

## Encounters with the Accidental in Éric Rohmer's Cinema

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### Abstract

This article examines how chance encounters and the accidental in Éric Rohmer's cinema—particularly across *Contes moraux*, *Comédies et proverbes*, and *Contes des quatre saisons*—shape narrative and existential themes through a distinctive realism that blends the everyday with choice, uncertainty, desire, faith, and the miraculous. Drawing on philosophical perspectives ranging from Kierkegaard's notion of possibility to Simone Weil's ideas of grace and fissure, the article shows how the accidental becomes a gateway to spiritual transformation.

**A**s cited by Sylvie Robic, Éric Rohmer once remarked, « Chance [*hasard*] is always present in my cinematographic activity. » (Robic, 29; author's translation). This statement reflects both his filming method and his artistic attitude, but it also permeates his films' narratives; it is always present in the narratives—so much so that one cannot imagine a Rohmer film without characters encountering chance. What distinguishes Rohmer's filming method from what we see within his narratives, however, is that he entrusts himself to chance in the filmmaking process only to the extent that it gives him something compatible with his characters' status and circumstances and the filmic space. In contrast, his characters are subjected to chance encounters by the filmmaker as a tool to practice. That is to say, they're put at the mercy of chance.

While often framed in terms of realism, Rohmer's narrative architecture reveals a more enigmatic structure, where seemingly trivial elements take on ontological weight. This article will examine how encounters with the accidental in Rohmer's cinema, which is rooted in the everyday, give rise to both narrative and existential weight. By exploring the typology of these encounters and analyzing the characters' confrontations with contingency, we will focus on how the interplay of contingency and necessity shapes the characters' internal negotiations with desire, belief, faith, choice, and self-understanding.

From the very first film in the *Contes moraux* series, when he seemed to finally find his filmic path—after initial setbacks, including *Le Signe du Lion* (1952), his first feature, and his pedagogical television films (some of which remain noteworthy)—Rohmer adopted chance encounters as a narrative foundation for his films. These encounters may occur between two people, between a person

and themselves, or between a person and the world, sometimes mediated by external forces. These encounters, which do not primarily unfold between people but between the self and the unexpected, become thresholds for moral or spiritual transformation.

In *Contes moraux*, the stories revolve around men who are usually characterized—a recurring depiction in writings on Rohmer—as solipsistic and narcissistic, and whose discrete thoughts are generally expressed through voice-over, with the exception of Jérôme in *Le genou de Claire* (1970). In each case, the narration serves as a justification for the protagonist's actions, not least to himself. While chance and the question of probability are central issues—in some films more strongly than in others—the characters' responses to these themes, and their ways of approaching and engaging with them, differ from one series to another.

The protagonists of *Contes moraux* encounter situations that provoke and activate their mathematical faculty, engaging them in a subtle competition with probability itself. To attain the probable—to bring a desired possibility into actualization—they calculate, measure, and strategize. In *La Boulangère de Monceau* (1962), the protagonist is drawn to a young woman, Sylvie, whom he notices in the neighborhood where he spends his evenings. After their initial meeting, subsequent encounters with her occur by chance—until, ironically, he stops seeing her altogether right after a lucky encounter in which she agrees to go out with him. Importantly, they do not arrange a formal date; rather, following her suggestion, they will dine together only if they happen to meet again by accident. This attitude from the female character marks the beginning of Rohmer's exploration of how female characters engage with and respond to chance—an exploration that becomes more pronounced in the subsequent series and will be discussed later. A similar structure of encounter and probabilistic logic appears between Jeanne-Louis and Françoise in *Ma nuit chez Maud* (1969), where Jeanne-Louis sees Françoise by accident for the third time, dares to approach her, and asks her out. However, Françoise refuses to set a date and instead postpones the meeting to whenever they happen to meet again by chance.

Both male protagonists recognize chance and the accidental as malleable forces and are confident in their ability to encounter the person they desire by retracing familiar routes or revisiting familiar places. The young man in *La Boulangère de Monceau*, after losing track of Sylvie, starts strolling through the same neighborhood where he encountered her a few times previously, hoping to see her again. Similarly, Jean-Louis in *Ma nuit chez Maud* takes the same routes and returns to familiar places in the hope of encountering Françoise.

