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Eric Rohmer's Last Moral Tale: Chloe in the Afternoon

by Beverly Walker

Zouzou as Chloe in **L'Amour, L'Apres-Midi (Chloe in the Afternoon).**

* **Chloe in the Afternoon** will be screened on November 10 at the Los Angeles International Film Exposition.

The most respected filmmaker in France today is Eric Rohmer, former teacher and critic, and the writer-director of a unique body of work which he calls "Six Moral Tales". The sixth of these films, *Chloe in the Afternoon*, opened the 1972 New York Film Festival and will soon be released theatrically in America.* Starring Zouzou, a superstar of French underground movies, and Bernard Verley, this film is certain to arouse as much comment as has his previous work.

Made over the past decade, the "moral tales" constitute an extraordinary body of work. (Three others have been released in the United States, *My Night at Maud's* in 1969, *Claire's Knee* in 1971, and *La Collectionneuse* in 1972). Although no actor or actress ever appears more than once in the series, the films are linked thematically and stylistically. Each of them was designed to take place in a specific locale and each concerns one man and two women. The recurrent theme is that of temptation mastered; Rohmer has defined it thus: "Just as the narrator is in pursuit of a woman who, momentarily, seems to elude him, events bring him in contact with another. And regardless of the charm and persuasion of the second, he will reject her in favor of the first . . ." The result of this thematic permutation is six films, four of feature length. "He is the most original and most classical of our filmmakers", said *Le Monde* in a recent article.

Although Rohmer is a Roman Catholic, and his philosophy quintessentially Christian, his films are not religious in any accepted meaning of the term, nor is he a proselytizer. "What I call a *conte moral* (moral tale) is not a tale with a moral, but a story dealing less with what people do than with what is going on in their minds while they are doing it", he said in an interview in *Sight and Sound*.

That statement is monumentally misleading to anyone not familiar with his work. The reverse is more accurate: Rohmer's preoccupation is with what his characters *don't* do—wherein lies the "moral" to the story. The action, such as it is, always deal with sexual adventure: in each of his six films, the hero is tempted to have an affair with a woman other than his true love—and ultimately talks himself out of it.

"Talk" is the key word. No filmmaker in the contemporary cinema uses as much continuous dialogue as Rohmer. Further, in all but one film the hero also serves as a narrator to tell us what he is thinking about throughout his travails. This tendency has led some people to define Rohmer's work as "literary", but this is not so (in the pejorative sense the word has come to mean as applied to cinema).

Rohmer is after a very special kind of character revelation: his aim is to express both conscious and unconscious feelings. Thus, his protagonist tells us what he is *thinking*, talks about what he is *doing*, and then *acts* in a certain way. His characters always believe they are in command of their lives, and usually act with the best of intentions. Even though we may smile at their moral struggles—their crisis of conscience seeming very old-fashioned in today's world—in the end we must also respect them for their courage in being true to themselves. Rohmer endows them with a dignity one rarely finds in films nowadays.

Rohmer, who is now fifty-two, conceived the idea for the series almost twenty years ago. He was interested in following the same idea through several films, and feeling that he could better develop an audience by making a number of films on the same subject. Rohmer knows very well that his films are for a special audience. He had yet another pragmatic motive: producers would be less likely to ask him to change his subject matter if they knew that a certain, upcoming film, was part of the *contes moraux*. "I was determined to be intractable and inflexible," he said to an interviewer, "because if you persist in an idea, it seems to me that in the end you do secure a following".

Certainly it is true that Rohmer's scenarios are also literature—in fact, plans are underway to publish all of the *contes moraux*. The French tend to see him as continuing a classic literary tradition although he disdains this, and once said he had learned about writing dialogue from studying detective stories. He has a particular admiration for Dashiell Hammett and (with Claude Chabrol) has co-authored a book on the films of Hitchcock.

But the special delight of Rohmer's films comes less from what the characters say than from the absolutely marvelous—and nearly indefinable—way in which they say it. Despite the intellectualism of Rohmer's work, his films are erotic in a very fresh way. We never see anyone making love, and only rarely a partially naked body. But, beguiled by the aura of seduction and sensuality which pervades his films, the audience is interested in how far his characters will allow themselves to go, sexually. If one wanted to be esoteric, one could say Rohmer had created a sub-genre to the thriller, that of the suspense of eroticism.

