



The Innocent (L'Innocent)

Director: Louis Garrel

©: Les Films des Tournelles, Arte France Cinéma, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Cinéma

Production Companies: Les Films des Tournelles, Arte France Cinéma, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Cinéma, Le Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée, Creative Europe MEDIA in association with: Cofimage 33, Banque Postale Image 15

With the participation of: ARTE France, Canal+, Ciné+

Post-production Supervisor: Cédric Ettouati

Script Supervisor: Anaïs Sergeant

Casting: Julie Allione

Screenplay: Louis Garrel, Tanguy Viel

With the collaboration of: Naïla Guiget

Director of Photography: Julien Poupard

Editor: Pierre Deschamps

Production Designer: Jean Rabasse

Costume Designer: Corinne Bruand

Original Music: Grégoire Hetzel

Sound: Laurent Benaïm, Alexis Meynet, Olivier Guillaume

Cast:

Roschdy Zem (*Michel*)

Anouk Grinberg (*Sylvie*)

Noémie Merlant (*Clémence Genièvre*)

Louis Garrel (*Abel Lefranc*)

Jean-Claude Pautot (*Jean-Paul*)

Yanisse Kebbab (*caviar truck driver*)

Léa Wiazemsky (*Sylvie's witness*)

Manda Touré (*woman at aquarium*)

Florent Masarin (*Commissaire Delmas*)

France 2022

95 mins

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PREVIEW

The Innocent (L'Innocent)

+ Q&A with writer-director Louis Garrel

When Sylvie (Anouk Grinberg), a prison drama teacher, marries convicted robber Michel (Roschdy Zem), her son Abel (Louis Garrel) is less than thrilled. It seems Sylvie has a habit of falling in love with her pupils, one that tends to end badly. Abel, meanwhile, has his own problems. Since the death of his wife in a car accident that happened while he was driving, he's been living a muted life, the underwater feeling emphasised by his job as an aquarium tour guide. At work, Abel explains to a group of students the biological concept of neoteny: the preservation of juvenile characteristics in adults. It's a description differently fitting both the mother and son: the one febrile and quickly infatuated, the other sullen and self-sequestered.

The Innocent, Louis Garrel's fourth feature as director, sees Abel reluctantly drawn out of his shell after he comes to suspect that the newly released Michel is up to his old tricks. Abel turns detective, recruiting dippy friend and co-worker Clémence (a sparkling Noémie Merlant, playing against type in a role that might have been written for Laure Calamy, and bringing a sharp-eyed wit to the part) as his Girl Friday. The dynamic between the mismatched pair is played for laughs, as Clémence's chaotic actions repeatedly propel the uptight, anxious Abel into difficult situations. Of course, their bickering signals a simmering sexual tension as well as a form of moral learning. He helps her grow up; she makes him freer. The stage is set for a skittering screwball romance.

As the idiosyncratic duo stalk Michel, however, the film takes on the trappings of film noir. We see split screens and superimpositions, iris effects that evoke the spy's binoculars, a Herrmann-esque score. Against a palette of tobacco brown and burnt umber, leather jackets and pistol shafts catch the light with a dull gleam. Cinematographer Julien Poupard shoots Lyon as a shadowy metropolis, all lamp-lit empty cobbled streets and Edward Hopper cafés.

If this all sounds rather hokey, it is. But it's also brilliant fun, ably supported by some terrifically game performances from the four main cast members, who have chemistry in spades. There's a great pleasure in seeing actors of this calibre wield their talents with such fleetness of foot. Watching Zem instruct Garrel how to salsa, for instance, one marvels at the good humour and physical grace of two men so often cast in heavy-duty dramatic roles (there's also a very silly scene in which the pair attempt to pronounce the word 'axolotl'). Likewise, French cinema veteran Grinberg and arthouse darling Merlant (of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, 2019, and *Tár*, 2022) seem to be having a blast as these open-hearted would-be molls. Another film might ask questions about why Abel is so attached to his mother, and how it is, exactly, that he ends up falling for a woman just like her. But Garrel largely swerves the darker aspects of character psychology. He has played a grieving widower of sorts before, in Christophe Honoré's *Love Songs* (2007). Whereas in that film the

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Thu 14 Sep 18:15

Doctor Who: The Five Doctors

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Kermode

Mon 18 Sep 20:20

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Tue 19 Sep 18:15

Attack the Block + panel discussion

Thu 21 Sep 20:35

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Mon 25 Sep 18:20

Preview: The Old Oak + Q&A with director Ken

Loach and writer Paul Laverty

Tue 26 Sep 18:00

Jung Jae-il in Conversation

Sat 30 Sep 18:10

question of how to move on after loss sits front and centre, here Garrel opts instead for the dopamine thrill of stake-outs and car chases and big, gorgeous, swooning kisses.

He's able to do this precisely because the actors so deftly telegraph the characters' deeper emotions, forgoing the need for exposition. Indeed Garrel's screenplay (co-written with Tanguy Viel and Naïla Guiguet) constantly celebrates the act of acting: opening, for example, with Zem giving a speech, which turns out to be part of a play, which turns out to be less of a dramatic stretch than the film first suggests. In a bravura sequence, Abel and Clémence stage a lover's quarrel to distract a mark from the illicit events happening behind his back (literally). Garrel uses depth of focus and racking beautifully to shift between the couple's table in the foreground, the mark sitting behind them and, through the window, the unfolding heist, but it's the guessing game of what is feigned and what sincerely felt that drives the tension. What to make, for instance, of the fact that Clémence follows up a teary declaration of love with a quick time-check?

No prizes for guessing how it all ends up. There are few surprises here, but that's all to the good. *The Innocent* is a cinephile treat, a nostalgic mash-up of *Bob le flambeur* (1956) and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) cast in the mid-70s aesthetic of *Night Moves* (1975). Riffing on the classics while refusing to slide into pastiche or parody, it plays it straight – unlike its hero – and emerges stronger for it.

Catherine Wheatley, *Sight and Sound*, September 2023

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