

TEN SHORT THOUGHTS ABOUT ERIC ROHMER

*Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,
And daffodillies fill their cups with tears,
To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.*

John Milton, Lycidas

Eric Rohmer passed away on 11 January 2010, possibly to a better life, although it is hard to imagine that it could be sweeter than the one he conceived on earth. His mind was on one thing: cinema, first as a critic, then as a maker of short films, then in television, and most superbly in feature films, 25 in all. He is a favourite film-maker of mine, and although there has been a gratifyingly wide coverage of his death in the press, his achievements I believe remain underrated. The standard charge against him is that the films merge into one another, making them hard to distinguish. I can see Rohmer may not be to your taste, but let us give him more credit than that. Here's how:

1 The total body of his film work makes a remarkable archive of what France in the second half of the 20th century looked like, what people wore, how they talked. Because they are made, like impressionist paintings, *en plein air*, there are subtle rewards to be had in ignoring what the characters say and in concentrating on what you are seeing.

2 He is the master of the everyday: in *Quatre Aventures de Reinette and Mirabelle*, Reinette teaches Mirabelle how to mend a bicycle puncture – or is it the other way round, Mirabelle teaching Reinette? Whoever, the film subtly depicts how a friendship between two strangers can be formed over such a trivial matter. This makes for a truly delicate and delicious scene.

3 His first feature, *Le Signe de Léo*, is usually written off as an aberration. What a misjudgement. This is a film about life on the Left Bank, life out-of-doors, the role of chance, a worthy companion to Bresson's later *Quatre Nuits d'un rêveur* and *Le Diable probablement*. Above all it is a documentary of Paris. It starts with a *bâteau mouche* and the Île de la Cité, traverses Paris from the Place de l'Opéra to the Pont de Neuilly, to a Nanterre backstreet in the *zone* before the construction of La Défense obliterated it, then back by the Arc de Triomphe, down the Champs Elysées, to the Jardin du Vert-Galant, on the *quais* under Notre Dame. It ends on the pavement outside the café 'Aux Deux Magots', and the final shot is a vertical pan up the Church of St Germain des Près at night. This is topographical cinema far beyond what Balzac was able to achieve.

4 His films chronicle the creative polarity between Paris and the countryside which is such a key element in the French psyche. Again, only Bresson has done so in a comparable fashion.

5 In an ideological world, his guiltless praise of *la vie bourgeoise*, of how many French people actually live or aspire to live, is especially seductive. His characters are identified not by what jobs they have or by what they earn, but by what they wear, what places they go to, by what they think about life, and by how they express that thought. Rohmer does not just show all this, he revels in it.

6 The films capture admirably the insularity of France, the country's provinciality in a cosmopolitan world. When in *Le Rayon Vert* Delphine is seeking a satisfying holiday, she goes first to the Cherbourg peninsula, then to the French Alps, and finally to Biarritz, in other words the three corners of the world. It does not occur to her to go to Tuscany, to hop across the Channel, to enjoy the Black Forest in Germany. What a perfect example of French exceptionalism.

7 I was astonished by *L'Anglaise et le Duc*, not just the spectacle of an Englishwoman for its heroine, but by its notion that the Citizens' Committees of the French Revolution were villainous and terrifying. Here at last was a French film-maker speaking the truth about violent revolution.

8 I believe that Rohmer is the true inheritor of Rossellini – much more so than the other French New Wave directors – in his devotion to the wonder of everyday life, to his humanism. If he was a believing Catholic, it doesn't easily show (except to weave fancily around Pascal in *Ma Nuit chez Maud*), but then the films are remarkably free of any ideological positioning. His art is the comedy of manners, the exquisite delusions which afflict all human beings, and the comforting redemptions brought about by self-knowledge. When watching a Rohmer film I often used to think of Virgil's 'Eclogues': Damia loves Lycidas who loves Phyllis, the utter inconsequentiality being rescued by the delicacy of art. His stories do not grow out of his own experience but from his sweet imagining, his love of classicizing.

9 The link to Impressionism is reinforced by Rohmer's preoccupation with colour. In an essay of 1987 'Les Citations Picturales dans les *Contes Moraux* et les *Comédies et Proverbes*' he writes of the latter series, that each film needed three colours:

- *Femme de l'aviateur*: a green background with yellow and blue
- *Le Beau Mariage*: a chestnut (*marron*) background with an orange-coloured strip and a pink strip
- *Pauline à la plage*: a blue background with a white strip and a red strip
- *Les Nuits de la pleine lune*: a black background with grey, yellow, green, red, blue, all in little touches.

And so on. [The full essay is in 'Pauline à la plage' by Carole Desbarats (Editions Yellow Now 1990).]

10 So we come to his last film, *Les Amours d'Astrée et de Celadon*, the authenticating signature to the vast canvas that his other films constitute. I call it 'swains in a swoon' and indeed they address each other as 'belle bergère' and 'belle nymphe'. Besides Celadon and Astrée, there are *tous les copains* - Phyllis, Léonide, Galathée, even Lycidas. The Virgilian connection I had long been making was amply confirmed.

Their sentiments towards each other are expressed in courtly language. We may be in rude fifth-century Gaul, but they dress like the shepherds and shepherdesses of Renaissance painting. This is pastoral in its fairest face, where kisses are innocent, where the emotion of revenge never enters their heads, where young love is sanctified both by elders and the Druidical church, where there are no sheep to hassle the shepherds, where the nobles wear taffeta, and the garments of the rustics are only a notch down. When we are told that Celadon's father Alcippe "smote the mighty Visigoths" a vision of Astérix, of Obélix swims into the mind. Instead, Alcippe presides at the feast, an embodiment of Merrie France, a distillation of Gallic courtesy, charm and gentleness. To this mix add the potently erotic tale of Celadon cross-dressing as the chief Druid's daughter Alexie, the pontiff himself being complicit in this plan, and you have something quintessentially French, and Rohmer's sublimest poem in praise of his country. His life may only have been 89 years long, but his cinema will rescue us from barbarity for centuries.

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