Yet beneath this confident engagement with chance—this calculated retracing of paths and presumed mastery of the accidental—lurks a deeper structure of self-deception. The narrators of *Contes moraux* often display an assured, even complacent, attitude toward themselves, cloaking their actions in moral or intellectual justifications. Characters like Adrien of *La Collectionneuse* (1967) and Jérôme of *Le Genou de Claire* turn their idleness or desire into narratives of heroism, while Jeanne-Louis, despite his more reserved demeanor, reveals a quietly grandiose belief in divine favor—a conviction rooted, as Pascal Bonitzer observes, in an « infantile armor » against doubt. This belief in perpetual good fortune—what Jean-Louis ultimately names as « luck »—serves not as an expression of faith but as a kind of protective fiction that wards off uncertainty (Bonitzer, 1991, 28). Such conviction feeds into a deeper blindness: Rohmer's male protagonists are not seekers of truth

but orchestrators of their own moral scenarios. As Bonitzer argues, they do not question others because they are too absorbed in their own temptations, too fixated on staging their own ethical or erotic tests. If the truth arrives, it does so unexpectedly—and even then, there remains in them a «strength of blindness» sufficient to deny it. In this sense, blindness is not merely an accidental flaw, but the very principle of their action: a willful ignorance that paradoxically sustains their illusion of control. (*ibid.*, 17)

Conversely, in the subsequent series *Comédies et proverbes* and *Contes des quatre saisons*, Rohmer presents characters and situations in which the accidental is employed in a markedly different way. Unlike the protagonists of *Contes moraux*, these characters do not strategize or calculate in order to realize a desired possibility—simply because they cannot. They are no longer the orchestrators of events, but are instead subject to contingencies shaped either by the intentions of other characters or by the invisible design of the narrative itself. In several cases, the unfolding of events suggests a form of machination—whether internal to the story, as one character subtly directs the course of another's experience, or external, as the filmmaker or narrator structures the plot with quiet deliberation.

To explore the theme of chance and accident in Rohmer's later films—and to understand the evolving attitudes toward these concepts by the characters—we must first consider the particular form of realism with which Rohmer depicts everyday life: a realism where characters encounter both the possible and the miraculous. Each film in *Comédies et proverbes*, as Antoine de Baecque and Noël Herpe observe in *Éric Rohmer: A Biography*, seems to begin with a kind of failed dream—a romantic ideal that has collapsed under the weight of «too much reality or lucidity.» (de Baecque, Herpe, 382). In the 1980s, Rohmer sought to revive this romantic dream by turning to theatrical structures. These allowed him to shape subtle, long-held reflections on the human condition. Yet he soon shifted direction again, attempting to conceal this theatricality beneath the « appearance of cinematic realism— because he firmly believed in this realism, as the only chance (minimal as it might be) to reopen people's eyes to the miracle. » (*ibid.*, 382)

Although Rohmer was a Catholic, his representation of spiritual ideas—such as faith and transcendence—through encounters with the accidental differed markedly from that of directors like Pier Paolo Pasolini or Robert Bresson (who described himself as a « Christian atheist »). Rohmer's approach was quieter, more oblique, yet no less committed to evoking the miraculous within the everyday. Fundamentally, in moving toward lighter yet more philosophically complex films, his perspective aligned increasingly with thinkers like Lev Shestov, who rejected the primacy of causality and rationalism in favor of faith and the unknowable (Shein, 282). Following Shestov's lead, Rohmer seemed ever more willing to abandon the secure boundaries of reason and venture into the realm of spiritual possibility.

