Between Topic and Topography: the Landscapes of Éric Rohmer

Sébastien Marot

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I am not a specialist, and not even a connoisseur of film and video, which is somewhat embarrassing. My topic, however, is Landscape—or landscapes—in the work of Eric Rohmer, and my ambition is to suggest that not only are landscapes of a great importance in Rohmer's films as backgrounds for the stories, but that landscapes and their contemporary evolutions or metamorphoses are truly the major subject or topic in many of those films.

Moral Tales: The Collector

To settle my first point—the importance of landscapes as backgrounds in Rohmer films throughout his career—I'll consider the three main series of films that he did between 1967 and the late nineteen-nineties. The first one, the "Contes Moraux," comprises six films based on very similar stories: a man who is married or engaged with someone meets another woman or girl, and gets involved in a game of seduction, but in the end gives up, just before conclusion, and goes back on track, to his previous wife, life, or preoccupations. Each time, the adventure develops as a promenade in a given landscape or area: the streets of Paris for *La Boulangère de Monceau* (F 1962), *La Carrière de Suzanne* (F 1963), and *L'Amour l'Après Midi* (F 1972); Clermont-Ferrand in winter for *Ma Nuit*

chez Maud (F 1969); or the Lake of Annecy in summer for *Le Genou de Claire* (F 1970). Maybe the most eloquent example is *La Collectionneuse* (F 1966). A young and handsome art dealer who is about to get married takes a month off to retire and meditate in a bastide near Saint Tropez lent to him by a friend. His project is to be alone and collect himself in this beautiful landscape by the sea, to immerse himself in nature, to spend his time in solitary walks between the house and the pebbled shore where Rohmer's camera stares into the seaweeds.

In any case, townscapes and landscapes are also extremely present in the "Comedies and Proverbs," the second series of six films that Rohmer did after the "Contes Moraux:" Paris again in *La Femme de l'aviateur* (F 1981), the newly built Villes Nouvelles of Marne La Vallée and Cergy Pontoise in *Les Nuits de la pleine lune* (F 1984) and *L'Amie de mon amie* (F 1986); Le Mans and its region in *Le Beau Mariage* (F 1982); and a seascape in Normandy in *Pauline à la plage* (F 1982). There is something of a Tour de France in Rohmer's movies, and the film of that series where this comes out most clearly is *Le Rayon vert* (F 1986). Landscapes are where we go for holidays, and this film is about holidays. The main character is a woman whose vacations plans for the summer have been called off. So there she is, alone in Paris, pacing the banks of the Seine, wondering what to do, and where to go. After the countryside and the mountain, she will try out the seaside. There, the beach is crowded with people surfing and sunbathing. The day after finds her in the station, waiting for a train that will take her back home for the third time, resigned. But there is a young man, on another bench, who seems to be nice and kind. They smile timidly at each other and a little chat follows. After all, no one is waiting for her in Paris. And so she goes with him. While they are having a drink at a terrace by the sea, the sun is about to set and she sees a shop sign advertising "Le Rayon Vert." She takes the guy, without saying anything, to a point where they can stare

at the red sphere drowning into the sea. Great emotion, hope, and anxiety reach their momentum when the horizon surprisingly exudes a brief green tear—a green blink—of pure happiness. The wanderings of solitude may ultimately lead to this oceanic feeling of communion. Territories are mazes where encounters and stories may happen that will turn them in commonly shared scenes and landscapes.

Stills from the film *Le rayon vert*, 1986.

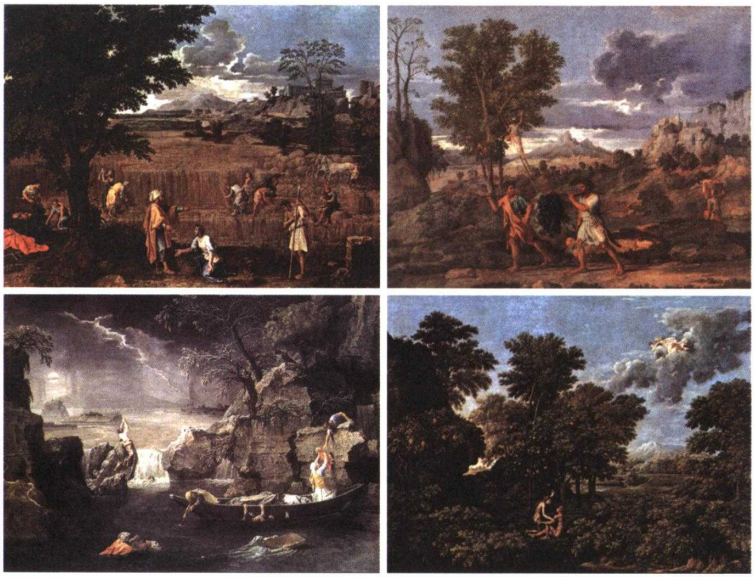
Tales of the Four Seasons

Rohmer's last series, the "Contes des Quatre Saisons," is probably the one in which this correspondence between landscape and story is expressed most eloquently. The reference, clearly readable when you assemble the four posters, is obviously the famous series of four paintings by Nicolas Poussin at the end of his life, illustrating significant scenes from the bible in gorgeous or dramatic landscapes, which literally submerge the view and the viewer. Rohmer's ambition is to provide a sequel, an update, a contemporary equivalent of this famous

reference, both questioning and celebrating the ways in which—despite the mutations our landscapes have endured—their seasons might still resonate with those of their inhabitants and visitors.

