

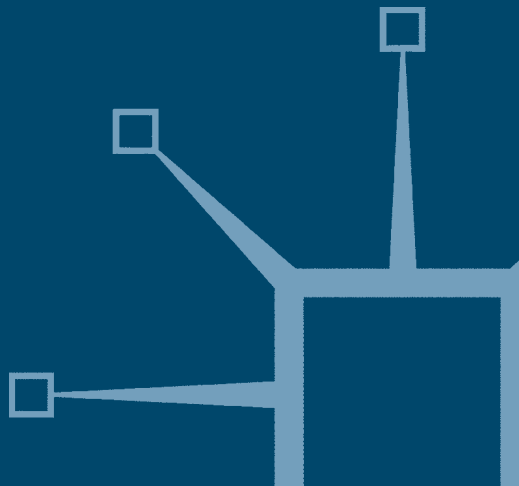
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# Eric Rohmer

Film as Theology

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Keith Tester



Eric Rohmer

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# Eric Rohmer

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2008 978-1-4039-9659-6

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First published 2008 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-1-349-54546-9      ISBN 978-0-230-58204-0 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1057/9780230582040

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

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# Acknowledgements and Note

This book has had a long gestation, and I am extremely grateful to the various friends and colleagues who supported and encouraged me through the process of writing it. Jill Lake at Palgrave was kind enough to take the project on, and Zygmunt Bauman has been enthusiastic and gently prodding since he first became aware of my love/obsession for things Rohmerian. Linda Rutherford and Maddy Tester lived with humour and good grace through an obsession that sometimes became a little too obsessive. I would also like to thank Kieran Flanagan, Sophia Marshman and Father Ian Vane for the good counsel and good humour with which they dealt with my requests for advice.

*Todo lo llenas tú, todo lo llenas*

Throughout this book, I have given the *English* translations of the titles of Rohmer's films. It seemed a little too mannered to keep to the French, given that the rest of the text is in English and given that the book is aimed at an audience beyond film studies. This use of English translations means that I have deliberately avoided the different titles that have been given to three of the films in America. This is because the *American* titles are less accurate translations and, more significantly, too directive about the film itself. The English and American titles are all the same except for:

French title	English title	American title
<i>L'Amour l'après midi</i>	<i>Love in the Afternoon</i>	<i>Chloe in the Afternoon</i>
<i>Le Rayon vert</i>	<i>The Green Ray</i>	<i>Summer</i>
<i>L'Ami de mon amie</i>	<i>My Girlfriend's Boyfriend</i>	<i>Girlfriends and Boyfriends</i>

# Introduction

Film ... teaches us to see  
Eric Rohmer

Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer  
Simone Weil

Eric Rohmer is one of the most important figures associated with the French New Wave that transformed cinema in the 1950s and 1960s. Although less celebrated than the likes of Godard and Truffaut, he has been an influential figure as a critic, film theorist and, most importantly, film-maker. His all-round contribution to cinema was recognised in 2001 when he was given a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Venice Film Festival. Indeed, Rohmer's strategy of making films in series, the six *Moral Tales* from 1962–72, the six *Comedies and Proverbs* of the period 1981–7 and the four *Tales of the Four Seasons* of 1990–8, has been taken to be an inspiration for the decision of the more feted Kieslowski to organise the *Three Colours* trilogy (Andrew 1998; Grey 2001). Kieslowski said that he liked Rohmer's work, although before the late 1980s he was not aware that by then Rohmer had made two series of films (Kieslowski in Insdorf 1999: 84). Rohmer has also made four full-length feature films that are similar in style to those in the series, although they do not fit in with any of them (*The Sign of Leo*, 1959; *Four Adventures of Reinette and Mirabelle*, 1986; *The Tree, the Mayor and the Mediacentre*, 1993; *Rendezvous in Paris*, 1995). They might be considered *occasional*, but they remain important in Rohmer's *oeuvre*.

All of these films – serial and occasional alike – are so distinctive that one commentator has identified an 'Eric Rohmer territory' which is characterised by 'Delicately stated emotional undercurrents, misdirected



erotic attachments, articulate, civilised dialogue, and a strong sense of place' (Kemp 2004: 42). They are situated in the old quarters of French cities such as Le Mans, Nevers, Paris (although Rohmer usually avoids Haussmann's Paris, what Walter Benjamin called the 'capital of the nineteenth century'), *la banlieue* and holiday resorts. The films frequently emphasise travel by train, and in cars that are very often driven by women. A broad social context is quite absent from Rohmer's work that is set in the present. He concentrates on 'micro-social structures' such as partner relationships, co-habiting families, small groups on holiday and friendship networks (Durgnat 1990: 187). The films pay no attention to abstract social institutions or structures.

