

CAT AND MOUSE, directed by Claude Lelouch.

DEAR DETECTIVE, directed by Philippe De Broca.

WE WILL ALL MEET IN PARADISE, directed by Yves Robert.

Cinema à la mode

STEPHEN HARVEY

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN quite a while, American moviegoers have recently been treated to a varied spate of French imports, all aimed at cultivating the taste for Gallic gaiety which *Cousin Cousine* discovered almost by accident two summers ago. If nothing else, such frothy *divertissements* as *Cat and Mouse*, *Dear Detective*, and *We Will All Meet In Paradise* should serve to disabuse everyone of the notion that the French cinema consists solely of an annual Truffaut charmer, the occasional elegant Chabrol thriller, and the sporadic, austere *chef d'oeuvre* from Robert Bresson.

The fact is, of course, that there, as here, most of the yearly output is devoted to undemanding time-killers made with an eye cocked in the direction of current popular tastes. Even now, what we're seeing is only a fraction of the potboilers that crowd the screens of provincial Odéons and Gaumonts week after week. The great majority are left to unspool at home, on the accurate assumption that we have enough of the native variety ourselves.

Nevertheless, based on what has arrived here lately, a few conclusions can be drawn concerning the ways French filmmakers differ from their opposite numbers in Hollywood when it comes

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to giving the local public what it presumably wants. Here much of the usual commercial fodder can be divided into two categories: the apocalyptically grandiose (everything from *The Towering Inferno* through *Star Wars* and *Omens I and II*); and the raucously juvenile (*Saturday Night Fever* and practically every other movie this past spring).

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the main impulse seems to be to overwhelm moviegoers with charm by lathering everyone on-screen in a creme rinse of geniality. At their best, these movies operate on the admirable assumption that the ticket buyers are actually grown up enough to sit still and watch other adults conduct themselves in a reasonable facsimile of human behavior, without having to be goosed with special effects or cacophonous soundtracks. At their worst, the moviemakers responsible for them are so entranced by their creations that they have made them all smiles and no spine.

CLAUDE LELOUCH, PHILIPPE De Broca, and Yves Robert all share this infatuation with geniality to varying degrees, but they also have considerably more in common than that. All these prolific directors are more or less the contemporaries of the New Wave graduates of the early sixties; yet they've never displayed the intensity of vision one associates with Rohmer or Chabrol, much less the audacity and rigor of the likes of Godard and Resnais. If they resemble anyone, it's Truffaut at his most slapdash and softhearted. Each of their current efforts focuses on the comfortably middle-aged and upper-middle class, whose *luxe* trappings are observed almost entirely without irony. The existence of a younger generation or of any political problems is hinted at only peripherally; at most they're regarded as a minor nuisance, and in the end simply irrelevant to the subject at hand.

Using these basic ground rules, Lelouch's *Cat and Mouse* is unquestionably the most successful. As with such Truffaut films as *Mississippi Mermaid* and *The Bride Wore Black*, it might be defined as a kind of homage to Hitchcock. Reduced to its essentials—no

mean feat considering the intentionally bewildering detours it takes—the plot deals with the purported homicide of a philandering industrialist (Jean-Pierre Aumont) and the simultaneous theft of his Impressionist art collection. The authorities assign their ace inspector (Serge Reggiani) to the case; immediately, the disconsolate widow (Michele Morgan) appears the prime suspect. The investigation proves politically indelicate, and Reggiani is forced into premature retirement; undaunted, he continues the search on his own, prompted by professional curiosity and his attraction to Morgan, although his belief in her guilt remains unshaken to (almost) the end.

Everything is resolved rather neatly at the finish, yet I'll wager that many people are still likely to stumble out shaking their heads with bemusement, distracted by all of Lelouch's fancy filigree work along the way. Red herrings, flashbacks both "real" and conjectured, and satirical snippets of heist flicks within the film casually segue into a bewildering network of subplots, both amorous and humorous. This welter of narrative is presented via Lelouch's usual array of visual pyrotechnics—here he's particularly fond of subjective camera shots, climaxing in a freewheeling car and motorcycle race from the Arc de Triomphe to Morgan's opulent suburban villa.

Miraculously, Lelouch's control never falters; as with all skillful whodunits, *Cat and Mouse* is so divertingly intricate that one neither notices nor cares how essentially trivial it is until after the final fadeout.

