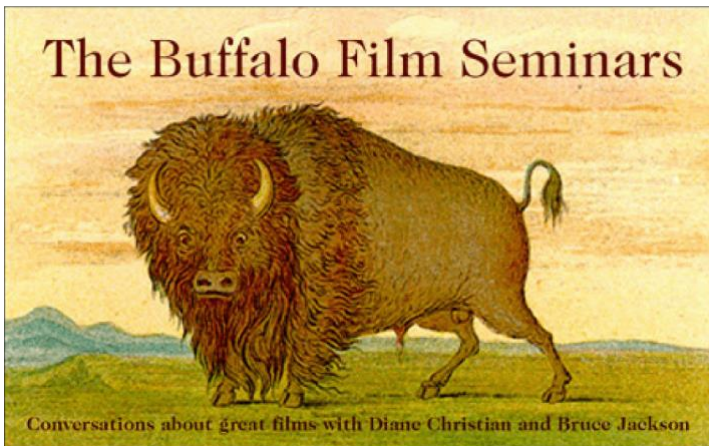


Virtual March 16, 2021 (42:7)

Éric Rohmer: **MA NUIT CHEZ MAUD/MY NIGHT AT MAUD'S** (1969, 105 min)  
*Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.*  
*Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries*



[Vimeo link for ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Vimeo link for our introduction to My Night at Maud's](#)

[Zoom link for all Spring 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:](#)

Meeting ID: 925 3527 4384 Passcode: 820766

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

The film was nominated for two Oscars at the 1970 and 1971 Academy Awards and for the Palme d'Or at the 1969 Cannes Film Festival.

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

**Éric Rohmer** (Jean Marie Maurice Scherer, 4 April 1920, Nancy, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Lorraine, France—11 January 2010 (age 89) in Paris, France) was a French film director, film critic, journalist, novelist, screenwriter, and teacher. Rohmer was the last of the post-World War II French New Wave directors to become established. He edited the influential film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* from 1957 to 1963, while most of his colleagues—among them Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut—were making the

transition from critics to filmmakers and gaining international attention. He directed 53 films and wrote 38. Some of his directing credits are: *Les amours d'Astrée et de Céladon* (2007), *Triple agent* (2004), *Conte d'automne/Autumn Tale* (1998), *Conte d'hiver/A Winter's Tale* (1992), *Pauline à la plage/Pauline at the Beach* (1983), *La femme de l'aviateur/The Aviator's Wife* (1981), *Die Marquise von O.../The Marquise of O* (1976), *L'amour l'après-midi/Love in the Afternoon* (1972), *Le genou de Claire/Claire's Knee* (1970), *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (1969), *La collectionneuse/The Collector* (1967), *Nadja à Paris/Nadia in Paris* (1964), *Véronique et son cancre/Véronique and Her Dunce* (1958), *Bérénice* (1954) and *Journal d'un scélérat* (1950).

**Barbet Schroeder** (26 August 1941, Teheran, Iran) produced 36 films, acted in 26, and directed 24. Some

of the latter are *Inju, la bête dans l'ombre/Inju: The Beast in the Shadow* (2008), *L'avocat de la terreur/Terror's Advocate* (2007), *Murder by Numbers* (2002), *La virgen de los sicarios/Our Lady of the Assassins* (2000), *Desperate Measures* (1998), *Single White Female* (1992), *Reversal of Fortune* (1990; Academy Award nomination for best director), *Barfly* (1987), *The Charles Bukowski Tapes* (1985), *Koko, le gorille qui parle/Koko, a Talking Gorilla* (1978), *Maîtresse/Mistress* (1976), *Général Idi Amin Dada: Autoportrait* (1974), *Sing-Sing* (1971) and *More* (1969).

### Néstor Almendros

(Néstor Almendros Cuyas, 30 October 1930, Barcelona, Spain—4 March 1992, New York) shot 56 films. He was the great eye of La Nouvelle Vague, the movement of French film-critics-turned-directors that dazzled the film world in the late 1950s and early 1960s: he did nine films each for François Truffaut and Eric Rohmer, two of the five original members of the movement (the other three were Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and Jacques Rivette; Agnès Varda and Louis Malle joined later). Some of his films were: *Billy Bathgate* (1991), *Heartburn* (1986), *Places in the Heart* (1984), *Vivement dimanche!/Confidentially Yours* (1983), *Pauline à la plage/Pauline at the Beach* (1983), *Sophie's Choice* (1982), *Le Dernier métro/The Last Metro* (1980), *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *L'Homme qui aimait les femmes/The Man Who Loved Women* (1977), *L'Histoire d'Adèle H./The Story of Adele H* (1975), *L'Amour l'après-midi/Chloë in the Afternoon* (1972), *Le Genou de Claire/Claire's Knee* (1970), *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (1969), and *The Collector* (1967). He received Best Cinematography Oscar nominations for *Sophie's Choice*, *The Blue Lagoon* and *Kramer vs. Kramer*; he won for *Days of Heaven*.



