

Ma Nuit chez Maud



Rohmer's film is very simple in the sense that it is an almost transparent rendering of what takes place in front of the camera: only rarely is the audience invited to interpret the meaning of a camera angle or movement. The images do not so much have meanings as show things which have meaning. As a rule the camera is placed simply where it can best observe the characters talking and reacting to each other. *Ma Nuit chez Maud* is a complex experience engaging our critical intelligence essentially because the characters Rohmer creates are complex. We learn about them less from the way Rohmer shoots and edits than from what they do and say when he is shooting them. Such a distinction between film and characters must be ultimately meaningless but the fact that we can even begin to make it is indicative of Rohmer's conception of the nature of the cinema.

He distinguishes two kinds of cinema: 'The cinema which takes itself for subject and as an end and that which takes the world for subject and is a means'. Rohmer does not necessarily prefer one to the other – he admires Hitchcock and Hawks – but he feels personally closer to the second, and has been called reactionary for saying so. For him the cinema is a means of revealing human beings and situations more than a means of revealing the nature of the cinema. His characters are the essence of his films rather than a pretext for them. He goes so far as to suggest that certain sequences in films (he gives as an example the scene in Jacques Rozier's *Adieu Philippine* [1962] where the trio are plagued by a wasp) give the impression of having an existence almost independent of their realisation. He objects to the labelling as exclusively 'modern' a cinema in which

the camera's presence is felt. Preminger's technical means in *Exodus*, wrote Rohmer in 'Le Gout de la beauté' (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, July 1961), have 'the immense advantage of making us forget, in art, human intervention and [...] bring us close to that natural beauty which is its aim [...]. The camera, always present at the desired moment, always where it ought to be, installs itself at the heart of things and, by this exactness, puts them in their natural perspective, whatever artifice presided over their arrangement.' Where the 'modern' cinema is concerned with illusion, Rohmer has always believed that the cinema allowed 'art to be made out of something that was the opposite of art: reality'.

The cinema however lends itself less easily to describing the mental world than to recording external physical reality. Since Rohmer is concerned to show that 'man is a moral being' as well as a physical one, his cinema must go beyond appearances. 'Images are not meant to signify but to show. Their role is not to say that someone is something but to show how he is [...]. To signify there exists an excellent tool: spoken language.' In *Maud* almost all the important action takes place on the level of talk. The critical act of the audience is to correlate talk and comportment. The 'contes moraux' (there are to be six; *Maud* is number three, *La Collectionneuse*, although made earlier, is number four; the first two were shot for television) have been misunderstood in so far as people have sought in them a moral lesson. This is not Rohmer's intention: 'A conte moral is not a fable. There is no lesson to be learned from it. I used the word moral as opposed to the word physical simply to announce that the whole dramatic texture lay in the evolution of the

characters, not in external events. In the six stories there are no fatal or violent events [...] everything is in thoughts. Only the heroes' thought gives a meaning to their acts.'

If there is no 'lesson' to be taken from *Maud*, if it is not about a particular 'choice', it is on the other hand about choice itself. Rohmer has said he likes man to be 'free and responsible', exercising his liberty, however illusory. The characters in *Maud* are seen exercising an illusory liberty. Like those in *La Collectionneuse*, they are people enclosed in their ideologies, shaped by their experience, yet involved in *le pari*, the wager – a real choice, yet dictated by outside forces. The Pascalian wager is central: 'Wherever there is infinity and there is not an infinite chance of loss against that of gain, there is nothing to weigh up, you must give up everything' – if there is the possibility of something and the gain would be infinite one must wager. All the characters do. Vidal wagers on history having a meaning, although he thinks it more likely it has not, because only in that way can his life, his Marxist political action, have any meaning. If he had wagered the opposite way and been wrong, he would have wasted his life. Jean-Louis wagers the same way on Christianity and, as an expression of it, on marriage with Françoise. As Jean-Louis says, he does not make individual choices about individual acts: 'I've simply made a choice in advance, a global choice of a certain way of living.' His global choice involves a life with the decisions made in advance of the event (for example, that he will not sleep around, that he will marry Françoise although he has yet to meet her that he will lead an unbroken, untroubled married life) and a refusal, from moral choice, to confront dissatisfactions, difficult decisions and uncomfortable truths. (Maud says he dodges issues and he certainly fails to confront the issues about choice put to him by Françoise.) It is less obvious that Maud also makes a global choice, though hers involves radically different things. She admits that her irreligion is like a religion but stresses that it is 'a different way of looking at problems, with a lot of principles, often very strict ones, but without any prejudice'. Maud's wager is quite simply not to wager, not to decide in advance. Her 'real problems' derive precisely from this global choice. If her moral choice involves spontaneity, honesty, a refusal to compromise, it also involves fragmentation, frustration, changes of direction. At the end of the film, talking of her new marriage going badly, she adds 'anyway, at the moment' – terms in which Jean-Louis would refuse to think. Similarly, no two views could be more opposed than those implicit in Jean-Louis's attachment to his conception of eternal love and in Maud's confession, explaining her divorce, that her husband *irritated* her.

