

**The critical years:
 interview with
 Eric Rohmer**
Jean Narboni

NARBONI: I offered to publish your essays on film: You didn't want them to appear as they were (even annotated), and you didn't want to update them with a preface; you wanted instead to talk about them. I'd like to know why.

ROHMER: You were the one who wanted to publish them, not I. Under the circumstances, the choice had to be yours, not mine. And since I had no desire to publish these essays, I didn't really want to write a preface, either. I don't want to publish them, but I'm not opposed to it. Many books by journalists are published. Sometimes they're posthumous works, and so the author isn't there. But when he is there, it's normal for him to indicate the distance between his current thoughts – his thoughts at the moment of publication – and his thoughts at the time he was writing. But if I had to write down all the differences, I'd never finish. It therefore is up to you to ask me questions, because I don't know what I'd say, except for this very vague and general thought: There are many things that I wrote at the time that I would no longer write. There are other things that I wrote that I would still write today. But is that at all interesting for the readers?

NARBONI: I think that for the readers, one thing may seem to be missing: a certain piece that was very important to many film enthusiasts. It appeared in *Cahiers* in five parts, entitled "Le Celluloïd et le marbre," and was almost an essay in itself. In it you began by noting that film generally was analyzed in terms of the other arts. In response to this, therefore, you wrote some articles on the modern novel, painting, architecture, music, poetry, and so on. But now you don't want to publish them.

ROHMER: That is, in fact, the only restriction I made. Why? Because, as you said, it's practically an essay in itself, and so I might want to publish it as a separate piece, if at all. But I don't want it published as it is now because there are too many things that I no longer believe and that now seem horribly naive to me – so much so that I'd have to write

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notes that would be longer than the essay. And since I haven't the least desire to address this question, or even to write film theory, let's just say that I'm putting it all off for the moment, perhaps forever.

In any case, this is how I'd define "Le Celluloïd et le marbre": I introduce myself as a film buff. That is, I speak in the name of this film buff, not in my own. The film buff seems to judge the other arts a bit too hastily. In fact, as a film buff, he recognizes that he lacks the cultural background necessary to judge the other arts. So he judges them from the point of view of a film buff, with a knowledge only of film. It's obvious that his judgments are extremely naive, unpolished, and reactionary. He doesn't know anything about modern art, because the aesthetics of film date back to before modern art, before impressionism – impressionism having been a reaction to photography. The film buff doesn't ask that the other arts return to the past; he's not quite that pretentious; he believes they must follow their own path, which is – in any case according to him – a dead end. He thinks that they're going to die at any minute and that another, younger art will take their place: film.

Now, in retrospect, many things have become apparent. I will say – quickly – that this return to the past, which seemed impossible in the fifties, has happened in the other arts. The international style in architecture and functionalism has been thrown into question. Likewise, painting has returned to the figurative style. In literature, it seems as if traditional forms are no longer ignored as they were before. Here I'm talking about the novel, poetry, and theater. As for music, it's more difficult to say. The greatest phenomenon of the twentieth century, I believe, is that there are two types of music: on the one hand, concert music and, on the other, popular music. Right now, owing to new techniques, especially electronic ones, it seems as if there's a bit more exchange between the two than there was in the fifties. Music is the most mysterious art. The things I wrote about music are what would have to be explained the most. But on the other hand, film has entered a decadent period – I'm not using this word in a pejorative sense – it's gone beyond its classical era. My theory, which I outlined in an article for *Combat*, called "L'Age classique du cinema," was that film's classical period was not behind us, but ahead. Now I'm not so sure. What I'm saying now might be just as open to criticism as what I said then. I therefore don't want to address the question. The only thing I can say for sure is that I no longer consider film to be the savior of all other arts, an art that could begin a new era, just as Jesus Christ began the Christian era. This idea may be more pessimistic in regard to film but may be more optimistic in regard to the other arts.