**Jean-Louis Trintignant** (11 December 1930, Piolenc, Vaucluse, France) has appeared in 145 films, the most recent of which are *The Best Years of a Life* (filming), *Happy End* (2017), *Amour* (2012), *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), and *Janis et John* (2003). Some of the others are *Un héros très discret/A Self-Made Hero* (1996), *Regarde les hommes tomber/See How They Fall* (1994), *Trois couleurs: Rouge/Three*

*Colors: Red* (1994), *La femme de ma vie/Women of My Life* (1986), *Un homme et une femme, 20 ans déjà/A Man and a Woman: 20 Years Later* (1986), *L'été prochain/Next Summer* (1985), *Viva la vie!/Long Live Life!* (1984), *Under Fire* (1983), *Vivement*

*dimanche!/Confidentially Yours* (1983), *La nuit de Varennes/That Night in Varennes* (1982), *L'affaire* (1977), *Le train/The Last Train* (1973), *L'attentat/The Assassination* (1972), *Il conformista/The Conformist* (1970), *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (1969), *Z* (1969), *Les biches/Bad Girls* (1968), *Paris brûle-t-il?/Is Paris Burning?* (1966), *Un homme et une femme/A Man and a Woman* (1966), *Le combat dans l'île/Fire and Ice* (1962), *Les sept péchés capitaux/The Seven Deadly Sins* (1962), *Austerlitz* (1960), *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1959), *Et Dieu... créa la femme/...And God Created Woman* (1956), and *La loi des rues/Law of the Streets* (1956).

**Françoise Fabian** (10 May 1933, Algiers, Algeria) has acted in 108 films and television series, the most recent of which are *L'Amour c'est mieux que la vie* (filming), *Rose* (post-production), *I Love You Coiffure* (2021, TV Movie), *Call My Agent!* (2015-2018, TV Series), and *L'arbre et la forêt* (2010). Some of the others are: *Un homme et son chien/A Man and his Dog* (2008), *La lettre/The Letter* (1999), *Plaisir d'amour/The Pleasure of Love* (1991), *Madame Claude/The French Woman* (1976), *Natale in casa d'appuntamento/Holiday Hookers* (1976 TV),

*L'amour l'après-midi/Love in the Afternoon* (1972), *Raphaël ou le débauché/Raphael, or The Debauched One* (1971), *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (1969) *L'américain/The American* (1969), *Belle de jour* (1967), *Le voleur/The Thief of Paris* (1967), *Una domenica d'estate/Always on Sunday* (1962), *Les fanatiques/The Fanatics* (1957), *Cette sacrée gamine/Naughty Girl* (1956).

**Marie-Christine Barrault** (21 March 1944, Paris, France) acted in 131 films, some of which are *La disparue de Deauville/Trivial* (2007), *Obsession* (1997), *Prisonnières/Women in Prison* (1988), *Un amour de Swann/Swann in Love* (1984), *Stardust Memories* (1980), *Perceval le Gallois/Percival* (1978), *The Medusa Touch* (1978), *Cousin, cousine* (1975), *Le tour d'écrou/The Turn of the Screw* (1974 TV), *L'amour l'après-midi/Love in the Afternoon* (1972), *Le misanthrope* (1971 TV), *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (1969), and *La grande peur dans la montagne* (1966 TV).

**Antoine Vitez** (30 December 1930, Paris, France—30 April 1990, Paris, France) appeared in 15 films, the last of which was *Hiver 54, l'abbé Pierre/Winter of '54: Father Pierre* (1989). Some of the others were *Je parle d'amour* (1979), *La chambre verte/The Green Room* (1978), *Printemps 58* (1974), *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maud's* (1969) and *La guerre est finie/The War is Over* (1966).

**Clermont-Ferrand** is a city and commune of France in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region. The city is Michelin's corporate headquarters. The statue in its public square was sculpted by [Frédéric Batholdi](#), who also did the Statue of Liberty. The city is the birthplace of [Blaise Pascal](#) (1623-1662) and [Pierre Teilhard de Chardin](#) (1881-1955).

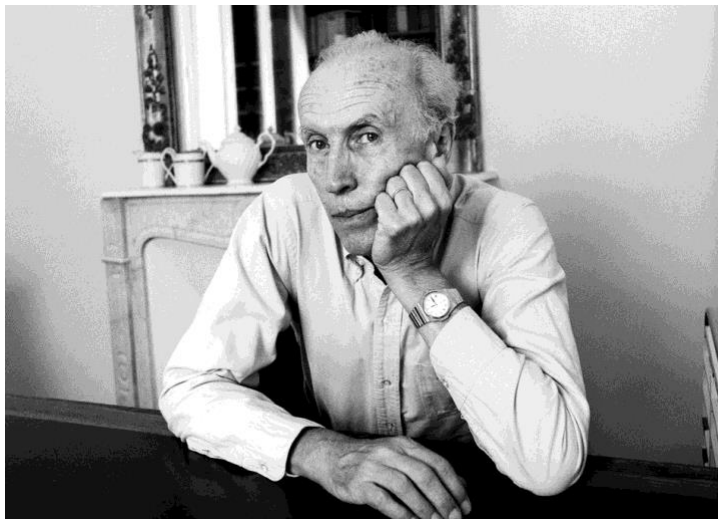
**from *World Film Directors. Vol. II. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Co., BY, 1988.***

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 *Révue du 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 Renoiresque 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 recut 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 retrench 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 seem 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 obsessive 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....

