

**The Moustache-2005:** A dream of a life may in fact be just a life in a dream.

This review reveals almost everything about this story. So, if you want to enjoy the mystery first, then stop right now...and come back after you've seen the film.

The title is classic misdirection by writers. This story has nothing specific to do with a moustache. It is merely a symbol used to highlight the idea of identity and, more particularly, the extent to which a husband and wife are aware of each other.

The story is as follows: the fade in opens with a successful Parisian businessman, Marc Thiriez (Vincent Lindon), shaving off his moustache while having a bath. When confronting his wife, Agnes (Emmanuelle Devos) she fails to evince any surprise. Somewhat puzzled – because, only a few moments prior, Agnes had said how much she liked his moustache – Marc says nothing but continues on to a dinner engagement to Serge and Nadia Schaeffer (Mathieu Amalric and Marcha Polikarpova) where they all say nothing about his new look. Later, suspecting a trick, Marc confronts Agnes at their apartment where she categorically denies Marc has ever had a moustache...

Ooops!

Dumbfounded, Marc has a troubled sleep but goes to work the next morning, convinced that Agnes and their so-called friends are out to get him, for some unknown reason. At the office and the nearby coffee shop – where Marc has dined all too often – the same situation persists: nobody makes any comment about the absence of his moustache.

Hence, for Marc, the puzzle worsens...

He begins to panic: he searches for the remains of his moustache in the garbage; he seeks confirmation from a stranger that a photo, from a 2003 holiday in Bali, shows him with a moustache. But, later that day, he asks Agnes to cancel a lunch with his parents - and she replies that his father died a year earlier! Questioning her further, Marc realizes with mounting horror, that she cannot even recall their friends, Serge and Nadia!

What's going on here? Am I crazy, thinks Marc? Confused and shattered, he falls into a stupor and sleeps again, allowing Agnes to slip a knock-out Mickey Finn to him. Hours later he wakes to hear Agnes and Bruno (Hippolyte Giradou), his office associate, discussing plans to have him committed to an asylum. Frantic, Marc runs off to find his parents, but is unable to contact them, and calls Agnes to meet him, while watching from a taxi. After she leaves with Bruno, Marc quickly gets his passport, a coat and money, and goes to the airport where he boards a flight for...Hong Kong!

When he gets there, he wanders around a bit, alternately ferrying from Hong Kong to Kowloon and back a few times – a great metaphor for his indecision - then pays his way onto a coastal trader to finally wind up at an un-named coastal village. He wanders off from the boat and ends up at a run-down hotel where he pays for a room and falls asleep, exhausted...

Okay – stop right here: all of the above is Marc's dream – or nightmare, I guess.

The next (real) scene, we see Marc, unshaven with many weeks growth, wolfing down noodles at a local restaurant. After the meal, he wanders back to the hotel where he finds (and, as the viewer, we also find) Agnes packing their bags to return to Paris. She tells him to shave off his growing beard and suggests he also remove his moustache. When he does so, she remarks how much it suits him. They go to bed; they make love; she sleeps. Marc lies there for a long while, eyes closed. Then, he opens his eyes wide, blankly and silently screaming: am I awake or is this a dream? Fade to black...

So, here's the real story: Marc and Agnes are on holiday, near Hong Kong, where he hopes to resurrect what he thinks is their dead or dying marital and sexual relationship. One night, he has a nightmare about his innermost fears and desires. The next morning, fortuitously, Agnes suggests he change his image, more or less in keeping with his prior dream, and so he does. Happily for Marc, she actually notices the difference and things appear to be better. Unhappily, however, aspects of his dream remain, most particularly, a post card that he wrote out in his dream. Or did he?

Hence, when Marc stares into the darkness, is it truly reality? This is where the writer/director weaves two fundamental issues together: first, there is the male angst about whether his wife still loves him - which generates the bizarre dream set in Paris (while they are both on holiday in China) and second, there is the deeper philosophical issue about reality itself. As the final scene very slowly fades to black, the camera fixes on Marc's troubled eyes, the unspoken question screaming at us: am I in a dream now, or have I woken up? So, does Agnes truly love me, or no?

That's for you and all of us to decide...

When you see the movie, watch out for the clues that tell you it's all a dream: as the credits roll, there are city lights on dark water – water heavily connoting sex – with a sampan just in view; a long column of lights from skyscraper – a phallic symbol, much repeated later in the story; the photos from Bali, every lover's dream destination; she loves to watch football, he doesn't. As they drive to the dinner date with Serge and Nadia, Agnes makes a shocking admission to Marc about the way she dresses; at work, Marc is so confused, he says to himself: "I must be dreaming!" And, just when Marc leaves to go to work, Agnes calls him back and says: "Marc – this is like a bad trip!"

All of which seems normal, at the time, but you just know something is seriously wrong. Not until Marc flew off to Hong-Kong, however, did I realize I was inside Marc's head, living out his nightmarish dream. So, to that extent, this film has its antecedents in thrillers such as *Spellbound* (1945), one of Hitchcock's best, or *Lost Highway* (1991), a Lynchian masterpiece with, as yet, no equal. *La Moustache* differs, first, in that there is no blood and gore, of course. Fundamentally, however, it has broader application and appeal to a wider audience, I think, simply because its *mise-en-scene* is so commonplace: it could indeed happen to you or me, in some form or manner – and therein lies its truth.

Highly recommended. Eight out of ten.

1st march, 2008.

Rating: 8

Copyright © 2008, Roger J Burke. All rights reserved.