

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Mississippi Mermaid 1969

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW

Wherever you cut into Truffaut's oeuvre, you are likely to be near the theme of love, often romantic love, and the obsessions it brings with it. From many examples, try *Jules and Jim*, *Two English Girls*, or *The Story of Adele H.*, and you will find romantic characters who let the passion of love guide and even derail their private lives. Love can kill you in any of these three films. There are many love-varieties in Truffaut. There is repressed, tense love (*The Last Metro*), puppy love (*Small Change*), Love with joy and sacrifice (*Jules and Jim*), and even the fragile, hysterical love of the suicidal former wife, in *Shoot the Piano Player*. Love is nothing to play with in these films, for unless it is carefully separated from lust, desire, possession, obsession, jealousy, control, or anxiety, it is likely to poison the bearer. We know from Goethe's *Faust* that even the most intellectual love, Faust's, can spawn murderous consequences.

The film before us borrows its mood from the prevailing 'American' fashion, gangsta love in the background, which was one strong trend in the New Wave 'movement.' Certain moves of the European outreach—like some Wenders (*Alice in the Cities*); Herzog (*Stroszek*; a very American docu like *The Wild Blue Yonder*); or Godard (cf. the mood and reference in *Breathless*)—gave full sanction to the American influence that was a socially somewhat shocking departure, already at the end of WW II, from the tiring Hollywood tradition, which neither in France nor America retained its discovery value. Even in far Isle de la Réunion, Truffaut is fictionizing, a robust and adventurous gent like Louis reaches out into the newspaper marriage ads—a trick with a strong American tweak to it—to find himself a suitable bride; a body is wiped out gangsta style, boatside murders arrange for identity modifications, and true love flourishes on the other side of a gun, as fluently as it does in Dashiell Hammet's *Maltese Falcon* (1929)

CHARACTERS

Louis Mahé	the tobacco growing protagonist of the film
Julie Roussel; Marion Vergano:	wife or girlfriend of Mahé
Camolli	the private detective hired by Mahé
Berthe Roussel	sister of Julie Roussel
Jardine	assistant to Mahé

SYNOPSIS

An adaptation of the American novel, *Waltz into Darkness* by Cornell Woolrich (1947), the film concerns the life events of a tobacco planter on the Isle de la Réunion, in the Indian Ocean. Louis Mahé becomes engaged, by correspondence, to a woman he does not know, and for whom he is anxiously waiting dockside at the start of the film. When the boat arrives, no one he expects debords; the woman awaiting him at his car, when he returns to it, is not the same woman whose photo had been sent to him, and whom he was expecting. Nonetheless—she is pretty and ready—he marries her and tells himself to take advantage of the mystery before him. It is not long, however, before he realizes that she has stolen his money, from what is now their joint bank account. From this point on, Louis undertakes a winding search for his lost cash, and for the lost thief, with whom he has fallen deeply in love, despite what he now knows is her outrageous track record.

STORY

Arrival. Louis Mahé is a prosperous tobacco farmer, on the Isle de la Réunion, in the Indian Ocean. He is waiting for the arrival of a mail order bride, whom he has never seen, but with whom he has been

corresponding for some time, through the personals column of a French newspaper. (She is arriving from Noumea, the capital of another French Indian Ocean colony, New Caledonia.) A lovely woman appears beside his car, but he does not recognize her, because she does not resemble the photo that has been sent to him. Nonetheless he shrugs off the explanation, that she has sent him a snapshot of a neighbor. They marry, and proceed to settle.

Shock. The couple marries, as is their plan, fall in love; convinced that they are on the right track, Louis goes to the bank, with his new bride, and gives her complete access to his bank account. (He even has her face stamped on every package of cigarettes mass produced in his tobacco factory.) Shortly after, Louis receives a furious letter from Berthe, his bride's sister, announcing that she has not heard a word from Julie, and that she demands an immediate explanation. Not much later Berthe arrives, reporting that she saw her sister leave for Réunion on the steamer Mississippi, and still has no word from her. By now, Louis realizes that he has been scammed and bilked; he checks to find that his wife is gone, and that there is no trace of his bank account. A detective is hired, to track down the imposter.

Break. Louis goes to the south of France for a vacation, to recover from these shocking events. There he falls seriously ill, and while recuperating in a local Clinique, he watches television, and there sees the imposter of Julie dancing in a nightclub in Antibes. He leaves the Clinique, buys a revolver, and goes to Antibes, where he scales the façade of 'Julie's' hotel, breaks into her room, and prepares to kill her. She puts up no resistance, but simply explains how the mystery of Julie took place: that Marion—the name of the criminal—had indeed a criminal past, and that (at the prodding of her sinister boyfriend, Richard) she had conspired to kill Julie, and substitute herself as the mail order bride. She begs Louis' forgiveness, and is given it. The now reunited couple buy a small car and drive to Aix en Provence, where for some time they hang out, walk in the mountains, and make love.

