



Green Rays on Historical Horizons: The Filmic Refractions of Tacita Dean's *The Green Ray* and Éric Rohmer's *Le Rayon vert*

Andrew Utterson

What connects British artist-filmmaker Tacita Dean's *The Green Ray* (2001) and French filmmaker Éric Rohmer's *Le Rayon vert* [*The Green Ray*] (1986)—on the surface, two very different works—are their obsessive quests to capture on 16 mm film (as opposed to 35 mm but also non-filmic formats) the elusive, naturally occurring optical phenomenon of the “green ray” that gives these films their shared title.

In their respective moments in film history, each sets out to represent this most fleeting of phenomena, which occurs only in very specific conditions, which result in a flash of green light at the very last of a sunset. In doing so, whether implicitly or explicitly, in their conscious choice to shoot with photochemical film (namely, celluloid)—and with 16 mm film, in particular—these works also intersect historical debates on medium specificity. Their 16 mm representations construct a corollary between a concern with the distinctive optics of the setting sun and the material properties of film itself in its capacity (or, otherwise) to represent the green ray. In such a reading, narrative and other dramatic elements give way to a reflexive focus on medium, with regard to whether and how this phenomenon might be documented, as well as the wider significance of such claims.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, and as the primacy of photochemical film was increasingly challenged by a film-to-digital transition, ontological assumptions came under considerable scrutiny in a period in which conceptions of materiality and indexicality were reexamined. Fittingly, the very limits of representation have also come to define each of these films, whether through the mystery that still shrouds *Le Rayon vert* and the potential fakery of Rohmer's means of capturing the titular ray, or the reflexively aware discourses of Dean and her own film, founded as it is on an allegory of the apparatus of cinema and its underlying ontology.

Andrew Utterson (autturson@ithaca.edu) is Associate Professor of Screen Studies at Ithaca College, NY. Among other publications, he is the author of *From IBM to MGM: Cinema at the Dawn of the Digital Age* (British Film Institute, 2011) and *Persistent Images: Encountering Film History in Contemporary Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

Considered collectively, and in retrospect, these films offer self-inscribed histories of the evolving material properties and representational characteristics of photochemical film, and the ways in which this medium has been historicized and theorized. To investigate the representational enigmas of these films is also to engage photochemical film as a medium and the material base of cinema, more generally. Framed in media-historical context, these setting suns become revealing symbols or signifiers of the materiality of cinema, as well as the role of films and filmmakers in negotiating a changing filmic substrate. In media-metaphorical terms, this solar cinema might be thought of as representing the “twilight” of photochemical film itself—here, in the shape of 16 mm—the distinctive imaging properties of which these films explore, anticipating the wider historical shift toward a post-filmic era. Spanning temporal as well as geographical horizons, an illusory panorama connects continents and decades alike, in these twinned attempts to capture the ephemeral glimpse of green as the very last ray of sunlight passes beyond sight.

Setting Suns at the Twilight of a Medium

Looking back, *The Green Ray* and *Le Rayon vert* are expressions of an era—broadly, the mid-1980s to the early 2000s—that saw the widespread proliferation of the digital image and the start of a concomitant decline in the use of photochemical film, as part of a broader film-to-digital transition that would continue in the following years (Rodowick 2007, 90–93). This shift gave rise to a series of related theoretical debates concerning the specificity of medium—for example, with regard to abstract formal qualities as well as questions of ontology and indexicality—and visibility, more generally. In seeking to film the green ray, these works also engage the position of photochemical film in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In more abstract or theoretical terms, their setting suns illuminate not only the representational properties of the medium—a modernist preoccupation for much of the history of cinema—but, more specifically, the nature, status, and understandings of the medium at a given point in time, and thus too the historical contingency of any conception of specificity.

In purely scientific terms, the green ray is a rare but explicable confluence of physics and atmospheric conditions. Put simply, specific conditions give rise to a refraction of only certain elements of light on the color spectrum, as an isolated ray of green, which travels more slowly than red or yellow, bends or refracts across the horizon and is thus discretely visible for an instant after the sun has descended. To observe this phenomenon, one must be situated on a westward-facing sea or ocean and experience optimal weather conditions.