In addition, there are two "Celluloïd et le marbre." There's the series of articles published in *Cahiers* in 1955. And ten years later in 1965,

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there's the television program that was completely different but that had the same title. I was no longer the film buff questioning himself about other arts; I was instead asking the contemporary artist about film. I spoke to artists who seemed to me to be at the forefront of art at that time: people like Xenakis in music, Vasarely in painting, Parent and Virilio in architecture, Claude Simon and Klossowski in literature, Planchon for the theater, and so forth. One day Claude-Jean Philippe gave me the idea for the program. He asked me: "Why don't you do something on 'Le Celluloïd et le marbre'?" The program is part of a series called "Cinéastes de notre temps" ["Filmmakers of our times"], produced by Janine Bazin and André Labarthe. Labarthe's collaboration was important, especially for the selection of the artists. Labarthe knows contemporary art very well. My way of questioning the artists no longer was critical of the other contemporary arts; I tried to be very open. I was the opposite of what I was in the articles. It's no longer a question of a film buff who thinks that in order to love film, he has to be closed to contemporary art; it's a film buff who believes that loving film doesn't prevent him from being open to contemporary art. Oddly enough, at that time I found myself agreeing with *Cahiers's* new viewpoint, when Rivette had interviews with people like Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Boulez, and so forth. Today, with a new generation of artists, things would be different still.

NARBONI: You've written for several publications, as different as *Les Temps modernes*, *La Gazette du cinéma* (which you founded), *La Revue du cinéma*, *Cahiers*... Could you give us a history of your criticism, and tell us what it was at each time? Who were you fighting against before *Cahiers* became the champion of the *politique des auteurs*, the Hitchcocko–Hawksians, and so on? What was the climate like, and who was your adversary? Even the articles you wrote before the ones in *Cahiers* were always rather polemic.

ROHMER: I think it comes from *L'Ecran français*. There was a disagreement among the staff of *L'Ecran français*, which was a very popular weekly review at the time of the liberation. There was one group, Bazin–Astruc, that had its roots in *La Revue du cinéma*, which unfortunately appeared very infrequently and disappeared, I think, in 1949. The *Revue* was directed by Jean George Auriol, and that's where I wrote my first article, "Le cinéma, art de l'espace." That group represented the aesthetic wing. And then there was the political wing. Bazin and Astruc were, for example, the only ones who said good things about American film. During the cold war it was not acceptable to say anything good about American film. Little by little, all the people from Bazin's group – which we could call the noncommunist wing – left, and *L'Ecran français* became communist and finally teamed up with

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Les Lettres françaises. The spirit of opposition is still around from those years.

NARBONI: What about you, weren't you writing then?

ROHMER: I wrote something in 1948 for the last edition of *La Revue du cinéma*, while *L'Ecran français* was still in existence. I had given Astruc an article that had appeared in *Les Temps modernes*, entitled "Pour un cinéma parlant." I asked him if he could publish it in *L'Ecran français*, and he told me that he'd broken off with *L'Ecran français*, that it had become communist, but that he could give the article to Merleau-Ponty at *Les Temps modernes*. I left *Les Temps modernes* a few months later, because of a review of the Biarritz festival. I had done it on purpose – it was quite a feat, in fact – I had written something like: "If it's true that history is dialectic, at some moment conservative values will be more modern than progressive values." Jean Kanapa picked up on this and wrote in *Les Lettres françaises*: "You see, *Les Temps modernes* is reactionary." I don't think that Merleau-Ponty had read my article, and my collaboration stopped there.

NARBONI: What was your first occupation?

ROHMER: I was a teacher, I taught in Parisian high schools.

NARBONI: After your break with *Les Temps modernes*, how did you come to write for other publications, *Gazette du cinéma*, *Cahiers*, and so on?

ROHMER: I presented films at the Latin Quarter film club, which is where I met Rivette. Rivette wrote a remarkable article criticizing film editing, for the film club's bulletin. We transformed the bulletin with the help of Francis Bouchet, a television producer, into *Gazette du cinéma*, which published some of Rivette's articles and some of Godard's articles signed Hans Lucas. Truffaut didn't work on the *Gazette*; I met him at the Festival du film maudit sponsored by Objectif 49.

NARBONI: Did the film club have any specific orientation?