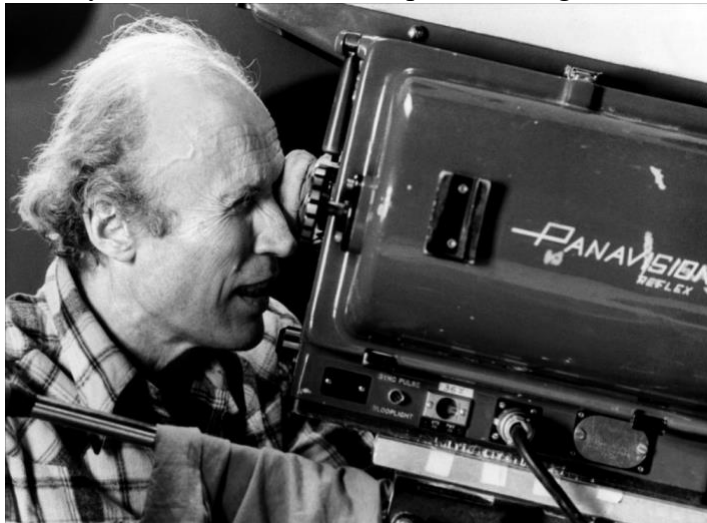
By this time, Rohmer was finding himself increasingly at variance with his colleagues and contributors at *Cahiers du Cinéma*—he did not share their growing left-wing commitment or their enthusiasm for *cinéma-vérité*, and retained his admiration for American cinema when theirs waned. He resigned in 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 “Filmmakers 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....

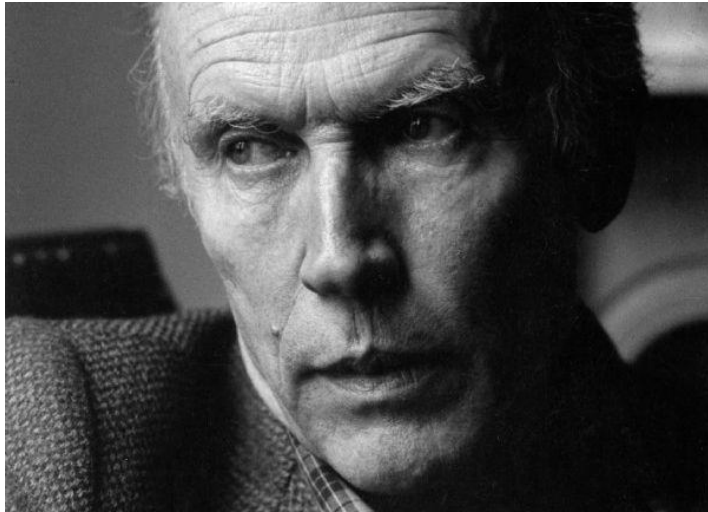
By selling television rights to two of their short films, Rohmer and Barbet Schroeder then raised the very small sum (\$60,000) needed to make *La Collectionneuse* (*The Collector*, 1966), the first of the *contes moraux* to be filmed at feature length, and in color. *La Collectionneuse* won the Silver 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—to her evident dissatisfaction, and, not without regret, is confirmed in his determination to marry his elusive blonde, Françoise (who, it ironically emerges, is not quite so chaste as he imagined).

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,

gravely 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 Ophüls, 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 Méliès in France and had great international success. For Vincent Camby 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* (*Chloë 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 Chloë (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 Héléne (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 *Chloë 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 *Chloë*, 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 Chloë 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 *Chloë* “the development of a moral sensibility is complete: Frédéric and Héléne 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 rhyming couplets 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’aviateur* (*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’aviateur* 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 proverb—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 (Tcheky 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.

Cameraman 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 Gikillberty 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.



**from *Second Sight Notes on Some Movies 1965-1970*. Richard Schickel. Simon & Schuster, NY, 1972. “My Night at Maud’s”**

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-Christine 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 understands 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.

I ended up voting for *My Night at Maud’s* as the best film of 1970. The reason was simple—its 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.

**Constantine Santas: “Choice and Chance: A Dialectic of Morality and Romance in Eric Rohmer’s *My Night at Maud’s*” (*Senses of Cinema*, 2010)**

*Let us weigh up the gain and the loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything; don’t hesitate then; wager that he does exist.*

