The Films of Eric Rohmer
French New Wave to Old Master

Leah Anderst
The Films of Eric Rohmer
This page intentionally left blank
The Films of Eric Rohmer
French New Wave to Old Master

Edited by Leah Anderst
## Contents

List of Figures vii  
Acknowledgments ix  

Introduction 1  
*Leah Anderst*  

1 Eric Rohmer and Me 7  
*André Aciman*  

### PART I: Rohmer: Critic and Philosopher

2 Eric Rohmer and the Legacy of Cinematic Realism 23  
*Tom Gunning*  

3 Practicing What He Preaches? Continuities and Discontinuities in Rohmer's Early Film Criticism and His *Conte d’automne* 33  
*T. Jefferson Kline*  

4 *Ma Nuit chez Maud* and the Moral Imagination: Rhymes, Symmetries, and Variations on an Ethical Theme 49  
*Matthew Thorpe*  

### PART II: Narration, Frames, Genres

5 The Fall into Words: From *Contes des quatre saisons* to *L’Anglaise et le Duc* 65  
*Noël Herpe*  
*Translated by Timothy E. Wilson*  

6 Eric Rohmer’s Magnetic Fluid 73  
*Dudley Andrew*  

7 Imagination and Grace: Rohmer’s *Contes des quatre saisons* 89  
*Keith Tester*
8  Auteur Meets Genre: Rohmer and the Rom-Com
   Mary Harrod

PART III: Politics, Gender, and Class

9  Rohmer/Politics: From Royalism to Ecology
   Antoine de Baecque
   Translated by Nathalie Fouyer

10 On the Class Character of Desire: Romantic Heroics in the Contes moraux
    Derek Schilling

11 Rohmer’s Realism: Women on the Border of What Is and What Might Be
    Aimée Israel-Pelletier

PART IV: Architecture, Places, and Space

12 The Changing Landscape and Rohmer’s Temptation of Architecture
    Ivone Margulies

13 Walking in the City: Paris in the Films of Eric Rohmer
    Fiona Handyside

14 Rohmer’s Poetics of Placelessness
    Leah Anderst

PART V: Adapting History and Literature

15 Eric Rohmer, Historiographer
    Jerry W. Carlson

16 Eric Rohmer’s Talking Heads: Listening to the Classical Text in La Bruyère
    Mark Cohen

17 Triple Agent: Eric Rohmer and the Tumult of the Interwar Years
    Pierre Lethier

Notes on Contributors 243
Index 247
List of Figures

4.1 Maud (Françoise Fabian) and Jean-Louis (Jean-Louis Trintignant) 53
4.2 Françoise (Marie-Christine Barrault) and Jean-Louis (Jean-Louis Trintignant) 53
6.1 “Wife à la Degas” 80
6.2 “Mistress à la Ingres” 80
6.3 “Master of the Frame” 82
6.4 “Caught in a Frame” 82
8.1 The slightly melancholic Isabelle (Marie Rivière) in Conte d’automne (1998) 111
10.1 The hands of Jacqueline (Claudine Soubrier) and the law student (Barbet Schroeder) 137
10.2 Daniel (Daniel Pommereulle) and Adrien (Patrick Bauchau) 140
12.1 Peripheral Construction Site, El Dorado, in Métamorphoses 167
12.2 Métamorphoses, industrial materials montage 168
12.3 “The lowest degree of beings” in Contemplations 172
14.1 Sabine (Béatrice Romand) and Clarisse (Arielle Dombasle) walk the cobblestone streets, Le Beau mariage (1982) 197
16.1 La Bruyère reading Descartes 223
16.2 Perspectival drawing in La Bruyère 224
16.3 The King in the chapel in La Bruyère 225
Acknowledgments

This volume has benefited from the support of many people. I would like to thank firstly all of the writers who contributed their good work. André Aciman and Jerry W. Carlson, contributors to this book, shared their deep appreciation for this filmmaker in a team-taught graduate course on Rohmer’s films that I was so lucky to have taken. Other volume contributors have far surpassed the work normally expected of them, especially Derek Schilling, who offered his encouragement and feedback over several years. The volume could not have existed without him. Noël Herpe was also extremely supportive well above and beyond writing his own chapter, and his volume, *Rohmer et les autres* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007), has been an inspiration as well as a resource. Many friends and colleagues provided invaluable feedback and encouragement throughout this process: Kathleen Alves, Thomas Deneuville, Noelia Diaz, James Donahue, Kira Greene (who watched many Rohmer films with me), Jennifer Ho, Liz Levine, Shaun Morgan, Thomas Meacham, Ken Nielsen, Patrick Reilly, Jill Stevenson, Marion Wrenn, and Janine Utell. I owe thanks to The Modern Language Association at whose 2011 convention I hosted a screening and a panel on Rohmer’s films, this book’s germ. I am grateful to Laurent Schérer for granting permission for the portrait of Eric Rohmer on this book’s cover. Robyn Curtis and Erica Buchman of Palgrave have patiently assisted me, a first-time editor, in navigating the process of bringing this book to completion in its best possible form. And for his continuous and unwavering encouragement, I thank always Dane Patterson.
Introduction

