

Humanities Institute
Frederic Will, Ph. D.

Jules et Jim (1962)

Francois Truffaut.

OVERVIEW

Jules et Jim is embedded in its historical setting, the Belle Epoque, the term to describe the robust period of French culture which corresponds to the Troisieme Republique, and spans the period between the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) and the outbreak of WW I, a period of forty plus years. The period is one of relative, and very welcome peace, in which the outlines of a contemporary France begin to make themselves apparent—stylish and efficient carriages morphing into early automobiles; widespread use of electric lights, telegraphs, and early versions of cinema; advances in aeronautics—the first helicopter; the development of the germ theory of disease, and advances in chemistry and physics which were to open pathways into genetic science and bacteriology. The parallel advances in the arts, public entertainment, the Nineties development of urban architecture, fashion and style, distinction in *haute cuisine* all added up to a cultural effervescence—Paris over thirty five years, which is there as the setting for the movie *Jules and Jim*, Truffaut's third feature. Roughly the same cultural-social developments—if one extends the dates up to the Second World War—emanate from the United States, with its Gay Nineties and Roaring Twenties, with their own multiple forms of new discovery and new energy. Into this fresh and still self-defining period, Truffaut introduces the three some of intellectual, volatile, high spirited characters who make up the backbone of the film before us.

CHARACTERS

Catherine. Wife of Jules; playmate of J and J
Jules Husband and playmate of Catherine
Jim. Playmate of Jules and Catherine
Gilberte. Fiancee of Jim
Albert. Catherine's sometime lover
Therese. Jules' ex-girlfriend
Sabine. Daughter of Jules and Catherine
Birgitta
Lucy
Helga
Customers in café
Merlin
Mathilde
Voice of narrator

SYNOPSIS

The film opens on the two figures who give their names to the work, Jules (Austrian) and Jim (French) two young blades from two different cultures and languages, meeting in Paris, getting to know each other. They are natural born friends—Jules tallish and dark and on the shy side, Jim a kind of James Dean tomboy, rather more extraverted than his friend—and they enjoy much in common. They take to one another's language, learning bits and pieces with gusto, they take fencing lessons together, party together, admire sculpture on similar wavelengths, and above all share the same girl friends, at least until Catherine (French) appears on the scene. At that point decisive chemistries set in, and Jules phones Jim to let him know that he would prefer not to 'share this one.' However, they both adore her equally, and she reciprocates the feeling, cutting up with the two boys both anticly and erotically. Sometime later, Jules lets Jim know that he and Catherine are marrying, Not long after that the war breaks out. During the war we are treated to daunting newsreel footage of armies on the march, as well as of frequent reminders

that Jules and Jim remain as close as ever, and live under terrible fear of shooting one another, as members of opposing armies.

After the war things are different, for everybody. Jim returns to visit Jules in the mountain chalet (in Germany) where the married couple are living. Jules is gloomy. He realizes that Catherine has been having various affairs while he was away at war, and he sees that she no longer has strong feelings for him. Jim listens with interest, and both men realize that it would be in alignment with their threepart relation, if Jim were to take over as active lover, or perhaps to marry Catharine, if she agrees. The 'if she agrees' is no small matter, and in the end, after she and Jim have tried procreating—successful in the conception but the baby is stillborn—and after she has flirted a little more, slept around with her boyfriend Alfred—the conditions for an effective threesome seem to have been dashed. Indeed they have. This beautiful and charming woman, who coordinated effectively into the duo of close male buddies, has ultimately acted out beyond the limit. The three of them find themselves again in Paris, partying with friends; Catherine asks Jim to take her for a ride. As they go out, Catherine motions to Jules, that he should watch them as they ride. She takes the wheel, drives slowly toward the lake, and goes straight off a bridge into the lake, where she and Jim drown. It is up to Jules to cremate them.

