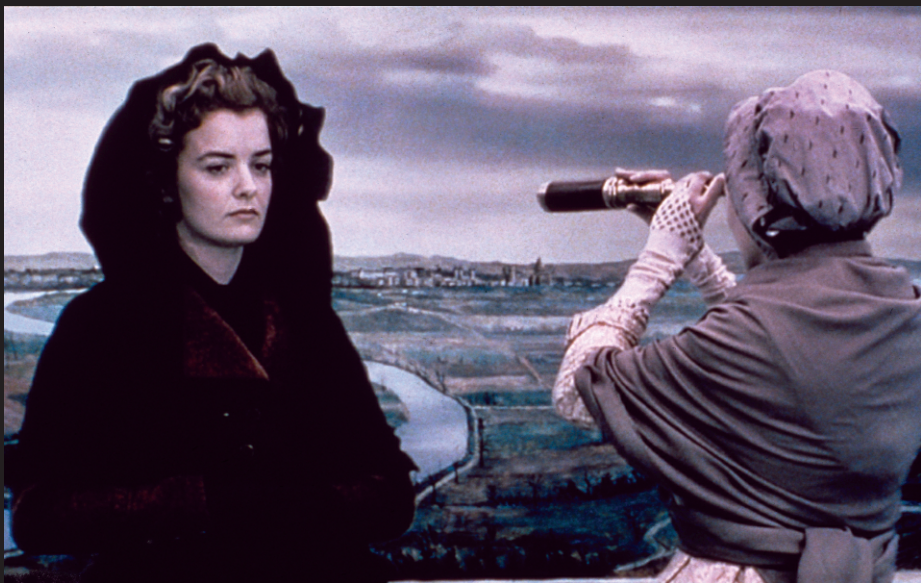


FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

# Eric Rohmer



DEREK SCHILLING

**Eric Rohmer**



Manchester University Press

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

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# Eric Rohmer

DEREK SCHILLING

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## Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent on national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as an art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about auteurism. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the auteur perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large



and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the informal and formal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES  
ROBERT INGRAM

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This book is for Ana and Adrian. You are always in my thoughts, even when my eyes are turned toward the screen.



## Introduction

Upon release in September 2001 of Eric Rohmer's twenty-third feature, the exquisite Revolutionary costume drama *L'Anglaise et le Duc*, the Parisian daily *Le Figaro* coyly asked its readers, 'Faut-il guillotiner Rohmer?' (Must Rohmer be guillotined?) (Macé-Scaron 2001). At age eighty-one, the reclusive director found himself in the glare of a spotlight he had long fled. That Rohmer, born Jean-Marie Maurice Schérer in 1920, had little patience for the institutional French Left and its rigidly Jacobin conception of the national past was no secret: 'Je ne sais pas si je suis de droite, mais ce qui est sûr, c'est que *je ne suis pas de gauche*' (I don't know if I'm a man of the right, but what is certain is that *I'm not of the left*), he famously remarked in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* (Biette 1965: 58). That the director of *L'Anglaise et le Duc* was a bona fide royalist nostalgic for the Old Regime, and hence deserving of the same fate as his aristocratic protagonists, however, was hardly a sure thing. No doubt it was the filmmaker's critics who lost their heads in the end. For in their attempts to stir up controversy, these self-appointed guardians of Republican ideology neglected the artistic merits of what was, as the first all-digital French feature (shortly followed by the Gérard Depardieu vehicle *Vidocq*), a signal achievement in the history of film style, and the capstone of Rohmer's half-century career.

It is fitting that an intimist cinema devoted to the analysis of sentiment should have so aroused critics' passions, however late in the director's life course. Political considerations aside, judgements of Rohmer's work have not been uniformly kind. It has been qualified as elitist, coldly intellectual, repetitive in its situations and themes, and downright exasperating in its garrulousness and often precious tone.

