

Childhood and Vulnerability in Films: An Annotated Filmography

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The 400 Blows. Directed by François Truffaut, Les Films du Carrosse, 1959.

Truffaut's directorial debut and one of the most well-known films of the French New Wave, *The 400 Blows* follows Antoine Doinel (a semi-autobiographical character based on Truffaut's own childhood experiences), a rebellious 12-year-old living in Paris. Throughout the film, Antoine's parents and teachers are constantly at odds with him – his parents often abuse him and neglect his emotional needs, leading Antoine to turn to a life of petty crime. The boy repeatedly defies his parents and teachers and often runs away from his home and school. One day, Antoine steals a typewriter that he plans to sell so he can run away from home for good but is unable to sell it. The boy is jailed for a night after being caught and turned in by his stepfather. He is later questioned by a judge and, during the interview, relays the circumstances of his neglected childhood. His mother had him out of wedlock and had initially wanted an abortion, he was raised by his grandmother until he was eight years old but had to move in with his emotionally and verbally abusive mother and stepfather. Antoine is placed in an institution for troubled youth near the seaside, where he reveals the reasons for his unhappiness to a psychologist. *The 400 Blows* is an intimate look into the nature of a troubled young boy and his psyche and highlights the impact caregivers, teachers, and social institutions can have on vulnerable children. The film also portrays the injustices faced by juvenile offenders and the state of their rehabilitation in France at the time.

Grave of the Fireflies. Directed by Isao Takahata, Studio Ghibli, 1988.

Isao Takahata's adaptation of the eponymous short story by Akiyuki Nosaka, *Grave of the Fireflies* is a Japanese film that follows two siblings, Seita and Setsuko, as they navigate war-torn Kobe in the aftermath of their mother's death in an air raid. 14-year-old Seita is dealt the responsibility of caring for his infant sister, Setsuko. The siblings are faced with various obstacles in their attempts to survive the widespread poverty and scarcity of resources, which ultimately leads them to seek refuge in an abandoned bomb shelter. The two live away from the bombings for a while until Setsuko becomes increasingly malnourished. Seita is confronted with his inability to properly provide for his sister and breaks down after receiving the knowledge of

Japan's defeat and consequently, his father's death. Setsuko succumbs to her disease, as does her brother a few days after her death. The film is a poignant narrative about the devastation of war and illustrates the struggles of young people who are left to fend for themselves or depend upon the kindness of relatives and strangers to survive in the absence of parental protection. Even Seita's resilience in the face of war-induced poverty and air raids is not enough to protect his 4-year-old sister, whose body inevitably gives in to disease and malnutrition.

Salaam Bombay! Directed by Mira Nair, Cadragé / Channel Four Films / Doordarshan / La Sept Cinéma / Mirabai Films / The National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC), 1988.

Mira Nair's directorial debut, *Salaam Bombay!* is a Hindi film that features children in the red light district of Kamathipura as they navigate the intersections of childhood, urbanity, poverty, and exploitation. Krishna is a little boy who has been turned away from home by his mother due to a fall-out with his elder brother. He can only return home if he has 500 rupees to pay for the damages he has caused, which leads him to go looking for opportunities in erstwhile Bombay. Throughout his stay in the urban city, Krishna is placed in an unfamiliar environment with sex workers and drug addicts, having to work for his daily wages in order to eat. Away from his family, Krishna is working at a tea stall and struggling to keep up with the demands of chaotic Bombay. He has someone write a letter to his mother, to tell her about what has happened, but ends up having to shorten his message and remove the lines conveying how he misses her because he does not have enough money for a longer message. The film has been noted for its depiction of real street children from Bombay in the roles of the characters, who were provided with drama training before filming began.

Ponette. Directed by Jacques Doillon, BAC Films, 1996.

