the fun. At the conclusion of the film, after Antoine and Christine are engaged, the mysterious stranger approaches and professes his unrequited love for Christine.

This enigmatic suitor not only deepened the comedy, it foreshadows another Antoine Doinel sequel. The dialogue used by the stranger is almost identical to the straightforward, awkward profession of love Antoine made in "Love at Twenty." We can surmise that this misanthrope is simply Antoine ten years displaced, and that when Antoine's love for Christine gives way to his restless incompatibility, he will again take to the streets, shadowing unknown girls, making silly professions of love. If Truffaut and Leaud live long enough that will be quite a film: Antoine Doinel in the world of "Soft Skin."

Let me, in a parting shot, head off some of the criticism of "Stolen Kisses." Several critical friends have suggested that, "If Truffaut had not made it, it would be a very good film," or that "It takes a great director to make a bad film" (although the later quote, I admit, sounds like it comes from a Dan Greenberg "How to go to a Foreign Movie" satire). What more do we want from Francoise Truffaut? Poor Stanley Kauffmann panned both "400 Blows" and "Jules and Jim," and had to add qualifying postscripts in his book. "Stolen Kisses" is the sort of film we recognize ten years from now as a masterpiece of movie-making. What the crap? Let's recognize it now! Why berate Truffaut for doing what he does so well—and what so few others can do?