Directed and written by Eric Rohmer  
Produced by Pierre Cottrell and Barbet Schroeder  
Cinematography by Néstor Almendros

Jean-Louis Trintignant...Jean-Louis  
Françoise Fabian...Maud  
Marie-Christine Barrault...Françoise  
Antoine Vitez...Vidal


CLERMONTE-FERRAND is a city and commune of France in the Auvergne. The city is Michelin’s corporate headquarters. The statue in its public square was sculpted by Frédéric Bartholdi, who also did the Statue of Liberty. The city is the birthplace of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955).


ERIC ROHMER (Jean-Marie Maurice Scherer) French director and scenarist, is intensively secretive about his personal life, which he keeps quite separate from his career, answering questions on such subjects as his date of birth more or less at random. However, it seems clear that he is the son of bourgeois parents, Lucien Scherer and the former Mathilde Bucher, and was born in Nancy, a manufacturing center in northeastern France. He was educated in Paris, earning an advanced degree in history, though he seems equally interested and learned in literature, philosophy, and theology.

Rohmer began his career as a teacher in the city of Clermont-Ferrand, birthplace of his beloved Pascal. In the mid-1940s he moved to Paris, where he worked as a freelance journalist. His novel, variously called Elizabeth and Les Vacances, was published in 1946 under the pen name of Gilbert Cordier. Rohmer had never been particularly interested in the cinema, but in Paris he began to frequent Henri Langlois’ Cinémathèque Française. He was soon addicted, and around 1949 turned increasingly from general journalism to film criticism, writing for Rêve de Cinéma, Arts, Temps Modernes, and La Parisienne.

At the Cinémathèque, Rohmer had come to know a group of equally passionate cinéphiles and critics, most of them younger than himself, including François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, and Jacques Rivette. In 1950, with Godard and Rivette, he founded the short-lived Gazette du Cinéma; and in 1951 he and his friends began to write for Cahiers du Cinéma, founded in that year by their mentor Andre Bazin. In Cahiers they excoriated the academic studio films of the period. They called instead for a personal style and promulgated a politique des auteurs—the then-startling theory (even many of the formerly despised products of the Hollywood movie “factories”) could and should be studied as personal works of art created by their directors as surely as books are created by their authors. And they insisted that it was the director’s moral duty to forget the sacred cow of montage and the psychological manipulation of the expressionists and to enter into an open and realistic dialogue with the members of the audience.

Rohmer’s early work as a film critic was published under his own name. He seems to have adopted his pseudonym in or about 1955 in order to conceal from his parents his growing involvement in the dubious world of the cinema. The same year his best-known essay was serialized in Cahiers, “Le Celluloid et le marbre” (Celluloid and Marble). It discusses film in relation to the other arts, maintaining that, in an age of cultural self-consciousness, cinema was “the last refuge of poetry”—the only contemporary art form from which metaphor could still spring naturally and spontaneously. In 1956 Rohmer became editor of the increasingly influential Cahiers du Cinéma, a post he retained for seven years, and in 1957 he and Claude Chabrol published their classic study of Alfred Hitchcock, the hero of the nouvelle vague critics.

Meanwhile, of course, the nouvelle vague critics were becoming the nouvelle vague filmmakers and Rohmer, like his friends, was serving his apprenticeship in 16mm. His first film was a short, Journal d'un scélérat [Diary of a Villain] (1950), featuring Chabrol’s scenarist Paul Gégauff, and made with a borrowed camera. With financial help from a few friends, he switched to 35mm for Présentation, ou Charlotte et son steak (1951), a 12-minute film written by the director, with Jean-Luc Godard in the central role. ...Rohmer himself appeared in Bérénice (15 minutes, 1954) and in La Sonate à Kreutzer (50 minutes, 1956), which was produced by Godard and scripted, directed and edited by Rohmer. After another short... came Rohmer’s first completed feature, Le Signe du lion (Sign of Leo, 1959), produced by Chabrol’s AYJM company.

