

Words for a Conversation: Speech, Doubt and Faith in the films of Eric Rohmer and Mia Hansen-Løve

Introduction: Dialogue in Film

On 5 April 2016, the cultural review programme *La Dispute*, broadcast on France Culture, reviewed Mia Hansen-Løve's latest film, *L'Avenir/ Things To Come* (2016). Despite its success at the Berlin Film Festival, where it was awarded The Silver Bear, the film received a rather tepid reception on this programme. Intriguingly, the critical discussion about the film, and its perceived faults, centred on the question of its use of dialogue and then moved more generally to question whether speech is excessive in Hansen-Løve's work. For Thierry Chèze, the key issue that Hansen-Løve's work tackles is that of representing thought in the cinema: 'She is once again in her comfort zone, where her films are about thought, the problem of how to show us words, how to put words onto film.' Hansen-Løve's fifth film, after the relative critical and audience failure of *Eden* (2014), returns to questions of how the predominantly visual art of cinema shows us interior process of thought and belief and their articulation in spoken debate between characters. Notably, she returns to this cinematic quest to find a way to represent processes of thought through tying it to a narrative of female becoming. Whereas her first three films all represent a girls' coming-of-age, here Hansen-Løve offers a narrative of a mid-life crisis, in the story of a 50 something philosophy teacher, Nathalie/Isabelle Huppert, whose marriage breaks up, whose mother dies, and whose publisher drops her book series. Through turning to the story of a middle-aged woman who loses her mother, her husband, and her professional standing, Hansen-Løve offers a new perspective to her ongoing interest in what Emma Wilson has described as the seriality of girlhood. Her first three films showcase what Wilson labels 'the different and more unsettled relation to subjectivity of the female child' (2012, 275), placing the ambivalences and hesitations in the shift from childhood to adolescence into a frame informed by the loss of a significant male (father or lover), so that 'her films effectively take rupture and autonomy as their subject' (2012, 277). Here, in *L'Avenir*, Hansen-Løve offers an adult woman the same journey of loss and freedom, allowing us to see all the more clearly the ties between her work and the female oriented melodramas of mid-twentieth century Hollywood discussed by Stanley Cavell, which addressed the mature woman caught in a specific moment of her life course, a resonance I shall flesh out more fully over the course of this article.

All four films are interested in what her heroines will become: resolutely oriented toward the future, the films reject flash-backs or explanatory voice overs, enfold us into the present alongside the character and watching her as she simply keeps living, in itself an achievement in the face of brutal male unreliability. Fathers commit suicide; lovers travel; husbands leave. Hansen-Løve's girls and women find themselves forced into freedom. Nathalie's comment that 'when I think about it, I've found my freedom. Total freedom. It's extraordinary' could stand as an epigraph for all Hansen-Løve's main female protagonists, whom we see coming to terms with their freedom to find who they are and where they belong. The problem of knowing one's self, of articulating one's place in the world, of finding a relation that allows one to blossom, are represented in these films through the process of articulating (or not) one's ideas, knowledge, beliefs and desires, but are also linked to a specific interest in female experience, and the problem of female freedom in a society in which women are legal, social and economic equals to men, but still framed within gendered terms, especially in a powerful beauty and celebrity culture informed by the inhalations and exhalations of tortured postfeminist logics.¹ Processes of thought, self-knowledge, how these inform the evolving self, and their place in the cinema are thus revealed to have a particular significance for the representation of girls and women.

In this article, I argue that this sustained investigation into thought, a desire to understand one's self, communicating this quest through speech, and a concomitant dedication to representing female experience, joins together the films of Hansen-Løve and *Les Comédies et proverbes/ The Comedies and Proverbs* (1981-1988) and *Conte des quatre saisons/Tales of the Four Seasons* (1992-1998) of Eric Rohmer. Discussions of the New Wave and its invention/promotion/dissemination of a certain school of cinematic realism tend to be located in the twin areas of its dedication to location shooting and its theoretical embedding in André Bazin's philosophy of the photograph's indexical nature. While we may indeed trace certain similarities between Hansen-Løve's dedication to location shooting, natural light, and a focus on youth and coming-of-age to the foundational films of the New Wave such as *Les 400 Coups/The 400 Blows* (Truffaut, 1959), *A bout de souffle/Breathless* (Godard, 1959) and *Cléo de 5 à 7/Cléo from 5 to 7* (Varda, 1962), as well as Rohmer's *La Boulangère de Monceau/The Girl at the Monceau Bakery* (1961) and *La Carrière de Suzanne/Suzanne's Career* (1962), Hansen-Løve traces the significance of Rohmer's films for her filmmaking not in their visual style (despite the lush recording of light by cinematographers Pascal Auffray and Stéphane Fontaine in her first three films) but to their