—Pascal

*Ma nuit chez Maud* (*My Night at Maud's*, 1969) is Eric Rohmer's third in the sequence of the 'Six Moral Tales', though chronologically it follows *La collectionneuse* (1967), which is numbered as the fourth but came out two years earlier. The reason for this chronological anomaly springs from the fact that Rohmer wanted Jean-Louis Trintignant for the leading role in *Maud*, as he intended to shoot the movie at Christmas, to coincide with the actual time when the action in the movie takes place. Trintignant was not available then so the filming started a year later. As we shall see, the film's numerical sequence is consistent with the thematic complexity to the story. *My Night at Maud's* is the first full-length feature in the group (provided one keeps the change of chronology in mind), *La boulangère de Monceau* (*The Bakery Girl of Monceau*, 1962) being about 20 minutes, while *La carrière de Suzanne* (*Suzanne's Career*, 1963) doesn't exceed an hour. Whereas in the first two 'Tales' all the major characters were in their late teens or early twenties, in *Maud* three of the four major characters are all mature adults in their mid thirties, and the fourth, Françoise, at 22, has already had experiences beyond her years. In addition, the theme of a man committed to a woman but gone astray momentarily before going back to the same woman is now presented in expanded terms of dramatic action and thematic complexity. In some ways, *Maud* is the most atypical of Rohmer's Moral Tales, for its dialectic touches on topics that seem only indirectly related to romance, deviating from the rather simple formula of the first two (and the subsequent fourth), and assuming a distinct characteristic of its own, for it branches off from its rather simple initial formula to topics such as religion, Marxism, mathematics and discourses on Pascal, the latter's ideas having a direct bearing on the actions of the main character. Even a casual viewer of *My Night at Maud's* soon becomes aware that the central point



of its dialectics is Pascal, whose ideas are referred to and heatedly debated by the principal characters. It is no accident that the action of the film takes place in Pascal's birthplace, Clermont-Ferrand (Clermont en Auvergne during Pascal's time), and that Rohmer had made a documentary on Pascal for French television a few years before the movie appeared. (1)

That Pascal's ideas become the overriding theme of this story becomes evident by the fact that as soon as the three main characters assemble, they begin to discuss Pascal, relating his views to modern times and to their individual lives. Pascal's famous "wager" remains at the centre of these discussions, which, in the course of the narrative, are broadened to include other related topics such as mathematical probability and free choice. As the discussions progress, it becomes clear to the viewer of *Maud* (as well as to the reader of his short story on which it is based) that the centre of dramatic interest is free choice, as the main characters do indeed make conscious choices, taking chances between lesser and great alternatives, as Pascal recommends. It is also evident that chance plays a role in the making of these decisions. Chance and choice interweave (relate), as the fortunes of all the principal characters are shaped by the interplay of these forces. The main character, especially, "bets" on his future happiness by marrying a girl he hardly knows but counting on his instinct that the choice he has made is the correct one. Still, chance has a great deal to do with his decision, as we shall see.

All these elements have a bearing on the outcome of an essentially romantic story and are organically connected to the drama of a man about to make a commitment to marriage. If there is a moral in this tale, it is a very complex one, for none of the characters involved can totally extricate himself, or herself, from all the traps and snares of moral ambiguity. As already noted, morality for Rohmer does not mean normal moral behaviour but rather a struggle within a certain individual to come to terms

with crucial decisions and to explain to himself and those around him his or her rationale for these decisions. The film still moves within the parameters that Rohmer has established for this group of tales. Thus the dialectic ventures beyond the romantic interests featured in almost all his stories. As a result, the film’s dialectic consists of a “triangular” set of ideas embodied in its three main characters and is carried out in extended conversations among them. One is an avowed Catholic, the other a Marxist, and the third an agnostic. This triangle expands to include the fourth concerned person, a man’s final choice as a marriage companion, the person to whom a male Rohmer hero (at least in the Moral Tales) will eventually return.

The film came as somewhat of a surprise to his audiences of the late ‘60s, and it may still look surprising to those of today; on the surface, it is no more than a rather ordinary story of romance of a straying man, sort of “lost sheep,” or “prodigal” lover, who eventually comes back to his initial choice. But the moral of this story, always an ambiguous concept with Rohmer, is not only a man’s struggle to remain loyal to his original choice when faced with temptation; it is also a rather detailed account of his religious views, in this case his beliefs in marriage as a result of love. This is a Catholic subject; for the man looking for a woman to marry must also comply with his moral principles as a Catholic. But the religious/philosophical underpinnings of the story add a new dimension to the existing formula, which in the end conforms to Rohmer’s original intentions to make several variations of the same theme in the six tales. Yet this tale is more complex than previous ones (or perhaps the ones that follow), for it is also predicated on views theoretically opposed to each other; here are at least three points of view: one, of a Catholic who staunchly defends his practice; another, of a Marxist atheist who finds Pascal relevant to modern politics; and, of a freemason and agnostic, a woman who is also the love interest of these two men in the triangle.



As these three views collide in a rather strenuous debate, the dialectic touches on several other factors – religion, theology, science, mathematics, history, love – thrown into the mix. All three participants, however, concentrate on one idea, examined from three points of view: the idea is that of choice – and of how choice is influenced by chance. As usual, the main character faces choices, often coming to a seeming impasse when he is tempted; but choices are also faced by

other characters, for different reasons – a historian, for instance, can make a bet, and choose the idea that history has meaning. And a woman, unlucky in love up to a certain point in her life, can choose to avoid a permanent commitment and seek love of the moment. Pascal’s “wager”, above all, implies choice. Life is

meaningless without a conscious commitment to salvation through Christianity; and, as soon as this commitment comes into play, and the choice is made, life acquires a direction that gives it its meaning. As usual with Rohmer, however, “freeplay” – a concept not unlike Jacques Derrida’s “de-centering” of an idea (in this case love) – also comes in; thence ambiguity with all its ironic twists is present, eradicating all sure bets to salvation. *Maud* seems to end happily, with a man having married the wife he loves and living with her and their child, but we know that his having made a choice has also involved a certain compromise. Let us look into the story a bit closer.