Le Signe du lion (the title refers to the month of August) tells the story of a Dutch composer (Jess Hahn), waiting in Paris for a legacy, who finds himself progressively more isolated as his friends leave for the annual summer exodus. ...In its sketches of the Parisian intellectual milieu—its cafés, parties and general shiftlessness—the film has something in common with other nouvelle vague productions of the time, but it differs from these in
ways that would later be recognized as characteristic of Rohmer’s work—in its adroit, economical, but unassertive camerawork, its combination of ironic observation and Renőresque warmth, and its fascination with place: the look, feel, and above all the quality of light in Paris in August.

Le Signe du lion is a low-key, modest, and basically literary conte, far removed from the consciously cinematic movies of Godard, Truffaut, and Chabrol, all of whom presented their startling first feature in the same annus mirabilis, 1959. At such a moment, the quiet originality of Le Signe du lion was easily overlooked, though it had its admirers. The situation was further complicated by the fact that Chabrol was forced to sell AJYM before the film was released; it appeared in some countries in a cut version, and with Louis Saguer’s music replaced by a Brahms score.

Continuing as editor of Cahier, but under attack from more radical colleagues, Rohmer was forced in his filmmaking to retreat to 16mm shorts in black and white, in which form he made his first two contes moraux (Moral Tales) Rohmer’s contes moraux, on which he worked intermittently for ten years, are not “moral tales” in the English sense but subtle psychological investigations concerned less with behavior than with what his introspective characters think about their behavior. Their antecedents are literary—Proust, Stendhal, Henry James—rather than cinematic, though the films are as satisfying visually as they are intellectually. The six contes moraux all share a common plot: a man emotionally committed to one woman is briefly attracted to another but eventually resumes his primary commitment. “Instead of asking myself what subjects were most likely to appeal to audiences,” Rohmer has said, “I persuaded myself that the best thing would be to treat the subject six times over. . . . I was determined to be inflexible and intractable, because if you persist in an idea it seems to me that in the end you do secure a following.”

The first conte—little more than a sketch—was La Boulangère de Monceau (26 minutes, 1962). A youth falls in love on sight with a girl he notices in the street and begins a long obsession search for her. As the days pass and hope wanes he is distracted by another girl who works in a bakery, but abandons her at once when he chances upon the first. It was the first movie produced by Film du Losange, the company that Rohmer formed with Barbet Schroeder (who served as narrator as well as producer of this film). La Carrière de Suzanne (60 minutes, 1963) is a more complex variation on the theme. . . .

By this time, Rohmer was finding himself increasingly at variance with his colleagues and contributors at Cahiers du Cinéma—he did not share their growing left-wing commitment or their enthusiasm for cinéma-vérité, and retained his admiration for American cinema when theirs waned. He resigned in 1963 and the following year he began to work for French television, for which he made fourteen films over the next few years. These included contributions to the “Filmakers of Our Times” series (on Lumière and Dreyer), educational films on Pascal, La Bruyère, Hugo, and Mallarmé, and documentaries on a variety of subjects, including the Parsifal legend, the industrial revolution and female students in Paris. Some of these productions he considered “real films” which he liked as much as his big screen works, and he acknowledges that television taught him to produce “readable images.” All the same, he says that “when you show a film on television, the framing goes to pieces, straight lines are warped . . . the way people stand and walk and move, the whole physical dimension . . . all this is lost. Personally I don’t feel that television is an intimate medium.”

Rohmer continued to make films of his own while working for television. The thirteen-minute Nadja à Paris (1964) was the first of his pictures shot by Nestor Almendros, who became his regular cinematographer. . . .

By selling television rights to two of their short films, Rohmer and Barbet Schroeder then raised the very small sum ($60,000) needed to make La Collectionneuse (The Collector, 1966), the first of the contes moraux to be filmed at feature length, and in color. La Collectionneuse won the Silver Bear as best feature at Berlin in 1968, and was generally well received in Europe. Tom Milne wrote that the film’s “teasing paradoxes. . . are set within, one might even say conjured by, the airy, inconsequential sensuality of an almost tangibly evoked St. Tropez summer. Like Murnau, on whose Faust he wrote a doctoral thesis and whom he once described as the greatest of all filmmakers Rohmer is intensely aware of the richly sensuous, almost magical properties possessed by natural landscapes. And if there is ever any danger of intellectual aridity in these moral tales, it is instantly dispelled by the way the settings are used to supply an emotional dimension of their own.”