Leah Anderst

Eric Rohmer's death at the age of 89 on January 11, 2010, prompted an immediate outpouring of tributes from a wide array of writers, artists, filmmakers, academics, cinephiles, and Francophiles from around the world. Scholars and critics have shown regular and enthusiastic interest in Rohmer’s films throughout his career. A classicist and a modernist, Rohmer’s films have long occupied a special place of favor, but his passing sparked renewed and urgent attention paid to his oeuvre and to his influence on future generations of filmmakers. For speakers of English, and American moviegoers in particular, Rohmer’s films seem to epitomize “French Cinema.” His characters talk and talk, analyzing their motivations and their relationships, and, often, nothing much seems to happen. While some may balk at just these qualities of his films (they’re so French!), for so many viewers, Rohmer’s cinema offers a unique opportunity to get a glimpse into a world where chance and coincidence seem, in fact, elegantly planned, where realism reigns, where characters scrutinize their own desires and negotiate their tentative relationships with one another, a tentativeness often concealed by talk.

A key figure of the New Wave, Rohmer served as the editor of the important review, Cahiers du cinéma from 1956 to 1963, crucial years that would influence the direction these critic-filmmakers, these “young Turks,” would take. Older than many of his peers at Cahiers by roughly a decade, Rohmer’s great successes in cinema arrived rather later in his life and career than some of his New Wave counterparts such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut. The apex of the movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s was already on the wane when Rohmer’s La Collectionneuse (1967) and Ma Nuit chez Maud (1969), from his series of six films, Contes moraux, brought him national and international acclaim. Many of his films since then continued to earn him important nominations and awards. And like many of his prolific New Wave contemporaries, in the 1980s and 1990s, Rohmer wrote and directed
at a pace of nearly one feature film per year, his output slowing somewhat in the 2000s, which saw three films released. So although his importance to the French New Wave cannot be underestimated, Rohmer’s influence as a filmmaker, critic, and thinker easily exceeds that movement.

This volume aims to explore the diversity of Rohmer’s works, with space given to his renowned essays and films, and an emphasis on new ways to frame and reframe his oeuvre. Many of the volume’s contributors revisit perennial Rohmerian topics in order to complicate or even upend existing readings and interpretations. Others turn to essays and films less frequently analyzed. The volume opens with “Eric Rohmer and Me,” an essay by André Aciman, who describes his introduction to Rohmer in the form of a solitary evening at the movies to see *Ma Nuit chez Maud*. The film presented the then 20-year-old Aciman with characters, coincidences, and conversations that seemed to closely mirror himself, his ways of thinking and perceiving, and his own recent experiences. The essay recounts his experience of reading the film through himself and himself through the film.

**Rohmer: Critic and Philosopher**

Rohmer wore many hats before he earned fame as a filmmaker, and several of the films produced throughout his career demonstrate his “extracinematic” interests. The volume’s first section features essays that focus on Rohmer’s film criticism and theory as well as the philosophical bent on display in his films. Tom Gunning’s “Eric Rohmer and the Legacy of Cinematic Realism,” revisits André Bazin’s theories through Rohmer’s own writings in order to complicate the traditional view of Bazinian realism. Rather than the indexicality of the photographic image, Rohmer’s assessment of Bazin’s theory places motion and time at the forefront of his mentor’s conception of cinematic realism. Continuing with this examination of Rohmer’s critical writing, T. Jefferson Kline’s essay “Practicing What He Preaches?” focuses on Rohmer’s earliest criticism, specifically articles and reviews he wrote for *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Arts* on filmmakers such as Bergman and Renoir and on topics including cinematic color and décor. Kline measures Rohmer’s later film *Conte d’automne* (1998) against the filmmaker’s early critical aesthetics, and he unearths fascinating connections between Rohmer’s critical and directorial impulses. Matthew Thorpe, in “*Ma Nuit chez Maud* and the Moral Imagination,” turns to the role of philosophy in film and whether film can “do philosophy.” Thorpe upends the reading of this film as an illustration of Pascal’s wager, seeing it, along with the other five *Contes moraux*, as variations on the “thick ethical concept” of self-deception. Thorpe suggests that it is precisely through this “thickness” he identifies, the fleshed-out realism and detail, that narrative fiction films “produce moral knowledge.”
Narration, Frames, Genres

