

An Extract from *Interviews with Eric Rohmer* edited by Bert Cardullo

PREFACE

In a career that spanned six decades, Eric Rohmer (1920-2010) earned himself a reputation as one of France's most incisive, eloquent and free-spirited film directors. One of the leading lights of the French New Wave, and before that an outspoken critic for *Cahiers du cinéma*, Rohmer was an *auteur* par excellence, crafting films of immense beauty and poetry — films about love, loyalty and life. There is a remarkable consistency of style and theme to his work, yet the director somehow managed to keep a freshness and youthful vigor in his art throughout his long and prolific career.

While few of Rohmer's films have been great commercial successes, his unique brand of cinema has found a loyal following and many of his films have garnered critical acclaim in his native France as well as abroad. These films are invariably about close human relationships, most often between young people experiencing the first traumas of romantic love, and they generally involve a moral dilemma of some kind. Thanks in part to the use of non-professional and inexperienced actors together with improvised dialogue, Rohmer's films have a natural spontaneity and beguiling innocence that make them enthralling, authentic explorations of the human psyche.



Eric Rohmer's first full-length film was *The Sign of Leo* which was made in 1959, the same year that Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut had their filmmaking debuts. Rohmer's film was, however, far more conventional and restrained than those of his New Wave contemporaries, which could explain why Godard and Truffaut won instant recognition and Rohmer was overlooked. Soon thereafter, in 1962, Rohmer began a project that was to take over ten years to complete: his celebrated series of films, *Six Moral Tales*. This series of films — outstanding among which are *My Night at Maud's* (1969) and *Claire's Knee* (1970) — may have been inspired by Rohmer's reaction to the permissive sexual attitudes of the late 1960s. Each film revolves around a male character who is caught in the moral crisis of loving one woman yet being physically attracted to another — representing, as Rohmer might put it, the eternal struggle between human nobility and animal instinct.

After a brief foray into historical dramas with *The Marquise of O* (1976) and *Perceval* (1978), Rohmer began work on another series of films, *Comedies and Proverbs*, which occupied him for most of the 1980s. Films from this series, which include *Pauline at the Beach* (1983) and *The Green Ray* (1986), take a relatively lighthearted look at the contemporary French middle class, broaching subjects such as infidelity and promiscuity in the search for everlasting love. The *Comedies and Proverbs* were followed, in the 1990s, by another series, *Tales of the Four Seasons*, possibly the most successful of Rohmer's film cycles. Each of these four films involves some form of emotional isolation, as the central character tries to cope with a recent crisis. The narratives of all the *Tales* end optimistically, looking forward to a better future and echoing the cycle of rebirth and renewal that we find in nature.

Rohmer's final three films show a surprising diversity in technique, although each is fundamentally concerned with the recurring Rohmeresque themes of love and fidelity. *The Lady and the Duke* (2001), set at the time of the French Revolution, is a moving historical drama that uses the latest digital technology to embed actors in painted backdrops. *Triple Agent* (2004) provides a poignant account of how external events can erode the trust between a husband and wife. Finally, *The Romance of Astrée and Céladon* (2007), Rohmer's last film, is a lyrical, highly stylised work set in fifth-century Gaul that is as much a celebration of the beauty of the natural world as it is a poet's heartfelt expression of the redeeming power of love.

Eric Rohmer's films may struggle to find a large mainstream audience but for those who appreciate his understated, intelligent, and intensely compassionate approach to filmmaking — amply on display in his interviews (especially valuable because Rohmer was essentially a private man who shunned publicity in his personal life) — they are a source of continuing joy and an inspiration for future generations of film directors, cinematographers and screenwriters who regard cinema as an art and not merely a stale commercial exercise. Modest as they are, many of Rohmer's films are certain to long outlive many of today's mainstream successes, if only because they are crafted with love and wisdom.

Rohmer's words themselves, preserved in these interviews that span four decades — the years 1970 to 2009 — reveal a critical, reflective sensibility that thoroughly complements the authorial one visualised in his films. The interviews were selected so as to give the reader as comprehensive a view as possible of Rohmer's career, to strike a balance between English-language and French-language publications, and to draw on a broad spectrum of sources: scholarly publications, film magazines, television programmes, DVD supplements, and internet websites. The interviews were also selected so as to make them as artistically inclusive as possible. That is, the questions focus on practical matters related to filmmaking (which, lest we forget, is variously known as a technology, an industry, an entertainment, and a 'total' art that contains or embraces all the others, including literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, music, theatre, and dance) as much as they do on the historical, aesthetic, and critical-theoretical issues raised by Rohmer's films themselves. Among those practical matters, furthermore, the reader will note that as much attention is given here to acting, design, and cinematography as it is to directing, writing, and editing (with some attention paid to finance and audience-reception, as well).

Rohmer is remarkably consistent throughout these interviews in his attitude towards his work and towards others' views of it. In various interviews he emphasises not only the highly verbal or written aspect of his cinema, but also the visual one: the fact that he carefully selects all exterior and

interior locations, and that he does his own scene design, selecting the framing, lines, spaces, decorative schemes, costumes, and key colours—for example, blacks and browns for *A Tale of Winter*; blue, red and white for *Pauline at the Beach*. In a number of these conversations, Rohmer also points out that he rehearses a great deal, sometimes for almost a year before the actual shooting begins; and that, most of the time, the dialogue is adapted to the way each actor plays his or her part. As for the other preparatory work he undertakes, Rohmer reveals that he researches characters and speech by walking around Paris observing and listening to people, the very people that may make up the audience for one of his films — still a coterie audience, to be sure, but not an elitist one (Rohmer would insist), and one that has managed to grow throughout his career.

Rohmer's films have a strong sense of place and time; his framing usually shows a contextual space around the characters, revealing details about where they live, work and pass the time. Accordingly, he avoids close-ups, explaining in one interview that he prefers to allow actors freedom to move within a scene, and that in any case close-ups don't usually add anything and can have the effect of diluting the relationship between character and setting. In this respect and others, Rohmer notes that 'other French cinema exists in an artificial world'. As he put the matter in a 1983 interview reprinted here, and which perhaps best serves as a prefatory note to the conversations that follow:

Cinema has more to fear from its own clichés than from those of the other arts. Right now, I despise, I hate, cinephile madness, cinephile culture . . . people whose culture is limited to the world of film, who think only through film, and when they make films, their films contain beings who exist only through film, whether the reminiscence of old films or the people in the profession. I think that there are other things in the world besides film and, conversely, that film feeds on things that exist outside it. I would even say that film is the art that can feed on itself the least.

This is an extract from *Interviews with Eric Rohmer*, edited by Bert Cardullo.

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