

Lab in Writing Film Criticism: Final Paper  
Professor Caryn James

Crystal Lua  
FILM UN2410

## THE LIMITS OF LOVE: INFIDELITY IN PHILIPPE GARREL'S FILMS

“Cinema is Freud plus Lumière,” is Philippe Garrel’s most-quoted refrain. And aptly so, for the French director whose quietly devastating films tease an emotional sublime out of every frame of reality. Watching his films, one engages with the work of both a Romantic and a romantic, but perhaps that oversimplifies his style—for he only deals with romance insofar as he deconstructs it. His recent films attempt to illuminate something ugly yet intensely vital about love, or more accurately, about infidelity, the spaces where love begins to break down. One of the lesser-known auteurs of the French New Wave, Garrel’s prolific filmography spans five decades, during which he simultaneously works within a formidable tradition of French cinema and seeks to define his own aesthetic with strains of philosophical introspection, moody black-and-white, and shades of flawed masculinity. Though the New Wave’s lingering influence continues to inform his particular brand of contemplative cinema, his post-2000 films mark a shift from his earlier work, which was coloured by the drug-hazy, agitational atmosphere in the aftermath of 1968. In this oeuvre within an oeuvre, it’s as if Garrel has taken all the simmering restlessness and discontent of that era and brought it into the domestic sphere, inflecting his relatively short filmic exercises with a bohemian melancholy. (Intriguingly, these films explore the unconventional, free-spirited relationships between artists exclusively—actors, painters, and filmmakers, among others.)

Infidelity occupies a consistent presence in most of his films; he revisits this with renewed intensity in *A Burning Hot Summer* (*Un été brûlant*) (2011), *Jealousy* (*La jalousie*) (2013), and *In the Shadow of Women* (*L’Ombre des femmes*) (2015). Made consecutively, these three newer films form an “infidelity trio” of sorts. Though much of his work tackles evergreen themes like youth, love, politics, and drug use, these specifically interrogate what happens when

romantic love is refracted through additional characters who complicate the picture. Each of the three films conduct an achingly poignant meditation on the vagaries of desire and art, on fickle love and the lack thereof. Despite being, essentially, experimental riffs on one common theme, his films never feel like imaginative flights of fancy, but instead unfold with verisimilitude through his deeply poetic narrative style and subtle cinematography.

## **FRAGMENTED NARRATIVES**

Garrel's films are the cinematic equivalent of Impressionist paintings—each individual scene disjointed and seemingly liminal, though when taken as a whole, cohering in a profoundly atmospheric shimmer of an idea. His films defy narrative clarity in favour of evoking the fragmentary, disorienting experience of a tumultuous love. From the beginning, the very first scenes in *Jealousy* and *In the Shadow of Women* depict a lone character: the former cries softly on a bed, and the latter chews gum, leaning against a sidewalk. Garrel withholds any dialogue or other action; nothing actually *happens*, and the scene ends with no explanation. In *Jealousy*, he cuts abruptly from depicting an amorous afternoon to the woman bemoaning their poor living conditions, incredulous at her lover's nonchalant optimism. "You don't love someone in a void," she accuses. Garrel is acutely aware that love doesn't exist within a vacuum, a concept that translates clearly in his films. Working within what is arguably a French cinematic trope of morally complex, enigmatic romance, Garrel's ruthlessly honest and bewilderingly fractured style is his response to New Wave chic.

He counters this most clearly by situating his films in densely layered contexts, especially in *A Burning Hot Summer*, where divisive political movements continue to intrude upon an idyllic summer, and one couple's cataclysmic fallout nearly result in another's. *A Burning Hot Summer* is, character-wise, possibly the most intricate of the three. Garrel sketches

out the fault lines that emerge when Frédéric and Angèle, a married couple whose faithful bliss is rapidly disintegrating, invite Paul (Frédéric's newfound friend and a bit part actor) and his girlfriend Élisabeth to live with them. Over one languorous summer in Rome, tensions unfurl in a series of slow-burning tableaux. The broodingly sensitive Frédéric, played by the director's son Louis Garrel, is the archetypal Romantic artist, artfully disheveled hair and all: he works in flashes of inspiration, citing love and art as his only two spiritual lodestars. He veers between confrontational sardonicism and raw, vulnerable sincerity, especially with Angèle, his fragile, sensual enigma of a wife, played by Monica Bellucci. But amidst their incendiary clashes Garrel lingers on the absolute mundanity of interstitial moments. The first time we are introduced to Angèle as Frédéric's wife, she is picking a splinter out of his foot, a tableau at once drolly comical and entirely unremarkable.

