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Jules et Jim—An Expressionistic Analysis

As far as Bazin's essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" might be used as a formal test of categorisation— notwithstanding the problematics inherent in his oversimplification of the realist and expressionist methodology— initial viewing of *Jules et Jim* seems to present a dichotomous structure. Certainly, a number of Bazin's criteria for realism are met: camera movement; long-takes; composition-in-depth. and deep focus; a certain ambiguity of meaning. Similarly, several of Bazin's criteria for expressionism also can be found: there is spatial and temporal discontinuity; editing is used for artistic effect; reality is augmented to create a world only vaguely like our own, and so on. The dichotomy though is only apparent. The over-all effect created by Truffaut shows *Jules et Jim* belonging more comfortably in the expressionistic domain; and, as we shall discover, devices which would normally—at least according to Bazin—deliver the effect of realism are utilised by Truffaut as tools of expressionism.

In our analysis of *Jules et Jim*, rather than examine fleetingly the whole gamut of expressionistic techniques, we shall instead explore in some detail the more important methods, paying particular attention to temporal and spatial distortions, editing and montage, special visual effects, and finally

discover the manner in which Bazin's archetypal techniques of realism—long-takes and composition-in-depth.—are recast.

Certainly one of the most striking features of *Jules et Jim* is temporal distortion. Truffaut utilises this effect by various means and for various purposes. In the first two minutes of the film, time is condensed in two ways: by the third person narrative, which encapsulates the film's exposition in the most laconic of terms, describing the meeting and developing friendship of Jules and Jim, and also by the selective images which largely avoid redundant description of the aural narrative, but instead seek to interpret and compliment. Accordingly, when the narrator tells us that Jules is a foreigner in Paris; that he wants to go to an art student's ball; and that Jim gets him a ticket and costume, the image we are offered is a simple one of the two playing dominoes. This image, incidentally, becomes a leitmotif in the film, supporting the theme of friendship and is touchingly varied much later when Jules plays instead with his daughter. Next, the narrator tells us that their friendship grows; the ball takes place; that Jules has tender eyes. The overlaid image though is of Jules and Jim hunting for a costume. It is interesting to note here that Truffaut not only condenses time, as already described, but creates a temporal duality, for the narrator has reached a moment subsequent to the ball, whilst we still watch the two friends costume hunting. This is the first instance of dual time lines, but it is often repeated. Simply stated, the audio narrative—and on other occasions the dialogue of the character—provides a temporal foundation that

allows great visual freedom. The expressionistic effect of this temporal condensation and duality combined with the third person narrative is to produce a story book quality, as if we are presented not with real life but with a real story. This quality is underlined by the frequent story telling of the characters'. More precisely, the initial style created by this method has a simplistic quality much like a children's story: the narration avoids hyperbole and treats exposition as bare-bones plot. Like a child having a story read to him, Truffaut provides us with the filmatic equivalent—though an equivalent which in many ways has greater potential—and we are allowed to look at the pictures, even when the story—narration—has advanced beyond their range.

As well as temporal condensing and duality, Truffaut also makes use of temporal displacement. An early example of this occurs when Jules and Jim meet up with the anonymous anarchist's girlfriend. The sequence begins with the girl running out of the frame to the left. The camera pans and we see her running away in a shot composed with shallow depth of field, with Jules and Jim out of focus in the distance. Another cut, this time bringing us in front of the girl. Again the camera pans, this time as the girl approaches. Another cut brings us in front of Jules and Jim. We begin to see the establishment of a pattern of shots in this sequence: cutting, panning, cutting, moving ahead, panning and so on. The rhythm produced by the combination of camera movement and editing reinforces the temporal rhythm; but when the girl finally links arms with Jules and Jim and they set

off running, the next cut not only brings us spatially ahead of the figures, as the rhythm caused us to anticipate, but temporally ahead: the scene has suddenly changed, with buildings becoming a fence and bushes. To reinforce the visual cues regarding the discontinuous time, the thread of causality is now shown to be broken: we now see and hear the three inexplicably laughing. Temporal displacement continues: the next cut shows the three seated in a carriage, though the laughter—on the soundtrack only—from the previous shot continues. Once again, the effect of this temporal tampering is to create a simple story-book world in which only the essentials are included.

