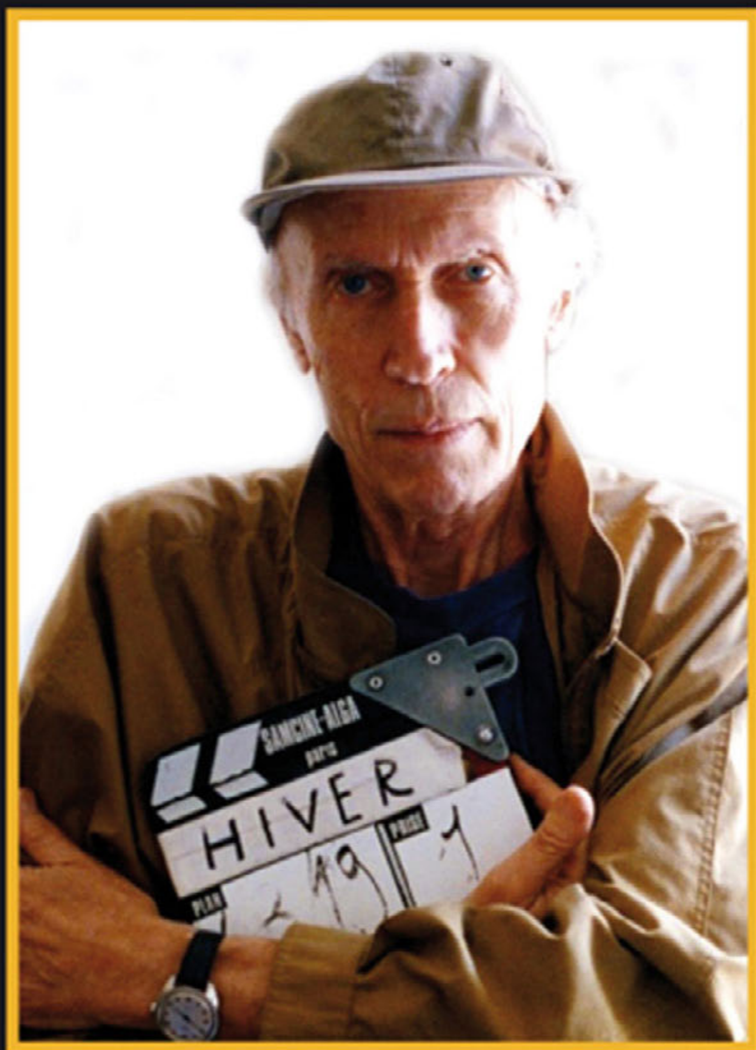
Interviews with ERIC ROHMER



Edited by Bert Cardullo

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INTERVIEWS WITH ERIC ROHMER

by
Bert Cardullo

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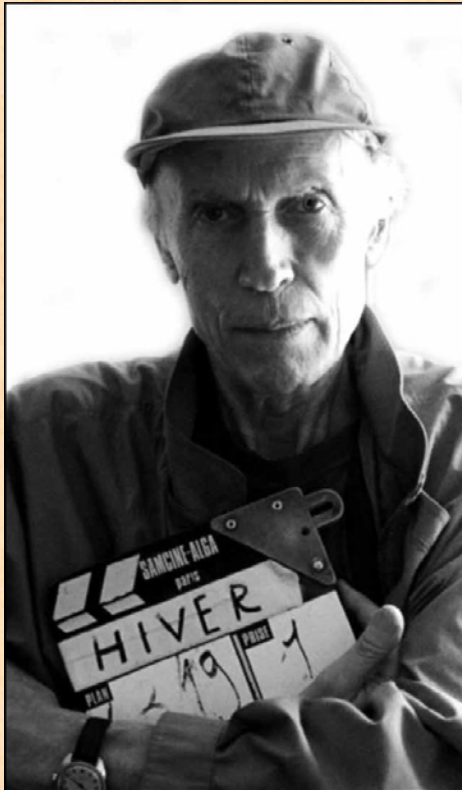

Preface

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 vigour 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 débuts. 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.

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Introduction

Seasons Change and Comedies Are Proverbial
The Tales of Eric Rohmer

The filmmaker as thinker, that's what Eric Rohmer was.