It produces a curious effect, for his characters seem suspended in a perpetual state of in-betweenness, always falling in love or falling out of it. As such, his films are entirely about love, but in an ironic twist rarely depict romantic bliss. We seldom see characters happy, nor do his films acknowledge the possibility of a fulfilling relationship. *In the Shadow of Women* maps out a futile emotional landscape: a cheating filmmaker (Pierre), his clingy mistress (Elisabeth), his long-suffering wife and assistant (Manon), and her unnamed, hapless lover. In one scene, Garrel cuts between the married couple looking at each other, flickering between Manon's adoring smiles and Pierre's indifferent gaze. And perhaps this is love's greatest undoing—the wearied indifference that seeps into his characters' interactions. Meanwhile, *Jealousy* strips the focus down to Louis (again played by the younger Garrel), a struggling theatre actor whose lugubrious good looks do little to fill his coffers, though they do facilitate his remorseless infidelity. Despite his culpability, Garrel paints him with nuance, at times louche and callous, at times a tender father. In the opening scenes he leaves his partner Clothilde and daughter for

another actress, Claudia, while his days away navigating his own emotional inadequacies and unsuccessfully trying to get Claudia a part. At one point, Claudia says, “We’re here to have as full a life as possible, not to wait. Waiting is death.” The line is written in with a touch of irony, since Garrel’s films are all about waiting. The director has been criticized for his dry scenes about nothing in particular, yet it is precisely here that dissatisfaction emerges. The elliptical narrative style reflects the disconnected nature of his characters’ lives. Nothing concrete happens, but everything is at stake.

Wherever his films might verge on the melodramatic, Garrel purposefully steers away. We never see Angèle revealing her affair, though we do see Frédéric’s protracted self-pity in its wake. Her confession is relegated to Paul’s narration, cleverly dodging the central conflict. Likewise, there are no sex scenes, possibly due to the casting choices—Garrel’s son has become somewhat of a director’s muse in a string of films, while his daughter and father also feature in several. As though observing his family members in their private moments, his films are made all the more intimate; love is rarely sexualized, and the director has a knack for depicting desire in a more spiritual, oblique fashion. Every frame is charged with a fierce yet tender expressivity, whether it’s in the close-ups of desperate, loving glances Manon throws Pierre despite discovering his affair, or an intimate cigarette Claudia shares with a stranger in the throes of her loneliness. Amidst the pointed gazes and disconnected moments, Garrel creates spaces for ambiguity.

These ambiguous narrative gaps are not always logical, sometimes to a fault—for instance, why did a mutual friend insist on Paul meeting Frédéric, and what bonds them? What drives Pierre’s then-one night stand to virtually stalk his wife? Garrel is frequently elusive about his character and plot motivations, walking a fine line between coyly enigmatic and confusingly

impenetrable. For instance, Angèle's main affair happens in a flash. We see their initial meet-cute, an awkward morning after, and then she is professing her love, the progression so rapid it catches us off-guard. Here, the huge gaps in Garrel's storytelling make themselves felt. Though the filmmaker generally uses this fragmentary style to great effect, some scenes feel unfinished, dangling awkwardly. *In the Shadow of Women* has a lengthy shot of Pierre and Manon at home, watching a film together but sitting apart. Their faces are expressionless, no dialogue is spoken, and the scene is never referenced again. Garrel deliberately defies straightforward narrative meaning, and at times, the logic behind scenes don't cohere till much later. Some characters are barely introduced: we vaguely know that Louis met Claudia in a play, and when Louis kisses a fellow thespian after rehearsal, it takes a while before we realize the woman isn't Claudia. Their clandestine flirtation leads nowhere—the woman never reappears, and the purpose of this brief encounter is never explored, either; where Garrel might push moral confrontations further or extrapolate character development, the plot falls flat.