Truffaut though makes other use of temporal distortion. In the slide viewing scene, for example, when Albert shows Jules and Jim a picture of the bewitching statue, the slow rhythm established by Albert manually changing slides one by one is suddenly broken when we jump rapidly from one slide to the next, with the time taken to change slides cut. The realism of the moment is similarly broken. This disruption shocks us and our suspension of disbelief is briefly forfeit. At once we are aware that this is a film we watch. A work of art. At the same time the film screen—upon which the film art (*Jules et Jim*) is displayed—presents us with the slide screen—upon which the photographic art (the slide) is displayed—which itself shows a sculpted work of art (the statue). This is an early example of the film's preoccupation with art and film in particular, which becomes sometimes almost self-reflexive. Another example of this reverie for art which profits from temporal manipulation occurs

when Jules shows Jim photographs of his old girl friends. We see the photographs passed, yet the close ups to which we cut show Jim's hands conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, the pictures are framed entirely in darkness, as works of art which exist in an entirely different temporal and spatial plane. Elsewhere, Truffaut presents old film footage in what seems a glorification of the medium's ability to immortalise. The art theme aside, the temporal jump we witness with the slide show also serves to underline the importance of the moment. Truffaut, throughout *Jules et Jim*, uses various techniques—montage, freeze frame, rapid zoom etc.—to draw our attention to significant "hot spots." Like a sudden cymbal crash in a romantic musical passage, these techniques demand our attention.

Even when Truffaut maintains temporal continuity, we might still witness the unexpected: Certainly there is no lack of causality when Jules and Jim voyage to the Adriatic in search of the statue they saw on the slide. But it is the suddenness of their arrival that takes our breath away: from a close-up of the statue's lips we cut to Jules and Jim on that far away island. And if this seems an unlikely hunt, we should recall the context is a stylised world, a story book world, an expressionistic world where wonderful and strange things do indeed come to pass.

To turn now from temporal to spatial distortion: an early example of this takes place when Catherine, Jules and Jim race across the bridge. The main purpose of this scene is character exposition, showing Catherine's willingness to cheat—she is already cheating her femininity by dressing as a man—in order to

attain her goals. When we see the three of them at the beginning of the bridge, bending to a starting position, with Catherine's subsequent darting ahead of time, there is a sudden cut which reveals the figures now displaced. The race no longer starts at the beginning of the bridge but at least a third of the way down. And so we see a sympathy between the film—the form that Truffaut creates—and the characters in the film: where Catherine cheats in the race by changing the *time* of the start, the film itself cheats in the race by changing the *place* of the start. We shall later examine another example of this sympathy of form for content, but it should be noted with this minor example that it produces something which is not limited by realism, for it creates two realities: the one *in* the film and the other *of* the film.

The next technique we shall examine is editing and montage. Like temporal and spatial distortion, this, according to Bazin, is a fundamental component of expressionism. It should come as no surprise then—at least from the standpoint of this thesis—that it forms an integral part of *Jules et Jim*. Indeed, it might be said to be the most important—numerically at least—stylistic device in the film.

Truffaut make many and varied use of editing and montage. We shall examine first the way in which montage creates a narrative effect similar to, though in the absence of, the third person

narrative¹. One characteristic example is the dress burning episode. The sequence begins with a long-take, composed in depth, with little activity. Jim moves Catherine's bicycle and does other bits of business. The pace then is deliberately slow. Catherine takes a pile of letters and says she wishes to burn lies. From the moment the words are blurted, the montage sequence proper begins. In contrast to the plodding long-take, we now cut rapidly from one brief shot to another, constantly changing angles; and in the space of twenty-four seconds we see twenty separate shots. The short shots are hand held, and the additional movement of the camera augments the excitement created by the fast paced montage. But nothing has actually happened. Catherine is still simply setting light to the papers on the floor. It is the montage which, like the now absent narrator, warns us that something *will* happen. Once the dress is alight, the danger is no longer potential but actual. The short shots continue with rapid pans and tilts, the montage serving now to intensify our impression of danger. But because the danger was first suggested and then maintained by a stylistic device, and since it comes from what must be an omniscient source and portrays a symbolic action—Catherine burning lies—we begin to realise that this montage speaks of a more ominous and far reaching danger than the one we see: the danger Catherine

¹By referring to montage as narrative I mean any additional message, inference or even association which is imbued in the montage itself.

must face when stripped of her protective pretence, when she must finally confront absolute truth which fails to conform to her idealised image. The danger of burning lies then, the narrative of montage tells us, is the danger of absolute truth.

