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MORAL TALES: Eric Rohmer Reviewed and Interviewed

Beverly Walker

When *My Night at Maud's* hit the film scene four years ago, I breathed a sigh of relief that someone had, at last, created a character with whom I could readily identify. The fascinating Maud was perfect: she was educated and self-supporting (a doctor by profession). She enjoyed being a mother to her daughter but made no apologies for her divorcee status. Her beauty and sex appeal were not surface artifice, manufactured by Hollywood: they were totally integral to her character and personality. No passive "sex object," she was perfectly capable of letting a man know she desired him. Brilliantly played by Francoise Fabian, Maud captivated everybody — men as well as women. The filmmaker, an unknown Frenchman named Eric Rohmer, had done something most unusual: he had presented an unorthodox woman without any dark insinuations about her character. She stood alone in counterpoint to a conventional married couple. And Rohmer showed his bias: marriage was portrayed as a refuge for guilty, frightened people.

The plot was simple: An engineer (Jean-Louis Trintignant) meets, by chance, Maud. Forced by a snow storm to spend the night in her apartment, they pass the time discussing their conflicting philosophies of life. She attempts to seduce him but he explains that he has already seen at church a girl he intends to marry. In his mind he has committed himself to her and must, therefore, remain faithful. They go their separate ways and he eventually contrives to meet the girl — a blonde-haired student (Marie-Christine Barrault) who, like himself, is Catholic. They marry and have children. A few years pass. A brief epilogue shows an accidental encounter between Maud and the happy family. A sharp glance between the two women indicates that the wife is the student with whom Maud's first husband was having an affair when their marriage ended. Their mouths are closed, however, and the husband will never know. He bids Maud adieu and scampers down the beach to build sandcastles with his kids.

The real substance of the film lay in its subtle ambience of characterization and mood. Maud was free and open and ready to accept life as it happened. The engineer lived according to a preconceived outline, a blend of tradition and Catholicism. The wife, laden with guilt over her affair, saw marriage as an escape from temptation. (And, perhaps, atonement for her sins?)

My enthusiasm for *My Night at Maud's* lasted quite awhile. Being a maverick was hard enough without constant reminders from movies and TV that a woman is condemned if she doesn't go the route of marriage and children. Eric Rohmer became my hero.

Then a friend, a film critic and essayist, planted a seed of doubt. The scenario went something like this:

HE: You're crazy to think that director is against marriage. You've misread the film.

ME: I don't see how. Maud is clearly superior to that uptight married couple. Imagine a man picking out his wife at Mass, the way a horse breeder might choose a fine mare from a line-up. Absurd. The man cuts himself off from life's possibilities by playing it so safe whereas Maud participates in all of life's possibilities.

HE: You're forgetting the epilogue. Maud stands there all alone, confessing that things haven't been so great. The engineer is happy as a lark with his wife and kids.

ME: No, you've got it wrong! Maud has courage. She's so secure she can admit mistakes without feeling annihilated. And at least she *knows* she's unhappy. The engineer is so cut off from his feelings that he wouldn't recognize dissatisfaction in himself or in his wife. How could he experience joy? He's fixed things so that only a catastrophe could shake his boat. And his smugness is shown to be foolish by the fact that even the people around him protect him from reality. Neither Maud nor his own wife will ever reveal his wife's contribution to the breakup of Maud's marriage.

HE: (Patience exhausted.) I know the man. He's a devout Catholic who is absolutely devoted to his wife and children. He lives a monastic life and has never, ever been known to get involved with another woman.

Well, you may have a point, I said, unconvinced. Hope dies hard.

My curiosity about Rohmer increased. I pried into every corner of his life by reading everything I could about him and questioning anyone I met who knew him. I learned that he was already close to 50 and had been a respected critic, one of the founders of *Cahiers du Cinema. My Night at Maud's* was number three in a series he called "Six Moral Tales." He had written the scripts twenty years earlier and each story was to be a permutation on the same theme, that of temptation mastered. Each was

to have a common, symmetrical construction: A man in love with one woman meets another. For a brief interlude, he flirts with the idea of a liaison. In the end, he decides against it and returns to the first. It was a variation of the perennial triangle. Parisian film gossip revealed that Rohmer kept his personal and professional lives totally separate. Almost no one had ever met his wife and children, or been invited to his home. There was conjecture that his wife didn't even know he was a filmmaker — and that his mother didn't, for sure. He had been a professor for years, teaching under a pseudonym. So devoted was he to his students that he stopped shooting his first film when he discovered it was taking too much time away from his students. It was never completed.

