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FILM

In the type of multi-sensation circus that is the New York Film Festival, it is difficult to pin down the precise intellectual tone and incredible grace of Eric Rohmer's *Ma Nuit Chez Maud*. What makes it so special is that it's involved with a whole stratum of European culture that's totally ignored in films: the intellectual Catholic living in the provinces. Constructed on the encounters of a single person in a new town, its pleasure comes from specificity: of time (Christmas), locale (a bustling job-prosperous town of narrow streets), geography (a wintry, sparse landscape), cast (an unimposing man leading a deftly ordered life meets a bristlingly alert charmer who seizes opportunities and is a hard loser when they dissolve; these two are brought together by an interesting old friend whose specialty is conversational fencing). The most important specific is that the movie is centered on the private intellectual and emotional areas of the very civilized, educated, believable French professional class, and, moving along through small unpointed, often unconnected events, it gets to the component parts of this class's life. The tone of their conversation, their bookstores, food markets, how they might meet in a bar or go on outings is sensitively phrased, spaced out, observed. Such consistently undramatic material is extraordinary in films today and needs tempered lightness to bring it off. And, actually, Rohmer's film, in its last third, begins to run down, as its good Catholic finally effects a date with a girl who meets all his qualifications.

One obvious fact about this *auteur*-minded festival is that it contained only one rich, satisfying, hard-to-accomplish performance: Louis Trintignant's indirect, intelligent acting, which fleshes out Rohmer's cerebral, problematic script. An older version of the shy, rather lonely, poignantly vulnerable student in *The Easy Life*, Trintignant keeps the movie elastic, droll, and dryly exciting through a mastery of slightness: he's slightly prissy about his Catholicism, slightly awkward defending himself against accusations of Jansenism, slightly graceful as he dashes across a snow-covered street in pursuit of a pretty

blonde he's been sizing up in Mass as a future wife. It's a fascinating idea for a movie — a young man's undramatic settling into a new town and job, structured around a long philosophical discussion in the rooms of a sexy, taunting divorcee — and, though it is immaculately written, it depends on taut smudges of elegant acting to keep it afloat.

While criticism gets hung up on old problems of taste, right and wrong, history in the making, the New York Festival at its simplest is an unweeded garden of mixed delights and endurance tests. Most of the interesting work — the BBC anatomy of von Sternberg's unfinished *Claudius, Le Gai Savoir, Ma Nuit Chez Maud,* and Bresson's transposing of a murky, believable Dostoevsky story into an afternoon piece for clavichord — were far from traditional movies. The BBC *The Epic That Never Was* is appetizingly special for the collage effect, but it's no movie. Godard's uncompromising stab at the story film is one of the few occasions when English subtitles under French-speaking voices are a positive design element.

What is good about Bresson's *Une Femme Douce* is the mulishness: the direct, resolute, obsessional artist always driving after the idea of exalted suspension and ascetic rigor in small, quiet phenomena. The movie works despite the spooky queerness of its three inhibited, sleepwalking actors and the silly verbatim use of Dostoevsky's lines, which are rescued from total silliness in the film by a blatant throw-away quality. Bresson, trying for a kind of Cubistic misalliance, doesn't care if the lines are understood or whether they fit in with the image. As story-telling the movie is a brain twister in which few sentences connect to the image they accompany. A young bride jumps up and down on her new bed, and her husband, the ultimate in prissiness and mundaneness, says: "I threw cold water on her ecstasy." Also: "I knew she had behaved honorably, there was no question about it." This blank, icy man has just seen his wife passionately necking in a roadster.

Through movies about hand-task-oriented social outcasts — a poacher setting his traps, an imprisoned man weaving ropes and making hooks for his escape, an apprentice pickpocket learning the trade — Bresson's vocabulary has been honed over the theme of humility as nobility. He likes a face to be as free from reflection as an animal's: his sensitive-faced outsiders do what they do without the face making any comment on the action. Before speaking, eyes methodically drop in nervous, hopeless abjectness. People turn away from the camera, assume prayerful or meditated poses, pass one another as though on a private procession.

On one level, the film is a geometric ballet of doors opening and closing, people exiting and entering, husband or wife turning down the bed covers, of objects or people moving into and out of the stationary camera, a young wife's dazzlingly white, fresh face against the sharp, crotchety profile of her black-haired husband, TV sets turned on and off, bathtubs filled and emptied. Despite the stylized repetitions of gesture, the rigidly held camera angle at stomach height, the uninflected voices speaking desperate, passionate lines, *Une Femme Douce* is an eerie crystalline work, a serious affirmation within a story of suicide.