One might insist that the very concept of landscape was invented and aesthetically theorized by those classic artists and painters, and that landscape art and theory are still living on this legacy. Rohmer's films both confirm and question this statement. If they are obviously penetrated by this reference and classical culture—both pictorial and literary—which they occasionally revisit as in his last opus devoted to L'Astrée (*Les amours d'Astrée et de Céladon*, F 2007), they show at the same time that cinema has considerably reexplored and renewed the genre, and that contemporary theorists should indeed mine the exceptionally rich jurisprudence and intelligence accumulated by the moving image throughout the last century. In this respect, Rohmer's trajectory is just an example among many others, but a particularly consistent one, which is what we now have to demonstrate.

Posters of the four films of Eric Rohmers film series *Contes des quatre saisons*.



Frédéric Poussin, *Les Quatre Saisons*, 1660–1664.

Slow Motion: The Birth of a Film Director

Rohmer, a specialist of German literature and a writer—he wrote the novel *La Maison d'Elisabeth* in 1946—made a living as a literature teacher for many years in different colleges. Very early on, he developed a passion for movies and cinema, which led him to write a doctoral thesis on *The Organization of Space in Murnau's Faust*, later published as a book, and to become a very prolific film critic: first, in *La Gazette du Cinéma*, a journal he launched; and then in the famous *Cahiers du Cinéma*, where he served as chief editor from 1957 to 1963. Together with his younger friends Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, François Truffaut, and Claude Chabrol—with whom he co-authored a book on Hitchcock in 1957—he became one of the main figures of the Nouvelle Vague. It is important to mention that Rohmer was the eldest of the group, a rather discreet and reserved person, extremely polite and gentle, absorbed in his work, with a touch of shyness—but an extreme dose of independence—very far from the image of the young wolf of a new generation that was soon attached to

the Nouvelle Vague, but very close to that of the *cinéma d'auteur*, which his younger friends also exemplified.

In the nineteen-fifties, Rohmer had realized—apart from his work as a critic—a few short films, but his career as a director really began at the end of the nineteen-fifties with his first long feature, *Le signe du lion* (F 1959/1962), which was unfortunately a commercial disaster. This film, almost entirely shot outside, follows the growing homelessness of an American musician in the hot Paris summer Paris, deserted by all his friends who have gone on vacation. As Baudelaire once said: "Pour le poète, tout est vacant." (For the poet, everything is vacant.) The camera is attached to the worn-out soles and slowing pace of this man as he wanders around different parts of the city: during the night of Saint Germain, illuminated by the lights of the cafés and terraces; along the avenues of the beaux quartiers, stunned by the burning sun, particularly the Champs-Elysées as he returns from an unlucky trip to suburban Nanterre—a glimpse of the emerging La Défense—having lost his last metro ticket; and on the bridges and the banks of the Seine, as he progressively becomes a bum. Thus, the film is about Paris: its noises and silences, bits of dialogues caught in passing by someone to whom nobody talks, bits of lives and stories, the growing loneliness of a heavy body accumulating the dust and pains of a city and slowly become just that—a drifting body in an urban environment, a magnificent urban scene whose means of transportations he no longer has access to, an urban wreck.

Rohmer uses motion, a deceleration that would be able to capture the city as a landscape and the true rhythm and nature of its transformations. Nothing like the kids' races in *Les Quatre Cent Coups* (F 1959), which Truffaut shot the same year. But Paris is obviously the epicenter, the scene of his cinema at this time, as it is for Truffaut, for the Godard of *A Bout de Souffle* (F 1960), or for the

Louis Malle of *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (F 1958). This topographic focus would become explicit in *Paris vu par* (F 1965), a collective film made of six shorts, each set in specific areas of the city. As film critic Serge Toubiana explains, the Nouvelle Vague, particularly influenced by Rossellini—but also by several technical innovations, and by the economic constraints of low budget production—shot most of its films in real-life exteriors, and actually "invented the street" in French cinema. This is especially true of Rohmer's first series, "Contes Moraux," where different areas of Paris are not only explored, but also almost portrayed, such as the Rue de Léris in *La Boulangère de Monceau*, or the Luxembourg area in *La Carrière de Suzanne*. In his contribution to *Paris vu par*, the whole plot—centered on an umbrella—revolves around the Place de l'Ètoile. At that time, in the early nineteen-sixties, Rohmer had also started to make documentaries. One is called *Najda in Paris* (F 1964) and follows a foreign student—staying at the Cité Universitaire—in her wanderings in the metropolis: the Cité itself; the RER that takes her to the Quartier Latin; the nights of Montparnasse; an afternoon in the park of the Buttes-Chaumont; and the bistros in Belleville; up to a final evening sequence where the young lady watches, from a footbridge, the car lights flowing in the newly built Boulevard Périphérique. The mysterious character that André Breton had depicted forty years earlier, like an Ariane lost in the maze of the city, is now a real woman who learns the world and its evolutions in the thick and mutating palimpsest of the metropolis. An independent woman who explores the riches of the urban incubator she has chosen, and is herself—on the soundtrack—the teller of her own everyday life.

