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Eric Rohmer: An Interview

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## Eric Rohmer: An Interview

*Where and when were you born?*

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 biographers. It was certainly 1923.

*Have you always been interested in the cinema?*

No, I couldn't say that. I became interested in cinema very late, when I was a student. Up till then I despised the cinema, I didn't like it, I just liked reading, painting, then music a little later. I didn't take any part in theater, I didn't go to it very much. I liked classical French theatre, Racine, Corneille, Molière, but to read it rather than see it. I discovered the cinema at the Cinémathèque. I came to like cinema because I liked silent films, but I didn't discover film through just going to the movies.

*And then you began to write for Cahiers du Cinéma?*

No. When I discovered the silent film, then I wanted to make films. I tried to make amateur films, but I didn't have any money, I didn't have any equipment, I didn't have anything at all, and so I had difficulties. I joined film societies and got involved in organizing these and I made friends there and with these friends we had the idea—we were all very young then—of publishing a Film Societies bulletin, and then we wanted to start a critical review. It was at the time when *L'Écran Français* had just folded up and there was no weekly film journal. So we tried to found a very small film journal for we hadn't much money, and this published five issues, one a month. It was called the *Gazette du Cinéma* and was in the same format as *Combat* was at that time. And those who wrote for that review besides myself were Jacques Rivette, who pub-

lished his first article there, and also Jean-Luc Godard published his first article there. I don't think Truffaut wrote for it, but he was one of our friends. As for Chabrol he didn't write for it either, though I knew him by then. And after the *Gazette du Cinéma*—there was a review called *Revue du Cinéma* after the war which had gone through various stages, there was a first series of the *Revue du Cinéma* in the thirties. It was founded by a critic called Jean Georges Auriol, then it disappeared, and it reappeared after the war, published by Gallimard and André Bazin wrote for this *Revue du Cinéma*. And the editor was Jacques Doniol-Valcroze. Then Gallimard stopped publishing it and moreover Jean Georges Auriol died in an accident. So Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and André Bazin decided to start another film review with the help of a distributor in Paris called Léonide de Quéjème who acted as a sleeping partner. So they began to publish *Cahiers du Cinéma*—they wanted to keep the title *Revue du Cinéma* but as that still belonged to Gallimard they couldn't. And at first a good many very different kinds of people started off writing for that review. There was a little core of young men, who were known as the young Turks because they had rather violent ideas, and these were François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, and myself, and André Bazin called us 'Hitchcocko-Hawksiens' because we admired both Hitchcock and Hawks. I made my début as a critic as one of this little group. On the whole we were very unified because we had very similar tastes. Then Truffaut wrote a very violent article for *Cahiers du Cinéma* attacking the French "quality" cinema, people like Autant-Lara, René Clément and so on. A weekly magazine called *Arts* noticed this article and asked François Truffaut to become its film critic, or at least to do some

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film criticism for it. Truffaut was still very young, only 21 or 22, and he became the film critic for *Arts* and as there were plenty of films to write about and he couldn't handle them all himself, he called on his friends and most of the *Cahiers* people lent a hand, especially myself, and for a time Truffaut and I did the film review for *Arts*. At this time the *Cahiers* people were spreading out into all the magazines: André Bazin was writing for the *Nouvel Observateur*.

*During this time did you still want to make films yourself?*

I hadn't given up the idea, we all tried now and then, but it was very difficult. We all made some amateur films, using whatever means we had, but in general these films weren't very successful because we didn't have anything—not even a camera. When we asked people to lend us their cameras they wanted to do the camerawork themselves and sometimes the photography was pretty bad as a result. We had problems. Then my own story gets involved with that of the *Nouvelle Vague*, at least with the most important part of it because most of the *Nouvelle Vague* people were also *Cahiers* people. We didn't call ourselves that, it was the press who decided that one year there was a *Nouvelle Vague*. It was Chabrol who got us started, he had succeeded in making a film [*LE BEAU SERGE*] all on his own without having done anything before, by setting up his own production company with money of his own. He was very worried because the film almost didn't get released, and if it hadn't, then the adventure of the *Nouvelle Vague* might have stopped there, but he succeeded in making the film and even in making another one [*LES COUSINS*] because the first film impressed the Committee that gave out subsidies and so he got a subsidy to make another one, and then the first one was released and was a big success. Then a little after Chabrol came Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups*, though this wasn't his first film as he had already made a short in 35mm, *Les Mistons*. Then, or even a little before that, in an almost desperate attempt, for he had



MA NUIT CHEZ MAUD

practically no money, nothing but the film stock itself, Rivette made *Paris Nous Appartient*, but he too had previously made a short film, *Le Coup du Berger*. I too had made some 16mm films, and my first real film was produced by Chabrol's production company in 1959, a year after *Les Cousins*, and that was *Le Signe du Lion*. And at the same time Godard made *A Bout de Souffle*, but he turned to a producer outside the *Cahiers* group, Georges de Beauregard, and that's how he met Raoul Coutard. So that's now I got started, at the same time as what came to be called the *Nouvelle Vague*.