stubborn insistence on the importance of language.ⁱⁱ Film's primary purpose is to show speech: to show us characters talking to each other. Throughout their films, characters talk to each other, and it is their dialogue that is filmed. Here, definitions of 'the real' are concerned less with the technical nature of the medium and its relation to representation, than choices that directors make to represent the world with verisimilitude. Both filmmakers define their films' realism through an everyday and fairly muted tenor, so that events are conveyed through character dialogue more than action. In this filmmaking, dramatic events such as the suicide of a father or the execution of a king are not shown, but reported or discussed by characters who themselves do not witness the event; characters talk to each other not (simply) to convey plot, but also to report events, discuss philosophy, recite poetry, tell stories, describe the landscape, give romantic advice, and so on. Rohmer defends his decision to prioritise speech in his films as a way of making his films come closer to everyday life, the lived reality of most of the spectators of his films. Furthermore, he senses that dialogue is not opposed to the dramatic vocation of cinema; rather it forms part of it. As he would have it, 'it's more interesting to show two characters in dialogue than people firing pistol shots at one another. Gunfights have been seen a thousand times. But there will always be something exciting to do with a dialogue' (qtd in Schilling 2007, 191).

Dialogue is a mode of action; a desiring consciousness. Rohmer's reference to gunfights above refers to a cinematic shorthand for masculinity in which machismo, violence, action and silence serve as an ideal. Rohmer argues that dialogue too can convey excitement and drama. Indeed, in everyday life, it is more likely that conversation, rather than guns, will be used to provoke and resolve disputes. Yet this link between language and realism goes beyond a concern with what might make a film closer to most people's experience of everyday life. As Tom Gunning explains, Rohmer's cinema is one that makes no apology for dialogue, 'allowing language neither to guide the cinematic style, nor to remain subordinate to it [...] Rohmer emphasized that language was an *element* of his film, not its means of narration' (2014, 30). Dialogue does not subordinate other elements of the film; the dialogues form part of the *mise-en-scène*: 'like images, speech is part of the life of the film. After all I do not say, I show. I show people who move and speak' (qtd in Jefferson Kline 2014, 35). It is this faith in the radical ability of cinema to show us speech without losing its own cinematic essence, to proclaim speech as part of the cinematic art, and give it its due place and weight, that marks Rohmer and Hansen-Løve. It is a way of showing, not telling, so it shows us the materiality of the world – landscapes, faces, objects, but also tales, philosophies,

conversations. ‘Cinematic realism does not consist in simple verisimilitude or in making things vivid or dramatic; rather it is about respecting the weight and resistance of both language and things’ (Gunning 2014, 31).

‘A meet and happy conversation’: Romantic Genres, Authorship, and Dialogue

In this article, I consider what’s at stake for both filmmakers in their use of speech; their defence of talk in the face of the idea it is somehow ‘uncinematic’ or excessive; their turn to direct speech, unmediated by voiceovers, flashbacks or other narrative devices, so that we are kept in the unfolding present of the dialogue; and why this is linked to their interest in and sympathy for the female experience. To understand why speech is so important to these two directors’ interest in, and sympathy for, the predicament of women in a culture that, while granting them some kind of political and legal rights, still understands them as different from a male norm, it behoves us to turn to the philosophical inquiry of Stanley Cavell in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), on the comedy of remarriage, and *Contesting Tears* (1996), on the melodrama of the unknown woman. These landmark studies established the centrality of women’s experience in mid-twentieth century Hollywood’s imaginary and posed, against a backdrop of increasing sexual equality following women’s suffrage, deep ethical questions of recognition and non-recognition, desire and freedom, within the traditional American heterosexual couple. According to Cavell, conversation is key to the mediation of conflict ridden socio-sexual relations:

[P]ervading each moment of the texture and mood of remarriage comedy is the mode of conversation that binds or sweeps together the principal pair [...] conversation is given a beautiful theory in John Milton’s revolutionary tract to justify divorce, making the willingness for conversation (for a “meet and happy conversation”) the basis of marriage (1996, 5).

Conversely, explains Cavell, as the unknown woman melodrama is somehow the negative pendant of the comedy of remarriage, so it rejects conversation as it renounces the possibility of the female being understood or educated by the man. For Cavell, these two genres together pose a key question about human relations in the twentieth century, which has seen continued questioning of and shifts in gender roles, while preserving nevertheless gender difference and debates about its biological basis and cultural and sociological import. He interprets the films as primary data for ‘the inner agenda of a culture’, and the films as

way of working out the new arrangements of private intimacies between heterosexual men and women following the public recognition of women when they gained suffrage in 1920 (1981, 17). Marriage, explains Cavell, is the meeting of the sexual and the social, and therefore raising the possibility of divorce implies trouble in both the sexual and social, internal and external realms. Cavell also insists on the cinematic value of this conversation, and the fact it takes place in a film. We must understand the words of the dialogue as carrying the significance they do only when put back onto the screen. Without vivid recall of the words as spoken by the actors in the precise environment of the film, they may seem trivial, rather than belonging to a network of significance. The same he adds could also be said of words from plays, which seem too poor on the page to live up to their reputation, allowing us to surmise that film is a dramatic and a visual art.