*My Night at Maud’s* opens with a man (Trintignant) driving his car to church, on a snowy Sunday, where he attends mass with other parishioners. It is 21<sup>st</sup> December, just a few days before Christmas, and, after a sermon and the reciting of “The Lord’s Prayer”, the man, who exchanges glances with a young woman, Françoise (Marie-Christine Barrault), standing not far from him, follows her as she is riding her motorbike, but then loses her in the traffic. The man, who remains without a name throughout the movie, is next seen at his apartment

reading a book of mathematics, and next day we find him at a cafeteria with a group of friends having breakfast and chatting; then visiting a bookstore where he browses at a book of calculus and probabilities; then at another bookstore he picks up Pascal’s *Pensées* and turns the pages, highlighting a passage about “unthinking belief”. Next, he is seen at a cafeteria, where he meets an old friend, Vidal (Antoine Vitez), whom he hasn’t seen since they were in school together, 14 years before. Vidal, who teaches philosophy at the university, spends a little time with him at the café, where the subject of mathematics comes up, since Jean-Louis (let us call him that for the sake of convenience) has taken an interest in it (in the short story we learn that he had studied mathematics in school, while Vidal tended towards literature). Vidal counters that mathematics has relevance in many subjects – philosophy and linguistics being among them – and brings up Pascal, whose ideas he considers relevant to modern times.

The character in the short story refers to the “arithmetic triangle” but the Vidal of the movie bursts out in a passionate diatribe on Pascal’s famous wager, and its relevance to modern times and its particular value for a Marxist like him. He says that Pascal’s wager has a modern relevance, and, as a Marxist, he has chosen to believe that history has meaning. Like Pascal, a modern Marxist has a question before him. Pascal’s wager poses a question to those who seek belief on rational grounds: Proposition A is that God does not exist, or at least you don’t know that He exists. In that case, if you accept this proposition, you lose if you are wrong. Proposition B posits that God exists, as does immortality (or, in the Pascal lexicon, “infinity”). If you go with proposition A, you lose, without hope of redemption. If you go with proposition B – that God and immortality exist, then, even though you bet against greater odds, you still have a chance to reach infinity, a mathematical result of differential calculus. Just as a believer who sides

with God and immortality by making Pascal’s wager, so a Marxist can choose to interpret history (and politics) as a progression of events with a meaningful goal. You can assume the chances are 50/50, but even if you bet 10 against 90, it would be better to bet that history has meaning, for the gain would justify your supposition. Otherwise he would have to consider history as a passing series of casual events without meaning, which would defeat the purpose of his existence. Gorky and Lenin, Vidal observes, made a bet on similar grounds: if their chances of succeeding in their ideology were one to a thousand, it would be better to take that chance than none at all. Thus, the Marxist, like the religious man, can also make a similar choice, or place a “bet” on the notion that history has meaning.

At the conclusion of their meeting, Vidal invites Jean-Louis to a concert, given by Léonide Kogan, the famous violinist, that night. He could meet some pretty girls there, he tells him. After some hesitation, Jean-Louis accepts to go, for it occurs to him that Françoise (he has already mentioned her name in his first voice-over commentary) would be there. As the music of a Mozart violin sonata is being played, he scans the audience, in the hope of seeing her. After the two friends attend midnight mass at Christmas Eve, Vidal then invites Jean-Louis to go with him on Christmas day to visit a woman he knows, and, after some hesitation, Jean-Louis accepts. Maud (Françoise Fabian) is an enticing divorcee, a pediatrician, who lives with her young daughter and a servant. At dinner, the Pascal question surfaces again, and this time its relevance to a modern man and woman is debated between Jean-Louis and Maud. Jean-Louis and Vidal have come from midnight mass at Christmas Eve (the previous evening) and Maud mockingly observes that they “stink of holy water”. She is an agnostic with little use for religion, coming from a family of free thinkers (or Freemasons). Pascal is not for the likes of her, although she obviously has