Ponette, a 4-year-old girl, loses her mother in a car crash which leaves her with a broken arm. After her mother's death, Ponette's father sends her to live with her Aunt Clair, and her cousins, Matiaz and Delphine. Ponette misses her mother deeply, and her grief is only made worse when the other children at her new school are cruel to her for not having a mother. One of the children gets into a fight with her, telling her that when a mother dies it is because her child is mean. Ponette wishes to speak to her mother one last time, and often pleads with God to make this wish come true. Her aunt, father, and cousins try to comfort her throughout the duration of the film –

reaffirming that her mother loved her very much, and that she must try to understand this instead of trying to bring her back. However, Ponette is especially confused by the logic of death in religion, especially Christian theology. She questions that if Jesus can come back to life after death then why can't her mother do the same. A Jewish child, Ada, at Ponette's nursery, tells her that she is a child of God – which prompts Ponette to think that becoming a child of God herself might help her speak to her deceased mother. In a dreamlike sequence, Ponette finally speaks to her mother who urges her to stop asking for her and go on living with the knowledge that she loves her. Poignant and sweet, *Ponette* is a French film that explores grief and loss from a child's innocent perspective, with some especially tender moments between Ponette and her cousins as they navigate questions of life and death.

Ratcatcher. Directed by Lynne Ramsay, Pathé Pictures International / BBC Films, 1999.

Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* is set in a poor neighbourhood amidst redevelopment in 1973 Glasgow. The families living there are waiting to be rehoused while a garbage strike adds various health hazards and leaves the neighbourhood a breeding ground for rats. James, a 12-year-old boy part of one of these families, navigates life as people move out while he waits for the day he can leave as well. One day, James and his friend, Ryan, are playing near a canal when their rough-housing goes wrong and Ryan drowns in the muddy water. James blames himself for the death, but does not reveal his involvement in the accident as he believes that his presence went unnoticed. Throughout the narrative, James struggles with his grief as well as his turbulent and neglectful family life. He befriends Margaret-Anne, a 14-year-old girl who is often bullied by boys from a local gang, and the two find solace in each other's company. The British Army eventually comes in to clean the rubbish that has piled up, while James realises that his situation may never change after witnessing Margaret-Anne being assaulted by the gang once again. Kenny, one of James' friends who had nearly drowned in the same canal earlier, taunts him for causing Ryan's death. Overcome with anguish and guilt, James throws himself into the canal. A film about the poor youth in Glasgow and the various hurdles in their lives, *Ratcatcher* is a story that captures the precarity of a disadvantaged childhood, the helplessness that comes with it, and the ways in which children try to negotiate with these tragic circumstances.

Nobody Knows. Directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda, Cinequanon / Bandai Visual, 2004.

Nobody Knows is a Japanese film that follows four children who move into a new apartment with their young mother, Keiko. It is based on the Sugamo child abandonment case of 1988, that took place in Tokyo's Toshima Ward, where a woman abandoned her five young children resulting in the death of two of them. The children in the film are aged between four and twelve with the eldest, Akira, largely bearing the responsibility of caring for his siblings after their mother abandons them without warning. Akira is the only one allowed outside the apartment, as the landlord is unaware of the other children who are snuck into the house by Keiko. The children are not allowed to go to school or be seen by others, besides Akira who pays the rent and buys groceries with the small amount of money Keiko has left behind. After running out of money, Akira goes to a number of men who may be Yuki's, the youngest daughter's, biological father and asks them for money. Later, Keiko returns bearing gifts for the children only to leave once again. In time, Akira runs out of money again and Keiko does not return. He comes up with various ways to care for the children, surviving on convenience store food and bathing in public restrooms. Kyoko, the elder daughter, takes on a surrogate mother role as the utilities to the apartment are cut off after their inability to keep paying the rent. The siblings try to survive without any adult supervision until, one day, Yuki falls from a stool and dies. A devastating story about the imposition of adult responsibilities on young children by a neglectful parent, *Nobody Knows* captures the resilience and ingenuity of childhood that is, inevitably, not enough to keep up with the demands of life.

Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids. Directed by Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman, ThinkFilm / HBO, 2004.