Through their ability to show us language as part of the cinematic worlds they construct, Rohmer and Hansen-Løve shape their cinematic realism which preserves the importance of speech as part of the world. This radical dedication to cinematic speech is particularly suited to their sympathetic interest in female experience, inspired by Cavell's conviction that 'questions of human creation and [...] the battle between men and women for recognition of one another [...] are given expression' (1981, 18) through film conversation, but a conversation that is absolutely in and of the everyday: 'film words thus declare their mimesis of ordinary words, words in daily conversation. A mastery of film-making and film writing requires, for such films, a mastery of this mimesis' (1981, 12).

What links Cavell's analysis of mid-twentieth century Hollywood to Rohmer and Hansen-Løve is a belief that films themselves can convey and make accessible philosophical dilemmas and dramas, and that through foregrounding female experience, these films show us the shifting and precarious nature of our private subjectivities and the links of these shifts to changes in the public forum. It is thus not too great a leap to label these films Cavellian, by which I mean they foreground everyday conversation as a means to investigate coupling culture and its complex blending of private emotions and intimacies with broader questions of changing social mores in the light of greater female emancipation and freedom. Furthermore, a turn to Cavell allows us to understand these films' interest in the consciousness of women as not directly linked to the gender of the director, and move away from a problematically essentialist manoeuvre in which a female director's interest in the interior experience of women is automatically assumed, and a male director's interest is thought to be purely about woman as sexual spectacle. This is not to argue that the gender of

the director is irrelevant to the question of representation and it is also noticeable and praiseworthy that Rohmer's increasingly sympathetic attention to female experience on-screen corresponded to an increasing use of female crews off-screen, including the entirely female staffed *Le Rayon vert/The Green Ray* (1986).ⁱⁱⁱ Rather, it allows us to see the director's gender as a contingent factor in a film world which attempts to explore 1980s-present day France's changing landscape of sexual and romantic intimacy and its links to broader questions of female emancipation.

While these films are not straightforwardly romantic comedies, in the sense the term is applied to Hollywood cinema, so they are not entirely focused on the happy ending of a romantic heterosexual partnership, usually guaranteed by implied or actual marriage, they nevertheless share similarities with it, especially in the broader definition as discussed by Mary Harrod. For Harrod, Rohmer's films can be compared fruitfully with Hollywood romantic comedy, through their

obvious interest in matters of the heart [...]; a recurrent concern with the (a)synchronisation of self and other; the narrative promotion of female subjectivity; a stress on the role of coincidence, wonder, and playfulness in self-realization through love; the staging of romance in a place marked as outside of the everyday; and an ostensible championing of commitment to another person, the love object (2014, 103).

Furthermore, Rohmer's affinity to the style and tone of romantic comedy is picked up by French reviewers, such as François Ramasse, commenting in *Positif* that the general happiness and laughter that marks the resolution of Blanche's romantic dilemmas in *L'Ami de mon amie/My Girlfriend's Boyfriend* (1988) is 'in the tone and style of American comedy' (1987, 59). Harrod's broader definition also applies to Hansen-Løve's work, especially *Un amour de jeunesse*, which while more melancholic in tone than Rohmer's comedies, echoes its interest in female subjectivity and its realisation within heterosexual desire and culture. As A O Scott, reviewing the film, summarises, 'there is [...] nothing more conventional than a coming-of-age story, but it is also true that the experience of moving from youth into relative maturity is always specific and unique' (2012, np) a phrasing that neatly captures the interplay between generic patterns and careful individuation that marks both Rohmer and Hansen-Løve's work.

If this combination of genre forms and personal authorial world-view seems contradictory, such a paradox is in fact central to the dynamics of New Wave cinema, which based its admiration for and love of Hollywood cinema precisely on the existence of great directors who worked within clearly defined genres, and placed their personal stamp on products that were produced within the industrialised system of the Hollywood studio era. For Rohmer writing in the 1940-1950s, discussing the same films that Cavell analyses, it was Hollywood cinema that most perfectly realised the twin ability of film to reproduce faithfully the world as humans perceive it, and to act as the vehicle of deep inquiry into human motivations and behaviours. As Derek Schilling explains

Hollywood was for Rohmer nothing less than [...] ‘this chosen land, this homeland which fourteenth century Florence had been for painters, or nineteenth century Vienna for musicians.’ Hyperbolic as it may be, the comparison is meant in earnest. Rohmer credits Hollywood’s ascendancy to the importance of subject over treatment, to hard-working, well trained screen actors, and to a choice of universal themes drawn from a conflicted national past of conquest, voyage and toil. [...] While French producers and hired scriptwriters continued to rehash bedroom farce [...] their American competitors looked modernity squarely in the face, taking into account changing gender roles in the workplace and new constraints of modern life, from speed and power of machines to the anxieties of middle-class comfort (2007, 76).

While Rohmer does not explicitly acknowledge the significance or usefulness of Cavell for his films, and is indeed more frequently associated with Bazin’s belief in the cinema’s indexical basis in reality, in his critical writing he does indeed offered a sustain defence of American cinema that echoes Cavell’s emphasis on its cultural and social importance and its use of a certain kind of dialogue to advance its understanding of male/female relations. For Rohmer, the most significant films being produced are those coming from America, and he names one of Cavell’s ‘comedies of remarriage’, *It Happened One Night* (Capra, 1934) as vital to his realisation that cinema is a legitimate art. ‘Out of nowhere, in the shape of Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable, the cinema displayed, in its finest hour, its unadorned face, raw but not unpolished: it spoke to me honestly, without a hint of vulgarity’ (qtd by Schilling 2007, 75).

