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The Green Ray By Eric Rohmer: An Attempt To Find The Real Story

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Abstract

This paper intends to go below the surface of Eric Rohmer's 1986 masterpiece, to discover what is really being said in the film. It is but a brief look at the film's naturalistic approach that carries elements of philosophy while also giving it a psychological touch. It is not too difficult a task as clues to what the film is really about are scattered throughout the screenplay. Eric Rohmer alludes to cinema being an art, eschewing the visual fireworks of commercial cinema and instead explores a character's imagination and obsession.

Keywords Email writing; Online teaching platform; Digital natives

Introduction

Definition: Green ray - noun (Astronomy) a flash of bright green light sometimes seen as the sun passes below the horizon, caused by a combination of the dispersion, scattering, and refraction of light.

The Green Ray by Eric Rohmer (1986) is adapted from the novel by the French writer Jules Verne. It was published in 1882 and named after the optical phenomenon of the same name. It is the story of a French girl, Delphine (Marie Riviere), who just broken up with her boyfriend via a phone call. Distraught, she goes on a journey around France in a bid to find a new relationship. She will soon discover that she is not going

to have one anytime soon, mostly because of how picky she is about almost everything, let alone when it comes to the choice of a man. Where will it eventually take her? A more important question would be: Can the audience understand the director's very personal treatment of an issue that is becoming more and more prevalent among young people in the modern age? This is the question that was raised in my mind after I watched the film.

Federico Fellini, the doyen of Italian filmmakers, notes that: "I don't like the idea of 'understanding' a film. I don't believe that rational understanding is an essential element in the reception of any work of art. Either a film has something to say to you or it hasn't. If you are moved by it, you don't need it explained to you. If not, no explanation can make you be moved by it." Al Jafree Md Yusop, one of Malaysia's Terajumuda (young director) says: "A good film is supposed to produce questions rather than answers."

If *The Green Ray* were to be screened today, it will be deemed rubbish by the general audience after about ten minutes of viewing, as it seems to be plotless, and appears to be headed nowhere. It is, however, aimed at a specific audience. It is a film that requires the audience to be involved with its storytelling, and is consonant with the manifesto of Cahiers du Cinema. It is, in short, 'cinema' and of cinema being an art. Even Hollywood director Martin Scorsese has been emphatic on this. Hence, the recent viral take on Marvel movies which he declared were "not cinema". Needless to say, it has managed to put the house on fire!

I am not a film scholar, and so will not be able to tell you what cinema is. But I think this piece by Eric Rohmer with his naturalistic approach, comes close to what is termed cinema. True to the manifesto of the Cahiers du Cinema movement to which he belonged, he eschewed the plot approach to filmmaking so as to express feelings that lie buried deep in his characters' consciousness. He developed the conversational, liberating style that would become his trademark, and which has led him to be recognised at the prestigious 1986 Venice Film Festival with four wins, including the coveted Golden Lion. The film has participated at the 1986 Toronto International Film Festival, the 1987 Rotterdam International Film Festival, and most recently, was rescreened at the 2003 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (Czech Republic).

The Adventures of Delphine

Delphine's trip around France could be named an adventure because the first and second part of the film is all about her going around city and country, meeting and having interaction and conversations with people along the way. But it all leads nowhere and there is no resolution. Her story of the journey is also like a fairy tale (I will talk about this later on). Along the way, Eric Rohmer cues the viewer subconsciously with scenes that have items that are green in color. My brain drew this conscious connection because the film's title has the word 'green' in it. Also, every time a green item is seen, a tune, which later I took as a

theme, comes on, as if indicating the significance of the moment. The tune itself takes on a significance because, nowhere else in the film is there any background music.

These elements hooked me into the narrative, peaking my curiosity about what else would crop up in her adventure, aside from the green paper advertisement, a couple of green playing cards, and a companion dressed in green who comforts her, and then, only in the third act, whilst walking down the beach, Delphine came across a group of old ladies talking about a novel called 'The Green Ray' by Jules Verne. This finally becomes the inciting incident that will bring the end to her personal journey. And at the very end of the film in a shop by the beach, she mentions it clearly: "The Green Ray'. But what is the significance of the green ray to her and her search?

