



International Web Journal
www.sens-public.org

His Acts, Her Words

The male and feminine characters in Eric Rohmer's films

MARIA FERENCUHOVA

Abstract: For a standard study of gender differences in the characters of modern cinema, the most evident possibility might be to examine the transformation of the typical heroes of the two most popular cinematic genres, that's to say, in melodrama and action films. Choosing this course of action, however, would most certainly lead to a more or less rough generalization that, rather than reporting the progress of change in the cinematographic models of what we can call « a heroine » or « a hero », would rather be just another contribution to the stereotyped images of contemporary women and men. It is for this reason that I chose – so as to show the inevitable differentiation of the two sexes - a cinematic concept that is completely different, that of Eric Rohmer. In his films, the representation of man and woman is not defined as the « politically correct » concept of the two sexes (that which has recently been very popular, especially in American cinema.) For Rohmer, rather, gender difference pertains to a repressed or barely discernable representation of masculine and feminine stereotypes, equally as far as discussion is concerned as is action, two of the most important elements in this director's films.

Résumé: Si l'on veut réfléchir sur les différences de sexes de personnages au cinéma moderne, il s'offre la possibilité, la plus évidente peut-être, d'examiner les transformations des héros-types dans les genres les plus répandus au cinéma, c'est-à-dire dans le mélodrame et le film d'action. Or un pareil parcours mènerait sans doute à une généralisation plus ou moins grossière qui en effet risquerait d'être non pas un bilan de changement dans la conception de ce qu'on pourrait appeler « une héroïne » ou « un héros » cinématographique models, mais une autre contribution à l'image stéréotypée de la femme ou de l'homme contemporains. C'est pour cette raison que j'ai choisi – pour montrer l'inévitable différenciation des deux sexes – un concept cinématographique tout à fait différent, celui de Eric Rohmer, dans lequel la représentation de l'homme et de la femme ne passe pas par la définition « politiquement correcte » de deux sexes (ce qui était récemment très à la mode, surtout dans le cinéma américain). Chez Rohmer, il s'agit plutôt d'une représentation refoulée ou quasi-invisible des stéréotypes du féminin et du masculin, tant au niveau du discours qu'au celui de l'action – deux éléments les plus importants dans le cinéma de ce réalisateur.

[Original French version available on line. Click here.](#)

His Acts, Her Words. The male and feminine characters in Eric Rohmer's films

Maria Ferencuhova

For a standard study of gender differences in the characters of modern cinema, the most evident possibility might be to examine the transformation of the typical heroes of the two most popular cinematic genres, that's to say, in melodrama and action films. Choosing this course of action, however, would most certainly lead to a more or less rough generalization that, rather than reporting the progress of change in the cinematographic models of what we can call "a heroine" or "a hero," would rather be just another contribution to the stereotyped images of contemporary women and men. It is for this reason that I chose – so as to show the inevitable differentiation of the two sexes - a cinematic concept that is completely different, that of Eric Rohmer. In his films, the representation of man and woman is not defined as the « politically correct » concept of the two sexes (that which has recently been very popular, especially in American cinema.) For Rohmer, rather, gender difference pertains to a repressed or barely discernable representation of masculine and feminine stereotypes, equally as far as discussion is concerned as is action, two of the most important elements in this director's films¹ [1]. It must be understood, though, that for Rohmer, these stereotypes determine less the actual attributes of the characters, (which are actually very specific,) but rather allow them to be given what we can call a "label" according to which the Rohmerian hero can be presented. For example, one character might be a "single, Catholic man," a "young freethinker," or an "indecisive woman," among others.

Eric Rohmer, a filmmaker-theorist of the New Wave, can be defined, at least if one analyses the film cycles *Six contes moraux* and especially *Comédies et proverbes*, (I will not talk about his *Contes des quatre saisons* because they seem to be a combination of the two previous cycles,) foremost as a presenter of the 'stagecraft' of the commonplace, the everyday or the ordinary. That said, one must understand that the banality that pervades Rohmer's cinema is not associated with the feminine, as some might consider it to be, but rather pertains equally to the two genders. This

¹ This is not to say that the Rohmerian hero/heroine who speaks or acts in a more or less stereotypical way is, himself or herself, a stereotypical hero or heroine. The essential is to observe the redistribution of acts and dialogue according to gender, to observe the rules of who speaks almost at the level of what one would call the analysis of conversation.

attribute of Rohmer's artistic approach is, however, not exactly the main concept of his work because what is the most striking in Rohmer's films is not the banality itself, but rather this banality's metamorphosis (that's to say its conceptualization) effected by the arrangement of what one can consider the "story" of the movie, in its precise setting¹ and in the stances taken by the characters. The creating principle used by Rohmer is what I would call the « mise en langage » (or 'wordcraft') of images, whether perceived by the hero or heroine of the film, or by the viewer. This principle is founded on the essentially competitive duality of images and words. Thus, despite the fact that one might, on first impression, think that images are duplicated by words in the majority of Rohmer's films, the vectors of the image and of the word are, in fact, not at all identical. To the contrary, they act often in opposite directions, in accordance with Rohmer's principal schema, in film, images are meant to show something, words meant to explain. Here, either it is the word that explains (or, to the contrary, confuses) the image or the image is moved along by prompting words.