The American critics, who tended to find La Collectionneuse dull and trivial in its concerns and “monotonously low-keyed” in performance, were won over by Rohmer’s next conte moral, Ma nuit chez Maud (My Night at Maud’s, 1969). This was made with money raised partly through the efforts of François Truffaut, who greatly admired Rohmer’s script. The film is narrated by its central character, a diffident but extremely serious Catholic engineer living and working in Clermont-Ferrand. (The part is splendidly played by Jean-Louis Trintignant, to secure whom Rohmer had postponed the making of this film, originally planned as the third of the six contes.)

Rather like the boy in La Boulangère de Monceau, Jean-Louis has recently noticed a blonde girl (Marie-Christine Barrault) in church and has decided for almost mystic reasons that she will eventually become his wife. Meanwhile, he is lonely in a snowbound Clermont-Ferrand, and goes with his Marxist friend Vidal (Antoine Vitez) to spend an evening with the attractive (and recently divorced) Maud, played by Françoise Fabian. They discuss—each from his or her very different preconceptions—such subjects as predestination, atheism, and the Pensées of Pascal. It comes about that Vidal is able to get home but Jean-Louis is not. He spends the night chastely in Maud’s bed. . . .

Central to the evening’s debate is Pascal’s famous wager—the suggestion that, since neither religious belief nor disbelief can be justified on rational grounds, it makes sense to gamble on the existence of God, a commitment that does no harm if it turns out to be wrong, and would be highly advantageous if
correct. “Here, for the first time,” wrote James Monaco, “the focus is clearly set on the ethical and existential question of choice. If it isn’t clear within Maud who is actually making the wager and whether or not they win or lose, that only enlarges the idea of le pari [the bet] into the encompassing metaphor that Rohmer wants for the entire series.”

As one critic wrote, “All is not as it seems: the doctrinaire Vidal is fundamentally uncertain, the high-minded Jean-Louis behaves deviously, Françoise is not an untouched innocent, and only the promiscuous Maud speaks and behaves with total candour.” Audiences and reviewers were left to interpret this subtle parable according to their own lights, but most agreed with Penelope Houston that “this is a calm, gravelly ironic, finely balanced film, an exceptionally graceful bit of screen architecture whose elegant proportioning is the more alluring because its symmetry doesn’t instantly hit the eye. The film is black and white, very correct for its wintry settings, and the finer shades of grey in its dialogue….Rohmer’s virtuous love story is also superbly defined for the screen in terms of a time and a place. It belongs to the dull flat Christmas holiday in a busy town where none of the characters is quite at home. Slushy snow is thickening the streets, cars stick on strange, frozen roads, and Maud’s lamplight and furs shine brighter against Françoise’s chilly student hostel….Rohmer’s discerning, witty comedy of sense and sensibility reaches a conclusion defined by the limitations, potential and truth of its characters. It’s shadowed by the regrets accompanying choices (or destinies) which are right, but also righteous.”

Ma nuit chez Maud, made when Rohmer was almost fifty, was his first real success. A hit at Cannes and winner of the Prix Max Ophuls, it had an art-house opening in New York and did so well that it was given general release. This time the American critics (with the strident exception of John Simon) were as enthusiastic as those in Europe. And there was similar unanimity about Le Genou de Claire (Claire’s Knee, 1970). Once again, Rohmer used only one well-known actor (Jean-Claude Brialy) who is both central character and narrator….Claire’s Knee won the main prize at San Sebastian, the Prix Louis Delluc and the Prix Méliés in France and had great international success. For Vincent Canby it was “something close to a perfect movie.” Unlike its predecessor, it was shot by Almendros in color—Rohmer says “the presence of the lake and the mountains is stronger in color than in black and white. It’s a film I couldn’t imagine in black and white. The color green seems to me essential in that film. I couldn’t imagine it without green in it. And the blue too—the cold color as a whole. This film would have no value for me in black and white.”

James Monaco wrote that “Claire, like La Collectionneuse, is a summer film, and the discussions which form its warp and woof are altogether warmer, more emotional, and more human than any we have seen previously.”

