Book Review -- "Pascal Girard's Petty Theft."

By: **Craig Fischer**

Abstract

A key to unlocking Pascal Girard's Petty Theft is the book's French title, La Collectionneuse ("The Collector"), a title shared with a 1967 film by New Wave auteur Eric Rohmer. Girard may have borrowed this title as a way of announcing a creative debt to Rohmer: both Rohmer and Girard are low-key, naturalistic artists who specialize in stories about self-conscious male protagonists navigating thorny romantic relationships. Rohmer's La Collectionneuse is an entry in his "Moral Tales" cycle of films—called "moral" not for ethical reasons, but because the term moraliste in the Gallic cultural context refers to those writers (such as Stendahl) who take the interior lives of men and women as their primary subject. Rohmer himself described his characters as people who like to bring their motives, the reasons for their actions, into the open. They try to analyze; they are not people who act without thinking about what they are doing. What matters is what they think about their behavior, rather than their behavior itself.

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REVIEWS

Petty Theft

Pascal Girard
Drawn & Quarterly
$20, 104 pages
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REVIEWED BY CRAIG FISCHER JUN 5, 2014

A key to unlocking Pascal Girard's *Petty Theft* is the book's French title, *La Collectionneuse* ("The Collector"), a title shared with a 1967 film by New Wave auteur Eric Rohmer. Girard may have borrowed this title as a way of announcing a creative debt to Rohmer: both Rohmer and Girard are low-key, naturalistic artists who specialize in stories about self-conscious male protagonists navigating thorny romantic relationships. Rohmer's *La Collectionneuse* is an entry in his "Moral Tales" cycle of films—called "moral" not for ethical reasons, but because the term *moraliste* in the Gallic cultural context refers to those writers (such as Stendahl) who take the interior lives of men and women as their primary subject. Rohmer himself described his characters as people who like to bring their motives, the reasons for their actions, into the open. They try to analyze; they are not people who act without thinking about what they are doing. What matters is what they *think* about their behavior, rather than their behavior itself. They aren't films of action, they aren't films in which physical action takes place, they aren't film in which there is anything very dramatic, they are films in which a particular feeling is analyzed and where even the characters themselves analyze their feelings and are very introspective. That's what *Conte moral* [moral tale] means. (James Monaco, *The New Wave*, 292-293)

Rohmer's *Collectionneuse* focuses on two men sharing a summer villa with a woman named Haydee (Haydee Politoff), the ostensible "collector" of the title because of the many different men whose hearts she collects. As Roger Ebert points out, Rohmer delicately captures "the indolence and narcissism of youth" through conversations where the characters talk about sex in philosophical terms without ever actually touching each other. For Ebert, Rohmer's films create "a sense of peaceful regard in me. He isn't afraid of losing my attention with too much dialogue, or too little action. He invites me to arrive at my own moral judgments." Not everyone finds such "peaceful regard" edifying—there's a famous line in Arthur Penn's *Night Moves* (1975) where a detective played by Gene Hackman likens Rohmer to "kinda like watching paint dry"–but I've always found Rohmer's films a contemplative alternative to New Hollywood noise.

Although Rohmer and Girard share narrative and stylistic affinities, Girard's *Collectionneuse* doesn't follow the plot of Rohmer's moral tale. *Petty Theft* begins with "Pascal," the author's autobiographical stand-in, in dire straits: he's just broken up with his live-in girlfriend of nine years, he's temporarily crashing with friends, and he's injured himself while out for a run. (He needs the mood-stabilizing high running provides: "I'll be totally depressed in less than a week... I need the endorphins!" [6].) All this instability leads Pascal to abandon cartooning and go back to a job as a construction-site welder, and during his off hours he hangs out at a bookstore whose owners suffer from a rash of thefts. During one visit, Pascal sees a cute woman (who, we find out later, is named Sarah) steal a book he wrote and drew (*Bigfoot*, previously translated and published by Drawn and Quarterly). Pascal's curiosity and libido are aroused, and the comedy/*conte moral* begins, as different from superhero comics as Rohmer's *Collectionneuse* is from *Godzilla*.

