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The Mystery of Green

Alex Clayton



“A medium, a friend of mine, told me green would be my color for the year,” reports Delphine (Marie Rivière) to a group of mystically-inclined acquaintances gathered in a Parisian garden during an early sequence in Eric Rohmer’s *Le rayon vert* (1986). “It’s really weird, but since then . . . maybe I’m just noticing it, I keep running into green things.” By way of illustration, Delphine recounts an incident we saw moments earlier: “On my way to my sister’s, what did I see? A green playing card by a green lamp post, and I was wearing green.” In fact, she was wearing an off-white honeydew dress, a fact that suggests either a telling misremembrance or, more likely, a rhetorical embellishment. At any rate, her

acquaintances agree this to be a good omen. Perhaps, her friend Manuella (Lisa Heredia) suggests, picking up on an earlier thread of the conversation, this means Delphine will soon find a romantic partner, joking that she might bump into “a little green man.” But it’s unclear what Delphine should do with this knowledge, specifically how it relates to her current dilemma about where and with whom to take her summer holiday, and more generally how her current feelings of despondency might be overcome or dissolved. For the meantime, at least, green is simply a mysterious waymarker.

The mystical qualities of green have been present for us right from the opening title screen, which boasted a distinctly supernatural shade of emerald and was accompanied on the soundtrack by an eerie atonal melody rendered by solo violin. This nineteen-note musical phrase recurs each time Delphine makes a discovery of what she takes to be an omen. The first instance is the discovery of the green-backed playing card of which Delphine will later tell her friends. As if a voice from beyond, the haunting melody breaks through the naturalistic texture of the soundtrack (traffic sounds, distant bird noises) from the instant Delphine spots the card. This is just after she has passed the green lamppost, the colour of which punctuates an otherwise drab grey street. The sudden insert shot of the playing card’s green back is also an abrupt break from the film’s quasi-reportage style. All of this underlines the idea of green as an intervention, as something “out of the ordinary.”

The second omen sequence takes place, like the first, on a grey suburban street, but by now we are primed, like Delphine, to find green at every turn. As the camera pans with her movement from left to right, eagle-eyed viewers might spot the statistically-unlikely presence of several green vehicles parked along the road, and observe that the house she passes is adorned with an impressive green cloak of ivy. As Delphine passes its dark green gates, the solo violin melody begins again. She has noticed a green flyer posted to a nearby lamppost, its colour popping out from the surround. Again the film offers an insert close-up of her discovery:

“Regain contact with yourself and others,” the flyer reads. The message speaks directly to Delphine’s recent feelings of depression, of being cut off from the world, out of sorts, at odds with the summer season. Regaining contact is what she needs, but how to achieve it? Notably, Delphine does not take up the flyer’s call to join a class, preferring to understand its words as a mystical message rather than a practical invitation.

The question of how to turn one’s life around, how to find a way out of despair, is central to the film’s concerns, but there is no easy answer. At the start of the garden scene that follows the discovery of the flyer, the conversation has turned to Delphine’s immediate problem of needing a vacation but having no one with whom to take it. Béatrice (Béatrice Roman) has plenty of solutions, and harangues Delphine when she refuses to take any of them up. Why doesn’t she go on holiday alone? Why doesn’t she make an effort to meet people? Why doesn’t she just express herself? In a perceptive discussion of this scene, Jacob Leigh notes that Béatrice’s scarlet outfit “differentiates her from the greenery of the garden and complements her loud and aggressive questioning” (111), whilst Steven Peacock, in a valuable and sensitive account of color in *The Green Ray* to which the present discussion is indebted, similarly characterizes Béatrice’s choice as a “confident commitment to being loud” (55). We might add that the blot of red formed by Béatrice’s dress overwhelms the white of Delphine’s blouse and unbalances what would otherwise be a symmetrical frame. As embodied by Béatrice, red is the colour of making things happen. “You must escape your loneliness,” she instructs Delphine, the camera by this point having moved in to a medium close-up that gives yet greater prominence to her red and excludes the subject of discussion from the frame. “Look how sad you are.” As she continues to berate Delphine for her inaction, the camera adjusts to frame a two-shot of Béatrice and another acquaintance, Françoise (Rosette), who wears a peppermint top and harlequin headband. Françoise says nothing throughout Béatrice’s interrogation, but, given the context, the green of her outfit makes her peripheral

presence felt, even as red is more dominant. Most notably, the film cuts across to her, in her green outfit, underlined by a green towel hanging on a line behind her, just as it is remarked that green is the “colour of hope.”