Although the cinematic style of the films has changed over the years (but little since the early 1970s), it is possible to identify common characteristics among them. For the most part the films consist of carefully composed long-takes shot by cameras that are at, or slightly below, the eye-level of a standing person who is not herself or himself involved in the action. The camera is *watching* and, by extension, so is the audience. 'Rohmer never indulges in "humanly" impossible shots ... This is almost a moral principle for him. His camera angles always have the point of view and are at the height of the human eye' (Almendros 1984: 159). The principle is maintained even in dolly shots when the camera moves to track a person walking, or to suggest the visual scanning of a field on the part of a character (for instance, the scanning of a beach in 1996's *A Summer's Tale*). When filming takes place in cars, it is invariably from the point of view of a back-seat passenger, and in trains from that of a passenger seated near – but not next to – the characters. The scenes have a deep focus (but not a deep staging), so that what is seen on the screen is immediately and obviously comparable with what we see through our own eyes as we look at the world around us. There is a general avoidance of reverse-angle shooting, and a total avoidance of montage and jump cuts. Rohmer's *mise en scène* has deliberate commonsense validity. There are very few close-ups or focus pulls, and all the time a gap is maintained between the viewer and the viewed. This is a *cinema of observation*; observation by the film-maker and of the film-maker's production by the audience. But the audience is all the time encouraged to *engage* with the film, because the deep focus and long takes create the space and time in which choices can – and have to – be made about precisely what is going to be observed, and whether it will be remembered. A fine example of this can be seen towards the beginning of *The Tree, the Mayor and the Mediacentre*, where a foreground conversation in the Brasserie Lipp rather seems to be much less intriguing

than one in the background between a young man and woman. Rohmer has confined his more overt directorial fancies to a series of extraordinary period films which are, by contrast, extremely artificial and draw on the devices of painting and newsreel in order to set the stage in which the characters move and, perhaps most noticeably, *speak* (*The Marquise of O*, 1975; *Perceval*, 1978; *The Lady and the Duke*, 2001; *Triple Agent*, 2004; *Romance of Astrée and Céladon*, 2007).

The 'territory' of Rohmer's films is not just spatial or stylistic, however. It is also thematic. Rohmer's work concentrates relentlessly on the confusions and self-deceptions of young(ish) educated men and women who have realised that 'Real life is always unreal, always impossible, in the midst of empirical life' (Lukács 1974: 153). In the films that are set in the present, this theme is for the most part explored through stories about love and, in particular, the desires of men and women, and the mistakes and delusions into which they allow themselves blithely to fall (two of the more poignant explorations of this theme are *A Good Marriage* of 1982 and *Full Moon in Paris* of 1984). This is desire as *wanting*, or perhaps even as a *request* that is made to an other, as opposed to desire as eroticism and sexual activity. It is love as *petition* to the other, a love through which possibilities beyond the empirical might be seen if the characters have the sight and disposition so to see. The period films meanwhile examine the problem of how the empirical is transformed into the 'real', through examinations of what can only be called catastrophic events.

Although Rohmer emerged in the context of the French New Wave, it is perhaps best to say that he was *with* it, but not *of* it, even though he published widely in – and between 1958 and 1963 was co-editor of – *Cahiers du cinéma*, the 'house journal' of the movement (Neupert 2002). Rohmer himself has been more likely to stress the differences rather than similarities between his own work and that of his New Wave colleagues (Calhoun 2003). Indeed, even the most superficial comparison of any film by Rohmer with anything by Truffaut or Godard shows that his 'style bears little resemblance to that of the New Wave film-makers. Where they deliberately intruded themselves into their works, he maintained a sober detachment' (Showalter 1993: 3). The difference between Rohmer and other New Wave figures became clear through the 1960s, and by the 1990s the gap was even wider. For example, in 1957 Rohmer had written a book with Claude Chabrol in which they were able to express shared views about Alfred Hitchcock (Rohmer & Chabrol 1979; for background on the book, see Vest 2004). In 1994 Chabrol released *L'Enfer*, a Hitchcockian study of marital jealousy and paranoia, featuring