It Happened One Night, with its improbable love story of an out-of-work journalist and a high society girl impatient with her milieu, would seem the perfect vehicle for Rohmer's discovery of a light but sophisticated world where talk is seduction. Rohmer's serio-comic exploration of the vagaries of love and marriage, in films such as *Le Beau Mariage/A Fine Marriage* (1982), where a young art student attempts to seduce a lawyer, or *Pauline à la plage/Pauline at the Beach* (1983), where a beautiful young divorcée mistakes a brief fling for a torrid affair brings Hollywood's bright, sparkling dissection of desire into a sympathetically depicted French milieu. As Jacob Leigh's analysis of *Le Beau Mariage* demonstrates, in his careful attention to Sabine's socio-economic situation (she still lives mostly with her mother) and the disparity in wealth and advantage between her and her best friend, Clarisse, Rohmer subtly hints at other reasons why Sabine might be attracted to Clarisse's cousin, and exposes an insidious layer of class prejudice in France (2006, 105). Whereas a Bazinian approach stresses the significance of changing technology and the apparatus through which images are generated, so that for example, one of Rohmer's most theoretically interesting films becomes his 2001 *L'Anglaise et le duc/The Lady and the Duke*, where characters are digitally inserted into painted backdrops, for Cavell technical details matter only so far as they are relevant to the experience of particular films (so, for example, the development of sound technology is vital to the comedy of remarriage with its stress on dialogue). Cavell is interested in how we experience films, how we might want to try and come to common understanding of how films mean to us (both narratively and emotionally), and how films come to be in dialogue with the culture from which they spring (Morgan 2016, 163). Here he focuses on how films enact a way of reconsidering the problem of female equality; the woman's right to tell her story; and the possibility (or not) of a feminine difference of subjectivity. Rohmer's admiration of classical Hollywood cinema, and its ability to pose complex questions of male and female equality within a popular form, finds its own expression within his films. Through relating this to Cavell and the comedy of remarriage, we can see how his cinema's interest in dialogue can be understood as indebted to a certain kind of Hollywood tradition as well as the Bazinian realism outlined above, and therefore that there is a more complex genealogy for Hansen-Løve's emphasis on speech, and her explicit acknowledgment of Rohmer's importance to her film-making style and technique, than we might expect.

Paying attention to words

With their extraordinary attention to dialogue, authored within the film screen play written by the director working alone, and thus source of the films' personal resonance and world-view, four of Hansen-Løve's five films, and Rohmer's *Comedies and Proverbs* (1981-88) and *Tales of the Four Seasons* (1990-1998), focus on girls and women working through their conflicted ideas about family, relationships, marriage and love. (We could also to a certain extent also include Rohmer's earlier *Contes moraux/Moral Tales* 1962-1972, a series of six films that all consider the state of bourgeois marriage alongside philosophical enquiries into questions of fate, destiny, (self) knowledge and hypocrisy, when a male protagonist is confronted with adulterous temptation. What separates this series, however, is that it concentrates on the male experience, with the stories being narrated retroactively by a self-justifying and ultimately unreliable male narrator. Indeed, even if this series does keep us in the worldview of the man, the girl/woman a beautiful object he desires to conquer, Beverly Walker sensed a nascent feminist sympathy in Rohmer's engagement with feisty, independent women who reject marriage that we could see come to fruition in his sustained interest in the female experience in his later series [Walker 2013 [1973]]). Hansen-Løve chooses the character of a philosophy teacher for her exploration of how a woman may remake her life when her marriage has unravelled, so that her domestic situation becomes a microcosm of broader issues concerning female identity in a world in which marriage is no longer compulsory but women are still subject to patriarchal prejudice. Nathalie comments to her former student that her chances of remarriage are slim as 'anyway, women over the age of 40 are only fit for the dustbin', and although there is a frisson of attraction between them, he does indeed have a younger girlfriend. Meanwhile, the middle-aged Etienne/Didier Sandre, the philosophy teacher in Rohmer's *Conte d'automne/Autumn Tale*, who was in a relationship with his beautiful (and much younger) pupil Rosine/Alexia Portal, rejects the idea he would be interested in a woman of his own age, and finishes the film inviting Rosine back to his home. Male and female philosophy teachers might share a cerebral ability, but their romantic and sexual options clearly differ in these films and the worlds they describe.