Jean-Louis's self-imposed morality, like Adrien's consciously cultivated dandyism in *La Collectionneuse*, limits his perception and experience, and is in fact a defence against experience. Both Jean-Louis and Adrien are narcissistic, 'cultivating' themselves from insecurity. Jean-Louis's attitudes derive partly from experience or from habit rationalised into conviction. He is Catholic because his family was Catholic. He feels as he does about casual love affairs because chance has kept him from them (though he admits with a smile that he has been incredibly unlucky). His love affairs – the most he can admit to is having loved *assez follement* – have led him to differentiate quite clearly between love and passion (he has renounced *les filles* but not *la femme*). He sees choice as a simple matter because his choices have been simple (Françoise feels differently because her choices have been difficult). Despite his apparent strength of conviction, he feels himself at risk: he is acutely *concerned* about his Catholicism. His insecurity explains

the importance of the Pascal dialogue about acting as if one believed, saying masses and taking holy water, and hence diminishing the passions which are the obstacle to submission to faith. Jean-Louis's behaviour at church does not show a man of great conviction. He seems to seek in the ritual, formula repetitions of the mass, as in the self-discipline of Lent and in mathematics, just that support, that strength, that Pascal recommends in them. Interestingly enough, work seems to play the same role in the film, imposing a regular rhythm of arrival and departure. In one sequence of events, work, Françoise (whom he wants not as a mistress but as a wife, part of an established pattern), mathematics and Pascal follow each other to impose a sense of ritual overall pattern calculated to exclude risk, the unexpected.

With *Maud*, Jean-Louis feels himself at risk. *Maud*, from whom he does not know what to expect, forces him into weak positions, 'tortuous' paths of thought and into a realisation of both his vanity and his insecurity. When *Maud* invites him to share her bed and he refuses, she asks what he is afraid of – himself? her? In the morning, half-conscious, *Maud* and Jean-Louis explore each other's faces with their hands (physical as opposed to mental exploration) and he almost succumbs to *Maud*'s natural, spontaneous advances. He proves how successful he has been in denying passion in that his half-conscious response is to thrust her away. A moment later, conscious, he is ready to abandon his moral position but *Maud* will not let him: she likes people who know what they want. Jean-Louis is caught in his own moral trap: *Maud* has described him as 'a shamefaced Christian added to a shamefaced Don Juan'. *Maud*'s integrity permits him to preserve his own. Like Adrien leaving Haydée at the end of *La Collectionneuse*, the result is 'by accident but also by choice'. Chance is an important element here as the motor of both moral choice and of such events as may disturb moral constancy. It is by chance that Jean-Louis is confronted by *Maud* and by chance that he is able to refuse the valid opportunity she offers, in favour of the decision he has taken to marry Françoise, and live a certain kind of life. Like Adrien, he will not 'go to the moon'.

Maud, without direction in Jean-Louis's sense, is consistent in her dependence on chance. She seems to be a free spirit but, unlike Haydée in *La Collectionneuse*, is never presented as a purely physical being. Her conception of the world is as strong as that of Jean-Louis or Vidal but quite different: empirical, one might say. Her openness to experience leads her to make mistakes (her two husbands, Jean-Louis perhaps) but whereas Jean-Louis's accounts of his relationships with women are always from his own point of view, with *Maud* one gets a real sense of human give and take. She judges relationships according to the facts and forces honesty upon others. Jean-Louis and Vidal desire her but feel threatened and resent it. She has a directness and security they lack: when she calls them two cases of protracted adolescence, Vidal asks if she intends it as a compliment or a criticism. She replies that it is neither, just a simple observation. When Vidal taxes her with revealing her bourgeois nature, she confesses to it without any complexes, while both the men are acutely conscious of being bourgeois and of feeling they need an attitude towards it. Perhaps the best expression of *Maud*'s qualities and attitude to life is her reaction to the appearance of her daughter halfway through the evening. *Maud* is gentle, tolerant, loving, amused; there is no trace of a certain kind of behaviour being expected, of *Maud* or the child. *Maud*'s openness to experience is the source of her problem with Jean-Louis.

However much she may dislike being drawn into the 'game' relationship Vidal creates, she is attracted to Jean-Louis. When Vidal goes so far in his interrogation of Jean-Louis as to ask if he would sleep with Maud, she finds it genuinely unamusing but, out of curiosity, she has to know his answer. In the course of the film it is Maud rather than the men who puts herself at risk. They talk about the wager, but whereas risk for them is hardly a real alternative, for Maud it is the only way to live.