A certain mythic quality has also become associated with this seldom occurring, and even less often witnessed, green ray. Even sober scientific accounts are prone to proclaim its rarity and beauty, conferring mythos even while seeking to explain this phenomenon in more rational terms. As one French scientist put it in the early twentieth century,

When the sun has set and disappeared behind the horizon of the ocean, the last witness of its presence is at times a ray of light of a brilliant emerald green and of a very brief duration.

This is one of the most beautiful spectacles in nature to those observers who are fortunate enough to see it under such conditions as to occasion the exhibition in its full intensity (Guillaume 1920, 102).

With regard to cinema, beyond any narrative concerns, to seek to capture this phenomenon is also to foreground and to a certain extent affirm the representational capacities of a medium that might be capable of evidencing this “most beautiful spectacle.”

Dean’s gallery-exhibited 16 mm film, *The Green Ray*, is one such search. Filming near Morombe (Dean 2007, 88–89), on the west coast of Madagascar, looking out across the Mozambique Channel, this effort to document the green ray is rendered essentially filmic, transposing the particularity of place—as it pertains to the conditions most optimal for observing the green ray—into a meditation on film itself. Filmed in one continuous shot, with a static camera, for the duration of a single 100-foot roll of 16 mm film—which equates to approximately two-and-a-half minutes—*The Green Ray* portrays the setting sun as one that might also carry media-metaphorical associations.

Fifteen years earlier, Rohmer had sought his own 16 mm documentation of the green ray, this time filming to the south of Biarritz on the bay of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, France (de Baecque and Herpe 2016). Unlike Dean’s experimental short, Rohmer’s feature explicitly narrativizes the search for, and dramatic significance of, the green ray. In one scene, Saint-Jean-de-Luz locals discuss its near-mystical properties as the sun sets in the distance. “It is very rare ... Some summers you never see the green ray because atmospheric conditions are unfavorable,” notes one, pointing to the cloud that will prevent the prismatic transfer of light on this occasion—a reminder that the green ray is seldom witnessed, let alone documented.

More generally, in terms of the plot that frames this underlying concern with optics and visibility: when Delphine (Marie Rivière)—who is in the midst of an extended bout of metaphysical malaise and existential ennui—discovers a mysterious green playing card in the street, she is convinced to embark on a journey to Biarritz and beyond, where she will eventually encounter the green ray.

Throughout, as if to parallel this existential search, or to reinforce the symbolic significance of the color green, such happenings occur within what Alex Clayton describes as the film's "continuum between organic, synthetic and mystical greens (Clayton 2017, 53)". Delphine inhabits a decidedly green-hued *mise-en-scène*: we see her wandering alone through verdant countryside; we see her wearing a green beret as she flees an unsolicited amorous advance; we see her in the green-upholstered waiting area of the Biarritz train station; and we see her as she drinks at the green table-tops of a *café en route* to the ocean. In all of these examples, more than simply form meeting content—a green *mise-en-scène* for a film with the word "green" [vert] in its very title—this color maps a representational palette with material as well as narrative resonances, as the pursuit of the green ray is mapped against the physical—as well as psychological—landscape of the French Atlantic coast.

Expanding historical horizons still further, with regard to the coloristic and other qualities of the green ray and its historical legend, both Rohmer and Dean reference and extend to the realm of cinema the representational concerns of Jules Verne's 1882 novel (translated into English in 1883), also titled *Le Rayon vert* (or, *The Green Ray*). Rohmer does so in the dialogue of his film, while Dean does so in her chain of titular allusions. For Verne, the green ray is found not in France, nor Madagascar, but off the west coast of Scotland, which he describes in the novel as a landscape of "rugged rocks and hazy horizons (Verne 1883, 179)."

