Notebook Feature

勝手にしやがれ #3: Rohmer (Relatively) Big In Japan

Stephen Sarrazin • 03 FEB 2010

勝手にしやがれ : Japanese Film & Media On Its Own Terms

Here's a mantra that has served me well: "in Japan, the French New Wave is to cinema what Impressionism is to painting". Except for Claude Chabrol, the other founding New Wave members—Godard, Truffaut, Rivette and Rohmer—all became staples of the art house scene in Tokyo. This was due not only to the aesthetic impact of the movement on those

filmmakers who would become the Japanese New Wave, but also to François Truffaut's groundbreaking legwork, of coming regularly to Japan, up until 1983, to show his films, and to his relationship with critic and film specialist Koichi Yamada, who published a biography and memoir of time spent with the great director.

François Truffaut's death shook the film community in Tokyo (in *Domicile conjugal* Truffaut had sealed the bond between him and Japan). Eric Rohmer's passing away was commented upon by the specialized film press, while the daily papers, made up of business and media gossip titles, either listed key reminders of his career—including the Academy Award nomination for *My Night at Maud's* screenplay —or simply acknowledged the fact.

Other key Europhile film scholarship veterans like Hasumi Shigehiko and Yokichi Nakagawa, as well as other writers who would gather around the short lived but influential Japanese version of *Cahiers du cinéma*, had also been instrumental in keeping those filmmakers in the foreground. Rohmer's fan base differed, however, from those of his illustreous peers. Young directors in Japan were just as attuned to Rohmer's fabled production method as their French counterparts, of being on budget and schedule within the house he built, Les Films du Losange, rarely using major stars, shifting

between the pleasure of discovering youthful talents, and building over the years a company of Rohmerian players.

The audience, however, remained largely loyal to him for two important reasons: the charm of his naturalistic French morality tales, set across the country, allowing spectators over the course of decades to see the changes in French society—as with the women in *My Night at Maud's* (1969), *Love in the Afternoon* (1972), *Les nuits de la pleine lune* (1984), *Le rayon vert* (1986), etc.—and to experience the beauty and verve of his text and the manner in which it was spoken. To this day, there are Japanese students who learn French, in class, by listening to Rohmer films.

Similar trappings would befall Rohmer in Japan as they did in France. Although his legacy, from Paris to Tokyo, of the "apartment" film, or, in French, the *film à texte*, continues to produce heirs, this issue of the spoken text, the quality of it, its civility, has all but abandoned French cinema, with few notables exceptions, as in the films of the wonderful Pascal Thomas.

And yet Japanese spectators remain attached precisely to it, to that false impression of contemporaneity. Japan, once a vital market for French films (Unifrance, the official organization for the international support of French cinema,

has an office in Tokyo, and holds a yearly festival to promote new releases), has significantly reduced the number of European titles shown in theaters, with French film producers and distributors dazed by the shifting trends in audience tastes.

Rohmer's period and costume films never connected in Tokyo: *Perceval* (1978), *The Marquise of O* (1976), *The Lady and the Duke* (2001), *Triple Agent* (2004), or his last film, *Romance of Astree and Celadon* (2007). Practically all the others were released both theatrically and as DVD box sets. And yet the exquisite playfulness of his love triangles and tales of unrequited love of his more popular films relied on what became an increasingly artificial device, that moved Rohmer's world beyond real time. If the French might have expressed themselves as they did in *My Night at Maud's*, the nineties and the last decade were something altogether different. From Mathieu Kassovitz to Abdel Kechiche, filmmakers demonstrated how stunningly malleable an entity fFench had become. The biggest French hit in Japan thèse last fifteen years, and everywhere else one expects, was Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie*. Which sounded familiarly French (1).

Still, that love of the theatricality of the French voice, from Jean-Louis Trintignant to Pascal

Gregory, to the more perplexing use of an actress he favored on several occasions, Arielle Dombasle, gave Rohmer's art a distinct aura. Over the course of his career, there was one performer who nearly overshadowed the films, by virtue of voice and delivery, an actor who may have been Rohmer's greatest find, Fabrice Lucchini.

But will that wider aural void left by Rohmer's passing resonate at all ? Will there be, as with R.W. Fassbinder, another director who will dedicate a film to Rohmer? The French Cinémathèque intends to find out soon. In Tokyo, no echo.

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(1) For further discussion of this theme, see my colleague Michel Chion's wonderful book, Le complexe de Cyrano: La langue française dans les films français, published by *Cahiers du cinéma*, 2008. Another magical example of the music of a language is Christoph Walz's sublime performance in *Inglourious Basterds*, opening with French, then English, German and Italian (in the face-off with Brad Pitt's brilliantly unrepentant and monolithic Aldo Raine).