The chapters included in the second section of the volume analyze a variety of Rohmer’s feature films with close attention paid to design, language, and framing. Noël Herpe’s “The Fall into Words” traces Rohmer’s tight control of his characters’ dialogues, with a focus on discourse that is finally insufficient, from the historical film *L’Anglaise et le Duc* (2001) back through the *Contes des quatre saisons*. Dudley Andrew’s “Eric Rohmer’s Magnetic Fluid” takes as its subject the multiple frames, both external and internal, of Rohmer’s *L’Amour l’après-midi* (1972), and he points to the paradoxical pairing of classical and modern influences on New Wave filmmakers. Chance and design—these seeming opposites are embraced simultaneously by Rohmer and others. Andrew reframes “classicism” from a Rohmerian perspective, a perspective that tilts the chance/design dichotomy more heavily toward design. Keith Tester’s “Imagination and Grace” revisits a topic long of interest to Rohmer’s viewers: the role played by the director’s professed Catholicism in his films. Rohmer’s *Contes moraux* have traditionally received the most attention from this angle, but Tester here examines the *Contes des quatre saisons* in light of the Catholic notion of grace. Tester demonstrates the ways that the heroines of these four tales either accept the “fissures” caused by grace in their lives or attempt to fill in those fissures with the power of their imagination. Mary Harrod analyzes two of Rohmer’s films, *Le Rayon vert* (1986) and *Conte d’automne* (1998), within the generic framework of romantic comedy, in “Auteur Meets Genre: Rohmer and the Rom-Com.” Harrod identifies a lack of critical attention to the rom-com aspects of Rohmer’s films, which are more often characterized as auteur-driven examples of “pure cinema.” Through the lens of genre, and rom-com specifically, Harrod resituates Rohmer’s films within their particular social context and with a focus on the ways they reflect romance and coupling practices.

Politics, Gender, and Class

Rohmer’s politics and the views on gender and class expressed by his films have prompted much discussion among his viewers and critics. Antoine de Baecque’s “Rohmer/Politics: From Royalism to Ecology” draws on materials recently made available from the filmmaker’s extensive archives—from letters, news and press clippings, interviews, and his published writings—to construct a fascinating narrative of Rohmer’s political life. Derek Schilling reconsiders prominent feminist criticisms of Rohmer’s first series of films in “On the Class Character of Desire: Romantic Heroics in the *Contes moraux*.” With Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” in mind, Schilling situates
Rohmerian desire in the series firmly within the class structures of the era. In Schilling’s estimation, the *Contes moraux* ironically critique some of the very biases with which Rohmer’s critics would charge him. Aimée Israel-Pelletier’s “Rohmer’s Realism: Women on the Border of What Is and What Might Be” looks closely at the unclassifiable or indescribable experiences and relationships between women in a number of Rohmer’s films. His women are often speechless in the face of important experiences; the failure of language in the face of such experiences, however, does not inhibit film, a medium with its own “vocabulary,” from realistically depicting their relationships. Israel-Pelletier links Rohmer’s conception of cinematic realism with just this ability: to show what language cannot.

**Architecture, Places, and Space**

Rohmer’s strong interest in architecture and space made itself apparent throughout his long career: he authored many essays and a book focusing on space, and he placed enormous emphasis on sets and filming locations. Ivone Margulies’s “The Changing Landscape and Rohmer’s Temptation of Architecture” looks closely at two of Rohmer’s early pedagogical films on landscape produced for educational broadcasting: *Méthamorphoses du paysage* (1964) and *Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations, livres V et VI* (1966). Margulies sees in these films representations of Rohmer’s “ambivalent relationship to modernity,” and she demonstrates an important link between architecture and cinema in Rohmer’s conception of aesthetics and of realism. In “Walking in the City: Paris in the Films of Eric Rohmer,” Fiona Handyside looks at Rohmer’s first feature film, *Le Signe de Lion* (1962), and at the first of his *Contes moraux, La Boulangère de Monceau* (1962), paying particular attention to the ways that Rohmer’s Paris films reconfigure the nineteenth-century *flâneur*. Handyside shows that Rohmer’s late-twentieth-century *flânerie* is characterized by fragmentation and is a good deal more purposeful and goal oriented than its counterpart from the previous century. My own contribution, “Rohmer’s Poetics of Placelessness,” begins with a focus on Rohmer’s writings on space, particularly his *The Organization of Space in Murnau’s Faust* (1972). The spatial vocabulary Rohmer deploys in his own films, his “poetics of placelessness,” closely mirrors his readings of Murnau. Rohmer’s many transient or liminal spaces—thresholds, commutes, and borrowed homes—taken as a whole across his oeuvre, are more than the realistic settings his preferred cinematic style calls for; they are metaphors for the psychic indecision and unsettledness of his characters.
Adapting History and Literature