Méliès/Lumière

In a recent lecture given by Serge Toubiana at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, he explained that the origins

of the "seventh art" could be traced back to two very different father figures and conceptions. One is Méliès, who engaged the movie industry into fiction and illusion, the fantastic invention of worlds and stories. The laboratory for this conception of film was mainly the studio where those fake worlds and illusions could be produced and devised: stage sets, tricks, etc. Cinema could free us from the prison of the real and the everyday, and allow us to explore and project imaginary territories. But on the other side, we have Louis Lumière who, with his brother, clearly used the moving image as a new means of documenting the real world, its motions, and evolutions. The camera would explore and register the actual landscapes of the world, and witness the lives and activities of the various people who inhabited and made them. The Lumières sent cameramen to numerous cities, ports, and villages around Europe and the world to capture those real-life scenes and landscapes: streetscapes in Paris (the Champs-Elysées, the Tuileries and the Pont Neuf), in London, New York, Berlin, or St Petersburg; shots of the first *traveling* ever made, from a train across a suburban and railroad landscape, probably somewhere around Lyon; ships and chimneys in an industrial port; peasants leading an ox plough in the fields; a sack race in a village fair; a blacksmith at work.

Theses images appear in a documentary that Rohmer made on the Frères Lumières (*Louis Lumière*, F 1968) shortly after these original reels were rediscovered and restored at the Cinemathèque Française, under the supervision of its founder, Henri Langlois. In Rohmer's documentary, those original excerpts illustrate a conversation with Langlois and film director Jean Renoir—whom the Nouvelle Vague admired—obviously moved and impressed by this rediscovery. Clearly, the restoration of those films shed a new light on the genealogy of cinema, and stimulated—among the Nouvelle Vague's circle, the Cinémathèque and the *Cahiers*—a new reflection on what cinema was and could be.

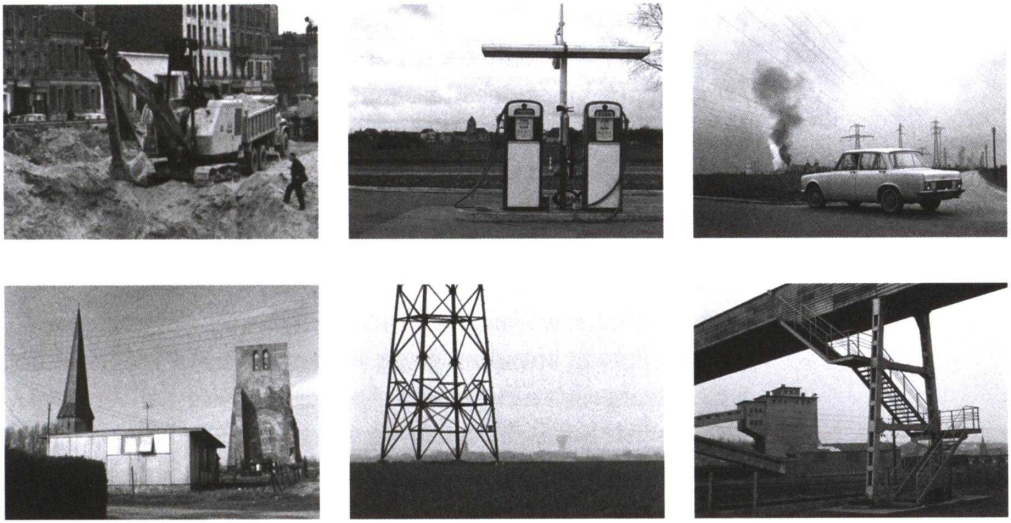
To Rohmer and his friends, it seemed that this documentary dimension had been somewhat overlooked by the preceding generation; that cinema could and should indeed loosen its link to the studio and explore the world both as the actual setting of our lives and emotions and as a subject in itself, probably the most important one. Whether or nor not it expressed a point of view globally shared by the Nouvelle Vague, this was clearly the message that Rohmer would soon deliver in a twenty-minute film that he made for television (a series called *L'Unité du Monde*), which I personally consider as the masterpiece of his documentary vein. The ambition of this film entitled *Métamorphoses du Paysage* (F 1964) is to depict and reflect on the mutations brought about in landscapes and townscapes by the "industrial era." The sequences and movements of the camera filming the landscape are accompanied by a continuous and carefully composed commentary. In a manner that explicitly recalls the Lumières but also echoes the Neue Sachlichkheit and seems to announce the school of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Rohmer introduces the usual suspects that have progressively invaded the countryside—water towers, power lines, barbed wire fencing, billboards, oil stations, grain elevators, railroads, chimney stacks, smoke streaks of planes in the sky; and radically transformed entire regions or cities—industrial ports and riverbanks, gigantic cranes, mining and production plants, huge construction sites, piles of waste, etc. In the first half of the film, Rohmer does not focus on those objects in themselves but rather measures their impact on the landscape, the way they superimpose or telescope with older features and constructions.

The commentary insists on the feeling of estrangement and denaturation that they produce, and despite the obvious beauty of certain images and sequences—such as those showing the lacelike steel structure of power

line pylons—it looks as if the demonstration might lead to a rather conservative bemoaning of the scars and defacement inflicted upon the world. Indeed, if the tone is rather sober, it also expresses concern, but in the form of questions rather than statements, as if Rohmer were trying to enter into a conversation with the mutations he witnesses. What are they heading to? What kinds of new landscapes are they sketching or delineating? How could we relate to them and respond aesthetically to the challenges they pose? Weren't the windmills and water mills of the proto-industrial revolution of the Middle Ages progressively integrated as natural parts and ingredients of the landscapes we were taught to love? Such is the debate to which Rohmer clearly invites the viewers when, in the middle of his film, he shows several impressionist and post-impressionist paintings in which the aesthetic potential of industrial landscapes and items—riverscapes of suburban factories, railway stations—were effectively expressed, thereby helping people to integrate those mutations into their mental and physical environment. Weren't the architects and engineers of railway stations, canals, steel bridges of the late nineteenth century able to transform the technical innovations of the time into new emotional experiences? Haven't they enlarged our emotional repertoire and helped urbanites to adjust to the dramatic transformations of the metropolis? Particularly admirable are, I think, the sequences that Rohmer devotes to the locks and footbridges of the Canal Saint Martin, and to the metro viaduct that tangents Ledoux's Rotunda in Paris. While documenting the stylistic differences between the sub- and superstructure of the latter, the camera superbly renders the telescoping with the older monument, the plunging gaze into the domestic interiors in the apartment buildings across the boulevard, and this whole kaleidoscopic experience that has become an integral part of metropolitan life; though it is unlike Dziga Vertov's urban opera. Rohmer's tone is reflexive. Nothing proves *a priori* that people and artists will be able to

