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THE DARWINIAN WORLD OF CLAUDE CHABROL

In the days before the new wave swelled to self-destructive proportions, discussions about it centred on three directors, all of whom had worked on *Cahiers du Cinema*. Advance warning of its arrival came with Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* and Truffaut's *Les Mistons*, shown at the National Film Theatre under the uneasy patronage of Free Cinema. Chabrol and Truffaut were still ahead when the new wave broke into the commercial cinema with *Les Cousins* and *Les Quatre Cents Coups*. And if it was Godard who made the definitive new wave movie with *A Bout de Souffle*, the precedence of his colleagues was confirmed by their appearance on the credits as alleged scriptwriter (Truffaut) and supervisor (Chabrol).

Three years later, Godard is still king of the *enfants terribles*, and Truffaut, after pleasing few people with his one really good film, *Tirez sur le Pianiste*, managed to combine conspicuous charm with intellectual gratification and in *Jules and Jim* quietly land a sockeroo at the b.o. Meanwhile Chabrol has made three times as many films as Truffaut and twice as many as Godard. His fall from critical esteem has been matched by a brisk decline at the box office, notching up four financial disasters in a row before he had another success in *Landru*.

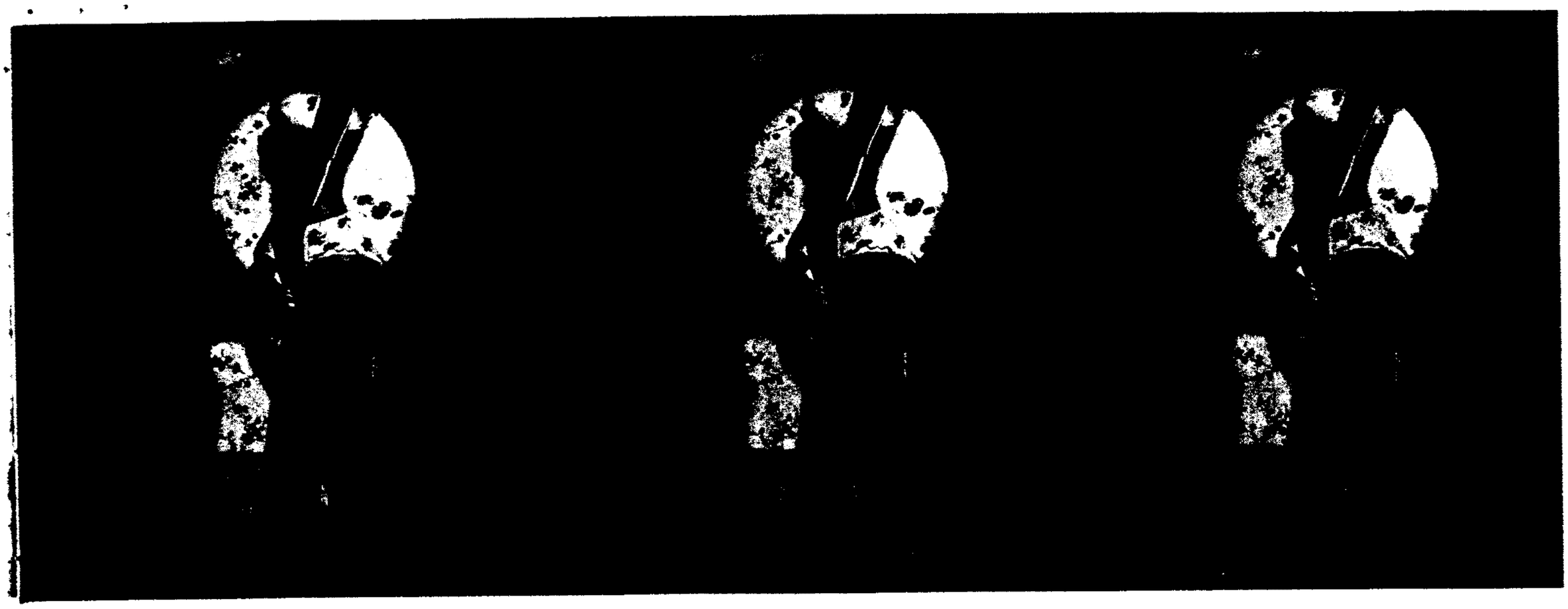
The reason that Chabrol is neglected can easily be found in his differences from Truffaut and Godard. These two have been thoughtful enough to provide eccentric camera styles and other evidence that they are Artists. Chabrol, on the other hand, has made the mistake of professionalism. That makeshift air, which writers find so endearing in the work of young artists, has been replaced in Chabrol's films by the more assured approach of a director completely in control of his resources. Even though his work may have more depth, the professional is always at a critical disadvantage compared to the inspired amateur. Chabrol's films, in their way, are as "well made" as those of his squarest predecessors: they fit together as smoothly and coherently as anything produced by Clair or Autant Lara. For the benefit of readers of *Film Culture*, who may still like it rough, coherence and smoothness are not disadvantages. In fact, Chabrol's first films improved steadily as he became more skilful as a director.

