

The Inner Life of Martin Frost (2007)

Cast: David Thewlis (Martin Frost), Irène Jacob (Claire Martin), Michael Imperioli (Jim Fortunato) and Sophie Auster (Anna James), Paul Auster.(English dialogue)

Director/Screenwriter: Paul Auster

Producers: Paulo Branco, Paul Auster, Yael Melamede and Gerardo Herrero

Genre: Comedy drama

1. What are the possible "intertextual" references you can spot in the film? After the film view on Wednesday some of you came up with interesting ideas. I am eager to discuss them with you in class.
2. What is the effect of having Paul Auster's voice over? Why do you think he came up with this idea? What about the opening scene? The family photographs decorating the house are of Auster and Hustvedt, which makes Auster the de facto star of the show (?). Then what about the choice of having Sophia Auster on the cast?
3. What are your interpretations of the film? What is the main theme in your opinion?
4. Why do you think Paul Auster makes the choice of having his characters share some parts of their names/surnames? How do you read this coincidence?
5. What can you think of as to the choice of the setting and music?
6. How do you interpret the typewriters spinning in black voids?
7. The film is dotted with some "comic relief" sketches. Can you think of some and explain their purpose?
8. Read the following reviews and highlight the **positive aspects in green** and the **negative ones in grey**. Be prepared to say which ones you agree or disagree with and why. (I decided not to simplify the language on purpose. However in brackets and highlighted in yellow you will find the meaning of the most difficult words)

The Affairs of a Novelist By MATT ZOLLER SEITZ Published: September 7, 2007

In the novelist and filmmaker Paul Auster's new movie, the novelist Martin Frost (David Thewlis) holes up in a cabin, intending to begin a new work, and becomes embroiled in an affair with a woman named Claire Martin (Irène Jacob). She appears one morning in Martin's bed, claiming to be the niece of one of the cabin's owners. She might be a con artist (a **deceiver**), or she might be Martin's muse. Indeed, he may have conjured her into life with the fiction he's writing. The movie's style is aggressively literary, with plummy third-person narration (read by Mr. Auster) that over-interrogates every development, and close-ups of significant objects (like a manual typewriter floating in black space) that aim for talismanic power but don't get there. A late appearance by a supporting character — a pushy plumber and aspiring writer named Jim Fortunato (Michael Imperioli), who offers his mentally damaged young ward (played by Mr. Auster's own daughter, Sophie) as a servant and possible concubine — pushes the movie from bland pretension into distastefulness.

interesting, fun, lyrical

Look, this was a fun and interesting movie. True (as with much of Auster's work) it skates the edge of cliché and portentousness, but always and exclusively at the expense of those qualities. The reviewer seems to have missed a great deal of the comedy - "talismanic power" is not at all what I think the director was aiming at.

Although not to be numbered among the great achievements of directing, the movie certainly looks good and sometimes even beautiful. All of the performances were terrific - Imperioli, in particular, was much closer to brilliant than "distasteful"!

It should have been noted in the review that "the Inner life..." is a film version of a movie which was described in Auster's novel "The Book of Illusions" about the discovery of a missing star of the silent film era. Though not at all necessary to enjoy the film, this notion adds an additional layer of enveloping - and it's an interesting addition, because, with "Book of Illusions" in mind, it's difficult sometimes to keep the layers in order. There are two slapstick gags, in particular, that caused

me to think of the filmmaker from *Book of Illusions*.

What else can I say: it has always been easy to think of Auster as an heir to the Hawthorne of the short tales and/or Irving of the *Sketchbooks*, and this movie confirms that impression. Auster may have the better sense of humor, in addition to the advantage of perspective.

Is anyone there, and will anyone care?

Novelist and sometime filmmaker Paul Auster hopes audiences will be amused by what goes on inside the head of his title character, a writer played by David Thewlis. Despite the scruffy charms of Thewlis, that's not going to happen. Being trapped in Martin Frost's mind, which Auster cracks open using a dull epistemological conceit, isn't fun, and this four-character parable is unlikely to tickle even the most sympathetic literary groupie.

