The intriguing, the disappointing and the rest

The 1998 San Francisco International Film Festival: A look at 25 works

Part I

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A Summer's Tale by Eric Rohmer is two years old, but then immediacy, much less topicality, is rarely an issue in regard to his films. Rohmer, born Jean-Marie Maurice Scherer in 1920 (he took his pseudonym from Erich von Stroheim and the pulp novelist, Sax Rohmer), was one of the founding contributors of the influential French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* and served as its editor from 1956 to 1963.

Rohmer first came to international attention with *My Night at Maud's* in 1969, followed by *Claire's Knee* (1970) and *Chloe in the Afternoon* (1971). In the first of these, a man, a practicing Catholic, passes up the opportunity for intimacy with the vibrant Maud in favor of loyalty to the image of a woman he has merely seen in church and to whom, for some reason, he feels bound. In the third, another of Rohmer's male protagonists imagines himself quite the free spirit until he meets a genuine one, Chloe, and runs back to the arms of his wife.

Rohmer's films appeared at the time to argue for self-denial and rejection of the sensual, in opposition to the ongoing "revolution" in sexual and political matters. Did the popularity of his work reflect the desire on the part of certain social layers for a return to "normalcy" and "traditional values" following the upheavals of the late 1960s? Perhaps. But such purely sociological analyses often fall short of the mark.

One has to admit the bitter truth. Much of the "anti-bourgeois" cinema of the time, including most of Jean-Luc Godard's films, was valueless. If a devout Catholic and a political conservative makes civilized films, in which intelligence itself is a sensual factor, a subversive element, as much as it is, say, in the novels of Jane Austen, while the "leftists" preach anti-intellectualism and a war on culture, then the shame belongs to the so-called revolutionaries.

Rohmer made a series of films, *Six Moral Tales* (including the three mentioned above), in the 1960s and early 1970s; after two literary adaptations, he embarked on a new cycle of films about modern life, *Comedies and Proverbs*, in the 1980s. In 1990, with *A Tale of Springtime*, he began a series of "seasonal" films. *A Tale of Winter* (or to do justice to its full Shakespearean echo, *A Winter's Tale*) followed in 1992.

Rohmer's films are economical and deceptively simple. People, almost exclusively young people, sit and talk. The films examine their desires, their hesitations and their delusions; they record, at a critical moment, the sorts of choices people make and what those choices make of them and the world around them. Made possible apparently both by the director's habit of carefully observing and recording behavior in public and, in the words of one commentator, his "uncanny ability—implemented by long hours of conversation and taping with the cast before each picture—to phrase the dialogue in the actors' own words," the films exhibit, at their best, a remarkable ease and naturalness.

The fact that Rohmer, now approaching 80, plows a single furrow and a fairly narrow one at that, the lives and loves of middle class young people, while it gives his work a consistency and coherence, is a limitation. There is a great deal of the universe that goes unnoticed in his films. While any human relationship has a universal significance, is it necessarily the case that the most pressing human issues make themselves felt in every relationship? It was surely disturbing when, several years ago, the director announced that he had essentially run out of ideas for stories and found nothing to inspire him in the contemporary world.

His films present another difficulty. There is something so exacting, so obsessive about Rohmer's examinations of his protagonists and their daily lives and difficulties that a great deal rests on the interest one feels for the individual characters and actors. When the latter are engaging, the films hold interest; when they are merely irritating and self-absorbed (as they too often are), the films are tedious.

Fortunately, in *A Summer's Tale*, the central figures warrant our attention. The film takes place over a period of precisely three weeks in July and August. It concerns Gaspard, an introverted mathematics student and guitar player, who is spending some time at a seaside town. He is waiting for Lena, with whom he has made no definite arrangement. She seems to be something of a fantasy, and one has the clear impression that she means a great deal more to him than he does to her. Lena is in Spain, and whether she will even show up is not clear.

In the meantime he strikes up a friendship with a waitress, Margot, whose boyfriend is out of the country. They take long walks and, since romance is not a pressure, talk about what's really on their minds. "You're the only girl who can stand me," he tells her. "I'll come into my own at 30." When he tries to kiss her, she puts him off. Margot suggests he find a girlfriend for the summer, perhaps Solene, an acquaintance.

He goes out with the aggressive, down-to-earth Solene and they have a nice time, although they don't sleep together. When he tells Margot at their next meeting that at first he had only dated Solene out of revenge, but that he now values her, she reacts angrily. All girls are the same to you, she says, how could you take "such a vulgar girl" seriously? "What am I doing with you?" she wonders out loud.