While some of these criticisms can be levelled against the director-based French cinema as a whole, others seem to dog Rohmer specifically, who has long drawn inspiration from such 'literary' sources as the short story and stage play and who, in later works like *Les Rendez-vous de Paris* (1995), has pushed his style to the limits of mannerism, at the risk of self-parody. Yet even the most conservative estimates acknowledge the profound originality that Rohmer brings to his filmic universe, idiosyncrasies and all (Thomson 2004: 771–3), and few would contest that he has crafted not a mere collection of features with the habitual number of hits and misses, but an œuvre of single-minded coherence. The six *Contes moraux* (*Moral Tales*, 1962–72), six *Comédies et proverbes* (*Comedies and Proverbs*, 1981–1987), and four *Contes des quatre saisons* (*Tales of the Four Seasons*, 1990–98), together with sketch films (*4 Aventures de Reinette et Mirabelle*, 1987), literary adaptations (*Die Marquise von O...*, 1976; *Perceval le Gallois*, 1979), and costume dramas (*Triple agent*, 2004) present a stylistic and thematic unity all but unparalleled in the contemporary French cinema. Along with Jacques Rivette and Jean-Luc Godard, Rohmer exemplifies auteurism – in Pascal Bonitzer's words, a cinema

qui ne se moule pas dans les standards exigés: une vedette, un 'sujet', une situation émotionnelle forte, une ligne d'action simple, une positivité immanente du héros.' (Bonitzer 1983: 10)

Arguably, the auteurism at hand is a conservative one: in Rohmer's view, the duty of the filmmaker is to explore human interaction through neatly drawn narratives which avoid the traps of introspection, symbol, or experiment.

What these films portray are moments of transition and availability, when characters caught between two or more objects of desire attempt to invent rules of conduct by which to engage to their advantage in the game of love and chance. In the prime of adulthood, they value the abstract freedom to choose among romantic partners in accordance with moral or practical principles, over and above the likelihood of attaining real-world results. Put simply, they find themselves talking about love far more than making it. This elision of sex in favour of discourse reflects not simply a debt to the classical French theatre, with its doctrine of *bienséances* (decorum), and to

1 'which doesn't fit the standard mould: a star, a "subject", a strong emotional situation, a simple plot line, an unfailingly positive hero'.

Hollywood 'sophistication' of the 1930s and 1940s, but the recognition that desire symptomatically must fail to attain its object. A gentle irony, sustained by an unemphatic, respectful camera, contrasts with the numbing physicality of many contemporary films, which tend to confuse emotional truth with extreme situations viewed in close-up. Historical pictures excepted, no one dies in Rohmer's universe, no pistols are drawn, no cars chased. Nothing much in fact will take place on screen, outside the exacting verbal confrontations through which characters of both sexes position themselves as intensely rational human beings who take intention and act, thought and speech to be one and the same – and who deceive themselves in the process. Launching themselves into intense debates and vaudeville-like plots as they seek out kindred spirits with whom to pass the time, only too rarely do they find, aided by chance, the transcendence they have been seeking all along, like Delphine in *Le Rayon vert* or Félicie in *Conte d'hiver*.

This is a cinema of visual understatement and, admittedly, verbal excess, where actors must scrupulously adhere to a text that determines their character's very being. *Je parle, donc je suis*: I speak, therefore I am, such is their motto. Rohmer takes to the letter the 'talking picture', making conversation the dominant form of screen action. But there is always more to a Rohmer film than meets the ear. Endings favour ambiguity over closure, asking spectators to revisit the narrative the better to expose characters' hidden motives and conflicting points of view (Magny 1995). And despite their straightforward, linear design, these fictions are not without what Bonitzer calls their 'secret compartments', their enigmas and their false trails (Bonitzer 1991: 69). Like Hitchcock's narratives, whose influence they bear, they can aspire to chiselled artistic perfection even as they invite us to contemplate the exterior, world-bound beauty which it is, in Rohmer's theologically inflected view, cinema's privilege alone to capture. 'A humbly documentary presentation of reality inevitably reveals an inherent order, which speaks of God', writes to this effect Colin Crisp (Crisp 1988: 5).