Martin borrows a friend's country house to rest after a three-year slog working on a novel but immediately realizes he can't not write. Instead of relaxing, he begins a short story and vows to stay until it's finished. Awakening on day two, he finds a woman in bed next to him. Claire (Irene Jacob) claims she's the owner's niece and is writing a doctoral thesis in philosophy. Is she real? Her Berkeley tee shirt implies she's a figment of his imagination, assuming it refers to the Irish thinker's Idealism as well as the university.

They fall for each other, and Martin's commitment to his vocation is threatened. He's torn between making art and making love, yet neither path seems very inviting to us. Claire comes off as an irritating muse, and the story-within-a-story amateurish. Things turn silly in part two with the entrance of a local plumber and aspiring author (Michael Imperioli), who has a muse of his own (played by the director's daughter Sophie) and zero talent.

The Inner Life of Martin Frost has greater visual than literary appeal. That's faint praise since it doesn't score cinematically, but the serenely conventional camerawork and Portuguese locale beckons in a way the script doesn't. Exhibiting a mundane (bordering on inane) sense of humor, Auster's movie is more ridiculous than pretentious.

Still, he could've helped neutralize the charge of high fault in solipsism if he hadn't voiced the narration himself. Better yet, he could've refrained from opining about the writer's life altogether.

A film review by Christopher Null - Copyright © 2008 Filmcritic.com

The work of Paul Auster can be an acquired taste, but his *Inner Life of Martin Frost* is so sweet and harmless that even the most jaded of moviegoers ought to find it a breezy way to spend 90 minutes, lost in Auster's weird fantasy land.

Martin Frost (David Thewlis) is a novelist, and he's off to the country for a vacation after finishing his latest book and to work on a new story. No sooner does he fall asleep, though, that he wakes up to find someone else in his bed, Claire Martin (Irène Jacob), who initially says she was lent the house by the same guy who lent it to Martin. Funny coincidence, eh? Just like their names: His first is Martin, her last is Martin. It helps that she's a hot, exotic French beauty with an active libido, and soon she's got her top off as they roll around in the sheets. When Martin talks to the cabin's owner, he finds that Claire isn't who she claims to be. Claire confesses, but can offer no details. They are in love now, and Martin decides to let the mystery of her past drop.

Strangely, as Martin gets closer to completing his story, Claire suddenly falls ill. The more he writes, the sicker she gets. What's going on here? To explain would be to spoil the mystery of Martin Frost's "inner life," but suffice it to say that, of the four characters in the film, only two are "regular" people like you and me.

Auster's trifle is fun and light, **an Aesop's fable for the modern age**. It is full of hope and good feelings, but it doesn't really make a lick of **(much)** sense in the end. Not that that's a bad thing, really. The real problem here is that Auster only has about 50 minutes of material, and the film comes to an obvious halt midway through, before Auster tries to abruptly jump-start by introducing two new characters in an even stranger situation than Martin and Claire. A connection surfaces in the end, but the conclusion comes across as tacked-on, padded to get the thing to feature length. That's an unfortunate way to wrap up an otherwise sweet little movie. I'd have preferred it at 50 minutes.

The Inner Life of Martin Frost (2007) literally unfolds in the restorative rustic lyricism of a country house, an ideal recharging site for fried, frazzled city-dwellers, specifically David Thewlis's titular novelist. The absent friends who own the place have lent it to him to repair his shredded nerves amid the cocooning surroundings of hand-rubbed oak furniture, whitewashed walls and rustling leaves against cloudless skies. Figuratively, though, it seems to take place inside the head of novelist-filmmaker Paul Auster. This imparts to the film a certain

beguiling fancifulness, but it can't last the distance. It suggests an art house analogue of a Road Runner animation, where the wingless bird races off the edge of a steep cliff, is kept aloft in midair by its spinning legs for an impossible moment, then plummets to a crashing end.