effectively adjust to the much larger wave of mutations brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Views of the construction site of the Boulevard Périphérique, of several slabs of the Grands Ensembles—will these be digestible, and eventually recyclable, like this former manufacture of bricks turned back into a sheep farm?

If Rohmer does not positively answer these questions, he clearly invites us to reflect on them, hiding nothing of their complexity. Clearly for him the "metamorphoses of the landscape" are a major issue, a fundamental concern for art, and for cinema in particular. Not only because film is indeed a most powerful medium to document those mutations, to penetrate and express the syntaxes of contemporary territories, and to reflect about their actual making, but also because it might be able to enchant those new landscapes by populating them with stories, conversations, and romances.



Stills from the film *Métamorphoses du paysage*, 1964.

In the following years, Rohmer made several other documentaries on specific mutations in townscapes and landscapes. In *Une étudiante à Paris* (F 1964), for instance, he described how student life and environment were changing at the time, showing the new campuses that were then being built in the periphery (Palaiseau, Jussieu). The old, famous, and central "Quartier Latin" was no longer the great ecological niche of knowledge in the city, but just one among several hubs burgeoning in a swarming metropolis. Students, likewise, weren't the specific horde they used to be, quartered in dedicated haunts or districts, but male and female bachelors commuting like other workers between their homes, "cités," and their universities or teaching facilities.

Here again, the ambition is to observe rather than criticize, to bear witness to the ongoing transformations of life conditions and habits by describing with a kind of willed (though perplexed) sympathy the new spaces, architectures, and territories that they produce. Nice and empathic views of the streamlined and rather desert subscape of Jussieu. As we saw with *Métamorphoses du Paysage*, Rohmer does not confine his testimony to the urban condition, but extends it well beyond the limits of the city. In *Fermière à Montfaucon* (F 1967), a short documentary where the theme of the four seasons plays a structural role, he follows a young farmer in her "works and days" along the year, as she collects the eggs on a cold early spring morning, drives the harvester through the wheat fields in summer, picks apples with her husband on a September evening, and makes errands or deliveries—either with her light truck on the country roads, or by foot through the mud and snows of winter. Short hair, rubber-boots, machines, discreet involvement in the parish council, meetings at the local chamber of agriculture: a sober, populated and local portrait of the evolutions taking place in the rural world.

Interestingly for us, Rohmer's concern and empathy for landscapes, territories, cities, and their mutations are not purely contemplative, but eager to tackle their reasons, to understand the ways they are or might be addressed and improved by politics and designers. This profound interest in the actual making, the studio, and construction site of our cities and territories is most apparent in the long documentary *Villes Nouvelles* (F 1975), which in four episodes, Rohmer, along with Jean-Paul Pigeat, devoted to the design of the French Villes Nouvelles in the early nineteen-seventies. The first part, entitled *"Enfance d'une ville"* (Childhood of a city), documents the development of Cergy-Pontoise, one of the five New Towns that were then being built in the greater Paris area. After a short introduction by the two authors, the film begins in the office of the New Town's Établissement Public, where its director, sitting or standing in front of the plan, exposes the main ideas and planning principles. The interview is regularly interrupted by shots and sequences showing the territory in question: the old villages still surviving with the bell tower standing against a cloudy sky; sites under construction where massive concrete buildings emerge behind the roofs of suburban pavilions, fields of lettuce and wheat; conversations on-site with perplexed farmers whose lands have been reallocated; and, from a vantage point, a long panoramic sequence over the whole territory that the Ville Nouvelle—not yet completed but already rising everywhere—will eventually cover, ending up on a loop of the Seine where all the farmlands should give way to Cergy-Pontoise's Central Park. In this particular instance, Rohmer's empathy for the situation *and* the burgeoning city is clearly palpable, and it almost feels as if the documentary was also—unconsciously(?)—a location scouting expedition: reality morphing into fiction. The second episode, *"La diversité du paysage urbain"* (The diversity of the urban landscape), develops as an extensive

conversation with a team of young architects and architectural historian/theoreticians—AREA: Philippe Boudon, Alain Sarfati, Bernard Hamburger—about postmodern ways of promoting architectural variety in the Villes Nouvelles, and avoiding the dreary monotony or dire homogeneity of modern urbanism: a rather protracted interview almost entirely shot in the team's office, where they explain their views, discuss their sources and references, and show their design models. The same conversational principle is also adopted for the third and fourth episodes. *"La forme d'une ville"* (The form of the city) consists of several discussions with and between the members of another famous architectural team of the time, the AUA, as they had just lost an urban-design competition for the New Town of Evry. Architects Paul Chemetoff, Henri Ciriani, and landscape architect Michel Corajoud not only describe and explain their project, around a table in their office supporting the model, but are also interviewed outdoors in the large neighborhood of Villeneuve, in Grenoble, then under construction. The last episode, *"Le logement à la demande"* (Housing à la carte)—which was shot in the new town of Le Vaudreuil, near Rouen—focuses on the experiment in flexibility that was developed there, as elsewhere, to provide apartment surfaces in collective housing where dwellers could freely choose the location of walls, rooms, services, and even windows. In this instance, the conversation with the architect Henri Thurnauer and the developers and technicians of the system is completed by extensive interviews with residents.