In spite of its recurrent narrative patterns and virtually unchanging treatment of image and *mise en scène*, Rohmer's work at the margins of French industry remains difficult to categorise. This is true in no small part for reasons of chronology. While his first completed shorts date to the early 1950s and his feature debut, *Le Signe du Lion*, to

1959 (released 1962), public recognition came late for Rohmer, with the successes of the mildly risqué *La Collectionneuse* (1967) and the international art-house hit *Ma Nuit chez Maud* (1969), which was nominated for two Academy Awards. Though his notoriety postdates the French New Wave's beginnings by nearly a decade, many historians have grouped Rohmer, who was editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du cinéma* from 1958 to 1963, with that journal's younger contributors, the 'Young Turks' Truffaut, Godard, Rivette, and Chabrol, all of whom made the transition to professional directing in 1958–59. Hence, in her influential survey of French film since 1968, Jill Forbes excludes Rohmer, together with Chabrol, Rivette, and Resnais, maintaining that

although all these directors continued to make films in the 1970s their period of influence was over. This was clearly true of Chabrol, who has devoted himself primarily to making commercial films, and of Rohmer, whose work is based on a deliberate and stylised continuity. (Forbes 1992: 2)

While one may agree with Forbes's premise, her conclusion begs the question as to the ways influence exerts itself over time. The films Rohmer released in the 1980s and 1990s – arguably the apogee of his classicism – may seem less innovative or less beautiful to look at than his *Contes moraux*, but they cannot be dismissed out of hand on the assumption that 'deliberate' variations on a theme are less compelling than bold essays in political filmmaking (Godard) or exercises in stylistic and generic virtuosity (Truffaut).

There is, indeed, a danger in classifying Rohmer based on the contacts he made in the heyday of *Cahiers*, during which he illustrated himself above all as a theorist of the seventh art after the manner of his mentor, André Bazin. As Richard Neupert has written,

Not every *Cahiers* critic who made a movie in 1959 was catapulted to fame, and just because historians by the late 1960s heralded Rohmer as a major figure of the New Wave does not mean that he was a vital member during its core years. (Neupert 2002: 271)

Whether the director should be considered central to the New Wave, then, depends on the definition given that entity as (1) an historical phenomenon predicated on changes in the economics of film production and confined to the years 1958–1962; (2) a generation of young, independent filmmakers who rejected the industry's rigid hierarchies

and standardised notions of professionalism; or (3) a way of seeing that questions the relationship between fiction and documentary, set and location, director and subject, screenplay and *mise en scène* (Marie 1997). By the first criterion, only the financially disastrous *Le Signe du Lion* and, if one stretches things a bit, the shorts of 1962–65 (*La Boulangère de Monceau*; *La Carrière de Suzanne*; *Place de l'Etoile*) are in any significant way New Wave films; by the second and third definitions, in contrast, any number of projects might qualify. With few exceptions, Rohmer has always worked from his own scripts, employed little- or lesser-known actors, and kept technical collaborators to a minimum, even when this has meant violating industry regulations. At the turn of the 1980s, when Truffaut had long accommodated his subjects to robust budgets and passably star-studded casts, when Godard had only just returned to fiction filmmaking after his foray into video, when Chabrol had arguably deserted innovation for tested formulas, Rohmer was virtually alone among his coterie of onetime *Cahiers* critics in making works consonant with New Wave ideals. The rough-edged location shooting of *La Femme de l'aviateur* (1981) and the improvisations of *Le Rayon vert* (1986), each produced on a shoestring in 16mm, attest to the do-it-yourself spirit that perhaps only Rivette, in *Le Pont du Nord* (1980), and Jacques Rozier, in his *Maine Océan* (1986), had managed to preserve intact. It's no accident that as Rohmer entered each new decade in life, the popular press persisted in calling him the most youthful of French directors, and one of few who, owing to a privileged relationship with a single production company – Les Films du Losange – had managed commercial viability without bowing to commercialism.

Film historians have not unduly insisted on sticking Rohmer with the New Wave label. One telling connection is suggested by Susan Hayward, who in addressing the 'moral discourses' of the 1960s and 1970s associates Chabrol's critique of bourgeois morality, Jean-Pierre Mocky's trenchant anti-authoritarianism, and Rohmer's 'intellectually intimist' depiction of 'the social mores of a certain intellectual middle class' and of female subjectivity in particular (Hayward 1993: 262). Despite the obvious differences that set off Rohmer's rather prudish rationalisations from the brash exposés and secret-sharing of a Mocky or a Chabrol, one should not discount the potential of Rohmer's pictures for social critique. This critique, however, would necessarily be of a second order, since a description of French class society is not