ROHMER: It had been founded by one of my former students, who was very resourceful. He was able to show copies of films that were going to be destroyed. We saw an enormous number of films there, especially American films from the thirties. The good thing about this film club was that it was for film buffs, and they showed the most films possible, without picking and choosing. It was different from the university film club which had its own theory, which showed film masterpieces, as judged by critics, by Moussinac, for example. But our film club showed everything, and that allowed us and our audience to say: "This is a masterpiece, this isn't."

NARBONI: How did *Gazette du cinéma* evolve?

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ROHMER: The *Gazette* had the support of the film club. We had wanted to change the film club bulletin into a paper, but we never managed to sell it at kiosks. It was very naive to try to get into all of that; I had financed a part of it, and some friends had given money as well. But we were lucky: We had readers from the film club, and *La Gazette's* first issues were profitable. But the last issues were unprofitable, and the *Gazette* disappeared. We thought of replacing *L'Ecran français*, but no one ever succeeded. There was never another film weekly. The weekly papers that came later were television weeklies, like *Telerama*.

NARBONI: Later on, there was *Cahiers*?

ROHMER: No, *Cahiers* is something entirely different. *La Gazette du cinéma* was the work of my film club friends, that is, Rivette, Godard, and me. Our film club was considered to be very amateurish. The people at *Cahiers* came from a different film club made up of professional critics, former collaborators from *La Revue du cinéma* – whose director, Jean George Auriol, had just died in an accident – as well as Doniol, Bazin, Kast, Astruc, Dabat, and so forth. The mentors of the group were Jean Cocteau, René Clément, and Robert Bresson. It had been founded at the end of 1948 and was called Objectif 49. It was a film club that, unlike ours, had a definite philosophy and debates that were held by all of these people. I joined them sometimes myself. Having begun to write for *La Revue du cinéma*, I could speak like a critic or even, I might say, like a film announcer and not just like a member of the audience, but I was really just a newcomer. Objectif 49 was led primarily by Doniol-Valcroze, who had decided after Jean George Auriol's death – and even when he was alive – to continue the *Revue du cinéma*. Because he couldn't get Gallimard's name, he took another one, *Les Cahiers du cinéma*. The first editions of *Cahiers* were very eclectic, written by people like Chalais, Mauriac, and so on. Even I was invited to write. My friends at *La Gazette du cinéma* came into it later. Truffaut, for example – I'm talking about this as if it were a political plot – had connections on both sides. He had a place in Objectif 49 because of his friendship with Bazin, and it was as Bazin's friend that I met him, rather than from the film club. Rivette, though, was connected only through *La Gazette du cinéma*. Rivette and Godard came from the *Gazette* side, Truffaut from the Bazin side. In the end, we all became friends; we went to films together and formed a small group, thereby creating a nucleus at *Cahiers du cinéma* that grew and grew, until the publication of the famous thirty-first issue which marked the first attack on "French quality cinema."

NARBONI: Thirty issues, that means the group had been in existence for over two years. But you and your group had had very definite ideas way before that, through the Festival du film maudit, the *Gazette*, your

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Eric Rohmer and Jean-Luc Godard celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of *Cahiers du cinéma*.

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taste for American films, and so on. Why did this statement appear so late?

ROHMER: You have to separate my situation from my friends': Each one has his own story. In Truffaut's case it was a bit different; his article had been written one year earlier. It was put aside because of his attack on René Clément. As for me, Doniol had asked me to write something, and so I did. But Godard and Rivette waited a year before agreeing to write something.

NARBONI: You say that there were two sides in criticism, an aesthetic one and a political one, more or less identified with the Communist party. When I reread the entire batch of articles, I noticed there was a great deal of criticism that focused on content. You and your New Wave friends considered yourselves to be advocates of the idea of *mise-en-scène*. But political and even religious and ethical ideas also seemed to have contributed to your philosophy. In rereading Truffaut's article "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français," which everyone saw as the most violent attack on "quality" film, I was struck by the fact that Truffaut also attacked these films on the grounds that they were blasphemous, childishly anarchist, and antireligious. You also wrote political criticism. You didn't like "decadence" . . .