And there exists a large strand of Gallic cinema for which the thoughtful, refined and psychologically acute depiction of urban middle-class manners is a mainstay. At its most superficial, this strand produces films like Martine Dugowson's *Portraits chinois* (1997), where the privileged milieux of fashion, art, and the media are the picture's flimsy substance rather than its pretext, and in which the characters' *angst* seems to be just another eye-catching item in a large display window. At its best, this strand of French film has come to be identified with the work of Eric Rohmer particularly in his three film cycles (the focus here), *Six Moral Tales*, *Comedies and Proverbs* and *Tales of the Four Seasons*. As Arnaud Desplechin said some years ago when he introduced his own *My Sex Life, or How I Got Into an Argument* (1996) at the New York Film Festival, 'For a French guy, this sort of movie' - with its anatomisation of the emotions and deployment of well-articulated thought as a form of action - 'is like a western for Americans'.

Rohmer was one of the longest-surviving (and active) writer-directors of the French New Wave that so invigorated the film world in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, except for a few early shorts made with Jean-Luc Godard, Rohmer's films always seemed to have more in common with Robert Bresson's spiritual austerity and Jean Renoir's lyrical humanism than with the youthful flamboyance or iconoclasm of Francois Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, and Godard. Here, for example, is Rohmer's Renoir-like description of his cinematic style:

I do not like long shots, because I like to place the characters in a setting where they can be identified, and at the same time I like to put them so that they can be identified with the backgrounds. Therefore, if I put them in a long shot you won't see the people, and if I go to a close shot you won't see the décor. Instead of using a long shot, I would rather use a panning shot which describes the milieu to the audience in the same way a long shot would. I have the camera move to show where the characters go without changing the frame. The camera does not move on its own authority. I think that my characters are bound to their environment, and that the environment has an effect upon them. ('Interview with Eric Rohmer', *Cinema* [Los Angeles], Fall 1971).

Fig.2: Le genou de Claire (Claire's Knee, 1970)

Rohmer described this style shortly after completing *Claire's Knee* (1970), the fifth of his *Six Moral Tales,* for which it was completely appropriate. In the best of the *Moral Tales - My Night at Maud's* (1969) and *Chloë in the Afternoon* (1972) as well as *Claire's Knee*

- the main characters, men, are self-absorbed and absorbed in the surfaces of life, primarily the surfaces of beautiful women; and the environments of these films, kept carefully in view, serve as moral comments on the protagonists. Jérôme, for example, says in *Claire's Knee* that for him 'looks don't count, only intellect', but the young woman he chooses to pursue and the setting in which he immerses himself (the tediously, nearly oppressively beautiful Lac d'Annecy on the Franco-Swiss border) indicate the opposite. The moral of these delicate little tales is 'know thyself', and the frightening implication is that knowing oneself in a modern world where superficial beauty is prized above all else may be undesirable, if not impossible: beneath one's own surface, one may find nothing.

Rohmer further described the style of the *Moral Tales* as (French) neoclassical: a style, that is, of restrained camera technique, distilled emotion, taut construction and pointed language instead of overt action. Rohmer's style, however, sometimes replaces the predestinate Jansenism of Catholic dramatist Jean Racine with the Kantian subjectivism of German Romantic writer Heinrich von Kleist. This, paradoxically coexisting with Kleist's own neoclassical impulse, postulated that character is destiny and that feeling, rather than reason, dictates character and determines 'truth'. Surely, then, it was no accident that Rohmer came to film Kleist's 1808 novella *The Marquise of O* after completing *Chloë in the Afternoon,* the last of the *Moral Tales.* And perhaps just as surely it was no accident that, in attempting to repeat the success of the *Moral Tales* in another series of six films, *Comedies and Proverbs*, he would parody himself, in part because his new subject, instead of being the superficiality of men who do not realise they are in love with surfaces, would be the interiority of women who are learning to fall in love with essences - a subject calling for a very different visual style.

Fig.3: La Marquise d'O (The Marquise of O, 1976)

In the *Comedies and Proverbs,* Rohmer dramatises the psychology of incipient love, the actions and reactions of his lovers - primarily his heroines - as they respond less to the external intrigue of romance and more to the inner promptings of the heart. The drama of such 'proverbial comedies' as *The Perfect Marriage* (1982), *Pauline at the Beach* (1985), and *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* (1987) is thus largely internal and as such belongs closer to the camera and even indoors, if not onstage, where we can concentrate on the revelations of language and gesture. Instead, Rohmer places them mostly outdoors, where the environment takes on a role far in excess of the one it should have - its surfaces even calling attention to themselves as surfaces rather than to what lies underneath.