the rhetorical aim of the films themselves. Rémi Fourier Lanzoni thus quite appositely casts Rohmer as an heir to the humanistic tradition of Jean Renoir. Like Claude Sautet, who came to attention around 1970 with the ensemble picture *César et Rosalie*, Rohmer makes no secret of his affinities for popular romantic comedy. Yet where Sautet defers to dramatic convention, Rohmer betrays his penchant for formal rigour, producing films that appeal to a class of spectators concerned less with identification and catharsis than with the intricacies of discourse. As Lanzoni writes, Rohmer's narratives

usually overlooked [*sic*] a possible contact with the spectator's deeper mental universe, and, as a result, the presence of unrelenting melancholy in Rohmer's films has always had a limited impact on French popular audiences. (Lanzoni 2002: 285)

Box-office figures confirm the modest appeal of the director's concerns: only *Ma Nuit chez Maud* topped one million tickets sold in France, while most of his pictures have hovered in the 200,000–400,000 range during their year of release, pushing the half million mark thanks to frequent revivals.<sup>2</sup>

In France and abroad, critics have largely neglected the extent to which Rohmer's quintessentially French fictions, seductive and contemporary as they may be, are insulated from social and demographic change. No speaking parts are held by actors of African or Maghrebi origin – a fact that may attest as much to the closed state of the country's drama schools and motion picture industry as to the old ways of a director born shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. All the same, form and content in Rohmer's cinema reproduce the world view of a segment of the white European intelligentsia for which language is prized over action and social privilege is enjoyed uncritically. We do not find activists striving for a better world or workers engaged in struggle (compare with the equally personal universe of Robert Guédiguian, the director of *Marius et Jeannette* and *La Ville est tranquille*), but men and women who, equipped with better-than-average physical and mental characteristics and, one suspects, deep pocketbooks, compensate for their insecurities by speaking their piece. Whether it is worth the trouble to extract social critique from this portrayal remains to be seen. At the very least, readings such as those of Alain Hertay, who brings to bear philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky's

2 For full attendance figures, see the Filmography.

theses on individualism and emptiness on the *Comédies et proverbes* (Hertay 1998), or of Marion Vidal, in her study of the *Contes moraux*'s ambiguous heroines (Vidal 1977), can motivate spectators to delve into the relationship of class and ideology to film form. The same can surely be said of gender. Against the popular clichés that would paint Rohmer as a mild-mannered fetishist with a thing for teenage girls' knees (Claire) or posteriors (Pauline), critic Bérénice Reynaud has argued that female characters are not objects of the director's desire, but abstract figurations of the workings of cinematic desire itself. If the heroines of the *Comédies et proverbes* consistently fail to make themselves loved, it is because the *desire* which motivates them to act cannot, unlike Lacan's principle of *demand*, be fulfilled. The sexual impasse in which they are caught becomes an aesthetic object in its own right, made concrete in the act of waiting for a grace which, most often, will simply not arrive (Reynaud 2000: 262–4).

One gets the impression that, had he but world enough and time, Rohmer, who varies plot structures slightly from film to film, would end up exhausting all the permutations of heterosexual romantic involvement, or how – given a woman and three men, or a man and three women, or two men and two women, and so on – things move from the disorder of freely desiring individuals to a state of order, however provisional. While works like *Pauline à la plage* bring to human relationships an exacting geometry that leaves some spectators cold, they embody at the same time the positive virtues of clarity, concision, and balance that characterise all classical achievements. The range of information they deploy fosters spectatorial engagement while preventing easy psychological identification; exclusion of such industry formulas as the subjective camera and extradiegetic film music reinforce emotional distance. Actors are asked to walk a fine line between naturalness and artifice in a procedure that Maria Tortajada has described as a 'third way' between Diderot's transparency of role and Brechtian demystification. An 'ambiguous' form of seduction results, destabilising the film narrative and the workings of spectatorial desire (Tortajada 1999: 6). If this cinema is so seductive, it is, in the end, due less to its represented content (the amorous games of a well-heeled social set) than to the allure of form itself. Literary models from the classical stage comedy to the eighteenth-century tale and psychological novel inform the dual search for narrative economy and discursive complexity that is the director's trademark. Indeed, as

Rohmer long argued in *Cahiers du cinéma*, tropes that we associate with ‘literature’ belong to the cinema too, an art which thrives on a constitutive impurity. It is hence all the more essential that the director’s work be reclaimed from the province of literature, where it is all too quickly laid to rest, and that we ask ourselves how it resonates with the history and ontology of the medium. Rohmer’s predecessors are not only Marivaux, Musset, and Dostoyevsky, but Murnau, Renoir, Rossellini, and Hitchcock, to name but a few.