Lena finally makes an appearance, 10 days late, and obviously harbors no strong feeling for Gaspard. At their second meeting she gets angry when he pushes his attentions on her. "You don't make the grade," she tells him. "Leave me alone." Disheartened, he tells Margot at their next encounter, "I'm only myself with you." They agree that relations are easier with a friend than a lover. "I'll give them all up for you," he says, sounding almost sincere.

In the end, posed with making a choice between Lena and Solene, both

of whom are suddenly available, Gaspard takes off to another town in pursuit of an 8-track recorder. He tells Margot, "My music comes first." As for Lena and Solene, "They're nice girls, they'll understand." Margot sees him off, sadly. "I won't forget our walks." They embrace. Their parting, although it may be a typical end-of-summer parting, is quite moving. It turns out that friendship is as serious and complex a business as love. Rohmer establishes the truth of his characters' lives and proves his points with delicacy and tact.

I would add *A Summer's Tale* to the list of Rohmer's films worth seeing, a list that certainly includes *My Night at Maud's*, *Chloe in the Afternoon*, *The Marquise of O...*, *Le Beau Mariage*, *Summer*, *Pauline at the Beach* and *A Tale of Winter*. He remains a minor director with major virtues.

Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, directors of the film *From Today Until Tomorrow*, made in 1997, present a slightly different problem. They have represented a certain tendency, of artistic asceticism and the refusal to adapt to popular tastes, for several decades in European filmmaking.

Straub was born in 1933, significant year, in Metz, capital of Lorraine. Until he was seven this was a French city; in 1940 Germany annexed it and German became the language of instruction in the schools. Straub studied film in Paris, where he worked as an assistant to numerous directors, including Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson and Jacques Rivette. He met Huillet in 1954 and they became artistic partners. In 1958, to express his opposition to the Algerian war, he moved to Munich.

Straub-Huillet's first film, *Machorka-Muff* (1963), was based on a novel by Heinrich Böll. The film for which they are best known, even to this day, is *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), a love story about Bach and his second wife, as Straub described it. Straub-Huillet have made films based on Corneille's *Othon*, Schönberg's *Moses and Aaron*, Brecht's *The Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar* and Franz Kafka's *Amerika*. No one has challenged their intellectual seriousness or their commitment. Some, however, including the late R.W. Fassbinder, the German director who worked with Straub as an actor in the late 1960s, have criticized their unwillingness to make their material accessible to wider audiences.

From Today Until Tomorrow is based on a relatively obscure Schönberg opera composed in 1929. It tells the story, in little over an hour, of a middle class, middle-aged couple who return from a party and reveal their discontents. He is bored with his life, and has been looking longingly at one of his wife's attractive friends. His wife demonstrates that two can play this game. She changes into a glamorous outfit and announces that she was flirting with another man all evening. And when, in response, her husband changes his tune, she asks, "Do you think I'm thrilled?" They briefly consider separating, but decide, in the end, to stay together. He: "Have I lost you?" She: "Shall I be myself?" He: "Just as you were before."

The opera is remarkable, and one assumes this is one of the reasons Straub and Huillet have chosen to film it, for the contradictions it embodies. Schönberg's difficult, dissonant music carries forward the most conventional and even conformist little drama. Two people become conscious of their own unhappiness—he sings about "slavery, suffocation and humiliation" at one point—and then decide to carry on with their lives, just as before. But the music suggests that there is another course, a far more honest and self-critical one, open to them, and to us. No doubt, as well, the directors would like us to consider the circumstances in which the opera was composed— the onset of a Depression, the imminent rise to power of the Nazis—set against the relative blindness and complacency of the opera's characters.

The film is made with the couple's usual rigor. Whether for lack of funds or other reasons, it is shot in black and white. There is no suggestion that this is the filming of an uninterrupted performance; *From Today Until Tomorrow* is composed of discrete shots, close-ups and long shots, that require separate set-ups. Brecht, or at least certain aspects of his work, clearly remains, for better or worse, a critical influence in Straub-Huillet's aesthetics. According to this school of thinking, a performance that seeks to encourage thought must find ways to make its content "unnatural," i.e., not taken for granted and subject to criticism. Opera, with its sung dialogue and stylized performance technique, provides a built-in alienation effect. This allows, one might say frees, the co-directors to present the piece in a relatively straightforward manner. For that reason, the film is perhaps one of their more approachable works.

Straub and Huillet are carrying on their decades-long effort to criticize and undermine commercial cinema. Art, the film strongly suggests, must be separated from any contact with popular culture, sentimentality, the effort to "sell" something—an easy answer, a feeling, a way of life, etc.