Best of all, at the center of the hubbub Lelouch sketches the developing rapport between Reggiani and Morgan with a firm yet leisurely hand, which grants the film just the focus it needs. In movies from *A Man and A Woman* through *Another Man, Another Chance*, he has proclaimed the truism that fate conspires to unite the unlikeliest of couples, and embellished it with sentiments best left to the House of Hallmark. Here the romance is unforced and rather matter-of-fact, and the restraint he's finally mustered makes the crucial difference. He's aided immeasurably by the low-keyed skill of his costars—Reggiani's rumpled wryness beautifully complements the introverted warmth Morgan has exuded so effortlessly ever since she debuted in *Port of Shadows* 40 years ago.

But whether intended as a tribute or not, *Cat and Mouse* isn't really on a par

with middle-level Hitchcock—Lelouch has only a hint of the Master's psychological density or visual majesty. Yet this movie is undeniably an awfully pleasant way to squander a couple of idle hours.

DE BROCA'S *DEAR DETECTIVE* likewise mingles murder with autumnal romance, capitalizing on the offbeat teaming of two appealing French stars—in this case Philippe Noiret and Annie Girardot. The gimmick (one for which De Broca spends rather too much screen time in congratulating himself), is that Girardot is not only the sleuth in question, but a latter-day Poirot, all evidence that she may well be the dizziest gal in town notwithstanding. Long lost comrades from their Sorbonne days, she and Noiret “meet cute” in old-time screwball fashion when her car topples his moped at an intersection. Soon she's sniffing around for clues to the murders of some aging swains of a Parisian Elizabeth Ray type; dismayed though he is by her unsavory and unladylike métier, Noiret eventually joins her to close in on the culprit.

sionally with some rather low gags involving prototypically vacant blondes and sibilant hairdressers, but the effect is only dispiriting. Ultimately there's something a little bit cold-blooded about all this larky archness. At the finale, when Girardot ever so cutely slams into Noiret's car—in order, she thinks, to save him from the murderer—from the little we can tell, the other passenger in the car is obliterated in the process. The clever symmetry he's drawn between the movie's opening and finish is all that De Broca seems to care about, and it's neat all right, but also pretty mechanical.

WE WILL ALL MEET IN *Paradise* exhibits a few more vital signs, but is likewise based on the assumption that the presence of some likable people is a sufficient excuse for a movie. Robert's film is a follow-up to the popular *Pardon Mon Affaire*, and as with most sequels, the most compelling reason for making this film was merely the success of the original. Like its predecessor, this entry focuses on the slapstick-tragedy antics of a rigid but randy bourgeois (Jean

of his other protagonists, and he derives some random wackiness from such fiascos as their purchase of a bargain country house that turns out to be next to a runway for departing Concordes. Parenthetically, it's also nice to see a movie that so deftly captures conventional discomfiture in the face of homosexuality while treating it so casually itself. Unfortunately, these zanies' idiosyncrasies are already so familiar from *Pardon Mon Affaire* that the sequel seems merely redundant. The chefs responsible for concocting *We Will All Meet in Paradise* practically knock themselves out in the process, but, as with *Dear Detective*, the result is a pretty flat soufflé. □

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The film is so divertingly intricate, you neither notice nor care about its triviality.

So far, fine—Noiret's basset-like muzzle and Girardot's peppy persistence are engaging enough for a couple of reels, but De Broca has placed inordinate faith in their ability to prop up an otherwise vacuous movie. The mystery isn't particularly intriguing in itself; moreover, De Broca makes the mistake of revealing the true malefactor to the audience before Girardot finally puzzles it all out, which only serves to make her seem dense without in any way adding to the tension of the denouement.

Anyone who's seen such earlier De Broca movies as *That Man From Rio* and *King of Hearts* knows his penchant for camouflaging tenuous storylines with the whimsical antics of his characters, but the little quirks assigned to Noiret and Girardot—principally his gluttony and her air of whirlwind distraction—are less fetching with each repetition. De Broca tries to enliven things occa-

Rocheport) and his three midlife-crisis-ridden cronies—a boorishly boyish womanizer (Victor Lanoux), a doctor, afflicted with hypochondria, who is an Oedipal wreck to boot (Guy Bedos), and a lackadaisical homosexual (Claude Brasseur).

Last time around, Robert focused on Rocheport's thwarted obsession with a luscious young model; this time the tables are turned as his wife's presumed affair with a mysterious silver-haired man becomes his new fixation. The sight of our trench-coated hero stalking his phantom rival like Inspector Clouseau at his most maladroit is good for an occasional guffaw, but both he and the director—not to mention the audience—lose the scent for reels at a time, for the simple reason that it's all just a desperate and arbitrary plot device to give the whole business a semblance of structure. Robert seems far more interested in the comic travails