The goal of this volume is to provide a balanced appraisal of Rohmer’s œuvre in historical context. Although interpretation of individual films will not be its main objective (see Magny 1995 and Crisp 1988), representative examples from the director’s twenty-five features and fiction shorts will be presented throughout. As I have chosen to privilege questions of theory, style, and form relevant to films of all periods over strict chronology, Chapter 1 will present a full career overview. Its focus is on production history and reception in the mainstream French press. My hope is that the reader will find within that opening chapter reliable information (other than biographical) and a convenient framework for grasping what is an extensive, but by no means unmanageable, body of work.

Paradoxically, among the most significant obstacles faced by Rohmer’s viewer is the apparent transparency of the films themselves, or the effacement of the camera’s presence through editing. This key stylistic trait cannot be appreciated without reference to André Bazin’s concept of ontological realism, of which Rohmer was a major exponent at *Cahiers du cinéma*. To establish the intertexts and artistic principles his films put into play, Chapter 2 reviews the abundant critical writings Rohmer published in France from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. That exploration leads up to the discussion in Chapter 3 of the interdependence of film style and technique in the director’s pursuit of cinematographic realism: how are sound and image configured, and to what effect? How is the production process envisaged from screenplay to shoot?

The two remaining chapters broach issues central to the director’s finest work for the screen. ‘Seriality and theme’, devoted to the *Contes moraux*, *Comédies et proverbes*, and *Contes des quatre saisons*, looks at how Rohmer’s decision to work by thematic series forces the viewer to intuit, beyond the data of any given film, relations of complementarity, identity, and opposition that lend each cycle a complex, musical

texture. The art or, rather, the difficulty of representing the past is the subject of [Chapter 5](#), 'Literature and history', which pays close attention to four of the director's costume films, each of which rethinks the cinema in relation to the artistic imaginary of past epochs. The volume concludes with a brief excursus on *le rohmérien* – that inimitable, instantly recognisable variant of the French language that spectators come to love or to hate.

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## Career overview

Eric Rohmer was born Jean-Marie Maurice Schérer in 1920 in Tulle (Corrèze), a provincial backwater in south-western France, halfway between Bordeaux and Clermont-Ferrand. The fact that many sources give his birthplace as the north-eastern city of Nancy or furnish alternate dates of birth reflects the director's onetime habit of leading those who would pry into his private affairs down false trails. Although he has long given up wearing fake beards and dark glasses in public, and even consents to attend the odd festival, Rohmer has neatly separated his professional activities, centred on the Right Bank offices of Paris' Les Films du Losange, from his quiet family life in a Left Bank neighbourhood abutting the Luxembourg Garden. Few artistic collaborators have joined his circle of intimates, and journalists have learned to stick to questions of filmmaking alone, leaving their cameras at the door.

The upshot of this secretive posturing is that little of certainty is known of the director's past. Though presumed to be a 'Catholic filmmaker' (Lopate 2003: 170), Rohmer shares the surname Schérer (pronounced 'shayr-air') with Alsatian Jews, many of whom converted or left the border province. He has shielded from the public eye his spouse, whom he married in the late 1950s, their children and grandchildren. He has never spoken publicly of his brother, the philosopher René Schérer (b. 1924) – who taught alongside Gilles Deleuze at the experimental university Paris VIII and, in the 1970s, co-wrote works on homosexual liberation with gay activist Guy Hoquenghem – or of his son Denis (born 1958), a journalist who, working under the pseudonym René Monzat, helped to found in 1990 the anti-right-wing activist group Ras le Front and has written widely on the history

of right-wing movements. Whether the filmmaker's discretion is designed to conceal untold secrets, or simply to give lustre to an otherwise unremarkable existence, is for future biographers to decide. The fact remains that by showing healthy disdain for the industry's star-system, Rohmer has styled himself as a fiercely independent creator, a *cinéaste du dimanche*, or Sunday filmmaker, whose energies are entirely given to the pleasures of creation, as distinguished from the pursuit of public recognition.