Turning to Rohmer’s interest in history and literary adaptation, Jerry W. Carlson approaches Rohmer’s final three feature films as prime examples of the director’s perennial concern with representation and historiography, in his essay, “Eric Rohmer, Historiographer.” Reading Rohmer’s work alongside of “heritage” films and other historically minded cinema, Carlson finds strong evidence in L’Anglaise et le Duc, Triple Agent (2004), and Les Amours d’Astrée et de Céladon (2007) that “Rohmer [is] a historiographer of film rather than a historian on film.” As a feature filmmaker, Rohmer directed a number of well-known literary adaptations, including Die Marquise von O . . . (1976) and Perceval le Gallois (1978). Less well known, however, are the pedagogical adaptations he produced during his time in educational broadcasting. Mark Cohen takes a close look at one of these films in his chapter, “Eric Rohmer’s Talking Heads: Listening to the Classical Text in La Bruyère.” Cohen finds important connections between the focus and style of La Bruyère’s portraits of “characters” in seventeenth-century France with what will become Rohmer’s working methods and the themes that will recur across his cinematic oeuvre. Wrapping up the section and the volume, Pierre Lethier considers Rohmer’s Triple Agent as a counter to the consensus surrounding the presumed guilt of that film’s two historical protagonists, in his chapter, “Triple Agent: Eric Rohmer and the Tumult of the Interwar Years.” Lethier shows that Rohmer’s combination of archival materials and imaginative changes to the byzantine story of espionage between the wars points to the filmmaker’s suspicion not of the couple, but rather of the French police’s handling of the case and the amount of guilt ascribed to the wife of the “triple agent.”

This volume aims to cover much of Rohmer’s work, but it is by no means exhaustive. His vast output warrants much more than can be achieved by one book, and, as these essays demonstrate, Rohmer’s work thrives from just this renewed attention and from perspectives Rohmer himself did not anticipate. My hope is that these essays will inspire new viewers and readers as well as steadfast devotees to visit and revisit Eric Rohmer’s many writings and films.
This page intentionally left blank
CHAPTER 1

Eric Rohmer and Me

André Aciman

April 1971. I am 20 years old. My life is about to change. I don’t know it yet. But just a few more steps and something new, like a new wind, a new voice, a new way of thinking and seeing things will course through my life.

It’s a Thursday evening. I have no papers due tomorrow, no reading, no homework. I still have my daily ration of ancient Greek passages to translate, but I can always take care of these on the long subway ride to school. This, I realize, is another one of those very rare, liberating moments when I’ve got nothing hanging over me. I was right to leave work before dark today: it’s a perfect evening for a movie. Tonight, I want to see a French film. I want to hear French spoken. I miss French. I miss France. I would have preferred going to the movies with a girl, but I don’t have a girlfriend. There was someone, or the illusion of someone awhile back, but it never worked out, and then someone else came along, and that didn’t work either. Since then, I’ve grown to hate loneliness and, more than loneliness, the self-loathing it stirs up.

But tonight I am not unhappy. Nor am I in a rush to find a theater. After working all afternoon in a dingy machinery shop in Long Island City (where I was lucky to find a job because my boss is a German-Jewish refugee who likes to hire other displaced Jews), I want to hurry back to Manhattan, not to my home on a dark, sloping 97th Street, where the occasional roadkill reminds me that this modern megalopolis could just as easily be a giant culvert, but to the twilit avenues of Midtown, and the busy luster of their lights. They always remind me of J. Alden Weir’s spellbinding nocturnes of New York or Albert Marquet’s nights in Paris—not the real New York or the real Paris, but the idea of New York and Paris, which is the film, the mirage, the irrealis figment each artist projects onto his city to make it his, to make it
more habitable, to fall in love with it each time he paints it, and, by so doing, to let others imagine dwelling in his unreal city.

It is this illusory Manhattan, glazed over the real Manhattan, altered just enough to make me want to love it, that I see now. I like this sudden break from reality, this mini spell of freedom and silence at dusk that lets me feel that I belong in this bright-lit city. Its people going places after work lead exciting lives, and, because I’ve crossed theirs by stepping on the same sidewalks, their bracing vitality has rubbed off on me. There’s something refreshingly grown-up about leaving work without needing to rush home. I like feeling grown-up. This, I suppose, is what adults do when they stop at a bar or sit at a café after work. You find an uncharted moment in the day, and because it’s earmarked for nothing, you allow it to linger and distend and slow things down, till this insignificant moment, normally smuggled between sundown and nighttime becomes something from nothing, and this vague hiatus in the evening finally unfolds into a moment of grace that could stay with you tonight, tomorrow, for the rest of your life—as this moment will, though I don’t know it yet.