As in Rohmer, the dialogue and the small details are the distinguishing facets of Girard's work. One recurring gag involves an oversized papier-mâché replica of his ex-girlfriend's head (part of a costume he wore one Halloween) that stares at Pascal as he tries to read and relax at his friends' apartment; another involves Pascal's attempts to return his would-be girlfriend's collection of stolen books to their owners.

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(She's *la Collectionneuse*, and Pascal–assuming the guilt he thinks she should feel–wants to break apart her collection.) Perhaps the most persistently repeating detail is Pascal's inability to understand and interact appropriately with children: he scares his friends' infant son by wearing the giant girlfriend mask, he inappropriately shushes a baby at a literary event (which pisses off the baby's mom), and he instinctually fails to catch a falling child because he's too busy jumping back in horror:

Near the end of the book, Pascal is kept awake by fantasies (nightmares?) of having a child with Sarah, and Girard hints that perhaps the failures of Pascal's earlier relationships are rooted in his own fears of commitment and parenthood. Like Rohmer's films–and like the neurotic "moral tales" of an American director like Woody Allen–*Petty Theft* is all about how people grow into, or compulsively avoid, relationships and intimacy.

What about the visual styles in which Rohmer and Giraud tell their stories? Rohmer's films are full of pictorial beauty; four of his six Moral Tales (*La Collectionneuse*, *My Night at Maud's* [1969], *Claire's Knee* [1970] and *Love in the Afternoon* [1972]) were shot by gifted cinematographer Néstor Almendros, who excelled in beautiful color and radiant close-ups of Rohmer's intellectual protagonists. (Phillip Lopate writes eloquently about Almendros' cinematography in *La Collectionneuse* here.) My own introduction to Rohmer's love of visual beauty came with the first of his films I saw in a movie theater, *Summer*, aka *The Green Ray* (1986), which ends with a man and a woman observing the elusive "green flash" that happens on rare occasions at sunset, as captured (in 16mm!) by cinematographer Sophie Maintigneux:

Although there are other reasons to call the film *The Green Ray* (most notably, the Jules Verne novel of the same name that plays a part in the plot), the title reflects Rohmer and Maintigneux's delight with this beautiful, natural phenomenon, with this minute flash.

I don't think there's a comparable love of visual beauty in *Petty Theft*, though that's not entirely Girard's fault. The book cover *breathes*; Sarah, in her red jacket, pops out from the gray-green background of book spines, and Girard embraces the imprecision of watercolors by coloring outside the lines and leaving generous areas of white space on the bookshelves. There's no color on the interior pages, however, and the dimensions of the book are smaller than the typical pamphlet comic, a size that reduces Girard's lines to thin undulations, with only spot blacks giving his art graphic impact. I'm sure Drawn & Quarterly produced *Petty Theft* as a small, 100-page black-and-white book at a high price point ($19.95) because they didn't see much of an American audience for Girard's cartooning, but I can dream of a version of *Petty Theft* at European album size, with watercolors throughout, as lovely as Rohmer's green ray.

Setting aside these production circumstances, I'm still not convinced that Girard's drawings are as effective and inventive as they could be. On almost every page of *Petty Theft*, Girard follows a three-tier, six-panel grid; the pictures are of roughly uniform size, without panel borders, and almost always in a middle distance that reveals how the characters roll their shoulders and lean forward with their chins in their hands. Such an Eddie Campbell-esque layout prompts readers to pay attention to body language than the shapes of the panels themselves, but Pascal's story is already so low-key that the rigid grid threatens to flatten the story into insignificance. My favorite page in *Petty Theft* breaks out of the three tiers; as Pascal sees for the first time a ladder he has to climb at his new welding job, Girard draws the ladder in a full splash page, to emphasize its height.

Later, after his sleepless night fantasizing about becoming a parent, Pascal is on this ladder when sparks from his welding gun burn his eye and he falls off. He is then fired from his job. Because these events aren't given any special visual emphasis–because they're portrayed at the same size and in the same layout as more mundane occurrences (such as Pascal walking to the bookstore or lying in bed)–Pascal's injuries and humiliation don't receive the dramatic emphasis they should. Giraud's storytelling in *Petty Theft* is rock-solid and entertaining, but I'm hungry for more color, more drama, and more green flash.

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