Still, it is difficult to be entirely enthusiastic about a project whose production one feels is permeated by rigidity, self-seriousness and a nearly religious attitude toward art. The work is remarkable for what it is, a film of a Schönberg opera, but there is something disturbing about left-wing artists so frightened of chaos, emotion and confusion, and finding it so difficult to reach, rather than intimidate, an audience.

Elem Klimov was born in Stalingrad in 1933. He emerged as a film director in the 1960s with *Welcome* (1964) and *The Adventures of a Dentist* (1965) and became the founding First Secretary of the Union of Soviet Filmmakers. He was married to the late director Larisa Shepitko (1938-79), whose unrealized final project, *Farewell*, he directed in 1981.

Come and See (1985), presented as part of the San Francisco festival's *Indelible Images* series—filmmakers, in this case Sean Penn, selecting their favorites from past festivals—is a harrowing account of the Nazi occupation of Byelorussia in 1943.

A teenager, against his mother's wishes, joins the partisans. At their camp, we meet their battle-hardened commander. The newcomer is left behind, in the company of the commander's girlfriend. The two of them pick their way across the devastated landscape.

The film records one murderous encounter after another. It culminates in a horrifying scene in a small village. The German forces herd every man, woman and child into a barn and set it on fire. This is a scene of orgiastic barbarism, cruelty and madness. The teenager, by mere accident, survives the attack. The partisans defeat the German unit. Captured, the German commander pleads old age and infirmity. A younger officer denounces him; some nations, he says, have no right to exist. The Soviet forces execute the Germans. They march off through the forest. A title informs us that this was only one of hundreds of villages in Byelorussia exterminated by the German forces.

The subject matter and its treatment are entirely legitimate. Can anyone suggest at this point in the twentieth century that we are not in need of reminders of the horrors inflicted by fascism? Then why do the same reservations keep recurring in one's mind?

First, the atrocities in the film become so innumerable that they begin to lose their impact, one becomes almost numbed. One gets the sense that Klimov set out to make the ultimate horrors of war film, and sacrificed every other consideration to that. Second, is there anything essentially new in the film? Do we leave it knowing anything more than we did when we entered the cinema? Third, a more complex issue. By 1985 the Soviet Union was entering into an advanced state of crisis. Harsh and even unfair as it may sound, one can't help having the feeling that this film, with its pronounced Soviet patriotism, represented—consciously or not—an evasion of increasingly difficult contemporary problems, or at least a reluctance to look at them.

To me, the biggest disappointment at the festival was Taiwanese director Lin Cheng-sheng's *Sweet Degeneration*. His previous film, *Murmur of Youth* —along with a number of other interesting films, including Bruno Dumont's *Life of Jesus* and Dervis Zaim's *Somersault in a Coffin* —was screened at both the 1997 Toronto festival and the recent San Francisco event. *Murmur of Youth* was an extraordinary film,

suggestive of real artistic ability and sensitivity.

While *Sweet Degeneration* has beautifully realized moments, in the final analysis it is a self-absorbed and banal work.

Chun-sheng has just come out of the army. The secret of his life is his love for his sister, Ah-fen. Because of his taboo longings, he stays away from her. She shares the feeling; her marriage has broken up partly on account of it. After stealing money from his father, he takes off for Taipei, where he stays at a series of motels and seeks solace in the arms of a series of prostitutes. He is a musician, but incapable of earning a living that way. Eventually, he is forced by circumstances to return to his father and sister. No happiness there. He meets up with a girl and decides, although he hardly knows her, to marry. His sister is horrified. Unable to bear the pain, she takes off for another town. Her family knows she's alive only because of the record of her ATM withdrawals. In the final scene, she stands alone on a beach.

The film is not psychologically convincing. The unhappiness is forced, everything strains. Why are these people so miserable? And why should we care?

Lin's comments in an interview are revealing. He explains that unlike a previous generation of Taiwanese filmmakers, who were obliged to concern themselves with political problems, "we, as a new generation of directors, are more concerned about personal and private subjects. The New Taiwan Cinema movement emerged around the time of the lifting of the Martial Law.... It has a strong sense of responsibility toward the society. As for me, I would like to get rid of this kind of responsibility.... I feel that our generation is less burdened by this sense of responsibility to the society."

What a silly comment! The great strength of the Taiwanese cinema has been its ability to confront social problems in a relentlessly truthful manner, *without for a second* abandoning "personal and private subjects." There is no more certain recipe for artistic insignificance than the separation of the personal and the social—this is precisely what dominates the contemporary art world. And now this is proposed as the way forward for artists in one of the few countries where it has not been the case in recent years. Wonderful! If Lin's example were to be followed, the Taiwanese cinema would cease to be meaningful within a relatively short period of time. Let us hope this doesn't occur