



The Green Ray

Director: Eric Rohmer
Country: France
Date: 1986

A review by Charles Taylor for Salon.com:

The American distributors who changed the title of Eric Rohmer's 1986 film "Le rayon vert" to "Summer" were probably hoping to convince audiences that the movie was another sunny, superficial entertainment from the director of the surprise art-house hit "Pauline at the Beach." It didn't work. Audiences didn't turn out for "Summer," although, along with "My Night at Maud's," the movie is one of Rohmer's masterpieces. It is also, in its small, stubborn way, one of the bravest movies I know.



The title "Le rayon vert" (literally "The Green Ray") is taken from a novel by Jules Verne. It refers to a rare natural phenomenon in which the refraction created by the curve of the Earth's atmosphere causes the last ray of the setting sun to flash a brief, intense green before it sinks beneath the horizon. Verne said that those lucky enough to see the green ray are able to see clearly into their hearts and the hearts of others. For Rohmer's heroine Delphine (Marie Riviere) that gift seems an unattainable treasure.

Delphine, a 30ish secretary, is the type of person who seems nice enough when you first meet her, yet somehow you're soon feeling guilty as you go out of your way to avoid her. Offered grilled pork chops at dinner, she can't simply tell her hosts she's a vegetarian and leave it at that; she has to launch into a speech on the medical and economic benefits of vegetarianism. While her friends play volleyball in the surf, Delphine stands a few yards away, kicking disconsolately, almost suspiciously, at the waves. She resists every suggestion anyone makes about how she might make herself happier, or even how she might spend a pleasant afternoon. And all the while, to each inquiry her friends make out of both exasperation and genuine concern, she keeps insisting nothing's wrong, nothing's wrong.

Unusually for Rohmer, "Summer" was largely improvised by Riviere and the other actors. (That leads to a few real gems of scenes, like one where an old confirmed Parisian insists that walking along the Seine is as good as going to the seaside.) Through much of the movie, we are given the privilege of watching someone behave as she does when she is at her least self-conscious and most characteristic. And the brilliant Riviere is so fully inside this maddening woman that we don't react as if we're watching an actress but as if she were Delphine. That may be why some people are so irritated by her that they can barely watch the movie. And also why others look at her and think, "My God, that's me."

A week before Delphine is to leave for Greece on her summer vacation, the girlfriend she planned to go with backs out on her. The rest of the movie is about Delphine trying to find a place to take her vacation. That's it. Rohmer has deliberately chosen a rather frivolous predicament to set off Delphine's uncertainties because both he and Riviere understand that Delphine is slightly ridiculous. But they also understand the state she's in, when there seems no chance for happiness, no possibility of change, a state when the slightest things — or nothing at all — set off inexplicable waves of sadness, when the smallest decisions seem impossible to make. Delphine is as precisely observed as any character Rohmer has ever put on the

screen, revealing herself, as all Rohmer's characters do, through minutely delineated nuances of conversation. And yet Rohmer allows himself to get closer to Delphine than to any of his other characters.

His peculiar gift has always been to make characters who might otherwise seem utterly trivial worthy of our attention. And yet if he weren't so civilized his films might seem almost clinical. The Rohmer of "Summer" still carries the subdued satirical air of a bemused observer. But he opens a rich vein of empathy for this genuinely unhappy woman. Even when Rohmer pokes fun at Delphine, "Summer" insists on the depths of her ordinary, everyday pain.

In summertime, it's expected that the very air and light will bring us pleasure. It's the worst possible season for Delphine because she is profoundly out of synch with the world. In one extraordinary scene she takes a solitary walk along a country road. It's a chilly, overcast day and suddenly, without warning, she finds herself in tears. Nothing about the scene calls attention to itself. Rohmer's plainer-than-plain images (the film was shot in 16 mm) show us Delphine walking intercut with the branches of overhanging firs blowing in the breeze. And yet it makes perfect sense when Delphine cries because what the scene conveys is her despair at being at the mercy of the world in all its vast unpredictability. Experienced through her eyes, a gray sky and a cool breeze in July are a thorn in the heart.

The marvel of "Summer" is how both Rohmer and his heroine get themselves back in tune with the world. Rohmer banked the entire movie on the off chance that he would be able to capture the green ray on film. He filmed sunsets for months. That's a hell of a risk for any filmmaker. For one who has controlled his films as precisely as Rohmer always has, it's nearly unthinkable. It's a leap of faith comparable to the one Delphine makes at the end of the film when, on instinct, she takes a chance in the Biarritz train station and is rewarded with her glimpse of the green ray. The look of sudden, unexpected joy on Riviere's face makes you feel as if you were seeing a soul reborn. It's a transcendent moment, and it seals up any remaining distance between Delphine and Rohmer, who was nearing 70 when he made the film and seemingly surprising himself with the joys still to be found in life. Rohmer brings Delphine to life, and she has the grace to return the favor.



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