

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Green Room 1978

Francois Truffaut

Overview. Truffaut is hardly a visionary director, in the sense that Bergman might be thought visionary. (Think back to *Persona*, the end of *Virgin Spring*, *Rite*, *Winter Light*, *The Seventh Seal*; each of these films centers on powerful but non-empirical experiences, small miracles.) Yet Truffaut makes his powerful moves beyond evidence, when we don't expect it. (This is the ingenious director who declares, at the height of his skills, both that he is an atheist and that he wants to be put to final rest in a Catholic mass.) The movie before us walks constantly over the thin line that separates the dead from the living; one need only look at the faces of WWI infantry, as they pass trudgingly across an anonymous battlefield in France, barely alive enough to lay claim either to living or dying. The caring for the dead, which is a so prominent and carefully prescribed responsibility in Catholic cult, is the central concern of the present film.

Truffaut's inspiration-texts for the following film were largely drawn from the works of the American Henry James, who himself frequently entered spiritual speculation, especially as it played into the sinister or weird. Truffaut particularly hooked onto the James short story, 'The Altar of the Dead,' which concerned a man for whom the dead were active elements of his own daily consciousness, and whose principal preoccupation was carrying on his personal cult of care for the dead. Truffaut remarked, to a Paris news journalist, that he wanted to film what it would be like 'to show on screen a man who refuses to forget the dead.' It is this 'point of view,' about caring for the dead, that provokes the film's love and conflict issue, between the dead-respecting local journalist and the woman who comes to love him, despite her conviction that the dead should be respected principally for the promotion of life.

CHARACTERS

Julien Davenne	The principal lead, editor of <i>The Globe</i>
Cecilia Mandel	The female lead, spiritual lover and spiritual antagonist of Julien
Bernard Humbert	editor of <i>The Globe</i>
The priest in the mortuary room	
Monique	Secretary at <i>The Globe</i>
Mme Rambaud	housekeeper of Julien
Georges	Julien's deaf-dumb child

SYNOPSIS

The film takes place in a small town in France, shortly after the end of the first World War. The main character is a war veteran who works as the editor of the local newspaper, *The Globe*. He is a 'specialist in obituaries,' as the editor-in-chief puts it, and is a person very much haunted by the thought of death. He has set aside a chapel on the upper floor of his house—which he shares with his housekeeper, and his deaf mute son. The chapel is devoted to the memory of his wife, who died seven years previously, at the height of her beauty, and whose memory he adores.

Unfortunately, a wildfire destroys this sacred 'green' room in Julien's house, and he manages to find an abandoned church shrine, in which he sets up as a sanctuary in which he places portraits and mementoes of the dead whom he has loved, and whom he wants to keep in reverential closeness. The remainder of the film plays out around Julien's efforts to honor the dead, and the relations in which it involves him, with the woman who loves him, while remaining true to her exasperating sense that the living should be honored before the dead.

STORY

War. The tale opens at the end of WW 1, in the atmosphere of world disaster. Death is in the air, from the combat—Truffaut chose the first, rather than the second, World War, for he thought it more bitter and sacrificial. The remainder of the film will deploy, in that atmosphere of death and destruction. We take our position, in that atmosphere, inside the mindset of a provincial newspaper editor, who is a war veteran, and whose beautiful wife has died seven years before.

Fire. A heavy thunderstorm leads to the incineration of the Green Room in Julien's house, and he decides to construct a candle-lighted altar to her, and to all the cemetery dead in the place where she is buried. It is at this pan-human prayer center, of his own creation, that Julien meets a young woman who leads him into far more complexity than he had anticipated in his adoration of Julie. She works for a local auction company, through which, with Cecilia's assistance, he is enabled to win at auction a ring which belonged to his wife's family, and which he had cherished. He becomes involved with Cecilia's world view, according to which the worship of the dead had best be seen as a step toward understanding life. Cecilia and Julien share the belief that respect and care for the dead is an integral part of life.

Reconciliation. A blend of fondness and distrust seems to hold Cecilia and Julien together, until Julien, increasingly attracted to this withdrawn but charming woman, decides to visit her at her home. Once in her house, he discovers the walls lined with photographs of Paul Massigny, once Julien's best friend, but anathema to him now, since Massigny's betrayal of Julien. (The film does not make clear what this betrayal was, but it was sufficient to turn Massigny—well known as a ladies man-- into Julien's worst enemy; upon finding the photos Julien storms angrily out of Julie's house. He suspects, and it turns out rightly, that Cecilia had been among Massigny's conquests.) In the end Julien is able to accept Cecilia's relation to Massigny, and deeply appreciates Cecilia's note to him, in which she declares that she loves him. Not long after, he loses his own hold on life, falls ill, and dies in Cecilia's arms. He has forgiven Massigny. Julie, from the outset a deep co-partner with Julien, in the caring for the dead, continues his work of respect and care for the others who are gone but with us. At the film's end she dedicates one last candle to Julien himself.