In pursuit of pure gestural atmosphere, Garrel's films tend to sacrifice cogency, leaving the viewer to connect the scattered dots. Yet arguably, in doing so, he saves non-essential narrative space for an underlying mood of existential ennui to emerge. For instance, in *A Burning Hot Summer*, realism is interspersed with mysterious dreamlike sequences. Early in the film an anonymous woman (only subsequently identified as Frédéric's wife) lies naked on vivid blue sheets, gesturing seductively towards the viewer in a scene evocative of a Venus painting. The abrupt cut to Frédéric crashing his car raises unanswered questions: was she a memory? A fantasy? Or was that a temporally parallel scene? And as he lies in hospital later, his grandfather's ghost visits him, sitting contemplatively at the foot of his bed as Frédéric ramblingly tries to justify his suicide. These asides can sometimes weaken narrative purpose, reading as an aimless amalgamation of elements.

To his credit, he frames all his films with a single consistent narrative structure or perspective. *A Burning Hot Summer* begins with protagonist Frédéric's suicide, then spends the entire film unravelling the passionate summer leading up to it through Paul's narrated memories. To some extent, Paul and Élisabeth are made unwilling witnesses to Frédéric and Angèle's quarrels. In *In the Shadow of Women*, the omniscient narrator (voiced by, unsurprisingly, Louis Garrel) gives us information before the characters themselves find out: introducing Manon's lover, calling out Manon's first lie to her husband, revealing Elisabeth spying on the very marriage she splinters, etcetera. Finally, *Jealousy* is loosely seen through Louis' young daughter Charlotte's perspective, the opening scene literally depicting her peering through a keyhole at her parents' fighting. Immediately, infidelity is marked as something clandestine and taboo, an impossible moral chasm she cannot fully apprehend. And even as she warms to Claudia, she spends the film trying to figure out why her parents fell apart, perceiving love with both a sharp clarity and childish innocence. Her gregarious, frank acceptance takes a figurative step back from the tense, knotty intricacies of the love triangle. Intriguingly, his narrators are always somewhat removed from the immediate affair (in both senses of the word), providing the audience with some critical distance.

## **AN OBJECTIVE LENS**

Correspondingly, Garrel dedramatizes his characters' clashes by employing a detached cinematographic style. Often, it feels like the camera is capturing what occurs in the incidental moments—a welcome respite for viewers. For characters who play their sidepieces so close to their chest, they are remarkably forthcoming about their explosive feelings. One of the intertitles in *Jealousy*, “Sparks in a Powder Keg”, encapsulates the majority of his characters. They are held captive to their tempestuous passions, often delivering melodramatic, soapy pronouncements: Manon passionately declares, “Believe me, I hate [Pierre]!”, and Frédéric

claims he “can’t live without a woman.” Like the rest of his characters, their lives are characterized by a deep, pervasive dissatisfaction. Garrel’s characters rank among those stylish, sentimental *bon vivants* who aspire towards some greater happiness, who are incapable of—or simply unsatisfied with—mediocrity, who live only in extremes. His characters are as maudlin as they are hedonistic.

Yet the camera’s gaze is always neutral, the *mise-en-scène* always sparse. Garrel seems to suggest that if we point a camera at the quotidian for long enough, something profound will emerge. Going back to his understanding of cinema as a fusion of Freud and Lumière, his fascination with the psyche’s mutable passions channels itself through a pure, realistic image. The camera directs his gaze, and by extension, ours, at an unadulterated reality—or at least a cinematic image made potent by effacing its own patina of pretense. As Louis drives to his death at the beginning of *A Burning Hot Summer*, the camera stays steady on his face in a scene that lasts close to two minutes. Against a contrasting soundtrack of calm piano melodies, we see his expression transform from distraught, to forlorn, to a glassy blankness. Later in the movie, the same steady camera gaze tracks Élisabeth around the villa’s pool, as she hugs a pillow and sleepwalks, clearly under the sway of some unknown perturbation. What is the purpose of her sleepwalking? We never find out, but it hardly feels accidental. Deciphering Garrel’s films require the same patience espoused in his cinematographic style, parsing the unfulfilling red herrings that don’t detract from the plot so much as disrupt it with the everyday, proving we don’t love in a melodramatic vacuum.

