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COUSINS, LES, France, 1958

Cert: X. *dist:* Films de France. *p.c.:* Ajym. *p/d/sc:* Claude Chabrol. *dialogue:* Paul Gégau. *ph:* Henri Decae. *ed:* Jacques Gaillard. *a.d.:* Jacques Saulnier, Bernard Evein. *m:* Paul Misraki, Mozart, Wagner. *sd:* Marchetti. *l.p.:* Gérard Blain (*Charles*), Jean-Claude Brialy (*Paul*), Juliette Mayniel (*Florence*), Claude Cerval (*Clovis*), Corrado Guarduchi (*The Italian*), Geneviève Cluny (*Geneviève*), Michèle Meritz (*Yvonne*), Guy Decomble (*Bookseller*). 9,270 ft. 103 mins.

Charles Thomas arrives in Paris from the provinces to study law at the Sorbonne and to live with his cousin Paul in a flat lent by a wealthy uncle. Hard-working, impressionable, something of a "mother's boy", Charles is soon appalled by his cousin's cynicism and corruption, his parasitic friends and wild parties, and falls in love with Florence, a girl he takes to be as sincere as himself. Florence allows herself to be seduced by Paul, however, and in an effort to live up to the morals of his new environment Charles accepts the position of odd man out, concentrating on his studies as best he can. When the results of the examination are announced, Paul has mysteriously passed while Charles has failed. Embittered and distraught, Charles loads a gun with a single bullet, aiming at his cousin's head as he sleeps. It does not go off. The following morning, toying with the gun, Paul unwittingly shoots and kills Charles.

Original in intention, eclectic in its references, *Les Cousins* falls somewhat short of Chabrol's first film, *Le Beau Serge* (still awaiting commercial distribution in this country), and fails to make anything like the same personal impact. At first this seems surprising, since *Les Cousins* has the apparently simpler and more first-hand subject of today's Parisian youth, or at least a well-to-do section of it: its aimless camaraderie and sexual promiscuity, its emotional fascism and hollow, self-dramatising nihilism. And in fact, as a representation of the student way of life, the film is persuasive and often perceptive. Chabrol obviously works best on the level of detached and humorously macabre observation, and Jean-Claude Brialy's performance as Paul, the cool immoralist with a taste for Wagner and Brasseur-toned rodomontade, is completely successful. With Charles, the weakling, the outsider, he significantly fails; Gérard Blain is a sensitive actor, but too sophisticated for a flat and colourless character whose sudden gesture of violence, following such super-human patience and straining after enlightenment, can only seem confected and false. Obviously—and the last shot makes this doubly clear—Chabrol's sympathies are with Paul, the wastrel, rather than Charles the victim, and his inability to bring off this boldly unconventional switch in values is due as much to unreal and arbitrary plot manoeuvring as to a general irresponsibility towards his characters. There is no denying the film's fascinating style and the sustained drive of Decae's photography; but the material itself is a confusing hotch-potch, the characters merely pawns in some diabolic chess-game. The insistence on German music and décor, the fascist miming of Paul's Mephistophelean friend Clovis, the Catholic theories of guilt and free-will and the themes borrowed from Hitchcock, Murnau and Cocteau—all these reflect Chabrol's determination to load his story with atmosphere and symbols of profundity. But their meaning, even when clear, seems immaterial for the simple reason that the central idea behind them is unconvincing. Unless one can believe in Charles's simple innocence, in his willingness to stay with Paul, in his masochistic acceptance of a *maison à trois* and of Paul's (unexplained) success in the exam and his own unmerited failure, the character becomes virtually pathological and the key relationship collapses. The film is therefore finally less revealing of Chabrol's preoccupations, and those of his generation, than of the limitations of shallowness.

Suitability: A.

P.J.D.

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