The contrast between red and green continues to feature in the aftermath of this scene. Delphine has retired alone to the steps at the side of the house, glum and lost in thought. Because she is visibly shaken by Béatrice’s attempt to “lance the boil,” her donning of a red jacket can be felt to suggest the wound caused by the friend’s intervention and to imply that Delphine has taken her words to heart. Delphine has sought refuge among the green leaves of a collection of potted plants, some of which sport red flowers while others sport lighter pink ones that match the muted pink of Delphine’s sneakers. The arrangement offers the sense of naturally pastel shades being lost in the push-and-pull between vibrant colour opposites. When Françoise arrives to comfort Delphine, she tips the scale in favour of green. Whilst she tries to show sympathy, Françoise herself is characterized as something of an irritant to Delphine and not an especially close friend. So Delphine’s acceptance of Françoise’s invitation to vacation with her in Cherbourg seems steered by the abstract idea of following a path of green. The scene cuts abruptly once Françoise says, “We’ll meet people.” A visual connection between her harlequin headband and the similarly-shaded green flyer, with its promise of reestablishing “contact with others,” may come to mind.

In answer to the question of whether she “wants a new guy,” Delphine has replied that she “hopes” to find one. She is then asked whether she is “waiting for Prince Charming” or whether she will “go looking.” By way of a roundabout answer, Delphine speaks vaguely of her belief “in the things that crop up in life, things that happen all by themselves,” like the finding of a green-backed playing card. On the other hand, Béatrice asserts that one must “make an effort.” The contrast is between reactive and proactive relations to life, between faith and determination, between a responsiveness to the world’s unfolding and the endeavour to make things happen. This thematic contrast is central to the film and

to an understanding the film's use of colour. There is also a salient connection to the film's style. Leigh has helpfully outlined the film's unusual production, wherein Rohmer set about filming with no shooting script to guide the production and an openness to spontaneous inspiration and chance finds. The resulting looseness, exemplified by the evident, almost rambling, improvisation of the garden scene, is counterpoised against what Leigh calls "highly organised patterns in colour, setting and theme"(110). That this combination narrowly avoids both the arbitrary and the schematic is one of the film's key distinctions.

One such "pattern in color" is the ironic use of red to suggest the dangers of trying to force a romantic connection, as Delphine is matched to potential partners with whom she is manifestly unsuited. On the seafront at Cherbourg, for instance, Françoise beckons over a rather louche-looking man in whom Delphine shows an interest. He has a red sweater draped around his shoulders. Coming so soon after the encounter with Béatrice, Delphine's red drawstring bag carries the implication that she has taken on board some of her acquaintance's counsel to "make an effort." Against the nautical blues and whites of the hazy seafront, it disrupts the otherwise calm, if drab, surroundings and, when the man joins them in frame, the red of their accessories draws an overt visual connection between them. But the very contrivance of the costume choice underlines the idea of a forced, unnatural encounter. Delphine soon concludes that the man is a "hustler" and begs retreat. Some scenes later, in a gathering in the family garden near Cherbourg, we are offered a tightly-framed two-shot of Delphine, wearing a red cardigan, with an unnamed cigar-smoking man, one of the house guests, who is topless and sports a red bandana. His body language is strangely, almost creepily, intimate, given that Delphine has only been at the house a few days. He obviously believes a relationship is developing between them, a construct supported by the tight framing and the virtual match cut from a two-shot of Françoise and her lover. Delphine is doing her best to fit in. But instead of matching the pair convincingly, the red color betrays Delphine's discomfort and her struggle to appear at ease.