The problem with *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*, for example, is not its script, as some critics once argued, but in the visual style that must give life to that script, the images that must reinforce the words and in turn be reinforced by them. Rohmer makes a big deal here of Cergy-Pontoise, a new satellite town just outside Paris (which we can see far in the background of a number of shots), but this setting, finally, has nothing to do with character or the (verbal) action in

the film. If the bland, even sterile, modernity of Cergy-Pontoise's office buildings, shops, high-rise apartments, and artificial lakes is meant to suggest the vacuousness of its inhabitants' lives, then Rohmer should have dramatised that vacuousness - not the growth of Blanche's love for Fabien and, to a lesser extent, of Léa's for Alexandre. (Blanche had initially been smitten by Alexandre, and Léa had more or less been living with Fabien.) Rohmer saturates his film with pastel foregrounds and white or glass backgrounds - that is, with surfaces that call attention to themselves as surfaces - yet he has Blanche utter such a self-knowing remark as 'I want him to love me, not what I pretend to be', and he has Léa declare 'He demands nothing, but he initiates nothing', which is a telling insight into her boyfriend's own sterile modernity.

On the one hand, Rohmer seems to be suggesting that his characters lead empty bureaucrats' or technicians' lives - Blanche, for instance, is a low-level arts administrator for the town, and Léa is in her last year of computer school - and on the other hand he wants, somewhat condescendingly, to show how even in empty lives the game of love can end in triumph. The final shot of *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* epitomises Rohmer's divided and ultimately pernicious aesthetic impulse: as Blanche and Fabien embrace in the foreground and the happy Léa and Alexandre depart in the background, the frame freezes, as if to suggest the spiritual paralysis that traps these otherwise loving couples.

The proverb on which *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* is based is 'the friends of my friends are my friends', and the comic twist, of course, is that Fabien, originally the boyfriend of Léa, becomes not only Blanche's friend, but *her* boyfriend. Yes, this is a slim bit of action on which to base a feature film, but again, action *per se* isn't the focus here: it is superseded by the precise calibration of emotional transitions and the careful shaping of language. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Marivaux, and especially his imitators, were accused of betraying the spareness of the neoclassical aesthetic with a profusion of rococo ornamentation: if Rohmer can be accused of a similar betrayal in this picture (and in the *Comedies and Proverbs* in

general), his is visual, not verbal. It often distracts from and finally contradicts the delicacy of what occurs between and beneath the lines. (By the time we get to the theatre of Musset in the first half of the nineteenth century, Marivaux's rococo elaboration of language is newly understood as the Romantic pursuit of pure linguistic self-expression – an understanding that cannot be applied to the visual images in Rohmer's *Comedies and Proverbs*).

Fig.4: L'Ami de mon amie (Boyfriends and Girlfriends, 1987)

That delicacy is not particularly well-served by Sophie Renoir (Léa) and François-Eric Gendron (Alexandre), who, unlike the splendid Eric Viellard (Fabien) and the acceptable Emmanuelle Chaulet (Blanche), act as if they are taking action instead of displaying the action that is within them. In films as 'quiet' as Rohmer's, putting actors on screen whose mere looks can speak is paramount: the actors in the *Comedies and Proverbs* seem to have been chosen more for their look, for the sake of facial contrast and harmony, than for the character conveyed by the look.

The internal lives of women or, better, the fluctuations and even fibrillations of their love lives, continued to occupy this director in

his third series of films, *Tales of the Four Seasons,* of which *Autumn Tale* (1998) is the last. One might expect environment or setting to play a big part in the *Tales,* since their focus seems to be on the seasons as motivating factors in human behaviour. However, the visual punctiliousness for which Rohmer has become known - or notorious - is appositely absent from these films. *A Tale of Winter* (1992), for example, is not concerned with depicting wintry landscapes, but rather with chronicling the time of year between Christmas and the new year as it affects a couple's 'rebirth' or reconciliation. Hence what we see in winter are Paris and Nevers shorn of their picture-postcard or travelogue, winter-wonderland beauty. Furthermore, because of the weather we are indoors much of the time - precisely where we should be for a film whose drama is largely an interior one and therefore requires our concentration on matters of the spirit rather than the spiritings of matter, on the experience of time or season instead of the influence of space or environment. If the spareness of Rohmer's cinematic style, with its restrained camera and unobtrusive editing, has long reminded me of Robert Bresson's own astringent style, his subject in *A Tale of Winter*, though essentially comic in form, recalls the transcendent or spiritual element in Bresson as well. (Like Bresson, Rohmer rarely features actors twice, and he generally uses performers who are not widely known if they are not precisely non-professional.)

