



About the Green Ray of Jules Verne and Eric Rohmer

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About the Green Ray of Jules Verne and Eric Rohmer

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2018.10.28 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. It is summer. A young woman and a young man are sitting side by side at a beachfront, looking out toward the vast sea that is facing them. They aim their gaze westward, viewing what seems like an infinite stretch of water that reaches all the way to the darkening horizon where the sea finally meets an infinite sky. As they watch the sun sink slowly into the sea, the young woman starts weeping. Then, suddenly, at the very moment when the glowing orb finally goes under, it gives off a subtle green flash. This is the green ray, which is a literal translation of the French words *le rayon vert*. The moment I am describing takes place in a film directed by *Éric Rohmer*, which actually bears the title *Le Rayon Vert*. It originally appeared in 1986. But *Le Rayon-Vert* is also the title of a romantic novel by Jules Verne, which appeared over a century earlier, in 1882. The novel was in fact the original inspiration for the film, though the stories differ radically. In the film, the story ends on a seemingly happy note: once she sees the green ray, the young woman who was weeping a moment earlier is now smiling as she cries out: *oui !* But the happiness of this moment marked by the outcry of 'yes!' is not what interests me the most in this film: rather, I will highlight the earlier moment of weeping.



After *Le Rayon Vert*, directed by *Éric Rohmer* (1986): Jacques and Delphine before the green ray.



After *Le Rayon Vert*, directed by *Éric Rohmer* (1986): the green ray at sunset.

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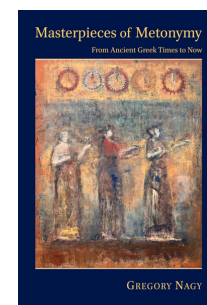
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§1. I cannot remember the first time I saw *Le Rayon Vert*, which was distributed in North America under the title *Summer*—and which was at some point remastered as a new 35 millimeter print. The film was originally a 16 millimeter print, made for pay-to-view French television. Whenever it was that I first saw the film, I have ever since been asking myself the same question: how to interpret the weeping of the young woman as she awaits what she seemingly hopes will be the epiphany of a green ray? In my essay here, I will compare a pointed reference to weeping in *The Green Ray* of Jules Verne. And, pursuing the comparison far beyond the original context, I will ask a more general question: in the film *Summer*, is there a way to link the phenomenology of sunset with the psychology of weeping? In attempting an answer to the second question, I will even compare an ancient Greek practice: as we will see, it is reported that women would weep for the hero Achilles while gazing at the setting sun.

§2. I start with my general question: in the film *Summer*, is there a way to link the phenomenology of sunset with the psychology of weeping? A correspondingly generalized answer can be found, I think, in the obsessive references, scattered throughout the story told in the film, to an overall sadness caused by the painful awareness that summer is coming to an end. The death of summer is approaching, and all the happiness of enjoying summer is doomed to die as well. There is a comparable sadness in the novel: summer is almost over, and I have not yet succeeded in seeing the green ray—which can be seen only in the summer! In terms of such thinking, the death of summer can be symbolized by the consecutive death of each day at sunset. It seems as if only an extraordinary sunset, as signaled by the green ray, could rekindle the kind of happiness felt at summertime.

§3. Of course we can all imagine causes of sadness that are far more specific than the death of summer as symbolized by the death of the sun at sunset. For me, at least, a prime example comes from ancient Greek traditions that center on sadness over the death of the hero Achilles. Such sadness, conventionally expressed in ancient Greek song culture by way of formalized weeping in lament—is in one case specifically linked with the ritualized act of gazing at the setting sun. Here is how I once described the ritual, in [H24H 0§37](#), and I paraphrase here:

This ritualized act was performed in ancient Greece every four years. It happened at sunset, on a day when the athletic events at the festival of the Olympics were getting started. We know from ancient sources that a traditional ceremony inaugurating this seasonally recurring festival centered on the hero Achilles: on the appointed day, the local women of Elis, the site where the Olympics were held, fixed their gaze on the sun as it sets into the western horizon—and began ceremonially to weep for the hero (Pausanias 6.23.3).

