

# What I Have Written

Australia, 1996, 96 mins. Drama/Mystery. 16x9, (R)

Dir: John Hughes.

Stars: Martin Jacobs, Gillian Jones, Jacek Koman, Angie Millikan.



An erotic mystery involving a couple married 7 years but on the verge of breaking up. After Christopher suffers a debilitating stroke Sorel discovers a novella which describes Christopher's secret affair during their recent trip in Paris. But what is real and what is fiction? Discovering the truth takes Sorel on quite a journey. Different film styles representing the different points of view and the different locations make this an intriguing and enjoyable film.

IMBD score 6.7

FVFS panel 3.5 stars (out of 5)

## Review by Ian Davidson.

Sorel and Christopher have a 7-year marriage on the brink of breaking up until a trip to Paris seems to turn things around. That is, until Christopher has a stroke and lies in hospital in a coma. Sorel is handed a novella which is clearly based closely on their Paris trip which reveals that Christopher may have had an affair when in Paris and kept in touch with "the other woman" after returning home by ever increasingly explicit letters. Sorel searches Christopher's rooms at home and at work but can find no evidence of unfaithfulness and certainly no letters, so is unsure whether the novella is factual, an exaggeration or even entirely fictional. Some small details within the novella and leads Sorel to discover the surprising truth.

This is a challenging, erotic mystery story of infidelity and erotic obsession. It is full of great ideas and elusive truths which makes the film ultimately very satisfying.

The low budget nature of this film caused the director, John Hughes, to find ways to reduce the cost of filming overseas, and he did this in a most unusual and effective way. The scenes in Paris are compilations of a series of still images producing montages, in black and white – giving a feel to the film as something remembered – in the past - and maybe slightly inaccurate or distorted, narrated in voice-over by passages read from the novella itself.

The film is R rated, but only because of several fleeting R rated still images in porno magazines. Otherwise it would probably pass now as an MA or even M rating.

The four key roles of friend Jeremy, Christopher and Sorel (in middle class Melbourne) and Frances (in Paris) are all excellent. The three characters in the novella (Avery, Gillian and Catherine) are played by the same actors as their counterparts in real life Melbourne, giving a reality and element of truth to the story portrayed in the novella.

Once I realized the characters in Paris and those in Melbourne were actually the same people but with different names, it became easier to follow. The one character I did not really warm to was the Melbourne friend, the lecturer in fine art, who seemed to choose his words from a dictionary I seldom visit. His ability to find obtuse meanings in art for his lectures, had me wondering if he was a caricature or whether there was some hidden message for us in his lectures. Despite this, I was able to move beyond this to take in the real feelings and heartache of the principal characters in the film.

The ending was a surprise, and yet completely rational and rewarding. This film will stay with me for some time.

## How Hughes has blinded us: *What I Have Written* (1996)

By: Joshua Smith

John Hughes' first non-documentary feature is an intricate, mature, subversive mystery unlike anything seen before in Australian film. Its subjective, ambiguous nature and the multiple layers of reading make it a film that is challenging to even the most cinematically-literate audience. For this reason, the film has, unfortunately, received a great deal of negative criticism from film reviewers who claimed that the film's overt "artiness" was a sign of its attempt to segregate its audience. More likely, such critics were simply shocked to see an Australian filmmaker producing such an intensely cognitive, European-inspired work.

What makes *What I Have Written* so visually and narratively compelling is its combination of three disparate styles, representing the viewpoints of each of its three main characters. The first, and most striking, style consists of a series of still photographs (actually achieved by shooting super 16 film at 6-frames-per-second). Each image is tinged with a small degree of colour, creating a surreal, dreamlike sensation that fetishes and defies the world as constructed in the manuscript which may or may not have been written by Christopher (Martin Jacobs). Sound confusing? It is.

The central thrust of the narrative concerns itself with discovering who actually wrote "the manuscript." As such, the still-frame style is contrasted with a frantic, documentary-realism that stands as Sorel's (Angie Milliken) viewpoint. While the still-frame sequence is slow and poetic, allowing the audience (and the film's characters) to scrutinise the characters who play out their respective parts within the manuscript's re-telling, the social realist style is shot with hand-held camera and complemented by a bizarre soundtrack and an urgent performance by Angie Milliken. This represents Sorel's frantic piecing together of clues in her attempts to prove the guilt or innocence of her husband, Christopher.

The third style, described by the director in his Cinema Papers (#108) interview as "Surreal Visuality" represents Jeremy's (Jacek Koman) point-of-view. Being an art scholar, Jeremy is an intensely passionate man. This passion, as well as the controlling, forceful aspects of his personality, is revealed through the intense colour saturation that identifies such sections.

Without giving too much away, the film's main themes revolve around the deciphering of this apparently haphazard combination of styles and viewpoints. Concepts of authorship (Who wrote the manuscript?) and the piecing together of puzzle pieces (the three styles) predominate a surface reading of the text. The human struggle, alienation within relationships, sexual obsession, deception, memory, knowledge and spectatorship are all investigated through sub-plots and Hughes' self-reflexive construction of the work. Also look out for Jeremy's analysis of the painting "The Virgin, Child and St. Ann." Jeremy's changing analysis reveals a great deal about his own psychological state.

While it is difficult to review such an intricate film without giving too much of the plot, or the unravelling of the mystery, away, this film is definitely worth a look. I would also recommend that people see it twice in order to gain a full appreciation of the intricate construction of the work and to understand the manner in which Hughes and John Scott, the author of the novel on which the film is based, have blinded us.



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