Indeed, Félicié, the central character in *A Tale of Winter*, is one of those seemingly perverse, exasperating protagonists who come right out of Bresson: the titular characters of *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and *A Gentle Creature* (1969)) - the *curé* of Ambricourt and the woman simply known as 'She' - are her cinematic forebears. *A Tale of Winter* opens under the credits with a montage depicting this young woman on holiday at the seaside, where she is having a passionate affair with a man named Charles. By the end of the credits, Félicié and Charles are at the railway station saying goodbye with every intention of seeing each other again, but she accidentally gives him the wrong address and never hears from him. It is five years later when the film actually begins, back in Paris. Félicié, a

hairdresser, has a four-year-old daughter called Elise - the fruit of her affair - but no Charles; she lives with her mother and shuttles between two suitors, a cerebral, sensitive librarian by the name of Loïc and the owner of the beauty salon where she works, the adoring but business-like Maxence. Significantly, almost all of *A Tale of Winter* takes place between Christmas and the new year, when Félicié is pushed into choosing between Loïc and Maxence, who has left his wife for her and wants to take her with him back to his hometown of Nevers, where he will soon open a new hair salon. One reason she finds the choice so difficult is that neither lover stirs her in the way the mere memory of Charles does; he is the one man she loved completely and he, or rather the possibility-next-to-inevitability of his return, still haunts all her amorous decisions.

Fig.5: L'Ami de mon amie (Boyfriends and Girlfriends, 1987)

Nonetheless, after explicating her dilemma, her *indecisiveness,* to her boyfriends, her mother, even her sister-in-law - among whom the two men are surprisingly the most patient and understanding in the face of Félicié's seeming capriciousness-cum-opportunism - Félicié agrees to move with her beloved Elise to Nevers, where she will live

with Maxence and work in his beauty shop. But she is there only a short time before returning to Paris, and what triggers her decision to leave is a trip with her daughter to a Catholic church to view a Nativity scene. Now Félicié is not a true believer in the manner of Loïc the intellectual - she does not attend Mass and, although she is against abortion, she says that this is for moral, not religious reasons. However, her moment of clarification or illumination about her love life - that she must remain true to her one true love, Charles - occurs while she is meditating, perhaps praying, in the Catholic church, and that moment of grace is reinforced once she is back in Paris by attending, with Loïc, a production of Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale*.

Shakespeare's tragicomic romance is set in a pagan era but, like many a medieval Christmas or Easter drama, its main theme is rebirth or resurrection, if not reincarnation, the forces of death and hatred in the play turning miraculously into those of life and love even as the old year becomes the new, or winter turns to spring. Indeed, the scene from *The Winter's Tale* filmed by Rohmer, and emotionally responded to by Félicié, is the final one of rebirth and reconciliation in which Hermione's statue comes to life before the overwhelmed Léontes, the husband who had wrongly accused her of adultery years before. Charles himself comes to life, or reappears, shortly after this performance as Rohmer first cuts several times to a mysterious stranger driving toward Paris, then shows Félicié miraculously running into and reuniting with this man - now revealed to be Charles - on a bus on New Year's Eve. The next day finds them at her mother's home, celebrating amidst family the birth of the new year as well as Charles' return, the return of her 'sailor', as Félicié calls him in what may be a reference to a play on a similar theme, Ibsen's *Lady From the Sea* (1888). Actually, Charles is a chef, an appealing yet understated character, and we may assume that Félicié and Elise will be moving with him to Brittany, where he is to open a new restaurant.

Whose hand is at work in this conclusion, we may reasonably ask: almighty God's or that of mere chance? It is impossible to

say for sure, of course, but Rohmer nonetheless coyly presents us with the choice - albeit an extreme restatement of that choice - in a conversation between Loïc and Félicié following the performance of *The Winter's Tale.* After the purportedly unreligious Félicié tells Loïc of her illuminating visit to the Catholic church in Nevers, he recites Pascal's wager, which argues that you run a far greater risk if you disbelieve rather than believe in God. If you believe and it turns out that there is no God, what have you really lost?; whereas if you disbelieve and God does in fact exist, you will spend eternity in hell instead of heaven. Appropriately, it is the literal-mindedly pious Loïc - who finds the ending of *The Winter's Tale* 'implausible' and for whom, according to Félicié, only what is written down or factually recorded is true; and who discounts the possibility of Charles's reappearance - who states the rationalist's calculating argument for believing in God and, by extension, in God's creation of the miracle at the end of *A Tale of Winter.*