The other obstacle between Chabrol and his critics is his attitude to his characters. The problem is rather the same as it is with Preminger. Chabrol is a "cold" director. Without manifesting the lofty detachment of Bresson, he shows no desire to make the audience love any of his characters. This does not mean that Chabrol has any less feeling for his fellow man. It merely implies that he does not tell us who to like, thereby leaving it open for us to extend the same respect to all his characters. Of course, we, as humans with prejudices, don't do so, but the freedom of the audience to make up its own mind about Chabrol's characters is central to his view of the world. In the context of his films, directorial "warmth," a quality that is always selective in application, would place limitations on *Le Beau Serge*. Bernadette Lafont says to Jean-Claude Brialy, "Tu as l'air de n'aimer personne." He replies, "Au contraire, j'aime tout le monde."

Unlike his colleagues, whose films are intimate stories of the lives of one or two characters, Chabrol is concerned to present a picture of the world in which *Le Beau Serge*, *Les Cousins* and *Les Bonnes Femmes* live. Chabrol has always had tendencies towards the documentary and they have found expression in the village background of *Le Beau Serge*, the shots of Parisian commuters that punctuate *Les Bonnes Femmes* and, I imagine, in the Munich beer festival of *L'Oeil du Malin*: the documentary aspects of the first two were intended to be more predominant, but were finally reduced in the cutting (see interview). In general, though, documentary description is replaced by a technique of selection: his films present samples of the world. The leading characters in *Le Beau Serge* and even the village itself, the group of students in *Les Cousins*, the people involved in the murder in *A Double Tour*, the shop girls in *Les Bonnes Femmes* the polytechnicians in *L'Avarice* and the lonely victims of *Landru* are representative of the world they inhabit. Not that they are meant to be representative in any statistical way, for Chabrol is taking a sample rather than conducting a survey. If you take a bucketful of water out of a pond, you can use it as material for a partial description of pond life. You probably won't catch any fish, but for anyone who is interested in the smaller fauna, there will be worms and water-fleas a-plenty. ("You look at us as if we were insects," says Lafont in *Le Beau Serge*. Brialy replies, ". . . it's because I like the truth.") So it is with Chabrol. His samples may contain some pretty strange creatures, but the larger predators are notably absent—even Landru is presented not as a monster but as a *petit bourgeois* surviving the hardships of war-time by finding a new means of sustenance for himself and his family. Modern society for Chabrol is just as red in tooth and claw as the rest of the animal kingdom. It, too, is governed by the Darwinian law of natural selection by survival of the fittest.

Les Cousins

Of course, the samples taken by Chabrol are considerably less random than the contents of buckets of pond water. His selection of characters expresses his preoccupations. In a world that is frequently grotesque and cruel, it is only natural that people should be grotesque and even



cruel in their behaviour. After a party in *Les Cousins*, Paul (Brialy) wakes up a Jewish student who has passed out on the floor by shining a torch in his eyes and yelling "Gestapo!"

Paul is lazy, unscrupulous, and determinedly eccentric: he lives in an apartment whose decor includes a bottled snake, an engraving of a dissected frog, a tiger skull, and a revolver for which he has a box of live ammunition. He entertains his guests at a party by walking around the darkened room in SS uniform, holding a candelabra and reciting Goethe in German. He is as self-centred as he is eccentric: his feelings of responsibility for a pregnant ex-mistress go no further than giving her the price of an abortion. He has equally few scruples about seducing his cousin's girl friend and having her live with them. When she goes, he regrets only the *tomates a la provencale* which she used to cook for them.

