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The Texture of Everyday Life

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

At the outset of "La Chienne," the first sound feature of the great French filmmaker Jean Renoir, a puppet appears before us and describes what we are about to see in the following words: "The show is neither a tragedy nor a comedy and proves nothing at all. The characters are neither heroes, nor villains, just ordinary people like you and me." Clearly the puppet is speaking for Renoir himself, offering us more than an introduction to a particular film and in fact, a declaration of principles.

Renoir saw in the talking film the most inherently realistic of art forms and in his movies he consistently rejected the conventional tragic or comic plot, with its stereotyped heroes and villains and its neatly

On Film

("Cousin, Cousine")

pointed moral lesson, concentrating instead on rendering credible and ordinary beings as they live out their lives in recognizable social settings. Treating these people and their lives with a comprehending affection, Renoir not only produced some of cinema's loveliest works but also introduced a naturalistic and humanistic approach to cinema that has permeated French filmmaking itself. Lately it seems to be more prevalent than ever.

With the waning of the New Wave of French directors and their passion for the American genre film, their experimental techniques and their frequently adamantly intellectual approach to film has come a new generation of filmmakers—humanists and naturalists all. Among others whose works have been seen here in the past few seasons there is Pascal Thomas ("Don't Cry With Your Mouth Full"), Claude Sautet ("Cesar and Rosalie Rosalie" and "Vincent, Paul, Francois and the Others"), Claudine Guilmain ("Veronique"). The most recent of all to have his work shown in this country is Jean-Charles Tacchella, director of the currently released "Cousin, Cousine."

Dealing with subjects that range from middle-age crisis to adolescent coming of age, and with life styles as vastly different as those of middle-class Parisians and provincial farmers, the works of these filmmakers nevertheless share a similar aesthetic. Their films tend to be set in homely and familiar surroundings rather than in glamorous or exotic locales, while the stories they tell eschew the highly dramatic plot and the extraordinary emotional situation, moving instead in their own free-flowing way through the typical crises and predicaments of everyday life. Their films also tend to concentrate less on a single character than on the interaction of several and most of all on capturing the texture of a particular time and place and sensibility. But it's not only a loose structure and an emphasis on the ordinary that these films share; it is also their tone. Each views the world from a gently comic stance, affectionately satirizing and quickly forgiving human foibles and accepting potentially tragic events—be they divorce, illness, or even death—as no more than part of the natural rhythm of everyday living. For life in these films is quite simply something to celebrate; and especially as it is lived by "ordinary people like you and me."

Herein lies the charm of these films—but here also, in a way, lies their flaw. For

offering us people we might have met in the course of any ordinary day, who spend most of their time doing the very things that we ourselves do, these movies not only tend to tell us little but what we already have observed and know only too well, but also merge so easily with life that they tend to lose their distinction as art. Perhaps it's that their touch is a bit too light, making the films themselves seem insubstantial. Perhaps it's that their optimism and humor at times seem forced, undercutting their own relaxed vision. Or perhaps it's that unlike the master filmmaker Renoir whose affectionate vision of the human comedy they attempt to share, they simply lack the sharp eye and ear for discovering the extraordinary in the mundane. But though they leave us with little to think about afterwards, these movies are extremely pleasant to sit through and we leave them smiling and somehow uplifted.

Take Jean-Charles Tacchella's "Cousin, Cousine," a sometimes broadly comic, a sometimes lyric, but nevertheless basically realistic slice of Gallic life. Concerned with a man and a woman, Marthe (Marie-Christine Barrault) and Ludovic (Victor Lanoux), each married not particularly successfully to someone else and who first develop a warm, platonic relationship and then fall very much in love, the film places this simple love story firmly in the context of bourgeois family life. For Marthe and Ludovic are cousins by marriage, who first meet at a family wedding, who are brought together at reunions, at children's parties, at Christmas dinners, and at funerals, and whose openly declared affection for one another is in a very real sense a refusal of the conventions and hypocrisy of the bourgeois family itself. The husband Marthe betrays, for example, is the typical, if somewhat exaggerated French husband (Guy Marchand) who justifies his philandering on the one hand, because he believes it a natural expression of the male ego and on the other, because he has been discreet, and who through it all keeps stressing the paramount importance of the family unit and of setting a good example for his son. Ludovic's wife (Marie-France Pissier) is the equally typical incurable romantic, the empty-headed child-woman given to ridiculous self-dramatization and absurdly sentimental fantasy.

Sketching these people, the quiet, endearing scenes between Marthe and Ludovic, as they talk and drink coffee and eat pastries and go for swims at a local pool and finally make love, the comically envisioned family gatherings where relatives argue, flirt with each other, and make inane conversation, and where children laugh heartily at adult silliness, the film charms us with its commonplace touches. Its details warm and amuse us because we recognize their truth to life. Its buoyant mood makes everything an occasion for gentle smiles and refuses to take anything at all very seriously. But while we are caught to a considerable degree by the likeableness and familiarity of it all, everything is somehow too likeable and familiar. Marthe and Ludovic may strike us as real but not as vivid and though Tacchella has trained his camera on an authentic world, that world lacks sufficient color, force, and particularity to remain with us very long. And so it seems that like other recent examples of its kind, "Cousin, Cousine" has caught merely the surface of reality, merely the shadow of the humanist aesthetic, failing to grasp the inner substance that would serve to transform even the most meager slice of life into a memorable work of art.