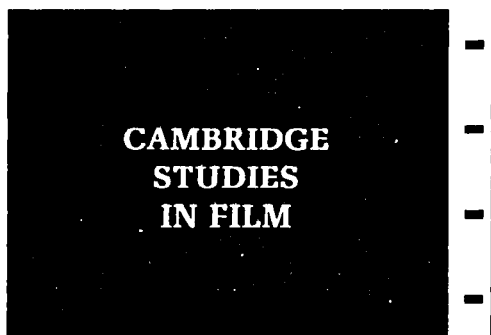


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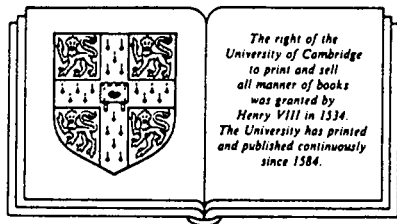
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# THE TASTE FOR BEAUTY

ERIC ROHMER

*Translated by*  
CAROL VOLK

Compiled for *Cahiers du cinéma* by Jean Narboni



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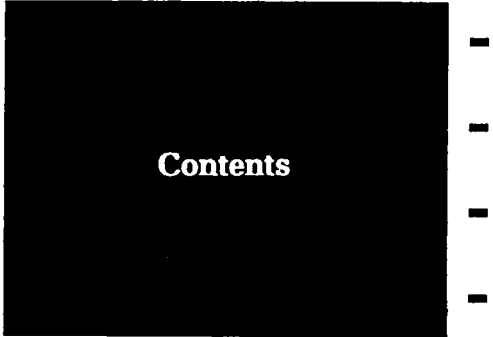
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**Foreword to the  
 American edition**  
*William Rothman*

My films, you say, are literary: The things I say could be said in a novel. Yes, but what do I say? My characters' discourse is not necessarily my film's discourse... What I say, I do not say with words. I do not say it with images either, with all due respect to the partisans of pure cinema, who would speak with images as a deaf-mute does with his hands. After all, I do not say, I show. I show people who move and speak. That is all I know how to do, but that is my true subject.\*

In recent years, the advent of what is called "theory" in academic film study has led the field to turn away from the study of authorship in film, both from critical studies of individual authorships and from reflection on the implications of the *fact* of authorship in film, on the conditions that make authorship in this singular medium possible. Historically, this turning away occurred at the precise moment rigorous practices of film criticism, responsible to the films and to the critic's experience, were being instituted in the university, and film study was claiming – and beginning to earn – its rightful place in the university's intellectual life.

When the field turned away from "author criticism," it turned away from criticism as such. Instead of critical acts grounded in experience, it turned to a succession of "isms" that shared a common understanding of the role of theory: Theory was to be primary, and was to be applied to films from the outside, seeking neither inspiration nor evidence from the films themselves or from the theorist's experience of them. Predictably, these theorists discovered in the films only what the theories they were applying had already determined, a priori, to be there. As a consequence, the achievements of the masters of the art of

\* From "Letter to a Critic: Concerning my *Contes Moraux (Moral Tales)*."

## Foreword to the American edition

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film – that is, the films themselves – and the achievements of those critics who defied fashion and never abandoned criticism remain substantially unacknowledged by a field that nonetheless possesses the means to acknowledge them. In other words, this “turning away” was – and is – also a repression.

For film study to undo this repression, to come to itself in the wilderness of theory, it must attain a new perspective on itself: on its own history; on its subject, film; and on film’s history. I view the publication in English of this collection of Eric Rohmer’s essays on film written between 1948 and 1979 as an important step toward this goal.

Love them or hate them (and all film lovers seem to do one or the other), no one would deny that Eric Rohmer’s films bear his personal signature. Rohmer has his own unique style, method, and thematic concerns and his unique vision of the power and limits of the film medium. Rohmer is an *auteur* if ever there was one. And as the essays in this volume abundantly demonstrate, when it comes to film criticism, too, Rohmer is an author who must be taken seriously.

“I don’t believe there is one good critic who isn’t inspired by an *idea*, whether of art, of man, or of society,” Rohmer writes.\* It is clear that Rohmer is indeed inspired by such an idea, around which all his critical writing revolves: It is Bazin’s seminal insight that the key to film lies not in the realm of language but in the realm of ontology, in film’s unique, unprecedented relationship to reality – a relationship that is radically different from that of literature, theater, or painting.

Until film, one had either to paint a painting or describe something. Being able to photograph, to film, brings us a fundamentally different knowledge of the world, a knowledge that causes an upheaval of values.<sup>1</sup>

Film doesn’t say, it shows. For Rohmer, this principle has fundamental implications on the nature of the *art* of film.

Painting, poetry, music, and so forth try to translate truth by the intermediary of beauty that is their domain, with which they cannot leave without ceasing to exist. Film, on the other hand, uses techniques that are instruments of reproduction or, one might say, of knowledge. In a sense, it possesses the truth right from the beginning and aims to make beauty its supreme end. A beauty, then, and this is the essential point, that is not its own, but that of nature. A beauty that it has the mission of discovering, and not of inventing, of capturing like a prey, of almost abstracting from things. . . . But although it is true that the cinema manufactures nothing, it doesn’t deliver things to us in a neat package either: It arouses this beauty, gives birth to it. . . . If it gave us nothing

\* From “Of Three Films and a Certain School.”