* * *

I don’t like going to theaters by myself. Always afraid people might see me, especially if I am alone and they are not. But tonight I feel different. I am not even thinking of myself as a lonely, unwanted, ill-at-ease young man. Tonight I am another 20-year-old with time on his hands, who, on a whim, decides to go to the movies and, seeing he has no one to go with, buys one ticket instead of two. Nothing to it. I’ll sit through this film for 15, 20 minutes. If it doesn’t do it for me, I’ll pick up and leave. Nothing to that either.

I wasn’t even planning to see My Night at Maud’s that night. There had been such a to-do about it, especially after it was nominated a year earlier for best foreign film at the Academy Awards, that I needed to let things die down, put distance between me and what others were all clamoring about. I was intrigued by what I’d read about the film, by the story of the practicing Catholic played by Jean-Louis Trintignant who, owing to a snowstorm, finds himself forced to spend the night in Maud’s home and, despite her disarming looks and unequivocal advances, refuses to have sex with her.

The movie theater on West 57th Street is nearly empty—this is the film’s last run in New York. I hear voices on-screen. I have no sense of how much of the film I’ve missed or if coming late might ruin it. The sudden disappointment of missing the beginning distracts me and gives the entire viewing an unreal, provisional feel, as though seeing it now doesn’t really count, might need to be corrected by a second viewing. I like the option of a second viewing
that is already implied in the first, the way I like to see places or hear tales told a second and a third time while I’m still experiencing them the first time—which is how I confront almost everything in life: as a dry run for the real thing to come. I’ll return, but this time with someone I love, and only then will the film matter and be real. This is how I went out on dates, answered job ads, picked my courses, made travel plans, found friends, sought out the new: with enthusiasm, sloth, and a touch of panic and reluctance—the whole occasionally bottled up in a brine of incipient resentment, perhaps disdain. Diffidence as an instance of desire. I withdraw before the real.

I lit a cigarette—in those days you could, and I always sat in the smoking section. I put my coat on the seat next to mine and begin drifting into the movie, because something about the film had already grabbed me. It has as much to do with the film itself as with me, the viewer. The twining of the two—the film and me—was not incidental, but in an uncanny, perhaps untenable way, essential to the film itself, as though who I am matters to the film. Everything happening in my very private life matters to the film. The ferment of lights in Midtown Manhattan suddenly matters, my longing to be in Paris instead of New York matters, the drab machinery shop I’d left behind in Long Island City, the passages I still needed to translate from the *Apology*, my misgivings about the girl I’d met at a party in Washington Heights more than a year earlier, down to the brand of cigarettes I was smoking and—let’s not forget—the prune Danish I had purchased on the fly to snack on, because something about prunes brings out a sheltered, Old World feel I still associate with my grandmother, who was living in Paris at the time and who loved France and kept summoning me back there because life in France, she’d say, gave every semblance of extending life she’d known before moving there—all these have, like unpaid extras, chipped in and are playing their small part in Eric Rohmer’s film.

The personal lexicon we bring to a film, or the way we misunderstand a novel because our minds drift off a page and fantasize about something superfluous, is our surest and most trusted reason for claiming it a masterpiece. The spontaneous decision to head to the movies tonight is now forever grafted onto *My Night at Maud’s*. Even walking halfway into the film has cast a strangely premonitory, retrospective meaning to this evening.

* * *

Jean-Louis, the protagonist of *My Night at Maud’s*, lives alone, likes living alone, though he’ll tell Maud in the film that he wishes to be married. His life has been crowded with many people, many diversions, and women; he welcomes his recent self-imposed reclusion, seemingly putting his personal life
on hold to take time out in Ceyrat, near Clermont-Ferrand in the Auvergne, where he works for Michelin. He is not sulking or brooding, just serenely withdrawn. No shame, no loneliness, no depression. This is not Dostoyevsky’s underground man or Kafka’s Joseph K. or, for that matter, yet another jittery, self-hating existential Frenchman. There is something so untormented, so cushy, so restorative in his desire to be left alone that I suspect what makes my own loneliness unbearable by contrast is not so much solitude itself as my failure to overcome it. This might ultimately be the most insidious fiction of the film: the airbrushing of loneliness until it seems entirely voluntary. There is a big difference between Jean-Louis and me. He is not being deprived of company; he can have it any time he wants. I cannot. He could be lying to himself, of course, and he could be wearing a mask and moving in a dollhouse world from which the director had managed to purge all vestige of anxiety and dejection, the way some eighteenth-century comedies ignore the realities of almshouses, suicide, syphilis, and crime. The world Jean-Louis steps into—and this world is made clear enough from the very first shot—is not the stark universe of action-driven films where people hurt, suffer, or die; instead, it is inhabited by a highly rarefied, elitist band of soft-spoken friends trying to figure out the meaning of conventional love with an unconventional mix of profound self-awareness and boundless self-delusion. There is no violence here, no poverty, no disease, no tragedy, no exchange of fluids, not even any abiding love or self-loathing; there are no drugs, no breakdowns, seldom any tears. Everything is whitewashed with irony, tact, and that perennial French gêne, which is the chilling sense of awkwardness and unease we all feel when we’re tempted to cross a line but are held back. Youth shirks off gêne, doesn’t accept it; grown-ups savor it, like an impromptu blush, the undertow of desire, the conscience of sex, a concession to social mores.