STORY

Setting. the setting is the Belle époque Paris discussed above, and firmly embedded in it a pair of young men in their late twenties who delightedly discover one another, young blades on the make, sophisticated, attractive, intelligent and adventurous. For a long time the two of them are happy in one another's company, seemingly prosperous and content. Everything from fencing to art-connoisseurship to girls unites them, until eventually they find a single captivating girl, Catherine, who fascinates them both: until one of the guys, Jules, says 'let's not share, I'll keep this one for my own.' This threat to the unity of the two guys is as it turns out essentially a challenge, for in the following narrative, concerning the two men, the wedge of Catherine will in fact not be enough to separate them—until the end of the tale.

Complexification. The fine balance that held the threesome together is not guaranteed. It is the product of a special moment when the fun of being together as a threesome in Paris has not yet begun to come apart from within. Clearly, as we know from the above synopsis, the present almost geometrical stasis, among the three partners, was fragile. The two males, as it happens, had a reliable relation to one another, but Catherine was if life loving and stimulating to the guys, also frivolous, fanciful, and capable of flights of fancy which left the males feeling intrigued and perplexed. It is evident that the war, which pits the two males' cultures against one another, provides a fresh challenge to all the participants. Jules and Jim were destined to consolidate their mutual feelings, but after the war the old *joie de vivre* of the group was gone.

History. How would they ever regain the *joie de vivre* of fancying the ideal in primitive sculpture, of running down paths in the woods as a threesome, or of listening to Jules read aloud, in the fencing studio, the story of the meeting and friendship of the two guys? The footage of tanks moving unfeelingly through great European city centers is Truffaut's way of telling us that the party is over, and that the cold bite of history will intrude forever on the lives of our three children of the Belle Epoque. (Truffaut is a master of characterizing time as flow; the sense of argumentative wearing down that pervades the time of young Antoine, the time of no time at all, free air, that at best buoys Catherine and the guys, and now the time of the inexorable, that pounds mercilessly into the lives of our three friends.

Apres-guerre. After the war new realities squat in the center of our three no longer so young lovers of life. Jules and Catherine are living in their chalet in the woods, in Germany, and have produced a daughter. Jim comes to visit them, finding Catherine at the cold mountainous rail stop, ready to meet him. Jules is said to be absent, to have gone into the city; a wrinkle that is disturbing and confusing to Jim, although he delights himself with the meeting young Sabine, the daughter of Jules and Catherine. After Jules has returned, and the trio of old friends has begun to restore some of their old easiness, it becomes clear that their personal constellation has changed. Jules is no longer intimate and playful with Catherine, though the presence of the little girl is clearly a source of joy to the group. Jim stays on with Jules and Catherine, and for a good while they resume the style of *Zusammenleben* to which they were accustomed

before the war. That is, until Jules confesses to Jim that he believes his marriage with Catherine will not last. The two guys clearly envisage the possibility that it is time for Jim to play husband, if not perhaps to face the possibility that Catherine is too capricious for marriage.

Crunch. Seeing this crumbling situation from her angle, and in no mood to be left alone, Catherine starts a powerful seduction campaign directed at Jim, who still treasures her from the good old prewar days in Paris. Jules gradually grows desperate, at the thought that he may be left behind; as security he gives his blessing for the couple to marry, so that he will have a permanent opportunity to visit his two best friends, one of whom is now his ex-wife. For a while, Jules continues to live with the other two, in the same chalet. Letters are exchanged between Catharine and Jim, meanwhile, in which we learn that the couple is seriously frustrated by their lack of success in procreating. Before long Catharine writes to announce that she is pregnant, but then Jim is soon informed, in a letter from Jules, that Catherine's pregnancy has resulted in a miscarriage.

Finale. The long tale of unwinding is gradually devolving into a condition very unlike the early ebullience of the life-loving trio. The group is almost dissolved. At about this time Jim runs into Jules in Paris. The three of them sit down at an outside café; at a certain moment Catharine whispers to Jim that she would like him to get in her car with her. She asks Jules to watch them, then drives the car off an abandoned bridge into the lake, killing Jim and herself. Jules is left with the job of seeing his friends' ashes buried in a columbarium of the nearby Pere Lachaise cemetery.