Detective Their idyllic existence is interrupted by the arrival of the private detective Camolli, who has arrived at Aix in search of the impostor in the Mahe case. Mahé urges the detective to drop the case, but Camolli refuses, on the grounds that his legal obligation is now to pursue the mystery to some kind of legal conclusion. At this, seeing a harsh conclusion looming before his idyll, Mahé murders the detective and buries him in the wine cellar of their hide out in Aix.

Flight. From this point on, there is no rest for the couple. They make their way to Lyons, but soon learn that the cops are on their trail. Ultimately, despite Louis' sale of his property in Reunion, the couple finds themselves low on cash, and devises a plan to cross the border into Switzerland, where they will be out of French jurisdiction. Holed up in a small mountain cabin, in deep snow near the crossing into Switzerland, Louis grows very ill. He begins to suspect that Marion is poisoning his coffee, and tries escaping from the cabin, but she catches up with him. She confesses her criminality again, but says he has taught her the meaning of love. After he has regained his strength they continue on toward the Swiss border.

THEMES

Deception Upon arriving at the port, Louis does not see the woman whose photo he has been fixed on. He goes back to his car, and to his surprise sees a beautiful girl standing, waiting for him. She claims to be the Julie he was expecting from the boat. It is a deception.

Compromise. Stuck with unclarity, but deeply attracted to the new arrival, Louis proceeds with his plans, gets married, settles down with 'Julie.' He settles too quickly.

Theft. Louis boldly invites theft, by providing his wife with complete access to his bank account. She proves her deep duplicity by emptying the account.

Passion. Louis is not only excited by the arrival of Julie, but he is excited in general, is a passionate man, and cannot fall out of love even with someone who is manifestly trying to rob him blind.

Investigation. There is a conspicuous role in the film for a private investigator, M. Camoli, who undertakes the search for Julie. In a wider sense, too, Louis himself is turned into a P.I. He is looking for his, or the, wife.

Violence. We are not sure whether we really know M. Mahé, when he shoots and kills M. Camoli. Our protagonist has a penchant for violence.

Poison. We are surprised at the strength of Marion's criminal instinct, when she attempts to poison her husband in the mountain cabin near the Swiss border. Do we believe her when she swears that she loves Louis?

LOUISE Louis Mahé is a successful tobacco and cigarette producer on the Isle de la Réunion. From first sight he seems self assured, yet on further knowing, we begin to doubt his stability. When he first discovers the woman who should be, but is not, his wife, he is surprisingly willing just to *go with the situation*. In fact, he does not dwell much on the discrepancy between this woman before him and the photos he has been studying. From that point until he realizes his naivete, on the matter of the bank account, we grow increasingly aware of Louis' *unsteadiness of purpose and insight*. Not only is he unsteady but he is *volatile*, as we see from the readiness with which he kills the detective in Aix. From that point on, while he is on the run with Marion, Louis is simply a creature in flight, naïve, a *lamb being led to the slaughter*, as we see from Marion's ultimate efforts to poison him, in the cabin.

Illustrative moments

Anxiety. Louis Mahé is agitated and unsure when he cannot locate his mail order bride among the arrivals from New Caledonia. He strides up and down nervously.

Suspicious. When Louis is having breakfast, he is informed, by the maid, that 'Madame's canary is dead.' Louis hurries upstairs to tell Julie, but is startled, when Madame pays almost no attention to the news. She is 'quite cold.'

Magnetized. Louis is sitting at breakfast, when his new wife calls to him from the staircase. She is having difficulty buttoning her blouse, and needs his help. He fumblingly helps her with the narrow buttons, at which she draws him gently down onto a chair. As artfully as a kitten she rests over onto his lap, smiling as he repeats, 'I adore you, I adore you.'

Appalled. When Louis receives the desperate letter from Julie's sister, he is startled and calls Julie, urging her to write immediately to her sister. When Julie's sister arrives she immediately interprets the situation. Louis is appalled.

Moved. When the enraged Louis follows Marion /Julie to her hotel in Antibes, and threatens to shoot her, Marion simply surrenders, tells him to shoot her; to which she adds that she will always love Louis. He melts. Is he a fool, or is he right to melt?

End game. Louis realizes that even in the snow burdened Alps, his beloved is still ready to poison him. Can he trust her as any kind of life partner, if she is at the same time both a devoted lover and a potential killer?

Parallels Jezebel, Phaedra, Lady MacBeth; these three female figures, from the textbook of cultural history, show us what vileness can be wrought by regal females. Each of these women belongs both to literature and to history, and serves as a trigger to a broad panorama of evils. Jezebel, in history, is a lethal servant of Baal, and harms the energies and faith of the Israelites, as Marion lovingly saps the strength of Louis. Phaedra both throttles the freedom of Hippolytus, and buries her vengeful fangs in him, as Marion offers poison even to a husband on the brink of death in the mountains. Lady MacBeth seizes her opportunity to make her husband her King, and sets up the true King's demise, with the coolness of Julie, signing for her husband's bank account.