

Nick Davis  
Film Discussion Group  
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## *My Cousin Rachel* (dir. Roger Michell, 2017)

### On Camera

Rachel: Rachel Weisz: *The Constant Gardener* (05); *The Lobster* (15); *Denial* (16)  
William: Sam Claflin: *The Hunger Games*, last three parts (13-14); *Me Before You* (16)  
Louise Kendall: Holliday Grainger: *The Borgias* (11-13); *Great Expectations* (12)  
Mr. Kendall: Iain Glen: *The Iron Lady* (11); *Downton Abbey* (11); *Game of Thrones* (11-17)  
Rinaldi: Pierfrancesco Favino: *Angels & Demons* (09); *Rush* (13); won two Italian Oscars

### Off Camera

Writer/Director: Roger Michell: known for moving across multiple genres; see titles below  
Cinematography: Mike Eley: *The Selfish Giant* (13), one of the great recent movies nobody saw!  
Art Direction: Alice Normington: *Suffragette* (15); *Their Finest* (16), also starring Sam Claflin  
Costume Design: Dinah Collin: she put Colin Firth in that wet smock in *Pride and Prejudice* (95)  
Film Editing: Kristina Hetherington: lots of British television, including *The Crown* (16)  
Original Score: Rael Jones: several major music-department credits, but rarely as lead composer

### Also directed by Roger Michell ...

*Persuasion* (1995) – One of the very best Jane Austen adaptations, based on her last finished novel  
*Notting Hill* (1999) – Romantic comedy uniting Hugh Grant with a major film star (Julia Roberts)  
*Changing Lanes* (2002) – Overlooked drama with Ben Affleck and Samuel L. Jackson as two anxious middle-class guys who meet in a road-rage encounter and keep pursuing each other  
*The Mother* (2003) – Another tense, hidden gem in which a widowed woman in her 60s (Anne Reid) enrages her children by starting a sexual affair with a young house painter (Daniel Craig)  
*Enduring Love* (2004) – From an Ian McEwan novel about an Englishman (Daniel Craig again) being stalked by an unstable fellow survivor (Rhys Ifans) of the same hot-air balloon accident  
*Venus* (2006) – Oscar-nominated character study that was one of Peter O'Toole's final films  
*Morning Glory* (2010) – Newsroom comedy with Rachel McAdams, Harrison Ford, Diane Keaton  
*Hyde Park on Hudson* (2012) – Promising project on paper, with Bill Murray as FDR having a historically true pseudo-affair with his cousin Daisy (Laura Linney), but didn't go over well  
*Le Week-end* (2013) – Lindsay Duncan, Jim Broadbent, and Jeff Goldblum star in another film that deserved better, about a late-middle-aged couple on a trip to Paris, contemplating divorce

Also adapted from fiction by Daphne Du Maurier ...

*Jamaica Inn* (1939) – Early Hitchcock thriller about a woman uncovering a seaside crime ring

*Rebecca* (1940) – Classic mystery in Gothic/Romantic vein about the young bride (Joan Fontaine) of a handsome, distant widower (Laurence Olivier) who remains obsessed with his first wife

*My Cousin Rachel* (1952) – The first feature adaptation of our story, produced by 20th Century Fox only a year after the novel appeared; starring Olivia de Havilland and Richard Burton

*The Birds* (1963) – Hitchcock's third Du Maurier treatment, about a murderous flock in California

*Don't Look Now* (1973) – Sinister mystery about an English couple (Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie) taking a trip to Venice after their young child's death, running into strange ghosts

*My Cousin Rachel* (1983) – British miniseries adaptation, with Geraldine Chaplin as Rachel

Facts about *My Cousin Rachel* you may appreciate...

20th Century Fox has retained the rights to *My Cousin Rachel* since buying the book in 1951 and producing the first film the following year. When Michell read his mother's copy of the novel three years ago and got the idea of re-making it, he wrote to Fox, who quickly signed on.

Neither Michell nor his cast watched the original movie of *My Cousin Rachel* so that their creative choices would not be influenced by those of the earlier actors and filmmakers.