In the seduction, Paul is aided by his friend and parasite Clovis (Claude Cerval). Ten years older than Paul, Clovis is even less admirable: in addition to encouraging the seduction, he also arranges the abortion. When Paul holds a party, Clovis brings an Italian count who is paying him to provide entertainment. Paul asks, "Who is that guy?" and Clovis answers, "You know, times are hard."

Contrasted with these two rather monstrous characters is Paul's cousin. Charles (Gerard Blain) is quiet, polite and sincere. He has come up from the country to study at the Sorbonne. He retires discreetly to his room on the arrival of the pregnant girl. Instead of reading gangster stories and pornography like his fellow students, Charles goes to a bookshop to buy a volume of Balzac. He works hard for his exams, buying printed transcripts of the lectures to study at home. When he falls in love with a fellow student, Florence (Juliette Mayniel), he doesn't expect to fall straight into bed with her. And he writes home regularly to his mother. A good son, a respectful lover and a diligent student.

But as the movie progresses, this paragon of virtue reveals himself as the screen's most thorough masochist. The first time he is alone with Florence, he announces to her that he is weak, spoiled and stupid. Everything he says to her seems almost expressly designed to destroy the relationship he most wants to build. He makes it plain that he cannot understand how she could like anyone as worthless and unattractive as him. His mother told him that he would fall victim to the first woman he met. Nevertheless Florence does her best to be nice. She tells him that he has the most beautiful voice in the world. Charles has a quick answer: "You're joking!" Paul has a much more beautiful voice. When Florence leaves Paul, Charles tells him that he didn't even like the *tomates a la provencale*—he ate them only to please her. On the other hand, he rejects all her attempts to be friendly after she has moved in with them. Usually he says that he has to work. But we know that his main reason for working so hard is to take his mind off Florence.

The apparently admirable Charles is shown to be totally unfitted for the world in which he finds himself. He loses his girl to Paul, fails his exams and is finally killed by one of Paul's revolver bullets, a bullet which he had intended for Paul. Even in small things, Charles is unable to survive the competition of his fellows. When he wants to take Florence for a drive in Paul's car, the upshot is that he goes for a drive in another car while she goes in Paul's car with Paul.

In the treatment of the two cousins, we see an approach to character building that is inherited from Hitchcock. Neither Charles nor Paul is as he at first seems. The revelation of their natures is a dual reversal of appearances, expressing the same refusal to take the world at face value that is part of the formal structure of Hitchcock's movies. Paul, in spite of his apparent weirdness is much more fitted to his environment than Charles, more balanced and more stable. The shyness which seemed at first to be endearing in Charles becomes irritating when we realise that it is the result of his masochism.

Le Beau Serge

A similar reversal appears in *Le Beau Serge*. There the counterpart of Charles is Francois (played by Brialy), who sets out to save his boyhood friend Serge (played by Blain) from alcoholism. But behind the noble intention, one detects, for example, repressed homosexuality in the way he turns against Serge's wife, trying to make him leave her after she has refused to co-operate in saving her husband. ("I want to help him." "Did he ask you?") When Francois' efforts have been unsuccessful, for Serge has beaten him up and seduced his girl friend, he shuts himself up in his room and refuses to see anyone. His first visitor, the village priest, asks him who he thinks he is—Jesus Christ? And indeed there is a sort of Christ complex behind Francois's efforts—he wants to set an example for lesser mortals, perhaps even to save Serge by sacrificing himself. We realise that his aim is intensely neurotic, that he needs Serge more than Serge needs him, for only by saving Serge can he save himself.

Good deeds in Chabrol's world are no longer inherently valuable; often they are motivated by self interest or by neuroses—the good guys in Chabrol movies turn out to be neurotics. Idealistic actions are often not just neurotic but futile as well. Serge has become an alcoholic because his first child was a mongol which died at birth. Francois risks his life—he is convalescing from tuberculosis—to drag Serge

through the snow to witness the birth of his second, normal child, but it is the normality of the child rather than the vision of its birth that saves Serge, so Francois's sacrifice achieves a result that would have come about anyway.