Jean-Louis and Maud are adults. They are versed in the affairs of the heart and in the sinuous course desire takes. They do not shun others; but they’re not compelled to seek them either. Rohmer’s men, as I was later to find out from his other Moral Tales, are all on a hiatus from what appear to be thoroughly fulfilling lives. Soon they’ll return to the real world and to their one love awaiting them there. The mini vacation in a villa on the Mediterranean in La Collectionneuse, the return to a family villa in Claire’s Knee, or the adulterous, afternoon fantasy world the husband dreams up in Chloé in the Afternoon—all these are interludes punctuated by women whom the male protagonist already knows he won’t really fall for.

Rohmer’s Moral Tales are nothing less than a series of what may be called unruffled psychological still lives.
To a 20-year-old, the 34-year-old Jean-Louis seemed old, wise, and thoroughly experienced. He has traveled to several continents, has loved and been loved, doesn’t mind loneliness, indeed, thrives on it. At 20, I had loved one woman only. And I am just that spring beginning to recover. The longing for her, the phone messages she never returned, the missed dates, her snub-nosed I’ve been busy, coupled with her evasive and dissembling I promise I won’t forget, and always my self-reproaches for not daring to tell her everything on the night I stood outside her building staring at her windows, wondering whether I should ring her buzzer, or the night I walked in the rain, because I needed an excuse to be out if she called, which she never did; our perfunctory kissing as we waited for the Broadway Local one evening; the afternoon I spent at her place when she changed her clothes in front of me, but I couldn’t bring myself to hold her because suddenly everything seemed unclear between us; and the afternoon many months later when we sat on her rug and spoke of that time when I’d failed to read her meaning as she took off her clothes, and, even after we had confided all this, I was still unable to bring myself to move, but fribbled our time together with oblique double-talk about an us we both knew was never going to be—all of these, like untold arrows driven into Saint Sebastian, remind me that if I’d never be able to forget loving the wrong girl, I should at least learn not to hate myself for it, because I also know that it is far easier to blame myself for not seizing the moment than to ask what had held me back.

Jean-Louis, like almost all of Rohmer’s men, had already been there and come out on the other side seemingly unscathed. This is the first time that I am even aware of another side. As bashful and tentative as I am, I see that there is still hope for me.

* * *

Early on we meet Jean-Louis in church. He is a devout Catholic. He is eyeing an attractive blond named Françoise. He has clearly never spoken to her before, but by the end of the sermon he decides that one day this woman will be his wife.

Nothing could sound more prescient or more deluded. But, once again, the braiding of foresight and delusion is typical of Rohmer. One feeds the other. Their collusion is not insignificant. The stars are aligned to our wishes or to what is best for us—but never as we thought.

Outside the church one day, Jean-Louis tries to follow Françoise but eventually loses track of her. A few days later, on the evening of December 21, he suddenly spots her on her motorbike but once again loses sight of her in the narrow, busy, Christmas-decorated streets of Clermont-Ferrand. On the
evening of December 23, he is strolling about town in the hope of running into her.

And of course he will run into her. But not just yet.

He will, however, bump into someone else: his friend Vidal, whom he hasn’t seen since their student days. In a café that night, the men begin talking, of all things, about chance encounters and, of all authors, about Pascal, the writer most associated with chance, hasard, and, as chance would still have it, the very author whom Jean-Louis had been reading. Coincidence thrice removed.

These multi-tiered coincidences beguile me and won’t let go of me and keep insisting that a greater design is at work here, as though the convergence of so many coincidences, however farfetched, underwrites the whole film, and that this conversation between the two men about coincidence is merely a prelude, a tuning of the instruments for things to come in the bedroom scene everyone has been talking about. The confluence of three hasards in the film, added to my own hasard in happening to be seeing this and not any other film tonight, plus the creeping realization that there is something uncannily personal each time I apprehend anything occurring on multiple removes; all these don’t just stir me intellectually but in some inexplicable manner ignite an aesthetic, near-erotic charge, as if everything in Rohmer has to come back to sex, but only obliquely and ethereally, the way everything about Rohmer has to come back to my life as well, but in an oblique and ethereal manner, because multiple removes keep reminding me that I too like lifting the veil and looking under things, denuding one alleged truth after the other, layer after layer, deceit after deceit, because unless something wears a veil, I will not see it, because unless something is partially derealized, it cannot be real, because what I loved above everything else is not necessarily the truth, but its surrogate, insight, because unlike truth, insight comes from me—insight into people, into things, into the machinery of life itself—because insight goes after the deeper, hidden truth, because insight is insidious and steals into the soul of things, because I myself was made of multiple removes and had more slippages than a mere, straightforward presence, because I liked to see that the world was made in my own image, in shifty layers that flirt and then give you the slip, that ask to be excavated but never hold still, because I and Rohmer and his characters are like drifters with many forwarding addresses but never a home, many selves folded together—selves we’d sloughed off, some we couldn’t outgrow, others we still longed to be—but never one identifiable identity.