That information only served to make him more interesting. A man of real moral conviction. Every filmmaker I knew would have sold his grandmother into slavery to finish a film.

As subsequent Rohmer films came forth, it became less clear what he was up to. *La Collectionneuse* (Moral Tale #IV but made before *Maud*) is the thinnest of the series: A promiscuous girl named Haydee (Haydee Politoff), the "collector" of the title, bewitches a couple of intellectual dandies one summer in St. Tropez. One of them (Daniel Pommereulle) finally gets her out of his system by sleeping with her but the other, Adrien (Patrick Bauchau) remains thoroughly befuddled. He alternates between indignation at her behaviour and enchantment-mixed-with-envy at her freedom. He finally manages to get away without ever having really confronted his desire for her, driving off to his fiancee with a clear conscience.

Claire's Knee (#V) tells of Jerome (Jean-Claude Brialy), a writer, who encounters by chance an old friend (Aurora Cornu) while vacationing near Annecy. While visiting Aurora, he becomes intrigued by her hostess' daughter, a beautiful young girl named Claire (Laurence de Monaghan). Already engaged to be married, he feels guilty about his attraction to the girl. Aurora is amused by his discomfort and urges him to pursue Claire . . . see what happens. A poet, she enjoys manipulating people as well as characters. Clair's stepsister Laura (Beatrice Romand) is there, too. Less beautiful than Claire, she is more interesting — in the tradition of Maud — and develops a crush on Jerome. Thus he has a double temtation. He finds Laura good company but not desirable. His interest in Claire mounts. Frustrated by her aloofness, he tries to break up her relationship with her boyfriend. His machinations fail, but Claire's distress provides him an opportunity to satisfy his obsession — to caress her knee! Just before he leaves, Aurora discloses her engagement. Peeved that she hasn't told him before now, he nonetheless congratulates her for making such a sound decision and departs in a boat for his fiancee in Switzerland.

Claire's Knee has the most complex structure of all the Moral Tales. Two parts of the triangle are doubled. The role of the narrator is split betweeen the man and his friend, Aurora. Each of them has already made a decision to marry and live a normal life before the film begins. Her vicarious enjoyment of Jerome's crisis implies that she has already passed a similar temptation. An added complexity is the question of their relationship. Were they lovers? Was she a temptation he passed up — perhaps because of her former independence? Therefore, Aurora might also be seen as a temptress out of his past, thus tripling that side of the triangle. At the time of the film, however, she seems to have "sowed her wild oats" and be reconciled to the safety and tranquility of marriage. She has taken a rather dull fellow as her fiance.

The "temptress" or "liberated woman" side of the triangle is likewise shared by the two young girls. Claire is similar to the wife in *Maud* and therefore an inadvertent "temptress." We know she'll settle down one of these days and become a good wife. Laura, the more unconventional of the two, is rejected by Jerome.

By the time I had seen the two additional films, I began to wonder if my friend hadn't been right. Perhaps I had misread Rohmer. He had continued to create off-beat, free-spirited females. But it appeared to me that some kind of subtle judgement was being made against them.

a) They were always portrayed as a "temptation."

b) They were always pitted against a more conventional woman.

c) They always lost the man.

There seemed to be an implication that the independent woman was never going to find "true happiness" — not on *this* earth, anyway. It was perplexing because these women were always far

Top: Laura in *Claire's Knee*
Bottom: ZouZou in *Chole in the Afternoon*

more interesting than the wife or fiancee — when the latter was even present in the film. In *La Collectionneuse* and *Clair's Knee* we see her only in a photograph! Even though each of the films was named after the independent woman, the central character was always a man. It was his story, his crisis: will he or won't he be unfaithful? Could *that* be the "moral" Eric Rohmer was talking about in his "Six Moral Tales?"