The futility of Francois's actions is demonstrated best in the sub-plot involving Marie (Bernadette Lafont), who lives with her father, a horrible old man who treats her badly. Marie becomes the mistress of Francois, who learns that the old man is not in fact her father. Aiming to save Marie from him, Francois tells him the truth. So the old man goes home and does what he's been dying to do all along—rape Marie. After making a gesture of beating up the old man, Francois tells Serge about it. Serge explains the old man's feelings on finding that Marie is not his daughter and adds: "It's not disgusting. It's more or less normal."

In the world as it is, it is people like Paul and particularly Clovis who are fitted to survive. If the last shot of *Les Cousins*—the gramophone autochanger switching itself off at the end of a Wagner record—suggests the end of the life Paul has led during the film, the cause of this lies not in himself but in the intrusion of the self-destructive Charles. Clovis, however, emerges unscathed—one does not imagine that the death of Charles or its effect on Paul will have any repercussions in him. When we last see Florence she is with him. So Clovis, the most unscrupulous and least likeable of characters is the one to survive. Natural selection at work.

Another indication of the unfitness of Charles and Francois is their lack of contact with the truth. In *Le Beau Serge*, Francois shows less self-awareness than any of the other characters. In *Les Cousins*, Paul (and later, more cruelly, Clovis) demonstrate to Florence that her life with Charles would be unworkable. It is evident that his description of what would happen is a very realistic assessment. When Clovis says to her "The person to save you from Charles is Paul," he is right. Her life after the "seduction" is the one to which she is accustomed, one with no great emotional involvement. With Charles, in place of this primarily sensual existence, she would be subjected to all manner of dark emotions for which she seems quite unequipped.

The ideas of fitness for life in the modern world are developed further in Chabrol's later work, but without the strained symmetry of his first two films. This symmetry was most troublesome in

Stills. Two doomed relationships. Top: Le Beau Serge, *Francois (Jean-Claude Brialy) and Marie (Bernadette Lafont). Bottom:* Les Cousins, *Charles (Gerard Blain) and Florence (Juliette Mayniel).*

the ending of *Les Cousins*, where the desire to make a formal point overcame Chabrol's better judgement. The origin of the structure could be found in Chabrol's view of Hitchcock, "the double postulation of the human conscience," and to this extent it was personal. But it was also rather stifling. Chabrol may have found the formal discipline valuable in his own development as a director, but within the freer forms of his next three films, he was able to go far beyond the first two films. And although he abandoned the use of structural ideas culled from Hitchcock, his films became much more Hitchcockian as he learned to use the master's methods of manipulating audience identification.

A Double Tour

Just as Paul and Clovis are custodians of the truth in *Les Cousins*, so in *A Double Tour*, the mystery is solved by Laszlo Kovacs (Jean-Paul Belmondo instead of Brialy, who should have taken the part but was ill). Kovacs is by far the most outrageous character in the film—often drunk and unkempt, he can derive enjoyment from shocking his fiancee's mother with a display of beastly eating as she returns from church. He also takes a delight in unravelling her knitting, an occupation which may have some symbolic connection with his encouragement to her husband to leave her. The husband, Henri (Jacques Dacqmine) has fallen in love with Leda (Antonella Lualdi) an Italian girl who lives nearby in a Japanese style house. He has grown to hate his wife Therese (Madeleine Robinson) but cannot find the courage to leave her, as she has a much stronger personality, and her determination to keep her family together is backed by hard religious principles.

Throughout the film, Laszlo's role is to bring the truth out into the open. In urging Henri to pluck up the courage to live with Leda, he helps him to find the only way in which he can be happy. When Leda is murdered, he has seen the killer returning and can force him to confess.

One recognises Chabrol's preoccupations again when one looks at the other characters in the film. Some of these people make Laszlo look quite normal. There is, for example, the gardener, who leers up at the maid's bedroom window and gestures with a pair of hedge clippers. Or Richard, the son, whose problem might be described as an Oedipus complex if he had not also designs on the maid and his sister.

Leda and Henri are unable to survive, for they represent those romantic ideals that have no place in Chabrol's world—love and beauty. Richard has to kill Leda because she is so beautiful that she makes him and his mother seem ugly. He hates her simply because she is beautiful, not because she is taking away his father: that would not be unsympathetic to him in the light of his psychological make-up, for it would bring his mother closer to him. This central motivation, the destruction of beauty, is so central to *A Double Tour* that the film automatically failed for those who did not find Antonella Lualdi beautiful.