But Félicié herself is no such rationalist - 'I don't like what's plausible', she declares; rather, she embodies the dark side of seventeenth-century French rationalism invoked philosophically in Pascal's own *Pensées* (1670), dramatically in the plays of Racine, and cinematically, prior to Rohmer, in the films of Bresson again. I'm speaking of Jansenism, which in its emphasis on predestination or fatalism, denial of free will in favour of God's will, and insistence upon salvation solely through God's grace as opposed to 'good deeds', is much closer to the Protestantism of John Calvin than the Catholicism of Ignatius Loyola. (Jansenism, Pascal's wager, the miraculous, and the time between Christmas and the new year all also figure in *My Night at Maud's*, although there they are put to somewhat ironic use, as they are not in *A Tale of Winter*).

Félicié is more of a Jansenist than a Jesuit not only in her intuited conviction that she and Charles are destined to meet up again, but also in her tacit belief that God is a silent or 'absent' presence in the affairs of men whose will can never be understood. Perhaps God drove her to enter the church at Nevers and absorb His revelation; perhaps not. Perhaps God arranged Félicié's reunion with Charles

on the bus as well as the prefiguration of that reunion in the production of *The Winter's Tale* she attends; perhaps not. Only He knows. Félicié doesn't reveal what she thinks about this subject, and in her silence may be imitating her God more than one might at first believe. We are left to determine for ourselves what happened, or rather why it happened precisely in this way, and Eric Rohmer has thus managed to put us where he wants us, intellectually as well as emotionally: beneath heaven's abyss, trying to decide whether to play the game of chance and possibly cast our fate to the wind, or to trust in God's ultimate inscrutability - and by implication that of his cinematic handmaiden.

Fig.6: Conte d'hiver (A Tale of Winter, 1992)

As I suggested earlier, the cinematography of *A Tale of Winter,* by Luc Pagès, is nearly ascetic. There are no superficially inviting colours or backdrops on the screen in this film - not even during the opening sequence at the beach - as there have been in such 'proverbial comedies' of Rohmer's as *The Aviator's Wife* (1980) and *Full Moon in Paris* (1984). Accordingly, the actors have been

chosen less for their own superficially inviting look than for the character, the substance, conveyed by that look. Paradoxically, I remember the faces of the principal players - Charlotte Véry (Félicié), Frédéric Van Den Driessche (Charles), Hervé Furic (Loïc), and Michel Voletti (Maxence) - quite well, not so much because those faces are memorable in themselves but because their *characters* are etched in my memory. Rohmer has quietly managed to inspire ease and confidence in his actors, and they in turn have given inspired performances of deceptively everyday characters before his reticent yet revealing camera - performances that, in their offhand, conversational quality, stand in distinct contrast to the formal, versified ones by the Shakespeareans of *The Winter's Tale.*

Fig.7: Conte d'automne (Autumn Tale, 1998)

As for music, there isn't much to speak of (only occasional piano strains) in this film; rather, it depends on the musicality of language, especially the French language as it sounds to non-French ears, to create the saving grace of instrumental music as it uniquely liberates us from the transitory world of natural forms and practical concerns. Indeed, the 'foreign' language of *A Tale of Winter* contributes in the end to the divinity of its (romantic) comedy, to a strangeness that

suggests otherworldliness rather than mere oddness or eccentricity. And that otherworldliness is confirmed by the film's inclusion in its story of a child, a lamb of God, if you will, in search of its father. No matter that the father is an earthly one in *A Tale of Winter,* for prior to his reappearance Charles had been a strictly spiritual presence, through word and picture, in the life of his daughter. It is with a shot of Elise playing with other children, not of Félicié and Charles embracing, that Rohmer's film ends, as a reminder that we are all God's children.