In his final film of the series, *Chloe in the Afternoon,* the battle lines were clearly drawn; all points of the triangle were visible in the story. The wife, for the first time, was given almost equal time on screen. The situation was the same as in the previous films: a man already promised to one woman (in *Chloe*, he is married) meets, by chance, another. He flirts with the idea of an affair but ultimately conquers the temptation and returns to his wife. And Rohmer switched things around a bit this time, loading the dice: The man's wife, Helene (Francoise Verley), is educated, impeccably dressed and comports herself with dignity and grace. She's a most sympathetic figure. The independent woman, Chloe (Zouzou), is an "unkempt hippie," promiscuous and unable to hold a job. Worse, she is conniving and treacherous, bent on seducing the man despite his stated protestations. Fredric (Bernard Verley) is the weakest of all Rohmer's protagonists. He goes further toward completion of the unmentionable act than any of the others. While Chloe awaits him, naked in her bed, he begins to undress in the bathroom. Suddenly getting hold of himself, he dashes out a side door, hastily turning on the faucet to disguise the sounds of his exit! The last shot of Chloe shows her stretched out on the bed à la Ingres. Fredric races home to his wife in the middle of the afternoon, making the excuse that he just had to see her. She, who has known that something was up all along, breaks into tears as her husband undresses her and leads her to the A-Okay marriage bed. Virtue intact. Marriage triumphant. The independent woman humiliated.

I interviewed Eric Rohmer in Paris last August, before *Chloe in the Afternoon* had opened either there or in America. He looks and acts like an older version of any one of his protagonists, particularly the engineer from *Maud*. One senses that the problems he has put on the screen are personal and deeply meaningful to him. As movies everywhere have become increasingly schematic and depersonalized, one can't help but admire him for his courage. I came away from the interview with a deepened respect for the man. While I do not agree with his conclusions, I certainly do share his concern about finding a way to live in harmony with oneself. At a time when conflicts between men and women seem almost insurmountable, we are fortunate indeed to have an artist who confronts the problem with such honesty. A modern consciousness has given his work a dimension he could never have anticipated when he conceived the stories some twenty years ago. The values he espouses in his films are held in contempt by a probable majority of the film-going public. And yet his love for all of his characters, and especially, I think, for the woman who dares to be different, has given his work a depth unique in modern cinema. This is possible only because of his ruthless — and undoubtedly painful — self-examination coupled with an extraordinary integrity.

What follows is an edited version of an almost three-hour interview. Rohmer is a quintessential European intellectual, speaking in long, convoluted sentences and constantly refining every statement. Since his replies to my questions were simultaneously translated by his indefatigable producer and friend, Pierre Cottrell, it was sometimes impossible to catch every word. It was also difficult to challenge some of his statements.

Q: M. Rohmer, Nester Almendros (cinematographer for all of Rohmer's films) told me that you are the most conscious filmmaker he has ever seen. That there is not one element of your films over which you do not have total control. Do you feel this is true?

A: Yes!

Q: Does that mean that your films always correspond exactly to what you wrote and envisioned?

A: The first day's shooting corresponds to the idea. But as each day's filming progresses, the rhythm is controlled by the actors. And you feel betrayed by the technique. But gradually you get used to this version and begin to see the film not the way you imagined it in your mind's eye, but for what it is on the screen. When it's finished, it somehow corresponds to the idea that you had . . . or the idea that has been transformed through the process of shooting. As to *Chloe in the Afternoon*, it is extremely faithful to the letter of the script.

Q: Are you never surprised?

A: The greatest difference comes in

Aurora, Claire and Jerome in *Claire's Knee*

the way the actors play, which makes my intentions more clear and, yet, somehow modifies them, too. For example, when you read a novel there is always a certain freedom to imagine the character from its literary description. In film, impossible. He is what he is on the screen. If the same words were said by a different actress than Zouzou, the character would be different. She brought a personal touch — and this is what interests me in cinema: to put together things that exist with things you are not totally master of. I like the actors to bring me something; I want them to interpret. This way, the film always surprises me — and this is what I want. It's necessary that something happen during the shooting, even in films as elaborated in their scenarios as mine are. And I will add this is what makes the cinema interesting for me; this is why I make films instead of writing books.

Q: Which is more interesting for you, the writing of your scripts or the shooting?

A: They're equally interesting. I'm not interested in making adaptations. In the Moral Tales, I never considered myself only a *metteur en scene*. I couldn't conceive one without the other. (Pause) I notice nowadays there are more and more *auteurs* in the cinema.