<sup>1</sup> From the interview with Jean Narboni.



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but things that were known in advance, in principle if not in detail, all it would capture would be the *picturesque*.\*

In turn, what film is has fundamental implications for the direction the history of the art of film has taken.

Ever since the cinema attained the dignity of an art, I see only one great theme that it proposed to develop: the opposition of two orders – one natural, the other human; one material, the other spiritual; one mechanical, the other free; one of the appetite, the other of heroism or of grace – a classical opposition, but one that our art is privileged to be able to translate so well that the intermediary of the sign is replaced by immediate evidence. A universe of relationships therefore appeared that the other arts may have illuminated or designated but could not show: the relationship between man and nature and between man and objects – directly perceptible relationships that are quite beautiful – but also, since the age of the talkies, the less visible relationship between the individual and society.<sup>1</sup>

I have quoted these passages at length because they are so characteristic. Reading the essays in this volume, so profoundly insightful, so cogently and eloquently expressed, it continually strikes me that Rohmer is very much a figure from a bygone age, an age these pages bring vividly to life – the postwar age when the best minds of a generation (at least in France) fervently believed in cinema, believed that making films, and also viewing and thinking about them, was a heroic enterprise. It was the age of André Bazin's pioneering investigations of the ontology of film, the age of the founding of *Cahiers du cinéma*, the age of the triumphant emergence of the "Nouvelle Vague." And it was also the age that immediately preceded film study's turning away from criticism. It is no accident that it was the thinking of this postwar age, and specifically thinking like Rohmer's, that film study repressed above all when the field turned away from criticism.

Nor is it an accident that the essays in this volume, which speak to us from a bygone age, are nonetheless so stunningly contemporary. I do not mean by this that they resemble current writing about film, which of course they do not. Rather, Rohmer's questions and ideas are fresh and alive today precisely because they have been repressed, not addressed, by film study. The vibrant life in Rohmer's writing gives it the power of making most of today's academic writing about film seem obviously repressed and repressive, dead from the neck up and the neck down, and specifically *dated* – dated because it is clearly past time for such denial of life to end.

As a filmmaker, Rohmer is not only still active but at the peak of his powers, continuing to make films that are at once classical and

\* From "The Taste for Beauty."

<sup>1</sup> From "Of Three Films and a Certain School."

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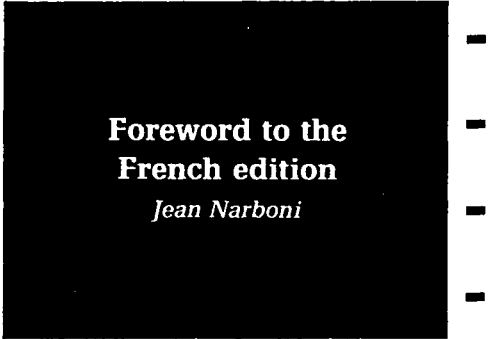
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**Foreword to the American edition****x**

astonishingly modern. In his films as in his critical writing, Rohmer strikes me as a figure out of the past. Yet his films, old and new, also have the power of making most other films seem dated. These films about contemporary life, pulsing with life themselves, are decisive demonstrations of the undiminished power of the ideas that are worked out in this volume – ideas about humanity, freedom, history, space, time, language, art, beauty, and, of course, about the medium, the art, and the history of film.

The ideas that stand behind Rohmer's films are also those that stand behind his critical writing, enabling it to penetrate to the heart of the films made by the masters he most admires, such as Renoir, Murnau, Hitchcock, Hawks, and Rossellini. Rohmer's own films cry out for criticism that is equally penetrating, honest, responsible, and philosophical. I hope that the publication of this volume will help spur the field to undertake to acknowledge Rohmer's exemplary authorship. That is a challenge fit to awaken film study from its dogmatic slumbers.

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This four-part collection of articles written between 1948 and 1979 contains the most important of Eric Rohmer's essays on film. The articles appeared in various publications, primarily *Les Cahiers du cinéma*.

"The classical age of film" treats both fundamental and theoretical questions from different angles, but from a single theoretical viewpoint: questions of space and development, dogma and re-creation, different levels of discourse, classicism and the avant-garde, ontology and language.

The title of the second part refers to the famous injunction ("For an impure cinema") by André Bazin, whose closest disciple is still Eric Rohmer. It opens with the analysis in the form of homage that Rohmer paid to *What Is Cinema?*, discusses the problems of literary adaptation, and points out the (at times involuntary) beauty that sprang from "marginal" films: those in which the idea of *mise-en-scène* – an accepted notion today but that was newly adopted at the time – came to life.

The third part is dedicated to these "marginal" films. Because it discusses directors such as Hawks, Rossellini, Hitchcock, and Ray, it needed a title like "*The politique des auteurs*" to indicate its diversity. Last but not least is the section entitled "Jean Renoir," because for Rohmer and a few others, he is still the greatest of them all.

The author of these articles did not wish to see them republished in their original state, nor did he wish to modify or annotate them. "The critical years," a recent and unedited interview, provides the distance necessary to put them in perspective.