The handsome visual textures of the setting (in Portugal, actually, although the story presumably unfolds in America) provide sensuous underpinning as Auster revisits a favorite theme -- individuals going back to ground zero to grapple in surreal ways with questions of language, perception and identity. In the case of Thewlis's Martin Frost, grappling is the last thing on his mind as he settles into the handsome borrowed hideaway to just kick back after having completed his fourth novel. Instead, he finds himself literally, and serendipitously, embracing his muse.

As embodied by Irene Jacob, she's highly embraceable. And accessible. Frost wakes up one morning to find her asleep next to him. Startled and disconcerted, he's further unnerved by her self-possession and poise. Explaining that she's the niece of his house-owning friends, and without ever quite explaining how she made her way next to him in bed without awakening him, she assures him that she'll respect his need for quiet and solitude, proposes that they make the best of it while staying out of each other's way, then brightly utters the dreaded words of the intruder: "You'll never know I'm here."

A few meals later they're in bed. So energized is the hitherto drained Frost that he's impelled to begin a new story. It goes well. He spends each day typing. They spend their evenings over simple, elegant, civilized meals, accompanied by all the right wines and all the right lines. The only flaw in their idyll comes when her health begins failing as he draws close to the end of his new opus (**important work**). In fact, there's a direct correlation between his creativity at the keyboard and between the sheets. Long after he has accepted her plea to just take her mysterious presence on faith and love her, he notices that the more his new work comes to life, the more her life force and energies seem depleted.

The film reaches a crisis point when he must decide whether to rejoice in the newly finished work and lose her, or destroy it and restore her. How far you will have borne with Auster's fable about the cost of art, and the erotic sources of its energies, will depend on your tolerance for whimsy (**unusual way of thinking or behaving**). The trouble comes when Auster's fabulist hand falters along with his inventiveness, then fails as the story thins out past what you feel is its natural shorter-than-feature-length span, then seems to evaporate altogether in its Architectural Digest country vacation ambience.

Before long, Jacob's Eurocharm and Thewlis's unconvincing abandon seem stranded by Auster's inability to take them anywhere. As writer and director, he seems to have painted them, and himself, into a corner they can't get out of, as gossamer fantasy, depending on lightness and evanescent charm for its appeal, is replaced by mundane wheel-spinning. It takes the form of the local boiler repairman, Michael Imperioli, arriving and proclaiming that plumbing and heating is just his day job and that he's really a writer, bouncing relentlessly from genre to genre, blissfully unaware of his total lack of talent.

It's as if one of the bumpkins from **Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*** has been plunked into a sort of Wings of Desire spinoff. Imperioli's would-be writer has also been assigned his own personal muse, and his lack of creativity is in direct proportion (or perhaps just another manifestation of) his total insensitivity to her. Lout (**rude**) that he is, he treats his muse (played by Auster's daughter, Sophie) as if she's a moron (**idiot**). In response, she shambles around in a state of virtual catatonia, greasy-haired, shlumpy, looking down at the floor a lot, mumbling. Once Thewlis's appreciative author and Jacob's senior muse get hold of her, however, she brightens into an ethereal delight.

Take care of your muse, the film says, and she'll take care of you in ways you never imagined – or in fact literally can't imagine without her. The sad thing about **The Inner Life of Martin Frost** is that it seems to think it's a tender tribute to the eternal feminine. In fact, it seems an undersupplied old man's fantasy projection of women as servitors, blissfully allaying male potency fears. There isn't enough inner life, or outer life, for that matter, just a sort of paternalistic misogyny softened by wistful intimations of morality.

Auster is a fan of **Kafka**, who leaves a heavy imprint on the events that follow. There are also reminders of **Francois Ozon's *Swimming Pool***, which has Charlotte Rampling as another writer having trouble in distinguishing the real from the imaginary. She, too, is alone in a idyllic country setting but Ozon is more skilful at maintaining the mystery. Auster can't make up his mind if he wants to concentrate on the tragic implications of his lovesick hero's predicament or work it into literary satire.