Francoise Fabian, Maud of **Ma Nuit Chez Maud (My Night at Maud's).**

Rohmer is a shy and secretive man about whom, for years, little was known. His real name is something else and no one is certain that the "something else" is his real name. He does not participate even a little in the French cinema's rich social life, and rarely allows himself to be photographed. He was politely requested to put in an appearance last year at the ceremony awarding *Claire's Knee* the Prix Delluc, the most prestigious cinema award in France. Reluctantly, he showed up, in glasses and a moustache! He published a novel (under a pseudonym), taught literature and now teaches film at the Sorbonne. He claims to have been born in Nancy though there's some reason to doubt that; he now lives in Paris with his wife and two children, whom only a half-dozen of his associates have ever seen.

His film career is well charted, however. Early-on he became a film critic and subsequently editor of the influential French film magazine, *Cahiers du Cinema*. His compatriots on the magazine were Godard, Truffaut, and Chabrol; together they forged the *politique des auteurs*. That is the controversial (and much misinterpreted) theory which holds that a film director is the creator of the concept and execution of his work; that a true *auteur* (literally, author) can be discovered only by analyzing the body of his work and that, further, it the *autere* who lifts the cinema out of the factory and onto the level of art. Ironically, the concept was created by Rohmer and others mainly through the study of American films made under the old studio system. Rohmer's favorite directors are Hitchcock and Hawks.

In addition to his journalistic work, Rohmer made several short films and worked extensively in television. He made a number of documentaries on a wide variety of subjects, from Poe and Pascal to a study on the use of concrete in architecture. The television experience influenced the style of his moral tales. "For me, television was a way of studying the relationship between text and images. 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. One was never completed; it interfered too much with his work as a teacher, so he gave it up and returned to the classroom. The other, *The Sign of the Lion*, is a sunny, humorous film about an American in Paris who loses all his money and becomes a tramp. Following this film, he made the first of

Jean-Claude Brialy and Beatrice Romand in **Le Genou de Claire (Claire's Knee).**

his moral tales, *La Boulangere de Monceau*. It was a half-hour in length and starred Barbet Schroeder. Schroeder, together with Pierre Cottrell and Rohmer, founded Les Films du Losange, the production company which has financed all of Rohmer's subsequent films. The second in the series was the hour-long *La Carriere de Suzanne*. Both films were ultimately sold to television, providing the financing for *La Collectionneuse*. Since that time, each new film has been financed by its predecessor.

Rohmer's method of working is as unorthodox as are his films. He attaches great importance to the players and has used non-actors more frequently than professionals. Unlike many directors, however, who dislike and fear actors, Rohmer loves his performers and selects them with utmost care. That he has rarely used professionals is chiefly because he couldn't find quite the right person from their ranks.

Although the films were conceived as a unit, and written years before they were made, Rohmer tailored each role to the person playing it. The structure changed minimally, but the dialogue was often written in conjunction with the actor or actress. Sometimes, Rohmer would sit down and talk with the performers while recording the conversation, later incorporating fragments into the dialogue.

Better than simply give an actor a script (there is not, in fact, a shooting script for his films) Rohmer prefers to first tell them the story himself. He spends an extraordinary amount of time with each actor, "turning them on", so-to-speak, to his moral quest. "He gets you thinking about the character", says Bernard Verley who plays the leading male role in *Chloe in the Afternoon*, "and by the time shooting begins, you are very electric. He makes you morally aware". The actor is given his dialogue a day or so prior to the shooting of each scene. There are, however, extensive rehearsals of each scene, in its specific locale when possible, weeks before shooting begins. In all of Rohmer's films, the characters are linked irrevocably to the landscape.

Rohmer has a positive genius for making each of his leading players think that their character is his favorite and speaks for him. "All the dreams of Rohmer are in this girl", said Zouzou, who plays Chloe. "He won't say anything, but I know it's true". "I'm sure he identifies with this man", says Bernard Verley of his part. "He never said anything, but I know it's part of his story". And so it goes.