read his works, as a copy of the *Pensées* is found in one of her shelves. Needled by Vidal, she responds that she doesn't care for Pascal's notion of a human being as "a thinking reed between two infinities" or that the fate of humanity had something to do with the size of Cleopatra's nose. Vidal makes it no secret that he is familiar with Maud, and one detects he is still smitten, but leaves the field open to Jean-Louis, pretending he has left a window open and the snow will go in. They revert to the subject of Pascal, and Jean-Louis, who dabbles in mathematics, and has lately taken an interest in Pascal, as he has already told Vidal at the restaurant, declares once more that he finds him wanting. When asked why, Jean-Louis rather smugly dismisses Pascal's famous wager, not liking the "lottery aspect of it". As a mathematician, he finds that one can calculate probabilities, given certain facts, but in the absence of such facts, the result of calculation would amount to zero. More importantly, he rejects Pascal for his refusal to sanction marriage, or love in marriage. Jean-Louis claims that Pascal himself had abandoned his principles and had condemned science and mathematics at the end of his life. Pascal, Jean-Louis also contends, dealt in abstractions, being unable to appreciate food (and the Chanturgue wine they are drinking, which he probably drank himself), marriage, love and the material pleasures of life – things a Catholic does not care to abandon. He says he finds Pascal's wager, a bet for those who wanted a good reason to commit to God and immortality, inadequate as a proposition for salvation.

When Vidal leaves, a potential physical encounter with Maud proves a half-baked affair since Jean-Louis has already committed to Françoise, and has revealed to the audience, in voiceover, that this is the woman he will marry. Though he is clearly attracted to Maud, who makes all too obvious overtures to draw him into her arms (she sleeps in the nude), he wavers when he wakes up in the morning at her side, kisses her passionately but then retracts; she



rejects him when he tries to follow her to her bathroom, saying she can't love a man "who doesn't know his mind". But we know that she continues to have an interest in him. Later that morning, as Jean-Louis sits at a cafe, he spots Françoise in the streets, runs after her and introduces himself, thus starting a relationship with her. They meet again soon, once more coincidentally, and this time it is snowing so

heavily he offers to drive her to her apartment, in a student dormitory – for she is a biology student. His car is stuck in the snow, and she offers shelter for him for the night, at a room next to her. He behaves like a perfect gentleman,

only getting up once to ask her for matches. She appreciates that, and they meet again, and this time he is seriously in love with her and asks her to marry him. She confesses she has a lover, or, rather, had one, a married man. Jean-Louis admits that he, too, has had affairs with other women. The past is the past, and must be forgotten. Five years later, as they and their young child are vacationing at a beach, they meet Maud again. Apparently she and Françoise had known each other, and at this point – though it is not at all clear – we suspect that Françoise had been having an affair with Maud's husband. Maud has remarried, doing not so hotly with her new husband – she never has any luck with men, she tells him. She is just the same: attractive, sexy, and with no trace of regret about the past, and she would try to seduce Jean-Louis again, if she could. Seeing her case is hopeless, though, she just walks off, and the happy couple trot over to the sand beach with their young son and dip into the sea happily.

Though the story evolves around that simple plotline, the idea of chance and choice – of calculation and coincidence – surfaces as soon as Jean-Louis meets Vidal at the café, and says he can calculate the odds of their meeting there, had he know certain facts about him. Jean-Louis still believes in taking a calculating chance – the chance that brought him into

contact with Françoise – and he believes in choice, since as a “converted” Catholic he can put aside his youthful indiscretions and marry a girl and live a normal married life. Despite his apparent rejection of the Pascal premise, ultimately, he does make a “bet” on an unknown girl (as he says he had made a decision to marry her as soon as he saw her in church), in a sense taking up Pascal’s advice to wager his life on only a possibility (or probability) that he would be happy. As a Catholic who has been “converted”, and has given up his previous indiscretions, he must make that choice. Not to have made a choice such as this, he would probably remain unmarried and an errant, subject to the whims of fate and chance.

What is interesting here is not the final resolution, but the fact that the greater part of the movie is spent at Maud’s apartment, during the night and in the ensuing afternoon, after they have met again during a mountain climb. As



usual with Rohmer, the temptation is greater than the ultimate reward. And as is also customary with his male characters in his Moral Tales, Rohmer shows how ironies reverberate through the confrontations between a male character who is tempted and the female character who acts as the tempting agent. Jean-Louis resorts to fibbing, denying that another girl already holds his interest, and that in Maud he sees a danger of being derailed from his conformist views and newly acquired “conversion”. Simply put, his conversion sounds phony, and his decision ironic, though ultimately it may lead to stability. He rationalises, as Pascal points out, an approach that does not lead to unbounded infinity. It could have been more interesting if he had bet on Maud, a concrete and tangible (and physical) proof of love, but evidently, Maud frightens him, so he cannot make the jump. Thus the whole concept of “betting” becomes ambiguous, for, after, all, who can know for sure that one alternative will lead to “infinity”, as opposed to

another? Modern life does not offer such guarantees. And yet, Jean-Louis remains loyal to his own “morals”, for, in his mind, his choice of the Catholic girl, since he is a converted Catholic, will ensure him what he seeks: a steady, happy life. But the film reveals the ironies of choice, and, although Pascal is not rejected by Rohmer’s tale, his premises are shown to be revealing in their nakedness, for modern ambiguity, and the knowledge of life itself as it is – including eating, drinking, smoking, and making love – precludes a commitment to infinity in the same way that the seventeenth century thinker would have us believe. Jean-Louis’s rejection of Pascal, as he points out that man’s “sterility” in not accepting food or women, is also an added irony to the story.