Just as for Rohmer, and in turn Dean, this natural phenomenon becomes an almost supernatural occurrence, on those infrequent occasions on which these "rugged rocks" and "hazy horizons" reveal the green ray. "Have you sometimes observed the sun set over the sea?" writes Verne, in a passage that could equally serve as the narration to either of these films.

Have you watched it till the upper rim of its disk, skimming the surface of the water, is just about to disappear? Very likely you have; but did you notice the phenomenon which occurs at the very instant the heavenly body sends forth its last ray, which, if the sky be cloudless, is of unparalleled purity? No, perhaps not. Well, the first time you have the opportunity, and it happens but rarely, of making this observation, it will not be, as one might think, a crimson ray which falls upon the retina of the eye, it will be "green," but a most wonderful green, a green which no artist could ever obtain on his palette, a green which neither the varied tints of vegetation nor the shades of the most limpid sea could ever produce the like! If there be green in Paradise, it cannot but be of this shade, which most surely is the true green of Hope! (Verne 1883, 32–33)

If it is beyond the purview of this study to consider in detail the specificity of medium as defined in the broader terms of literature-to-film adaptation or translation, as opposed to an alternate conception of medium rooted in photochemical film, it is nevertheless precisely this "green of

paradise” or “green of hope” and a “green which no artist could ever obtain on his [or her] palette” that Rohmer and Dean would seek to capture, more than one hundred years later. That is, to make visible and representable the invisible and unrepresentable, and on film rather than a painter’s palette or a writer’s page.

The Optics of Cinema

After all, if Verne locates us within notions of the sublime in his novel’s description of the green ray and related ontological themes with regard to its witnessing, the very obvious difference, of course, is that Verne’s green ray is one that is visualized through words rather than images. By contrast, whether implicitly, in Rohmer’s *Le Rayon vert*, or explicitly, in Dean’s *The Green Ray*, each of these films engages questions of medium specificity—what photochemical film alone might reveal, and in this instance 16 mm. For Rohmer, but especially for Dean, there is a reflexive aspect to how this optical phenomenon is captured (or, just as importantly, whether it can even be captured). In media-metaphorical terms, the films of Rohmer and Dean become allegories for the apparatus of cinema, the act of cinematic representation, and the medium of photochemical film, in its capacity (or, otherwise) to represent and thus bear witness to what might otherwise exceed vision and representation alike.

For Dean, in 2001, the choice was between 16 mm film and countless other formats, not least the increasingly omnipresent digital video image. As she puts it in an exhibition catalogue entitled nothing less than *FILM*, “Both film and digital are *pictures*, perhaps copies of one another, but they are not the same thing—one is light on emulsion and one is light made by pixel, and they are also conceived, made and seen differently (Dean 2011, 16).” If the sunset is a recurring figure in countless paintings, photographs, and other art works, and forms a key iconographic element of cinematic landscapes, too, those of *The Green Ray* and *Le Rayon vert* can usefully be considered in the context of expressly materialist concerns.

Indeed, *The Green Ray* fits a broader interest in Dean’s work with the mediation of optical phenomena. Within this body of work, the diurnal patterns of the sun, or the shadows that arise from its obstruction and occlusion, appear in a number of other 16 mm films,¹ with a particular repetition of the twilight transition from day to dusk and its optically mediated temporal cycle.

If Dean’s choice of 16 mm film for *The Green Ray* illustrates a firmly established artistic practice, one that continues even today, Rohmer’s films of the 1980s and 1990s frequently switched between 35 mm and 16 mm film formats, depending on the exact production. As Rohmer would

explain, if there were practical or technical reasons for shooting with 16 mm rather than 35 mm—such as cheaper costs and lighter, more mobile cameras, etc.—there were also creative considerations with regard to subject matter and esthetics. Interviewed in 1993 on the so-called “amateur” esthetic associated with 16 mm film, and discussing the unique characteristics of this format, Rohmer detailed how he filmed a series of 16 mm and Super 16 mm films—including *Le Rayon vert*—as what he terms “16mm intermediaries (de Baecque and Jousse 2013, 134),” to punctuate and distinguish these films from the 35 mm works he was also producing at the time. For *Le Rayon vert*, 16 mm film was seemingly considered well suited to the season-specific seascapes and light and color of the south-west coast of France, including the possibility of filming the green ray.