What is particularly interesting about this phenomenon is that it exactly parallels audience reaction to the films. No two people see them exactly the same way: is he for marriage, or against it? Sympathetic to the man, or to the woman? Does he really believe in a rigid Catholic morality, or is he satirizing it? No one knows the answers to these questions, and Eric Rohmer is not about to shed any light.

It is doubtful that *Chloe in the Afternoon*, the last of Rohmer's "moral tales", will provide any final clues as to what is going on in his mind. It continues the theme of the five previous films: Frederic is a *petit-bourgeois* businessman living in a suburb of Paris with his wife and child. One day, by chance, he encounters Chloe, a Bohemian girl who had an affair with a friend of his some years before. Although he is attracted to every pretty woman on the streets, he tells us via narration, he at first avoids Chloe's advances. She persists, however, and soon he is spending every afternoon with her—having coffee, going for walks, helping her move, etc. Very platonic. Chloe is disillusioned with men, but she wants a child and tells Frederic she has chosen him to be the father: "You're tall, married, handsome, not too dumb and you have blue eyes." Despite himself, Frederic is flattered and considers the matter for several days. Finally, however, he can't do it and flees from Chloe's apartment back to his wife.

So, we have the constant theme: man in love with one woman, intrigued and tempted by a second, resists and returns to first. But in between is enough ambiguity for a dissertation.

What is Chloe up to? Does she really want a child by Frederic or is she merely amusing herself? Frederic moves closer to a real, honest-to-god affair with Chloe than any of Rohmer's previous heroes. Why does he stop, literally, at the last minute?

Rohmer's men are always wishy-washy and a bit prudish—hardly worth the trouble the women go to; Frederic is typical, only less intellectual than the others (Patrick Bauchau, Jean-Louis Trintignant, Jean-Claude Brialy). His women are always opposites: the "temptress" (Rohmer's term) is a liberated woman, independent, charming—and always a brunette (Haydee Politoff, Francoise Fabian, Beatrice Romand and now Zouzou). The wife or fiancee is usually blonde, somewhat passive and conventional. Her pleasures come from husband, home, family.

Zouzou's Chloe has many of the same characteristics of the others. But she is cast in the hippie mold—tougher, less vulnerable, more aggressive.

Frederic's wife (played by Bernard Verley's real-life wife, Francoise) is unusually sympathetic, but it is difficult to say to what extent this is attributable to the player.

All of Rohmer's films have presented a paradox: the temptress is infinitely more interesting than the wife or fiancee—and she is the leading role. Yet, she always loses the man and there is a final implication of her inability to ever achieve happiness. This seemingly ordinary story is painted with extraordinary delicacy, a strangely bittersweet melange of passion and detachment.

Admirers of Rohmer's work have found themselves endlessly debating which "side" he's really on. Since he constructed the stories with extreme precision, and in a specific order, shouldn't one assume that this, the last of the *contes moraux*, contains some conclusions about love, marriage, relationships? He once again closes the film with the married couple, the "temptress" having been rejected naked in her own bed!

Rohmer resolutely denies having a bias: "The tales only analyze situations that exist in life," he said. "They are moral inasmuch as the characters follow a certain idea of life in common, everyday situations. The public is free to be critical (of the temptress), but I am not."

Of course, artists have often expressed an opinion of their work divergent from that of its audience. Surely each is valid; the artist is never completely conscious of the contents of his work, or may be reluctant to discuss it. It is the viewer's special privilege—and pleasure—to think what he or she likes. My conclusion about Eric Rohmer is that he is a very moral man who accepts certain strictures, but with regret. In a recent interview, he did acknowledge that he writes about the two types of women to whom he is attracted. When pressed, he said "Of course I'm more interested in the temptress; this is proven by the fact she's on screen longer. *But interest is one thing, sympathy another.*"

That statement is probably the clue to the ambiguity, the answer to the debates. It is interesting that in *Chloe in the Afternoon* we sympathize with the wife over the temptress—for the first time in any of the moral tales. Chloe is an interloper and a bit of a nuisance. However foolish Frederic may be, he did not seek out Chloe. We can't imagine his life being better with her, whereas we thought Trintignant mad to give up even one night with Maud.