A look into the lives of the children born to sex workers, *Born into Brothels* is a documentary set in the Sonagachi brothel in Calcutta. Director Briski gives them cameras and teaches them photography, providing them with a platform to share their perspectives. These photographs also help raise some funds for the children to leave their current lives in the red-light district, as they are displayed at an exhibition in New York. However, Briski struggles in her efforts to provide the children with an education, a better life, and escape the future planned out for them, particularly the girl children, who are expected to work as second-generation prostitutes when they 'come of age.' Obstacles such as the rigid norms of the brothel, the social stigma surrounding the sex workers and their children, and a lack of government documents and

HIV/AIDs tests, come up in Briski's efforts to enroll the children in schools outside the district. *Born into Brothels* provides a voice to the children of the criminally overlooked population of sex workers in India. Already relegated to the margins in legal and socio-cultural terms, children born in red-light districts have very few opportunities for social mobilisation available to them. This film documents and, consequently, provides a better life for the children who are the subject of the project, while also asking the question of what happens to the children who do not have documentaries made about them.

Persepolis. Directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, 2.4.7. Films, 2007.

An adaptation of Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel based on her childhood experiences in Iran, *Persepolis* is a French-Iranian coming-of-age film. It follows Marjane, or Marji as she is called by her loved ones, and her family in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Daughter to liberal parents, Marji is unhappy with the imposition of the hijab and the restrictive nature of the laws in Iran – often vocalising her disagreement with the Iranian government's actions and embracing the punk subculture by wearing makeup, 'Western' clothing, and listening to heavy metal music. Marji's parents send her to Vienna to study in a French school due to the growing political unrest in Tehran, and out of concerns about her being arrested after she is expelled from school for disagreeing with a teacher about the government's abuse of power. Besides depicting the political climate of Iran during the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, *Persepolis* also touches upon themes of identity, isolation, family, and migration, amongst others. Satrapi emphasises her formative experiences of coming to terms with her identity as an Iranian girl whilst also adjusting to the unfamiliar environment of France. She portrays her grandmother as a decisive force in her childhood, and the reason behind her staying true to herself through the tumultuous events of her adolescence: navigating war, political restrictions, and her personal familial and romantic relationships.

Juno. Directed by Jason Reitman, Mandate Pictures / Mr. Mudd, 2007.

Juno, an eccentric and witty 16-year-old girl living in Minnesota, becomes pregnant after a sexual encounter with her friend, Paul. Ill-equipped to deal with the pregnancy at first, she decides to get an abortion but ends up choosing to keep the foetus and give it up for adoption once it's born. She finds a suitable, childless couple, Mark and Vanessa, in a newspaper ad and

opts for a closed adoption after meeting with them and their lawyer. Juno grows closer with Mark, the two sharing a love for rock music and horror films, while Vanessa prepares for the baby's arrival. However, Mark confesses his disinterest in being a father and his plans to leave Vanessa. Juno is distraught upon hearing this and tries to change his mind but, instead, Mark questions her feelings towards him and the reason behind why she visits him so often, revealing that he is developing an attraction towards her. Juno is upset by this news, but returns to leave a note for Vanessa – telling her that she is ready to have her adopt the baby if she still wants to. Juno and Paul reconcile once she admits that she is in love with him and, soon after, delivers a baby boy who will have Vanessa as his adoptive single mother. The film captures the adolescent innocence of Juno as she faces the challenges that come with being pregnant – her peers in school often stare at her and her changing body is a constant source of discomfort – while still dealing with the typical problems of a teenage girl who is not ready for the emotional, physical, and psychological responsibilities of motherhood.

Children of the Pyre. Directed by Rajesh S. Jala, Fortissimo Films, 2008.

Seven boys from the Dom community of cremators in Manikarnika, Varanasi, are documented as they go about their lives in one of the busiest cremation grounds in India. The film touches on various aspects of their condition, most prominently the unusual lifestyle that is enforced upon them due to their caste identity as members of the Dom community. They are regarded as 'inauspicious' and 'untouchable' due to the nature of their work and proximity to death and dead bodies, with upper caste people threatening them with physical violence at the prospect of even having their shadows fall upon them. The boys are subjected to extreme physical conditions, working with fire in hot summers and incurring injuries due to the flames. *Children of the Pyre* presents an intimate look into the lives of these children, who are denied an education or any opportunity for an ordinary childhood – some of them admitting to smoking cannabis in order to deal with the nature of their work. The film also poses questions about the loose laws that allow child labour to continue in India and place children at risk, particularly in harsh working conditions such as the ones depicted here. After the release of the documentary, four of the boys have gone on to receive an education at a school in Varanasi while the others have either gone back to working as cremators or taken up other jobs.