Q: What is the genesis of the "Six Moral Tales"?

A: Two or three came from little stories I wrote when I was very young, that I thought of publishing. But I modified them completely and never published them. When I became interested in the cinema, I didn't think these stories were filmable. Then one day I had an idea for a film (*La Boulangere de Monceau*) — one that was not written out. And I realized this little scenario had something in common with the tales I had written before. Splitting hairs, I realized the stories had a common theme and I decided to point out this theme and make six. I thought that instead of looking for a producer before making the films, it would be better to make one film and *then* get a producer. I felt the producer or the public would come later. And finally they came!

Q: How did you decide their order? (Note: Rohmer lists *My Night at Maud's* as III though it was shot after *La Collectionneuse* which is number IV.)

A: The order was that of the easiest to shoot. At the same time, the first one was a simple story and the last enriched by all the others. In both *La Boulangere de Monceau* (I) and *Chloe* (VI), the theme is apparent. It's like a musical composition when the theme returns in the last movement. I also felt the last three had to be done in color so they must come when it was possible to shoot in color. (Note: Meaning when there was a sufficient budget.) Except for *Maud* which was always conceived in black and white.

And, of course, it was easier to make the first films with young people because there are more of them not doing anything and they will make movies without being paid. The first ones were also better realized with non-professionals whereas mature actors were needed for the last three.

Q: I find it extraordinary that you could have conceived the stories for these films twenty years ago and filmed them with almost no change. In other words, that you, as a person, as an artist, didn't change and therefore find it necessary to alter your scripts. Did you never feel at odds with yourself?

A: You can judge from reading the scripts that I always remained faithful to myself. There were some changes: for example, I wrote *Maud* right after the war and the hero was retained in the girl's apartment not by snow but the curfew. He had already decided to marry the girl whom he had seen, however. And there was no religion, originally.

Q: Why did you add that element?

A: The concept of the moral tales was that there would be an explicit philosophy expounded. . . not my own but that of the character. . . although this is difficult in cinema and there is the danger of doing a thesis movie. It was a reaction to a certain conception of modern literature. When I wrote the stories that led to the Moral Tales, I was discovering American literature between the wars — what was called "behaviour literature." It was the painting of situations: what people said was less important than the literature that preceded it. This eventually led to the French *nouvelle roman.* I felt the cinema had to do something different from literature, so I acted against this tendency.

I think that in life — in our Occidental society since I know very little of others — conversation often involves things other than the frivolous. Rather, ideas and feelings. Those were the subjects I wanted to show in my films. "Moral" means that each person expresses his philosophy of life. I don't want to sound too pretentious. . .

Haydee Politoff and Patrick Bauchau in *La Collectionneuse*

Of course, the young man in *La Collectionneuse* (Patrick Bauchau), the girls in *Claire* and in *Chloe* have very different conceptions of life. And express it differently. In life that's how people are. And cinema is to show life. It's because I'm a realist I do that, not to express my own philosophy. In the world I see, that's how it goes.

The difficulty is that these philosophies must be integrated in the story, not merely *hors d'oeuves*. But for me this was not too difficult since the story and the philosophy of the story are one. This is particularly evident in *Claire* but also in *Chloe*. The characters in *Chloe* say more banal things but, still, they act in accordance with their concept of life. Even if they don't elaborate, it becomes clear by their actions.

Morals change less than people, at least in this area which is mine. Superficial things change, but not deep things.

Still, I modified. I adapted my films to the period in which they were happening

Still, I modified. I adapted my films to the period in which they were happening. Even though my original idea was ancient, the final writing took place only just before shooting began.

Q: I should think audience reaction to the character of Chloe — as well as Maud — would have been very different twenty years ago. Far less approving.

A: The bohemian tradition always exists and this character could have been conceived even in the last century. You could put the story in 1890, at the time of Maupassant, with only a few changes.

Q: That is true, but the literature of the last century wasn't read by the same masses of people that see movies today. I can't imagine how, even ten years ago, audiences would have responded so sympathetically to Chloe. Women like Chloe, Maud, Haydee (in *La Collectionneuse*) could never have been cheered then, as they are now.

A: It is true there's been a change in mores, which I would date from around 1965, when I made *La Collectionneuse*. And maybe the public will find them demode, but I wrote them before this change. When I conceived the character of Chloe, there were existentialists.

