

ADELAIDE CINÉMATHÈQUE



THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN FILM SOCIETY DEVOTED TO SCREEN CULTURE

Day for Night / *La Nuit américaine* (1973)

DIRECTOR: François Truffaut

WRITER: François Truffaut, Suzanne Schiffman, Jean-Louis Richard

PRODUCER: Marcel Berbert

CINEMATOGRAPHER: Pierre-William Glenn

EDITOR: Martine Barraqué, Yann Dedet

ORIGINAL MUSIC: Georges Delerue

CAST: Jean-Pierre Léaud, Jacqueline Bisset, Nathalie Baye, Valentina Cortese, François Truffaut

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Les Films du Carrosse.

YEAR OF RELEASE: 1973

RUNNING TIME: 115mins

FORMAT: 35mm

RECOMMENDED READING: Roger Crittenden, *Day for Night* (BFI: London, 1998)

RECOMMENDED LINKS:

www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/05/35/la_nuit_americaine.html



AWARDS:

Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, 1973

Tomorrow's film therefore appears to me even more personal than an individual and autobiographical novel, more like a confession or like an intimate diary ... The film of tomorrow will be an act of love.

So said François Truffaut in 1957, just as his masterpiece *The 400 Blows* and his radical new agenda for film-making was about to usher in first a French, then a European, and then a World Cinema New Wave. Fifteen years later came *Day for Night / La nuit américaine*, Truffaut's affectionate homage to movie-making and illusionism that won him an Academy Award and influenced films as varied as Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights*. The film charts the pleasures and pains enjoyed or endured by the cast and crew of a film as it is being shot in the Victorine Studios in Nice. The film-within-a-film is directed by Alphonse - played with breathless energy by Truffaut surrogate Jean-Pierre Léaud - who desperately tries to complete his masterpiece while chaos enuses around him: whether it's grande dame Cortese infuriating everyone by forgetting her lines, or a cat awkwardly refuses to drink its milk. This is autobiographical cinema writ large, complete with wonderfully expansive tracking shots and clever in-jokes (the title refers to a cinematographic technique designed to simulate a night scene during daylight hours). At its heart, the film explores the relationship between director and film and, by the end, transforms into a profound meditation on the nature of reality and artifice, inventive spirit and artistic integrity.

"In his quest to try to find the right balance between making a cinema that is both intellectually challenging and wildly popular, there exists the ever-present danger of slipping too far to one side or the other. Despite the insistence of many critics that Truffaut spent most of his career alternating between films that emphasised the one over the other, it is my opinion that by this stage of his life (from the late 1960s until his death) Truffaut had unmistakably taken the road of popular acceptance, especially in the seemingly unending number of literary *Verfilmungen*. Happily, and what possibly gives this particular film such a fond place in my mind, *La Nuit Américaine* was a genuine attempt to steer the ship somewhat in the opposite direction, without making too radical a departure from Truffaut's general canon." Danny Fairfax

Mississippi Mermaid / *La Sirène du Mississippi* (1969)

DIRECTOR: François Truffaut
WRITER: François Truffaut
PRODUCER: François Truffaut, Marcel Berbert
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Denys Clerval
EDITOR: Agnès Guillemot
ORIGINAL MUSIC: Antoine Duhamel
CAST: Jean-Paul Belmondo, Catherine Deneuve
PRODUCTION COMPANY: Les Films du Carrosse
YEAR OF RELEASE: 1969
RUNNING TIME: 123mins
FORMAT: 35mm

RECOMMENDED LINKS:
http://zakka.dk/euroscreenwriters/interviews/francois_truffaut_529.htm

RECOMMENDED READING: Don Allen, *Truffaut* (Secker & Warburg, London: 1974)



Made in 1969, *Mississippi Mermaid* was Truffaut's first big-budget production, shot on the lush Indian Ocean island of Reunion, in the south of France, and in the French Alps. Jean-Paul Belmondo is the owner of a tobacco plantation on Réunion, and when he advertises for a wife, his mail-order bride Catherine Deneuve isn't all she seems. Thus follows numerous conspiracies, crises and suspicions, played out against the backdrop of a suitable sweaty desert island atmosphere. This is an adaptation of Cornell Woolrich's noir novel *Waltz into Darkness* (a title that would have suited this film just as easily), and it sits alongside Truffaut's other experiments with the film noir and thriller genre, such as *The Bride Wore Black* and *Confidentially Yours*. It is also revealing that Woolrich also wrote the story from which Hitchcock adapted *Rear Window*, for it was during pre-production for *Mississippi Mermaid* that Truffaut began interviewing Alfred Hitchcock (the resulting book, *Hitchcock / Truffaut* is one of the most indispensable books on the craft of film-making). Accordingly, Hitchcock's influence seeps into *Mississippi Mermaid*: low-key thriller elements that always threaten to escalate, repressed sexuality, claustrophobic settings, and, in Deneuve, a portrayal of the icy blonde that Truffaut sought to revere as much as punish.

As usual, there is a good deal of self-reflexivity going on, as Truffaut continues his exploration of cinema's to reflect real life, and vice versa. The police detective who hunts Deneuve's character remarks on "her perfect features," noting that "people remember her. I guess men do prefer blondes...she doesn't escape notice." The film also begins, essentially, as a fairy tale, with Belmondo's Louis as the wealthy prince who rescues Deneuve's Marion (a welfare baby) by summoning her to his island paradise for a royally lavish wedding. And when her prince loses his fortune, Marion is inspired by a Snow White comic strip to attempt poisoning him. Elsewhere, the film is dedicated to Jean Renoir, and the opening shot recalls the closing iconic sequence of Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (again, another possible title for Truffaut?). One can also sense the presence of Truffaut's New Wave rival Jean-Luc Godard, whose 1966 *Pierrot le fou* also starred Belmondo in almost the same role he plays here — a conventional, upper-middle-class man whose passion for a beautiful, enigmatic woman destroys them both.

The film's turbulent post-production history hints at a major reason why *Mississippi Mermaid* was greeted with such ambivalence on its release. Up to 13 minutes of the film were excised by nervy American distributors after rather disastrous pre-screenings, but the new version was both convoluted and leadenly paced. The restoration of the cut scenes recreates the required dreamy atmospherics and restores Truffaut's original vision of a film that combined both the pulpy and the mythic, blending caper film and sexual psycho-drama to beguiling effect.



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Produced by Ben McCann, Adelaide University