The relationship of Garrel’s camera to his characters is that of a calm eye amidst a maelstrom. A scene in his 2004 film *Regular Lovers* depicts a youthful crowd dancing, movements ecstatic and uninhibited; as the camera roves among the bodies, it cuts to reveal

the solitary protagonist merely watching them, silent and still. In the same vein, his camera enacts this deliberately observational mode with a keen eye, allowing the stormy emotional action to play itself out. In the liminal spaces between action and dialogue, Garrel's camera captures the minutiae of gestures, articulating multifaceted relationships far more potently. In a particularly memorable scene, Claudia, Louis, and his daughter sit around a dinner table. He watches his daughter, and Claudia watches him, enframed in a strange triangulation. Notably, the camera never deviates throughout the conversation, keeping all three of them in the frame, allowing the unspoken tensions to cohere. Instead of sweeping flourishes, every careful shift is weighty, made poetic through the economy of his camera movement.

Garrel's cinematography reveals a remarkable ability to bring us into vulnerable moments. In *Jealousy*, the camera does little more than simple pans. When Louis and Claudia walk through the streets, heady with novel romance, the camera keeps close to them with a tight tracking shot. We feel like we are intruding, a sensation exacerbated by the copious use of lengthy, silent takes. For instance, Angèle and her secret lover lie in bed for a minute-long shot, utterly silent and motionless, captured in all their fragile intimacy. Sometimes, these scenes seem entirely irrelevant. In the same film, Garrel spends three minutes on a single unmoving shot of a director explaining an upcoming scene to Paul. The camera's refusal to shift away serves two functions, firstly to emphasize the excruciating passage of time as part of his fragmentary storytelling. The second, more radical one, is that while Garrel presents his characters sans judgement, he is persistent in his interrogation of them, through the way he fixes his camera on subtle facial expressions and body language.

*Jealousy* and *In the Shadow of Women* form two-thirds of Garrel's loose anthological trilogy investigating complicated love, replete with masculine melancholy, tortured introspection,



and the use of lustrous black-and-white film that verges on pretension. But we quickly realize that his films don't merely replicate the look and feel of classic New Wave trappings. Instead, the black-and-white purposefully strips film to its critical elements—in this case, it allows us to focus on the nuanced acting. In place of lush, saturated colour, everything is coloured instead by the jealousy and paranoia pervading his films. The many silent shots of faces and bodies render each glance significant, allowing the dialogue to remain sparse (even for his relatively short films). Infidelity suffuses every frame, particularly in *A Burning Hot Summer* with its complex character dynamics. An ostensibly casual dinner thrums with tension: “Stop looking at [Angèle] like that,” Frédéric accuses Paul. Later, the same friendly dinner becomes the backdrop for the birth of an affair. While conversation flows at the table, the camera zooms in on Roland and Angèle in the background, smiling at one another. It's worth noting that although infidelity is not always made explicit, the temptation to certainly is. The first hint of cheating in *A Burning Hot Summer* limits itself to Angèle dancing with another man, before Frédéric accuses her of “whoring around” later that evening.

These characters' already-convoluted relationships are inflected with insecurities that run far deeper. When Claudia invites Louis to move in with her, happily showing him her new apartment, he is instantly wary, unjustifiably but accurately jumping to the conclusion that she has another (more moneyed) lover. This underscores a dual impotence: not just the sexual betrayal, but the recognition that he has been supplanted by a richer, more capable, possibly more virtuous person. His inability to get her a job is a through line across the film, a testament to his failure. Similarly, in *A Burning Hot Summer*, Frédéric is willing to overlook Angèle's affair, but finds her disdain for him “unforgivable.” He admits as much to Paul, in a lengthy, nearly incoherent rant during which the camera never leaves his face. Amidst this tangle of suspicious gazes, the camera in turn puts characters under its scrutiny. On the occasions his characters do

devolve into histrionics, they are balanced out by his dispassionate camerawork, the two elements playing off one another.

