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The Grand Cartesian

Even Eric Rohmer admits that nothing much happens in an Eric Rohmer film. Characters sit and walk and eat, but mostly they think—and talk, sometimes interminably, about what they are thinking. A good definition, in short, of a kind of anti-cinema. Yet no movie was more eagerly anticipated at last week's opening of the New York Film Festival than Rohmer's *Chloe in the Afternoon*; and no director aroused as much interest as the mysterious, almost mythical but undeniably brilliant Rohmer, who flew in from Paris to launch his film with an almost unheard-of public appearance.

Like most of his other work, *Chloe* (the last of "six moral tales") describes the dilemma of an upright, somewhat priggish man torn between two wom-

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DIRECTOR ROHMER IN DISGUISE
A passion for privacy.

en. The chief interest in the movie is how, and more important, why, he remains faithful to one of them. In bedroom scenes, Rohmer, a conservative Catholic, has been known to have his characters passionately engaged in a discussion of Pascal and Jansenism. It is his particular gift that he makes such scenes not only amusing and interesting but also downright sensual.

That may sound like a contradiction, but then Rohmer lives by contradiction. An ecological zealot, he refuses to step inside that "immoral polluter," the automobile. As a result he jogs two miles to his office, running in place when he is stopped by a traffic light, and he refuses to go anywhere he cannot reach by his own feet or public transportation. A few years ago, after urgently requesting a meeting with Screenwriter Paul Gégauf, he naturally refused Gégauf's offer to meet him at the train with a car and instead walked five miles from the station to Gégauf's château. "I have come," he announced, "to tell you that all your former influence on me is gone." He then marched back into the night.

One of Rohmer's colleagues in the

French New Wave. Director Claude Chabrol, calls him "the grand Cartesian," after Descartes, the great French philosopher ("I think, therefore I am"). For one of his pictures, Rohmer needed well-dressed little girls as extras. Disdaining casting agencies, he decided to find them in Monceau Park, which is frequented by little girls of the upper class, and sat down there with a bag of bonbons. "He was so bound up in the logic of his action that he forgot to look in the mirror," recounts Chabrol, "to see his usual garb of the time—long black cape, slouch hat and boots." The police, acting on a logic of their own, threw out the suspicious character who was offering candy to little girls.

Rohmer's rationalism has better results on the set. A picture that is supposed to encompass six weeks is shot in six weeks—no less, no more. He shoots a story chronologically: the seasons change, and fruit ripens just as it would in real life. Though a scene that is supposed to take place at 4 a.m. could be photographed in the evening at much greater convenience to actors and crew, the cameras must roll at 4 a.m. People, says Rohmer, act differently at 4 a.m. from the way they do at 6 p.m. and to film at 6, just because it is easier, would be dishonest.

Moral Tales. A former film critic, Rohmer, 52, began directing in 1950, with 16-mm. film shorts and television documentaries. Television, together with American westerns, was, in fact, a major influence on his film making, and his peculiar static style comes from his TV years. "I learned from television not to use too many effects," he says, "to leave the camera immobile in front of the speakers."

According to Rohmer, the speakers should be left largely to themselves. "In my moral tales there is no moral message," he says. "These people determine their own way. The film simply lets them find it." In a sense, Rohmer watches rather than directs his characters. "He's a spectator," says Gégauf. "The world amuses him—like an ant heap. He is completely independent of it, which is why he is a pleasant fellow who smiles and is decent but who is totally without compassion."

The first two of his six moral tales were shot in the early '60s, and the third, *My Night at Maud's*, perhaps his best film so far, was released in 1969. It immediately became a cult favorite. Typically, when *Maud* won the prestigious Delluc Prize, Rohmer announced that he would send a representative to the ceremonies rather than ap-

pear himself. The representative, it turned out, was Rohmer, perfectly disguised in a long beard.

Rohmer's passion for privacy is so extreme that it passes beyond mere eccentricity. "Rohmer," of course, is a nom de plume. Even his mother went to her deathbed not knowing that her son Maurice Scherer was the famous critic, director and leader of the New Wave. He has rarely been photographed for publication, and he testily refuses to talk about his family, which consists of his wife Thérèse and two sons, aged eleven and 13. "The boys pretend not to know that their father is a movie director," says Writer Aurora Cornu, who acted in *Claire's Knee*, and is one of the few outsiders he has allowed to visit his spartan Left Bank apartment. "I choose to be masked," Rohmer explains. "I pull the curtain. Why? Because I have nothing to hide."