Given the importance of dialogue to these directors, they both use various cinematic techniques to give it the substance and weight required. Dialogue is an element of the mise-en-scène. Dialogues are frequently situated in a naturalistically filmed landscape, so that the unfolding dramatic arc of the film takes place within a carefully defined milieu. The conversations are staged in parks, on beaches, on boats, in cafés, in trains, in offices, and on the streets, blending a theatrical attention to speech with cinema's vocation to show us the

real world. Rohmer was renowned for his use of direct sound, working with sound engineers such as Jean-Pierre Ruh and Claudine Nougaret; he favoured placing his characters into natural amphitheatres or into sealed off environments (park benches surrounded by foliage; dips and hollows; cars; courtyards), so that their speech could be recorded as clearly and cleanly as possible without the need for overdubs or post-production work. Hansen-Løve too uses this technique. The effect is at once eminently theatrical and entirely ordinary, as the world itself becomes a stage, and voices are contextualised by their sonic environments (wind, birds, traffic, crickets, music). The visual style of the films also works toward helping the viewer to focus on the significance of dialogue. Camera work tends to eschew close-ups in favour of longer shots that show us bodies interacting with their environments, so that gesture and position are important to the performance and how dialogue is to be interpreted. Words are spoken in a carefully delineated real world, articulated by individuated characters whose physical, corporeal presence gives the words heft, grain and tone. Speech is embedded into a world rendered to us through the devices of cinema – colour, movement, sound, texture, light. This careful crafting of the film world, so that conversation becomes the key to understanding the characters within a *mise-en-scène* that goes beyond a mere positioning of objects and actors in the frame, is demonstrated by critics in their close textual analysis of key moments from both directors. What emerges from both readings is how giving language and things their proper weight and resistance also informs us subtly about the delicate power balance between the couples involved.

Consider for example T. Jefferson Kline's close reading of a scene from *Conte d'automne*, where Rosine explains to Etienne her desire to recalibrate their 'friendship'. Kline's reading demonstrates how Rohmer's attention to Rosine's gestures, clothing, position, movement, and framing shows her constructing 'a web of seduction' even while her speech proclaims her independence from him:

We might well believe that Rosine has come to establish secure boundaries between them once and for all, but instead of maintaining a secure distance, she walks seductively towards him as if she is intentionally crossing the boundary she had just established. "Nonsense," she chides, "all your students are crazy about you." As she proffers this concession to his sex appeal, she stands over him while he sits pouting on the low stone wall of the courtyard. She now visibly has the upper hand, and her draping sweater suddenly looks

uncannily very phallic. She now arches her back seductively and sits down next to him [...] As they continue to talk about his relationships with students [...], he nestles his head into her neck and kisses it. Now, in a moment of remarkable irony, she accuses him of “adoring ambiguous situations”, clearly projecting onto him the very pleasure she is currently enjoying (2014, 37-38).

Tom Palmer finds a similar skilful interweaving of dialogue and mise-en-scène in his discussion of the opening of Hansen-Løve’s *Tout est pardonné/ All is Forgiven* (2007), where Victor/Paul Blain plays with his daughter Pamela/Victoire Rousseau on her 6th birthday.

Leaving the apartment to play tennis, father and daughter hit their ball off walls, the ground, and each other, and the two actors simply play, in impromptu reaction to where the ball bounces. Hansen-Løve’s camera tracks the pair in a static long shot as they exit their building, a rightward pan as they move through an adjacent courtyard, then a series of wobbling handheld close-ups when the game [of wall tennis] degenerates—happily—as Victor grabs Pamela (“Meanie!”), and she sees him off with a swipe of her racket. Hansen-Løve’s cinematography underscores the unforced tenderness of the characters, the actors’ physical improvisations accentuated gently by the increasingly close, bustling camerawork. The payoff comes, though, when Annette [Victor’s wife and Pamela’s mother] arrives in a static insert that interrupts both the stylistic flow and the tennis. The effect is compounded when she calls out (“I’ve been looking for you everywhere!”) in loud German, rather than Pamela and Victor’s conversation French. When Victor now hastily abandons Pamela to her mother’s care, the dramatic seed is sown. Victor, we infer, is the source of anarchic fun in this household whereas Annette is the reluctant disciplinarian; one parent, not two, is present in this family tableau (2011, 45).

This careful attention to dialogue as an element within the mise-en-scène demonstrated through these readings is necessary to this balancing act between rather formulaic situations within the comedy of remarriage/coming-of-age traditions (couples

meeting, breaking up, getting back together) and highly individual characters with psychological depth and emotional weight. In keeping with Cavell's comments about reading film as both a dramatic and a visual art, such dialogue only comes to have its full force when incarnated by a carefully chosen actor, hence the importance Hansen-Løve and Rohmer pay to casting. In an interview with France-Culture, Hansen-Løve explains that 'for me, the choice of actors is essential – and I couldn't choose an actor, from the starring role to an extra – for whom I didn't have some desire, an authentic love' (Adler 2016, np). Rohmer, too, spent a good deal of time choosing his casts and attending to the particularity of how his actors spoke, often recording them while they chatted in his office so he could adapt their particular turns of phrase and speech rhythms into his screenplays (see for example Hammond and Pagliano 2013 [1982], 61). *Mise-en-scène* is organised to facilitate the interactions between characters and the natural expression of their relation through gesture and speech.