## **IN THE SHADOW OF MEN**

Across his films, male cruelty, desire, and impulses take centerstage. Yet curiously, the camera never follows the men, but instead the women they leave in their wake. This is particularly evident in *Jealousy*, where many scenes depict women moping in private, lonely moments. The opening scene shows Clothilde sobbing; later, when Louis bids Claudia goodbye, the following shot is set days later, showing her leaning against a wall, her only purpose ostensibly to await his return. Perhaps “In the Shadow of Men” would be a more appropriate title, for Garrel spotlights the fallout for those eclipsed by their masculine counterparts. *Jealousy* gives us an intimate glimpse into the lives of the family Louis leaves behind. In a rare instance of purposeful editing, Louis is shown laughing and racing his mistress up the stairs to their shared apartment, but as the door bursts open Garrel cuts away and juxtaposes this to a parallel scene of his daughter sitting by the doorway in a different home, wistful. “I’m waiting for father,” she tells her mother morosely.

Women, in Garrel’s worlds, are eternally afraid of abandonment. Elisabeth, Pierre’s mistress in *In the Shadow of Women*, is painted as desperate and pathetic, sprawled on the bed pleading with him to acknowledge her in public, even as he laces his shoes up to leave. Married women are not spared, either. Early on in the film, the narrator plainly states, “Manon lived in her husband’s shadow.” Indeed, whenever they occupy the same frame, Pierre is always the one shot in focus. Manon works on Pierre’s films, having dropped out of college to devote her life to him; “It’s not a sacrifice, it’s a choice,” she tells her mother. Most laughably, as the couple listen to a potential documentary source talk about his Resistance exploits, the man’s

thoroughly domestic wife repeatedly offers them cookies, boasting about her baking in farcical non-sequitur bursts that only emphasizes the contrast between heroic man and compliant wife.

*A Burning Hot Summer* is significantly more intricate, probing an unusual four-way dynamic (Garrel explores a similar theme in his latest film *Lover for a Day*, where a daughter moving home must come to terms with the fact that her father's new lover is her age). We see the two female characters form a friendship of their own, as well as the odd homosocial-bordering-on-homoerotic relationship between Frédéric and Paul. "Friendship isn't love," Frédéric insists, but in the very next scene Élisabeth expresses her jealousy towards the excessive time Paul spends with Frédéric. Their chance encounter a year later in Paris is painted as an almost romantic reunion, each transfixed by the memory and presence of the other. Inevitably, Frédéric and Paul's friendship drives a wedge between both couples; the women feel lonely and irrelevant (though we are made painfully aware of their sense of irrelevance). Meanwhile, the men adopt, at best, a cavalier attitude. Angèle complains, "[Frédéric] said fidelity is an outdated, petty-bourgeois concept and he isn't into it." In any other context, the line would sound campy, but lensed through Angèle's anguish, Frédéric's adulterous trysts land as quietly shuddering blows. These often thorny gender dynamics mean that, in Garrel's pessimistic interpretation of infidelity, "Men always blame [women] for what they do to [them]." The great tragedy is that maybe Garrel's women blame themselves, too. When Elisabeth (Pierre's lover) discovers Manon has a lover of her own, her indignance appears absurd.

To his credit, Garrel doesn't give them a moral pass, rigorously surfacing the jarring incongruities in his characters' casual misogyny. It's this double standard that give Pierre the courage to casually admit his marriage before he sleeps with Elisabeth—and true to the

director's archetypal women, she simply shrugs in response, inadvertently normalizing male infidelity. Yet Pierre assumes that he cannot be cheated on, and when Manon defends herself by saying her new beau makes her feel truly loved, Pierre's frigid anger is destructive and obsessive. He sees infidelity as taboo for women, perceiving them as parasitic, perpetually at fault in any faltering relationship. In *Jealousy*, when Louis' throwaway remarks to Claudia objectify female beauty, she pauses, laughs nervously. "Very funny," she bites out—here, the close-up on her facial expression makes it clear she finds it anything but. The juxtaposition is made all the more striking when Garrel's female characters knowingly settle for a veneer of romantic bliss, resorting to emotional impassivity as the lesser of two evils. At one point, Louis semi-confesses to his mistress, "If one of us ever cheats, do we say so?" Her only reply is, "You're so complicated. I just need you to love me. Love me. And for us both to be happy." To some extent, this deliberate ignorance is one of the many ways his women subvert their "victimhood". Manon, Angèle, and Claudia all leave Pierre, Frédéric, and Louis respectively. There is a poignant symmetry to *Jealousy*: echoing the title as its central theme, the film begins on a distraught Clothilde clinging to Louis, but ends with him the jilted, jealous one. For eventually Claudia dumps Louis, mirroring the opening scenes, though this time the fallout feels like a quiet catastrophe. We are brought into Louis' perspective for a change, as he stands alone on the street, bereft, before a stark cut ominously shows a gun lying on a table.