Unlike his predecessors, the central male figure in the final conte moral is already married. L’Amour, l’après-midi (Chloé in the Afternoon, 1970) begins by recalling all five of the preceding tales when their heroines figure in the sexual fantasies of Frédéric (Bernard Verley), the bored husband. When fantasy offers to become reality, in the splendid shape of the sexually liberated Chloé (Zouzou), Frédéric retreats (or advances) to the security of his marriage. This is the only one of Rohmer’s contes in which a woman—here Frédéric’s wife Hélène (Françoise Verley)—is a fully developed character, whose point of view is clearly shown (and eventually recognized by her partner).

There was a mixed reception for Chloé in the Afternoon. It had been possible to interpret the earlier contes as fables in which an overly intellectualized man is confronted by the simplicity of instinct but fails, as it were, to rise to the challenge. The same thing happens in Chloé, but here it seems fairly clear that Rohmer approves of his hero’s eventual commitment to his wife. Some critics seem to regard this as a betrayal; Molly Haskell, for example, thought that “Frédéric’s farcical escape from Chloé and fatuous reunion with his wife, and Rohmer’s vindication of conjugal love…represent a complete capitulation to bourgeois morality.” James Monaco, on the other hand, believes that Rohmer’s men grow progressively wiser and more mature as the contes proceed until in Chloé “the development of a moral sensibility is complete: Frédéric and Hélène have established a balance at the end of the film the likes of which we have not seen earlier.”

Rohmer’s detractors complain that the contes moraux are limited to a single class, which is largely true, and that they are more literary than cinematic. His admirers contend that his “aim is less to create a literary cinema than to enrich cinema with the techniques of literature,” and point to his undeniable success in “finding cinematic images for what are notably uncinematic subjects,” thus giving us “prime evidence that film is an art that can grow organically out of the art of the novel.” He is unique in his ability to draw the audience “into an intimate relationship with the characters, enabling it to participate on an equal footing in the questioning of motives and feelings.” Rohmer himself says that he had wanted in the contes moraux “to portray in film what seemed most alien to the medium, to express feelings buried deep in our consciousness. That’s why they have to be narrated in the first person singular….The protagonist discusses himself and judges his actions. I film the process.”

Needing to move out into something less personal, Rohmer made Die Marquise von O…(The Marquise of O…, 1976), adapted from Kleist’s novella and filmed in Germany….Several placed it with Maud and Claire among Rohmer’s best films.

It was followed by Rohmer’s most extreme experiment in “literary” cinema, Perceval le Gallois (1978), an adaptation in rhyme of couples of a Grail legend written down in the twelfth century by Chrétien de Troyes….Returning to more familiar territory, Rohmer made a contemporary comedy which was received with virtually unanimous delight. La Femme de l’aviatuer (The Aviator’s Wife, 1980) is the first in a new cycle which Rohmer calls comédies et proverbes and which is intended to deal with less sophisticated and self-analytical people than the contes moraux…. “Once again,” wrote Tom Milne, “Rohmer is concerned ‘less with what people do than with what is going on in their heads while they are doing it,’ with the difference that his characters here …are less aware of what they are thinking….Probing areas that the characters themselves prefer to leave unknown and unexplained, La Femme de l’aviatuer is endlessly perceptive beneath its casual surface.”
It was only with his next film *Le Beau mariage* (*A Perfect Marriage*, 1981), that he developed a story specifically for the *comédies et proverbes*. According to Rohmer, “What interests me here is to show how someone’s imagination works. The fact that an obsession can replace reality.”...Rohmer forged ahead with the *comédies et proverbes*, shifting the scene to Normandy and the season to summer for *Pauline à la plage* (*Pauline at the Beach*, 1983). Here the lives and loves become more intricately entwined—there are six main characters—but the heart’s tug between dreams and reality remains central. The idea for *Pauline at the Beach*, Rohmer says, came to him in the 1950s (when Brigitte Bardot was to have played Marion) and, like *The Aviator’s Wife*, was revived for the *comédies et proverbes*. “I can’t say ‘I make one film, then after that film I look for a subject and write on that subject...then I shoot. Not at all—these are films that are drawn from one evolving mass, films that have been in my head for a long time and that I think about simultaneously.” *Pauline at the Beach* brought Rohmer the Silver Bear for best direction and the critics prize at Berlin....