Unlike *A Tale of Winter*, *Autumn Tale* takes place mostly outdoors in the Rhône valley of southern France. Nevertheless, once again, landscape is enlisted not as calendar art but as temporal contributor to the largely internal (if not expressly spiritual) narrative - an internality that is all the more notable for being (gingerly) juxtaposed against the external beauty of this wine country. Diane Baratier's colour cinematography consists mainly of crisp medium shots that avoid the two visual extremes of 'autumnal' pictures: pretty, full and long shots suffused with the golden, heartening glow of the autumn sun, or intense close-ups of melancholy faces in autumn rain, amid falling leaves. Harvest time has come to the vineyards of the Rhône valley, and it is in the mellowing effect of this time on his characters that Rohmer is interested, not in the lush harvest itself. Thus his film's title has a double meaning: not only have the valley's grapes ripened, but four of its inhabitants - the principal figures in *Autumn Tale* - have come to that mature age of 45 or so when the reality of winter, or the fact of mortality, first comes into view.

The film centres on two friends: the frisky but dignified Isabelle, who owns a bookshop in Montelimar and lives in the countryside (with a husband who is irrelevant to the story as well as a daughter who is soon to be married), and Magali, her friend since childhood, who runs a vineyard in the vicinity and is a widowed mother of two grown children. A wiry, vital woman with snapping eyes, pouty mouth and an unruly bush of hair, Magali is very much interested in remarrying but believes that it is too late - and too difficult (particularly out in the country) - to find a man. When

Isabelle suggests placing a personal ad, her simultaneously proud and shy best friend is revolted by the idea. So Isabelle secretly places such an ad in the local newspaper, and when Gérald, a divorced businessman, responds, she interviews him extensively over several lunches before revealing to her dumbfounded date that she is merely acting as an unbidden liaison for someone else.

Fig.8: Conte d'automne (Autumn Tale, 1998)

Complicating matters is the fact that the only other person to whom Magali feels close is Rosine, girlfriend of her callow son, Léo. Magali feels that Rosine is too good for her own child, while Rosine says she loves Magali more than she loves Léo. But the two women do not, as a result, unite in a trendy lesbian love relationship: instead, Rosine tries to set up her ex-lover and former philosophy professor, the fortysomething Etienne, with Magali. They meet at the climactic wedding of Isabelle's daughter, but Etienne is clearly only interested in younger women. At the wedding, Magali is also finally introduced to Gérald.

They happen to be drawn to each other - *before* they receive any formal introductions - though Magali is not at all pleased when she

learns the manner in which Isabelle has brought them together; while Gérald, for his part, is still disappointed that Isabelle was just a surrogate for her best friend. The feeling seems to be mutual: Isabelle not only flirts with Gérald at her daughter's wedding, but also gives him something more than a friendly kiss - a kiss interrupted by a startled Magali. At the very end of *Autumn Tale,* even though Magali and Gérald have made a date, it is not this couple that we see, but rather a pensive Isabelle dancing with her oblivious husband to a sprightly, accordion-accompanied folk song. The final image fades to black on the sublimated face of this *femme d'un certain âge,* who earlier had revealingly told Gérald, 'I want all men to love me, especially those that I don't love'.

If the preceding plot summary sounds like the description of a French bedroom farce *à la* Feydeau, it well could be except for a few, signal ingredients. First, Rohmer is, of his own admission, a practising if sometimes reluctant Catholic. Therefore, in *Autumn Tale* as in his other films (particularly *Chloë in the Afternoon*), he continually toys with temptation of a moral kind. Yet, unlike the farçeur, he does not let his flirtation with temptation slide into carnal banality. For Rohmer the Catholic, as opposed to Feydeau the amoralist, banality contains bane as well - hence the providential design of Rohmer's cinema as opposed to the mechanical one of farce. Design for him, because he is a Catholic, is not an independent, mathematically schematic truth. Design is not simply a question of intricate plotting, as it was for the nineteenth-century farceur whose plots (consisting of human parts) dramatically reconstituted the well-oiled machines of an era of rapid industrialisation and technological advancement.

Design for Rohmer - the very power of its intelligent conception - is a spiritual clarity and manifestation of the Spirit, amidst the physical chaos of existence. (The very fact that he liked to work in clusters, as in his *Moral Tales, Comedies and Proverbs,* and *Tales of the Four Seasons,* is another warrant of design.) And this means that, together with the design, one must create sentient, articulate, inspirited characters of a kind not seen in farce, where single-

minded, one-dimensional figures are ultimately dehumanised by their pursuit of sensual gratification. (Thus does Rohmer marry, in *Tales of the Four Seasons,* Jansenist determinism to Kantian subjectivism, or fatalism to free will).