*I've heard that you recently re-edited Le Signe du Lion, that the producer had made some cuts in it when it was first released.*

No, what happened was that I made the film as I wanted to. It was produced by Chabrol, but for personal reasons, family reasons, he had to give up the company to someone else. The person who was managing the company didn't like my film, he thought it was too long and he cut it. So there is in existence a shortened version of *Le Signe du Lion*, to which I objected, but I couldn't take the matter to court and I settled for a compromise by which this version could be distributed in the provinces, but in art cinemas and abroad only my version was to be shown. And as the film in fact was shown only in art cinemas, I was really

the winner. Les Films du Losange have now bought the rights to the film and if we find a copy of the shortened version of the film we have the right to destroy it. So the only version of *Le Signe du Lion* which is valid is the one that lasts 1 hour and 40 minutes with music by Louis Saguer. But the version that was shown in London, I'm told, and this was contrary to the agreement we made, is the shortened version which is 1 hour 25 minutes long and has symphonic music by Brahms. And that isn't my version of the film, it's the producer's one.

*And then you began your series of Contes Moraux with two films in 16mm?*

Yes, the first two are in 16mm. This was because the *Nouvelle Vague* had established itself; those whose films had done well were setting out on a successful career, but those whose films hadn't done so well, like myself with *Le Signe du Lion*, were having problems with continuing. So I decided to go on filming, no matter what, and instead of looking for a subject that might be attractive to the public or a producer, I decided that I would find a subject that I liked and that a producer would refuse. So here you have someone doing exactly what he wants to. And as you can't do this on 35mm, I made the films on 16mm. That way it didn't cost very much, just the price of the film stock. I found people willing to work for me out of friendship, either as technicians or actors. The first was a very short film, only 25 minutes long, the second a bit longer than that, and then I decided to make the third, which was *La Collectionneuse* and I realized that, as long as you were economical with the amount of film you used, it wouldn't really cost much more to do it on 35mm, especially if you used color. Fortunately I met a friend who could advance me enough to pay for film stock and we used 5,000 meters for a film that ended up 2,500 meters long—that means almost a 2:1 ratio. And that is how I made *La Collectionneuse*, with no money.

*Can you tell me something about the subject-matter of these first two films?*

In the first two *Contes Moraux* I'm telling the story of a young man who meets up with a young girl or woman at a time when he's looking for another woman. You find this idea very clearly in the first film, which is about a boy who sees a girl in the street and falls in love with her but doesn't know how to become acquainted with her. He tries to follow her to find out where she lives, but loses track of her. So he makes up his mind to make a systematic search for her, and as he usually eats in a restaurant frequented by students he decides to go without dinner and use the time to look for her in the district round about. And as he gets hungry he starts going into a baker's shop every day and buys some cakes to eat while he's exploring the area. He notices that the assistant in the shop is becoming interested in him, perhaps falling in love, and as he is getting a bit bored, he starts flirting with her. He gets caught up in the game he's playing with her and finally makes a date with her, just to see what will happen. But just as he's going to meet her, he comes across the first girl, the one he'd seen right at the beginning of the story, who lives just opposite the baker's but had sprained her ankle and couldn't go out, which is why he hadn't seen her. She had seen him go in there every day, but, thinking that he knew where she lived, she assumed that he just went in there so that she would notice him. She doesn't know anything about the girl in the bakery. It's a very slight story, an anecdote really.

The second film is a little more complex because it lasts longer. It's the story of a young boy who has a great admiration for one of his friends, a student; he's younger than him and rather dominated by him. At the same time he holds it against the other that he sees him a lot with girls he doesn't like very much. For example, the other one has a girl that he doesn't like, she's not even a student, she has a job in an office and he finds this a bit vulgar. The friend neglects her, he wants to get rid of her, and this girl, who is in love with his friend, attaches herself to him and begins to flirt with

him just because of his friendship with the one she really likes, and he wants to get rid of her too and can't. So it's the story of this boy who spends all his time with this girl who's trying to make advances to him, and at the same time his friend amuses himself by jeering at the girl and making fun of her, he even takes all her money from her because she's ready to do anything to keep him. The boy is ashamed of all this and at the same time he daren't do anything to antagonize the friend he admires so much. So that's the situation: he's ashamed of going along with the game his friend is playing, but he doesn't dare to reproach him frankly and say "no." There's a second woman here too, an attractive young girl, and the young boy the film is about is a little bit in love with her, but she looks on him as just a youngster and isn't interested in him. There's really nothing but failure in the film: the boy spends all his time with a girl he doesn't like and the one he would like to go out with is inaccessible and each time he sees her he doesn't know what to say and is aware anyway that she would refuse him. The characters are all very young: the boy is 18 and his friend is 21.

