

[Matthew A. Sheldon](#)

Tami Williams

[French New Wave](#)

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How the French New Wave's Breathless & Jules and Jim

Influenced Bonnie and Clyde & the New American Cinema

The sudden arrival of the New American Cinema between the years 1967-1974 was historically significant for American audiences. The rise of anti-establishment pictures coming from various young and talented filmmakers included gritty stories which involved cool detached characters who were selfish, narcissistic and oblivious to society and of the outside world. Various women characters were also much more independent, strong and sexually confident. They seemed to be more highly feminist in nature and could easily be looked at as part of the new modern woman. But the root behind the New American Cinema and the defining trend of anti-heroes and the rise of sexuality can actually be found almost a decade earlier out in Europe. In France during the late 1950's there was an influential film movement called the French New Wave which rejected the traditional French cinema and embraced a rougher, more freewheeling style of film-making.

The [French New Wave](#) was revolutionary as it added a more personal and experimental feel to the cinema; and it wouldn't be until the late 60's that America would finally welcome this European movement with open arms. The rise of the anti-hero and of sexuality in New American Cinema was more a direct response to the anti-establishment of authority figures and of the

rebellious young characters in some of the most popular films that came out of the French New Wave. It was the New Wave actors and actresses like Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jeanne Moreau who would start a trend that would be created and expanded upon again and again later with American actors and actresses. I will be exploring two separate films by French New Wave directors Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut, and explain why each film presents the characteristics of the narcissistic anti-hero and of the sexual modern woman. Such characteristics would later be presented a decade later in Arthur Penn's American classic *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); one of the very first films which began the New American Cinema movement.

The French New Wave was led by a group of young filmmakers that included [Jean-Luc Godard](#), [François Truffaut](#), [Alain Resnais](#), [Claude Chabrol](#), [Eric Rohmer](#) and Jacques Rivette, who were connected to the anti-establishment magazine Cahiers du cinema. "The new young critics who began writing for Cahiers...these critics quickly earned the label 'young Turks' for their fiery, often ruthless brand of criticism" (Neupert 30). The idea of The French New Wave film was that it should seem personal and freewheeling, where the directors often chose to shoot on location, using natural lighting and often using hand-held cameras which added to the experimental feel of the films. "New forms, new modes of production, and new audiences proved that French culture was indeed undergoing what L' Express called a nouvelle vague...No medium of this new activity would prove more exciting or marketable than the French New Wave" (Neupert 25). Key themes explored in the French New Wave include breaking the distinguishing boundaries of realism, and the idea of exploring the relationships between men and women.

One of the very first French New Wave films that directly started that trend occurred with Jean-Luc Godard's masterpiece [Breathless](#) (1960), which is considered one of the quintessential

films of the French New Wave movement. When *Breathless* became a commercial success several young directors saw it as a chance to finally abandon the traditional studio and start from scratch, rewriting and reconstructing fresh new ways to tell a great story. Many of the Cahier critics besides Godard helped collaborate on *Breathless*, including an original story written by Francois Truffaut and Claude Chabrol as the production designer, (Jean-Pierre Melville even plays the classic novelist interviewed by Patricia at Orly in which he explains his own theories on life, sex and women)!

What makes *Breathless* extremely pivotal was the anti-social attributes of the main character of Michel. He's an arrogant, rebellious and sexist youth who believes he is invincible to the brutal realities of the law and pretends to be as tough as the movie stars he sees in the movies. "Belmondo gave to his character an engaging, if despicable, insouciance...providing calculated gestures...the thumb on the lips, the grimaces...and impulsive acts such as shooting the cop or jumping out of a cab so he can win a sexist point by flipping the skirt of an unsuspecting pedestrian" (Andrew 11). The character of Michel was just one of the many roles which made Jean-Paul Belmondo an international star along with actors Jean Gabin and Alain Delon. Michel's macho persona is a performance to conceal a lost soul who sadly doesn't even know himself.