Comparatively, when we do encounter the setting suns of *The Green Ray* and *Le Rayon vert*, it is in anticipation of epiphanic moments, ones imbued with existential significance, whether for Delphine, in the fiction of *Le Rayon vert*, for example, or for the representational properties of a medium, in the reflexive subtext most central to *The Green Ray*.

As each sun reaches its respective horizon, textures and tones reveal the distinctive features of photochemical film, in terms of granular representations across color and light, as the last rays of the sun appear to span and then bend from beyond the horizon, marking the finale of each film. In these fragments of time and shards of light, filmed and thus preserved forevermore in photographic and in turn cinematic form, we appear to finally witness the green ray through the medium of film.

In *The Green Ray*, the entire work—a single shot—frames the sun against the ocean and horizon, the sky clear, in an image remarkably consistent with Rohmer’s own solar descent. At the outset of Dean’s film, the lower radial of the sun has already passed below the horizon and the ocean that moves with undulations that visually rhyme with the “sea” of 16 mm film grain that shimmers and swims across the frame as a whole. As this single shot progresses, it functions as a study in materiality: with every passing second, the sun moves in real time ever lower in the sky, with the elements of sun, ocean, and horizon delicately interconnected and subtly transforming; yellows become oranges, oranges become ambers, and the greens, blues, and grays of the ocean interact and reflect the rays of the sun in iridescent relief.

At the potentially fateful moment, the spectatorial gaze is cued and focused, as the last sliver of sun disappears from view and appears to emit a glow of green, before the film comes to an end with a fade to black. Have we witnessed the green ray? It is a question that remains elusive, an ambiguity and enigma ripe with relevance for the ontology of the cinematic apparatus, the indexicality of photochemical film, and our faith and desire to witness through this medium what the naked eye might not.

In *Le Rayon vert*, and its own sunset, we cut to and from Delphine; from her gaze to the object of her gaze, the setting sun as it, too, moves ever closer to the horizon. Prior to these shots, this scene is preceded by a brief spell of black, a fade out and then in, as a temporal ellipsis that also recalibrates the spectator's vision. As the first image of the sun appears, it is as if the camera lens is opening, as the sun flares a bright orange. For several seconds, we are in stasis, focally aligned with Delphine, awaiting the possibility of an encounter with the green ray—by way of Delphine as proxy and the medium of film as secondary surrogate.

In the shot that follows, the colors of the sun and sky have shifted, with the advance of the sun toward the horizon, against which it now sits, with an orb of orange around the sun itself as its light is exposed by film stock. Continuing to cut back and forth to Delphine, now in tears, a third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh shot reveal the sun now only partly visible, its orange hues deepening.

In an eighth, longer shot of the sun, approximately seven seconds in duration, Delphine and companion—and, by extension, the spectator too—now appear to witness the green ray, in the very last of the sun's visible arc. As in *The Green Ray*, the light and color sensitivity of 16mm film registers a changing color scheme, especially in the fading light. The framing remains fixed, capturing the vertical movement of the sun itself, the cyclically disappearing form of which now appears as a small disk of orange against the horizon. At the last of this orange, a vivid green appears to emanate from the infinity point of the seascape vista, only to then disappear. In its totality, this shot is long enough to direct our attention, but short enough—within the context of a feature-length narrative—to also leave us in some doubt as to quite what we may or may not have seen, and what Delphine may or may not have seen, even while her gasp of exhilaration suggests an affirmation in terms of her own subjectivity and the certainty of her ocular experience.

