Document Citation

Title	**Films**
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Source	*Village Voice*
Date	1968 Aug 22
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	La mariée était en noir (The bride wore black), Truffaut, François, 1968

films

by Andrew Sarris

Francois Truffaut's "THE BRIDE WORE BLACK" has been reviewed as if it were a filmed sequel to Truffaut's book on Alfred Hitchcock. But it isn't. Whereas Hitchcock is basically a genre director, Truffaut's temperament is closer to the sprawling humanism of Renoir. Of course, no director can memorize the life's work of another director without picking up a few tricks and ideas along the way. When Charles Denner's pathologically lecherous artist delicately poses Jeanne Moreau in the white tunic of Diana the huntress, the image of James Stewart adjusting Kim Novak's coiffure in Hitchcock's "Vertigo" comes immediately to mind with all its romantic reverberations. (The fact that Miss Moreau, like Miss Novak, is too substantial for the ethereal spirit of the illusion only heightens the resemblance.) Also, the mere fact that "The Bride Wore Black" is a violent melodrama with a soupcon of suspense is sufficient grounds for most critics to tag Truffaut with a Hitchcock label. However, even Renoir is not entirely a stranger to violent melodrama. The murders in "La Chienne," "La Bete Humaine," "The Crime of Monsieur Lange," and "The Rules of the Game" are as memorable as any in the history of the cinema. But these murders do not make Renoir a genre director. Renoir's feeling for life flows over the violence like an inexhaustible torrent of tenderness. Whereas Renoir proudly sacrifices form (and art) for truth, Hitchcock salvages truth from an art that rigorously obeys the rules of the game. Truffaut breaks the rules of the genre without abandoning the genre, and thus teeters precariously between Hitchcock and Renoir without committing himself entirely to either.

Truffaut begins "The Bride Wore Black" by plunging into the action before its premises have been established. Thus, the heroine has committed two murders and is well on her way to her third before the audience is informed of her motive. Truffaut's storytelling is thus anti-Hitchcockian in that it sacrifices suspense for mystification. Once the audience is implicated in the lyricism of Moreau's murderousness, it is too late to measure her motivation. "The Bride Wore Black" succeeds therefore as a fait accompli. Truffaut manages even to get away with a big hole in the plot. We are told that the heroine is tracking down five men who were involved in the prankishly accidental murder of her husband as he was descending the steps of the church with his bride on his arm, an overwhelmingly Orphic piece of sexual imagery reminiscent of a similar incident in Sam Fuller's "Forty Guns." We see the five men playing cards in the hotel room, and then joking about the long-range capabilities of a hunting rifle. We see one man load it for fun, and another man fire it by accident. We see the bridegroom falling and falling and falling. We see the action in various speeds and colors until it is engraved on our minds with the reality of a recurring nightmare. But we are never told how the bride learned the identities of her bridegroom's murders. By simply showing us the murderers, Truffaut discharges his obligations to the genre. If he had wanted us to think more seriously about the premise of the plot, he would have told us much sooner. As it is, the director's procrastination is justified by the wildly unconvincing casting of Jeanne Moreau as a vengeful bride turned into a true femme fatale. Truffaut conceived Moreau's character as a Hawksian heroine divested of her sexual sophistication for the sake of the severe intelligence her revenge demanded. The result is a performance from Moreau so dully deadpan that the interest shifts inevitably to her male victims, all of whom rise to the challenge with vivid glimpses of life and desire on the brink of death.

Consequently, "The Bride Wore Black" derives its dramatic power from the irony of an illusion. The bride of vengeful death enters the life of five men as a temptress. She is unreal, unconvincing, and discouragingly uncooperative, but it doesn't matter. Her victims will grasp at any straw that promises even a moment of pleasure. Michael Bouquet's born loser is especially moving as an evocation of muddled middle-aged hopefulness in the presence of a sexual fantasy come to life. If Moreau's character were at all real, it would be impossible to forgive her for her mercilessness to this particularly pathetic child of woman. But because of the displaced sensibility of the film, the men are too real for the genre, and Moreau too fantastic. Thus a second film emerges over the smudged design of the first, a film more interesting than the first because it is closer to Truffaut's true feelings. This second film concerns the obsession of men with the ever receding realities of women. What Truffaut has taken from William Irish's action novel is the urgency of a melodramatic situation, the urgency without which Truffaut's feelings would spill out over the edges of his frames until more of him would be off-screen than on. What Truffaut has taken from Hitchcock is an adroitness in balancing abruptness of action with a drifting for meaning so that every characterization can be enriched with an intimation of inevitability. The difference between Truffaut and Hitchcock is the difference between a life style and a dream world. Truffaut's males are derived from the director's sense of reality void of melodrama. If Hitchcock and Irish had not intervened, Truffaut's lecherous males would talk on night after night about all the women they'd laid and about all the women they wanted to lay until even their lechery would disintegrate in the lassitude of an uneventful life. By contrast, Hitchcock's characters are designed expressly for their genre functions in the sense that they correspond to conflicting impulses in the director's personality. Hitchcock is what he is, and Renoir is what he is, but Truffaut is still suspended between an art of meaningful forms and a world of changing appearances. Still "The Bride Wore Black" is a film of undeniable if uncertain beauty by virtue of its director's critical intelligence in an era of mindless lyricism.