Unlike *Contes moraux*, encounters in Rohmer's later films take on the character of games. A prime example is *Le Rayon Vert*, where Rohmer guides Delphine toward her destined endpoint by having her follow a winding path marked only by subtle, material signs—such as the playing card. Rohmer, who frequently employs objects rather than actors to represent fate and misfortune and to make them perceptible, relies on visible, external elements to convey these abstract forces. For him, introspective searching or constant self-analysis is futile, as everything of significance exists outside the self. Even if he did not hold firm beliefs, Rohmer described himself as someone who never doubted anything in

nature. This perspective explains why he incorporates it as a symbolic motif for Delphine; through the final sign, the green ray, she ultimately comes to belief. For Rohmer, what mattered was not the object of belief itself but that a person believed in something—anything was sufficient to inspire attraction.

To bring about Delphine's salvation through the attainment of divine grace and the awakening of faith, Rohmer could have chosen any number of dramatic natural events—such as a flood or a rockfall. Yet, as a nature-oriented filmmaker and admirer of directors like F.W. Murnau and Roberto Rossellini, who explored ontological questions through humanity's relationship with nature, Rohmer instead pursued phenomena that are elusive, transient, ephemeral, and miraculous—events whose perception and capture depend fundamentally on luck. Rather than depicting the grand, the impossible, or the purely accidental, he focused on pre-existing, sometimes unknown yet astonishing natural occurrences. In this approach, the boundary between spiritualism and materialism blurs and ultimately collapses into unity. For Rohmer, the miracle is that brief, unattainable, and elusive moment experienced not only visually, as in *Le Rayon Vert*, but also auditorily, as exemplified by the « blue hour » in *Quatre Aventures de Reinette et Mirabelle* (1987). In the latter film, the two girls have but one minute to listen to the profound silence that occurs just before sunrise. Like the green ray, this phenomenon exists at the threshold between two realms: sky and earth, spirit and matter.

Joël Magny argues that in *Contes moraux*, the mind is privileged over the body, yet the body resists ethical control, resulting in a form of happiness that often resembles resignation or suffering rather than true fulfillment (Magny, 56). In Rohmer's later films, too, we encounter characters whose thoughts are revealed through their physical and existential journeys—through encounters with people, objects, nature, or unpredictable events—each of which introduces a degree of uncertainty. As Magny suggests, their paths are both intellectual and corporeal. However, the form of happiness they reach, if it can still be called that, differs from that of the *Contes moraux*: it resembles a kind of conversion, an awakening to the realm of the possible in the Kierkegaardian sense. This process unfolds within a state of suspension that, as Serge Daney notes, replaces Hitchcockian suspense with a distinct form of *suspens*. Daney characterizes this *suspens* not by narrative tension or urgency, but by a theological suspension of belief. In *Le Beau Mariage* (1982), as the protagonist Sabine becomes increasingly unlikeable yet unavoidable, the spectator—paradoxically left entirely free—is subtly tempted to hope for the impossible, to believe in spite of what is shown on screen (Daney, 56). By the same token, a shared uncertainty is built between the spectator and the character in a film like *Le Rayon vert*, where Rohmer allows the narrative to unfold according to the contingencies of reality rather than predetermined plot mechanics. Delphine's diffuse yearning, shaped by hesitation and solitude, gradually draws the spectator into a space of quiet anticipation. The film resists narrative closure until its final moments, when a subtle, almost miraculous alignment of inner desire and external circumstance occurs—not as resolution, but as the emergence of a possibility glimpsed, rather than grasped.

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze describes Éric Rohmer's cinema as «a cinema of the spirit», arguing that Rohmer consistently insisted on the supremacy of the clear and delicate image over other types of images in order to reach what he terms the fourth (or even fifth) dimension of cinema: spirit (Deleuze, 178). If we consider *Comédies et proverbes* as a relative departure from the

motifs explored in *Contes moraux*—marking the beginning of Rohmer’s interest in depicting the conflicts of a new generation with everyday reality in a distinct manner—then the *Contes des quatre saisons* series can be seen as a return to the same philosophical questions posed in *Contes moraux*, albeit in a subtler and more veiled form. Unlike the earlier series, Rohmer addresses ontological concerns here with unprecedented clarity—though this should not be mistaken for an oversimplification of characters or relationships. Rather, this clarity corresponds to a theatrical transparency, where everything unfolds on the surface.