It was only with *Les Nuits de la pleine lune* (*Full Moon in Paris*, 1984) that Rohmer dispelled such doubts [about the seriousness of his subject matter] by rendering fully the everyday world he sought to explore in the *comédies et proverbes*. This time the proverbe—invented by Rohmer—was: “The one who has two wives loses his soul; the one who has two houses loses his mind.” A winter tale that is a kind of inversion of *The Perfect Marriage*, the story begins in November. Louise (Pascale Ogier), a young fabric designer, is living outside of Paris with her boyfriend, Rémi (Tchéky Karyo). She has begun to feel a need for more independence—her own close friend Octave (Fabrice Luchini), wants to fix up her old apartment in Paris and spend more time there. By December, Louise has created for herself a second life, but she is now confronted with the other side of independence—solitude. In January, she begins to suspect that Rémi is seeing another woman. In February, her married companion Octave proposes himself as an alternative to Rémi but Louise decides not to complicate their friendship. After spending the night with another man whom she meets at a party. she returns to the house in the suburbs, only to discover that Rémi is not there. When he comes home, he tells her that he has fallen in love with another woman.

Camerasman Renato Berta describes *Full Moon in Paris* as “one of the most luxurious films ever made,” referring not to the comparatively scant budget, but to the amount of time spent preparing the actors and technicians. Rohmer began with general discussions “around” the film, then conducted readings from the scenario and made sound recordings; after extensive rehearsals, he did preliminary filming in Super-8. As a result, the final shooting required very few takes—an average of two or three, and sometimes only one, per scene. “All the art of Eric Rohmer,” said Alain Bergala and Alain Philippon of this meticulous preparation, “consists in creating on the set a veritable osmosis among himself, the actors, and the technicians.” Rohmer took this “osmosis” in a literal direction in *Full Moon in Paris* by inviting Pascale Ogier to design the sets that her character decorates in the film. Her efforts, according to Gilklberyt Adair, led to a 1980s “look” that distinguishes the film from the earlier *comédies et proverbes*. And Adair suggests that the doubling of Ogier’s roles on- and off-screen underscores the visual dimension that otherwise tends to be overlooked in Rohmer’s films, because attention is usually lavished on the dialogue.

In any case, critics were fairly unanimous in praise of the film, and Ogier (who died soon after it was released) received the best actress award at Venice. For Alain Philippon, *Full Moon in Paris* was “one of the most accomplished films that Rohmer has given us,” notably because of the balance between structure and content. “If the film moves,” he commented, “it is because of its own risk-taking.”

Rohmer kept up his momentum with *Le Rayon vert* (*The Green Ray/Summer*, 1986), which is at once a continuation of the *comédies et proverbes* and a radical departure from them.... Delphine’s comings and goings have provided glimpses into her inner being. Like the other women in the *comédies et proverbes*, she knows what she wants, but wants so much she ends up with nothing. She is ruled by her own likes (grains, leafy vegetables, the color green) and dislikes (meat, eggs, sailboats, swings). Yet, she tells a friend, it is not she who is stubborn; it’s the world that is stubborn with her. ...

The hint of a happy ending—though it is one so mystically happy that it is probably ephemeral—sets *The Green Ray* apart from the other *comédies et proverbes*. But the way that Rohmer chose to make the film—almost entirely from improvisation—was an even greater innovation, not simply for the series, but for the whole of his work, which in the past had been scripted down to the last word and was almost never altered after shooting began. The inspiration for this drastic change of technique was television. “I was struck by the naturalness of television interviews,” Rohmer explains. “You can say that here, nature is perfect. If you look for it, you find it, because people forget the cameras.” ...

James Monaco says of Rohmer that “like the painters he most admires—Rembrandt, Turner, Cézanne—he is concerned first and foremost with character and the quality of light, that and the way we perceive character through light and sound”: for Graham Petrie he shows in his films “an intellect finer than that of almost any other contemporary director.” Rohmer, whose master remains Jean Renoir, acknowledges that his work “is closer to the novel—to certain classic style of novel which the cinema is now taking over—than to other forms of entertainment, like the theatre.”