Although the attitudes and beliefs of Jean-Louis and Maud are deeply opposed, their relationship is not one of hostility. Much of the tension of the film derives from the existence of their mutual attraction alongside their differences. They are both aware of the potential of their relationship, a potential built up by Maud's good humour and Jean-Louis's increasingly critical self-awareness. The turning point in their relationship and the film is Jean-Louis's refusal of Maud. After that point the potential becomes easier to perceive while its ultimate realisation becomes increasingly impossible. Jean-Louis's change of mind and Maud's refusal to accept it put him in a weak position, so that his smiles and confident style in their last scenes together (up on the mountain and in her apartment) betray a certain insecurity. But he no longer feels at risk with her. She has decided for him, so he can act in a controlled way, able to say playfully loving things to her but sure of himself in a rather self-satisfied way. Maud's challenges and leading questions indicate that she is still equally attracted to Jean-Louis, but in the scene in her kitchen they seem to be already on quite different wavelengths. Superficially they talk and move with easy familiarity but there is a wariness in their reactions. Afterwards, with an almost constant smile, Jean-Louis proceeds quite consciously to destroy whatever potential remains. When he leaves and Maud offers her mouth for a kiss he pecks her cheeks lightheartedly. In a rare moment of symbolic 'comment' Rohmer emphasises the finality of Jean-Louis's departure: the Christmas tree lights flick off and the double doors click shut.

Jean-Louis's confidence in these last moments derives partly from the fact that he has at last made Françoise's acquaintance. His determined effort to meet her is a result of his night with Maud. He can play with Maud because Françoise is waiting. With Maud no longer a danger, he simply moves on to Françoise, safely and as planned. Nevertheless all does not flow easily with Françoise. Jean-Louis *thinks* it does – that is clear from his behaviour – because he knows it must. She is, after all, his destiny. When he picks her up in the square, the odds he gives on it being her are the same as those of Vidal on history having a meaning and hence, by analogy with the Pascalian wager, on Christianity. Whereas Jean-Louis did not know what to expect of Maud and was unsure of himself, he has definite expectations of Françoise and in consequence acts quite differently. He is very confident, makes jokes, takes the initiative and even presents himself differently (he says he never uses his kitchen, quite the opposite of what he told Vidal earlier.) Yet despite his conviction that all is well – next morning he assumes Françoise will let him kiss her – there is not much evidence of the 'common ideas' Jean-Louis told Maud were essential to love. Françoise refuses to be simply a fulfilment of his expectations. Their ideas about choice and free will diverge widely. Yet it is equally clear that ultimately this concept of 'common ideas' is a valid and key one. Jean-Louis and Françoise come together from Maud and her husband, from moral insecurity and lack of definition. They seek moral definition in that both are anxious to be acceptable Catholics but are acutely aware of

their weaknesses and passions (and see passion as a weakness). When they go to Mass together the priest's sermon, with its references back to Pascal, encapsulates their problems and feelings. While the priest talks of man's difficulty in living 'with his passions, his weaknesses, his tenderness', Jean-Louis and Françoise lower their eyes, darting vague glances at each other, but they look up brightly and confidently together, as the priest continues: 'but also in living such that he *wants* to be a disciple of Christ'. They need the strength and definition that the church offers. It is in the light of this sequence that the end of the film must be seen. Whatever doubts they may have about their own weaknesses and mistakes, Jean-Louis and Françoise have a common ideological bond which enables them to transcend their doubts and fears.

The concept of the wager is, finally, highly ambiguous. Does Jean-Louis wager or not? Is Maud closer to the Pascalian idea of infinite gain than Françoise and Catholicism? Jean-Louis loses Maud and the infinite possibilities she may offer but wagers, or is forced to wager, on infinite gain with Françoise. The wager is not presented simply in terms of Maud and we have no way of assessing gain. One can guess where Rohmer's own sympathies lie but part of the genius of the film is the lucid way it poses the problem of choice – why we choose, if indeed we *can* choose, and the consequences of choice. We are allowed to choose as between Jean-Louis and Maud, but not without a full awareness of what the choices entail. Maud remains honest and open to experience, but we have to recognise what this means in terms of her rather unsatisfactory life. The film *ends* with Jean-Louis and Françoise happy. They opt to live with half-confessed, half-guessed truths but with an essentially open and joyful acceptance of concealment, since for them it is no longer important.

The final sequence is a good example of the beauty of the film. Our critical assessment of the choices is dependent also on the subtlest, often conflicting, characterisation: Maud's slow, slightly weary walk but also her twinkling good humour, her optimistic acceptance of life as it comes, her enjoyment of the meeting with Jean-Louis, her calm beauty (whereas Françoise is less attractive than before); Jean-Louis's apparent complacency and lazy manner and Françoise's confused terror but, coupled with these things, their serious concern for what is at stake and, finally, their happy bounding down the beach. Such details are hard to explain precisely. Rohmer himself has commented that films about the nature of the cinema are more easily talked about than films transparently about life. On the other hand he believes he can learn more about painting by looking at the thing painted than by considering the painter's touch. Much of the beauty of *Ma Nuit chez Maud* derives from Rohmer's capture of the minutest inflections of voices and movements of hands and eyes. In *Exodus*, again, he noted 'a thousand little inventions, especially concerning the movement of hands, always characteristic, always eloquent, always sensitive, always intelligent, always beautiful, always true. These *little* beauties are *great* art: it is admitted in painting, why not in the cinema?'

Jim Hillier

Movie, 18, Winter 1970-71 ©Estate of Jim Hillier

[Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism](#), 5, 2014.