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Film 487: Transnational Film Noir

16 March 2026

The Femme Fatale in *The Bride Wore Black* and *Mississippi Mermaid*

What is the essence of a cinematic character—an actual person, a projection of the subconscious, or a deliberate construction of the author? For any of these possibilities, what might the character signify? Various commentators have attempted to answer these questions at times, postulating that characters are the product of the actors who portray them, of the film's director, of the writer who provides the source material, or even of the film genre as a whole. In this context, the characters of Julie Kohler (played by Jeanne Moreau) in François Truffaut's 1968 film *The Bride Wore Black* and Julie Roussel/Marion Vergano (Catherine Deneuve) in Truffaut's subsequent film *Mississippi Mermaid* (1969) are interesting to compare. Though radically different, Kohler and Vergano both exemplify forms of the *femme fatale* archetype, a staple of crime novels and the genre of films based upon them, film noir.

In most noir films of the time—both Hollywood and international—the *femme fatale* is a clearly defined character type delineated not by her own actions, but by her influence on others in the film, especially the male protagonist. She manipulates the protagonist into sheltering and protecting her—especially from law enforcement—or even killing for her while convincing him of her unquestioning love. By some ruse, she prevents him from recognizing her true nature while relying on him and often other men for support. As described in Jack Boozer's article "The Lethal *Femme Fatale* in the Noir Tradition," the *femmes fatales* in classic films "appear beautiful but also treacherous, criminally depraved, and castrating in their desires[, o]ften serving as

catalysts for criminal behavior in men” (21). A typical noir has the main male character torn between this vice-infested but inexplicably persuasive *femme fatale* and her antithetical counterpart: a woman who embodies virtue and all the concepts associated with it in the popular imagination, who is entirely suitable as a partner but fails to excite him in the manner he obtains from the *femme fatale*. Truffaut’s films complicate the dichotomy between these types of women, more overtly in *The Bride Wore Black* than in *Mississippi Mermaid*. As Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston note in their essay “Truffaut’s Gorgeous Killers,” this ambiguity is mirrored through narrative and moral uncertainty; their investigation of the *femme fatale* throughout Truffaut’s *oeuvre* reveals his “combination of attraction and hostility in response to this kind of woman” (2). While the opposition between these types is less explicit in Truffaut’s works than in Hollywood films, it remains the product of a common and reductive characterization of women by society.

In *Mississippi Mermaid*, this dichotomy is initially subverted but later returns explicitly. The character first introduced as Julie Roussel seems to be honest and loving, despite the surprising discrepancy between her appearance and the photograph she sent to Louis when they arranged their marriage through correspondence. Julie explains that she sent him her neighbor’s picture to avoid attracting his interest solely for her beauty, a story that seems plausible at first. The minor details that discredit her identity are readily ignored, such as Julie’s difficulty in placing the wedding ring on her finger. Later, when she leaves the house surreptitiously, her husband’s business partner sees her quarreling with an unknown man. Shortly afterward, Julie abandons Louis by departing covertly and unexpectedly with his money. In desperation, Louis forcibly pries open her trunk, which had always remained locked. It contains a Bible, a cross, and some humble garments—of which Louis later remarks, “I realized that they could never have

belonged to the woman I married.” He recognizes abruptly that the actual Julie Roussel, with whom he had exchanged letters and whom he had agreed to marry, was a religious young woman who dressed modestly, in accordance with the artifacts in the trunk. Yet Louis has become fascinated with the woman who defrauded him and hires a private detective to trace her. Although he burns her clothing in an effort to eradicate his obsession, he eventually begins tracking her himself. Allan Hirsh’s essay “Truffaut’s Subversive Siren” explains this surprising twist as an extension of a trope that equally entangles the prior protagonists of noir, the “pursuit of the phantom woman. Julie Roussel, although unknown, is nevertheless domestic compared to the lures of the ‘siren.’ This story is, of course, a staple of past cinema” (82). After finding the *femme fatale* and discovering her true name to be Marion Vergano, Louis remains with her despite her deceptions, her intermittently cold demeanor, and her subsequent efforts to poison him. The film is somewhat sympathetic to his perspective in allowing Marion the chance to describe her childhood experiences in an orphanage and the psychological traumas she experienced, but it does not attempt to excuse her behavior entirely, and the line is preserved between women characterized by virtue and those by vice. Marion admits that she began her criminal activities as a pickpocket during high school and became increasingly adept over time by perfecting her talents, especially her ability to manipulate men. Her adolescent metamorphosis is described in the film but remains largely peripheral, serving merely to entrap Louis further as his sympathy intensifies his love.

