

BY STEPHEN HOLDEN

## 'LA MOUSTACHE': A FRENCH MYSTERY PLAYS WITH NOTIONS OF CONSPIRACY AND ILLUSION

Emmanuel Carrère's psychological mystery, "La Moustache," begins innocently enough, with a scene of domestic chatter that prepares you to bask in one of those sexy, bittersweet marital comedies that is a hallmark of sophisticated French cinema. Then, by degrees, it subverts those expectations to spiral down a rabbit hole of ambiguity and doubt.

Either its protagonist, Marc Thiriez (Vincent Lindon), a successful, happily married architect, is dangerously delusional, or he is the victim of an elaborate conspiracy to undermine his sanity. At one point you even wonder if "La Moustache" might be science fiction located in the kind of time warp that was a favorite destination of "The Twilight Zone."

But the film is neither a paranoid fantasy nor a futuristic fable. Reminiscent of a John Cheever story like "The Swimmer," it is a surreal reflection on perception, reality and memory, whose focus shifts as the film burrows ever more deeply into subterranean territory. No matter how serious it becomes, however, "La Moustache" never forsakes an underlying attitude of high-style playfulness that recalls Hitchcock's cat-and-mouse romantic thrillers. This screen adaptation of a novel by Mr. Carrère, a popular French author making his directorial debut, never lets you forget your manipulation by a storyteller with the mind of a trickster.

It all begins when Marc and his wife, Agnès (Emmanuelle Devos), are preparing to visit friends for dinner, and he casually asks her what she would think if he shaved off his mustache.

“★★★★½!  
ELUSIVE, ENIGMATIC,  
AND FASCINATING!”

— John Anderson, NEWSDAY

When she replies that she likes it and can't imagine him without it, he goes ahead anyway and removes it. Shorn of facial hair, Marc is taken aback when Agnès seems not to notice the change, but he stays silent and waits for her to comment.

At dinner their hosts, Agnès's ex-boyfriend Serge (Mathieu Amalric) and his Russian wife, Nadia (Macha Polikarpova), also appear oblivious to the change. Serge shares a disturbing memory



EMMANUELLE DEVOS  
VINCENT LINDON

### LA MOUSTACHE

A FILM BY EMMANUEL CARRERE

WINNER  
DIRECTOR'S FORTNIGHT  
CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

A Cinema Guild  
Release

of Agnès's bad behavior years earlier during a weekend in the country. She denied that behavior then and even now brusquely refuses to admit what she did.

By now Marc assumes that everyone has conspired as a practical joke not to mention his change of appearance. But when the couple arrive home, and he declares that it's time to stop the charade, his wife is baffled. She insists he never had a mustache.

Exploding in frustration, Marc plunders the garbage for his facial hair and locates a photo album of a recent trip to Bali in which snapshots show him mustachioed. Strangely, however, he doesn't force his wife to look at the pictures. His grip on reality appears more tenuous shortly after

“CHILLING! PROFOUND!”

— Michael Atkinson, VILLAGE VOICE

he plays back a telephone message from his father and mentions it to Agnès, who reminds him sharply that his father is dead.

"La Moustache" invokes visions of "Gaslight" and "Notorious" in a scene in which Marc, drugged by Agnès, struggles out of bed and flees home just in time to avoid being carted off to a mental hospital. Outside there is a deluge. As the rain streaks the windows of his taxi, the torrent seems to be washing away reality itself.

“AS IF ANTONIONI  
HAD SUDDENLY  
PICKED UP  
A MOVIE STARTED  
BY HITCHCOCK.”

— Elisabeth Vincentelli, TIME OUT NEW YORK

Marc impulsively jumps on a plane to Hong Kong, a city that, like Marc's life, feels suspended between two realities (in its case East and West). He spends an entire day on a ferry shuttling back and forth across the harbor over which the spiky skyline shimmers like a mirage through the mist.

At first "La Moustache" seems to be a darkly witty commentary on what we notice or don't notice about one another; we're so lulled by the predictable and the commonplace, it implies, that

we fail to recognize change. Then it widens into a reflection on marriage and the notion that two people, no matter how intimately connected, inhabit separate worlds. An illusion of oneness requires each partner to overlook or deny the other's unknowable qualities.

This handsomely photographed fable is grounded in strong performances by Mr. Lindon and Ms. Devos, who are entirely convincing as a long-married, childless couple, whose relationship still has pockets of passion. "La Moustache" views events entirely through Marc's eyes. Agnès increasingly emerges as a headstrong, changeable enigma, not to be contradicted.

The film is likely to frustrate those who demand that a mystery be solved and wrapped up with tidy explanations. But its refusal to tie everything up in ribbons and bows is one of its strengths. Even after it finally exits the rabbit hole, and the Thiriezes find a tentative peace, unanswered questions and contradictions hover over their cozy rapprochement like anxious spirits.