

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Chloe In The Afternoon*

France, 1972. 95 min.

**Cast:** Bernard Verley, Zouzou, Françoise Verley, Daniel Ceccaldi, Malvina Penne; **Writers:** Eric Rohmer; **Music:** Arié Dzierlatka; **Cinematographer:** Nestor Almendros; **Producer:** Pierre Cottrell; **Director:** Eric Rohmer

What does a film without action look like? It's a trick question, of course, and Eric Rohmer is the trickster behind it. He would have you believe that the answer lies in his "Six Moral Tales," of which *Chloe in the Afternoon* (*L'amour, L'après-midi*) is the sixth: a series that takes its name not from any didactic leanings — as the filmmaker was often forced to explain — but rather from the moral dilemma that the central character of each film faces. This dilemma is always the same: should a man remain faithful to his wife or girlfriend when tempted by another? The decision is always the same, too, and the plot, or what passes for one, consists mainly of the progression of thoughts and conversations that leads our tortured hero to that decision.

Characters in Rohmer films, like those in Woody Allen and Whit Stillman films, communicate using a language that is at once peculiar and, in their own small world, universal. They speak in theories, of love and of beauty, of city life and of country life. In *Chloe in the Afternoon*, for example, we see Frédéric on the train commuting from the suburbs into Paris, reading a book and being distracted by the pretty woman in a nearby seat. Frédéric is not merely reading a book, though; he is reading a book because he needs to lose himself in it, which he does on the train in each direction and again at home, where he reads other books and several at once, each rooted in a particular time and place. Frédéric is also not merely noticing the pretty woman; he is wondering how as a young man he ever formulated the criteria that allowed him to categorize all the women in the world into the two groups of chosen and not. And most important, Frédéric is not merely commuting; he is leaving the

suburbs, which he detests, for the city, whose crowds invigorate him, allowing him either to be taken by the current or at any moment to strike out as an individual. He is the master of his sphere, and he sets himself apart from other professionals by taking lunch late and walking around the city streets in the afternoon.

These theories are delivered so articulately, so readily, and with such confidence that the novice will be forgiven for assuming that they are genuine. Often, in fact, they are beautiful delusions. When Frédéric brags convincingly about his ownership of the afternoon, a friend corrects him, pointing out that there are thousands of businessmen whose schedules are as flexible as his. Frédéric likes to imagine



himself in control of his life, but his clever observations mask a comic helplessness; like other Rohmer heroes, for example, he claims to be "obliged" to feel jealousy or lust. Rohmer once wrote in an essay that these men think of themselves as characters in a novel but, he continues, maybe there isn't any novel. This seems right: each is trying to be his own author, recording his desires and actions as if that gave him the power to write his own story and imbue it with significance. And Rohmer cannot help but recognize that he, as a writer-director, suffers similar anxieties as he tries to exert his own authorial power. But now Rohmer is extrapolating further, suggesting that perhaps this anxiety mirrors the anxiety of the cinema, which as a relatively young art form is always borrowing from novels and plays, trying to justify its existence — until finally you grin and realize you've been had.

Rohmer has been called "literary," both to distinguish him from his fellow members of the French New Wave — Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and Claude Chabrol (Rohmer was the eldest of the group) — and to make an attempt at capturing in a word the talky, philosophical style that characterizes so many of his films. The description is misleading, though, because the screenplays don't work on paper. Before he made the films, Rohmer wrote the "Six Moral Tales" as short stories, and he claims that had they succeeded in their original form, he would not have needed to become a filmmaker. Whether or not we are meant to take such a comment seriously, it remains true that landscapes, rooms, colors, and sounds are

essential both to the character of these films and to our enjoyment of them. Would we be as interested in Frédéric if it were not for his colored turtlenecks? Would his musings seem as compelling if we were not walking down the street with him, gazing at the same women, sharing his fantasies, and hearing the hum of the train, the clinking of cups and plates, the footsteps on the stair, the squeak of a leather armchair, the birds singing outside, and the neighbor whistling in the apartment next-door?

It has been said that Rohmer's films are best appreciated for their cumulative effect — and the Brattle's February, 2001, showing of a dozen of them in new prints was one excellent opportunity to see his works as parts of a whole. Watching a group of these films at once gives you a sense of Rohmer's clever narrative rhythms and his ideal aesthetic world, which is one enabled by leisure. Some of his characters have jobs, but only as a pretense; more often they are seen at tea or at dinner, on the beach or in the street. Those who are willing to remove themselves from the everyday are rewarded with beauty and eloquence, absurdity and realism, all tied up neatly in the end with a peremptory *fin*.

- Written by Joshua J. Friedman