Michel's shootout with the cops and death in the street is more of homage to the American classic gangster films of the Golden Age, and in many ways Michel gets an ending that he would probably feel is fitting. In one sequence Michel exaggeratingly knocks a man unconscious to steal his cash, obviously trying to reenact one of the many American movies he so adores. But the most iconic character moment is outside of a movie theatre where Michel is looking at a poster of actor Humphrey Bogart, adoring his idol and blowing smoke at the poster

while rubbing his lips with his thumb. Michel anti-heroic character was a direct response to the anti-establishment of authority figures and of the rebellious youth in the late 1960's. His anti-hero persona would later change and evolve in American movies with new upcoming method actors like Robert Deniro, Jack Nicholson, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Gene Hackman, Robert Duvall and Warren Beatty.

François Truffaut is another pioneer who helped launch the French New Wave movement. His most famous French New Wave film was [\*The 400 Blows\*](#) (1959) which was also slightly autobiographical on Truffaut's early childhood. But the one film I want to explore is his 1962 film [\*Jules and Jim\*](#) which was released at the creative peak of the French New Wave. Many usually site Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* as the most influential film that started the French New Wave, but *Jules and Jim* was the most audacious incorporating such New Wave aesthetics as newsreel footage, photographic stills, freeze frames, panning shots, wipes, masking, dolly shots, and voice-over narration. With films of The French New Wave there was a fresh excitement and joy in the way the films were created with its raw style and spontaneous energy. You can clearly see that energy and style in *Jules and Jim*, especially with the rapid, fast-paced opening montage.

*Jules and Jim* were the flower children of the 60's as the story explores a woman named Catherine, a fascinating, strong ambitious character with the liberating freedoms of female sexuality. As unlikable as Catherine can originally come off as being when viewing *Jules and Jim*, you could also recognize her character as being extremely strong, independent and highly liberating. She carries the various traits of the new modern woman which was explored much more with the female characters in New American Cinema. "Catherine is part of a new breed...the independent, intellectual modern woman, so determined to live as freely as a man

that while claiming equality she uses every feminine wile to gain extra advantages, to demonstrate her superiority, and to increase her position” (Kael 36).

In one crucial sequence in the film the characters of Jules and Jim are discussing the weaknesses of women when all three are leaving a movie theatre. Catherine immediately proves them wrong by courageously jumping into the Seine. Her character is determined to live freely and as equally as a man which is why she wanted to dress up as a man as a prank. Catherine wants to claim equality by using her sexuality and strength to get what she wants which ultimately increases her power in a male-dominated society. “She is the emerging twentieth-century woman satirized by Strindberg, who also adored her; she is the woman with rights and responsibilities” (Kael 36). It’s fascinating that *Jules and Jim* is considered by some as a highly feminist film, since the ending of Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), which is also considered a highly feminist film, has a striking parallel ending to *Jules and Jim*.

When *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) was released in America in the fall of 1967 it became one of the first mainstream American films that portrayed the rebellious, sexually liberated, cool detachment of authority figures, which began almost a decade earlier in Europe with the French New Wave. Aesthetically, *Bonnie and Clyde* was also very similar to Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* and Francois Truffaut’s *Jules and Jim*, in style, tone and spirit. And so was it such a coincidence that the original screenplay of *Bonnie and Clyde* was first approached by the two leading directors of the French New Wave, Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, and they both turned it down? “The film existed for a number of years as a screenplay in search of a French director. Its authors, Robert Benton and David Newman, and its producer, Warren Beatty, anxiously sought out Francois Truffaut and even attempted to recruit Jean-Luc Godard to direct the film” (Kolker 30). *Bonnie and Clyde* became such a landmark American film with its use of

various French New Wave aesthetics like quick cutting, editing, spontaneous music and its rapid change of tone.

