“Seasons Change, or the Tales of Eric Rohmer”

Abstract English
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 movies like Martine Dugowson’s Shadow Play (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 type of French film has come to be identified with the work of Eric Rohmer. The author re-views Rohmer’s films in general, and in particular Boyfriends and Girlfriends (L’Ami de mon amie, 1987), A Tale of Winter (Conte d’hiver, 1992), and Autumn Tale (Conte d’automne, 1998), as instances of “thinkers’ cinema.”

Key words: Eric Rohmer; French film; Boyfriends and Girlfriends; A Tale of Winter; Autumn Tale

Abstract French

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 an almost unique 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 remarkably 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 his 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 (Le Signe du lion), which was made in 1959, the same year that Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut had
their filmmaking débuts. Rohmer’s first film was far more conventional and restrained than that of his New Wave contemporaries, however, which could explain why it was overlooked, whereas Truffaut and Godard won instant recognition for their maiden efforts. Soon thereafter, in 1962, Rohmer began a project that was to take over ten years to complete. It was the first in his celebrated series of films, Six Moral Tales (Six contes moraux). This series of films—outstanding among which are My Night at Maud’s (Ma nuit chez Maud, 1969) and Claire’s Knee (Le Genou de Claire, 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 (Die Marquise von O . . ., 1976) and Perceval (Perceval le Gallois, 1978), Rohmer then began work on his next series of films, Comedies and Proverbs (Comédies et proverbes), which occupied him for most of the 1980s. Such films from this series as Pauline at the Beach (Pauline à la plage, 1983) and The Green Ray (Le Rayon vert, 1986) took a relatively lighthearted look at the French middle class during the 1980s, broaching subjects such as infidelity and promiscuity in the search for everlasting love. The Comedies and Proverbs were followed, in the 1990s, by Rohmer’s next series of films, Tales of the Four Seasons (Contes des quatre saisons), possibly the most successful of his film cycles. Each of these four films is set at a particular time of year chosen to illustrate a season, and each 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 same 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 (L’Anglaise et le Duc, 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 (Les Amours d’Astrée et de Céladon, 2007), Rohmer’s last film, is a lyrical, highly stylized 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—not greasy banknotes.

They are crafted with thought, as well. 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 movies like Martine Dugowson’s Shadow Play (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 type of French film has come to be identified with the work of Eric Rohmer. As Arnaud Desplechin said some years ago when he introduced his own My Sex Life, or How I Got Into an Argument (Comment je me suis dispute . . . (ma vie sexuelle), 1996) at the New York Film Festival, “For a French guy, this sort of movie”—with its anatomization 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 share more with Bresson’s spiritual austerity and Renoir’s lyrical humanism than with the youthful flamboyance or iconoclasm of Truffaut, Rivette, 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.)

Rohmer described this style shortly after completing Claire’s Knee, 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 and Chloë in the Afternoon (L’Amour l’après-midi, 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 their heroes. 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 Jean Racine’s Catholic Jansenism with the Heinrich von Kleist’s Kantian subjectivism, which, 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 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 would be, not the superficiality of men who do not realize they are in love with surfaces, but instead the interiority of women who are learning to fall in love with essences—a subject calling for a visual style quite different from the one employed in the Moral Tales.

Rohmer would be the Marivaux or Musset of cinema in the Comedies and Proverbs, in which he dramatizes 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 than to the inner promptings of the heart. The drama of such “proverbial comedies” as The Perfect Marriage (Le Beau Mariage, 1982), Pauline at the Beach, and Boyfriends and Girlfriends (L’Ami de mon amie, 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 these works 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 (the literal translation of the French title is My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend), for example, isn’t its script, as some critics once argued, but precisely 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, the (at the time) new satellite city just outside Paris (which we can see far in the background of a number of shots) in which Boyfriends and Girlfriends takes place, but this setting, finally, has nothing to do with character and (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 dramatized 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, not to what’s underneath—yet he has Blanche utter such sincere remarks as “I want him to love me, not what I pretend to be,” and he gives Léa the following incisive line: “He demands nothing, but he initiates nothing.”

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 epitomizes 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 boyfriends 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. If Rohmer can be accused in this picture (and in the Comedies and Proverbs in general), as were Marivaux and especially his imitators in their plays, of betraying the spareness of the neoclassical aesthetic with a profusion of rococo ornamentation, then the ornament here is visual, not verbal as in the case of French drama in the first half of the eighteenth century, and 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 expressiveness or self-expression.)