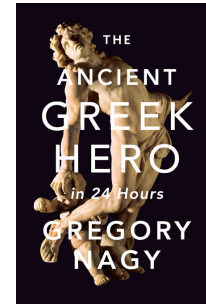
§4. I return here to the green ray. If I understand the symbolism that pervades *The Green Ray* of Jules Verne, this all-too-rare flash of green light given off by the setting sun at summertime signals happiness, *le bonheur*, for the chosen few who are fortunate enough ever to see it. If an ordinary sunset symbolizes death, exemplified by the death of summer, then the extraordinary sunset that produces the green ray could symbolize a recovery of life—and of the happiness that life brings, especially in summertime.

§5. According to la légende, as Jules Verne writes in his romantic novel, the green ray signals to the one who sees it that everything in life has come together in the most perfect way, leading to a happiness that is surely complete. That happiness, in the story of the novel, comes from falling in love. But this story is rethought in the film made by *Éric Rohmer*.

§6. I proceed to my specific question about the film made in 1986 by *Éric Rohmer*. How are we to interpret the weeping—and, then, the smiling—of the young woman in the story? I find a clue in the novel by Jules Verne, *Le Rayon-Vert*, which as I already said was published in 1882:

<https://beq.ebooksgratuits.com/vents/Verne-rayon.pdf>. An English version, translated by Mary de Hauteville, appeared in 1883 as *The Green Ray*: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Green_Ray. In this novel, we see a combination of smiling and weeping at the end of the story. Without attempting to retell the whole story just for the sake of interpreting how this novel ends, I will paraphrase only this much here:

Two well-meaning uncles of an independent-minded young woman named Helena attempt to marry her off to a young man who fancies himself as a great scientist, but Helena refuses even to consider the attempts of the uncles unless she first fulfills her burning desire to see the green ray at sunset. For Helena, such a vision would be a mystical experience, making it possible for her to understand her own emotions—and the emotions of any would-be lover. In the end, Helena marries not the scientist but another young man. He is a painter. Unlike the scientist, for whom “the green ray” is merely a scientific convergence of optics and atmospheric, the painter has fallen in love with Helena, and that is why he too conceives a burning desire to see the green ray. In the end, it is the painter and not the scientist who wins the love of Helena, and the two of them get married. The two uncles of Helena are happy that Helena has married the painter and that she too is happy. While one uncle expresses his happiness by smiling, however, the other uncle weeps, despite his happiness. And their merged happiness is explained this way by Helena herself, together with her lover: the two uncles, both of them, have succeeded in seeing the green ray. But the two lovers, it turns out, never got to see the green ray themselves. When the liquified emerald, as the painter describes it, flashed at the two lovers, they were at that moment gazing into each other’s eyes, missing out on viewing the scientifically verifiable flash of green light that the two uncles actually saw. The two lovers already knew



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happiness, whereas the two uncles were only now finding it. That is why, it seems, they could smile afterward and weep symmetrically as they thought back, recalling their primal experience.

§7. The story is different in the film *Summer* by *Éric Rohmer*. Here a young woman by the name of *Delphine*, who is the main character in the story, actually sees the green ray. And so too does her would-be lover, *Jacques*, whom she first saw at a train station: at the time, she spotted him in the act of reading *The Idiot* by *Dostoevsky*. And not only did *Delphine* get to see the green ray. Even better, the director *Éric Rohmer* himself actually saw this scientifically verifiable flash of liquified emerald. And so too did *Sophie Maintigneux* see it. Of course she too saw it, since she was the genial cinematographer, and she saw the green ray with her camera at the actual moment when it happened, since the director—production scheduling be damned—spent what must have seemed like eternities waiting day after passing day for that single all-too-rare moment when he too, together with the camera, could finally see this scientifically verifiable flash of green light. And it gets even better: *Marie Rivière* could see it, too: she was the young woman who acted the role of *Delphine*, and she even co-wrote with the director the quasi-improvised script for the film. And we must not forget *Vincent Gauthier*, who acted the role of the empathetic would-be lover *Jacques*. So, they all saw it.