While Rohmer, like his French New Wave contemporaries, initially defined his cinematic approach in opposition to the theatricality of pre-New Wave cinema, he gradually came to embrace a distinct quality of theatricality. This stylistic evolution enabled him to reflect his unique form of ontology—a transparent ontology—within his films. Beginning with *Comédies et proverbes*, he increasingly opened his cinema to a theatrical element that allowed for a more articulate presentation of the veiled ontology embedded in his work. Rohmer poured the mysterious, the invisible, and the unattainable into the most exposed and surface-level domain—that of theatricality—and in doing so, approached the fourth dimension Deleuze identifies.

As a follower of André Bazin’s theories, Rohmer advocated a return to nature and a reversal of the dominant aesthetic values of his time, aligning himself with filmmakers such as Murnau, Rossellini, and Renoir. His commitment to portraying reality in cinema reaches one of its most nuanced expressions in the *Contes des quatre saisons*, where he foregrounds not the actual but the possible. While the possible is often conceived in opposition to the real—something unreal until actualized—Rohmer’s cinema challenges this dichotomy. If, as Kierkegaard suggests, the possible constitutes a higher reality insofar as it gestures toward freedom, transformation, and faith, then Rohmer’s characters inhabit a world in which the possible is more vital than the actual. What unfolds in these films is not a definitive realization of desire or truth, but an openness to what might emerge—a space where chance encounters, subtle gestures, or seasonal rhythms catalyze internal shifts. In this way, Rohmer reveals a deeper, more authentic dimension of reality: one shaped not by certainty or outcome, but by materializing possibilities within the everyday.

Pascal Bonitzer distinguishes between two types of filmmakers—those who favor complex, curved trajectories (Jacques Rivette or Raúl Ruiz being exemplary of this approach), and those who work with minimal, straight lines within a fixed frame, waiting to see what emerges at their intersections. He aligns Rohmer with the latter, suggesting that the distinct pleasure of his cinema arises from its clarity, precision, and sharply defined interactions (Bonitzer, 1983, 17). Rohmer indeed constructs his narratives with a rigorous linearity—stories unfold through encounters, dialogues, and decisions that map out clear relational geometries. Yet within this apparent simplicity, a different kind of logic quietly asserts itself—not one of curves or labyrinths but of contingent interruptions. In this sense, the narrative logic binding *Contes des quatre saisons* could be seen as a fourth logic: one that operates within the structure of straight lines, but opens them to the unexpected. If the four protagonists are connected by three straight lines—whether to each other or to a central figure—there remains something external to these connections, something that disturbs their coherence. Unlike a third logic aiming for synthesis or convergence, this fourth logic unravels threads, exposes hidden motives, and unexpectedly redirects trajectories. It is the lost necklace in *Conte de printemps* (1990),

the church and the Shakespeare play in *Conte d'hiver* (1992), Gaspard's composition in *Conte d'été* (1996), and Magali's intoxicating wine in *Conte d'automne* (1998).

The four stories share thematic resonances, particularly in pairs. *Conte d'hiver* and *Conte d'été* both center on indecisive protagonists who struggle with making choices. Rohmer remarked that Gaspard's dilemma in *Conte d'été* is not an inability to choose but rather the fact that he has already chosen *not* to choose (de Baecque, Herpe, 511). In other words, Gaspard believes he has no real choice, and thus he refrains from acting. According to Kierkegaard, this condition marks a surrender to a passive mode of existence, born out of the fear that making a decision would foreclose all future possibilities. *Conte d'été* bears a semi-autobiographical significance for Rohmer: Gaspard represents a version of his younger self, navigating a time of indecision. Though Rohmer was not a professional musician, his lifelong fascination with music and his slight regret at not pursuing it inspired him to portray Gaspard as a musician working on a melody based on sailors' folk songs.

