

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Woman Next Door 1981

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW

For Truffaut, secular love—as distinct from spiritual-intellectual love or from intellectual love like mathematics—takes many forms, all deriving from our corrupt and desiring bodies, and playing out into many kinds of self-maltreatment. There is the love promoted by jealousy, by rage, by crime, or by the simple daily facts of physical attraction. None of these emotional conditions seems to promote any lasting or benign love, and as we see from Truffaut's body of work, little promise for human happiness seems to reside in the varieties of secular love Truffaut surveys. The world cinema itself, after all, was coming into its maturity in a mid-century pockmarked by the experience of war, and death. Intimacy had become a luxury, and even when it played out—think of the fate of Jules and Jim-- it ended with a crazy loss. From Truffaut's last work we might want to hearken back to an effort, like that of *The Green Room*, to create a refuge for love in the heart of death.

CHARACTERS

Bernard	married to Arlette, instructor in the merchant marine training school.
Arlette	wife of Bernard.
Thomas	son of Bernard and Arlette.
Mathilde	new neighbor and former mistress of Bernard.
Philippe	husband of Mathilde, air traffic controller at Grenoble Airport.
Mme. Jouve	owner of the condo complex at which the principal actors live.

SYNOPSIS

Bernard lives happily with his wife and young son, Thomas, in a condo complex near Grenoble. One day a married couple moves in next door. Bernard is shocked to realize that the lady of the new couple, Mathilde, was his former mistress, who shared with him a tumultuous affair, which ended disastrously. Bernard makes every effort to keep the situation from growing difficult, but inevitably the crisis strikes—Bernard and Mathilde meet in a local supermarket, offer one another a kiss, for old times' sake, and open the door to a new affair, which will be the story of the present film.

The old flame is burning, now, and the couple of lovers begin to establish a pattern of rendez-vous, hotel room meetings, and passionate interludes which make the maintenance of daily social life increasingly stressful; Bernard, the first to crack, showing his sexual passion for Mathilde at a garden party. Then Mathilde cracks, and has to be hospitalized for depression. While she is recuperating, her husband moves the family to another village, but Mathilde cannot endure her deprivation from Bernard. She intrudes into his house, one night, makes furious love to him, then shoots him dead.

STORY

Truffaut turns in this narrative to a seemingly familiar tale of adultery, in which an old flame is relit by what seem purely chance circumstances, and bursts into full brilliance, before leaving its victims devastated. Essentially that is what happens here, and yet, as in Truffaut's other films about the travails of love—*Jules and Jim*, *Two English Girls*; *The Soft Skin*—the love affair is distinctively tweaked, and from the start menaced with inherent danger. The tweaking, in the present instance, will derive from the depth of the obsession of Mathilde, and the alarming volatility with which Bernard fluctuates between passion and dismissal of his love object.

The menace is there in the most seemingly tranquil moments, as when, at the outset of the film, Bernard sends his little son into the suburban's back door to recover the keys, which Dad has locked in the vehicle. We feel danger in the son's over-the-seats climb. Will he start the ignition and send the vehicle hurtling forward? Will the car explode? Seemingly irrelevant questions of this sort hover around the actions of the film, leaving us breathless.

Proximity The story itself advances in classical fashion, raising the stakes between the two old lovers, to the point where we start to ask ourselves how long any sort of side by side coexistence between the two families is possible. The two lovers make personal efforts to keep apart from one another, to avoid any chance encounters.

Separation But ultimately Mathilde cracks under the pressure and subsides into a deep depression, for which she is hospitalized. This is for her the decisive turning point. Her reasonable and well prepared husband, the air traffic controller, moves the family to another village, while Mathilde is recuperating, and yet this well intentioned act itself proves fatal.

Ending When she learns of her enforced separation from Bernard, she realizes that breaking away from her lover is intolerable. One night, not much later, Bernard hears a heavy banging on the window of the empty house next to his. He goes over to investigate, finds Mathilde; the two of them make love on the floor, in their intense, truly ferocious manner. Mathilde crowns the love act by pulling out her pistol, and shooting her lover dead—as other Truffautian lovers have fallen victim to a slim pistol.

THEMES

Violence. Pistols are a theme in Truffaut's cinema, and can, it seems, be wielded gracefully and lethally at the same time. In several films—*The Bride Wore Black*, *Shoot the Piano Player*, *The Soft Skin*, *Mississippi Mermaid*—the elegant decisiveness of the pistol provides a crisp and much needed finale for a plot in need of a final sentence.

Passion. Powerful intercourse scenes play throughout the work of Truffaut. In the course of such scenes—say in *Shoot the Piano Player*, or *The Woman Next Door*—death and the carnal appear to blend into one another.

Chance. The present film is predicated on the statistically thin chance that two families with entangled romantic histories would have settled in the locales they occupy in the present film. Right next door to each other, no less. That of course was not enough for fate, because it was waiting to bring Bernard and Mathilde together in the supermarket, where they could snatch a hurried kiss.