One way to approach the films of Eric Rohmer, in which assorted combinations of attractive, cultivated Europeans rearrange their lives amid much exquisitely verbalised soul-searching, is to see them (particularly if you are a non-believer) as sophisticated fairy tales in which, despite what setbacks characters may encounter, an overarching plan emerges in the end that replaces confusion and disappointment with order and acceptance. Along the way, rational decision-making is rewarded, just as is the trust of one's deepest intuitions. True love (never adulterated lust) - or the closest one can come to such romance in this life - is the ultimate reward, but it cannot be savoured or even intimated until every moral quandary has been aired and somehow resolved. Hence the anti-climactic nature of Rohmer's climaxes, which come at the end of stories whose telling, not their ultimate predictability, makes them such rich, emotionally satisfying experiences. And that telling consists of emotional as well as intellectual dissection along a continuum - of measuring the vacillations or vibrations of introspective love - rather than emotional and mental upheaval that moves toward a genuinely dramatic peak.

That telling also consists of verbal comedy, in contrast to the physical kind found in farce. *Autumn Tale* is, after all, a romantic comedy, not a sex comedy, although to the extent that Rohmer satirises the modern French professional class, with its highly civilised code of behaviour, advanced educational level, and leisure to indulge in amorous whim, the film is also a comedy of manners. Albeit a gentle one, and in that sense this late picture of Rohmer's has something in common with both Verdi's light, feathery, and benevolent late masterpiece, *Falstaff* (1893), and Shakespeare's majestic, magical, ultimately mysterious final play, *The Tempest* (1611) - each of which signifies the sublime stage of (let us call it) distilled humanism at which its author had arrived.

Here's one example of such humane distillation in *Autumn Tale*: the sullen Léo, who doesn't seem to like his mother very much, is appalled by Rosine's 'monstrous' attempt to match Magali and Etienne, which he views as a kind of Oedipal scenario in which his romantic rival would become his stepfather. 'Kids shouldn't mess in their parents' lives', Léo explains, to which Rosine responds that Etienne is not her father. In age, however, he could be, and he could become her father-in-law if he were to marry Magali and Rosine were to marry Léo. What Magali's son fails to realise, though - and it is this piece of information that puts the humorous topping on this particular comic cake - is that his girlfriend has no intention of marrying him or even of being his girlfriend any longer. He's a bit obtuse, then; she's a trifle manipulative, like Isabelle; and Etienne is really in love with himself. But none do, or come to, any harm in the divineness of Rohmer's comedy, and, unbeknown to her at this point, Magali will finally separate herself from her friends' machinations at the same time as she tastes the fruit of their wiles.

Fig.9: Conte d'automne (Autumn Tale, 1998)

She's played with just the right amount of moodiness by Béatrice Romand, who made her film début, at age 15, in *Claire's Knee* and has since appeared in several other Rohmer pictures, including *The Green Ray* (1986). Marie Rivière, who brings far more than the requisite volatility to Isabelle, also acted in *The Green Ray,* having first collaborated with Rohmer on *Perceval* (1978). Together these two women show why *Autumn Tale* has been labeled a 'women's picture' and Rohmer a 'women's director', for they act (and he directs them to act) less as if they are taking action (in the manner of a men's action-adventure picture) than displaying the action that is within them; less as if action need ultimately be physical or corporeal than that it must fundamentally be mental. For Isabelle, Magali and their *auteur,* then, cogent thought and articulate speech are the bases of humane action if not forms of action themselves.

As for the two principal men in *Autumn Tale,* Etienne and Gérald, they are performed with resource by Didier Sandre and Alain Libolt - a resource that, in their case, comes from considerable experience as stage actors. Libolt may be the more impressive in the mercurial play of his nimble mind and fretted emotions, but Sandre may have the more difficult role, not only because his character is out of his element here (the element of the *Six Moral Tales*), but also because he must play a student of philosophies whose personal philosophy appears not to probe any deeper than the nearest pretty female face and figure. It was the almost classical musicality of Sandre's and the other actors' language (the *French* language, let us not forget) - in its symmetrical order and rhythmic completeness - that makes me unable to say, even to this day and after multiple viewings, whether *Autumn Tale* has any background music. Claude Marti gets credit for a musical score, but, as in the case of *A Tale of Winter*, all that I can - or perhaps want to - remember is the music of spoken words. *Merci à Dieu pour la langue française!*

Thank God as well for the words, and films, of Eric Rohmer.