Laszlo manages to keep his relationship with Henri's daughter alive, because he recognises the danger, that he may lose his fiancée by revealing her brother as a murderer. Before he forces Richard to confess, her tells her that he is going to hurt her. Through his awareness of the difficulties of life and his devotion to the truth, his love survives where Henri's has perished. And just as Paul's way of life in *Les Cousins* was destroyed not by himself but by Charles's intrusion, so it is only the doomed love of Henri and Leda that endangered Laszlo's romance.

The viewpoint of characters like Paul and Laszlo is to some extent Chabrol's own. They are sufficiently well-adapted to their life to be able to survive. If their behaviour seems rowdy or vulgar or even cruel, this is the measure of the world in which they live. Like Chabrol, they are able to relish the grotesqueness of their environment in a way that the heroes of earlier generations derived pleasure from beauty.

Not that Chabrol means us to admire his heroes. The destruction of romantic ideals is something to be regretted, for Chabrol is as moved by love or beauty as anyone else: witness the treatment of Antonella Lualdi in *A Double Tour*. But at the same time as they are beautiful, the love scenes, particularly the famous one in the field of red poppies, are also corny. The romantic quality of these scenes is something that we cannot quite accept any longer. But the feeling of these scenes suggests that their anachronistic quality is to be regretted.

Les Godelureaux

Chabrol's reservations about his world and the characters adapted to live in it are expressed in *Les Godelureaux*, the lightest of Chabrol's first five pictures. It is a comedy about a character who is an extension of Paul and Laszlo; Roland, again played by Brialy. This has the grotesque fun of *Les Cousins* and *A Double Tour* to an even greater extent. Roland lives in a candle-lit apartment full of white doves, he wears a mask in the bath and sometimes drives around in a Rolls Royce with Arabic registration plates. Like Laszlo, Roland has no hesitation in expressing his contempt for the stuffy hypocrisy of French bourgeois life. When he undertakes to arrange the entertainment for his Aunt Suzanne's charity tea party, he produces a dancer who does bumps and grinds, much to the distress of an audience which includes a tall senile-looking man with a large nose, referred to as Monsieur le President. The fun is completed with a naughty song from an aged dancer of the Folies Parisiennes, who winks lewdly at guests as she sings, and a speech from Roland on what he thinks of them. Finally the guests are driven into the street when Roman candles start exploding everywhere.

Les Godelureaux is a comedy because troublesome ideals like love only make a tentative appearance. The story concerns Roland's revenge on a student, Arthur (Charles Belmont), who with his friends has lifted Roland's Alfa-Romeo on to the pavement in order to park their aged jalopy in front of their favourite cafe. "This afternoon, for the first time in my life, someone has done me wrong." Roland weaves spells to conjure up a miracle: it arrives in the bouncy shape of Ambroisine (Bernadette Lafont, of course). She provides Arthur with a sex-life for Roland to louse up. At the end of the film, when Arthur has stormed out of Roland's apartment after learning that the ups and downs of his bumpy love-affair with Ambroisine have been stage managed, all our hero can say is: "For the first time in my life I feel sad." The last sequence of the film suggests that Arthur, who has become a little more like Roland, isn't likely to be hurt that way again.

The point of *Les Godelureaux* is its pointlessness. The whole action is built, albeit loosely, around the elaborate execution of an almost motiveless revenge. In a way, the film is a comic version of *Les Cousins*, with Arthur taking the part of Charles.

In *Les Cousins*, we were made to feel the callousness in Paul's behaviour only by a few isolated incidents, like the Gestapo act for waking up the Jewish student. Elsewhere, acts which seem to be cruel, like Paul's seduction of the girl his cousin loves, are shown to be realistic. The later films concentrate much more on the results of the heroes' actions. There is a method very characteristic of Chabrol in showing callousness through its results: he leads us to identify with a character, then points out the effects of whatever fun we are participating in. In *Les Godelureaux*, Arthur and his uncle, with whom he lives, go away from Paris for a few days. Roland takes the opportunity to hold a large and exceptionally rowdy party in their house. "I don't want it to be an orgy," he says to his guests, who are all wearing togas. "We're here to drink, to play and to break things." And that is just what they do. As the party builds up in merriment, it is intercut with the dinner which Arthur is