ROHMER: Yes, that's true. It's difficult to talk about. I could say that that's the most outdated part of what we wrote. But in fact, I'm not quite sure. Let's just say that at the present time, I wouldn't get involved in politics – no one does anymore, not even *Cahiers du cinéma*. Having said that, there are many ideas today that I consider right leaning but that the left claims: For example, the idea of specifics – which extends to regionalism and nationalism – was considered extremely reactionary. Today, that's no longer the case. Criticism of industrial progress was considered to be a purely rightist idea, but now it's more or less a leftist theme. While reading these articles you have to make an allowance for the right wing's provocation, which I was not necessarily consciously aware of. It came from the polemic we had with *Positif*, which was, at the time, very political.

NARBONI: If we take away the part played by circumstances or provocation, there still remain some fundamental ideas. You were often charged with being a conservative, but I noticed that your articles continually advance the idea of modernity – you cited Rimbaud's famous injunction several times. I'd like you to talk about the relationship between the modern side, which you have always championed, and your desire to preserve a classical side. How could you both attack what you called decadence and refuse to look toward the past?

ROHMER: My idea is very simple, and I still believe it. It's the idea that in the evolution of art there are cycles, and so it returns to the past.

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There was Antiquity and the Middle Ages, then the Renaissance, then once again we returned to the Middle Ages with romanticism. It's as simple as that. When I say, "We have to be absolutely modern," I mean that to be modern sometimes means being backward looking, although right now I'm against such "retro" tendencies. I'll use a simple example: In the past, if an architect had been told that he could design a house with a roof, he would have fallen into a horrible rage, it was unthinkable. Now, a modern architect does design houses with roofs. To lock oneself into a so-called modern form, and to want it to remain fixed, represents a conservatism worse than saying "Classical values are permanent." I thought that modern art was somewhat deceptive. It could be just as tyrannical as classical art, and as tyrannies go, we may as well have classical tyranny! But I was careful to indicate that I was speaking in the name of modernity.

NARBONI: Yes, in fact, everyone was surprised when you finished making your film for educational television, on the changes in industrial landscapes. Some people were expecting a nostalgic film, but you insisted on the true beauty of modern architecture.

ROHMER: In an article that is the introduction to an interview that Michel Mardore and I had with Henri Langlois, I said that the preservation of the past ensures the possibility of modern art. If museums were to disappear, we would have to start painting like Raphaël again, but as long as Raphaël's paintings still exist, why bother imitating him? We can do other things. So we should preserve the past. It's the same for film. Maintaining links with the past, with the works of the past, doesn't prevent our moving forward – quite the opposite. In other words, in my opinion – and if I reread this sentence later on I don't think I'll be ashamed of it – I've always been against destruction. I think that in order to build, we mustn't destroy. Many people think the opposite, that destruction is necessary. I don't agree at all: New structures must take their place next to old ones. There's plenty of room in the universe; destruction is not a prerequisite for construction. That's why, politically, I'm a reformist more than a revolutionary. It's true that in the seventies, the word *revolutionary* was so revered that to say "I'm a reformist" seemed incredibly vulgar – but I think that now it's OK to say it.

NARBONI: At the time, there was a certain kind of film content that you didn't like: It was the opposite of films that glorified ideas of grandeur and nobility, heroic acts, and equilibrium between man and nature.

ROHMER: In this, I think that Rossellini had a great influence. If you want to retrace my aesthetic and ideological itinerary, you'd have to start with the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, which made its mark on me in the beginning. I never talk about Sartre, but he was still my

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starting point. The articles that appeared in *Situations I*, which discovered Faulkner, Dos Passos, and even Husserl, contributed a great deal to my thinking. I went through an existentialist period before I began thinking about film, but the influence remained, I think, and continued to affect me in my first films. Rossellini is the one who turned me away from existentialism. It happened in the middle of *Stromboli*. During the first few minutes of the screening, I felt the limits of this Sartrean realism, to which I thought the film was going to be confined. I hated the way it invited me to look at the world, until I understood that it was *also* inviting me to look beyond that. Right then and there, I converted. That's what's so great about *Stromboli*. It was my road to Damascus: In the middle of the film, I converted, and I changed my perspective.