Maurice Schérer's initial vocation was not cinema, to which he had limited exposure as an adolescent in the provinces: 'Quelques Charlot Pathé-Baby, *L'Aiglon*, et autres *Tartarin de Tarascon* constituaient tout mon bagage',<sup>1</sup> he noted in 1955 in *Cahiers du cinéma* (Rohmer 1955: 11). Coming from a major film critic, this admission undoubtedly took readers by surprise. But surely they had not been to Tulle, which Schérer left in 1937 to study letters at the Lycée Henri-IV in Paris, a training school for the academic elite. After failing twice the second part of the dreaded *agrégation* examination, Schérer taught French grammar and literature during the war years in various secondary schools outside Paris. Under German occupation, he chose, as did the majority of his compatriots, the middle ground between active resistance and collaboration: 'Je suis resté sans rien faire, sans participer à rien' (I got by without doing or taking part in anything) (Goudet 2004: 26). Germany's creation in February 1943 of the Service du Travail Obligatoire, the compulsory labour service required of all able-bodied French men born between 1920 and 1922, forced Schérer to lie low and even to procure false identity papers. He escaped – narrowly in one instance, in a Métro station – the habitual round-ups of STO-dodgers by the collaborationist Milice (Goudet 2004: 26). Whatever spare moments he had in these uncertain times were presumably spent composing short stories, some of which laid the groundwork for future screenplays.

In 1946, under the pseudonym Gilbert Cordier, Schérer published *Elisabeth* with the venerable Parisian house Gallimard. Written in July and August 1944 and set during the summer vacation just before the war, the novel treats the escapades of young men whose

1 'A few Chaplin pictures for home viewing, *L'Aiglon*, and things like *Tartarin de Tarascon* were the extent of my film culture'. The former is a 1931 historical melodrama set under Napoleon, after Edmond Rostand's play, the latter an adventure story from a novel by Alphonse Daudet.

primary occupation is flirting with the women they encounter along the banks of the Marne and at get-togethers in comfortable suburban villas. The women are prone to fits of pouting and their would-be suitors are listless and uncertain: very Rohmerian indeed. Themes of romantic insecurity, feminine beauty, and changes in the weather as a correlative of emotion likewise prefigure Rohmer's many 'outdoor' films, from *Le Genou de Claire* and *Pauline à la plage* to *L'Ami de mon amie*. Unremarkable in style, the dialogue-heavy *Elisabeth* went all but unnoticed.

For the war-weary French, the years following the Liberation were a time of reawakening, signalled by the arrival on French screens of the countless American films that had been banned under German occupation. As popular film-going entered its boom years, with a record 424 million tickets sold in 1947 (Crisp 1993: 67), a new, self-aware film culture took hold around the *ciné-club* movement, dedicated to the study of film history and aesthetics. As the chief programmer of Le Ciné-Club du Quartier Latin, Schérer came into contact in the late 1940s with younger and often intemperate film enthusiasts like Truffaut and Rivette. He attended *Objectif 49*'s Festival du Film Maudit in Biarritz, which featured premieres of Renoir's *The Southerner* and Vigo's restored *L'Atalante*, and began writing pieces on cinema aesthetics that led to his tenure with *Cahiers du cinéma*, the magazine founded in 1951 by Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, André Bazin, and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca. Influenced by Bazin's own theories of the photographic image, Schérer crafted throughout the 1950s arguments concerning cinema's classicism, its relationship to the other arts, and the notion of film authorship. This activity established him as a prominent critical voice in France, as we will see in Chapter 2.

## First steps

From the start, film comment was for Schérer connected to the practice of filmmaking. Aided and abetted by the core group of cinephiles who, on account of their antics and verbal sallies, became known as the 'Young Turks', he began work on his first 16mm shorts as early as 1950. There was at the time considerable demand for short subjects, both as part of standard cinema programmes, since the abolishment in 1941 of the double and triple bills (Crisp 1993: 52), and thanks to