As *Le Rayon vert* closes, it cuts again to a shot of the ocean, now after the sun has set, followed in turn by a jump cut to a shot with identical framing, of the orange sky of the so-called “golden hour,” against which the closing credits of the film are optically printed as they play out against the seascape and its changing gradations of light and color. For Jacob Leigh, in the texture of this slow-motion shot, “The inclusion of visible grain emphasizes verisimilitude, but it also foregrounds the image quality itself (Leigh 2012, 135).” This is a shot, in other words, that draws attention to the medium and its apparatus, including in precise connection to the green ray that gives the film its title.

At the same time, as dramatic denouement, the sunset of *Le Rayon vert* offers symbolic meaning, too. In her tears, and in her gasp, and with her

hand on her mouth, Delphine's exhilaration at having witnessed—or, at least believing to have witnessed—the green ray matches that of Dean's, certainly, and perhaps Rohmer's, too. Each of their films is an effort to manifest the ineffable or intangible, to render material the immaterial, through the properties invested in the green ray, likewise conferred upon any medium that has the capacity to represent it.

“Know what Verne says?” asks one of the characters in *Le Rayon vert*, as a reminder of a mythic quality. “That when you see the green ray you can read your own feelings and others' too.” For Delphine, when she experiences the green ray, it is at the point of her own self-discovery, the seeming emergence from an extended period of estrangement. In this narrative, and in its intertextual referencing of Verne, the green ray comes to symbolize an act of faith, of searching, and of potential discovery—one that might equally describe, at a reflexive remove, the representational quests of Rohmer and Dean.

The Ephemerality of Vision

Yet, what if what appears to be depicted in each of these films is in fact a falsehood or other form of illusion in the representational leap of faith—on the part of filmmaker and/or spectator? Did *any* of us really see the green ray? And, if so, how can we be sure that this is an image whose apparent verisimilitude does not in fact perpetrate a photo-indexical fraud or ontological fallacy? What, if anything in these films, can we believe? Or rather, with regard to the ephemerality of vision—of witnessing, and of witnessing through film—what have we historically wished to believe?

In the case of *Le Rayon vert*, the plot thickens with regard to persistent rumors that charge that trick photography or a visual effect—either analogue or digital—was used to conjure this particular green ray, when the camera crew posted to the Atlantic coast of the Canary Islands failed to document the green ray, despite sunset after sunset of scouring the horizon (de Baecque and Herpe 2016, 368–369).

In terms of the veracity of these images, it is noteworthy in itself that Rohmer had resorted to seeking to film additional footage off the coast of the Canary Islands. In a variation on art imitating life, the production of the film partly mirrored the search for the fabled phenomenon that is so central to its narrative. If there is no pretense at documentary-like truth claims in what is an overtly fictional film, to insert footage of the Canary Islands into a film that so clearly foregrounds its narrative location as the stated source of its green ray arguably already constitutes something of a deception.

However, according to the ongoing mystery of the ontological lineage or photo-indexical rooting of Rohmer's green ray, even the "fraud" of sourcing supplementary footage appears to have proved inadequate to represent this optical phenomenon.

In an ironic twist, it was the playback of *Le Rayon vert* on an altogether different screen than theater projection, with this 16 mm film in a televisual transfer, that would first raise suspicions. In a 1986 article entitled "The Disappearance of the Green Ray" [La disparition du rayon vert], published in the French daily newspaper *Libération* following the first television screening of *Le Rayon vert*, Louis Skorecki reports the conspicuous absence of the green ray and suggests a possible conspiracy. Noting the Hitchcockian suspense of the moment at which we anticipate the green ray, he writes, "The sun sets, sets, this is it, we will see it, we will..." (Skorecki 1986, 35). As he continues to recall the televisually mediated experience of Rohmer's film:

Nothing. Nothing happens. The film ends like this, without rays, without anything, and we are all sad. The next day, at the office, a colleague was crying: "Do you realize, she [Delphine] never saw its ray? She has dreamed that it existed, it was even more moving than if she had really seen it (Skorecki 1986)."

