

# L'Amoureuse

by Rhys Graham

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Rhys Graham is a filmmaker and writer based in Melbourne.

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*L'Amoureuse* (*Women in Love*, 1988, France, 98 mins)

**Source:** French Embassy/CAC **Prod Co:** Sept Films, FR3-Cinéma 16, Nanterre Amadiers, Lola Films **Dir:** Jacques Doillon **Scrt:** Doillon, Jean-François Goyet  
**Phot:** Caroline Champetier **Ed:** Marie Robert **Mus:** Les Rita Misouko

**Cast:** Marianne Cuaul, Catherine Bidaut, Dominic Gould, Eva Ionesco.

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Although his works are little seen outside of France, Jacques Doillon has been one of the more prolific directors of the post-1968 generation. A surprisingly large body of work (almost a film annually since 1971) reveals him to be a director whose concerns have never strayed far from the maneuverings of the human heart. For the most part, his work could be described as "realist" in that his films depend little on the importance of temporal setting or dramatic action, but are imbued with a sense of the commonplace. His films inhabit a cinematic realm where emotional truths and the subtleties of interrelations are foremost.

The loose narrative of *L'Amoureuse* (1) unfolds around eight young women who arrive at the coastal home of a ninth friend to celebrate her birthday while her parents are away. It seems from the outset that these twenty-somethings are intent on finding men for the weekend. No one special, "just one with charm and not too stupid". There is little explanation of who these young women are or what they do, but there is a sense that these lives have been intercepted at a collective low point. Each of the women expresses feelings of isolation, low self-esteem or frustration with their current relationships. Yet, together they exert a sense of combined joyful resistance that is played out through expressive and physical acts of celebration or subversion. They run and sing, gossip, play jokes on each other or on men whom they pretend to seduce only to humiliate, cry, dance, and eagerly attempt to find lovers.

As friends depart to pursue absent boyfriends, or leave in despair - even the birthday girl eventually leaves for Paris - the narrative focuses on the three remaining friends, and a handsome American tourist, Dick Diver (Dominic Gould), who they "imprison" through a mixture of deception and seduction. The three women, passionate Camille (Catherine Bidaut), Marie (Marianne Denicourt) who, against her own wishes, becomes love-struck with the tourist, and the impulsive Elsa (Eva Ionesco), form a vibrant and occasionally explosive emotional trio. Both the occasionally gun-toting Elsa and Camille, whose moods change from moment

to moment, express a need for love. "We have no home, no lovers", says Camille, "only men in the place of lovers". So, the presence of Dick creates a charged romantic potential. Yet, the sadness of Marie inspires Elsa and Camille to play matchmaker for her rather than pursue their own desires. On one level, the film can be seen as a rather simplistic rendering of heterosexual relations. It is in the final stages of Doillon's film, however, that the intimacy and sense of enclosure that he develops throughout provides a rich and satisfying outcome. As with much of Doillon's work, the performers are affectionately shot in lengthy close-ups (by Caroline Champetier) and given the time and space to work with Doillon's frequently witty and incisive dialogue. Complex and energetic performances by a strong ensemble cast, and subtle characterisation creates a theatre of emotion that reflects Doillon's passionate concerns with the frailty of human relations.

*L'Amoureuse* is much lighter in tone than some of Doillon's better known works, *La Drolesse* (1979), *Ponette* (1996) or *La Vie de famille* (1985), but it remains firmly fixed in the volatile space of intimacy and dependence. It is distinguished also by a combination of performative verve and economy of means that Doillon shares with Cassavetes, an acknowledged influence. Explosions of energy and hysteria, drinking sessions and situationist humour blend seamlessly with discussions of emotional secrets and heartfelt revelation. In a self-conscious gesture, Doillon avoids moralising or intellectualising the actions and emotions of his characters but lets their interactions play out to physical or performed excess. This, he explains, is because French cinema is "not generally physical. It does not like dealing with the violence and emotions within us. In France we always try to be clever, we have to think about everything and comment on the images. We always insert a point of view between the actor and the spectator. I hate it." (2) Doillon, rather, relies on a claustrophobia of emotion and physical space that can be stifling.