***Conte d'hiver/A Winter's Tale* (Rohmer, 1992), *Un amour de jeunesse* (Hansen-Løve, 2011) and *L'Avenir* (Hansen-Løve, 2016): doubt and faith**

While all of Rohmer's explorations of love and desire across his *Comédies et proverbes* and *Contes des quatre saisons* share with the comedies of remarriage an interest in games of talk and seduction, the film which most clearly shares a generic inheritance with these films is his *Conte d'hiver* (1992). This is because Cavell finds a precedent for the structure of remarriage in Shakespearean romance, and most centrally *The Winter's Tale*. (From the perspective of unearthing Cavellian resonances in Rohmer's work, it is thus hardly surprising that he comments on the Shakespearean comic themes of confusion and *quid pro quo* in his *L'Ami de mon amie* (Legrand and Thomas 2013 [1990], 102) or the themes of illusion and masquerade that surface in *Les Amours d'Astrée et de Celadon/The Loves of Astrea and Celadon* (2007) (Fauvel and Herpe 2013 [2007], 178). Cavell argues that Shakespearean structure serves as the defining structure of the comedy of remarriage, a structure Rohmer too finds useful in his exploration of feminine desire). Cavell himself wrote an analysis of Rohmer's *Conte d'hiver*. Using Cavell's analysis as my starting point, I shall trace how the themes he traces of faith and doubt are taken up and reworked by Hansen-Løve in her two films most closely resembling the unknown woman melodrama, *Un amour de jeunesse* and *L'Avenir*. As with Cavell's filmic corpus, these films too pose the central (perfectionist) question that binds the two genres of the comedy of remarriage and the

unknown woman melodrama in common: how is human change possible? The concept of becoming on film, shown through its automatism, its genres, its forms, is connected philosophically to the problem of self-reliance, defined as aversion to conformity, to find a truth to one's self that recovers human existence against fixity and stagnation. For David Rodowick, 'in their deployment of and expression of concepts of transfiguration and transvaluation, the moral of the melodramas of the unknown woman – or better what they construct and convey through the medium of film – is that one of the powers of photogenesis is to express the transformation of fixation as metamorphosis, to show that subjects do become or become-other, on film' (2015, 270). These films all allow us to see how a woman learns to rely on herself and her instincts to allow her to change, become other, on film. The question these films raise is how this issue of self-reliance may be reconciled (or not) with the risks of maternity, in a patriarchal society in which mothers are still economically and emotionally vulnerable even as they may be venerated.

The narrative arc of each film takes its female protagonist through an experience of loss. In Rohmer's *Conte d'hiver*, in common with its Shakespearean antecedent, a woman loses contact with her lover, who is returned to her at the end of the tale. In Hansen-Løve's films, the girl/woman is left by her lover, and finds an alternative way toward renewal and hope at the end of the story based not on implied marriage but on 'radical, astonishing, one may say melodramatic change of the woman, say of her identity' (Cavell 1997, 6) and 'the action returns to and concludes in the place from which it began or in which it has climaxed, a place of abandonment or transcendence' (Cavell 1997, 6). In *Un Amour de jeunesse*, we revisit the river that was the site of Camille/Lola Créton's intense holiday romance with Sullivan/ Sebastian Urzendowsky; on this second trip, she is triumphantly alone, the former lover's gift of a hat lifted by a gust of wind onto the river to drift away, symbolising her final abandonment of a damaging relationship. In *L'Avenir*, we return to the family home, and find a unit in which Nathalie carves out a new role as grandmother, singing a lullaby of deep, lasting love and memory that transcends her ex-husband's callow decision to leave her. The three films treat these themes of hope and despair, faith and abandonment, through a distinctly everyday register, which they transpose against a time and place picked out as special, analogous to the so-called 'golden world' or 'green world' of Shakespearean comedy (Brittany for *Conte d'hiver*; Brittany and the Vercors for *L'Avenir*; the Ardèche in *Un amour de jeunesse*).

All three films make use of the bus as the key site for the meeting of the miraculous and the ordinary, as the everyday business of making one's way across the city in public transport contains within it the possibility of renewal and redemption. In the first film, Félicie/ Charlotte Véry is reunited with Charles/Frédéric van den Driessche, her long lost lover, when they happen to be travelling on the same bus. Félicie, overcome with emotion, runs from the bus, followed by Charles, who sweeps their child, Elise/Ava Loraschi, up into his arms. In the second, Camille bumps into her ex-boyfriend's mother, Selma/Ozay Fecht, and this initiates them getting back in contact and re-kindling their relationship, although Camille is now living with a different man. She and Sullivan's mother exchange a few words, before continuing their journeys. In *L'Avenir*, Nathalie happens to glance from the bus window, and see her ex-husband walking down the street with his girlfriend. She laughs out loud at the absurdity of this coincidence. The bus is the motif of the encounter that is at once quotidian and within the realm of the possible, but also miraculous or absurd. On the one hand, the films show us characters travelling through the city, underlining how every day the bus is, and how it is precipitous to chance meeting. On the other, perhaps we might be led to believe that God has intervened and brought Charles back to Félicie, as she had a revelation earlier in the film that she must remain open to the possibility of his return, and undertakes a Pascalian type wager on her possible future happiness with Charles against filling her life with substitute lovers who will always be unsatisfactory. The bus journey situates the directors' differing stances on what may motivate the becoming we witness. Rohmer's bus meeting carries within it the seed of religious faith, as Félicie is the recipient of grace, having been brave enough to embrace self-reliance and live with hope as against filling up her life with routine. Hansen-Løve's films render this moment more existentialist, so that Nathalie's laugh places such a meeting into the void of absurd fatalism rather than divine intervention. Nathalie's becoming occurs without any sense of a plan or meaning that may lie behind what happens to her. The films' complex interrogation of faith and doubt are above all addressed through their attitude towards maternity, as a Cavellian reading of them demonstrates.