In flight from all this social labor, Delphine gravitates towards the green leaves of the garden and prefers the company of children, who make fewer demands upon her (although a young girl with whom she picks berries still quizzes her about her love life). Eventually we see her on a walk in the countryside near the house. Somewhat heavily, she meanders down dirt tracks, leans on fences, and wanders around with little direction, running her hands over grasses and bringing the occasional hedgerow plant to her nose--all restlessly, without pleasure. It's as if she's hoping to find something, but there's nothing to find. Finally Delphine settles at a gate and we are shown shots of treetops, bushes, and nettles being bustled and buffeted by the wind. One senses her identification with these entities that resist the constant assault of external forces, surviving only through a kind of stubborn pliancy. When we return to Delphine, she is crying. The relentless sound of wind punctuated by a sudden intake of breath evokes her utter desolation at this moment. The greens that now surround Delphine bring her no solace. Their silence points instead to the insufficiency of nature to provide consolation. She has never been more isolated. This is not the green she needs.

Reportedly, the human eye can discern more shades of green than of any other colour. The film exploits this capacity by making salient the continuum between organic, synthetic and mystical greens. As a color range, green is unique in Western culture for the way its shades can variously embody the "natural", the "unnatural" and the "supernatural", or indeed hover indeterminately between. Accordingly, there is not just one green in the film, but an array reflecting the myriad directions that Delphine may find herself pursuing. Following her epiphany on the country walk, whilst the main group chatter round a table Delphine sits framed by some rather sad drooping leaves on either side of her, in the doorway of the cottage on concrete steps that distantly recall the earlier moment in Paris when she similarly broke off from a gathering. Just as on that earlier occasion, Françoise appears from the rear of the shot, dressed in the green top and harlequin headband. Françoise also carries a red holdall (she's leaving for

Paris), the colour of which, as it passes Delphine, seems to inspire a rare moment of decisiveness. Delphine jumps up and calls “Françoise!” A good instance of contrived *mise-en-scène* that is made to look natural: as Françoise turns she is backed by the drooping leaves and the colour of her headband “pings” against their musty shade of green and in opposition to the red of her holdall. “I can’t stay here. Take me with you,” Delphine begs. The impression that Delphine is trailing the ray of almost neon green formed by Françoise’s headband attends the implication that she continues to retreat from, rather than forge connections with, human company. When Françoise goes over to the group to explain that Delphine is leaving, the green of the headband contrasts to the dark leafy greens of the hedge and the dull pistachio sweater worn by the man with whom Delphine was earlier uncomfortably coupled. Disappointed by the earthy, Delphine reverts to following the luminous.

But her path is never straightforward. After taking herself off for an unsuccessful trip to the mountains, where a hike to the summit, rising above green slopes, yielded no satisfaction (so the answer is not in the clouds), Delphine returns again to Paris. She once more finds Françoise, who this time sports a little green bow, a slighter presence than the headband, as if Delphine’s hope in the colour were dwindling. Françoise assures her: “You always meet someone when you least expect it . . . wait and see.” (Again, that connection between green and “waiting.”) We next see Delphine beside the Seine, for the first time wearing green herself--a shade bordering turquoise--on a patterned summer beach dress that looks distinctly, and purposefully, out of place in the haze of riverside Paris. Perhaps the choice is prompted by a vague notion that somebody else “out there” will be magnetically drawn to it. At any rate, her resolve to take her vacation in Paris is suggested by a red scarf accessory around her waist, emblem of a paradoxical determination to await the indeterminate. What is she waiting for? Where is she going?