The process of moral degradation adopts a greater significance in Truffaut’s previous film, *The Bride Wore Black*. Here, Julie Kohler is presented as a calculating killer, planning each murder in detail before committing it, researching her victims, and crossing out the names of those deceased in a small black notebook. As the narrative progresses, the murders become

increasingly protracted and elaborate. The first man talks with Julie for a few moments before being pushed from a balcony, having been told only at the last moment the identity of his killer. The second has an impromptu date with her and later welcomes her suggestion that they return to his apartment, where she poisons him. But unlike the first victim, this one is conscious for long enough to struggle on the floor as Julie reveals her identity. Brief images from the scene of her wedding years earlier depict the groom collapsing abruptly upon leaving the church, but the rest remains a mystery for the viewer until Julie suffocates a subsequent man, Clément Morane. In the moments before Clément's murder, flashbacks reveal that the groom was Julie's childhood sweetheart, David. While trapped by Julie beneath the staircase in his house, Clément begs to be released and attempts to explain the events precipitating David's death as the scene is reenacted in another flashback. A group of intoxicated men in a hotel room across the street from the church—Clément among them—are playing poker while intermittently amusing themselves at mock target practice with a hunting rifle. One of the men watches Julie's wedding party leave the church through the scope of the rifle, violating all the rules of firearm safety in the process. When another man in the group realizes the danger, he struggles to confiscate the gun, which fires accidentally. The shot kills David, who collapses on the steps of the church, leaving Julie devastated. In despair, she subsequently attempts suicide and is prevented by her mother. Instead, she resolves to kill the men who have destroyed her beloved and shattered her hope for the future. As with Marion Vergano's past, the revelation of Julie Kohler's psychological trauma explains but does not excuse her criminal behavior. Nonetheless, Truffaut's choice to include these flashbacks allows the viewer to empathize with the characters, mirroring the perspectives of the men enticed by them.

Though Truffaut was no stranger to the world of Hollywood genre films, his material for both motion pictures was purposely selected from American crime novels: *The Bride Wore Black* was derived from a Cornell Woolrich novel of the same name, while *Mississippi Mermaid* was based on Woolrich's later novel *Waltz into Darkness*. However, as Sharon Buzzard explains in "Scripting for a Viewer Response," Truffaut's method of adaptation was never a direct translation of a novelist's style into cinematic terms; rather, it incorporated elements of the original work within a reimagined structure aiming to convey Truffaut's own ideas. Buzzard views Truffaut's adaptation as accentuating feminist ideas "suggested but not emphasized thematically in the novel" (19). The critic Jonathan Rosenbaum concurs in this view, stating of Woolrich that his work consistently reveals men to be just as susceptible to fear as the traditional perception of women, and "fear becomes the universal, democratic plane on which they can meet as equals" ("Black Widow," 36). Rosenbaum believes that Woolrich was one of the only novelists in his time who recognized stereotypical masculine behavior as concealing underlying psychological and sexual weaknesses, with a perpetual nervous energy exhibited by men as well as by women in his works. Though distinct, the men in Truffaut's film versions display these same insecurities.