In *Bonnie and Clyde* there is even a slight homage to Godard's film, a playful breaking of the fourth wall which Godard also does in *Breathless*. In *Breathless* there is a scene where Patricia is fleeing from a detective who is following her and she runs into a movie theatre and escapes through a back exit. This scene is directly quoted again in *Bonnie and Clyde*, where the movie that's playing in the theatre directly reflects the film that we are watching. In *Breathless* we hear the dialogue about a woman "covering up for a cheap parasite," in Budd Boetticher's *Westbound*. In *Bonnie and Clyde* we hear "we're in the money," from the 30's classic musical *Golddiggers of 1933*. "The song and dance number comments on *Bonnie and Clyde* and was itself filmed at the time when the events in *Bonnie and Clyde* are meant to be taking place. Director Arthur Penn does not permit a lingering over this distancing device, for nowhere is it his intention to force his audience away from the fiction to a speculation on the nature of film images and narratives, in the manner of Godard" (Kolker 31).

The selfish, narcissistic anti-social attributes that are found in the character of Michel in *Breathless*, are highly identifiable in Warren Beatty's character of Clyde Barrow. He like Michel is extremely narcissistic, arrogant and concerned with his image and how he looks to the world. The opening sequence in *Bonnie and Clyde* shows Clyde in the street about to break into Bonnie's mother's car (which is exactly what Michel does in the beginning of *Breathless* as he uses a woman he casually knows for his look-out). Bonnie catches Clyde in the act and runs out to confront him. Clyde immediately begins to charm Bonnie with his bad-boy persona and does a amusing trick with a matchstick in his mouth. Ironically throughout *Bonnie and Clyde*, Bonnie is the highly sexual partner while it's later discovered Clyde is impotent. His absurd violent nature

is his sexual masculinity and Bonnie is immediately turned on and excited by it. But just like Michel, Clyde's masculine bad-boy nature is simply a façade. Like Michel who uses the classic Hollywood gangster persona as his bad-boy image, Clyde seems to use the personas of the western outlaw. Since both characters believe they are invincible to the brutal realities of the law it's not a surprise both characters ultimately end up killed in the end.

Faye Dunaway's character of Bonnie presents the strong, liberating, impulsive, highly sexual attributes that are found in the character of Catherine from *Jules and Jim*. When the audience first gets a glimpse of Bonnie's character in the beginning of the film it opens to an extreme sensual close-up of Dunaway's red lips. "The close-up of Bonnie's lips moves out to encompass her at her mirror. There follows a succession of abrupt shots, in which she lies on her, pounding on the frame, and flounces about her room" (Kolker 32). Bonnie looks as if she wants to liberate herself by frustratingly shaking the prison-like bars of her bed frame. This opening sequence gives a perfect visual example of her imprisoned sexuality, which she will later liberate and release later in the film. When Clyde gives Bonnie a quick glimpse of a gun he has under his shirt Bonnie is in awe and slowly reaches out and strokes the gun in an obviously sexual manner. "Bonnie caresses his gun and urges him to 'use it', pressing the connection between repressed sexuality and the need for some physical action to sublimate it" (Kolker 34).

When closely observing *Breathless*, *Jules and Jim* and *Bonnie and Clyde's* various creative processes, it's not too surprising to see the obvious similarities in several of their themes. I earlier stated how French New Wave filmmaker's Truffaut and Godard were first offered the early drafts of *Bonnie and Clyde's* script, but ultimately refused. Well, the handling of the sexuality in *Bonnie and Clyde* was also much more toned down from its original conception. Originally Clyde was written as bisexual and he and Bonnie were to have a three-

way sexual relationship with C.W. Moss, their male getaway driver. But because of the Production Code still in place (the code was on its way out) and the taboo theme of a menage a trios between its three main leads, the script ultimately made Clyde impotent, if ambiguously heterosexual. The menage a trios element immediately reminds me of the main story-line in *Jules and Jim*.

It is extraordinary how *Jules and Jim* was released a whole five years earlier than *Bonnie and Clyde* and European audiences were still comfortable enough to explore such sexual and controversial subject matters. In retrospect, that's just how ahead of the game the French New Wave was. Because the French New Wave was such a revolutionary film movement in Europe it helped pave the way not only for *Bonnie and Clyde*, but also for *the Graduate*, *Taxi Driver*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *the Wild Bunch*, *Last Picture Show*, *the Godfather*, *Easy Rider*, *Badlands* and just about every other innovative American film occurring during the New American Cinema.



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