Silenced. Directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk, Samgeori Pictures, 2011.

An adaptation of Gong Ji-young's novel, *The Crucible*, *Silenced* is a Korean film about a school for deaf and mute children where the students are repeatedly sexually abused by members of the faculty. Based on real events that took place at the Gwangju Inhwa School, the film evoked nationwide protests upon its release. In-ho, an art teacher, discovers the horrific physical and sexual abuse that the children are subjected to after accepting a teaching position at the Ja-ae Academy in the fictional town of Mujin. He begins working with a human rights activist, Yoo-jin, to bring justice to the victims. The film depicts the graphic violence that three students undergo, as well as the court proceedings of their case. *Silenced* depicts the unique challenges that hearing-impaired and mute children face due to the nature of their disabilities, quite literally unable to voice their plight to those around them. Moreover, the power and social status of the headmaster, as a reputed member of the town, is constantly wielded against the protagonists as the local authorities and larger community come together to cover up the truth. The widespread outrage upon the film's release ultimately led to real change in the legal system of the country. Stricter measures were put in place, in the form of the Dogani law and other legislative amendments, to protect children and people with disabilities from sexual abuse.

Tomboy. Directed by Céline Sciamma, Hold Up Films / Lilies Films / Arte France Cinéma, 2011.

A French film about a 10-year-old girl, *Tomboy* follows Laure as she moves into a new home in Paris with her family. She meets Lisa, a girl in the neighbourhood who mistakes her for a boy. Lisa asks for her name upon which the child offers the masculine name, Mickaël. Mickaël is introduced to the rest of the neighbourhood children, and soon starts presenting as a boy in front of his friends. One day Lisa and Mickaël are playing when she puts makeup on his face and tells him he looks 'pretty as a girl.' Later, when he goes home, his mother appreciates and encourages the feminine look. Jeanne, his little sister, meets Lisa and finds out what has been going on. She threatens to tell his secret to their parents but relents after Mickaël convinces her against it and is happy to have a big brother. She quickly becomes accepting of Mickaël's new identity and even helps him cut his hair short into a more boyish look. However, the child's secret is revealed when Mickaël gets into a fight with a boy in the neighbourhood. The boy's mother confronts Laure/Mickaël's mother who plays along for the conversation, but later scolds them for 'pretending to be a boy' and forces them to wear a dress. Laure/Mickaël's secret is also revealed

to Lisa and the neighbourhood children who are shocked and disgusted at the truth – with the boys chasing and capturing them in order to ‘find out’ their sex. The film ends with Laure/Mickaël begrudgingly accepting the female identity forced upon them. In a scene, Lisa asks them their name and they reply that it is Laure. *Tomboy* follows Laure/Mickaël over the course of summer break as they question their gender identity and societal expectations of gender presentation. The film poses important questions about the rigid, normative sex roles imposed on children that restrict their free, natural curiosity towards gender expression.

India's Forgotten Children. Directed by Michael Lawson, Vision Video Inc., 2014.

A documentary that chronicles the state of various underrepresented and exploited children in India, *India's Forgotten Children* addresses the gaps in the rights of children and how caste, gender, and poverty intersect and contribute to further widening these gaps. The documentary aims to advocate for children's rights by providing a platform to various activists and experts who paint an objective yet bleak picture of the state of children and young people in the country, while also showcasing real-life instances of children who have been exposed to exploitation and discrimination. One of the key concerns regarding the status of Dalit children is the number of unregistered births that undermines their rights and prevents them from seeking protection against injustices such as exploitation, trafficking, forced and early marriage, and child labour. The film features various individuals throughout the documentary ranging from experts such as Dr Joseph D'Souza, to children such as Amit and Sumit, who share their lived experiences of working as bonded labourers. The documentary also consults children and women's activists Cynthia Stephen, Jeevaline Kumar, and Brinda Adige, amongst others, to highlight the growing problems of femicide, female infanticide, sexism in the domestic sphere, and sexual trafficking and exploitation that children, specifically girls, are subjected to in India. Poverty is another major axis of exploitation, especially in cases of bonded labour, that disproportionately affects poor, disadvantaged children, coercing them into forced labour and trafficking so they can earn wages to support their families. Children in the labour force are also easier to exploit as they are less likely to dissent, and are often paid much less than adult workers.