Michell thought quickly of Rachel Weisz to play the title figure. She signed on based on the script and a first conversation with Michell. He encouraged her to form a firm opinion as to whether Rachel was guilty or innocent of the crimes ascribed to her, but not to tell him. Over the entire course of filming, he never asked and she never confided her view of the story's events.

Sam Claflin, a graduate of several youth-targeted films, had been imploring his agent to find more complex, adult characters for him to play—and then discovered that what made William so exciting to play was that he was *not* particularly adult *or* complex. Instead, he viewed William as remarkably simple, an orphan raised amidst privilege, suddenly denied what he wants and having a childish fit. He also decided that William was a virgin, a kind of delayed adolescent.

Michell believes that one reason Du Maurier has been so popular with filmmakers is that her writing includes so many details about setting and lighting—as if she has already been inspired by cinematic techniques, or is writing in hopes of her masterly plots being adapted for film.

Du Maurier never specifies exactly when the story unfolds. Michell and his design teams elected to situate the plot sometime in the 1830s—“after canals but before railways,” in the director's terms, because advances in high-speed transportation would have made it too easy for the people in the story to travel or correspond quickly, uncovering answers to their questions.

Most of *Rachel* was shot in an existing house on the coast of Cornwall, where the weather could change very quickly from sunshine to storm fronts. Despite the problems of shooting amid unpredictable climates, the filmmakers liked how these sudden alterations mirrored the characters' changing senses of Rachel's innocence or guilt and kept these shifts in the film.

Broad conversation topics...

**Did She or Didn't She?** I can't imagine our conversation won't revolve substantially around this question, and I'll be curious what evidence or intuitions people gathered for why they believed Rachel was innocent of imputed crimes or whether she did have a hand in killing Ambrose, and/or trying to kill William. Or, perhaps you didn't see this as an either/or proposition and think Rachel might be guilty of everything the story implies *and* a victim of sexist skepticism?

**Gender:** Both of the main characters shoulder major social and historical pressures on men and women. William seems extremely agitated by his lack of sexual experience and his unfamiliarity with women—which sometimes inclines him to distrust them and at other times drives his obsession with them. (The nature of his intimacy with Ambrose is also an open question.) Rachel insists on a certain amount of financial and sexual freedom, highly unusual for a woman of her time period, while also respecting various rules of decorum, gendered and otherwise. What larger messages about gender did you take away from the film, if any?

**Italy:** Du Maurier's novels, influenced by countless Gothic fictions since the late 1700s and by later authors like Henry James, tend to see "Italy" as a code word for all kinds of corruption: moral, cultural, spiritual, sexual, and financial. Would you have responded differently to the story if Rachel and Ambrose had met in a different place? If only as a literary convention, did Rachel's relationship to Italian or Continental culture make her more suspicious to you?

**Judaism:** Particularly in the context of 19th-century English literature and culture, "Rachel" would certainly read as a Jewish name. The most famous Rachel of the mid-19th century, who mostly went by that name alone, was Rachel Félix, a French actress at the Comédie Française, and the prototype of the "tragic muse" figure in literature and theater, who often struggled with her "mixed" cultural, racial, and religious identity and usually met a sad end in these tales (not unlike the "tragic mulatto" in American fictions of the same era). For a film with such modern perspectives on gender and sexuality, *My Cousin Rachel* never makes clear the likely allusion to Rachel's Jewishness, but did you connect those dots? Did they influence the story for you?

**Adaptation:** Even though the makers of this version say they did not watch the 1952 film, it is remarkable how often the scenes and even specific filmmaking details align fairly closely between the two movies. Again, this may have to do with how clearly Du Maurier lays out a cinematic "template" in her own writing, which was influenced by filmic language and techniques. If you were able to watch the 1952 film before seeing this version, which similarities or differences struck you most—either in the performances or the storytelling?

**Filmmaking:** I couldn't take my usual level of detailed notes about the filmmaking during the one time I saw the film this month, although I did find a few prominent patterns significant:

- \* The highly mobile camera, which felt fairly "restless" and in sync with the story's themes
- \* The editor's tendency to cut abruptly between tranquil and agitated scenes without any smooth transition, which exacerbates the sudden emotional and tonal swerves in the plot

What else did you notice in the film's aesthetics that meaningfully shaped the story for you?