Félicie in *Conte d'hiver* appears indecisive not due to weakness, but because she longs for something deemed impossible by others—this very social doubt distances her from the ever-present realm of the possible. For Félicie, the possible and the impossible are not abstract concepts but visceral experiences. As an ordinary woman and a hairdresser with limited cultural capital—unfamiliar even with Shakespeare—she embodies these concepts through lived experience. She holds a belief that chance and coincidence create possibilities, even if she can't explain it to others—like her slip of the tongue early in the film when she gives Charles the wrong neighborhood name, causing her to lose him. What Félicie shares with Natacha in *Conte de printemps* and Margot in *Conte d'été* (both catalysts and agents in Rohmer's narrative games) is a deep trust in herself, grounded in a world brimming with possibility that she accesses through a primal kind of faith, expressed through a mix of superstition, expectation, and prayer. As Marie Anne Guerin noted, these women, like others in *Comédies et proverbes*, are seekers, looking for spaces of belief in streets, country roads, summer houses, and spaces outside the city (Guerin, 88).

After visiting a church, Félicie tells Loïc, her intellectual and bookish boyfriend: « I used to try to choose, but there [in the church], I saw there was nothing to choose. » Given Félicie's tendency to misuse words and speak in awkward syntax, one might question whether her words fully capture her inner thought. She doesn't want to choose—but she chooses *to choose*. Unlike Gaspard, she recognizes that choice is not singular. This is an act of faith that affirms the continual presence of authentic alternatives and prepares her to embrace the untimely, the unforeseen, and the new.

For Rohmer, to believe in this world is to believe in its possibilities. He makes this explicit in *Conte de printemps*, establishing a tone that resonates across the series. In the final scene, Jeanne, a philosophy teacher, knocks over a shoebox and discovers Natacha's lost necklace—a moment of pure chance, precipitated by her own clumsiness (a trait of Rohmer himself). Until this point, Jeanne had pursued rational explanations, grounding all understanding in philosophy. Now she confronts coincidence head-on. It is even possible that Natacha herself hid the necklace, conspiring with Rohmer to demonstrate that scheming can lead to possibility—and, ultimately, to belief. As the youngest character in the series, Natacha resembles a mischievous yet generous puppeteer. Unmoved by Jeanne's tears, she closes the scene with a victorious smile and the line: « La vie est belle. »

In *Conte d'hiver*, Félicie takes her daughter into the city. On their way home, the girl insists—without a word—on entering a church to see the Nativity scene. Though hesitant, Félicie follows. As with other Rohmer characters, it is in the absence of speech that inner transformation begins. She later tells Loïc, « It's hard to say. I wasn't thinking. I saw. I saw my thoughts. » This is Félicie's new possible: waiting for the miracle and taking joy in it. In this, she resembles Gaspard in her passivity—but, unlike him, she embraces it consciously.

Each film includes a figure who initiates or guides the game: Natacha in *Conte de printemps*, the daughter in *Conte d'hiver*, Margot in *Conte d'été*, and Isabelle in *Conte d'automne*. Yet the actual scheming occurs in the first and final films. Rohmer's cinema is filled with young characters, whose future-oriented gaze fascinated him. The *Contes des quatre saisons*, in particular, delve more deeply into love, fidelity, seduction, and jealousy than many of his other works. But *Conte de printemps* also begins to complicate Rohmer's « youth-obsessed » image by including an older character, Igor, in the younger characters' world—through Natacha's intervention. This shift is further developed in *Conte d'automne*, which centers on middle-aged characters still oriented toward the future. Isabelle, Magali, Gérard, and even Étienne differ from the younger generation in their relationship with destiny: they can look both ahead and behind. In the final scene, Isabelle dances with her husband at their daughter's wedding, gazing past his shoulder into the unknown. The future? The past? This is the central question posed to a woman in her mid-forties. Her gaze—this act of looking—is distinct from the fixed gazes of younger characters such as Gaspard or Félicie. Gaspard's downward glances convey an inability to decide—a relation to the future. In contrast, Félicie's gaze in the church and in the theatre while watching *The Winter's Tale* signals the reception of a force capable of initiating a future event.