As Cavell explains in his reading of the film, Rohmer's *Conte d'hiver* is not an adaptation of the Shakespeare play of the very similar title (identical in the French translation), but functions as a commentary or even meditation upon it, and thus in some ways as a kind of meta commentary on his own continuous fascination with tales of love, chance, fate and predestination (2005, 429). Rohmer sends his heroine, Félicie, to see the play, after she made her decision sitting in Nevers cathedral to remain open to what Keith

Tester describes as ‘the possibility of grace’ (2014, 95). The final miraculous scene of Hermione’s return to Leontes, as Cavell explains, functions so that ‘Shakespeare’s play enabled her to articulate what she has found, by herself [...] she has found Charles in her desire [...] she will not live in a way that is incompatible with their recovering each other’ (2005, 438). Her final joyful reunion with Charles ‘offers a kind of redemption of the price paid during the wait because this love is real [...] And he returns when he returns, not just when it is convenient. Consequently, it is necessary to be always ready for him’ (Tester 2014, 98). Cavell explains that Rohmer’s *Conte d’hiver* permits him to return to Shakespeare’s play with new insights into its interest in the female protagonist who finds herself alone, and who must come anew to an understanding of a reshaped world. Cavell points out that one of the most unusual aspects of the film in terms of Rohmer’s oeuvre is in its attention to several generations (confirmed of course in his decision to finish the film on the delightful image of grandmother and grandchild sitting on a sofa together) and in particular its attention to a young child. Furthermore, Cavell comments, he senses that Rohmer’s camera’s frequent cuts to five year old Elise by herself are ‘as if to reassure itself of her existence’, reminding us of how Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, even if it ends with the comic motif of harmony restored, nevertheless leaves a five or six year old child unaccounted for (2005, 423-4). Cavell argues that the timing of Leontes’ jealous rage against Hermione – a sudden suspicion that she is having sexual relations with his best friend Polixenes – coincides with her late pregnancy. Hermione is about to give birth to a second child, striking doubt into Leontes’ heart about whether he is the father of Mamillius, his first child, too. He expresses this doubt when he asks Mamillius ‘art thou my boy?’ and attempts to re-assure himself by remarking ‘they say [your nose] is a copy of mine.’ This is taken up by Rohmer, when Félicie, who hates her own nose, she tells us, can re-assure Charles that Elise is indeed his daughter when she tells him to notice the resemblance between their noses (something Charles does with alacrity as he sweeps Elise into his arms) (Cavell 2005, 431).

Cavell argues that this moment of Leontes’ doubt takes us to the heart of an existential doubt that can only concern men. They can never truly know if they are the father of their child – a doubt a woman can never have about her own progeny. This is not to say, Cavell hastens to add, that a woman cannot experience maternal existential doubt – she may, for example have concerns about the identity of the father of her child (a dilemma Rohmer explores in *La Marquise d’O/The Marquise of O* (1976)). Indeed, Cavell’s complex reading of Félicie as a repository of scepticism suggests to me that her pregnancy becomes ironically

an expression of doubt about Charles; after all, his first words (and the film's first dialogue) are to tell Félicie that she is 'taking a risk' as they lie naked in bed together after having sex. Her 'lapsus' becomes a test of Charles' ability to find her again. It is not by coming into her life once, but rather by coming back to her, that he proves his suitability as a father, and that she can trust him with her and her child's vulnerability.

Meanwhile, Hansen-Løve too scatters her film *Un Amour de jeunesse* with unborn or miscarried children, ghostly babies whose presences haunt relations between Camille, Sullivan and Lorenz/Magne Håvard-Brekke (and suggested perhaps even in the son who Lorenz leaves with his mother in Berlin and whom we never see in the film). Camille's miscarriage, though it takes barely a minute of screen-time, is her test of Sullivan. Can his return into her life compensate for the loss of the family envisaged with Lorenz? She projects into the future with Sullivan, buying him a watercolour of a man carrying a child on his shoulders. For all this is an image that moves Sullivan to tears, it is also an image he forgets to take away from the apartment with him. If Charles passes Félicie's test and shows himself ready to be trusted with the gentle responsibility of fatherhood, this is a test that Sullivan once again fails. It pays off here to attend to the difference of the film's opening scenes. While both show us characters naked and making love, Rohmer places his into a golden glow of summer and a knowing risk of conception; a risk that we see Sullivan avoid in his very first act in the film of buying a condom in the chilly grey of a Parisian winter. Although clearly this is a sensible precaution in the context of teenage sex, within the logic of the films' investment in a woman's ability to find a man whom she can trust to support her through the inevitable vulnerability motherhood assigns her to in patriarchy, Sullivan is marked here symbolically as averse to risk for Camille. The film's endings also bear comparison. The tears of joy suggesting the complexity of water and emotion that closed Rohmer's film are here transformed into the image of a vast sparkling river, its paradoxical role as giver of life and harbinger of death underlined by the lyrics of Johnny Flynn and Laura Marling's folk song 'The River' playing over the credit sequence. Whereas Félicie's discovery of the father of her child gives her the closure and intimate domesticity of the comedy of remarriage, Camille's realisation of Sullivan's untrustworthiness gives her the freedom to confront the world on her own. In Hansen-Løve's updated melodrama, Camille survives to find strength in her independence and in her abandonment of her link to Sullivan.