How to explain Skorecki's reaction? Had Delphine simply willed the green ray into being, a subjective delusion to which the spectator is narratively and optically aligned? Was this television transfer sourced from an alternate print, deliberately or otherwise altered to somehow remove the green ray? Was the detail of this subtle phenomenon simply not visible on the smaller screen of the television set with its reduced size and resolution, and thus only visible when projected on film and at scale?

Perhaps we will never know for sure, though Rohmer biographers Antoine de Baecque and Noël Herpe offer one possible explanation:

Later he did try to draw this green ray on the film itself, which could be no more than a temporary solution. Although he abhorred trickery, they resolved to send a camera operator to the Canary Islands to bring back satisfactory images. Rohmer even allowed the green in question to be slightly enhanced. He knew that this banal story needed magical counterpoints [...] (de Baecque and Herpe 2016, 369)

When the Canary Islands failed to deliver said "satisfactory images," according to this theory, the temporarily drawn green ray became permanently etched, an image created not by the light of the sun but by a visual effect during post-production, rendering the filmic image a filmic-electronic image (or, filmic-digital, depending on the precise source of the post-produced ray).

Notably, even if this tale of a synthetic ray were true, in a twist that might still reveal something of medium specificity, a further, more convoluted conspiracy theory suggests instead that Rohmer instructed his lab to

create a visual effect that was all but imperceptible on video—and, in turn, television broadcast. The result would be that television viewers would have to return to the movie theater to witness what may or may not have been the green ray, preserving the particularities of the cinematic experience—and, at its base, affirming the ontological specificity of photochemical film—of *Le Rayon vert*, even if via a fraud of sorts. As Skorecki's report continues, hinting at this tantalizing prospect,

After investigation, we are sure: there are rays that do not pass through the TV-dam. And this is perhaps not for the worse: we will go to gaze at Rohmer's green paintbrush in a real movie theater. And if they had done it on purpose? (Skorecki 1986, 35)

In the instance of *The Green Ray*, and a film produced fifteen years later, Dean has maintained the integrity of her own filmic quest for the green ray, even while framing this work within transcendental conceptions such as “faith” and “belief” in what we are seeing, or what we think we are seeing, and thus, too, the distinctive properties of the medium.

Necessarily, in terms of a comparative consideration of media, an exploration of the specificity of photochemical film necessarily also engages that of the digital moving image, too, which by 2001 had increasingly come to replace it. As Dean herself recalls of her time on the Madagascar beach:

The evening I filmed the green ray, I was not alone. On the beach beside me were two others with a video camera pointed at the sun, infected by my enthusiasm for this elusive phenomenon. They didn't see it that night, and their video documentation was watched as evidence to prove that I hadn't seen it either. But when my film fragment was later processed in England, there, unmistakably, defying solid representation on a single frame of celluloid, but existent in the fleeting movement of film frames, was the green ray, having proved itself too elusive for the pixellation of the digital world (Dean 2007, 89).

Negotiating a wider historical context, Dean responds with a compelling contingency, in her suggestion that “looking for the green ray became about the act of looking itself, about faith and belief in what you see (Dean 2007).”

Ultimately, at the bounds of both visual perception and media representation, with regard to “what we see” and what is bound up in “the act of looking itself,” what is “unmistakable” for Dean is the poetic potential of the belief in representation, one that complicates and partly obviates questions of ontology or indexicality *per se*.

The very ambiguity of the indexical status of the filmic image, and thus the representational act, is an inherent element of the time-based experience of *The Green Ray*. Detailing the site-specificity of the spectatorial experience of this film as a gallery installation, and the meaning that arises from such an encounter, Erika Balsom identifies a pointed uncertainty

around the critical issue of whether or not we witness the green ray. The spectator is never quite sure, she explains.

The film is not displayed on loop, like many of Dean's other works; instead, the 16mm projector is outfitted with a push button that will begin the film at the viewer's volition. Over the course of two-and-a-half minutes, the spectator sees the golden sun sink below the horizon and waits for the fatal instant. But before one knows it, the sun is gone, the sky is dark, the film has ended. *Did I glimpse the green ray?* Time to push the button again (Balsom 2013, 65).

