

Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000, directed by Alain Tanner (Switzerland, 1975) from a script by John Berger and Alain Tanner

Film Workshop by Caryn Cline

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“Jonah violates frontiers.” --Robert Stam

The opening scenes of *Jonah* announce the film’s approach to structure and themes. In the first scene, we see Max and then Mathieu come into a *tabac* to buy cigarettes. These characters don’t know each other yet, but they are fated to meet. After an intertitle that announces “the next morning,” we cut to a statue of Geneva-born philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), while an unidentified voice-over narrator reads from Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*. While these filmic sequences critique the artificiality of linear editing, the juxtaposition of the everyday (buying cigarettes and complaining about the prices) and the historical, philosophical and societal “big ideas” are continually linked in the film. Discuss how the structure of *Jonah* reinforces the filmmakers’ thematic intentions.

How do the black and white scenes in the film illuminate, contradict, comment on, and/ or reveal aspects of the characters? Do these scenes change in relationship to the main storyline as the film progresses?

All of the adult characters in *Jonah* have names that begin with the letter “M”. What do the filmmakers suggest by this choice?

Marco’s lecture on time is central to the film. How would you assess his approach to teaching? What about Mathieu’s? How are each of the lectures received by the students? Notice the differences between Mathieu’s guest lecture in Marco’s classroom and his work with children in his greenhouse school.

There are several references in the film to “May ‘68”. These characters are, in one way or another, influenced by that uprising: a period when students, workers, and intellectuals on the political Left in France (and elsewhere in the world) took to the streets to protest capitalism, imperialism, the war in Vietnam, and other pressing issues. This movement was quickly and violently suppressed. However, the lessons

learned by young people during that period led them to make changes in their lives. Max is the character most closely associated with the “movement” (“I see Kissinger circling the globe,” he says), but others are, too. What sorts of behavioral, attitudinal and/or ideological associations do you have with each character? Which characters besides Max can be associated with May '68 and why?

Vegetables are central to this film. References to and scenes of eating abound in the film. As Jim Leach notes, in *Jonah*, “Food and eating are key elements in the politics of everyday life” (137). Discuss both the literal and symbolic implications of the uses of food in the film.

Allusions to whales also permeate the film. The most obvious reference is to the child, who will be called “Jonah,” and will be “vomited up by his whale of a century” (Stam, 245). Discuss the other allusions to whales in the film.

Robert Stam discusses the “Brechtian” approach used in the film: “telling the story, but also stepping outside the story to question it.” What examples of this technique can you find in the film?

Rousseau is a prominent figure in this film. Marco mentions Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein, Max has a picture of Trotsky in his room, and there is a poster featuring Angela Davis (I think) in Max’s workplace. Where do you think the filmmakers stand in relation to these shapers of 20th century thought?

Robert Stam observes that “*Jonah* orchestrates . . . a dialectical music of ideas” (243). Stam also sees *Jonah* as a good example of the Bakhtinian *carnavalesque* in cinema. What scenes can you point to support such a reading of *Jonah*? Consider the discussions of time, art, food and history, and the juxtapositions of the characters’ positions and opinions about urban/rural, nature/society, work/play, children/adults, men/women, spiritual/political, human/animal, and labor/capital.

Looking back from a future that *Jonah* tried to imagine (the child, Jonah, after all, is your contemporary), how do you think the film resonates today?

What elements of the comic, as you’ve come to understand them in *Tragic Relief*, do you find in *Jonah*?

Tanner and Berger also interrogate notions of time, history and art in the very structure of the film. In what ways?

Bibliography:

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- Pulleine, Tim. "Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000," (film review). Sight and Sound, vol. 47, no. 2, Spring, 1978, 122–23.
- Stam, Robert. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1992.