**THE JONESES** *(Cert 15)*

**Reel Issues author:** Simon Carver

**Overview:** The Jones family, 'picture perfect' new arrivals in the neighbourhood, have an immediate impact on their new friends. However, the family is not all it seems and their influence is far from accidental. Alongside their story, The Joneses skewers the power of advertising and materialism in promoting the 'American dream'.

**Director:** Derrick Borte *(2010)*  
**Produced by:** Roadside Attractions  
**Length:** 92 mins

**Cautions:** The film contains some strong language, sexual scenes and nudity and the death of a character by suicide.

**THE FILM**

_The Joneses_ is the directorial debut by German-born Derrick Borte. It is a film set against the background of advertising and marketing, a world which former graphic artist Borte knows well.

_The Joneses_ tells the story of a husband (David Duchovny), wife (Demi Moore) and their two teenage children (Amber Heard and Ben Hollingsworth) who move into a new neighbourhood and immediately become the family with whom everybody wants to keep up. However, it soon becomes apparent that the Joneses are not what they seem to be and their purpose in moving into the neighbourhood has a more mercenary purpose than merely making friends. Keeping up with the Joneses takes its toll on their new neighbours, but there are also unexpected consequences for the family.

The influence of this family offers food for thought for Christians too. What affect do they have on friends and neighbours as they look to live out and share their faith?

**FIRST REACTIONS**

- _The Joneses_ was one of those films that ‘slipped under the radar’, despite getting generally positive reviews. Is it possible that there was some genre confusion? How would you categorise this film?
- The Joneses’ intention was that people find them attractive. Did it work for you? What was it about them that people liked — was it the Joneses as people or the things they had?
- If the presence of the Joneses caused problems, did these result from the Joneses’ concealed intentions or from the neighbours’ envy? How did the film make you feel about advertising? Is it a ‘necessary evil’?
- The lead character in _The Joneses_ is female, in contrast to the majority of films. Is this a welcome response to the usual Hollywood stereotyping of male/female roles and does it work?

**INTERACTIONS**

_Read Genesis 3.1–7_

- Most people, if they are honest, like nice things and the number of our material possessions tends only to be limited by our income. Is it wrong to want what we haven’t got?
- Would it be fair to equate advertisers to the snake in the Garden of Eden in that both have enticed people with things that are harmful to them? Is advertising wrong in principle, or is it simply the way in which we hear about the things we already want?
If most people in this country have all the material things they need, is it legitimate for advertisers to suggest things that they might want?

**Read Exodus 20.17**

- It is said that one difference between British people and Americans is that on seeing someone with an expensive car, an American will say, ‘One day, I’m going to get one of those’ whereas a British person says, ‘Why’s he got one of those and I haven’t?’ Is this a fair analysis? What does it have to say about both envy and covetousness?

- How much does our capitalist economy depend upon people wanting things that other people have?

**Read John 13.34–35 and Acts 2.42-47**

- Whoever dies with the most toys wins.’ This line, spoken by one of Steve Jones’s golf buddies, catches the ethos of the film. Is it the ‘toys’ they have or the relationships they share that are most the subject of Larry’s envy?

- What is it that makes the Gospel most attractive to those outside the Church? Is it the ‘signs and wonders’ that they might see, the relationships Christians share with one another, or the love that Christians show to others?

**Read Luke 12.13–21**

- In this parable Jesus suggests that this way of living is the way of the fool. What might Jesus mean by being ‘rich towards God’?

- ‘We take into the afterlife only what we have given away. Shrouds have no pockets.’ (Anon) What do you think of this statement? Does it have any currency in either the world of The Joneses or in our own world?

**Read Matthew 6:19–21, 24**

Jesus often spoke about the negative effect that wealth has on poorer people, but here he describes how a wealthy person’s spiritual health can be seriously affected if they cling to what they’ve got. Jesus is often misquoted as having said that ‘Money is the root of all evil’, whereas he actually spoke about the effect of the ‘Love of money’. Do we struggle to understand the difference?

**Read Matthew 21.12–17 and Mark 5.1–17**

- How attractive was Jesus as a personality? Discuss in what ways you think Christians could adapt the Joneses’ model — attracting people not by material possessions but in other ways?

- Is it possible to be attractive and remain ‘counter-cultural’?

- ‘If people want you, they’ll want what you’ve got.’ — KC’s advice to Steve. Do you think that this statement is relevant with regard to evangelism? How much does ‘our’ success in sharing the Gospel have to do with the attractiveness — or otherwise — of our lifestyle?

**CLIP TO DISCUSS**

**Watch Chapter 3, 19:04 – 22:30 (approx. 3½ mins)**

KC visits the Joneses in their new home and we learn the secret of their somewhat strange family life.

- How did you feel about this twist in the story? Did you expect it? Did this twist in The Joneses story change how you felt about the characters? Did it make you more wary of taking subsequent events at face value?
Were you familiar with the expression ‘stealth marketing’? How did you feel about it? Is it a natural extension of traditional advertising?

Lord Olivier advertised a number of products on overseas TV, but refused to advertise in British media. This might suggest that he didn’t want to tarnish the public’s perception of him in the UK. How is your view of a product affected by the famous person endorsing it and is your view of the famous person affected?

The Joneses were selling not products but a lifestyle with which the products were associated. Have you ever bought something because you were attracted to someone’s lifestyle?

‘Keeping up with the Joneses’ is an old expression and the commandment against coveting one’s neighbour’s ox or wife warns against the internal feelings which lie behind this kind of behaviour. Is it possible in the Western world not to want what other people have?

OTHER ANGLES TO TALK ABOUT

Steve felt responsible for Larry’s fate. Was his guilt justified? Compare this with Cain’s question: ’Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (Genesis 4.9). How much responsibility do we have for another individual’s well-being and the choices they make? Is it the responsibility of the State to encourage people to adopt a healthy/safe lifestyle – or is this simply a matter of economics? (e.g. reducing smoking and drinking saves money for the NHS)

If the film is a morality tale, what is its message?

Simon Carver is the Senior Minister of Dagnall Street Baptist Church, St Albans. He is married and has three adult children. He writes and broadcasts on Christianity and contemporary culture and is a contributor to Flickering Images (Regent’s/Smyth & Helwys, 2005).

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