This cycle continues, like that of the rising and setting sun itself, connected in turn to the recurring mediated optics of the cinematic apparatus as its own source of projected light as radiant luminescence.

As attempts to witness, document, and represent an inherently fleeting, ephemeral, and elusive phenomenon, the resulting material evidence of *The Green Ray* and *Le Rayon vert* is suitably vexed, raising fundamental questions of filmic—and, by extension, digital—cinematic representation. If these films explore ontological debates that preceded them, they also evidence an historically specific transition from a media ontology that was arguably assumed to a representation whose images are in some respects ontologically untethered. Put another way, if Rohmer did resort to trickery in 1986, it was an illusion that exploited an implicit faith in the filmic image and the process of cinematic representation, a faith that Dean, by 2001, newly articulated as an act of reflexive devotion, to some extent a necessity for engaging film in a moving image culture increasingly dominated by the digital image.

Crepuscular Refractions

Looking back, whether or not the green ray is witnessed, and this witnessing documented and in turn represented, the consequences of this solar spectacle, and the further spectacle of its filming and projection, assume metaphysical proportions and metahistorical significance. What was invested in these quests for representation—on the level of narrative, in terms of Delphine in *Le Rayon vert*, and abstracted to the level of production or artistic methods and imperatives in the form of filmmakers Rohmer and Dean and their resulting films—is itself illuminating as an historical window onto a medium and related discourses, even or precisely in their disputed ontology and representational ambiguity.

In historical terms, the analysis of these films also gives rise to a broader consideration of medium and the shifting significations of photochemical film, in general, and 16 mm film, in particular. Today, the historical meanings of these 16 mm representations (or, otherwise) of the green ray are necessarily filtered through our knowledge of the subsequent plight of film

and the broader shift toward digital images. In this sense, the sunsets of *The Green Ray* and *Le Rayon vert* cannot be divorced from the secondary relevance of their broader metaphorical meaning as together representing the end of an era—here, of the very medium used in their production, one that assumed particular significance at the point of its seeming obsolescence (or, at least, postulated obsolescence). For J. Hoberman, configuring the sunset as a related historiographic metaphor, cinema gave rise in the early 2000s to a cycle of “twilight movies (Hoberman 2012, 19),” eulogies to a medium at the moment of its potential passing. Revealingly, in *The Green Ray* and *Le Rayon vert*, this metaphor is rendered literal, too.

If, in 1986, Rohmer would approach 16 mm film as a viable format, albeit one with amateur applications, a medium to which he would return on several occasions in subsequent years, this context would be markedly different by the time of Dean’s own green ray. Put another way: if, in 1986, Rohmer’s use of 16 mm film was one of practical convenience and/or esthetic choice, by 2001, just fifteen years later, Dean’s exploration of this medium would be equally concerned with a wider media history, as a response to the growing obsolescence of film of all kinds, including 16 mm. Against a tide of digitalization, 16 mm film had gone from being a medium that might convey a sense of realism and/or intimacy well matched to the interiority of Delphine in her search for the green ray as a narrative symbol, to being, by the time of *The Green Ray* and Dean’s own search, a signifier of the wider, gradual disappearance of photochemical film.

It is for this reason that Balsom locates her own discussion of Dean’s work, more generally, within the context of what she terms “filmic ruins (Balsom 2013, 65–106).” Viewed amidst these “ruins,” the rare and ephemeral optical phenomenon of the green ray is thus linked to the rarity and ephemerality of the medium of photochemical film itself. Discussing *Le Rayon vert*, Leigh argues that “the representation of natural light is appropriate to the film’s emphasis on transient epiphanies, a chance meeting in a station, a chance vision of the green ray and life decisions made in an instant (Leigh 2012, 135).” Rohmer’s textually—and texturally—inscribed “transient epiphanies” anticipate a later period in which film would become a symbol of fragility and the passing of time, with its materiality an expression of this altered historicity, including the particular associations carried by the 16 mm format as a marker of the past, for example, and of the various amateur contexts in which it circulated.