*Do you plan to release these films ever?*

No, because they are really very amateur films, they were made on 16mm. If I were ever to show them it would have to be in a very small cinema and I think the public would just find them too amateurish anyway.

*Do you think this idea of the man who hesitates between two women is the connecting link between all the Contes Moraux?*

He doesn't really hesitate, it just happens that at the very moment that he's made his choice, made up his mind, another woman turns up. But there isn't really any hesitation, all that happens is that this confirms his choice. In *La Collectionneuse* for example, he just spends a week with her and then leaves her. In *Maud* too it's an adventure for him, but he doesn't hesitate between one girl and the other; if he'd had an affair with Maud it would have lasted a week and then it would have been over. In my latest film the hero's choice is al-

ready made, he's going to get married, and if he has an adventure it's nothing more than that.

*Did you start this series with very precise ideas about the subject-matter?*

Yes, I had had the stories in my mind for a long time, and when I started the series I knew what the theme of each *Conte* would be. But I hadn't developed them, they were still very vague.

*You've made some in color and some in black-and-white . . .*

Three in black-and-white, two of them in 16mm and *Maud* in 35. *La Collectionneuse* and *Le Genou de Claire* are in color and the final one, for which I haven't decided on a title yet, will be too. I haven't written the script for it yet, I'm still thinking about it.

*Why did you choose black-and-white for Maud?*

Because it suited the nature of the subject-matter. Color wouldn't have added anything positive to it; on the contrary, it would only have destroyed the atmosphere of the film and introduced distracting elements that had no useful purpose. It's a film that I *saw* in black-and-white, I couldn't see any color in it. There is nothing in it which brings colors to mind, and in fact there weren't any colors in what I filmed—for example I filmed a town in which the houses were grey, certainly there were a few colored hoardings and road-signs, but I avoided these, you don't see them because they weren't interesting. There is a stone church and there are no colors in that church. Then there is snow—no color there either. The people are really dressed in black or in grey, they're not wearing anything colored. The apartment too didn't have any color in it, it was decorated in grey already. I was concerned above all with exploiting the contrast between black and white, between light and shadow. It's a film in color in a way, except that the colors are black and white. There's a sheet which is white, it's not colorless, it's *white*. In the same way the snow is white, white in a positive way, whereas if I had shot it in color, it wouldn't

have been white any more, it would have been smudged, and I wanted it really *white*.

*So you don't agree with directors like Antonioni who say it's no longer possible to make films in black-and-white and that all films should be in color?*

I would agree that nowadays the normal thing would be to make films in color, and it might seem a bit archaic to film in black-and-white. And yet I don't agree really. I think that man has a very strong feeling for black-and-white; it doesn't just exist in photography, it's there in drawings and engravings too—painters created pictures in color, but they also worked in black-and-white for drawings and engravings, in order to create a certain effect. As a result I think that black-and-white is now accepted by the public, and so I think that people are wrong when they say that black-and-white is impossible nowadays. It's a very curious phenomenon. I think that black-and-white will always exist, even if it's true that it will be an exception and the use of color will be standard. However, it's quite certain that at the moment film-makers aren't particularly inspired by color; most films in color have the same banal look about them and might as well be in black-and-white. Color adds nothing to them. For me color has to *contribute* something to a film, if it doesn't do this, I prefer black-and-white for, despite everything, it gives a kind of basis, a unity, which is more useful to a film than color badly used.

*What would you say color contributes to La Collectionneuse and Le Genou de Claire?*

I didn't use color as a dramatic element, as some film-makers have done. For me it's something inherent in the film as a whole. I think that in *La Collectionneuse* color above all heightens the sense of reality and increases the immediacy of the settings. In this film color acts in an indirect way; it's not direct and there aren't any color effects, as there are for example in Bergman's most recent film, his second one in color, where the color is very deliberately worked out and he gets his effects mainly by the way he uses red. I've never tried

for dramatic effects of this kind, but, for example, the sense of time—evening, morning, and so on—can be rendered in a much more precise way through color. Color can also give a stronger sense of warmth, of heat, for when the film is in black-and-white you get less of a feeling of the different moments of the day, and there is less of what you might call a tactile impression about it. In *Le Genou de Claire* I think it works in the same way: the presence of the lake and the mountains is stronger in color than in black-and-white. It's a film I couldn't imagine in black-and-white. The color green seems to me essential in that film, I couldn't imagine it without the green in it. And the blue too—the cold color as a whole. This film would have no value for me in black-and-white. It's a very difficult thing to explain. It's more a feeling I have that can't be reasoned out logically.