The Diary of a Teenage Girl. Directed by Marielle Heller, Archer Gray Productions / Caviar, 2015.

Based on the novel of the same name by Phoebe Gleckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* follows 15-year-old Minnie as she is groomed by her mother's boyfriend, Monroe, and begins to explore her emerging sexuality in 1976 San Francisco. The film marks a daring representation of a young girl who is taken advantage of by a trusted, older male figure in her life and how she comes to terms with her body and identity in the aftermath of this incident. In a crucial scene that truly drives home the vulnerability of adolescent girls, Minnie playfully screams that she is being raped by Monroe in public – who becomes tremendously worried at the prospect of being caught with a minor girl in a compromising position – but nobody comes to her rescue or is otherwise alerted by her cries. The audience knows that she is joking but the complete absence of any attention being paid to her screams for help is a telling portrayal by Heller. Who is looking out for the teenage girls being preyed on by adults? Monroe, it is insinuated, is left without facing any consequences for the statutory rapes he has committed against Minnie and, later, against her friend Kimmie. Minnie's mother, upon finding out about the 'relationship' between Minnie and Monroe, is, at first, enraged at the betrayal and then finds herself unable to talk about what has taken place. Instead, she believes that they must marry once Minnie turns 18, prompting her to run away in disgust. The film ends on a touching note, with Minnie coming to terms with her identity and what she has been through, realising that what she needs is to love herself rather than relying on the affections of other people.

Moonlight. Directed by Barry Jenkins, A24 / Plan B Entertainment, 2016.

Following the life of an African-American boy growing up in Miami, *Moonlight* tells the story of Chiron, or 'Little' (his nickname), in three parts as he navigates childhood, adolescence, and adulthood while grappling with his identity. The story begins with Chiron running away from a group of bullies to hide in an abandoned crackhouse, where he is rescued by Juan, an affluent drug dealer who brings him home to his girlfriend, Teresa. Chiron's relationship with Juan and Teresa develops while his mother begins to neglect him due to her drug addiction. The film highlights the poverty and bleak conditions that Chiron is raised in, as well as the constant bullying he receives from his peers for being a "faggot." He is confused about why the other kids call him this and asks Juan what the word means, the film implying that Little is as yet unaware of his sexual orientation. Kevin, his only friend, advises him to act tough to not look 'soft' in front of his bullies. After Juan's death, Chiron's mother forces him to hand over whatever money

Teresa gives him to keep up her drug habit while the bullying he faces at school only grows more vicious. Amidst all this, Chiron, now a teenager in high school, has an emotional sexual encounter with Kevin which is a significant event in his life. After a serious physical altercation with his bullies ultimately leads Chiron to fight back, he ends up being taken away by the police. As an adult, Chiron, now going by the nickname ‘Black,’ is a drug dealer himself and performs the prototypical image of black masculinity – completely unlike the quiet, little boy of his childhood. *Moonlight* effectively and beautifully represents the complexities of race, gender, sexuality, and identity in modern-day American society, while also showcasing the effects of poverty and lack of opportunities on vulnerable black children.

The Breadwinner. Directed by Nora Twomey, Aircraft Pictures / Melusine Productions / Cartoon Saloon, 2017.

The Breadwinner is an animated film that tells the story of Parvana, an 11-year-old girl living under the Taliban’s law in Kabul, Afghanistan. After the unfair arrest of her father, and in the absence of the sole male figure, her family struggles to support itself due to the prohibition on women venturing out of the home without a suitable male guardian. Parvana tries to buy food for her family but is refused service as an unaccompanied female due to the widespread fear of the Taliban. With nobody to turn to, she takes on the disguise of a boy to support her family and attempt to free her imprisoned father. In time, she befriends another girl, Shauzia, who has also disguised herself as a boy, and the two take on odd jobs together to save money for their causes. Parvana wants to earn money for a big enough bribe that would be sufficient to free her father from jail, while Shauzia wants to escape her abusive father. Although based in 2001, the film continues to be relevant today in the wake of worrying events, such as Iraq lowering the age of consent to 9 years for girl children and the Taliban’s ever-increasing efforts to render women completely invisible. An adaptation of the eponymous children’s novel by Twomey, *The Breadwinner* is a moving narrative about the restrictions imposed on women, young and old, and how girl children are systematically denied dignity and equality in sexist regimes such as the one depicted in the film.