Walking an unpromising path through the clutter of some grey bins and a telephone cubicle, a voice calls out to her: “Delphine!” It’s her friend Irène (Irène Skobline), outside a nearby café, who just happens to be in the neighbourhood. When Delphine joins her at the table, the alignment of Delphine’s green dress with the green timber façade of the café is suggestive of a different kind of chance encounter, one in which Delphine has been as much discovered as doing the discovering. (Perhaps the stand-out green of her dress helped facilitate this find.) In turn it yields another discovery, that Irène has a holiday apartment in Biarritz, going spare. “Very nice crowd there, so you never know . . .,” Irène says, using a phrase that would appeal to Delphine’s faith in fortune. The red of her scarf-belt is now prominent in the composition as she mulls it over. Just as Delphine moves to accept, the film cuts abruptly to one of its white calendar cards (*mercredi, 1er août*: a new month, a new start?). The use of a hard cut to white (rather than, say, a fade-out) creates an afterimage, almost a snapshot effect, of an uncharacteristically self-possessed posture in which Delphine suddenly straightens her back and raises her face skywards, marking the instant of summoning courage: the *taking* of a chance.

It is in Biarritz that Delphine learns of the green ray, *le rayon vert*, a mysterious meteorological phenomenon wherein just before vanishing the dying light of a sunset momentarily flashes green, and (so Delphine overhears from a group of Jules Verne enthusiasts) grants those who see it the ability to read their own feelings and those of others, too. In Verne’s 1882 novel of the same name, its heroine Helena Campbell determines to experience this phenomenon after learning of its apparent mystical effects. That this idea strikes a chord with Delphine is evident from the shot of her listening intently and gazing out to sea. That the idea has stayed with her is clear from an outfit choice scenes later. She has been swept into the company of a confident and carefree young Swedish girl, Lena (Carita). Having spent the day at the beach, Lena has suggested they go out cruising for guys and, presumably as a prelude, they are having drinks on a seafront

terrace. The two young women could not be more different. Lena is all fizz and energy, draped in a blue towel robe over a white swimsuit, with a pink flower behind her ear and clasping a cocktail, cigarette, and lighter. By contrast, Delphine's red woollen jacket and emerald-green beret, autumnal in texture and function, emphasise her remoteness. The bipolar color scheme also suggests that she is in two minds about what she is doing here, sending off conflicting signals. Lena busily quizzes Delphine about how she will recognise Mr. Right when he shows. In the previous scene, Delphine whimsically referred to her ideals as romantic and confided a hope that one day, "Perhaps in the hollow of a wave" But Lena believes in practicalities. "A guy won't come to you," she lectures Delphine, "You have to do something." "To me that's just talk," Delphine replies; "Do Something!" I've heard it before." Perhaps in memory of earlier interrogations, Delphine falls into defensive mode, finally slipping into despair. "If people don't come to me, it's because I'm worthless," she concludes. The camera holds on her throughout this soul searching, isolating her in the frame and backing her with the featureless sea and sky. At some point we notice the green arc of her beret against the horizon line, like a beacon, like the green ray itself, as an expression of the wish to be discovered.

When finally she is discovered, by a young man (Vincent Gauthier) in the Biarritz train station, and when in turn she takes the chance to discover him by accepting his advances, the path to the green ray has been cleared. She is more relaxed with this stranger than she has been with anyone else in the film. Encouraged by the stunning coincidence of seeing a tourist shop named "Rayon Vert," Delphine proposes they venture to a rocky outcrop to observe the sunset together. The proposal represents a perfect synthesis of the instinct to "wait and see" with the principle of "seek and find." Hunting the green ray means no more than readying yourself to receive it, putting yourself in a position to be lucky. Delphine's submission to an understanding of her fate is at last continuous with an active determination of her future. As the pair settles down and looks out to sea,

Delphine adjusts her red jacket and a reverse-field cut to the horizon leads us to anticipate the vivid green that would--if only!--form its complementary opposite and, in some as-yet-undefined way, complete her. With the sunset imminent, the eerie “green” melody we heard earlier now develops and transfigures into a suspenseful fugato for string quartet, as if the earlier musical fragments were now maturing and making sense. Delphine sobs in anticipation. The young man holds her. Finally, as the sun sinks out of sight, a glow of emerald green emerges on the horizon, for just the swiftest instant, and disappears. Delphine lets out an euphoric cry, and we cut back to witness her rapture and her sharing of it with the young man. The final shot is of the sunless horizon. We never learn whether the green ray has bestowed the insight promised by its myth. But its light supplies the reward for courage without which love can never happen.

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