*What exactly do you mean by the word "moral" in the title of this series of films?*

In French there is a word *moraliste* that I don't think has any equivalent in English. It doesn't really have much connection with the word "moral," a *moraliste* is someone who is interested in the description of what goes on inside man. He's concerned with states of mind and feelings. For example in the eighteenth century Pascal was a *moraliste*, and a *moraliste* is a particularly French kind of writer like La Bruyère or La Rochefoucauld, and you could also call Stendhal a *moraliste* because he describes what people feel and think. So *Contes Moraux* doesn't really mean that there's a moral contained in them, even though there might be one and all the characters in these films act according to certain moral ideas that are fairly clearly worked out. In *Ma Nuit chez Maud* these ideas are very precise; for all the characters in the other films they are rather more vague, and morality is a very personal matter. But they try to justify everything in their behavior and that fits the word "moral" in its narrowest sense. But "moral" can also mean that they are people who like to bring their motives, the reasons for their actions, into the

open, they try to analyze, they are not people who act without thinking about what they are doing. What matters is what they *think* about their behavior, rather than their behavior itself. They aren't films of action, they aren't films in which physical action takes place, they aren't films in which there is anything very dramatic, they are films in which a particular feeling is analyzed and where even the characters themselves analyze their feelings and are very introspective. That's what *Conte Morale* means.

*In Maud and Le Genou de Claire in particular you show us some people around 35–40 years old and also some who are very much younger. Do you think there is now a real disparity between these age groups, in the way that people often talk of the new generation having a completely different set of customs and moral values?*

My films are pure works of fiction, I don't claim to be a sociologist, I'm not making investigations or collecting statistics. I simply take particular cases that I have invented myself, they aren't meant to be scientific, they are works of imagination. Personally, I've never believed very much in the idea of a difference between age groups, I don't think it's very strong and it's certainly not an opposition between one group and another, and I don't think it's so very much stronger nowadays than it was before. And even if it is true, it doesn't interest me very much. It's not something I'm concerned with. The fact that the young generation today in 1971 might as a whole have a certain kind of mentality doesn't interest me. What interests me is to show young people as they really are just now, but also as they might be if they were fifty years old or a hundred years old, and the events of the film could have taken place in Ancient Greece, for things haven't changed all that much. For me what is interesting in mankind is what is permanent and eternal and doesn't change, rather than what changes, and that's what I'm interested in showing.

*I read in an interview in Les Nouvelles Littéraires that once you had finished this series*

*you planned to do something completely different, perhaps a film with a historical setting?*

No, I didn't really mean that. Certainly once I've finished the *Contes Moraux* I want to do something else, I want to have a change and I don't want to go on with them. I'll do six, that's all, and I've still one to go. But I don't know what I'll do next.

*You've done some work for television, haven't you?*

No—I've worked for educational television, which is rather different. Television itself is intended for a huge audience, but educational television is intended for a very restricted public because, until now, there was a lot of difficulty in even finding an audience. There were very few television sets in schools and they weren't available in every classroom. Now, with the coming of cassettes, things will change. I did some educational films on different subjects, just as other people did documentaries, and what I found very interesting was that I learned a great deal and I was free to do what I wanted. I was on my own, I wrote the scripts as well as filming them. It was a very interesting experience. But I don't know if these films would interest a wider audience.

*What do you think about what is happening in films just now? Do you think a new kind of cinema is coming into being?*

I've no idea. There may be people who are creating a "new" kind of cinema, but you have to ask how new it really is, if it doesn't just form part of the "eternal *avant-garde*," which sometimes just rediscovers ideas that were *avant-garde* years ago. For me what is really new is those ideas that never date. But what is certain is that lots of new ideas find their way into films that the public never gets to see. It seems to me that it would be desirable to be able to see everything that was being made by young people in the cinema, even if it wasn't completely successful, and in France, which is a country where you can see plenty of films, I think it's the country with the largest number of specialist cinemas in Europe, we haven't been given the chance to see what is

really new, and there's no place to show truly experimental films except the Cinémathèque. And so I can't pass judgment on this new cinema, though the films I make myself haven't any of the characteristics of what is called the *avant-garde*, and I feel that this "traditional *avant-garde*" isn't the route the cinema ought to follow. But I don't know very much about this new cinema, especially the young American cinema. I don't want to judge it; I make films that are right for me, and other people have their own ways to follow. What I want is for everyone to be able to take his own way and find his own public. But I go very seldom to the cinema, I don't write criticism any more, and I don't have enough knowledge to reply properly to your question.