the then-new star of French cinema, Emmanuelle Béart (Austin 2003). Chabrol drew on controlled stylistic moves and a powerful narrative thrust to unsettle the relationship between the audience and the film. A year later Rohmer released *Rendezvous in Paris*, which contains three unconnected episodes (they cannot really be called 'stories') about the dreams and deceptions of characters in potentially romantic trysts set in Parisian markets, parks and an art gallery. For the most part, Rohmer's actors were amateurs, and certainly none of them have become big stars in the way of Béart. He has often used untrained actors in his films, and it is only when they forget to maintain the pretence that they are not being filmed and glance directly at the camera that the carefully maintained distance between the viewers and the viewed comes anywhere near to collapse (for more on Rohmer's use of amateur actors, see Monaco 1976: 301–2). Where Chabrol's film builds up an extraordinary measure of tension through directorial artifice, Rohmer's relies on the deeply focused and continuously edited filming of meandering characters in order to take the audience on a little journey that ends with a question mark. Chabrol seeks to excite and raise anxiety, while Rohmer is more concerned to observe and raise a wistful smile of recognition.

Why the difference? Perhaps it is a matter of age. When the New Wave took form in the 1950s, it was motivated in no small part by the struggle of a new generation of film-makers to carve a space for themselves through a repudiation of everything that their cinematic fathers were taken to be standing for. This is clearest of all in the work of Truffaut, where there is a deliberate and breathtaking emancipation of film from the shackles of convention. The new directors had all been born in the 1930s and consequently started to make films before they were 30. Rohmer was around a decade their senior; he did not finish his first feature film until 1959, and it was not a success. *The Sign of Leo* was not released until 1962, and only 5000 viewers watched it (Crisp 1988: 27; the film was produced by Chabrol). In terms of age at least, Rohmer was closer to the fathers the New Wave sought to kill, than to the killers themselves.

But as soon as an attempt is made to say exactly how much older Rohmer was, interesting problems begin. There is a degree of confusion about exactly when Rohmer was born: 'He was born at Nancy on 4 April 1923 ... or on 1 December 1920 ... or on 4 April' (Monaco 1976: 286). In his book about Rohmer, C.G. Crisp is confident that the birthdate is 4 April 1920 (1988: 14), but Showalter shows that such confidence might be misplaced. He lists the alternative birthdates that have been given: 4 April 1920, 21 March 1920, 1 December 1920 and 4 April 1923.

Moreover, Rohmer might have been born in Tulle rather than in Nancy (Showalter 1993: 29). At least the weighting of the list of birthdates makes it look as if he was born in 1920. But even that minimal level of confidence gets shaken as soon as a little investigation is carried out. When an interviewer asked Rohmer the simple question, 'where and when were you born?' the answer was splendidly confusing: 'What I say most often – and I don't want to stake my life that it's true – is that I was born at Nancy on April 4, 1923. Sometimes I give other dates, but if you use that one you'll be in agreement with other biographies. It was certainly 1923' (Rohmer in Petrie 1971: 34). The confusion gets worse because the name 'Eric Rohmer' is a pseudonym for Maurice Schérer (Crisp 1988: 1), or for Jean-Marie Maurice Schérer, and his parents were Lucien Schérer and Mathilde Bucher, or they could have been Désiré Schérer and Jeanne Monzat (Showalter 1993: 28). He is generally credited with having published a novel in 1946 under another name, Gilbert Cordier (Davis 1971: 38; Showalter 1993: 30), but when questioned about it in an interview in the early 1970s he replied, 'I have never written a novel. It must be a mistake; as you know, this publicity material is full of mistakes' (Rohmer in Chase & Fieden 1972: 20). However, it ought to be noted that in 2005 a German language novel called *Elisabeth*, that is identical to the one that had been originally credited to Gilbert Cordier, was republished with the author's name being given as 'Eric Rohmer'. The book contains a brief interview in which Rohmer accepts responsibility for the work (Rohmer 2005; but still it could be argued that up to the time of that republication Eric Rohmer had not in fact been the author of a novel). The name 'Eric Rohmer' first appeared in 1950 (Showalter 1993: 30), and has been used more or less exclusively as his public signature since October 1954 (Crisp 1988: 16). The name was chosen either as a homage to Erich von Stroheim and Sax Rohmer, who wrote the Fu Manchu mysteries (Jeffries 2004; Wiegand 2001: 9), or for no reason at all: 'It was a name I chose just like that, for no particular reason, only because I liked it' (Rohmer in Davis 1971: 38). Holding his head in his hands and groaning, he told C.G. Crisp that the name 'Eric Rohmer' was chosen for 'personal reasons'. Crisp suggests that these 'reasons' were a desire to hide the fact that he was a film-maker from his mother, who evidently thought that her son was the school teacher he had trained to be (Crisp 1988: 16). However, in 2007, Rohmer gave an interview in which the mysteries surrounding his name were clarified, and very simply. He pointed out that Eric Rohmer is more or less an anagram of Maurice Schérer (Rohmer 2007).