9. A viewer of the film wrote this positive review. Do you share his views? Why/why not?

We are brought into a paradise of limpidly beautiful visual textures. The oaken rhythms of a country house ensconced in a springtime parkland of luxuriant trees and luminous skies bestow the soothing natural blessing needed by the main character, Martin Frost (David Thewlis), a writer rubbed raw by the mechanics of finishing a novel in New York City. Then paradise morphs into purgatory, made less sad by the postmodern angelic visitations of Claire (Irene Jacobs) and Anna (Sophie Auster). So beguiling is the willful vulnerability of Auster's fantasy, and the edgy interplay that it potentiates between Thewlis and Jacobs, and the broad comedy of a rural everyman (Michael Imperioli), that it is very pleasant to be carried along on the visual foam of uncertain sensual delight, eddying into a feeling that this film's oddly decadent light touch is adept at tracing some grave lineaments of the human heart.

Writer Paul Auster earned his first movie credits as the author and co-director (with Wayne Wang) of the twin films "Smoke" and "Blue in the Face" in 1995. Both films were hits on the indie circuit which helped encourage Auster to fly solo as writer/director of "Lulu on the Bridge" (1998) which was not a hit on the indie or any other circuit. Auster wrote for a few film projects (most notably as one of several story-writers on Wayne Wang's underappreciated "The Center of the World") but did not sit behind the camera again for nearly a decade. "The Inner Life of Martin Frost" (2007) began as a short film, but, regrettably, finished as a feature-length project. Auster treads on well-worn territory with a tale of a writer who seeks seclusion from society. Martin (David Thewlis) stays at the country home of vacationing friends so that he can recover from a novel that took him a gruelling three years to complete. Martin has a surprise in store when he wakes up the next morning next to a gorgeous woman named Claire (played by a gorgeous woman named Irène Jacob, best known for her role in Kieslowski's "Red"). Martin is outraged by this intrusion on his solitude.

Claire explains that she's the niece of the home owners and promises she'll stay out of his way, but you probably already know that's not going to happen. Martin gradually warms to his new roommate; he is particularly won over by her tendency to strip naked and have sex with him on demand. As their romance blossoms, Martin discovers that Claire isn't who she claims to be at all. In fact, she's not human at all, but a muse sent straight from heaven to inspire Martin (by any means necessary) to finish his newest project. It's the ultimate male fantasy, like "Weird Science" or "My Tutor" for the ascetic set, and it would be downright offensive if it didn't feel so absurdly antiquated.

Claire's story peters out (becomes weaker) around the mid-point which, I would guess, is where the original short film ended. Alas, the viewer is asked to stick around for a second half which involves an unconvincing friendship between Martin and a plumber/aspiring writer, a grating tone-deaf performance by Michael Imperioli. Auster and cinematographer Christophe Beaucarne don't have many fresh ideas for the look or style of the movie. And Auster contributes the occasional howler (stupid mistake that makes people laugh) to the script:

Claire: "I have a lot of reading to do."

Martin: "Reading's bad for your health."

Claire: "Only high cholesterol books. I read low fat."

Thewlis is always at his best when he's in high dudgeon (in an angry or offended way), and he's in fine form here. He doesn't spew wall-to-wall vitriol (to say a lot of bad or negative things very quickly) like in Mike Leigh's "Naked," but he plays the angry, alienated artist to a tee (perfectly). Once he falls in love with Claire, though, he loses his edge and with it most of the energy in his performance. Jacob is a beauty who is given little to do in the film besides look beautiful; she can get away with the "I read low fat" line because she's a babe, but I don't think Auster has the same excuse. Imperioli seems lost from the get go, and a late appearance by the director's daughter Sophie Auster is painfully awkward.