

JULES AND JIM (1962)

Major Credits:

director: François Truffaut
screenplay: Truffaut and Jean Gruault, from the novel by Henri-Pierre Roché
cinematographer: Raoul Coutard
music: Georges Delerue
cast: Jeanne Moreau (Catherine), Oscar Werner (Jules), Henri Serre (Jim)

Background:

The film is based on the memoirs-as-novel published a few years earlier by Henri-Pierre Roché, the man who introduced Gertrude Stein to Picasso. Catherine's character is derived from a number of different women in the novel, including the literary woman who translated Lolita into German. Jim's monologue about the soldier's love letters is based on Apollinaire's letters to Madeline. In the novel, Jim is the author's alter ego, but in the film, Truffaut identifies with Jules (who is also a translator).

"For me shooting a film is like laying a bet. People took a strong dislike to the script for Jules and Jim. Distributors said: 'The woman is a tart; the husband will be grotesque, etc.' The gamble for me was to make the woman moving (without being melodramatic) and not a tart, and to prevent her husband from seeming ridiculous."

--Truffaut

Stylistic Qualities:

1. Jules and Jim is a good example of the cinematic style of the French New Wave, which was launched in 1959 by Godard's Breathless, Resnais' Hiroshima, Mon Amour, and Truffaut's own The 400 Blows.

--mixture of styles (melodrama, slapstick, comedy of manners, documentary), "suggesting that life is more complex than the categories with which we attempt to understand it" (Michael Klein).

--rapid cutting, especially in the first half of the film

--special effects: freeze frames, iris shots, bicycle tracking shots, aerial tracking shots, double exposure--all expressing the sheer joy of filmmaking.

2. panning shots, which generally express the solidarity of the group.

--in the cafe, the panning shot creates a kind of tapestry of bohemian life.

--in Jules' room, the rapid 360 degree panning shot of Therese as a "steam engine" reflects the dizzying effect she has on Jules.

3. mise-en-scène

--triangular compositions, such as the famous long shot of the chalet with each character at an open window, continually remind us of the film's basic plot.

--Jules is often placed in corners, suggesting his vulnerability. In the deeply moving (and improvised) scene in his bedroom late in the film, Jules is almost crowded off the frame in the tight two-shot by Catherine's face.

--in the background, we often catch glimpses of significant works of art: a chronological sequence of Picasso's, Catherine's portrait of Napoleon.

4. documentary footage, which provides the film with some structure and also reaffirms the role of history.

--the newsreel footage of World War I which divides the film in half was stretched to CinemaScope width, distorting the scenes and creating a unique combination of abstraction and realism.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Each of the major characters could be the subject for an essay. Catherine could be the subject of a book. Is she essentially neurotic and perverse, or the only unregenerate bohemian among them? John Howard Lawson has noted how "Catherine's neurosis is somewhat similar to Kane's--she has to dominate in order to be loved."

2. Like so many other New Wave films, Jules and Jim is concerned with the theme of freedom in its many manifestations and permutations. Catherine seems at first a "free spirit," later as a queen who enslaves others. Yet is she herself ever truly free?

3. Consider the role of history in the film. What are the crucial differences among the documentary sequences in the film and how do they define the evolving relationships among the three?

4. All of the major characters are associated with art. What does the film have to say about the nature and limits of creativity, the relation of the artist to society, and the relation of art to life and to history?

"I honestly believe that pleasing people is important, but I also believe that every film must contain some degree of 'planned violence' upon its audience. In a good film, people must be made to see something that they don't want to see; they must be made to approve of someone of whom they had disapproved; they must be forced to look where they had refused to look."

--François Truffaut