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A Break With the Past

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

Eric Rohmer, that supreme moralist of the movies, is always breaking rules. In each of his four features to be shown in the U.S.—"My Night at Maud's," "Claire's Knee," "La Collectionneuse," and "Chloe in the Afternoon," all part of a cycle he has called "Six Moral Tales"—the distinctive French filmmaker has used techniques seemingly inimical to the very nature of the movie medium, to come up with works that rank among that medium's finest expressions.

Where movies are traditionally committed to physical action, Rohmer's films are emphatically static, with the only significant movements those of the mind and emotions. Where movies are usually resistant to lengthy conversation, Rohmer's works are full of talk about such unlikely subjects as Catholic theology. Where other

On Film

"The Marquise of O. . ."

current movies tend to reflect the sexual attitudes of our notoriously permissive age, Rohmer's films make sexual restraint their quintessential sexual theme.

And so it should come as no surprise that Rohmer's current film, "The Marquise of O. . .," also runs counter to current notions about what is possible in film. In fact, the movie even seems to a large extent to break with Rohmer's own rules of the game. It reverses his moral scheme; the hero is a man of action rather than thought, more surprisingly, a rapist whose sexual conquest is ultimately affirmed. It also goes against Rohmer's implicit preference for original screenplays and for realistic contemporary settings; here, Rohmer has used as his text an 1808 German novella. In its formality, objectivity, and Catholic ambience, the story might seem totally consistent with Rohmer's style. Nonetheless, it's his first venture into adaptation and his first period piece, and as such, it represents a break with his past efforts.

The work of that eccentric, if brilliant, early Romantic, Heinrich von Kleist, "The Marquise of O. . ." tells the bizarre story of a virtuous young widow who finds herself mysteriously pregnant. Having no idea how this came about, the Marquise is driven after much storm and stress to place an ad in the local newspaper asking that the father of the child identify himself. The man turns out to be precisely who it must be—a Russian count who, some months before, had rescued the Marquise from an attack by marauding soldiers. But the Marquise is more shocked by the explanation than by the original mystery: How could the man who was her savior also be her defiler?

There is nothing very unusual about adaptations. They are, in fact, more the rule than the exception in movies. This particular story, however, does seem a rather unlikely choice for the screen. Released from the protective distance of Kleist's subtly ironic prose, its plot devices—being raped while asleep and advertising for the unknown father of one's unborn child—risk seeming ludicrous. Yet Rohmer has skillfully suppressed the tale's potential absurdity—in part by his unique approach to the art of adaptation.

At their most ambitious, adaptations usually attempt to rethink the originals, to restructure and transform them into purely cinematic terms. Think of Kurosawa's transformation of "Macbeth" into "Throne of Blood" or Tony Richardson's use of wipes, freezes, speed-ups, and other camera tricks in "Tom Jones" to stand in for the novel's fund of literary devices. At their most serious, adaptations usually justify themselves by offering some fresh vision of the original, some re-interpretation

of the text in light of contemporary notions. Such was the case in Olivier's Freudian approach to "Hamlet" or Peter Brooks' existential one to "King Lear."

But Rohmer, that adamant individualist, has neither transformed nor re-interpreted Kleist's story. He has, in fact, used the novella as if it were a shooting script, literally following the story almost line by line. He has even made his film in German, presumably so that the dialogue could be gleaned directly from Kleist's prose, in this way breaking still another rule of thumb which suggests that literary language cannot be translated whole to the screen. Except for a single alteration (in the story, the Marquise falls into a deep faint when the Count rescues her, but in the movie she is given a drug to insure a heavy sleep), Rohmer has made no concessions to contemporary notions of what is credible in human behavior.

Rohmer's actors (Edith Clever as the Marquise; Bruno Ganz as the Count; Peter Lühr as the Marquise's father), following Kleist's directions, behave according to the conventions of 1808: They fall to their knees, fling their hands to their foreheads and frequently break into sobs. They are posed to look like period portraits, with the Marquise a perfect Madame Recamier, reclining on her chaise in flowing Empire gown, and the blazoning white-clad figure of the Count recalling a hero in a Gericault battle scene. But if all this makes "The Marquise of O. . ." sound like a German "Barry Lyndon," it isn't. Aside from the fact that Rohmer's people aren't wooden 20th Century mannequins serving only as elements in a canvas, Rohmer's camera (in the hands of the gifted Nestor Almendros) is, unlike Kubrick's, still and unobtrusive, never commenting at all on the action.

Unusual as these strategies are, their result is even more so. What Rohmer has come up with is no dogged, "literary" film, but a perfect cinematic equivalent of a work of literature. In other words, his movie emerges less a translation of Kleist's story than an exquisite and fascinating visual embodiment of it. Yet, within all this apparent perfection, there is ultimately something not quite satisfying about the film. Resurrecting Kleist's world objectively and as nearly as possible in its own terms, investing it with film's aura of immediate reality, Rohmer has demanded our participation in a time and place whose sensibility and emotional element are simply not our own. We cannot share this era's passionate Romantic concern with the dualism of man; we cannot experience as revelation the insight, apparently so overwhelming to the Marquise and her contemporaries, that virtue and vice are inextricably entwined. And so, though we can intellectually appreciate the film and delight in its artistry as well, we remain throughout at an uncomfortable and somewhat chilling distance from the human predicament before us.

Rohmer, then, has created a near perfect "adaptation" by breaking some aesthetic rules. But breaking other aesthetic rules, he has also created a movie that may have lost contact with the essential power of the medium itself: namely, its power to arouse our identification and awaken our emotions.

Correction

A review of the film "The Memory of Justice" in the September 27 Journal incorrectly identified Dr. Robert Kempner as a defense attorney at the Nuremberg war crimes trial. He was in fact a prosecutor, as the film made clear. Dr. Kempner writes us from Frankfurt that his record of prosecuting Nazi criminals began 50 years ago in Berlin during the Weimar Republic. We offer him our apologies for the inadvertent transposition.