In *Conte de printemps* and *Conte d'automne*, the vulnerability of human nature—its social dimension, exposed through disruptions to the everyday and shaped by destiny—is more palpable than in Rohmer's other films. In both, Rohmer demonstrates that even those who look to the past can be bound by the banalities of the present and confined to the properties of the now. This is why his narratives never truly surprise: all four *Contes des quatre saisons* end precisely where they began, looping back on themselves. In *Conte d'hiver*, the inclusion of the *Winter's Tale* theatre sequence functions as a *mise en abyme*, preempting shock when Charles (the lost lover and her child's father) reappears on the bus. This aligns with Serge Daney's observation that Rohmerian characters do not transform, resolve conflicts, or undergo change. They remain as they were at the beginning—a narrative choice that reflects Rohmer's commitment to resisting idealism and confronting everything within the singular plane of immanence:

« A Rohmerian character doesn't evolve, doesn't change, doesn't resolve anything: by the end of the film, they are what they were at the beginning, and at the beginning, they were what the actor was outside the film. This is why Rohmer succeeds so admirably in bringing together, within a single film, seasoned actors, newcomers, non-actors, and friends. No doubt because he believes in transcendence, he treats everything on a single plane of immanence. His metaphysics contains a share of physics and keeps him safe from all idealism (in this sense, it's truly left-wing anti-fiction); but refusing evolution is one thing, not telling a story is another. A beginning and an end are still needed. » (Daney, 57; author's translation)

In his book *Eric Rohmer: Film as Theology*, Keith Tester, in the chapter devoted to *Contes des quatre saisons*, draws on Simone Weil's assertion about the imagination that « fills the void » left by

contingency, thereby acting as a « liar » that obscures grace (Tester, 157). In Weil's philosophy, the *void* is the space left by the absence of certainty or divine presence, which the imagination hastens to fill with illusory constructs; *grace*, by contrast, is that which arrives only when one consents to endure this void without substitution (Weil, 16–18). He then argues that in this series, characters like Natacha, Rosine, Isabelle, and Margot engage in elaborate romantic schemes to evade the fragility of empirical relationships, using imagination to mask the void of contingency. Their efforts often lead to dissatisfaction, as their plots either fail or remain unresolved, leaving them trapped in self-deception. In contrast, Félicie (*Conte d'hiver*) embodies Weil's ideal of receptivity to grace: she accepts the void rather than filling it with imaginative constructs, allowing for the possibility of transcendence. Tester thus frames Rohmer's cinema as a theological exploration of human attempts to evade contingency, with most characters failing—except Félicie, whose openness to grace aligns with Weil's philosophy (Tester, 157–159).

However, building on Tester's own reading of these characters, I argue that whether their schemes fail (as with Natacha), remain unresolved (as with Margot), or even succeed while planting seeds of ambiguity (as in Isabelle's case, which Tester surprisingly reads as a failure), these are precisely the figures who open fissures—not only for others they scheme for, but also, perhaps unconsciously, for themselves. Moreover, as the four films are structured in thematic pairs, it is important to consider the distinctions within and between these pairings. The contrast between *Conte de printemps* and *Conte d'automne* on the one hand, and *Conte d'hiver* and *Conte d'été* on the other, lies in the protagonists' modes of thinking and their relationship to uncertainty.

For Jeanne in *Conte de printemps*, thought is only legitimate if grounded in texts. Largely an observer, she seeks to rationalize the world through logic, thereby foreclosing the very fissures through which grace, in Weil's terms, might enter. Natacha, in contrast, keeps these fissures open through her scheming. As a young person brimming with potential, her thought is entangled with chance—an element Jeanne cannot grasp. In *Conte d'automne*, the schemer is Isabelle, a middle-aged businesswoman seemingly at ease in her domestic life. The generational distance between her and Natacha spans decades, and her matchmaking scheme is not an expression of youthful potential but a response to the boredom of routine—something even her daughter's wedding cannot dispel. Though she differs from Jeanne in her worldview, her imagination is still shaped by what might be termed a « philosophical allure »: a tendency to impose meaning on the world by aligning its fragments. For Rohmer, what matters is not the outcome of this scheming but the act itself—especially in *Conte d'automne*. Thus, even thirty minutes before the film ends, in the scene in which Isabelle embraces Gérald and kisses his cheeks, the first fissure begins to open for her—brought about by Magali's intoxicating wine.

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