having with his uncle in the country. Every time we get caught up in the fun of the party, there is a cut to the pair having dinner. Uncle is rather fussy about his food, and the ceremonial care with which the meal is consumed provides a series of hilarious juxtapositions (Uncle asks for tarte a la creme and someone in the party gets one in the face). But the contrast also makes us feel guilt at enjoying the destruction of the home, by repeatedly bringing us up with a start. When a window is broken, we cut to Uncle accidentally knocking a glass off the table and being very upset by this one small breakage. By the end of the party, it is the Uncle, a man we had previously disliked, who has our sympathy.

The same method is also used in *A Double Tour* and results in an emotional response from the audience that is unusually sophisticated. We initially dislike Thérèse, the mother, because she is a killjoy. When Laszlo arrives on the scene, we identify with him: the treatment of his drive through town, which introduces him to us, encourages this. We are in the car enjoying the ride with him as he yells jovial insults at the pedestrians. We are pleased to see him shocking Thérèse with his eating habits, and unravelling her knitting. We are with him when he urges Henri to leave her. We are sorry for Henri being stuck with Thérèse, and touched by Leda's beauty and her love for Henri. When Henri decides to bring the situation out into the open we are pleased. He tells Thérèse about his day with Leda. The flashback which follows includes the romantic scenes in the country and their walk through the town, to be seen together at last. They meet Laszlo and his friend Vlado, and the four go back to Leda's house. "Since I've an unpleasant nature, I can't wait to see the faces of certain people!" Then Chabrol cuts from a close-up of Leda, beautiful and happy with her lover and his friends in her spacious home to a second close-up, this time of Thérèse, haggard, without any make-up, lying distraught on her bed surrounded by the stifling, ugly decor of their house; she is listening to her husband say that he is going to leave her. The viciousness of the contrast changes the emotional impact of the film. We have suddenly been shown her plight and her inability to compete with Leda in any sympathetic way—Leda is beautiful and generous beyond compare. Thérèse's only chance of preserving her family and the life she wants is by being stronger and harder than her husband. The presence of Leda makes it impossible for Thérèse to be likeable. Suddenly we are sorry for Thérèse (although we may not like her) and this modifies our attitude to the other characters. The beautiful, romantic love of Henri and Leda is something destructive, making it impossible for Thérèse to be other than as she is.

We are made to see the good and bad sides of actions in Chabrol's films, for the idea of absolute right is as foreign to his world as any of the other absolutes. Characters may be revealed as weak and unstable, but they are not condemned by the director. Whatever their faults, neither the director nor the audience has the right to feel superior to them. For example, we are allowed to watch the maid in *A Double Tour* wandering round her bedroom in a bikini. We're quite happy to watch this spectacle until the camera tracks back to frame the girl in a keyhole (an outrageous piece of technique), and then cuts to outside the door to reveal that we were looking at her from the same viewpoint as the son of the family. We liked peeping too, so what right have we to feel better than him? By laughing at him, we are also laughing at ourselves.

Thérèse, her son and the stuffy house in which they live represent the world against which the ideal romance of Henri and Leda has no chance. It is characterised, particularly before they decide to bring it into the open, by images of escape—the cool, spacious house on the other side of the fence, the field of poppies, the dream-like image of Leda reflected in a copper screen and Leda herself lit so that her skin visibly glows, so beautiful that she seems a fantasy of perfection. The murder demonstrates the impossibility of Leda's escape world, as it is an invasion by the son, telling her of the destructive effect of her presence on the family next door.

Les Bonnes Femmes

The fullest picture of Chabrol's world comes in *Les Bonnes Femmes*, his best film, which was made after *A Double Tour* and before *Les Godelureaux*. In a way, it presents the world as seen by one of the heroes from his other pictures: the picture is disillusioned, but not at all bitter. The grotesqueness, which abounds in the film, is often treated with relish. But underlying this is a moral awareness which constantly makes us assess what we see and, more importantly, our reaction to what we see. This time, the intention of presenting a picture of the world is explicit and, in a less restricted setting, the sampling technique is underlined by the mise en scène.