What impresses me in these films, almost forty years after, is not only the remarkable document they represent on the building of the French Villes Nouvelles and the architectural debates that took place then, but the extreme intimacy—between film and architecture, film and landscape—that emanates from them; almost as if filmmakers and architects or designers were collaborators,

working on the same issue: enlivening territories, trying to make them more habitable, as livable as possible.

Boyfriends and Girlfriends

The border—between real and romanced conversation, between documentary and fiction—is rather thin and porous in Rohmer's filmography, and the Villes Nouvelles would soon make their way into the "Comedies and Proverbs," first in *Les Nuits de la pleine lune* where the said proverb, "Qui a deux femmes perd son âme, qui a deux maisons perd sa raison," (He, who has two wives loses his soul, he who has two houses loses his reason) would be illustrated between Paris and Marne-La-Vallée. And even more explicitly in the last opus of the series: *L'Amie de mon amie*, shot entirely in Cergy-Pontoise, then in its late teens. The plot is quite simple: girl one, a young bachelorette, rather modest, who works in the planning service of the New Town, meets girl two, a young and pretty woman, somewhat smarter—actually played by Jean Renoir's granddaughter—during a lunch break. They get along, and Rohmer's camera follows them as they walk and talk, thus treating us to a tour of the City's central forum, public spaces, and facilities. Girl one is single, but girl two has a boyfriend, a rather nice fellow, although their relationship is somewhat fragile. Girl one lives in one of the landmarks of the City—the immaculate crescent that Ricardo Boffil had just built, between piazza and compositional axis—while girl two stays with her parents in a suburban pavilion. Rohmer can thus show us the different states and atmospheres of the Ville Nouvelle, and provide a kind of section through the urban territory he had panoramically documented twelve years before. While girl two is away for a short holiday, her boyfriend takes girl one, who also likes sports, to the artificial lake in the now completed outdoor recreational park of Cergy, and introduces her to windsurfing. The

two of them get along well and share their thoughts, with the most honorable intentions. Girl one is in fact attracted to a kind of dandy who also works in Saint Quentin but ignores her; a player with women, girl two is actually more his type. So girl one and "her girlfriend's boyfriend" spend time together and become closer, passing their weekend afternoons windsurfing and talking in the park crowded with suburban families. And during a walk that they take up the forested hill that rises by the lake—wood paths, clearings, nice panoramas of suburban Paris—they naturally end up meeting their predicament.

French architect Roland Castro once said that a city is a place where there are at least two different ways back home and where husband and lover do not meet. So it looks as if the Ville Nouvelle, seen by Rohmer, might well have its own ways and nooks towards urbanity. In any case, girl one and her friend's boyfriend spend the night at her place, which proves that even a panoptic building by Ricardo Boffil may house a secret romance. But the game has to end when girl two returns to Cergy and declares that she has decided to resume the relationship with her boyfriend. Our little bird is single again, but the efforts that girl two will deploy to connect and match her with the dandy will unexpectedly bring the happy ending, as she herself will be seduced by the player's light-hearted gallantry. A final scene at the park restaurant clears out the case of mistaken identities: the tables have been turned and each one is now free to love her friend's friend. Exit.

It is unclear whether the real subject of the film is this modern *marivaudage*, or the setting of the Ville Nouvelle itself, which Rohmer explores and surveys so carefully. I assume that it is both, that topography and topic are one and the same thing; that Rohmer does cinematographically for the urban territories of the late twentieth century, what painters had done for the landscapes produced by the first waves of the industrial revolution: an exercise

of willed empathy. Of course *L'Amie de mon amie* is not *Deux ou trois chose que je sais d'elle* (F 1967), which Godard had done twenty years before, and where "elle" was actually the Paris Region, taken as a subject in itself, whose aesthetic could be investigated and elaborated by the moving image and its montage. Artistically less ambitious, apparently less *engagé*, Rohmer's undertaking is both politically and topographically more to the point: an attempt to investigate and to focus on the new urban species that we have produced; to enliven them by showing that they can actually be "lived in"; and to involve the viewer in a genuine reflection on the reasons for their being and evolution.



Stills from the film *L'ami de mon amie*, 1986.