There can be little doubt that all of this confusion betrays the presence of a mischief-maker. The man who is known as Eric Rohmer is quite deliberately creating a web of confusion. It carries on with the intrigues and plots which feature in the novels of one of his favourite writers, Balzac (Rohmer 1989: 18), and often in his films (for example, *An Autumn Tale* of 1998). He has said of Balzac that 'I would give up pages of some more rigorous prose writer, or a line of verse by the most celebrated poet, for just one of his master strokes' (Rohmer in Williams 1980: 62). Yet there is good reason to believe that something much more significant than game-playing is also going on when Rohmer creates confusion. This is not *just* mischief; it is also a deliberate and quite conscious attempt to make sure that the body of work stands independently of, and is invested with greater value than, the body of the film-maker. It has been pointed out that even as the films appear at festivals (and frequently win prizes), Rohmer himself rarely attends. In 1971 it was said that 'He never signs manifestos or petitions, belongs to no clique or coterie, refuses to own a car or install a telephone, and sends back letters that reach his home with "addressee unknown"' (Davis 1971: 38). Indeed, according to one anecdote, when he was asked to provide a photograph for a biographical dictionary of the New Wave, Rohmer submitted the worst one he could find: 'It's important that people should realize what a boring person I am', he said (Crisp 1988: 16). This is consistent with Crisp's suggestion that the introduction of the pseudonym 'Eric Rohmer' reflects 'the need to efface himself, control his sensuality and deny any world aspirations' (Crisp 1977: 13; Rohmer's self-effacement is discussed through the prism of *Triple Agent* in Tracz 2005). In this way it is hard not to see a current to Rohmer that flows out from Balzac's *Père Goriot*, a novel in which public identities are masks and in which no one is entirely what they seem. They hide their selves so that their public presence as a *work* might be accomplished and successful without giving away, or being dependent upon, private secrets. (Rohmer has commented on this one of Balzac's works; Rohmer in Williams 1980: 62. But of course there is a difference because Balzac's characters for the most part are obsessed with 'world aspirations'.)

*'Rohmer territory' is distinct from 'Eric Rohmer' (whoever he is), and this book is about the former not the latter.* The key to unlocking 'Rohmer territory' is its *realist* commitment. Consequently, this Introduction seeks to provide a way into the 'territory', first of all by establishing the meaning of realism for Rohmer. Themes from that discussion are pursued, and the narrative proceeds to contend that Rohmer's is a realism of a very specific sort. It is a realism that is indebted to, and which

reflects, a distinctive Catholic theology. By way of pulling the discussion together and establishing a framework for the rest of the book, it is argued that Rohmer's films stress the significance of theological *grace* to the processes and understandings of empirical life. The sociologist Kieran Flanagan has made the point that 'Grace lies outside the realm of the social, but yet is embodied in it ... Often manifestations of grace are noted within the social, in appearances, in roles that transmit unexpected insights, that just happen to be noticed'. But, Flanagan continues, 'such cultivation of sight, of seeing and believing, requires a cultural site for cultivation, where the spiritual eye is nurtured to see' (Flanagan 1996: 83). It is the thesis of this book that the work of Eric Rohmer and the 'territory' that it maps is precisely a site for the cultivation of sight to attend to the manifestations of grace. Through his own observation, Rohmer is inviting his audience to begin to see.