But this thing about mores is very exterior. The fact that morals are a bit freer changes very little the basic relationship between men and women. What makes my subject free from fashion is that my characters do not claim a certain freedom against the rules of society. They do not try to free themselves from social pressure. There is not a conflict between the individual and society. The conflict is more between the freedom of the character and the rule he imposes on himself. Frederick (the husband in *Chloe*) has a rule which is to be a good husband; Chloe, not to get married. And inasmuch as in any society there are rules — whatever they may be — these subjects are valid. If it's not bourgeois morality, it's anti-bourgeois morality. (Pause.) Some say that the very idea of morals is passe, but I do not feel that.

Q: Why is it that audiences always dislike your leading man?

A: The male character examines his own conduct and doesn't see himself in the most favorable light. I don't want to make my male character sympathetic, but the contrary. He's someone with certain beliefs who becomes intrigued by a woman with different beliefs. He thinks they're wrong but, somehow, better than his. And so the audience, too. They're attorneys for the other party.

Q: But you evidently agree with him because he never makes a decision to go with the woman who intrigues him.

A: In the long run, even if he thinks woman #1 (wife or fiancee) is not worth as much in the abstract as woman # 2 (the tempting woman), she's really worth more. They're compatible. The man and woman # 2 don't make a good couple.

Q: You, as their creator, don't want them to make a 'good couple.'

A: Since they're right for each other in real life, the fact they're together on-screen cannot be criticized. In *La Collectionneuse* there was the Bauchau couple (Patrick Bauchau's real-life girlfriend was the one in the photograph) and in *Chloe*, the Verley couple. (Bernard Verley and his real-life wife, Francoise.) And I've always found certain antagonisms between actress # 2 and the male actor. In all of my films I've never had the bad surprise of the male character and the temptress falling in love. On the contrary, there's always been a little teasing game. There's no compatibility between the independent woman and the narrator.

Q: Are you a crusader for marriage?

A: No, the tales only analyze situations that exist in life. The traditional moral values seem to win over, even if they're criticized in the process of the movie. That made Zouzou call me a

ZouZou and Fredric in *Chole in the Afternoon*

reactionary. But I don't feel it is my role to fight roles or to defend them. (Note: I think he means he is not a propagandist for either party.)

Still, I think morals are an important thing. Moral judgement still has meaning. Literature and cinema that show the animal rather than the moral side of people is less interesting . . .

Q: For you?

A: No, for the audience. Modern literature and cinema are very often critical and derisive and make fun of the people presented. I find in that direction there is little to say. It's a small subject.

For me, what makes the human being different from an animal is that he imposes obligations upon himself. Man is looking for a certain rule of life. "And who can go with humor to heroism," says the dandy in *La Collectionneuse*. My characters refuse heroism. They want to live in the everyday life and heroism is not part of everyday life. I think its an interesting problem because it concerns everybody — how to live each day according to certain ideas. What is tragic in modern life is when the idea of life is lost .

Q: Your point of view toward the women in your films is controversial. Some feel you disapprove of the independent woman.

A: The tales are moral inasmuch as the characters follow a certain idea of life, even in common everyday situations. But you must realize that woman # 1 has just as equally a strong notion of life as woman # 2. If the public has more sympathy for woman # 2's idea of life, it may be because it seems less conformist than the man's. But maybe it's just as conformist. (Long pause.)

The public is free to be critical of my characters, but I am not. On the contrary, I am an admirer. I show only things I like. What I like about the temptresses is not an abstract idea of their prettiness, but because they have a variety, a richness of life. What I like about them — as in all of life — is the fact they are unique. And the cinema, of all the arts, is the best to show the unique aspect of a human being.

The great ambition of the Moral Tales was to take everyday situations and make from them stories that do not look like any other. I like to find a situation in which I could find myself . . . If my Moral Tales appeal a little to the public, it is because they show that life is not as dull as reading magazines or statistics. And that passions and feelings cannot be reduced to figures and percentages.

Q: Forgive me for staying on this subject of your women a little longer. Why is it that in all of your films the independent woman always loses the man?

A: The moral tales happen in the past: before the story begins, the man has already chosen his woman. He might wonder about the independent woman. "If, instead of my wife, I'd have married another . . ." And why not. There might be millions of women he could marry. But I don't write to justify his choice of one or the other. I'm writing to show what is happening in the heads of the people.