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, and I can’t recall any of his films save the Comedies and Proverbs in which actors were 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 (Conte d’automne, 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 behavior. However, the visual punctiliousness for which Rohmer has become known—or notorious—is appositely absent from these movies. A Tale of Winter (Conte d’hiver,
1992), for example—the second of the Tales of the Four Seasons—is not concerned with depicting wintry landscapes, but rather with chronicling the time of year between Christmas and New Year’s 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 movie-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 sparseness of Rohmer’s cinematic style, with its restrained camera and unobtrusive editing, has long reminded me of Robert Bresson’s astringency, his subject in A Tale of Winter, though essentially comic in form, recalls Bresson’s transcendence as well. (Like Bresson as well, Rohmer rarely features actors twice, and he generally uses performers who are not widely known if they are not precisely non-professional.)

Indeed, Félicié is one of those seemingly perverse, exasperating protagonists who come right out of Bresson: the titular characters of Diary of a Country Priest (Journal d’un curé de campagne, 1951) and A Gentle Creature (Une Femme douce, 1969) are her cinematic forbears. 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 New Year’s, 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.

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 (which she had previously visited with Maxence) to enjoy 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 (are the two really so “separable”?). 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, as Félicié herself admits, and that moment of grace is reinforced once she is back in Paris by attending, with Loïc, a production of *The Winter’s Tale* (1611).

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 (in which the strictly Catholic Loïc said earlier he doesn’t believe, but the idea of which Félicié finds appealing), 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’s return, the return of her “sailor,” as Félicié calls him in what may be yet another reference to a play on a similar theme, Ibsen’s *Lady From the Sea* (1888). Actually, Charles is a chef, an appealing yet somehow different character, and we may assume that Félicié and Elise will be moving with him to Brittany, where he is set 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”; 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 favor 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 New Year’s all figure as well 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: 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.

As I suggested earlier, the cinematography of A Tale of Winter, by Luc Pagès, is nearly ascetic. There are no superficially inviting colors 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 (La femme de l’aviateur, 1980) and Full Moon in Paris (Les Nuits de la pleine lune, 1984). Accordingly, the actors have been chosen less for their own superficially inviting look—for the sake of facial contrast and harmony, if not allure—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. The saturnine Rohmer has inspired ease and confidence in his actors, and they in turn have given inspired performances of deceptively “daily” 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.

As for music, there isn’t much to speak of (only occasional piano strains) in this film that depends more on the music or 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 color 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 fall sun, or intense close-ups of melancholy faces in autumn rain, amidst 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 forty-five or so when the reality of winter, or the fact of mortality, first comes into view.

The film revolves around two friends: the friskily 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, a widowed mother of two grown children who runs a vineyard in the vicinity. 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, seeking a suitable suitor and presenting herself as her friend. When the courtly Gérald, a divorced businessman, responds, Isabelle interviews him extensively over several lunches before revealing to her dumbfounded date that she is merely acting as an unbidden liaison for someone else.

Complicating matters is the fact that the only other person to whom Magali feels close is Rosine, the girlfriend of her callow son, Léo. Magali feels that Rosine is too good for her own child, while Rosine says she loves Léo’s mother more than she loves him. But the two women do not, as a result, unite in a trendy lesbian love relationship: instead, the younger woman tries to fix the older one up with her ex-lover and former philosophy professor, the fortysomething Etienne. These two are no match, however, partly because Etienne is still smitten with Rosine in particular and younger ladies in general. He even heavily flirts with a new woman at the climactic wedding of Isabelle’s daughter—which is where he meets Magali for the first time and she is 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. So is she disappointed, it seems, for she not only flirts with Gérald at her daughter’s wedding, she also gives him something more than a friendly kiss—a kiss interrupted by a startled Magali. At the very end of *Autumn Tale*, though Magali and Gérald have made a date for the feast to celebrate the end of harvest season, 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 practicing 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 farceur, he does not let his flirtation with temptation slide into the banality of carnality. For Rohmer the Catholic, as opposed to Feydeau the amoralist, that 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 industrialization and technological advancement.

Design for Rohmer—the very power intelligently to conceive it—is a chief spiritual clarity, and chief 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, inspired characters of a kind not seen in farce, where single-minded, one-dimensional figures are ultimately dehumanized by their object pursuit of sensual gratification. (Thus does Rohmer marry, in *Tales of the Four Seasons*, Jansenist determinism to Kantian subjectivism.)

One way to approach the films of Eric Rohmer, in which assorted combinations of attractive, cultivated Europeans rearrange their lives amid much exquisitely verbalized 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 savored 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, not a sex, comedy, although to the
extent that Rohmer satirizes the modern French professional class, with its highly
civilized code of behavior, 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 realize, 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, unbeknownst 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.

She’s played with just the right amount of moodiness by Béatrice Romand, who
made her film début, at age fifteen, in Claire’s Knee and has since appeared in
several other Rohmer pictures, including The Green Ray. 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. 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 (à
la 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, respectively—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.

Robert J. Cardullo

**Bibliography of Books on the Films of Eric Rohmer**


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