## Realism

With their dependence on long scenes and deep focus, Rohmer's films draw on a very specific cinematic language that is derived from André Bazin's cinema theory, and this is not terribly surprising, given the relationship between the two. They were both central figures in the film clubs that emerged in Paris in the late 1940s, and they worked closely together on *Cahiers du cinéma*. Rohmer called Bazin his 'teacher and friend' (Rohmer 1989: 93).

Rohmer noted that 'all of Bazin's work is centered on one idea, the affirmation of cinematic "objectivity"' (Rohmer 1989: 95). This idea presupposes a reality that is external to cinema itself, a reality which is both the object and the guarantee of 'objectivity', and from this it follows that the aim of cinema is to work towards the most object-adequate representation that is technically and stylistically feasible. This is the nub of Bazin's ontological position on the cinema, and from it he deduced the form of a distinctive 'language' that can be seen to run through the work of Rohmer. (A good summary of Bazin's ontological position is provided in Casetti 1999: 30–5.)

According to Bazin, a retrospective of cinema between 1920 and 1940 reveals the coexistence of two different cinematic trends, pulling in opposite directions. He said that there are 'those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality' (Bazin 1967: 24). The former group, those who 'put their faith in the image', can be identified by their tendency to use montage editing and thus to create 'a sense or meaning not proper to the images themselves but derived

exclusively from their juxtaposition'. Bazin continued to say that directors such as Kuleshov, Eisenstein and Gance all used montage in such a way that they 'did not give us the event; they alluded to it. Undoubtedly they derived at least the greater part of the constituent elements from the reality they were describing but the final significance of the film was found to reside in the ordering of these elements much more than in their objective content' (Bazin 1967: 25). This particular cinematic language of montage consequently fails to accept the demand of objectivity, precisely because it relies on the image to make a point to the audience, and refuses to accept that events can be given.

Although he does not say so in as many words, it is very clear that Bazin prefers the language that is used in the films of directors such as Erich von Stroheim, Murnau and Robert Flaherty. In their films 'montage plays no part, unless it be the negative one of inevitable elimination where reality superabounds. The camera cannot see everything at once but it makes sure not to lose any part of what it chooses to see' (Bazin 1967: 27) – a principle that is reflected in Rohmer's panning shots. This is a language that has faith in reality. Bazin emphasises the difference between the two languages with some comments on Flaherty's film *Nanook of the North*. One scene shows the amount of time and the care that is required for Nanook to successfully hunt a seal. Bazin argues that Nanook's perseverance could be suggested through montage techniques, but that Flaherty places his faith in reality: 'Flaherty however confines himself to showing the actual waiting period; the length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true object. Thus in the film this episode requires one set-up' (Bazin 1967: 27). Rohmer made more or less the same point about *Nanook of the North*, and discussed exactly the scene upon which Bazin commented. Rohmer called the film a tragedy 'of the dimension of time', and explained that 'film's primary purpose is to give the present the weight that other arts deny it. In *Nanook*, the pathos, the pathos of waiting, which in other films is but a vulgar artifice, mysteriously plunges us to the heart of understanding'. He continues to say of the hunting scene that its 'beauty' can be attributed to 'the fact that the point of view imposed on us by the camera is neither that of the actors of the drama nor that of the human eye, whose attention would have been drawn to one element to the exclusion of another' (Rohmer 1989: 46). Indeed, in the Hitchcock book, this scene is identified as one in which the hunter and the audience share a 'state of grace' (Rohmer and Chabrol 1979: 124). Rohmer also embraces Stroheim and Murnau in a way that is obviously indebted to Bazin. According to the latter these directors use

a language 'in which the image is evaluated not according to what it adds to reality but what it reveals of it' (Bazin 1967: 28). Meanwhile, what Rohmer commends in all of them is commitment to reality, and their refusal to impose meanings or to add to what objectively is: 'let's carefully hold on to an instrument we know can still portray us *as we see ourselves*. May this very simple certainty reassure us and keep us from pointless exercises' (Rohmer 1989: 53. Original emphasis).