NARBONI: You went through the same changes as Ingrid Bergman did in the film.

ROHMER: Yes, it's extraordinary! That's what I tried to show in my article for the *Gazette*, to show that these values of grandeur, values that were completely rejected at that time, the resolution to create greatness using great means was able to exist through film, whereas the ideology at the time was to create something from nothing.

NARBONI: In talking about *Pauline at the Beach* (*Pauline à la plage*), you once said that you'd always been in favor of the optimistic film, in the tradition of Renoir – even if it led to sad, cruel films and might include death – rather than existential films like – as you mentioned – Wim Wenders's films, for example.

ROHMER: That's right. I'm very sensitive to the existential charm of film, which we see, for example, in Antonioni or Wim Wenders. That's the way I feel at the moment. In fact, I recently saw *Alice in the Cities* (*Alice dans les villes*) again, and I found it wonderful, yet I'm still as in favor of optimistic films as I was then.

NARBONI: For you, then, the source of film's greatest current is "the boss," Jean Renoir?

ROHMER: Renoir is something else, he represents another current. Renoir is no longer at all existentialist. But he's modern. More expressionist than impressionist, closer to Cézanne than to his father. There's a Brechtian side to him as well, a certain didacticism, but much more deeply buried. I might have been opposed to Brecht as a film critic, and none of Brecht's ideas, in fact, has come to the cinema, except perhaps through Renoir. You mustn't look for Renoir's modernism in the same place you find it in Antonioni or Wenders: It's completely different, it's unique, inimitable. Renoir is the least theatrical of all the filmmakers, the one who goes the furthest in his criticism of

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the theater and, at the same time, the one who is closest to the theater. It's a total paradox. It's the paradox of film, which is an art without being an art, performance without being performance, theater without being theater, which rejects theater, in fact. For me, in this sense, Renoir is the greatest of them all; I can see his films over and over and always find something new, and just the fact that his importance has not yet been recognized proves to me that he is in fact the greatest.

NARBONI: Greater than Hawks, for example, who is another of your favorite filmmakers?

ROHMER: Hawks's importance has not yet been recognized either, it's the same thing. It is recognized, they say, but in my opinion, Hawks is way above the place they've assigned him. Hawks is different from Ford, different from Walsh. I think people who admire Hawks generally admire him as an American filmmaker. At the moment, I'm rather anti-American, but that doesn't prevent me from liking Hawks, because there's a paradox in him, just as there is in Renoir. As far as I'm concerned, Hawks and Renoir are not so different, but I can't talk about that here. I can only say again what I said about Hawks in a little article on his filmography: He is not the filmmaker of appearances but the filmmaker of being.* What does that mean? I can't say. I can't explain it, but that's what it is: There's no difference in his films between being and appearing. It's not being and nothingness, either. It's being opposed to being, I could say.

NARBONI: Rivette ended his article "Génie de Howard Hawks" ("The Genius of Howard Hawks") with this sentence: "What is, is."†

ROHMER: Yes, in the end what I'm saying isn't original, since Rivette has already said it, but I agree with him.

NARBONI: Your articles are based on the idea that film isn't an art that says the same things that the other arts say, but just in a different manner. Instead, it's an art that says things that are fundamentally different.

ROHMER: Yes, and that's an idea that I still believe in very much.

NARBONI: It was very strange at the time to say things like that.

ROHMER: That's why I was opposed to all the sixties' structuralist and linguistic ideas. For me, the important thing in film – to repeat what Bazin said – is ontology and not language. Ontologically, film says something that the other arts don't say. In the end, its language resembles the language of the other arts. If one studies the language of film, one finds the same rhetoric as in other arts, but in a rougher, less re-

* *Cahiers du cinéma* 139, January 1963 (Howard Hawks special issue), p. 39 (JN).

† *Cahiers du cinéma* 23, May 1953, p. 23 (JN).