The Florida Project. Directed by Sean Baker, A24, 2017.

Moonee, a 6-year-old girl, lives in a motel with her young, unemployed mother, near Walt Disney World in Kissimmee, Florida. She goes about her days during summer break playing with her friends and getting in the way of the various people who live and work in the area. *The Florida Project*, named after the code given to the amusement park during construction, follows Moonee, her mother, Halley, and the various characters in their life as they navigate poverty and unemployment in a setting just outside the gates of what is marketed as the most magical place on earth. Halley finds it increasingly difficult to get a job as selling perfumes to tourists is not very lucrative, and turns to sex work to make ends meet. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is called on her, and Moonee is about to be taken to a foster family. In a fit of anger and frustration, the little girl runs away to say goodbye to her best friend, Jancey, who lives in another motel nearby. The two share a tearful goodbye, with Moonee afraid that she may never be able to see her friend again, before Jancey takes Moonee's hands and the two run away to Walt Disney World. The film has been praised for its thoughtful portrayal of a child's innocent perceptions of what would otherwise be viewed as a difficult life. Moonee and her friends' innocence is juxtaposed with the cold, hard outlook on life that is the domain of the adults in the film. The film also subtly comments upon the resilience of childhood through a particular scene where Moonee tells Jancey that one of the trees in their usual spots is her favourite because it has tipped over, but continues growing.

Procession. Directed by Robert Greene, Netflix, 2021.

Revolving around six men who were sexually abused as children by Catholic priests in Kansas City, *Procession* is a documentary that follows these adult survivors as they confront their traumatic experiences through drama therapy. The film accompanies these men as they work with the crew and therapist to come up with fictionalised reenactments of their childhood abuse, coming to terms with their inner turmoil regarding the events while shedding light on the involvement of the Catholic Church in protecting the child predators who victimised little boys over the span of decades. Although only one child is prominently featured in the documentary (an actor hired for the reenactments), the survivors regularly make references to their younger selves and their personal feelings of vulnerability and fragility as "tiny," helpless boys. The film also delves into the individual details of their cases; some victims reported their situation to adults and were denied help or acceptance while others were severely manipulated or threatened

into staying silent. Even while focusing on middle-aged adults, the film is a noteworthy representation of the lasting effects of childhood abuse and trauma, which follow these men well into their adulthood, with many still unable to properly recall specific memories and details of the distressing events. *Procession* particularly draws the audience's attention to how the statute of limitations is used to protect predators and deny justice to the victims.

Farha. Directed by Darin J. Sallam, TaleBox, 2021.

Based on the events of the 1948 Nakba (the expulsion and displacement of indigenous Palestinian Arabs by the Zionist military), *Farha* is the story of a 14-year-old girl living in a village in Palestine. She dreams of going to school in the city, like her cousin, rather than being married off like the other girls in the village. Her father eventually gives in to her wishes, but Farha's hopes for the future are abruptly cut short by the invasion of Zionist soldiers. People are forced out of their homes by the military who quickly takes over the village. Rather than fleeing with her cousin, Farha stays behind with her father who locks her in the pantry of their home and promises to come back. A significant portion of the narrative focuses on Farha's time while locked inside the pantry, waiting for her father to return. In a few days, a pregnant woman and her family find refuge in the abandoned home where she delivers a baby boy, but they are soon found out by members of the Zionist military. The family is executed once the keys to their house are confiscated while the newborn baby – who is ordered to be killed – is left alive by a young soldier unable to do the deed. Farha, still locked inside the pantry and unable to open it, helplessly watches through the door while the baby cries outside. Finally, she finds a pistol hidden in the pantry by her father and is able to open the door, only to find that the child has died. Traumatized and severely dehydrated, Farha makes it out of her house to find a village devoid of any survivors and walks away. The film is based on the retellings of Radiyyeh, a survivor of the Nakba, and is a chilling portrayal of the countless young lives that have been lost in the settler-colonialist regime that continues to this day in Palestine.