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Alain Tanner's (LE RETOUR D'AFRIQUE)

With *Le Retour D'Afrique*, Alain Tanner completes his unique film trilogy. In the first, *Charles—Dead or Alive*, the hero at age 50 changes his life—no man is too old for a new vision of the world. In *La Salamandre*, a scatter-brained 20-year-old proletarian girl contrives to slither through a rich consumer society, evading the “enemy.” In *Le Retour D'Afrique* a young couple experiences an imaginary “return” from a voyage to Algeria, grappling in the process with the authenticity of their own existence. All three of these films are challenges—and responses—to a mummified society.

Alain Tanner makes young films. He does not break new stylistic ground in the manner of a Renoir, a Godard, or a Bertolucci. He is, rather, the “parfit cineaste” whose engaging, original films touch our daily nerves, a social historian whose wit, artistry, intellect and moral passion illuminate our confusing roles in modern Western society.

Le Retour D'Afrique is a story about exile and identity. It takes place in Geneva where a young couple, Vincent and Francoise, live. Vincent, though a city boy tuned in to politics and movies, works as a gardener; his wife in an art gallery. Fed up with their conventional life, Vincent twitches for a change: either have a baby, or take off for Algeria. Since Francoise rejects the first, they write to a friend in Algeria. The reply is positive. In fact, the friend offers to put them up while helping Vincent to find work. At once Vincent and Francoise give notice to their employers and in order to finance the trip sell their possessions: their furniture, their car. That done, all of their friends are invited to a farewell party. The apartment remains stripped of everything except two mattresses and their luggage. Already Vincent and Francoise feel like foreigners, like outsiders. At that moment, however, a telegram arrives from their friend in Algeria. They must not depart, he says, but must await his forthcoming letter of explanation. Concealing the turnabout from their friends, the goodbyes are said.

And now comes the long wait for the letter. Vincent and Francoise hole up in their empty apartment, in limbo—neither in Geneva nor in Algeria, gone as far as their friends are concerned. They are confronted now with the bare bones of their relationship, their impatiences, their own identities. Finally the long-awaited letter arrives. They must not come, their friend advises, for he himself is returning to Switzerland.

Nine months later. We see Vincent and Francoise living in a totally conventional suburban highrise apartment, their conversation punctuated by the thunder of jet planes. Out of touch with their old friends, Vincent is working in a flower nursery, Francoise as a postal clerk. Though Vincent seems little changed, Francoise is perceptibly different. She has the air of someone with a

“past,” no longer Vincent’s pretty modish wife, but someone possessed of her own authentic existence, a woman with opinions, who connects with her fellow woman-workers. She has made an inner voyage.

One day a letter from their landlord informs them that all the apartments in their building are going up for sale, and they as tenants have priority to buy theirs. Unwilling to become property owners, Vincent and Francoise decide to summon the other tenants to protest. At the same time, almost defiantly, they plan to have a baby. Francoise, however, raises the question: who will tend the child—he or she? They discuss, they argue, and finally flip a coin. How it falls, we never learn.

Le Retour D'Afrique (Return from Africa). Written and directed by Alain Tanner. Photography by Renato Berta and Carlo Varini. Featuring Josee Destoop, Francois Marthouret, Juliet Berto, and Anne Wiazemsky.

Switzerland, 1973. Black and White. In French with English subtitles.

109 minutes. Rental: F.