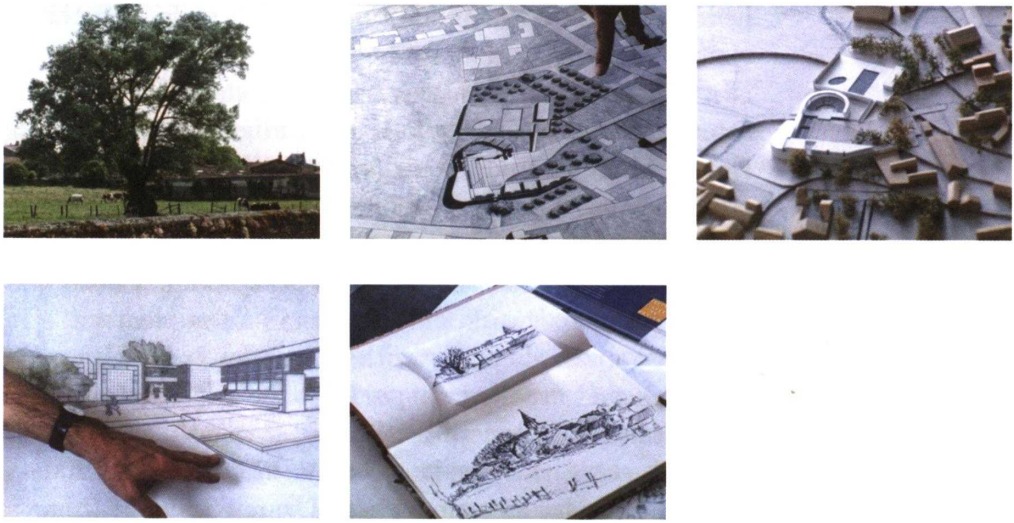
The Tree, the Mayor, and the Médiathèque

None of Rohmer's films expresses this agenda more eloquently than the puzzling *L'Arbre, le maire et la médiathèque* (F 1993), where documentary and fiction are literally fused. The scene is a little village in Vendée, south Brittany, during the mayoral election campaign. The actual mayor, running for reelection, is a young socialist deputy, obviously from a wealthy local family, who divides his life between Paris and his manor in the village. The young man, a type of gentleman farmer, is a "renovator" full of good will, whose ambition is to help the village evolve in an era of mutations where, thanks to communication and transportation networks, the distinction between rural and urban lives is not as clear-cut as

it used to be. His main project is to build, on a meadow recently acquired by the municipality and adumbrated by a magnificent tree—in the style of Ruysdael—a fully-fledged modern "médiathèque."

In the first part of the film, the mayor is visited by his girlfriend, an elegant, talkative, and somewhat affected Parisian novelist, whom he treats to a tour of the village: extensive chats about plants, vegetables, and cows, creaks of ill-adjusted gates, conversations on the evolution of life conditions and activities in villages, meetings with old and recent villagers—such as young long-haired artisans—all real people actually interviewed by the two actors. Grins and chuckles in the movie theater as the young lady, dressed for a tea at the café Flore, marvels at the "prehistoric look" of cows in a stable, or develops her strongly urban views of the rural. It is interesting to note that Rohmer's film audience often settles for irony and second degree meanings only to realize later as the story unfolds, that each character is a fair voice expressing a sound and necessary point of view in an essentially complex debate, in this case: the mathematics of the rural issue. The walk ends in front of the meadow, where the mayor explains the situation and the project: how agriculture is progressively getting weaker—the reason this meadow as well as several farms in the village have been abandoned—and how villagers will benefit from a quasi-urban cultural facility. Sure, says the novelist, but why not locate the médiathèque in one of those large abandoned farms with their beautiful stone walls? Well, answers the mayor, aren't villages entitled to modernity, as well as cities? Besides, the financial help he was able to obtain from the region, or the département, only applies to new construction. The stage is set and the conversation resumes later as the mayor takes his lady to Cergy-Pontoise, to the office of the architect to whom Rohmer had actually commissioned a project for the said médiathèque: a detailed presentation of the scheme, model,

plans, perspective views. Our novelist is not convinced and argues. Isn't it too big, too modern? Is it really necessary to provide such a large parking lot?



Stills from the film *L'arbre, le maire et la médiathèque*, 1993.

In the meantime, we've been introduced to another character: the schoolmaster. Originally an urbanite who explicitly chose to leave the city and establish himself in this little village, right in front of the said meadow with its beautiful tree, he does not understand why the mayor should develop any project on this charming site, which is perfect as is and shouldn't be touched by anyone. There is an exhilarating scene where we see him pacing through the meadow and throwing a tantrum against the mayor and the disrespectful brutes who wreck the landscape: "France is disfigured by accesses.... Death penalty should be abolished, except for architects." The opposition of the mayor and the schoolmaster is clear, but Rohmer never has them confront each other directly in the film.

In these matters, as in many others, things are mediated. So the film takes us to Paris, the hub of medias and politics, to meet a young journalist who tries to make a living by selling articles to different journals.

That day, she has an appointment with the editor of a political magazine called *Après-Demain*, but when she gets there, the editor—a deadpan, smart and ironical player, obviously at ease in double meaning—tells her he had forgotten the appointment and is expecting the visit of a cousin, who is into politics and is the mayor of a village. He then suggests that she should stay and attend: "You'll see, he is dull, but it might interest you." Enter the mayor and his girlfriend, and the audience is in store for another conversation on politics and ecology in which the two women are particularly present, whereas the magazine editor, sitting at his desk and half absorbed in business paperwork, only throws in a few pleasant remarks, obviously happy with a situation in which he doesn't have to really take part. As the audience will later understand, if Rohmer, like Balzac, sympathizes with all his characters, this one is probably the only figure that he might despise as a smart ass. The net result of this scene is that the journalist decides to devote a paper to the mayor, the village, and the médiathèque project. Thus, we thus follow her as she goes there to conduct a series of interviews with the two major contenders, the mayor and the schoolmaster, but also with several real figures of the real village such as the woman who runs the bar/grocer's shop, two farmers, and a social worker. Through this new series of interwoven scenes of fiction and real interviews, Rohmer documents the situation of rural villages and introduces the spectator into its polyphony and political complexity, which the journalist honestly tries to translate in her paper. But complexity is not an easy thing to convey, and it does not sell. Taking advantage of the journalist's absence, the opportunist magazine editor therefore decides to cut and edit the paper so as to amplify the single voice of the schoolmaster: simplicity and one-sidedness, instead of complexity.