That is why the ending is so deliciously two-pronged. On the one hand, Maud, who by coincidence finds herself on the beach with him – now married to the woman he loved and with their child – is still capable of provoking him and reminding him of what he has lost. She walks away with a swing of her hips and a swagger only known to temptresses and women assured of their power over men – for Maud is Pythia, Circe and Eve, perhaps a duplicate of Haydée in the previous tale, but one endowed with wisdom won by years of experience. She is Pythia, for she guesses all along that he had a Catholic girl in tug, even before he utters a word about her. Maud spots what she thinks is Jean-Louis’ weakness: to love a woman “certain conditions” must be met. He cannot love a woman without “planning ahead, calculating, and classifying.” (3) First, the woman must be a Catholic, and then love will follow. For Maud, love should be unconditional, no strings attached. This was a choice that brings a peace of mind and stability, perfectly Catholic from all points of view. But it is a choice mocked by one who is unattainable, and unhappy. This is the essence of the dialectics of the story. All the forces are at play here: religion, which dictates

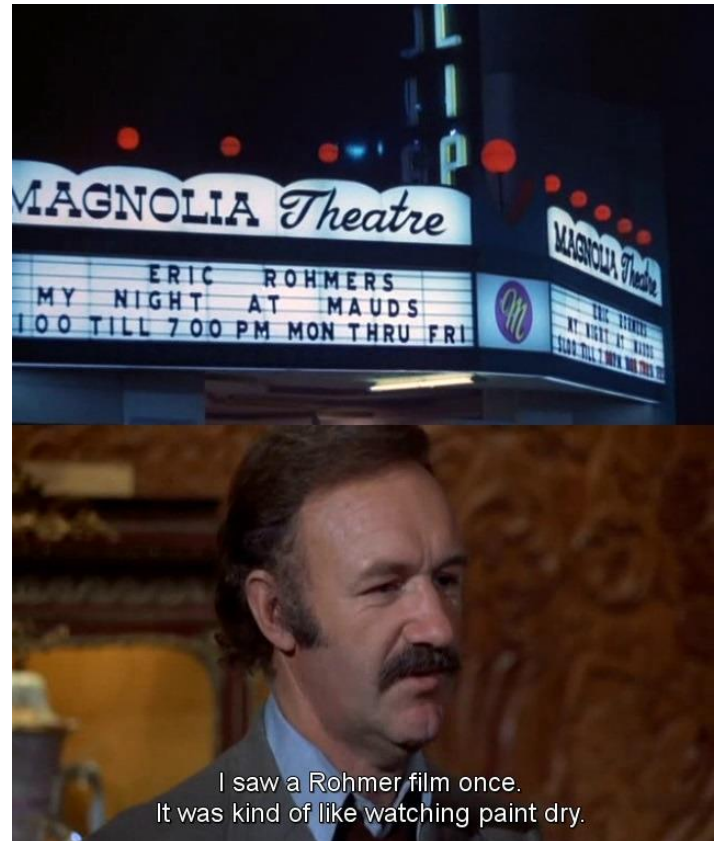
one’s choice; love, which is “real” in a physical sense but no guarantee of future happiness; faith, which is crucial to a believer; and even history and politics – admittedly borderline issues – which are affected by Pascal’s thesis that one must take a chance and bet on the desired alternative. But chance always affects choice. Even if one can calculate a probable encounter, one cannot always count on it. After all, Jean-Louis had lived two months in Clermont-Ferrand and had not met Vidal; and he would not have met Françoise at the time he did without having spent the night at Maud’s. None of these facts could be judged as stable, or certain. Human life – and consequently happiness, such as one chooses to define it – will always depend on chance, and choice, to some extent, on coincidence. A mathematician would do well to calculate, but he is still at the mercy of the merest incident, such as a snowstorm. With all this said, Jean-Louis can exercise his free will when, at a crucial moment, he is master of his own happiness, when, at the very end, he chooses not to reveal to Françoise that he has understood her predicament – that he knows she had been the lover of Maud’s husband. That would have embarrassed her and perhaps ruined his by-now established marital happiness. Rather, he said that the night at Maud’s was his last escapade. He shifts the burden of sinning to himself; and that little act of mercy redeems him.

**Bruce Jackson: “Night Moves Around Maud”**  
**(Senses of Cinema, 2010)**

*Night Moves*’ private detective Harry Moseby (Gene Hackman) may not understand the difference between chance and choice, or the need to consider long-term consequences, but director Arthur Penn surely does. That’s why Eric Rohmer’s *Ma nuit chez Maud* (*My Night at Maud’s*, 1969) figures so prominently in *Night Moves* (1975).

When Harry visits his wife Ellen (Susan Clark) at her antique shop she invites him to join her and her shop assistant when they go to see *My Night at Maud’s*. She is using her assistant as a beard for her meeting with Marty Heller (Harris Yulin), and the invitation is part of her deception as well: she knows her Harry. He responds with *Night Moves* most famous line: “I saw a Rohmer film once. It was kinda like watching paint dry.” (1)

As Harry later approaches the Magnolia Theater hoping to catch up with Ellen, we see the marquee from one side and the front. He makes a U-turn and we see it from the other side. All say, “Eric Rohmer. *My Night at Maud’s*.” We see the sign again when Harry follows the car in which Ellen leans over and kisses the lover he hadn’t until that moment known she had.



