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By JOY GOULD BOYUM

Some years ago, a team of psychologists did a study of creativity, hoping to discover what sets creative people apart from others. One of the things they came up with was that most creative people remembered their childhood, whatever the actual circumstances, as having been quite unhappy.

Hardly a startling discovery, this is very much what creative writers have been telling us since at least the turn of the century. Think of Joyce's "Portrait of an Artist" or Lawrence's "Sons and Lovers" — to cite two exemplary instances of thinly disguised autobiographies which treat childhood as a time of painful vulnerability

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"Small Change"

and agonized adjustment. And although film is by and large a less personal art, it has nevertheless managed to offer us visions consistent in kind.

Consider French director Francois Truffaut's 1959 classic, "The 400 Blows." Focusing on a young boy whose experiences closely parallel Truffaut's own, the film shows us childhood as a relentless and anguished struggle against the arbitrary authority of unloving adults — a struggle which ends in hopelessness, with a freeze shot of the boy standing at land's end.

Truffaut was 27 when he made "The 400 Blows" and was not to return to the theme of childhood — except in the highly idiosyncratic context of his period piece about a wolf-boy, "The Wild Child" — for 15 years. In that period, his vision has apparently changed quite remarkably. His current film, "Small Change," while empathetic with the child's point of view, is no longer a tragic lament but a lyric and comic celebration of the child's magic gift for survival. As such, "Small Change" emerges a joyous and endearing film. But it is also something even more rare: a vision of childhood by a 20th Century creative artist — and a major one at that — which tells us how truly wonderful childhood is.

Set in the present in the French provincial town of Thiers, "Small Change" deals primarily with a group of boys, most of whom attend the local school (where much of the film takes place) and seem to be somewhere between the ages of eight and 13. We learn most about two of the youngsters — pudgy and pleasant Patrick (Gregory Desmouceaux) who lives with and cares for his severely crippled father and impoverished Julian (Philippe Goldman), neglected and abused by his mother and grandmother. But the film centers on no single protagonist and offers no sustained narrative. Rather, as scripted by Truffaut together with Suzanne Schiffmann, his long-time assistant, the film is essentially a series of anecdotes and impressions, linked together less by character or story than by time, place and the theme of survival.

In revising his vision of childhood, Truffaut has not removed the threat of pain and abuse from children's lives. The world of "Small Change" may be bathed in the golden glow of optimism and good humor, but still contains the emotional hazards of insensitive and cruel parents. There are

also the physical hazards of scissors and knives, and windows carelessly left ajar. What Truffaut is driving at is not that children are safe, but that they are resilient, living in what his film quite explicitly describes as "a state of grace."

Thus, we watch a baby hurtle from the upper story window of an apartment house only to see it emerge unscathed. We are assured that Julian will not only survive his loveless homelife but in some way be rewarded. As Julian's sympathetic young teacher, Mr. Richet (Jean-Francois Stevenin), explains, clearly speaking for Truffaut: "Those who have had a difficult childhood are often better equipped to confront adult life than those who have been protected. It's the law of compensation."

But though the film does touch on very real dangers, it more often concerns itself with the less serious and perhaps more typical variety of peril that children tend to face: being caught unprepared for a lesson in school; being discovered sneaking into a movie without having bought a ticket; being found out by one's peers as not being privileged enough to own a television set. While fate sometimes comes to the rescue, as it does in the case of the heedless scholar when the dismissal bell happens to ring just in the nick of time, it is usually the clever wiles of the children themselves that save the day. A little girl, for example, left home without supper as a punishment by her parents, brilliantly conceives of a plot by which she ends up with a far better dinner than she most likely would otherwise have had.

This vision of children as resourceful and blessed may be jarring to our 20th Century sensibilities. And Truffaut's children may in fact be more in tune with other times and other places, more readily at home, let's say, maneuvering a raft down the Mississippi or lending a sympathetic ear to Mr. Micawber. Yet we can't dismiss Truffaut's vision as bleary-eyed romanticism. For one thing, his children are too real and recognizable, reminding us not only of children we know but of the children we all once were.

Truffaut has often elicited from his delightful cast a non-professionals reactions so authentic that they must be totally spontaneous: the giggle of a little boy, for instance, as he tries to tell an off-color story; the response of an infant left alone with a bag of groceries who ecstatically empties boxes of spaghetti on the floor and hammers biscuits to smithereens.

Truffaut's vignettes are filled with ironic and unsentimental details that ward off charges of mawkishness. The child who tumbles from the window, for instance, is no pure victim of circumstance or neglect. He falls mostly because he is reaching for the pussycat he has just gleefully dropped out the window. The little girl who gets her fine dinner is shown to be less thrilled with the simple pleasures of food than with the much more complex ones expressed in her delighted gasp: "Everyone looked at me."

Truffaut's film as a whole is so vividly and affectionately rendered that we want to believe in its vision. It's a vision so long neglected by artists that some of us may well need to be reminded that, even if it's only part of the story, childhood is indeed "a state of grace."