*Have you ever wanted to make a film in the United States?*

No. First of all I don't speak English and I couldn't work in a country where I don't know the language. And I want to show the reality of life in France, I don't want to deal with a way of life I don't understand. At a pinch I could make a documentary about life in a foreign country, but that's a different matter. Also I have a very personal way of working and in France I have a great deal of freedom in this respect. I work with an extremely small crew; I have no assistant director, no script-girl, and I take care of the continuity myself. Perhaps I make mistakes and put an ashtray here when it should be there, but that's just too bad. And as usually there are no special clothes for the actors and few objects of special importance, in the long run there are no problems with this way of working. I use very few technicians because there are very few camera movements, but those technicians that I have are excellent, even though there aren't many of them. In other countries you have crews that are quite terrifying. I use five or six people and there you have sixty. That frightens me and I would be quite incapable of working in that way. I don't like to be the big boss who dominates everyone else; I like to be close to everyone, and I don't see how I could work

under these conditions in the United States. Certainly that applies to traditional film-making; "underground" films would be a different matter. But I can show on the screen only those things I know about, and I think that there's still a lot to deal with in France. There's the question of language too: I place a lot of importance on speech, on style, on voice quality and intonation, and it's very important. The French language counts for a great deal in my films. I'm a writer too, I write my own scripts, and as a writer the French language is important to me. I couldn't write something and give it to someone else to translate, for I'm my own author in my films. So I could only make films in France.

*What films or directors have most influenced your own, in style or themes?*

Silent films above all, though I don't know how direct the influence is. People say that there is a lot of talk in my films, that I express myself through speech rather than images, and yet in actual fact I learned about cinema by seeing the films of Griffith, Stroheim, and Murnau, and even the silent comedies. That's how I learned about cinema. There are two directors after the silent period whom I like very much and these are Jean Renoir and Roberto Rossellini; they are the people who most influenced me. As for the others, I admire Americans like Hitchcock, but I don't think I've been really influenced by them; if I have, it's quite unconsciously. I can tell you whom I admire, but influence is a different matter, for sometimes you don't even know yourself who has influenced you and I'm perhaps not the right person to talk about it.

*Do you prefer to work for a small audience that will appreciate what you are doing, rather than for a large public?*

Yes, certainly. If it depended only on me, instead of attracting people to my films, I would try to drive them away. I would tell them the films are more difficult than they really are, because I don't like to deceive people, I like to show my films to people who can appreciate them. I'm not interested in the

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number of spectators. Having said that, it's true that a film is a commercial undertaking and ought to recover its costs. But as my films don't cost much, I don't think I need a very large audience, and I've always thought that they should be shown in theaters that aren't too big. The intimate character of my films doesn't suit a theater or an audience too large for them. And I don't think they are suited to a mass reaction or a collective reaction. It's better if the spectator feels he is experiencing a completely personal reaction to it. Each reaction should be unique, individual, different. I think the film is enjoyed better if the spectators aren't sitting too near one another, if the theater isn't too full, and they don't know each other. Then each has a different reaction. That's better than a theater where there's a uniform reaction. I don't like watching one of my films in public and it distresses me if everyone laughs in the same place, as my film wasn't made with that in mind. I didn't write something just to make everyone laugh at the same time. It's all right if someone smiles, but it shouldn't happen at exactly the same place in the film. Perhaps this is because my films

are more like reading than like watching a spectacle, they are made more to be read like a book than seen like something on the stage. So it distresses me to see a collective reaction.

*Would you agree that the endings of your films tend to be rather sad?*

They are not what one is expecting to happen, they are to some extent *against* the person concerned. What happens is against the wishes of the character, it's a kind of disillusionment, a conflict—not exactly a failure on his part but a disillusionment. The character has made a mistake, he realizes he has created an illusion for himself. He had created a kind of world for himself, with himself at the center, and it all seemed perfectly logical that he should be the ruler or the god of this world. Everything seemed very simple and all my characters are a bit obsessed with logic. They have a system and principles, and they build up a world that can be explained by this system. And then the conclusion of the film demolishes their system and their illusions collapse. It's not exactly happy, but that's what the films are all about.

[Translated by Graham Petrie]