Les Bonnes Femmes are four Paris shop-girls, Jacqueline (Clothilde Joano), Jane (Bernadette Lafont), Ginette (Stephane Audran) and Rita (Lucile Saint-Simon). The film follows Jane and Jacqueline on a night out, all four through the following day and night, and Jacqueline on an outing in the country which ends with her murder. The final sequence in a dance-hall shows a fifth girl dancing with a stranger whose face we never see. Reduced to these terms, the film might seem to have the shapelessness of a "slice of life." And so it would, if the girls were meant to be taken only for what they are worth. But Chabrol is using them as representative of Parisian women. Therefore he does not build up their individual characters, as this treatment would introduce much that was extraneous to the structure of the film. The girls are recognisable human beings rather than puppets, thanks to the excellent acting, but we know nothing about them except what they do while they are on screen. Their individual pasts and futures are irrelevant to Chabrol's purpose—they are meant to typify, though not in a lifeless, statistical way as four specimens of "The Average Woman."

Throughout the film Chabrol reminds us that his heroines are unexceptional members of the working population of Paris. After the opening shots (Arc de Triomphe/flame on Unknown Soldier's tomb/Champs Elysées/night club with doorman chanting "les plus beaux nus de Paris") which present a brisk tourist's-eye introduction to Paris-By-Night, the camera picks on a group of young people almost at random. It follows a leather-jacketed Parisian who happens to be passing the nightclub. He stops to look in the window of an electrical shop, and both he and the camera glimpse some young people, obviously having a night out, as they stroll through the arcade behind the shop. Among them are Jane and Jacqueline. The observer is André, who is following Jacqueline. But the informality of our introduction to them makes us feel that they could equally have been other young Parisians.

For the same reason there are constant references to Paris in general, starting behind the credits with the traffic going round the Place de la Bastille. The shots of great masses of Parisians, which are often used to indicate the time, remind us that the girls are doing the same as everyone else. Chabrol's insistence that his characters are part of the crowd also extends to the men. At one point, for example, the camera follows André as he cycles past the shop until it loses him in the evening traffic.

In case the audience has not realised that it is meant to generalise on every possible occasion, Chabrol provides a final indication with the fifth girl in the dance-hall. She never speaks or performs any action which gives a clue to her personality. We see her sitting alone beside the dance floor. A man goes over and asks her to dance. We watch her face as she dances, and wonder what her expression means—pleasure and hope, perhaps. But we cannot tell, for we know nothing about her, or who she came with, or whether

she came alone. We are as unaware of her predicament as the first four girls were of theirs. She is the summation of them, for being without individual characteristics, she is any girl, Everygirl. The meaning is underlined with a symbol of universality in the shots of the revolving globe in the dance hall.

Ginette, in one of the moments of total emptiness which punctuate the day, says, "Do men have dreams like us?" She is not speaking just for these shopgirls, but for women in general. The girls merely provide Chabrol with a way of showing women's dreams and the contrasting reality as far as he could from the outside viewpoint of a man. Although the girls all cherish impossibly romantic dreams of a great love, their day to day lives are filled with more modest distractions and ambitions. Rita wants security and a better social position, which she will obtain by marrying Henri, the pusillanimous son of a snobbish grocer. Ginette consoles herself for the monotony of the days by singing in a music-hall in the evenings. Jane has a puny soldier boy-friend whom she dominates, and also seems willing to sleep around. The middle-aged cashier, Mme. Louise, whose dream lover was a sadist called Weidemann, keeps a handkerchief which she soaked in his blood when he was guillotined; she also keeps a young and very phoney poet. Underlying all this is the usual theme: the unreality of the romantic ideals in the modern world.

Only Jacqueline lives by her ideal of a great love, which she hopes to find in the man who is following her. The first time we see her apart from the group, she is framed in the windscreen of André's motor-cycle, as she runs her fingers over the leopard skin of his saddle. It turns out that André is a psychopath and that the natural consummation of his love is murder. Jacqueline is very much more reserved than the other girls (André calls her "tendre et gracieuse") and somehow the sort of girl one expects to get murdered. She has the touchingly vulnerable look of a small antelope (André says, "I love your neck because it's long and slender"). And she has, if not actually a death wish, at least a fatal attraction to predatory beasts like the tiger at the zoo—and André (who is characterised as a carnivore in his leopard skin motor-cycle saddle and swimming trunks, his taste for steak and his smile of pleasure at the girls' fright when the tiger roars). So André takes Jacqueline out into the country on his motor-cycle and quietly, tenderly strangles her. There are no screams, no real struggle, but just a touching little flurry and the mewing cry of the bittern in the distance. Then André gets up, drags his jacket from under her, dumping her in a heap on the ground and runs off. Murder can be beautiful, but death is ugly. Once more, romantic love has been unable to survive—although this time it has destroyed itself.