It is extremely tempting to interpret this duality of images and words according to the typical man/ woman dualism. Let me explain myself: In a Occidental patriarchal worldview, one can say, grosso modo, that the woman has been for a long time condemned to being shown (as the ideal of beauty, eloquent by her visibility and yet mute) whereas the man has taken for himself the power to signify, thus to have the right to words, to be a spokesman of dominant ideas, and to create a spiritual world, unlike the woman who is, after a fashion, the symbol of materiality.

However, this schema can function also in an inverse form, that of stereotypes of everyday life where the woman is considered chatty, wasting her words and spreading them everywhere to verbally create a virtual universe, fictive, furtive, ephemeral and thus vain. The man, in contrast, is defined as a being of action, of solid creation, verily a being of all which is solid (equally materially and spiritually.)

This double definition of clichés concerning the image and the word, the act and speech, can be illustrated by the two cycles mentioned by Rohmer, thanks to the strictly masculine narration of *Six contes moraux* and by the salient and abundant display of language of the female characters in *Comédies et proverbes*. Yet, Rohmer cannot be considered a director who succumbs to the classic representation of women and men in film. Nonetheless, in *Six contes moraux*, he seems to illustrate the first concept, her-action, he-words, that's to say, the woman shown, not completely passive, but all the same subordinate in the status imposed upon her by the man. The women's

¹ Don't forget that Rohmer, having studied architecture, always chooses precisely the settings for his films. The city or the country can thus become, in Rohmer's films, the very subject of the film, associated with the aforementioned banality. In the same way, Rohmer makes of the verbal or physical actions of his characters a theme.

actions are not, in general, endowed with a commentary that comes from her own mouth. It is the man, rather, who comments on what she does or what she has done. She is thus, despite the fact that she speaks, in a sort of underhanded fashion, rendered mute. The man, also the film's narrator is thus the one who controls what is said, the one who elaborates a style of speaking and consequently a narrative. More precisely, he invents the film's very narrative.

In *Comédies et proverbes*, Rohmer rather applies the second concept. Here, female speech is at the center of attention, while the man is presented above all as an interesting subject of discussion for the woman, someone to seduce or to observe. This speech, though, is abundant, random and intuitive, and is thus different from the men's speech in *Six contes moraux*.

To illustrate what I have just said, I choose only one example from each cycle, even if one could stop oneself at each film and try to depict the characteristic traits of this rough typology of speech-based gender difference. For *Six contes moraux*, the most pertinent example would doubtlessly be *La collectionneuse* (1969) in which Haydée, a young woman, is the least chatty character in the film, despite the fact that her actions keep her a sort of negative center to the story. The fact that she always "uses" different men sexually and without commentary, then leaves them one after the next, indifferent, annoys her two roommates in a summer vacation home. These two young men are, on one hand, offended because she has not, at least at the beginning of this narrative – chosen either of them, but on the other hand they judge her behavior, more or less masculine, (at least as the stereotype would have it,) to be scandalous. They make mocking remarks about next guest in the girl's bedroom, and offer themselves (as though the choice was theirs and not hers to make,) but in reality they shrink away from this anarchic danger, the approach of a collector who frenetically enlarges her collection. It is not until one of them succumbs to her charms that the male character changes over to the side of the act devoid of speech and that his words lose their force. Haydée, though, does not get the opportunity to form her own words, and even when she is humiliated by the men, she tries to defend herself more by actions than by speech. What is incidentally very symptomatic in this film is the way in which the three main characters are introduced. While Adrien, the narrator, is shown together with two girls, all talking about beauty, and Daniel, the second man, is shown in the process of giving a passionate speech of ideology and art, Haydée is presented in a close up featuring her bottom and thighs – wearing a swimsuit as she wanders or runs after men on the beach.

Yet, we must not forget that, even in this opposition of words and actions, that *to speak is already an action*, and that this action, itself, is gifted with eloquence. That said, the fact that one of the film's characters speaks does not necessarily mean that he *produces a dominant discourse*, asserting a certain position or point of view that will pervade the overall tone of the film. The concept of speech is thus, in this fashion, much more closely related to that of the general

narration of the film rather than the simple event of expressing oneself verbally. Furthermore, in *La collectionneuse*, the narrator is certainly not Haydée but rather Adrien, and it's he who, at the end takes the story with him, leaving Haydée, unchanged, to leave, to fade out, to disappear. The last *discursive* action in the film is that of Adrien, even if it is cowardly, as we see him henceforth unable to remain alone (that's to say, in silence.)