Commitment to reality implies a cinematic language which avoids 'pointless exercises', which refuses to impose meanings upon the world, and which instead shows us as we see ourselves. It requires 'a form of self-effacement before reality' (Bazin 1967: 29), of exactly the kind that is represented by Rohmer's effacement of himself behind a pseudonym, mystification and a body of work. The objectivity of an external reality is made paramount and unassailable. Bazin identifies the components of the language that follow from this 'effacement' in the work of a number of directors who were also embraced by Rohmer. Not just Flaherty, Stroheim and Murnau, but also Marcel Carné whose 'editing remains on the level of the reality he is analyzing. There is only one way of looking at it', and so there is a refusal to use superimpositions or close-ups (Bazin 1967: 32). From Welles and Wyler, and particularly from Jean Renoir (Rohmer eulogises Renoir; Rohmer 1989: 173–99), Bazin takes the principle of deep focus, thanks to which 'whole scenes are covered in one take, the camera remaining motionless. Dramatic effects for which we had formerly relied on montage were created out of the movements of actors within a fixed framework' (Bazin 1967: 33). In this way, the event is put back into a dimension of time and reality. Renoir, in particular, discovered through deep focus and long scenes 'a film form that would permit everything to be said without chopping the world into little fragments, that would reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them' (Bazin 1967: 38). Exactly this point can be found in Rohmer's reflections on his own work: 'What am I interested in? I'm interested in the relationships of the characters to the surroundings. I like to show the surroundings, the décor in its entirety ... to show the characters moving in the décor and being part of it. That's why I don't like long lenses, which take the characters away from the décor' (Rohmer in Chase and Feiden 1972: 48).

'Natural unity' was taken by Bazin to be represented especially well in the Italian neo-realist cinema of Rossellini. One of the most significant qualities of a film like *Rome, Open City* is its use of what Bazin terms an *amalgam* of professional and amateur, untrained, actors. According to Bazin, this is important because it involves 'the rejection of the star



concept' (Bazin 1973: 23) in such a way that the overall objectivity and realism of the film is increased. First, the audience is forced to engage with the film without preconceptions or distractions that are created as soon as a star appears and second, the actors are required to be more flexible and to subordinate themselves to the film (Bazin 1973: 24). Similar principles inform Rohmer's use of amateur actors and, indeed, his use of professionals who are – or at least at the time of filming *were* – relatively unknown. He exploits the expertise of trained actors who can subordinate themselves to the plot (a good example of this is provided by Jean-Louis Trintignant in *My Night at Maud's*, 1969) and the honesty of amateur actors who lack artifice. This way of using amateur actors is shown very clearly in *Love in the Afternoon* (1972), where 'real life' husband and wife Bernard and Françoise Verley play the roles of a fictional husband and wife who are tempted to have affairs but in the end return to one another. Sometimes it also seems to be the case that professional actors are used *precisely because* of the overstatement that they can bring to a role, as implied by Arielle Dombasle's performance as Marion in *Pauline at the Beach* (1983). These strategies are pursued in order to capture 'what is natural ... I'm very particular about this point' (Rohmer in Ziolkowski 1982: 65). The general principle seems to be that either professional or amateur actors will be used depending on the reality that Rohmer seeks to explore. In this vein, Crisp proposes that the *Comedies and Proverbs* series uses amateur actors because their lack of expertise and confidence in front of the camera means that they possess a degree of naiveté that reflects the characters' lack of self-consciousness (Crisp 1988: 88). The intention throughout is to make sure that those actors are used who will prevent the audience from reducing the character to a symbol or one-dimensionality. The concern is to use actors who will make the characters rounded human beings in specific surroundings, actors who will make the characters, in a word, *real*.

The cinematic language that Bazin commends as that which is least likely to 'forget that the world *is*' (Bazin 1973: 21) is more or less identical with that which is employed by Eric Rohmer. To this extent Rohmer's films can be identified as *realist*.

Rohmer's realism does seem to be of an especially naive sort. For instance, he says quite straightforwardly that 'cinema is the description of man and his surroundings' (Rohmer in Davis 1971: 92) – not an *analysis*, not an *intervention*, not a *critique*, just a *description*. Rohmer is following on from Bazin's proposition that the Italian neo-realists 'know better ... than to treat this reality as a medium or a means to an end' (Bazin 1973: 21). Reality *is*. In a comment which fits in well