Eric Rohmer: A Chronology

1920: Born Jean-Marie Maurice (or Maurice Henri-Joseph) Schérer on April 4, in Corrèze, France, the son of Mathilde (née Bucher) and Lucien Schérer. Religion: Roman Catholic. One brother: René, who became a philosopher.

Early 1940s: After taking an arts degree at the University of Nancy, begins his career as a teacher in Clermont-Ferrand. Moves to Paris, where he works as a freelance journalist and newspaper reporter.

1946: Publishes the novel *Elisabeth* under the pseudonym Gilbert Cordier.

1948: As a regular at the *Cinémathèque Française,* comes into contact with François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, and Jean-Luc Godard. Begins writing film criticism for *Revue du cinéma* and *Les Temps modernes*, in particular two seminal articles: 'Cinema, the Art of Space'and 'For a Talking Cinema'. Around this time, he adopts the pseudonym of Eric Rohmer, an amalgam of names of the film director (and actor) Erich von Stroheim and the author of the Fu Manchu stories, Sax Rohmer.

1950: Founds the short-lived magazine *Gazette du cinéma* with Godard and Rivette. Makes his first short film, *Journal d'un scélérat* (16mm). He continues making shorts through the 1950s in collaboration with such friends as Godard, Rivette, Paul Gégauff, and Agnès Guillemot.

1951: Joins the staff of *Cahiers du cinéma* at the invitation of Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and André Bazin. There he helps develop the theory of *auteurism* and echoes Bazin in praising long takes and the kind of camerawork that does not interfere with the faithful replication of the real world.

1952: Begins work on an uncompleted feature, *Les Petites Filles Modèles*.

1956: Promoted to chief editor of *Cahiers du cinéma*, where he remains.

1957: Publication of *Hitchcock*, a book co-authored with Claude Chabrol and a model of *auteurist* criticism in its detailed narrative analysis and attention to filmic technique. Marries Thérèse Barbet; the marriage produces two sons. Writes the screenplay for Godard's *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick* (*All the Boys Are Called Patrick*).

1959: First feature, *Le Signe du Lion* (*The Sign of Leo*), produced by Claude Chabrol. It is not released commercially until 1962.

1960: Makes his first 35mm film, *Présentation ou Charlotte et son steak*, with Godard (12 minutes).

1962: Approached by the cinephile Barbet Schroeder, who had set up his own production company, Les Films du Losange, with money from his parents, admired Rohmer, and wanted to produce his films. Begins series of *Six Moral Tales*, the first of which was *La Boulangère de Monceau* (*The Bakery Girl of Monceau*), produced by Schroeder. Establishing the director's slow, talky, relatively plotless, philosophical style, all the tales will also follow the same basic story - inspired by F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927) - in which a man, married or otherwise committed to a woman, is tempted by a second woman.

1963: Dismissed by *Cahiers du cinéma* at the insistence of Truffaut and Doniol-Valcroze, who wanted to extend the critical range of the journal (to documentaries and Third World cinema, for example), as well as include more political commentary. Through friends and admirers, he manages to get a job working for ORTF, the national radio and television unit, where he works for some years directing

over a dozen films, including profiles of Lumière and Dreyer for the 'Filmmakers of Our Time' series, as well as other documentaries on such diffuse subjects as the Parsifal legend, the Industrial Revolution, and the lives of Paris' female student population.

1965: Contributes an episode to the New Wave compilation *Paris vu par . . .*

1967: Shoots his first film in colour, *La Collectionneuse* (*The Collector*). The film wins the Silver Bear at the Berlin Festival, thus helping to assure the financial success of Les Films du Losange.

1969: Earns international recognition for the third film in the *Moral Tales* series, *Ma nuit chez Maud* (*My Night at Maud's*), which stars Jean-Louis Trintignant and garners an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film.

1970: The fourth film in the *Moral Tales* series, *Le Genou de Claire* (*Claire's Knee*), secures his international reputation, along with that of his cameraman Nestor Almendros.

1976-78: Following the *Moral Tales*, makes two period films, *La Marquise d'O* (*The Marquise of O*) (1976), from a novella by Heinrich von Kleist, and *Perceval le Gallois* (1978), based on a twelfth-century manuscript by Chrétien de Troyes.

1981: Begins his second series, *Comedies and Proverbs*, with *La Femme de l'aviateur* (*The Aviator's Wife*).

1990: Begins his third series, *Tales of the Four Seasons*, with *Conte de printemps* (*A Tale of Springtime*).