Rohmer values the combination of freshness and “ordinariness: he finds in nonprofessional actors. Since he seldom uses music in his films, regarding this as a distraction he cannot afford, and relies on speech to give his work its emotional precision, he chooses his actors as much for their voices as for their appearance. He spends hours in discussion with them, adjusting his dialogue to their verbal style, though once the shooting script is complete he seldom deviates from it. His preparation is so thorough that his films need very little editing. Rohmer likes to shoot his films chronologically and, if a scene is set at 4am, insists on filming it at that hour—partly for aesthetic reasons, partly for moral ones: any other course would be dishonest.
In Gerard Legrand’s view, the pleasure of Rohmer’s work comes from the fact that “he is one of the rare filmmakers who is constantly inviting you to be intelligent, indeed, more intelligent than his (likeable) characters."

A tall thin man with a long, ascetic face, Rohmer lives in Paris with his wife Thérèse. They have two sons. Rohmer is a Catholic and an ecological zealot. According to Time magazine, he has no telephone, refuses to step inside that “immoral polluter” the automobile, and jogs the two miles to his office. Rohmer’s passion for secrecy has been legendary. Although there are comparatively few photographs of him in existence, he once disguised himself at the New York premiere of one of his films by wearing a false moustache. And Time claims that his mother went to her deathbed unaware that her son Maurice Scherer was also the famous cinéaste Eric Rohmer.


How soberly involved everyone is! How comic is the care with which they examine themselves and each other about their motives and the effect their small statements and actions are having! In particular, how moving it is to watch Trintignant prove himself one of the master screen actors of our time as he studies the life flowing past him to see if it proves or disproves the theories he has been toying with. Years ago D. W. Griffith perceived that one of the unique qualities of the movie camera was its ability to “photograph thought,” a quality that has not been, by and large, adequately pursued in films of late but which is the principal aim of Rohmer, who is fortunate indeed to have found in Trintignant and friends (Françoise Fabien, Marie-Christian Barrault, Antoine Vitez) actors who can give him some thoughts to shoot.

I doubt that any major American actors would risk such quiet roles in so quiet a picture, and I doubt that, in our present overheated climate, a man like Rohmer could obtain backing for a project containing so little action, so little “youth appeal.” Is there, in fact, an American producer who understand that eroticism can be intellectual, may involve neither coupling nor stripping? Is there one who would risk a satire on the modern demi-intellectual’s insistence on analyzing everything to death that you do not begin to laugh at until after you have left the theater and the lovely absurdity of the whole enterprise begins ticking like a time bomb in your brain? Is there one who would risk a dollar on a man whose style can only be described as classic formalism? I doubt it. Which means that if you value these virtues, you’re going to have to read a lot of subtitles in order to rediscover them.

Still, My Night at Maud’s has found a surprisingly large audience in New York among the thoughtful silent minority, and I’m sure there exist elsewhere enough people of similar bent to give this dry, delicate, elegant novella of a film the audience it deserves. 6/19/70

I ended up voting for My Night at Maud’s as the best film of 1970. The reason was simple—it’s exemplary simplicity of image combined with its exemplary complexity of thought. The movie had a purity, a wit, a sense of style that were, for me, breathtaking. It, along with The Rise of Louis XIV, The Passion of Anna, The Wild Child, and Tristana, made me think that possibly we are at the beginning of the end of baroque film making, that we are about to witness a return to a radical simplification of method. One need only compare it to something like Catch-22, the final (one hopes) effulgence, to see the virtues in this method. It has also the advantage of being inexpensive, and this may recommend it to cost-conscious producers. The trouble is that it requires genuine intelligence, a profound and disciplined austerity to make such films, and these are not qualities that are very highly developed among American directors.

COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIX:
Nov 10 Andrei Tarkovsky Solaris 1972
Nov 17 Arthur Penn Night Moves 1975
Dec 1 Bela Tarr Werckmeister harmoniák/Werckmeister Harmonies 2000
Dec 8 Mike Leigh Topsy-Turvy 1999

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