* * *
So here are the two men: I am here, says one, and you are there, says the other, and between us there’s time, space, and a strange design, which, to some is no design at all but to us, proof we’re onto something whose meaning nevertheless eludes us.

It is the search and the possible discovery of an undisclosed design in their lives that suddenly enchants me, because everything in Rohmer is about design, which is another of way of saying that everything is ultimately about form. Form is the imposition of design. In the absence of God, in the absence of identity, in the absence of love even, is design—perhaps even the illusion of design; but form is how we reason with chaos and make sense of the nonsense around us.

The world teems with coincidences. Chance meetings, chance sightings, chance insights. In fact, change is all there is. In Rohmer, however, there is an algorithm to chance—or at least the search for such an algorithm—just as there might be a logic to happenstance. This logic is not to be found outside the film, or even in the film. It is the film. Form is the algorithm. Form, like art, is seldom about life, or not quite about life. Form is both the search and the discovery of design.

The plot of My Night at Maud’s screams the design of symmetrical reversal, what Pascal most likely also meant by his renversement perpétuel. Jean-Louis has his eyes on the blond Françoise, a seemingly virtuous churchgoer. Meanwhile, he meets Maud, the brunette, a typical temptress who wishes to sleep with him but whom he manages to resist. He spends a whole night in her bed wrapped in a blanket as in a metaphorical chastity belt. However, the morning after leaving her apartment, Jean-Louis spots Françoise on the street and does something he claims he’s never done before with a stranger on the street: he boldly walks up to her and confesses that he has never spoken to a stranger before.

As with Maud, he will end up sleeping under Françoise’s roof, but not with her. He does indeed marry Françoise, only to discover, completely by chance, when he and Françoise run into Maud at a beach five years later, that his wife had been the mistress of none other than Maud’s husband. In fact, Françoise may be the cause of Maud’s divorce.

At the beach, Jean-Louis is about to confide to his wife that nothing has happened between him and Maud. But before telling her this, he realizes in a flash of insight that what seems to disturb Françoise at that very moment is not that he and Maud might have been lovers. It is something else—and the symmetrical reversal and double remove here couldn’t be more stylized. He looks at his wife and realizes that she is just then inferring what he himself was just inferring about her. Nothing is ever stated in the film, but the
inference is clear enough. Françoise and Maud have slept with the same man, and that man is Maud’s husband. Jean-Louis tells his wife that Maud was his final fling, but he asks nothing of her and, by so doing, saves face for her. In life, their pairing is simply reversed; in art it is corrected.

* * *

If Rohmer has frequently been “accused” of being literary, it is not just because his screenplays are extraordinarily well written; it is because he always wagers that the key to the psyche, like the key to every accident in our lives, can be found only in fiction, and this because fiction, and more broadly art, is the only instrument with which to capture however tentatively the demon of design. The thought that there may be no design instead of some design is aesthetically unacceptable.

Sitting together at the café, Jean-Louis and Vidal, like almost all characters in Rohmer’s films, derive a peculiar, self-conscious thrill in finding themselves eagerly discussing the very thing that is right this minute happening to them. Is there a meaning to our meeting, or is it just luck? Since there is no way to answer such a question, one has to wager—Pascal again—that there must be a meaning behind coincidence, if not in conventional, ordinary life, then at least in the conventions of art. How dear are those moments when we suddenly perceive in a series of accidents something like an omniscient intelligence deploying—or, as Proust likes to say, organizing—one by one the events of our lives, such that it is not just their alignment that strikes us but their resonance, the specter of meaning. What can be better for those who are loath to exercise their will than to espy in real, day-to-day, humdrum, desultory life the light touch of the great artificer himself framing our lives according to the covenants of art? They happen once or twice in a lifetime—such miracles.