§8. But why is *Delphine* weeping—and only afterward smiling—when she sees the green ray? Maybe she is like the two symmetrical uncles in the novel by *Jules Verne*: one of them is smiling while the other is weeping as they both remember actually having seen the green ray—by contrast with the two lovers, who have already found happiness without actually having seen that liquified emerald. The weeping of the young woman in the film signals, I think, some kind of incompleteness. And such incompleteness can be linked, I further think, with a basic problem that is highlighted by the macro-narrative of the story told by the film itself. The problem is, *Delphine* has never read the story originally told in the novel of *Jules Verne*. Instead, she happens to overhear a story about some green ray as retold by an old man. He is a tourist who is telling his story not to the young woman but to other tourists whom *Delphine* randomly encounters at a seaside beachfront. He had once read the novel of *Jules Verne* about the green ray, and he is now explaining to his fellow tourists the scientific basis for the optical sensation of seeing that rarest of sights to be seen—that perfect moment when the setting sun flashes a green ray. Hearing this, the young woman *Delphine* makes it her half-hearted quest in life to find such a perfect moment. There is another problem, though: this young woman does not know what she wants out of life. Is it really the green ray? But that is just a metaphor, isn't it? What *Delphine* does know for sure is that a lot of men are chasing after her while she is chasing after her undefined goal, and she doubts that her goal is just another man, since she is sorely disappointed by all the mecs she meets in her soulful journeys from one picture-perfect place to another. Then, in the final moments of the film, she meets a young man who seems to be different from all the others. She cannot be sure, though, whether this singularity means anything, anything at all. Will there be a sign?

§9. I have already spoken briefly about the driving desire of the director, *Éric Rohmer*, to capture on film an actual green ray. In the surviving lore about both the verbal and the visual creativity of *Rohmer*, we can find countless anecdotes about the director's quest to highlight the mystical sensation felt by those who succeed in viewing the elusive green ray. A good place to start reading about such anecdotes, I think, is a piece written by *Emanuel Levy* on 2011.05.18: <http://emanuellevy.com/comment/summer-le-rayon-vert-by-eric-rohmer/>. And then, for following up, I suggest this piece: *Charles Taylor* on 1999.06.21: <https://www.salon.com/1999/06/21/summer/>. I am particularly fond of this formulation by *Taylor*:



The marvel of *Summer* is how both *Rohmer* and his heroine get themselves back in tune with the world. *Rohmer* banked the entire movie on the off chance that he would be able to capture the green ray on film. He filmed sunsets for months. That's a hell of a risk for any filmmaker. For one who has controlled his films as precisely as *Rohmer* always has, it's nearly unthinkable. It's a leap of faith comparable to the one *Delphine* makes at the end of the film when, on instinct, she takes a chance in the *Biarritz* train station and is rewarded with her glimpse of the green ray. The look of sudden, unexpected joy on *Rivière's* face makes you feel as if you were seeing a soul reborn. It's a transcendent moment, and it seals up any remaining distance between *Delphine* and *Rohmer*, who was nearing 70 when he made the film and seemingly surprising himself with the joys still to be found in life. *Rohmer* brings *Delphine* to life, and she has the grace to return the favor.

§10. Instead of delving into further anecdotes, however, I prefer to focus here on the epigraph that *Rohmer* himself chose to visualize at the very start of the film. As in all the other films that he made for his series *Comédies et Proverbes*, of which *Summer* is I think the finest, this film too begins with a visualized quotation. The epigraph that *Rohmer* chose for *Summer* are these words of *Arthur Rimbaud*:

'Ah! Que le temps vienne | Où les cœurs s'éprennent.'

(from "Chanson de la plus haute tour" 1872).

I translate:

'Ah, may the time come when hearts catch on fire' (from "Song of the Highest Tower").

§11. I bring this essay to a close with another sunset: I have in mind here the death of *The Village Voice*. The sun had set for the last time on the *Voice* when it ceased publication toward the end of summer in 2018. But here too a green ray may be found—somewhere. For me it is a review article by *Andrew Sarris*, with the evocative title "The Sweet Melancholy of Summer," published in the *Voice* back on 1986.09.02: <https://cinfiles.bampfa.berkeley.edu/cinfiles/DocDetail?docId=12994>. He is reviewing there the *Summer* of *Éric Rohmer*, who lived till 2010. I end by quoting from the words of *Sarris* himself, who lived till 2012:

The miracle of summer is how *Rohmer* has penetrated so deeply into the psyche of an ordinary person with none of the usual stigmata of high drama. His working methods have been described as quick, sequential, often improvisational, and scrupulously anti-expressionistic. Yet, when I saw the brilliantly correct direction of the camera setup for the first shot of the crowded *Biarritz* beachfront, I felt a shiver of recognition of *Murnau's*

formal rigor and metaphysical intimations. Through Rohmer I felt my own summer passing inexorably before my eyes. ... One could say, if one were so inclined, that Summer is ideal end-of-summer entertainment. It is often funny, but in a way that makes it hurt too much to laugh.

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