Another important example of montage as narrative occurs when Catherine throws herself off the bridge in mock suicide. Again we see rapid cutting, with five shots—this time static—in the space of only two seconds. There is also a brief temporal displacement, as the fourth shot begins prior to the conclusion of the third. Since this sequence comes one third of the way into the film, our fluency in the stylistic language of *Jules et Jim* has reached a point sufficient to grant immediately comprehension. Perhaps we are unsure of the specifics, but we understand that this is at least a key moment and that foreshadowing is the likely translation.

Truffaut also uses similar "visible" editing as an associative device. The most striking example begins with the slide show, which we examined as an example of temporal discontinuity. The static and rapidly changing front and side shots of the statue in the slide sequence is repeated when Jules and Jim finally study the actual statue. After a peculiar and ominous tilt and extremely rapid zoom into the shower rail above Jules and Jim, we are finally presented with Catherine. The same short takes and rapidly changing front and side shots which describe the statue are again employed here. Besides fashioning a thematic link, the montage here also continues the ominousness begun at the conclusion of the previous shower scene.

At this point, and for some time to come, Catherine is clearly defined as an *objet d'art*. Note also how she presents herself on the patio at the sea-side house, first serious then smiling, as a model in varied poses. This demonstrates another instance of sympathy of form for content: since Catherine presents herself as a model, the film, in sympathy, treats her as one, with each pose held in a freeze frame: each pose rendered a framed picture. Catherine then, as that *objet d'art*, is to be admired and praised and glorified. It is only when Jules and Jim begin to know her that she becomes a Queen, and must then, in addition, be obeyed.

Catherine's car tumbling over the broken bridge offers our final example of associative montage. Using an almost identical method: static shots, rapid cuts, varied angles, this scene is linked through montage to the very early episode when Catherine jumped from the Parisian bridge. Because of their great separation in time—though as we have seen, time as a stream of causality is far from overflowing its banks in this world where there seems little physical evidence of the characters ageing—the connection of these two events both in relation to the *mise-en-scene* and montage makes a final allusion to the “whirlpool” quality of life. This “whirlpool” interpretation is, of course, Catherine's and finds expression in her song which, characteristically, is about herself and which all three men, Jules and Jim and Albert, believe is written from their point of view! The whirlpool analogy suggests an existence which turns and repeats past events in slight variation—a view which the

content and form of the film seems to uphold.

To sum up: the above examples of what we have called narrative montage in essence *allude* to aspects of character, future events or information which exists not entirely in the *mise-en-scene* or dialogue alone, and offers further evidence of the expressionistic tendency of *Jules et Jim*.

Special visual effects are clearly an affirmation of Bazin's "faith in the image" of expressionism. One particularly moving example of this occurs at the garden party when Catherine is first introduced. After some interesting shots of feet which describe the sexual motivations of Jim: "Jim's foot stayed near Catherine's. She moved hers away first"; and the more heart centred nature of Jules: "Jules was happy and moved his feet away"; the picture fades to black with the exception of a rectangular frame which isolate Jules and Catherine. This continues the art and photographic glorification theme, but more particularly is a foreshadowing of their marriage.

A very similar effect is created when Jules and Jim look out of the cabin window into the night. "Listen to that mole cricket. It's like a mole," Jules comments. The night scene then fades entirely to black. The next shot fills only the top right corner of the screen—the rest remaining black. It shows the hill on which Jules lives. The darkness with light at one end suggests a tunnel-like view. The juxtaposition of the shot and the previous comment suggests a mole tunnel. The house on the hill becomes a mole hill. The implication then is that Jules has burrowed his way into seclusion and security—and away from the

light and excitement and danger which Catherine craves.² Other interpretations are possible—and indeed likely; the point is that from such stylistic devices comes the ambiguity of *Jules et Jim*, not from Bazin's composition-in-depth.