with his expressed contempt for 'cinophile madness, cinophile culture' (Rohmer 1989: 17), Rohmer wrote that 'The modern audience ... has been too long accustomed to interpreting visual signals, to understanding the reason for each image, to become suddenly interested in the *reality* of what they see. The cinematic spectacle is now presented more as something to decipher than as something to view' (Rohmer 1989: 27–8). As with Bazin, this is an ontological argument. Rohmer is presuming that the cinematic image ought to be a means by which the audience is invited to become interested in, and more observant of, an external reality. From this point of view it is incumbent upon the filmmaker to use a language that makes the viewing of that external reality, that objective *is*, all the more immediate and, thereby, all the more compelling. Overly theoretical positions (presumably such as that which Godard developed) become abstractions that create mere boredom and, unsurprisingly for so faithful a follower of Bazin, montage is repudiated (for a hint of Rohmer's attitude towards the Godard who emerged in the 1960s and through the 1970s, see Andrews 2002). Directors like Welles, Wyler and Hitchcock are commended for their 'systematic use of the still shot' (Rohmer 1989: 19). For Rohmer, the problem is that abstract understanding has got in the way of a more simple and immediate seeing of what *is*: 'In learning how to understand, the modern moviegoer forgot how to see, and if film has succeeded in educating us visually, it did not do so by making us more sensitive to the pure signification of certain forms or movements' (Rohmer 1989: 29).

Moreover, in order to achieve that increased sensitivity, film has to carve a space for itself against commodified and commercialised culture: 'I would not like to film the world as it is shown in fashion magazines, this modern, cheap vision of the modern world ... What interests me is man in his setting, the human face, the human body, human gestures, human behavior'. He said that 'If there is beauty, this is where I like to find it, even if it is not Greek beauty' (Rohmer in Davis 1971: 93–4). This tension between the concern with the real quality of human presence (the setting, the face, the body, gestures and behaviour) and a critique of the empirically 'cheap vision of the modern world' is expressed very clearly in films such as *Full Moon in Paris* (1984) and *My Girlfriend's Boyfriend* (1987), where there is an implication that the commodification of the empirical human setting has had a disastrous impact on the real beauty of human being. It is noticeable that shopping is rarely an easy experience in Rohmer's films, and it is usually a moment of deception and self-deception. For example, buying a shirt is a rather fraught experience in *Love in the Afternoon*, and an antique causes problems in

*A Good Marriage*. Meanwhile there is a nice moment of mischief in *The Aviator's Wife* when a character gloomily descends the steps into the Métro and goes beneath a bright advertisement for the C&A chain store. It is hard not to conclude that Rohmer is nudging the audience to think that mass consumerism is a gateway to Hell. (However, Rohmer explicitly denies that he has any sociological interest or competence [Rohmer in Petrie 1971: 39].)

For Rohmer cinema is especially able to achieve the task of showing the world as it is because for him, the camera is nothing more than an instrument for the recording of what is put in front of it: 'I know a great deal of effort has gone into devising a proof that the camera is not a simple recording instrument, that the world of the screen differs from perceived reality ... And what a futile undertaking it is!' But for Rohmer this does not demean the importance of cinema. To the contrary, it is precisely because cinema merely records that it is so immensely valuable: 'the ability to reproduce exactly, simply, is the cinema's surest privilege' (Rohmer in Williams 1980: 55). After all, 'Film ... uses techniques that are instruments of reproduction or, one might say, of knowledge. In a sense, it possesses the truth right from the beginning and aims to make beauty its supreme end' (Rohmer 1989: 75). He has said, 'I don't want to make profound films. Bazin used to say that there was a profundity of the superficial in American film, but I also think that there is a superficiality to profundity' (Rohmer in Ziolkowski 1982: 64). Once again, the theme of self-effacement in the relationship with reality comes to the fore. What Rohmer is saying is that the objectivity of *what is*, and the unique ability of cinema to capture it, means that the filmmaker must refuse to make her or his own presence too overtly obvious. For instance, film has an advantage over art because it 'cures the artist of his fatal narcissism ... We are tempted to look at the world with our everyday lives, to keep the tree, the running water, the face distorted with happiness or anguish, to keep them just as they are, in spite of us' (Rohmer 1989: 45).

### **Rohmer's *Theo-logia***

The world *is*, in spite of us. It is independent of our actions, designs and impositions. As such, it is our responsibility to be committed to the world and its beauty. At one level, this position has caused Rohmer to embrace environmentalism (Rohmer in Davis 1971: 92, and see also *The Tree, the Mayor and the Mediacentre*), but at a somewhat more important level, Rohmer's ontological position is an expression of his theological