L'Avenir develops this theme of female existential doubt about the worthiness of men to be trusted as fathers as it revisits the unknown woman melodrama. Maternity too structures

the narrative arc of the film, as we see Nathalie coping with the demands of her ageing mother and then her rapid decline and death, followed by her own daughter giving birth, and thus Nathalie becoming a grandmother. Cavell argues that the problem of philosophical doubt concerning the existence of one's self and the world – what philosophers have labelled hyperbolic doubt – is addressed and partially resolved through the growth of self-reliance and the ability to trust to one's experience. The position of the unknown woman in the Hollywood melodrama Cavell discusses however is in a place of isolation and transcendence, so that her self-reliance leads also to a place at which she cannot be reached by fellow humans, cannot enter into conversation with them (think for example of the letter from beyond the grave of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Ophuls, 1948), the film that lends its name to this genre). In contrast, *L'Avenir* shows us how Nathalie's increasing self-reliance outside of marriage nevertheless brings her back into contact with the world and its immanent luminosity, especially in the film's final moments where she sings a lullaby to her grandson in the family home lit by Christmas lights, having banished her ex-husband to the darkness of his Christmas alone being kept company by his essays to mark and his copy of Schopenhauer. Above all, she forges a connection with her (grand)child which refuses to recognise any paternal claim over him, and does not seek to reassure the (grand)father who may doubt his role in the child's life (thus becoming the opposite of Félicie). This insight helps us to interpret the strange moment where Nathalie meets her grandchild for the first time. Her ex-husband is holding the baby when she arrives, but Nathalie scoops the baby from him, and gazes down into his face. 'It seems he looks like me', says the grandfather. 'What?!' replies Nathalie. 'He looks like you? Not at all, he looks like me.' Against her daughter's insistence that the baby's chin bares some resemblance to that of her father, Nathalie asserts her resemblance toward, and thus relation to, the child. After her ex-husband and her daughter's partner leave, her daughter begins to cry. 'What's wrong?' asks Nathalie, 'is it what I said about your Dad? I was only joking.' 'Give me my baby' asks her sobbing daughter, unable to process the doubt about the worthiness of her/a father that Nathalie has expressed.

Through revisiting the comedy of remarriage and melodrama of the unknown woman genres, Rohmer and Hansen-Løve are speaking back to a French film culture that is dominated by masculine concerns and male subjectivity. Tracing a Cavellian philosophy in their films permits us to speculate, at the very least, that their films posit a specifically female doubt about how motherhood may contain and limit her self-reliance, and how she may trust a man to support her. They ask how a woman is to establish herself in the world as a subject

to know and be known, and how she may be enabled to survive and flourish. Furthermore, against the existential doubt that Cavell finds in the images of children and families – the concern that one can never truly know one's child – they assert in their understated naturalism and their attention to the warp and the weft of conversation, a faith in the existence in the world. They assert the possibility of the miraculous in the everyday through staging an encounter on a bus (reminding me, I hope not facetiously, of Joan Osborne's 'One of Us'). Our hard-won grown up work of learning to live with the world as it is does not mean we should forget to believe in the world's potential to be made anew, to witness it re-becoming. Against the sexual jealousy, lost lovers, dead children, loneliness and despair that characterises their portrayal of heterosexual relationships, these films nevertheless reward their female characters with an overwhelmingly certainty in the significance of their own lives, and their ability to (re)make themselves in sympathetic, symbiotic relation to the world around them.

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ⁱ For more on French beauty culture, see Chollet 2012.

ⁱⁱ It is fairly routine for Hansen-Løve to discuss her indebtedness to Rohmer. See for example, Anon, 'Filiation, Transmission: Quelles Généalogies?', *Où va le cinéma?*, Centre Pompidou Thursday 4 December 2008; Laure Adler, 'Hors Champs', *France Culture* 10 December 2014; Caroline Broué, 'La Grande table', *France Culture* 5 April 2016; Anon, 'Mia Hansen-Løve inspired by Eric Rohmer', Toronto International Film Festival Interview, 10 September 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rohmer made this film with Marie Rivière as lead actor/co scriptwriter, Françoise Etchegarary as producer, Claudine Nougaret as sound recorder, and Sophie Maintigneux as DP. For more on Rohmer's work with Maintigneux, see Fiona Handyside, 'A Woman's Art: Sophie Maintigneux, Eric Rohmer and Female Friendship', *Another Gaze* 25 April 2016.