When a Film Talks About Itself

The old ladies in the afore-mentioned group have all read the novel. Each one shares her romantic take on it, drawing parallels with the likes of the Cinderella and Snow White fairy tales. Is *The Green Ray*, therefore, a fairy tale? A bearded old man then appears to share his take about the novel. He, however, gives a scientific explanation about the green ray phenomenon in the manner that the author of the novel has done. That is, the green ray effect appears just as the sun is setting. And it is just for a moment. (The old man might have just been Jules Verne himself!) These elements raise more questions as to what the film is really about. Delphine has been eavesdropping but the conversation of the group seems to have had an effect on her. And she was not even part of the group! Has she finally discovered what it is that she is looking for? For me, this scene calls attention to the film's intent. Delphine appears to be confused. Does she see herself as being in a fairy tale, as being part of a fiction?

Delphine, the self-aware protagonist

She now comes to the realisation that she is actually a 'damsel in distress' in her own fairy tale. She decides to end the journey and go back to Paris. But at the railway station, her 'handsome prince' appears. He is reading a book (the connection to Jules Verne); they get into a conversation and they are attracted to each other straight away. But it is not yet the end of the story. Delphine remembers the Jules Verne description of the green ray that appears just as the sun is setting. It is late evening. Delphine decides to take him to the beach to experience the green ray. As she watches the sun setting, she is emotionally overcome. She begins to cry, the 'handsome prince' consoles her. The film ends when both of them seem to see the green ray. Significantly, the audience does not. Well, I certainly did not! So it must all have been in Delphine's mind.

But is that all there is to it? A fairy tale happy ending for Delphine? Not quite. We need to consider the film's subtext in relation to the character psychology. Fiction, though of the realm of fantasy, has in

fact, led Delphine to a psychological transformation, taking her back to her original self. And so inventing her own narrative becomes a necessity for her.

The Art of Eric Rohmer

In the 1960s and 1970s, Rohmer began to make films with his own unique voice. His Six Moral Tales were of fragile men and the women who tempt them. The six films that made up the tales were *The Bakery Girl of Monceau*, *My Night at Maud's*, *Claire's Knee*, *Suzanne's Career*, *La Collectionneuse* and *Love in the Afternoon*. The films explored all manner of men and their character, and their relationship with an 'unknowable' woman. Issues ranged from the men as just being naïve or indecisive, to living with a strict moral code that becomes challenged, having complications in friendship and romance, to lust and infidelity.

Rohmer once said that, that in his films, he was interested in showing how someone's imagination worked. And that obsession can replace reality for his characters. These themes, including that of the Six Moral Tales, later appeared in his films like *The Aviator's Wife* (1980), *Le Beau Mariage* (1981), *Pauline at the Beach* (1982), *Full Moon in Paris* (1984), and, of course, *The Green Ray* (1986). Delphine's obsession with her search for a partner results in her imagination working overtime. It is fiction that initiates a change in her character with the (overheard) conversation about Jules Verne's novel becoming the inciting incident that takes her to the (her own) satisfying conclusion seeing the sunset on the beach. She has broken free finally of the (Jungian) shadow that was stifling her.

The Animus and The Shadow Archetype

Shadow, in the psychologist Carl Jung's definition, is all outside the light of consciousness. It is sort of a circle where our conscious self or our ego, is at the middle of it and the shadow is at the bottom half. Animus is the female shadow in the form of a male. The young man Delphine meets in the train station exists only in her mind, because for her, the idea of the perfect man she is searching for (the handsome prince), is only in her mind. It is this animus that motivates her to take the final step to her self-realisation. However, the film has no happy ending in the usual sense. Eric Rohmer takes us into the realms of philosophy, to raise questions of ontology, about who we are, and where we are headed, and what would satisfy us. It is about the human condition in the modern world where nothing is certain.

These issues have been the subjects of many films by different directors from all over the world. Some films with female protagonists are *Out of Africa* (Sydney Pollack, 1985), *Three Colours: Blue* (Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993), *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003), *My Blueberry Nights* (Wong Kar Wai, 2007), *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009), and *Dear Frankie* (Shona Auerbach, 2004), to name a few. They portray characters who are restless, in search of what they themselves are not sure about, and sometimes the search leads to tragic and painful consequences. These subjects are becoming very relevant as more and more young people – like Delphine – struggle with their lives and try to make sense of what happens to them.

Jung has said that here is no coming to consciousness without pain. Going through some pain is necessary for the soul. And certainly Delphine has her share of it. Witness the release of pain through her tears as she sees the green ray at the end of the film.

What Eric Rohmer might be trying to say with *The Green Ray* is that fairy tales do not happen. They are fiction and will remain fictive. It is the same with the hope of meeting ‘the perfect man’. The chance is as rare and random as witnessing a green ray. But on the other hand, is Rohmer also saying – as with the character of Delphine – that a little fiction is sometimes necessary in our lives? These are the questions that stayed with me long after seeing the film. It was a good journey for me. And I’m all the better for it.

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