

Document Citation

Title	Love blinds French filmmakers
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	La femme de l'aviateur (the aviator's wife), Rohmer, Éric, 1981 La femme d'à côté (The Woman next door), Truffaut, François, 1981 Beau-père, Blier, Bertrand, 1981

Love Blinds French Filmmakers

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

Think of French films and what comes to mind? Men and women dining intimately; women and boys strolling romantically through picturesque Vieux Quartiers; girls and men chatting warmly in sunny sidewalk cafes; couples of various types and persuasions embracing between rumpled sheets. In other words, amour and more amour—into which the French seem to believe they have more insight than the rest of us.

And in their films, they have admittedly been immensely inventive about love's

On Film

"The Aviator's Wife"

"Beau Pere"

"The Woman Next Door"

many permutations. The best French films are refreshingly unsentimental and wryly knowing, particularly those by such prestigious and seasoned practitioners of the ironic love story as Eric Rohmer (*"Claire's Knee"*), Bertrand Blier (*"Get Our Your Handkerchiefs"*) and Francois Truffaut (*"Jules and Jim"* or *"Stolen Kisses"*). So it's not surprising that these three filmmakers have returned once again to their nationally and personally pervasive subject. The surprise and disappointment is that, of the three, only Mr. Rohmer has remained both witty and wise.

Slimly plotted and generously conversational in the manner of his *"Moral Tales,"* Mr. Rohmer's *"The Aviator's Wife"* chiefly examines the delusions young lovers are prone to. Callow Francois (Philippe Marlaud), a law student, is passionate for the somewhat older Anne (Marie Riviere), who is smitten with her older and occasional lover, an aviator (Mathieu Carriere). He, in turn, is intent on finishing this, for him, extramarital affair. Finally there is beguiling teen-ager Lucie (Anne-Laure Meury) who develops a crush on Francois on meeting him in a luscious green park to which he's been drawn by misunderstanding and impulse. Seeing the aviator leave Anne's apartment early in the morning, he mistakenly thinks the affair is continuing and trails his ostensible rival and a mysterious blond companion who may or may not be the aviator's wife.

Much of the film's fun lies in Mr. Rohmer's explorations of the twists and turns of Francois's mistaken imaginings. In his blinding passion, he misconstrues everything—what he sees, what others feel, even what he feels, not even knowing which of these young women he's truly attracted to: dour, sexy Anne who rejects and teases him at the same time, or charming Lucie whose affections turn out to be as fleeting as they are innocent. But these observations about elusive desire and its various obscure objects are more than merely amusing; they also strike us as revealing and accurate. Mr. Rohmer's characteristic delicacy and restraint, as well as his dis-

tinctive tone, manage a splendid balance between cool detachment and warm irony and make *"The Aviator's Wife"* a playful delight.

What Bertrand Blier is after in his current tale of errant love, *"Beau-Pere,"* is somewhat different. Though he shares with Mr. Rohmer a vision of men as emphatically dense and unknowing in affairs of the heart, passion's blinding force doesn't really concern him. Rather, it is passion's power to overthrow the strongest of taboos. Thus he presents us with a would-be daring tale of a young man (Patrick Dewaere) who, after the death of an older woman he's been living with, has an affair with her precious 14-year-old daughter, also in a way his stepdaughter, at the predatory adolescent's insistence.

With its *"Lolita"* premise, the film obviously demands a tactful approach (much like Eric Rohmer's) or at least the acerbically witty one revealed in Mr. Blier's own *"Get Out Your Handkerchiefs."* But Mr. Blier's attempts at restraint are so awkward and his stabs at dry humor so dry that the film ends up being dull, not understated. Even more damaging is his failure to keep the necessary distance from his amorous characters. In fact, Bertrand Blier heaps so much pity on the suffering Mr. Dewaere's supreme (and unbelievable) efforts to resist temptation that the entire film falls into bathos.

So too, Francois Truffaut's current opus, *"The Woman Next Door,"* which like Mr. Blier's requires not the intermittent humor Mr. Truffaut provides, but a consistently comic stance. The film tells of one Bernard (Gerard Depardieu), a happily married man whose potentially humorous misfortune is to have his ex-mistress (together with her husband) rent the house next door and to still be desperately infatuated with her. She turns out to have similar feelings for him, so they resume their tempestuous affair. Mr. Truffaut sets up the situation with considerable wit and handles smoothly his dramatization of Bernard's early conflicts and confusions.

But midway through the film, Francois Truffaut starts betraying a marked ambivalence about whether he intended the film to be wry. Certainly the crises, nervous breakdowns and murder he comes up with are difficult to take lightly. It's equally difficult to be touched by the proceedings, since they are poorly set up, melodramatic and saccharine. Suffice it to say that the narrator of the film is a woman who is crippled because she once threw herself out of a window for love. Apparently, we're to think her heroic, not idiotic.

If Mr. Truffaut at least in the past has been perceptive about the dangers obsessive lovers are prey to, he has neglected to be equally cognizant of the danger confronting filmmakers who repeatedly deal with that theme. And that is that they themselves grow obsessive and, like their heroines and heroes, lose their sense of irony, humor and perspective—in fact their good sense altogether.