We have, of course, examined only a few of the expressionistic techniques and examples which fill *Jules et Jim* like a myriad of brush strokes on canvas. We turn now though to the long-take and composition-in-depth, traditionally the devices of realism.

Firstly, the greatest number of long-takes and the most important compositions in depth occur, notably, as the film develops. This fact alone is enough to suggest that their purpose is something other than affecting realism. Even if we borrow an interpretation that agrees such scenes do lend realism, the question remains: how real a world is it that displays only sporadic reality? It seems clear that their purpose is not so much for realism *per se*, but to create a number of effects: to demonstrate a harmony with the almost pastoral scenes; to provide a change in mood and tone, for the film slips ever more into a sombre, pensive, meditative and tragic state; as a sympathetic response to the character with special emphasis on their situations.

When Jules and Catherine and Jim are reunited in the cabin after the war, we see a number of longish takes composed in

²I realise that this interpretation stretches credulity to the breaking point. In its defence I can only mention that it did not actually break and still remains in one piece.

depth, sometimes intercut with shot and reverse shots. The effect, despite the occasional cuts, is of smoothly passing time. But the realism of temporal continuity and spatial depth is used not as an end in itself, but as a means of intensifying and demonstrating the discomfort they now feel together. The dialogue itself confirms this as they make strained small talk about *time*. After so many short-takes, the long-take now has the effect of time slowed down, with every awkward moment stretched out and made more awkward. Further, Jules and Jim have changed. Jules no longer smokes; Jim does. Jules takes a drink; Jim does not. Jules has a new interest in biology; Jules does not. Most of all, Jules has a wife . . .

Just as temporal continuity becomes an expressionistic device here, enhancing reality in sympathy with emotions of the characters, rather than simply displaying it, so too does the spatial realism. Its realistic effect is indeed manifest, but Truffaut, by executing rapid pans from one character to another, intensifies their individual dialogues. Thus, when Jules says, "So you won the war, you louse," the subsequent rapid pan to Jim emphasises the chasm that now separates them. Their opposition, though the war is over, to some degree remains still. When Jim pointedly responds, "Yes, but I'd rather have won this," we pan again rapidly to Jules and his daughter and then to Catherine. Also, the triangle, already graphically displayed at the seaside house when they each stand at the sun drenched windows, is again graphically drawn, though here in a less concrete medium: the triangle is etched in three-dimensional space by the rapid

movement of the camera. It is the speed of the movement that not only serves to demonstrate their distance from each other, but also to draw our attention to that movement and thus make the line it draws graphically clear.

In another episode at the cabin, a sequence of long-takes provides a number of interesting effects, least of which is realism. It begins with Catherine endlessly listing wines. At the same time Jules talks about a shell falling down steps. Catherine rises, moves to the door and says, "Catch me." Jim obeys. None of these events, besides Jim's compliance, have any causal rapport. The fact that this all occurs in a long-take underlines the breakdown in causality, the strangeness of it all, for nothing clearly can have been cut. After the pointless chase, another long-take begins. It adds to the tranquillity of the night and the sombreness of the darkness. After almost three minutes there is a cut: a break. The break occurs because Catherine was both literally and metaphorically left behind. During her walk with Jim she has paused while he continued. The spatial distance is an expression of temporal distance: she has reached a happy moment in the history she recounts and is briefly lost in the pleasant moment of the past. It is the moment when "Jules wrote wonderful love letters." The break between Catherine and Jim and between Catherine and the present—Jules—is made concrete by the break in the long-take. There is no other purpose, for as they come together and the walk in the present continues, the long-take is resumed.

As we have seen then, not only is the overall effect of *Jules*

et Jim expressionistic, but most of the specific devices are intended to maintain that effect.

Truffaut's aim in *Jules et Jim* is not so much Bazin's much acclaimed true to life realism, which exhorts the banishment of such dainty devices as symbolism and the metaphors created by montage, but an expressionism redolent of literature which extols such devices. He creates a world distorted by personal emotion, using the language of image in the quintessential terms of expressionism: to express feelings rather than to represent stark reality. He creates a simplified, stylised world by temporal manipulation; directs our interpretation by the subtle subtext of narrative and associative montage; makes delicate points by special visual effects. But above all he treats the characters and situations of *Jules et Jim* with a sympathy which is demonstrated in the relationship between form and content.