Themes

Freedom. "Joie de Vivre" French is the language to describe this condition, of living life wholly and to the fullest. The urban setting of Belle Epoque Paris will seem to have been the perfect setting for the enjoyment of life; urban architecture tooled to lightness and grace, mirroring ponds, elegant parks. The joy of our three central characters could not have been more vividly enhanced than in the city of eternal light.

Transience. The sense of transience is powerful in *Jules and Jim*. The fragile relation of the three member trio is constantly threatened, whether it be by war or by internal volatility—Catharine never at rest, the two men torn between love for Catharine and fondness for one another.

Sexuality. The entire film centers around the sexual vibes among the three central figures. Heavy sex this is not. When we see Jim and Catharine making out, in the chalet in Germany, we hear giggling, we see a kind of puppyish thrashing around on a bed in a sun filled room. Gentleness and desire blend erotically. A graceful play of bodies suits the life scape of the *belle époque*.

Jealousy. There is inevitable jealousy, among the threesome at the center of our film. Given the proximity of the lovers, however, what strikes us most is the lightness and non possessiveness of the sexual hold the partners exercise over one another. Appreciation rather than possession is the keynote. Catherine moves from Jules to Jim when it seems a move favorable to the group pleasure.

Friendship. The homoerotic between Jules and Jim resides in the sense that neither is complete without the other. Their friendship, which is equally strong, does not define them but gives them a behavioral ground rule: to support one another. If Jules is losing his grip on Catherine, Jim will over to take her in marriage, while keeping her emotionally available to Jules. Jim provides the same friendship for Catherine; when he goes to her for a visit in the mountain chalet, where she lives with Jules and the baby, Jules 'is not there,' and Jim knows there is trouble in the marriage. He comforts Catherine, plays with the lovable baby, and helps hold the fort for mother.

Love. As distinct from friendship or homoerotics, love is about self-sacrifice for another person. Catherine is not self-sacrificing; she is too self-centered and volatile. Jim and Jules are prepared, from the beginning of their relation to this volatile woman, to yield to one another as central lover and even spouse. Jim

cedes Catherine to Jules when the men first meet her in Paris. Jules cedes Catherine to Jim, when he feels she is too much for him, and his friend wants to take her on.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Catherine. Jules and Jim are both stopped in their romantic tracks, when they meet Catharine. She (Jeanne Moreau) takes their breath away, and puts an end to their ceaseless girl hunting games. Catherine is fresh-faced, spontaneous—susceptible sometimes to wild cascades of mood—and neither monogamous nor strict in her relations with men. She can be dangerous, though, when she gives way to a mood—jumping into the lake spontaneously, to startle her menfolk, or drowning Jules and herself by driving her vehicle over a bridge.

Initiator Catherine is the freest of the three friends/lovers brought together in the film. It is she who initially cracks up the emotional monopoly the two men have on each other, and it is she who suggests bike rides, runs through the forest, and trips to the beach. She is the group initiator.

Impulsive Catherine is the most impulsive of the trio. Jim and Jules share a symmetrical relation to one another, which keeps them in check, while Catherine has an unbalanced and volatile relation to the guys. Noteworthy: Catherine sits at dinner with Jules and Jim, then starts rattling off the names of the superior wines of France, races through the classic names, opens her frustrated soul into a kind of mania, jumps up and tears out of the house, running to her once in a while lover, Albert. Impulse overwhelms her.

Parallels. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a grand tribute to history, and thrives on its author's vast sense of the sweep of human History. Such vast military movements as Truffaut sketches, with tanks in city streets, are delineated with immense power by Tolstoy, as he masses his language around the armies of Napoleon and of the Tzar. For a parallel to the Jules and Jim and Catherine trio, with its playful as well as life-and-deathish treatment of inter gender sexual play, one might have to go to the genius of television in our time, and look in on *Mash* again: Hawkeye, Margaret, and Hunnicutt (or pick another of the jokester paramedics,) cut up, make fun of the operating theater, and turn life into a nonstop ball.