Garrel explores the weaknesses of men and women alike. When Angèle dumps Frédéric, he is left sulking and weeping incessantly, much like the spurned women in *In the Shadow of Women*. And in a rare moment of levity, an extended dance sequence shows Angèle flirting with multiple partners, an intimate, freeing scene; Frédéric is never allowed the same uninhibited exuberance. In fact, Angèle admits (although much later) that, in spite of her accusing Frédéric, she was the one who first started cheating. Élisabeth remains on Angèle's

side “simply because she is a woman,” evincing a tacit mutual recognition of the things we do for love, and to escape the suffocating constraints of love. Interestingly, Garrel’s ambivalent cinematography makes it clear that according blame is not his project. For his characters are in denial, fatally tethered to one another; they profess their undying love but continue to hurt one another.

It’s worth mentioning that many of his films (these three included) are based on his father’s or his own lives, bearing some autobiographical strains. Couple this with his assembled cast of family members, and they begin to take shape as intimately personal tales. One can’t help but wonder if this non-judgmentality comes from a truly aloof objectivity, or from being too close to the subject. But the question should be: does it matter? What emerges from the collaboration is a precarious sensitivity, a manner of looking clear-eyed back at what their tales might reveal about humanity more generally. It’s as if in the retelling, he is not trying to piece a singular narrative together, but merely offering us the chance to make sense of these tricky emotional entanglements. In *Jealousy*, an elderly friend of Claudia’s counsels Louis on everyone’s differing, often incompatible “limits of love.” Garrel’s films therefore pose a similar question: how do we navigate our limits of love?

## **THE LIMITS OF LOVE**

“I’m not a masochist. I’m not made for self-sacrifice,” Angèle laments, as she considers leaving Frédéric. Garrel suggests that suffering is inextricably embedded within love, and the endings of these three films indeed offer little respite. In *In the Shadow of Women*, when the estranged lovers meet some time later, Manon begrudgingly admits solitude saddens her. She giggles shyly, tucking her hair back in a coy gesture, and they share an embrace of relief. The film closes on them walking together, but we can’t tell whether it’s a lasting reconciliation, or

simply them slipping back into an endless, inescapable cycle. All three films end on a bittersweet note as murky and indefinite as his plot drivers. That's not to say, however, that his work is entirely characterized by depressive romance. There are brief flashes of happiness—watching Claudia and Charlotte's foolish antics, Louis exudes fondness and affection. Manon and Angèle appear truly content with their extramarital affairs (though possibly only in the moment, for when the storylines skip ahead, neither are still in the relationship). Hence, the filmmaker adopts a thought-provoking approach to infidelity. It doesn't manifest as eroticized bodies or shiny new objects of desire, but simply as inherent to any realistic understanding of love.

Garrel's body of films form a cinema of introspection, his camera capturing secret vignettes that elucidate the paradoxes of love and infidelity. It's voyeuristic, but never judgmental, and utterly compelling. Nothing his characters say or do are particularly radical, but perhaps that is what Garrel strives to show us: the casual cruelty normal people inflict upon one another, and upon themselves. His films, for all their parallel preoccupations, are less repetitive than they are receptive to endless interpretation. We are left to piece together these drifting, transitory moments that meander along as one intoxicating, extended reverie, the halcyon thrill of fresh romance often tumbling rapidly into *amour fou* (literally "mad love", passion to the point of obsession). To watch a Garrel film is to immerse yourself in a moral conundrum, grappling with the contrast between illicit infidelity and the seemingly transcendental intimacy of these love affairs. Flirting with controversy, he forces us to consider the implications of his characters' pure idealism. Astonishingly, it is impossible to accord blame by the time his nuanced films draw to a close; instead, we are left questioning if the pursuit of genuine happiness might not justify some moral ambiguity after all.