In *Comédies et proverbes*, the narrating principle changes. Here, the heroines have the role of indirect narrators of the film. They are placed at the center of the story – of their own story – as subjects, and thus as talkers, able to produce speech. In *Le beau mariage* (1982), Sabine invents for herself a whole romance between herself and a young lawyer, but this love only exists in her words. These words, incidentally rather militant, do not take into consideration the words and even the actions of the “future spouse” who does not give any sign of reciprocating this love. The interpretation of this man's restrained actions (which are rarely shown on screen, rather, Sabine's words both define and interpret them) is thus insufficient, a perfect example of verbal illusion. The fact that Sabine believes in what she is saying seems to prove the clichéd concept of the virtualness of female discourse, to show that it is subjective and egocentric, but withstands multiple collisions with the reality of actions and images. One sees that Sabine's romance has no referent, that it takes place only in words, yet, we are led by her words and by the film's narrative that leads from them, to hope that the passionate words of this heroine could make her dream a reality. However, this biblical principle of the creative power of words has no place in this film of Rohmer's. (It must be added that he will eventually use this concept, but this won't be for ten more years, in *Le conte d'hiver*.) If one tries now to characterize Sabine's speech, that which I just called militant, one could consider it – just by its tone and it's force – pseudo-feminist speech, but later it shows itself to be almost anti-feminist, asserting that a woman's place is in the home, the calm of essentially-passive interior life. It is thus a great paradox that Rohmer establishes by showing us at the beginning of the film – and in images – an unhappy heroine – but one autonomous and emancipated (who has a relationship with a married painter, who works and tries to earn a living on her own) and in tearing apart this image of the modern woman just presenting it with the naive, traditionalist, and radical discourse that Sabine produces. I cannot say that it is not the same for the male speech in *Six contes moraux*, where the speech likewise enters often into conflict with reality, here understood to be the images, but what is crucial for the first cycle is that the cinematic narration continues to be moved along by this speech, to the contrary of that in *Comédies et proverbes* where it is moved along by images, in actions often enough devoid of speech.

Moreover, it is interesting to reconcile the masculine speech of *Six contes moraux* and the feminine speech of *Comédies et proverbes* with the respective title of these two cinematic series. There once again, the masculine and feminine principles are underhandedly conformed to gender

stereotypes: morality, verily ethics, even, are associated with male speech, whereas chat, proverbs, and idiolects are considered the hallmarks of female speech. These labels are, of course, not decisive or imperative to one's reaction to the films, but they reflect rather well the divide between males and females all the same, at least as the clichés would have them be understood. It seems like the need to differentiate women's and men's words requires a certain tendency of stereotypical representation in which the differentiation of principal themes also comes into play. The religious belief in *Six contes moraux* is contrasts with the superstitious beliefs espoused in *Comédies et proverbes*, as do ethics and customs with body language and caprices, solemn tones with joking ones, and a story with a moral as opposed to a funny anecdote.

Despite all of these mentioned oppositions, it is impossible to consider Eric Rohmer a black-and-white director. The classification of *Six contes moraux* as a cycle of male clichés and *Comédies et proverbes* as one of female clichés would be much exaggerated. Besides, such a statement is not at all the point of my short exploration through these films in question. Rather, my focus is on revealing the fact that the differentiation of speech according to gender can easily lead to a sort of « canonized » representation and that it is practically impossible to escape this divide, one that can be sometimes pertinent, but sometimes founded on no more than cultural and social prejudices.

Eric Rohmer has been often proclaimed as the director who understands equally the reasoning of men and women. The truths of life that his characters discover are essentially a mundane universalism, one that is certainly not menaced by any shocking dysfunction. This verbal universalism, of which Rohmer is at once the author and spokesman, has, nonetheless, a double-face, always defined by the gender of whoever is speaking. And here we find another paradox, one very often found in movies, for the world of cinema remains, even nowadays, occupied mainly by men. The representation of men and women in movies is thus often men's impression of the way that women perceive the world around them and put it into words. The perfect example of this approach, which, in fact, personally offended me, is the American film *Ce que veulent les femmes*, conforming to the pseudo-feminist rule that Hollywood has applied to itself for the last ten years. In this film, Mel Gibson, after a rather ridiculous, (but nonetheless dangerous) accident, receives an injury that causes him to suffer a strange malady: he is capable of hearing women's thoughts. This film's representation of the noise in women's heads, however, is nothing more than an atrocious simplification of what usually goes on in anyone's head. Women's inner words here deny any concept of thought – and yet the objective of the film was to represent the complexity of female beings which – strangely enough – just like men, have the habit of using their minds.

In this point of view, Rohmer escapes the simplifications or clichés characteristic of this American film. This is above all thanks to his semi-documentary methods of working. The lively

dialogue of the heroines of *Comédies et proverbes* owes, in large part, its verisimilitude to the actresses' improvisation, for they, in an autonomous manner, expressed often enough their own thoughts. All the same, Rohmer does not escape the principle of a film author and thus the impression of an extraordinary realism in his films is actually nothing but a pretense. Thus, the gender difference pertaining to actions and especially to dialogue, stereotyped or true, are, in Rohmer's films, at once crafted from a mimesis and from a false illusion.

Translated from French by Claire Léon.