But the discovery that form is a way of attributing meaning to coincidence is sidelined by another discovery: namely, that this ability to move on multiple removes—to discuss the act of discussing—is itself meaningful and becomes unbearably erotic when transposed to the boudoir. And this is exactly what happens about 20 minutes later between Jean-Louis and Maud. This kind of candor and this kind of self-conscious thinking and lifting of layers could only end up in a bedroom. It isn’t even candor, though it bears all the inflections of candor: at once very frank and intimate, spoken with the confiding grace with which people open up to each other, all the while maintaining a guarded distance. They analyze and overanalyze each nuance of desire and discomfort and then turn around and confide this to the very
person who is stirring these feelings of desire and discomfort. They might as well be flirting. In every spoken truth lies the inscription of artifice, the intrusions of craft in our most spontaneous avowals. *Tell all the truth but tell it slant—success in circuit lies.* Emily Dickinson. I had never seen things this way. Nor had I ever spoken about desire while I was prey to it. Watching Jean-Louis and Maud think aloud about themselves and speak ever so eloquently about love on their one, snowbound night together, I am reminded that insight is at its very core erotic, almost prurient, and that speech can give voice to passion, without dispelling or intruding on it.

* * *

Left together, and yet clearly ill at ease, Maud and Jean-Louis continue to talk. While she is under the covers, he leans over and sits on her bed, fully clothed in his double-breasted gray flannel suit and, in a moment of silence that is as uncomfortable to Maud as it is to the spectator, stares intensely at her while she returns his gaze, the two of them at a loss for words and yet already unburdening themselves to each other. She tells him of her life, of her ex-husband who had been unfaithful, of her lover who died in a car crash, of her terrible luck with men; he paints a broad picture of love affairs in the past, but far more cagily—Maud will later call him *cachottier* (secretive). They discuss his conversion to Catholicism, his avoidance of light sexual affairs, his desire, as she sees it, to marry a blond woman, since, in her prescient view, all pious, Catholic women are necessarily blonds. Then, as they stare at each other, Maud, in an unhinged moment, says: “It’s been ages since I’ve spoken like this to anyone. It’s good for me.”

In the makeshift boudoir, Jean-Louis and Maud are analytical in a situation that is unbearably intimate and in which most people would let their senses take over. But analysis is not allowed to slip into hasty sensuality. Here the mild *gêne* and the occasional lapses into total silence are so intense and so disarming—one is tempted to say denuding—that *gêne* and silence, more than the bed itself, keep stoking at the hovering sensuality of the moment.

The senses cannot deflect analysis; they become analytical. Passion in this instance, as is more often the case than people admit, is not really the end but the cover, the pretext; physical contact often buries the tension between two individuals who cannot stand either tacit ambiguity or the rising awkwardness between them. In some cases, it is speech that is spontaneous, not passion: speech undresses us; passion can be a cloaking device. This, as would become the hallmark of so many of Rohmer’s films, is not just using talk to attenuate or defer sex. It is, rather, a desire to find the
sort of intimacy that sex, allegedly the most intimate act between two indi-
viduals, hastily cheats us of by sidestepping intimacy altogether. In Rohmer's
universe, passion is nothing more than a desired blindfold that allows us to
work around the unbearable moment when we are forced to disclose who we
are and what we want.

But at some point, and as though to undo all these layers of analysis,
conversation, and subterfuge, Maud will stare at Jean-Louis and sum up his
entire behavior that night with one word: “Idiot.”

* * *

While watching the film, and feeling the growing discomfort of the two
would-be lovers stuck in the same bedroom, I am thinking of the girl from
Washington Heights. One night a year earlier, I had taken her to Central
Park, right by Bethesda Fountain, and begun making out with her. How su-
ddenly it had all happened: her call, the Paris Cinema on 58th Street, getting
a bite to eat in some unnamed place then heading through the park until we
reached 72nd Street. All of it so unplanned, as if life itself had taken things in
its own hand and told me not to intrude, don’t even think of meddling, every-
thing is taken care of. Two policemen walked up to us and told us that the
park was closed to lovers. There was a snigger in their voices, while I thought
to myself, So we’re lovers now, fancy that! We joked with the officers until we’d
walked out of the Women’s Gate on West 72nd and then headed uptown on
the CC train to Washington Heights. When we reached her home, she asked
me to come upstairs. So I hadn’t misread the signals at all this evening. She
put some water to boil to make instant coffee, and we began to kiss on the
sofa, then on the rug where months earlier we’d had our long conversation
about the cue I’d missed the year before. We kept speaking about that until,
during a pause in our conversation, she told me that her mother might wake
up in the room right next to the living room. Not to worry, I said, we weren’t
making noise. But after a pause, she said that perhaps I should start heading
home, it was getting late. So she’d changed her mind, I thought on my way
to the subway station that night. Only then did it hit me: I had hesitated. I
had wanted to resolve the mystery of the afternoon when she’d taken off her
clothes in front of me, I had wanted to resolve the past, to speak not just
freely but intelligently about that day or about the party where we’d first met,
wanted so many things that were obviously not scripted for tonight. Without
knowing it yet, what I’d wanted was a Rohmerian moment—that magical
span when a man and a woman, unwilling to rush things to where both know
they are headed, heed another impulse: to distend their chance encounter,