But how little chance it has in Chabrol's world, which in *Les Bonnes Femmes* is often as gross as in the other films it is cruel or ugly or grotesque. The grossness is most evident in the two men, Marcel and Albert, who pick up Jane and Jacqueline on the first evening. Marcel's conversational opening is to ask Jacqueline "What's the difference between a frying pan and a chamber pot?" "I don't know." "A fine household yours must be!" And so the evening wears on—nothing particularly unusual happens, but we catch ourselves thinking how vulgar it all is. They drink. Marcel whispers a dirty joke to Jane. She gets up from the table with the words, "J'ai quelque chose à *faire*," spoken with the lewdest possible emphasis. Then it's bowler hats, false noses and bottom slapping in a night club. Marcel is hit in the face by a stripper's bra. He kisses the inside of it and throws it back. The merriment ends after Jacqueline has gone home with Jane on a bed locked in a clinch with Marcel while Albert's hand wanders over her knee. "Leave him be, he's a good type," says Marcel when Jane protests. "What are you two after?" grumbles Jane who is the coarsest of the four girls. The next morning we are treated to the sight of her slapping cologne on her armpits. It seems almost fitting that she has arranged to meet her boyfriend during her lunch hour at the monkey house in the zoo. We discover him standing in front of a cage of baboons, eating nuts.

By this time we are feeling a little disgusted, certainly a little superior. Chabrol is out to take advantage of these almost involuntary reactions.

Our feeling of superiority over the characters take a couple of pretty hard knocks in rapid succession. On the second evening in the film, Rita's Henri takes her, Jane and Jacqueline to a music-hall. The acts are at best mediocre. In the first a greasy little singer is wooing the female part of the audience. As he sings "Toi, toi, toi, toi," four shots—one per "toi"—show four middle-aged housewives completely under the spell of his synthetic charm. More shots of more rapt women, including the girls, follow, and by the applause at the end of the song we are feeling very smug indeed. Then we are shown Henri reacting in much the same way. So much for our smugness, as Henri is the one really detestable person in the film, a compendium of petit bourgeois faults.

Having shown us that we are no better than Henri, Chabrol goes on to make us see ourselves enjoying the activities of horrid Marcel and Albert. After the music-hall, Henri and the girls go swimming. Marcel and Albert turn up on their evening flesh hunt. The middle-aged Albert is scoring only occasional successes in his struggle to hold in his pot belly and look well-built, instead of just fat. After the introductions ("Très honoré . . . de Balzac" says Marcel, taking Henri's hand) the two suddenly start heaving Henri and the girls into the water. Then they dive in and set about ducking them. Aha! we think, what fun. We only realise the effects on others when they pick on Jacqueline, the character in the film we can like most. To make us see the unpleasantness of her plight, Chabrol cuts in a silent underwater shot of her every time she is ducked, and goes on until she is rescued, gasping for breath, by André.

Very near the beginning of the film, Chabrol has announced his intention of using our feelings about the characters as comments on ourselves. In the night club scene the compere invites us to watch "la plus perverse . . . ensorceleuse qui ait jamais brisé le menage . . . dans son numéro le plus exciting, le plus anatomique." We settle down expectantly, only to find that the first shot is of the stripper's gloved hand pulling back a net curtain revealing not herself, but the audience—us. In the strip that follows we see rather little of the girl and a lot of the audience.

Chabrol's films involve us in a sort of mental striptease, which unveils in ourselves a lot in common with the various characters on the screen. The things that we despise in them, we discover in ourselves through our reactions to them. By confronting us with these reactions to a world of which we are inescapably a part, Chabrol makes his films into a critique, not of the people on the screen, but of the audience in the cinema.

Ian Cameron

Still. Bernadette Lafont in A Double Tour.