Q: It's difficult not to take sides. Your independent woman or temptress is always far more interesting than the wife. Francoise Fabian ran away with *Maud*.

A: It's necessary that the merits of the two women be approximately equivalent. I realized, after the films were made, that audiences had more sympathy for one or the other of the two ladies. There were many people who, contrary to you, loved the Marie-Christine character in *Maud*. And the actor. By the same token, for some the character of Chloe is the heighth of horror.

I like the fact that the character must hesitate between the two women. And I like the fact that audiences hold for one or the other. But you must start from the fact that he's married to one woman and not wonder why he doesn't marry the other one.

Q: Are you implying that the independent woman, whom you call the temptress, can never find marital happiness?

A: You can say the following: I choose two women who interest me. I'm not a director who shows only one type of woman in his films. I'm more interested in Chloe. This is proven by the fact that she's longer on the screen. *But interest is one thing, sympathy another.* (Italics mine.) The characters of the wives have not been developed as much as those of the temptress because the subject of the film is the interest and time spent by a man with a woman who doesn't correspond to his notion. If some despise my narrator because he's not in love with the independent woman, that's okay. It might be proof of his humility.

Fredric and Helene in *Chole in the Afternoon*

Jean-Louis Trintignant and Francoise Fabian in *My Night at Maud's*

Eric Rohmer is a shy and secretive man about whom, for years, little was known. His professional life is conducted under a pseudonym and he once published a novel under yet a third name. He lives quietly in Paris with his wife and two children. He claims to have been born in Nancy in 1920.

Rohmer's professional life is well charted, however. He taught literature for a number of years, at the same time writing criticism for several publications and ultimately becoming editor of *Cahiers du Cinema*. His compatriots on the influential French magazine were Godard, Chabrol, Truffaut, Rivette; together they forged the *politique des auteurs* and have helped each other throughout their respective careers as filmmakers. Rohmer co-authored (with Chabrol) a book on Hitchcock who, along with Hawks and Murnau, he accounts his favorite directors. While preparing *Chloe in the Afternoon* Rohmer completed his doctoral thesis on "The Organization of Space in Murnau's *Faust*."

In addition to his journalistic work, Rohmer made several short films and worked extensively in television. He made a number of documentaries, of an educational nature, on a wide variety of subjects, from Poe and Pascal to a study on the use of concrete in architecture. This work influenced the style of his moral tales. "For me, television was a way of studying the relationship between text and image. It taught me how people react, and I learned from television not to use too many effects, to leave the camera immobile in front of the speakers."

Rohmer made two feature-length films prior to the Moral Tales, the incompleted *Les Petites Filles Modeles* (1952) and *Le Signe du Lion* (1959). In 1962, he made *La Boulangere de Monceau*, the first of his Moral Tales. Made in 16mm, black and white, it was 26 minutes long and starred Barbet Schroeder, the executive producer of all his subsequent films. The following year he made the second of the series, *La Carriere de Suzanne*. These two films were eventually sold to French television, providing the funding for *La Collectionneuse*. Each of his films has, in turn, financed a successor.

Rohmer spends a long time preparing his films and then shoots them in six weeks, rarely repeating a take. The preparation time is divided between research and actors. Locations are scouted with great care, with special concern for the best light of day for each. Rohmer is influenced by certain painters and studies their work carefully; a touch of Ingres may be noted in *Chloe in the Afternoon*. He is always accompanied by his director of photography, Nester Almendros. "Rohmer avoids easy beauty but, at the same time, he wants every shot to be beautiful," says Almendros.

Rohmer chooses his players with utmost care and has demonstrated an eye for unusual personalities, particularly in his choice of women. He spends a lot of time with each of his leading players. "He gets you thinking about the character," says Bernard Verley, "and by the time shooting begins you are very electric." Rohmer often tailors his dialogue for the specific actor, giving it to him or her a few days prior to the shooting of a scene.

A sports enthusiast, Rohmer runs three miles every day and, as part of his thirty-year crusade against pollution, refuses to own a car. An occasional cigar or glass of wine are his only known vices; tea is served promptly at 5 p.m. every day on his set.

Rohmer's future plans include publication of the moral tales and, in 1975, a new movie.