With good reason, the mayor is disappointed and feels cheated. But the film's lesson is not a bemoaning on the sad tricks and dead ends of democracy. Some voices

might be heard that are genuinely more complex, more concerned, and more hopeful. This is why Rohmer treats us to a last conversation between the mayor and Zoe, the schoolmaster's ten-year-old daughter who is playing alone in the manor's garden. Zoe—her very name a invitation to pay attention to what she has to say—disagrees with the mayor's project but, as she tells him, not for the same reason as her father does. It would certainly be great to have a médiathèque, but why not housing it in one of the unused farm buildings? As a result, says she in her apparently naïve vocabulary, the meadow would be available for another and much needed project: that of a "green space." To the mayor's objecting that the countryside is a green space in itself and does not need a dedicated one, the little girl replies, catching his attention, that because of the demise of traditional agriculture, resulting in the fact that paths are not maintained and disappear, and because of the growing pervasiveness of cars on the roads, kids of her age have no public spaces where they can freely and safely meet to play and ride their bicycles. If turned into a public amenity, instead of being simply preserved, the meadow and its magnificent tree, next to the heart of the village, would perfectly play that role. If Zoe's point of view is not necessarily Rohmer's, it is certainly one that could have been heard and discussed in a public debate held before the project. In the end, we learn in the epilogue—chance encounter of the mayor and the journalist in Paris—that the project eventually fell through because of the unfavorable report of some technical or administrative commission. An exterior and advantageous reason, certainly none more relevant and concerted than those that substantiated the idea in the first place—but it's good news for the schoolmaster.

I don't think I have ever seen any movie go that deeply into the intricacies of a given "situation," without favoring, either explicitly or implicitly, one particular

point of view, which the spectator—being spared the trouble of reflection—would be induced to share. Rohmer addresses his movies to careful viewers who are willing to listen and think through the conflicting views lying at the heart of contemporary cities, villages, and landscapes, their design plot. In so doing, with the apparent casualness or naïveté of his dialogues, he raises the degree of intelligence and responsibility of the viewers, their awareness in the politics of landscape. His example shows that cinema and video, combining fiction and documentary, are indeed powerful means of probing, investigating, and enlightening the design plots of contemporary territories.

A Méliès Side: The Lady and the Duke

Before I conclude, I have to return a little to the documentary/fiction, real world/studio, or Lumière/Mélies bipolarity. If Rohmer, as I said, was clearly inspired by the Lumières, we must not forget that he had also a Méliès side, already obvious in his early thesis on the *Organization of Space in Murnau's Faust*. This resurfaced on several occasions in his trajectory, most particularly in two stunning films, shot entirely in studio with painted landscapes as exteriors. For *Perceval le Gallois* (F 1978), he chose to film the story of the Arthurian knight, the version by Chrétien de Troyes, as a moving illumination. The characters evolve in a kind of diorama—a merry-go-round stage set of fake landscapes and cartoon castles, rendered in the style and colors—gold, indigo—of medieval images. Old French, medieval chants accompanied on old instruments, stylized steel trees: a bubble of medieval atmosphere and luster. History: the past is another world, and the studio, the Mélies laboratory, is a time travel machine that may be used to convey both the glow and atmosphere of the "story," and a truer sense of its distance and strangeness. Illusion, art, as the medium of historical truth, animating documents.

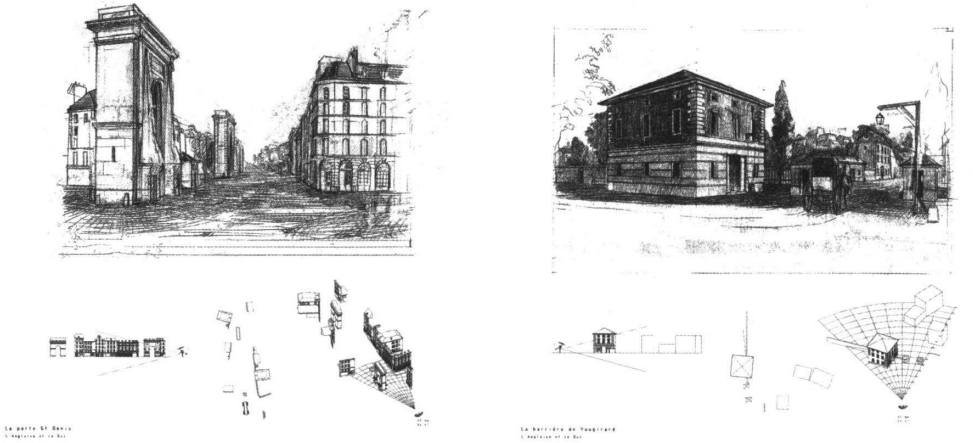
At the age of eighty, Rohmer came back to this vein and in 2000 produced a most beautiful and intriguing film, *The Lady and the Duke* (F 2001), inspired by the autobiography of Grace Elliott, a Scottish aristocrat who had been the mistress of the Duc d'Orléans, lived in Paris during the French Revolution, was imprisoned as a royalist during the "terror," and really "saved by the bell" at the fall of Robespierre (Elliott 1859). Rohmer wanted to revisit the atmosphere and events of this most famous and terrifying period of French history, through the eyes of someone who had lived them as a direct witness. The film develops as a series of encounters between Grace and the Duke, in carefully reconstructed interiors: as they progressively diverge on the cause of the revolution, the Duke votes for the death of his cousin, the King; and as the climate of terror progressively mounts outside. Rohmer also wanted to show these outdoor scenes—the streets, public spaces, and townscapes of Paris at the time—to convey a sense of the actual theater and physical context in which these events unfolded. But how can you do that? Other "historical" films about the revolution had to make do with the very rare areas where eighteenth-century Paris had been preserved, or go to diverse provincial towns—such as Auxerre or Provins—to capture narrow frames of the urban atmospheres of that time. Of course they could also, if needed, reconstruct one or two specific urban street-scapes. But what can you do—especially if you have a limited budget—if you need the rue de Miromesnil where Grace's Parisian hotel was located, the road to Meudon where she had her suburban mansion, the Palais-Royal, the rue Saint-Honoré, the rue des Carmes. And not only these but also the Portes Saint Martin and Saint Denis, the then Place Louis XV, the Esplanade des Invalides, the Gates and Barriers of Ledoux which imprisoned the city, a riverscape of central Paris from a bridge, and even a panoramic bird's eye view of the city from Terrasse Le Nôtre in Meudon?