Underlying all of the filmmaker's work is the attempt to come to terms with the enclosed relations of parents and children, lovers or close friends. Central to an exploration of these intertwining lives is Doillon's all-important space of interaction, the *huis clos*. The *huis clos* is a term which indicates an enclosed space such as a room or cell. The notion is both literal and metaphoric in that his films revolve around emotional confinement while also taking their setting from isolated, enclosed or impersonal locations - hotels, sparsely decorated rooms, institutions. This concept of the *huis clos* that is so important to Doillon, is explained by Jill Forbes as principally a 'dramatic or legal device':

In classical drama it is a means of securing the unity of time, place and action required to generate tragedy, and in legal proceedings it is the term used for the judge's private chamber where testimonies of the most secret kind are heard 'in camera' and are privately resolved. (3)

It is in the *huis clos* that Doillon's work as an 'intimist' comes to the fore. In this sense he bears comparison to Rohmer in the lighter work and Bergman in the darker. Bergman and Rohmer share with the director a tendency to employ visual sparseness to emphasise the textures of the heart and soul. Parental relationships, love triangles, deceptions and seductions, impossible loves. Doillon is at his best in the intensified space of characters who must come to grips with their relationships as if their life depends on it. More tragic films, such as *The Prodigal Daughter* (1980) or

*La Puritaine* (1986), are built around familiar oedipal strategies. While the acclaimed *Ponette* - one of his few films to be widely distributed - is a tale of the grief and despair of a four year old.

Doillon is often criticised for being overly "talky" or for making films about nothing (an absurd criticism directed at *L'Amoureuse* among others). (4) Yet, despite the words and actions of his performers, his films are clearly played out in a world beneath the skin. His work as a director is in some ways not unlike recent Zhang Yimou or Bertrand Tavernier in his astounding use of children, novice-actors or non-actors. Yet despite politically active beginnings in the anarchic *L'An 01* (1972) made with Alain Resnais and Jean Rouch, Doillon's concerns are less and less motivated by social or political realities. His interest is, he states, in the elemental passions. (5) His films take on the difficult task of showing methods of coping, of enduring the weight of emotions. Doillon is a director who remains focused on investigating the intricacies of well-articulated emotional and artistic concerns, and who deserves greater exposure and consideration for a body of work that is as extensive as it is remarkable.

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This film screened at the [Melbourne Cinémathèque](#) on August 30, 9:10 p.m.

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Jacques Doillon selected filmography:

L'An 01 1972;  
Les Doigts dans la Tete 1974;  
Un Sac de Billets 1975;  
La Femme qui Pleure 1978;  
La Drollesse 1979;  
La Fille Prodigue 1981;  
La Pirate 1984;  
La Vie de Famille, La Tentation d'Isabelle 1985;  
L'Amoureuse 1988;  
La Fille de Quinze Ans 1989;  
La Vengeance d'une Femme, Le Petit Criminel 1990;  
Le Jeune Werther 1993;  
Ponette 1996;  
Little Fellas 1999.

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*Endnotes:*

(1) Interestingly, Doillon made a second film of the same title in 1992 which tells the tale of a *ménage-à-trois* and the subsequent romantic pitfalls. This film is usually translated as *The Sweetheart* while the earlier film is translated as *Women in Love*. 

(2) Quoted in Forbes, Jill, "The Family in Question" in *The Cinema in France: After the New Wave*, Macmillan Press, London, 1992, p 211 

(3) *Ibid.*, p 206 

(4) See Stratton, David, 'L'Amoureuse', *Variety*, May 4, 1988, p 309; Stratton, David, 'La Fille de Quinze Ans', *Variety*, March 8, 1989, p 25; Nesselson, Lissa, 'L'Amoureuse', *Variety*, april 20, 1992, p 47. 

(5) Forbes, Jill, *op.cit.*, p 208 

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