Comedy. The bourgeois suburban condo world—commuting distance to Grenoble—is overseen by a close inspecting, ironic midlife manager, Mme. Jouve, who takes an interest in her residents, and adds a désabusé glance to the ironies implicit in the narrator's *récit*. High passion provides the narrative thread, but the setting is strickly back and forth dinner invitations, pool parties, and kids' games.

Depression. Depression, the bourgeois illness, is the loosely fitting name given to Mathilde's inability to take another step forward. After her physical recovery, from her self-control and will-power, Mathilde has nowhere to go except to a violent resolution. She cannot subside into bourgeois satisfaction.

Conflict. There is little conflict brought to the surface in the family lives of Mathilde and Bernard, respectively. Why? Because the lovers, who have been shell shocked ever since discovering one another's presence, have not confided in their spouses, but have instead kept the past a secret. This means of avoiding family conflict is in itself dangerous, for it drives the current situation, which is being hidden, still further underground.

Entertainment. The locale of the deathly bourgeois drama, being played out between the two couples, is a condo complex with tennis courts and swimming pools and patios for outdoor picnics. It is across this

scenario that the seemingly all-is-normal relation between our two families plays itself out, with regular back and forth dinners, and drinks.

Secrecy. The refusal of the lovers, to level with their families, plays into an increasingly dark and secretive relation between the lovers, who are driven farther from home to find their fields for being along together. The more secretive they become—like the lovers in *The Soft Skin*-- the more dangerously cut off they become from the pleasures of sexuality and the erotic. Already, before *The Soft Skin* has reached its savage conclusion, falsity and lying have condemned the principal to a premature death.

Transience. Truffaut is a remorseless critic of the rapt search for sexual pleasure. This search, which of course fascinates the director, rarely, and never in the films he offers us, ends in satisfaction and happy life completions. What pleasure the senses offer us passes quickly, as in *The Soft Skin*, *Two English Girls*, or *Jules and Jim*.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MATHILDE The main character is Mathilde, for though she and Bernard are almost interfused, by their passions for one another, it is she whose passion is most remorseless and in the end, life-threatening. From the time she is first 'introduced' to Bernard, at the start of the film, she is rivetingly sensual in her stance toward him. Of the two lovers, Mathilde is the more urgent to set up future rendez vous, the more desperate upon finding that she is cut off from her lover, and, in the end, the more hysterically determined to see him, to make love to him, and ultimately, as a final gesture of possession, to keep him from leaving her.

Riveting. Upon first being introduced to Bernard—as the two couples meet for the first time in the film—Mathilde stares rivetingly into the eyes of her own lover, unable to hide the power of her emotions.

Decisive. When Mathilde meets Bernard by chance, in the local supermarket, she most insists that they can safely share a kiss, while clearly planning forward to the path from that kiss into a renewal of their love affair. She says to Bernard, in reviewing their past together, that she was the one of the two who truly *loved*.

Vulnerable. Bernard is the more volatile of the two lovers, suffering exasperating alternations of passion with indifference, while Mathilde, as her hospitalization shows, can be reduced to debility by the developments in her love life. She can be put out of commission by any suggestion that her passion may have to be cut short. We are forced on various occasions to reflect on her visual fixation on Bernard, with its power of total absorption into a beloved person.

Physical. From her first appearance, among the two couples adjacent to one another, Mathilde is not only beautiful in her sexuality, but is startlingly physical. She is a strong female beauty.

Collapsible. As we see, in Bernard's visit to Mathilde in the hospital, after her diagnosis of depression, and her episode of fainting and collapse, Mathilde is the harder hit of the two, by the stresses and strains of the new love affair.

Risk taking. Mathilde was perhaps right, in her initial supermarket talk with Bernard, when she contrasted the power of her love with his. She felt that she was the less able to take risks with losing his love, while he, Bernard, was more able to do without her. In their past as lovers, she complained, Bernard would love her cyclically, totally absorbed with her for a while, then quite able to do without her. In the end, of course, Mathilde was the separated lover, out of touch with Bernard—and desperate. Did she long for him, or did she long to kill him, for all the suffering he had caused her?

Parallels. Dido, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, gradually built up a love for her nation-founding hero, Aeneas, who landed on her shores, in the course of his post-Troy wanderings. Little did she know that, besides having fallen for her, tentatively, Aeneas' inner mandate was to get to Latium and found a new kingdom for the

Romans. Mathilde was probably deceived, deep down, by a sense that Bernard was exceptionally devoted to her.

The Greek lyric poet and Lesbian lover, Sappho, fixated on her lover—by way of a third person, a guy who was sitting opposite Sappho's lover, and drinking in the beauty of Sappho's lover. Sappho, like Mathilde, found a way through her eyes to penetrate herself with the beauty of her lover.

Dante and Beatrice—goes the legend underlying the lifetime vision of the *Divina Commedia*—saw one another once, when he a young teen ager and she a maiden of ten—and that one insight and passion filled glance sufficed for a life time of love. And for a poem devoted ultimately to the supremely visible radiance of god's light.