The Epic That Never Was is a British TV documentary about the making of an unfinished movie called *Claudius.* Narrated by a strangely stiff, schoolboyish Dirk Bogarde, the movie gets sparkle and dimension from intercutting candid interviews with a few completed segments from the elephantine Korda production that mysteriously smashed up after a month. There is something phony about the stuffy stateliness of the rooms. A lot of the sparkle comes from smart-aleck remarks by the writer, Robert Graves, and the co-star, Emlyn Williams. There are pathetic-exciting shots around the abandoned Dedham studios, and, along with the funny, uncut rushes of *Claudius,* the flubs, nervous wisecracks, false starts, Charles Laughton's strong, emotional turmoil turns up like a ghostly giant in anachronistic crown scenes. At moments, this BBC document reaches a poetic peak above its witty gossip: somehow the material becomes layered, recapturing a moment in time, through the mind of a costume designer still puzzled at this date by von Sternberg's giantism ("I want 60 naked vestal virgins dressed in white gauze on the stage by tomorrow morning.").

Or the oblivious, heart-faced, quivering voice of Merle Oberon: "Korda wanted to make the film to make me a real big star, to really make me shine." (She has the same naive-vain expression thirty years earlier when she answers Caligula's "Wouldn't you like to marry my Uncle Claudius, Messalina?" with a helpless, "My family has other plans for me.")

In Godard's *Le Gai Savoir,* which looks for the most part like a funny, daring, remarkably lighted, neon-colored rehearsal on an empty stage, two bright-faced Parisians, aged twenty, get together each night between midnight and dawn, to examine the meaning of words and their relationship to the phenomena they describe. Practically all of the movie is structured on one static frontal image in boundary-less black depth, the edges of the two seated figures picked out by a powerful floodlight. This mysteriously inky-hot lighting is hypnotic, slowly joining usually unseen nooks and crannies in the sullen Léaud-Berto faces with some sense of the young Leftists' purpose and youthful energy. To describe its content (silhouetted faces alternating with Tom and Jerry cartoons, newsreel footage of Paris students rioting, illustrations, ads flashed on the screen with words or parts of words scrawled over them, flashes of colored photography of city streets that are as deep as the rest of the film is flat) fails to convey the exhilarating goofiness. As always, Godard's sound track is distinctive: sporadic, unsettling, and, as with the visual material, apt to issue from any source. Does anyone else use sound as a totally filmic weapon?

Pierre and Paul is an eccentric film with a headlong self-involved propulsion. Wry and affectionate, it never managed to get inside the young working couple, a stocky, self-made builder and a nicely acted slender typist. The sub-theme, the extent of the inroads into Paris life of plastic modernity, is sort of amusing and skillful in its details. Bergman's *The Ritual* is a self-indulgent film with one good actor, and some good writing about people defiling each other. The good actor is a Richard Basehart type with funny embedded-in-fat eyes and a crisper style than Thulin and Björnstrand. The movie probably evolved when a David Susskind Swede made a phone call: "Mr. Bergman, would you be interested in writing an original play for TV? There'll be no censors and no cutting to save time. You'll have complete control. Would you be interested in that kind of a project?"

Susan Sontag's *Duet for Cannibals* looks and feels like skimmed milk. An airless, room-locked, unusually adroit drawing-room comedy. A young man with the style and dress of an avant-garde painter is employed to catalog the life work of a political refugee. There is nothing convincing about his task, his employer's career or the reason he and his girl are swallowed up by the powerful personalities of the two urbane, pompous vampires in an ultra-bourgeois house. The combination of a gutless spirit and sado-masochistic games (I kill you, you kill me and then we all get up and walk out the door) kills the film midway, when a suicide, with unbearable playfulness, hides herself and her lover behind a windshield that she covers with shaving soap. What is amazing is how little juice there is in the inventions and characters, yet this grey coagulation keeps going forward in a half-entertaining way.

Sifting through a Festival experience, a madness, 100 hours sitting in a dark chamber, brings back a half dozen vulgar, terrific, enervated images that are anything from piercingly poetic to whorish. Norman Rockwell's vignettes of adolescent rural life, full of obsessively researched and accentuated-beyond-realism detail (buttons a little larger than life, suspenders filled with folksy charm), were never more fastidious than the nostalgic re-do of the early 1930s in *Adalen '31.* It is the craziest picture of people out of work and on strike: an intensely lyrical evocation of slender boys in caps and trousers, flowering meadows, delicately patterned wallpaper and summer heat. Two big scenes in *Bob and Carol,* played on a slow-curving Spanish stairway, have squirts of hard modern patois ("Why didn't you call me first?" "I couldn't call and ask you, 'Bob, can I have an affair?' ") calculatingly poised together, while a vulgar camera reveals old hard-core Hollywood physiques in long forgotten Edith Head costumes. ■

— MANNY FARBER