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Paris Belongs to Them: Friendship, Empowerment, and Good Times in Celine and Julie Go Boating

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Abstract
_Celine and Julie Go Boating_ has enough material packed into its four hours to fuel any number of critical monographs and probably a few dissertations as well.* It’s part of the movie’s charm, though, and a self-referential nod to its own exploration of the qualities of magic, that it never feels heavy, stuffed, dense, or impenetrable. For almost 40 years the movie has remained open-armed, lighthearted, and glad to have you watch it. It’s even saved a seat for you on the sofa (literally).

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“Paris Belongs to Them: Friendship, Empowerment, and Good Times in Celine and Julie Go Boating” by Dan Coffey

Celine and Julie Go Boating has enough material packed into its four hours to fuel any number of critical monographs and probably a few dissertations as well.* It’s part of the movie's charm, though, and a self-referential nod to its own exploration of the qualities of magic, that it never feels heavy, stuffed, dense, or impenetrable. For almost 40 years the movie has remained open-armed, lighthearted, and glad to have you watch it. It’s even saved a seat for you on the sofa (literally).

In keeping with the spirit of this essay series, I’ll dispense with as much of the material that would allow academics to fill the above-mentioned books and papers as I can, but to do so entirely would be to shortchange the reader -- everything in this film is connected.

The story at the heart of the movie is among the simplest possible: one woman sees another woman, running through the streets of Paris, drop an article of clothing. Failing to catch the attention of the second woman, the first woman chases after her.

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They become friends, live in the same apartment, try out each other’s identities, and, after a fashion, decide to solve a mystery and save the life of a young girl.

Of course, it’s what’s done with that story, how it’s teased and fleshed out, that makes for such engaging, thrilling, and mindbending cinema. According to legend, director Jacques Rivette had been plotting a project with actor Juliet Berto, who had worked with Rivette on his previous film, *Out 1*. The project fell through, and Rivette and Berto regrouped in the summer of 1974, with Paris as their playground. Berto and actor Dominique Labourier (“Julie” to Berto’s “Celine”) immediately started working together and developing the two titular characters who were extremely idiosyncratic and immensely sympathetic to one another.

Early on, it was decided that magic would be a pivotal element in the film. In fact, in the film’s very first scene it is suggested that Celine is conjured by Julie’s rudimentary rune-making in the dirt beneath a park bench near her home. Julie is obsessed by the arcane: she has a very old and very serious looking tome with the word M-A-G-I-C emblazoned on the red cover, from which she reads assiduously and even, on one occasion, attempts to incant a spell from its pages (thankfully, English subtitles were not offered for this section); she throws the Tarot with a co-worker; she keeps a magic square on a blackboard on a wall of her apartment; she keeps dolls as talismans; and when Celine complains of not feeling well, Julie gives her a pill from a bottle clearly labeled MANDRAKORE.

Celine has her own brand of magic. She works as a dancer in a “safe” striptease joint, and does magic tricks to supplement her act: endless streams of ribbons, a bird in a hat, etc. But neither are prepared for the type of magic that they are about to encounter in the second half of the film.

Jump-cut from Paris, 1974 to Hollywood at the turn of the 21st Century, where David Lynch is setting what may prove to be his career-defining film, *Mulholland Dr*. This film also features a pair of female friends at the center whose lives and identities are toyed with, altered, and perverted by a kind of magic that emanates from a blue box. Other, shadowy figures, partially known to the characters and to the viewers, have something to do with this blue box, but not everything. For the two female friends in Lynch’s film, one of whom was almost certainly conjured up, terror and paranoia become the norm, and the viewers get sucked into Lynch’s very addictive puzzle at the pair’s expense, in a milieu that constantly rewards patriarchy.

This is where I, and I assume many people of my generation looking for the strange, the impossible-but-holy-shit-it-just-happened-anyway, in cinema, initially got off the train. Lynch was it. He had been “it” since the Twin Peaks television series a decade earlier and the follow-up feature length “prequel.” But with *Mulholland Dr*. He. Was. It.

So imagine then, a movie that centers around a female friendship where the origin of one of the friends is always held in some state of doubt, where both characters explore each other’s identities...
but due solely to their own whims and always on their own terms -- a movie where the only brushes with patriarchal oppression occur within these out-of-character explorations and are each summarily dealt with in a very funny, cathartic way. (Julie performs a striptease audition pretending to be Celine and ultimately gives the men evaluating her performance their own dressing down, while Celine meets with Julie’s long-absent lover who suddenly wants to marry her but can’t even tell her identity from that of his betrothed-to-be, and, after some hot-and-heavy dancing and disrobing in a gazebo in a public park (where the crowd saw the cameras but still didn’t know what to expect) tells him to “go jerk off among the roses!”) Celine and Julie OWN Paris.

The mysteries within mysteries that are carefully layered in Celine and Julie exist in an atmosphere of chance and fun. I lay no claim to any knowledge of David Lynch’s filmmaking style, but I have read that, to make Celine and Julie, Jacques Rivette called on Berto, Labourier, and the three other prominent actors to collectively write the film. They all shaped the narrative, scripted the dialogue, and improvised many of the scenes. Rivette’s great strength was in realizing the power of the chemistry between Berto and Labourier and giving it space to grow. When the central mystery of the movie does begin to unfold -- sorry, I’m not going to toss you that lozenge -- there is no question that it is being interpreted, as though it itself were on a movie screen, by the best of friends, in an atmosphere that one could describe as utopian, or, a little less bombastically, a wonderland with no sinister blue boxes.

I close my laptop and walk away from the world of “Celine and Julie” with something like neural bliss. I walk out of a theater showing Mulholland Dr. with my mind running down every path it can find searching for answers and my body trembling with chemicals shot straight from the amygdala.

*Jacques Rivette is probably the least known of his French Nouvelle Vogue director contemporaries, of which Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut are undoubtedly the most famous. Earlier this year, Rivette was publicly diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and will make no more films. Because of Rivette’s filmmaking method, he has far fewer films to his name than contemporaries like Godard or Truffaut. Furthermore, next to nothing by Rivette is currently in print on DVD in the United States, though quite a few DVDs are available in the UK (available through Amazon.uk) and can be
played on computers that have software which can handle DVDs that contain “region codes”
different from that of the United States. The dearth of writing on Rivette has also begun to show
signs of improvement with Morrey and Smith’s *Jacques Rivette*, Manchester UP, 2009, ISBN:
9780719074844, and Mary Wiles’s book, with the same title, published by the Univ. of Illinois Press,

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