Shooting and editing in *Night Moves* are highly economical. Many key facts go by once, often fast. The call from Nick (Kenneth Mars) in the opening scene giving Harry Arlene Iverson’s (Janet Ward) case, for example, is barely audible under the music. The background information on Arlene provided by Nick is on a tape Harry plays while he’s driving through night-time Los Angeles streets to the Magnolia. Harry flies to New Mexico and back, to Florida and back, and to Florida a second time, but Penn never shows a single commercial airplane. Instead, he always has Harry in his guacamole green Mustang in California and in a different rental car each of the three times he’s away: the rental cars are instant synecdoche for air travel.



So why so much talk and imagery having to do with *My Night at Maud’s*? Why do we hear about the film once and see that Magnolia marquee in eight separate shots? Why did Penn substitute Rohmer’s film for the Claude Chabrol film in Alan Sharp’s original script? (2)

*My Night at Maud’s* is about a man, never referred to by name in the film itself but generally listed as “Jean-Louis” (Jean-Louis Trintignant) in the credits, who encounters an old friend, Vidal (Antoine Vitez), in a restaurant. They discuss belief, choice, responsibility and Pascal. Later, Vidal brings Jean-Louis to the apartment of Maud (Françoise Fabian), a physician, where they have dinner and continue the conversation. Vidal gets drunk and Maud sends him home. It is Christmas, the town is covered with new snow, so Maud insists that Jean-Louis, who lives in the hills outside of town, spend the night at her place because the roads are dangerous. He does. They talk, she offers him sex; he declines. The next morning he encounters Françoise (Marie-Christine Barrault), a young woman he has previously seen in church. In the film’s final scene, Jean-Louis and Françoise, now married and with a young son, encounter Maud at the beach. Jean-Louis realises that not only do Maud and Françoise know one another, but Françoise was the woman Maud’s husband was having an affair with when Maud’s marriage broke up. He decides to say nothing about it because more knowledge about the past will do no good to their relationship in the future. Some secrets, he decides, are better kept and some actions are better not taken.

Jean-Louis is a man who makes choices not so much on the basis of what he wants to do as on the basis of what he believes he ought to do. There is a great deal of discussion in the film about Pascal’s “wager”: if there is the slightest chance that God exists, Pascal argued, then it is to your advantage to act accordingly because by doing so you have eternity to win and therefore your life has meaning; if you do not act accordingly you risk eternal damnation. By extension, Pascal’s argument goes to the meaning of all choice: consequences unlikely to occur but of great moment must be taken seriously because if you choose incorrectly the results could be catastrophic and irreversible. There is also a great deal of discussion about living by and violating one’s principles, fidelity, faith and love.

*My Night at Maud’s* was released in the U.S. in 1970 and had two Academy Award nominations the following spring. It was influential enough that Chanturgue, a wine from the Auvergne region mentioned in the film, went from being virtually unknown in the USA in 1969 to one of the highest-selling imported white wines in 1971. *Night Moves* was shot in 1973. If you haven’t seen *My Night at Maud’s*, it is unlikely you know about the central character’s devotion to an idea or the great amount of screen time devoted to Pascal, moral choice, principles and love. In that case, it’s just the movie Harry’s wife was at the night he learns she’s been having an affair. But the scene is far more resonant if you know that the central issue of the Rohmer film is about making choices when you cannot know their potential consequences, and that the central character is a man who believes absolute fidelity is not only possible but, for him, necessary. It also helps if you know that *My Night at Maud’s* is a film about a man who has an opportunity to have sex with a beautiful intelligent woman but chooses not to; that Harry’s wife was seeing the film with a man she has been secretly having sex with for an unknown time; and that later, when Harry has an opportunity to have sex with an attractive woman who is involved with another man and does, he isn’t so much making a choice as being distracted.

*This short discussion of My Night at Maud’s in the context of Night Moves is a slightly amended extract from an article titled ‘Loose Ends in Night Moves’ largely devoted to Arthur Penn’s film which appears in Issue 55 of Senses of Cinema.*

#### Endnotes

1. The line was quoted, for example, in [Rohmer’s New York Times obituary](#).
2. Jean-Pierre Coursodon said to Penn, “Here are three superimposed three-way relationships: Moseby’s client’s adulterous affair, mentioned on the tape, Harry’s wife’s affair as she is in the theater with her lover, and the triangular relationships in *Ma nuit chez Maud*.” Penn responded, “This is actually the reason why I chose Rohmer’s film. [Alan] Sharp suggested a Chabrol film in his script, I forget which one, but it made no difference as far as the psychological

point was concerned as Harry is no 'intellectual.' But the Rohmer reference does add something thematically." Arthur

Penn interview by Jean-Pierre Coursodon originally published in *Cinéma*, May 1977.

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May 4 1982 Ingmar Bergman *Fanny and Alexander*

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