THEMES

Religion. The film plays out in the atmosphere of post war suffering, with its emphasis on death, and of the Catholic background of the provincial world in which Julien lives, while working as editor of *The Globe*. From the start we are introduced to the Catholic burial of Julien's beloved wife, and to the Catholic view of salvation through the saving death of Jesus Christ.

Piety. Julien and Julie are brought up into the rural Catholic faith of WW 1 France, and are in fact inheritors of the oldest strata of Celtic pre modern belief, a cult of piety which is pervasive in the present film.

Neurosis. Piety is one term we should welcome, in trying to grasp the tenor of this film; another is *neurosis*, in this case a preoccupation with the dead—Julien's preoccupation with his deceased wife—a turn of mind our 'mental health' culture would be inclined to discourage.

Sexuality. The relation between Julien and Cecilia is wired and rich with nuance, sexual in that implication-full way, and in that way pervades the entire film, and adds a level of intensity. We observe from the initial scene, in which Julien throws himself on the body and then the casket of his dead wife, that the repressed nature of Julien is only a cover for his intensely passionate nature.

Jealousy. It follows from Julien's passionate nature that he is a natural for jealousy. The introduction of Cecilia, into Julien's midlife solitude, is a tremendous enlargement of the risk he takes in the direction of life. But when he learns of Cecilia's previous affair with Massigny, his rival at *The Globe*, it drives him crazy.

Death. Death might be viewed as the principal driver of this film. Truffaut has spoken at length about his

growing sense, in midlife, that he is surrounded by the dead, more than by the living. He felt a personal obligation to sustain these presences.

Transience. Julien lives surrounded by the dead, photos and mementoes and memories of those he loved or admired, both among his friends and acquaintances, and among those past greats he cares for, like Marcel Proust or Guillaume Apollinaire. Living in this space between life and death, Julien deeply understands the transience of life.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

JULIEN Julien is the main character. He is content with his status, as an editor of a country newspaper, and when urged to accept a far more interesting post, with a newspaper in Paris, he rejects the opportunity, remaining true to the direct memory of his deceased wife, whose loving presence to him is all he cares for. Like Truffaut, who created him, Julien is, already in midlife, aware that among his acquaintances more are now dead than alive: respect for the living seems foremost to require respect for the dead. To carry out this personal cult makes it a matter of indifference where one lives and works.

Julien's personal relations among the living, however, continue to shape the quality of his existence, and Julien is too intuned and somber to be a happily adjusted social figure. His wife's haunting presence tortures his relation to other women, and when he does venture into a caring relation with Julie—a fellow spiritual custodian of the zones between life and death—his relationship becomes tangled in his old pattern of jealousy toward Massigny. His intimacy with the dead moves into the space of the living and he dies paralytically, in his churchyard chapel.

Desperate Julien grows desperate as he sees his beloved wife enclosed in her casket. He throws himself on her body, and attempts to prevent the closure of the casket. He is far from being at peace with death, which he will ultimately come to accept.

Requesting Once Julien has realized the interpenetration of life with death, he decides to construct a chapel, for remembrance and celebration of the dead, in the churchyard where his wife is buried. He goes to the local priest, to request permission to reconstruct a decaying chapel, which is in the corner of the grounds of the local church.

Encountering At the local auction house, Julien makes the acquaintance of a young lady, Cecilia, whom he approaches about the acquisition of a ring, which belonged to the family of his deceased wife, and which will soon go on auction. This new acquaintance, as it turns out, shares Julien's interest in the dead—what topic could be more relevant to an auctioneer dealing in personal memorabilia?—and becomes his principal living soulmate for the remainder of the film.

Blundering As his affection for Cecilia grows, and with it his understanding better the relationships between death and life, Julien takes a chance on visiting Cecilia in her house. While there, however, he sees that the walls are covered with photos of Massigny, Julien's arch enemy, and, as it turns out, the one-time lover of Cecilia. Julien is shattered by this discovery. It is the beginning of the end of Cecilia's affection for him, although it is also the beginning of a mellowing in Julien, who ultimately forgives Massigny.

Break down After the scene in which Julien storms out of Cecilia's house, she decides to cut off their relationship, and he is shattered. The entanglement with this new affection, and the jealousy of Massigny, have become too much for this withdrawn man, and he collapses.

Parallels. In the *Odyssey* Odysseus digs a pit through which he has access to the swarming souls of the dead, many of them familiar to him from his life and wanderings, and many eager to question him about events on earth. Dante's *Commedia*, in its way, permits the same kind of direct experience of the world of the historically dead, though intelligibly present and live. Throughout the *Inferno*, we are surrounded by those who are thirsty for the light that will eventually shine upon them, at the end of their journey toward

the divine vision. The same kind of vision, of the transparent curtain between the dead and the living, is taken for granted in the fictional work of Charles Williams, especially in *Descent into Hell* (1937).