In short, these stories of the green ray also illuminate that of the last decades of photochemical film, as an impermanent base in the wider history of a medium. Unbeknownst to Rohmer, in 1986, but very consciously for Dean, in 2001, these works collectively occupy an historical cusp; the last rays of their suns were also, in certain respects, those of photochemical

film as the predominant cinematic medium, prior to its displacement in all but the most specialist of contexts and applications, including the galleries in which artist-filmmakers such as Dean continue to exhibit.

Considered in retrospect, the related mysteries of the origins of the green rays of Rohmer and Dean are a fitting summation of the position of film in this historical context, with competing proclamations of its specificity or otherwise, unique and distinct capacities or otherwise, ontological or indexical properties or otherwise—all of this vis-à-vis an increasingly digital cinema and its own images. If these cases remain open or unsolved, and the sources of these rays still contested, this is perhaps all the better, in this media-metaphorical or media-allegorical reading, as an illustration of film in its own historical cycles.

After all, as both Rohmer and Dean remind us, in the setting sun, in the very last of the sunset, there exists the possibility of something revelatory or indelible, too—the witnessing and preservation of something that might otherwise escape the human senses. At the close of a medium, its specific qualities came—and perhaps continue to come—under greater scrutiny, contested status, and ultimately sharper focus. As cinematic suns are charted, with filmic rays historicized and contextualized, the suggestion of these films, and this article, is that the setting sun should not be the very last we see of photochemical film, nor of 16 mm film in particular. As we gaze at this history, *The Green Ray* and *Le Rayon vert* are evidence not only of a twilight transition toward a post-filmic era but in turn the crepuscularity of a cinema whose filmic rays now extend and refract beyond their own historical horizons, continuing glimpses of a bygone moment that nevertheless continues to illuminate the present in its evolving signification.

Note

1. Broadly contemporaneous with *The Green Ray*, *Banewl* (1999), *Totality* (2000), and *Diamond Ring* (2002) all feature solar eclipses, for example, while *Disappearance at Sea* (1996), *Fernsehturm* (2001), and *Palast* (2004) capture the light (or, the abstraction of its absence, in terms of the shadows that form its relief) of the setting sun in one way or another.

Works Cited

- Balsom, Erika. 2013. *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.
- Clayton, Alex. 2017. "The Mystery of Green." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 15 (1): 48–57. doi:[10.1080/17400309.2017.1265425](https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2017.1265425)
- Dean, Tacita. 2007. "The Green Ray." In *Tacita Dean: Film Works*, edited by Rina Carvajal, 88–89. Miami, FL and Milan, Italy: Miami Art Central and Edizioni Charta.

- Dean, Tacita. 2011. "Film." In *FILM: Tacita Dean*, edited by Nicholas Cullinan, 15–33. London, UK: Tate Publishing.
- de Baecque, Antoine, and Noël Herpe. 2016. *Éric Rohmer: A Biography*, translated by Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- de Baecque, Antoine, and Thierry Jousse. 2013. "The Amateur: An Interview with Éric Rohmer." In *Éric Rohmer: Interviews*, translated and edited by Fiona Handyside, 124–139. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Guillaume, Ch-Ed. 1920. "Green Rays at Sunset: Explanation of the Curious Emerald Light That Sometimes Follows the Setting Sun." *Scientific American Monthly* 2(2): 102–106. doi:[10.1038/scientificamerican10011920-102supp](https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican10011920-102supp)
- Hoberman, J. 2012. *Film after Film: Or, What Became of 21st-Century Cinema*. London, UK: Verso.
- Leigh, Jacob. 2012. *The Cinema of Éric Rohmer: Irony, Imagination, and the Social World*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Rodowick, D. N. 2007. *The Virtual Life of Film*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Skorecki, Louis. 1986. "La disparition du rayon vert." *Libération*, September 3: 35.
- Verne, Jules. 1883. *The Green Ray*, translated by Mary de Hauteville. London, UK: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington.