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Fascination, Friendship, and the "Eternal Feminine," or The Discursive Production of (Cinematic) Desire

by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis

C'est la seule chose qui peut atténuer les complexes que me donne le génie hitchcockien, de savoir que je suis capable de faire sympathiser les gens avec un gosse qui fauche tout ce qui lui tombe sous la main, un petit pianiste égoïste et lâche, une salope 1900 qui baise à tire-larigot.

A l'intérieur de mes vingt ans de tournage, le tournage de Jules et Jim, grâce à Jeanne Moreau, reste un souvenir lumineux, le plus lumineux.

—Truffaut, Correspondance

THESE TWO QUOTATIONS from the recently published letters of François Truffaut trace, with an almost startling economy, the fundamental ambivalence that underlies—and indeed structures—*Jules et Jim* (1961) as a cinematic text.¹ For in trying to come to terms with the film's curious and contradictory fascination, an attraction it holds in spite of the devastating (and some would say horribly misogynist) consequences of its plot, I kept returning to the image of the woman—Jeanne Moreau, the captivating lyricism of a smile, the dazzling whirlwind of a presence that, like a golden thread, sparkles incessantly through the narrative weave. Likewise, my efforts to determine the complex dialogue between novel and film—to discern the *cinematic specificity* of the film itself—kept circling back to that same image, an image produced only partially by verbal rhetoric and much more significantly in the film, obviously, by the specific conjunction of apparatus, sound, and image whose peculiar engagement with fantasy and desire irrevocably links the processes of the cinema to the image of the woman.

What is it about the *image* of the woman that makes this film, *Jules et Jim*, what it is? What is it about this particular representation of "the feminine" that allows its simultaneous embodiment of desire and dread to achieve the status of paradigm? What is it about this film that makes it so seductively purport to be about female desire when it is, in fact, masculine fantasies of the woman that are put into play? What is it about each of these questions that makes them all partake, irreducibly, of "the cinematic" *par excellence*?

One way to approach this complex play of intersecting questions is to consider the terms of my tripartite title as they relate to each of the issues outlined. *Fascination* concerns the cinematic image itself—the particular conjunction of sound and image that engages specific cinematic codes (for example, codes of shot-size, camera movement, editing, and music) in the production of filmic spectacle. *Friendship*, that kernel of "story" that lends itself to the title of both novel and film, suggests the narrative movement of the film, and thus the particulars of the "novelistic" (or *romanesque*) as they articulate the overall structure of the film. And the "eternal feminine" is, finally, the myth that is produced in the interaction of image and narrative, a myth that exists in reciprocal relation with the culture that both nourishes and is sustained by it. In the movement from image (the overwhelming "image-presence" created in the first half of the film by a highly active camera and a dense referentiality of image processes) to narrative (in which a distanced camera and emphatic discursivity finally eliminate the female character altogether), what is *produced* is the fantasmatic myth of the "eternal feminine": elusive, seductive, capricious, and ultimately fatal ("*la femme fatale qui m'fut fatal*").

Nearly everyone is familiar with the story of two best friends (the German Jules and the Frenchman Jim) who fall in love with a statue (or more precisely, with her smile), find her incarnated in a woman, Catherine, and proceed in the vicissitudes of numerous liaisons with her (including marriage and the birth of a daughter for Jules, an affair for Jim), until Catherine decides in impulsive frustration to kill herself, and Jim along with her, while Jules looks on in horror. The brutality of this summary hardly does justice to the captivating force of Catherine as an image, and that is precisely my point. Because, first and foremost, Catherine is an image—a plurality of images and representations of desire that circulate throughout the film, moments of exquisite beauty that can be freed from the constraints of narrative, isolated, savored, and committed to memory. Part of this image of the fictional character is inseparable from the actress who plays her (and thus "creates" her), Jeanne Moreau, who, in the words of Annette Insdorf, "endows [Catherine] with her own qualities of intelligence, sensuality, and mystery" (111). As an actress who embodies the spirit and vitality of the New Wave, Jeanne Moreau became its icon, not so much for specific roles as for the way her face and body could express the ineffable.

The film takes great pains to introduce "Jeanne-Catherine" into a representational context, and from its very beginning, the "image-status"—as

well as the centrality—of this woman is asserted. In an atmosphere of hilarity supplied by fast-paced circus music on the sound track, the credits show partial and diverse scenes of the friendship between the two men: only twice are we treated to close-ups of people, and these are of, significantly, the primary female character, Catherine, and her offspring, Sabine (each with the actress's name superimposed). Thus before we even know the fictional person, the actress's name is associated with the image. Once this smiling face is inscribed as a sort of ideal image, it disappears for about eleven minutes, so that a context, in which varied images of women are in circulation, can prepare for Catherine's spectacular entrance into the world of the fiction. (Some examples are the "primitive cinema" shot of a nineteenth-century woman's ankle, equally dated photographs of "anciennes filles," and the face sketched on the table.)

Laughter, lyricism, sexuality, and a fabulous smile are associated before this entrance, however, and the stage is set by a secondary character named Thérèse. A now-famous vertiginous circular pan in the enclosed space of a room follows Thérèse in close-up, "la locomotive-goulue," and is reproduced in the cafe, this time with a tracing of her face into "frames" as she circles past the individual panes of glass. Music is much more than background here, for it establishes an equivalence between emotion and femininity that will intensify as the film progresses.

But, obviously, the most marked assertion of the image is with the "discovery" of Catherine herself—a process built *cinematically*, for which a verbal description can only ever be a pale approximation. Starting with a slide show of statues shown to the two friends, this "discovery" follows them on a trip to a sun-bleached Greek island, where "the camera searches, probes among the statues, hesitates, moves back and forwards from one to the other, until it finds the right one and triumphantly circles around it" (Petrie 21). Some time later, Catherine's entrance at a garden party arranged by Jules (especially with respect to the camera work) recalls—but does not reproduce—the camera work on the statue, as the camera zooms in on her face in a series of quick, disorienting shots from all angles. Thus, as Roger Greenspun asserts, "Catherine is conjured into view through an insistence upon the powers of seeing. First she is a photograph projected by concentrated light in a darkened room, then a carved stone head in the bright Mediterranean sun, and finally a living presence in a Paris garden" (78). This "imagizing process" is continued later with a foot-race, in which Catherine as "Thomas" is shown in jerky hand-held close-up as the sound of her panting is emphatically heightened on the soundtrack, both processes that foreground the production of Catherine as a visual and auditory *image*.

If the image of the woman, "Jeanne-Catherine," is unproblematically beautiful, fascinating, and luminous whatever the situation, then the narrative itself is what introduces contradiction. When we turn to a discussion of *character*, we find that Catherine *embodies* contradiction, and this is what

makes her simultaneously seductive and deadly. As Annette Insdorf describes, "Catherine is a veritable orchestra who changes tones impulsively and unpredictably. Anything one can say about her has its contrary. She is absolute with respect to her sense of freedom and to the adoration she inspires and insists upon, but relative in her relationships. . . . She is creative and destructive, the source and embodiment of both life and death, open and mysterious, calm and passionate" (113). But it is not only at the level of character psychology, or even at the level of thematics, that contradiction surfaces. For the film can be seen as a struggle *between* image and narrative, between woman as *signifier* of desire and the narrative *signified* of an "essential" femininity. The proliferation of descriptions of Catherine's cruelty, the profound "melancholy" that the film provokes (Truffaut: "il n'est sauvable que par la tristesse" [188]), is the result of a narrative that demonizes the woman in order to require her destruction—an elimination from the narrative that is accomplished, precisely, by displacing the destructive force itself onto her.

Whence the profound ambivalence of the film: it dramatizes the culture's complicated relation to the feminine as both fascinating vision and destructive essence. Narrative has a crucial function here. Starting from Annette Kuhn's assertion that "woman is constructed as eternal, mythical, and unchanging, an essence or a fixed set of meanings" (208), we can see how the narrative of *Jules et Jim* activates this myth, humanizing the woman, allowing her to enter into narrative relations, to assume an active power in the fiction as a "person." But what happens as a result of this process is this: the cultural essence reasserts itself with even more force, because the fascination of the image takes on a stronger hold. We do not suffer as the diegetic characters do, or we do so only momentarily. What we retain as a result of the narrative "experiences" is a much fiercer attraction to this disturbing, mobile, but ultimately mesmerizing phantom of the woman. For an example of how the narrative tries to "overtake" Catherine, and ultimately fails, consider the sequence beginning with "Attrapez-moi," in which Catherine forces Jim to run after her near the chalet on the Rhine. A total of four shots portrays a highly verbal exchange between Jim and Catherine (in which each is completely honest with the other about their histories and their love)—four fluid, langorous tracking shots in which the camera exults and music underscores the fatality, and tragedy, of this sexual story and its compelling appeal.

In order to consider just how the image of the "eternal feminine" achieves its force, we must turn to the *cinematic* production of spectatorial desire, for that, in fact, is the source of its power. The fascination with Catherine, *Catherine-as-image*, dramatizes the specific imaginary capacities of the cinema by engaging structures of the gaze. While the film originally dupes us into believing that this will be a "woman's story" (it opens with a woman's voice-over, black leader on the screen: "Tu m'as dit: Je t'aime. Je t'ai dit: Attends. J'allais dire: Prends moi. Tu m'as dit: Va t'en."), it quickly

mobilizes the masculine structures of seeing on which the cinema is based. In what is now an axiom of feminist film theory (from Laura Mulvey on), the disturbance that the woman's image evokes is met with two textual responses—either fetishization through an overvaluation of the image, or the sadistic voyeurism of narrative domination. As should be evident from my discussion, *Jules et Jim* presents both of these two options with amazing clarity; in fact, it is the alternation from one to the other that fuels the narrative machine. Not only are masculine fantasies put into play by the narrative signified (even a fairly traditional critic like James Monaco recognizes that: "*Jules and Jim* is not so much about feminine freedom as it is about men's reaction to that freedom" [48]), but the very forms of "representing woman" are permeated by masculine modes of vision. Claire Johnston has maintained that "within a sexist ideology and male-dominated cinema, woman is presented as what she represents for man" (25). *Jules et Jim* takes this one step further, allowing us to see just how deeply embedded in the cinematic apparatus this male perspective is.

But does this mean that the woman and her image are totally lacking in textual power? I think not. After all, it is the incandescence, the passion and the beauty that impress, while the narrative has simply been used as pretext. One has only to think of the disarming and powerful close-ups in the second half of the film (the more "narrativized" part): Jim and Catherine making love, Jules and Catherine consoling each other (Truffaut: "[De ce qu'on aime le mieux dans mes films, par exemple] Jeanne Moreau pleurant avec Oskar, tout cela a été fait entre [*Raoul*] Coutard et moi, en foutant tout le monde à la porte" [234]), Catherine's face over the landscape as she recites her letter to Jim, or even her despondant reaction to his breaking it off ("et moi?") before she flies into a rage.

Despite the cynicism that permeates this idealized vision of the woman, something remains—haunting in its beauty—that continues to enchant (like a rare perfume) long after the particulars of the film itself are forgotten. This has to do, crucially, with the adoring gaze on the body of the woman—and its pervasiveness—throughout the variety of narrative maneuvers which continually reveal the destructiveness of her capricious cruelty. A deconstruction of this adoring gaze, cornerstone of cinematic meaning-production, might tell us something about how the system of the look functions to generate such a powerful and enduring image of the feminine. First there is the look of the camera, which as we have seen, establishes the inexorable *presence* of this woman as image of desire, creating the context of feminine iconography which she both resumes and transcends at the same time. Then there are the looks of the characters within the diegesis, condensing the obsessive idealization and cynical debasement that forge the dialectics of the narrative action. Finally, and most importantly, there is the look of the spectator, held in rapt fascination by the image, negotiated through the film by the distribution of diegetic looks, and constantly, irrevocably, held in thrall by the complicated weave of

desire and vision which is the film-text itself. For the viewer, this vision is inseparable from the desire for the woman, and speaks forcefully of the mutuality of psychic processes and sexual difference in the production of the cinematic fantasm. *Jules et Jim* is a paradigm, then, of the fascinating lure of the cinema in general, and it is only fitting that "Jeanne-Catherine," whose absence from the title simply reinforces her structuring presence, should remain, powerful and ineffable, as the memory of the impossible film of our psyche.

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Notes

¹The first quotation to the *Correspondance* is dated 4/63 to Helen Scott (238); the second part of the *chronologie* (671) 4/10-6/28 1961.

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