Rohmer's ambition was to stage the topographical substance of Paris at the time. To transpose into film the narrative of his main character, he needed to deport the viewers into the space-time coordinates and aesthetics of the Revolution's epicenter. The trick and technique that he resorted to, and patiently tested prior to deciding whether he would do the film of not, was to ask an artist to execute thirty-six paintings—93 × 55 *centimeters*, for a 16 : 9 picture format—representing the desired spaces and views in the style of the time: Hubert Robert, Louis-Léopold Boilly, early Camille Corot, etc. The outdoor scenes were then shot in a blue screen studio, according to the precise coordinates of the spaces represented in the paintings, and later inserted, in postproduction, in those paintings. You have here an extremely interesting fusion and confrontation of cinema and painting, of the different ways in which moving and still images are able represent landscapes and spaces. Most of our

Stills from the film *L'anglaise et le duc*, 2001.

mental images of places and landscapes are impossible to photograph on-site, at least in the 16:9 format: they are mental recompositions that combine several views captured, while our moving body and eyes experienced the place and/or several other documents that we may have seen, such as photos, paintings or plans. If the painter—think of Guardi or Canaletto—wants his space to be immediately and plausibly identified by the viewers to achieve *verisimilitude*, he has to *re*-present it, which means to distort reality, to manipulate perspective so as to capture, within his fixed frame, the essential elements of the site's identity. In the case of the Place Louis XV, for instance, these will be the statue of The King, the Tuileries Terrasse, and the façades of the two hotels by Gabriel, which you could not capture in one photographic view, unless you placed yourself at a distance from which it would be impossible to distinguish anything of what is actually happening on the spot.

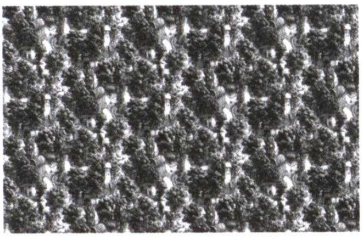
It so happens that the artist who collaborated with Rohmer on this film, and executed the paintings, is a very close relative of mine—my brother Jean-Baptiste Marot—and I was therefore able to discuss the process in detail with him. What is striking is the mixture of historical acuteness and precision with optical manipulation. Rohmer was literally obsessed with historical exactitude in all kinds of architectural details, and Jean-Baptiste's work required a great deal of preparatory research: checking paintings, engravings, plans, reading Louis-Sébastien Mercier and Restif de la Bretonne. Those details give part of their consistency and materiality to the manipulated and anamorphic views that were painted. Once the paintings were finished, Jean-Baptiste actually had to provide Rohmer and his assistants with plans of the distorted spaces drawn with AutoCAD, so that the scenes—the way people moved, their speed, the whole choreography—would be perspectively consistent with the pictured space.



Sketches for the film *L'anglaise et le duc* by Jean-Baptiste Marot.

Rem Koolhaas once wrote, speaking of architects and designers: "We can make things, but not necessarily make them real" (Koolhaas 1995). What we learn from Rohmer, and from his careful short-circuits between documentary and fiction, is that there is quite a difference between *faking reality*—a tiring spectacle nowadays—and achieving some degree of poetic *verisimilitude*. In fact, I am not sure I have any conclusion to offer, other than my faith that this combination of documentary and fiction, attention, and imagination could be furthered and fruitfully emulated in our fields, so as to enlighten the plots our landscapes are pregnant with. Instead of attempting to wrap it up, I'll end my text with some images of wallpaper that my brother is currently designing. At a certain distance, it looks like a new kind of "toile de Jouy," those garments of repeated decorated patterns that generally depicted complex pastoral scenes and were very popular in the late eighteenth century. Except that the interwoven landscapes are here denser, filled with both banal and weird industrial constructions, covered by trees, a water tower, a metro entrance, concrete sheds, a power line steel pylon, an advertising board, etc. As you get closer, you

are absorbed in the detail of those scenes, which literally melt into one another, forming a continuous fabric of trees, paths, and clearings that you can populate with dreams and memories. Jean-Baptiste has drawn some scenes of his childhood memories on a little canvas that can be superimposed in specific places onto the wallpaper and be made to fit exactly in the landscape.



Wallpaper designed by Jean-Baptiste Marot.

Finally, here is an image of his son and one of my daughters parading as little Rohmerian figures against this landscaped wall. I hope their generation will count a fair number of thoughtful Zoes.

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