The Truffaut adaptations nonetheless differ considerably from their source material. Indeed, Rosenbaum argues that the films may have been closer to their original novels had Catherine Deneuve been cast as Kohler and Jeanne Moreau as Vergano. Such an alteration seems unimaginable due to the enormous influence of the stars on their roles, but it simultaneously suggests that Rosenbaum has seen a parallel in the characters' natures, with the distinction between them possibly better expressed by a reversed casting choice. He continues by noting that the casting and the nature of the adaptations both remove the films greatly from the

psychological realm of the original novels: “In the Truffaut adaptations, Deneuve and Belmondo are simply too charming to qualify as Woolrich monsters, and Moreau is too chic [...]. The sustained perversity of [*Waltz into Darkness*] is something that Truffaut can only hint at” in *Mississippi Mermaid* (Rosenbaum 38). While it seems doubtful given Rosenbaum’s criticism of the leads in both films that a reversal of casting would have extracted the psychological essence of the novels and placed it on the screen, his point remains that the film adaptations diverge substantially from their source material and must be understood as separate works with a distinct philosophy. Although Woolrich’s characters usually lack agency and find themselves at the mercy of their circumstances regardless of their gender, Kinder and Houston argue that Julie Kohler actually achieves her goals in the film adaptation: “Though she ends up behind bars, no one has escaped her power and, in her own terms and those of the film, she’s a smashing success” (2). In a radical departure from the ending of the novel, in which Julie is shown to be mistaken about who killed her husband and why, her character in the film version is entirely accurate in her analysis of the crime. In addition, while the novel has a male detective who uncovers the motive for her murders, the police in the film cannot determine the connection among the victims, with Julie’s reasons remaining mysterious to them. They are entirely powerless to prevent Julie from committing the last murder after being sent to prison, where she assists the kitchen staff in order to enter the men’s ward with a concealed knife and stab the last of her husband’s killers. Truffaut has reversed the novel’s hierarchy of knowledge, aligning the viewer with the *femme fatale* while rendering her motivations entirely enigmatic to the male investigators.

In a fashion that reveals a realm of significance exceeding the bounds of the diegesis alone, the characters’ names appear deliberately selected to suggest the *femme fatale*. As Kinder

and Houston note, each “woman is called Julie, evoking Strindberg’s play *Miss Julie* [...] [whose] freedom-loving heroine is, of course, destructive to men” (8). The stories of their identities also appear to correspond with their actions. Julie Kohler is known by her actual name from the beginning of the film, always stating her genuine identity at the critical moment of killing. By contrast, the character first introduced to the audience as Julie Roussel in *Mississippi Mermaid* is soon revealed as Marion Vergano. She proves incapable of murder; the actual Julie Roussel was killed by her former boyfriend before Marion arrived on the island, and Marion’s efforts to poison Louis are thwarted after he merely becomes ill and recognizes her intentions. Despite her forged identity as a false “Julie,” Marion epitomizes the *femme fatale*; she steals her husband’s fortune and later drives him to murder the detective to protect her, all as a result of his infatuation and misplaced trust.

The multidimensional distinction between the characters discloses a genuine psychological progression in Kohler, who appears justified in her murderous intentions, while Vergano’s perpetual deceit erodes the legitimacy of her rationale. Although both characters blame their destructive actions on earlier events in their lives, the film never establishes whether Vergano’s stories are true, and her decisions are not motivated by a desire for revenge against those who have wronged her. It is Kohler who departs more from the norms of classic Hollywood, seizing agency to shape her own destiny by killing the men who have wronged her. By contrast, Vergano surrenders her volition to Louis, passively accompanying him in his escape to Switzerland. Though she remains nominally free at the film’s conclusion as an uncaptured fugitive from justice, the imprisoned Kohler is the one who has achieved her goals. Truffaut’s juxtaposition of the two films and their mirror-image characters suggests the incommensurability of physical and psychological freedom; the Julie at liberty in the world is trapped in the mind of

a man, while the one surrounded by bars has broken the bonds of bereavement. In a characteristically modernist fashion, both endings are left open for the viewer to decide the events that follow, rather than offering a simplistic or reductive conclusion. Similarly, the ultimate source and significance of the characters remain unclear; are they the cinematic equivalent of a *femme fatale* named Julie in Truffaut's own life? Given the films' divergence from their novelistic basis as well as from existing tropes within the noir genre, the viewer is left to wonder who provided Truffaut's cinematic inspiration.

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