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Mary M. Wiles, *Jacques Rivette*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. xiv + 179 pp. Still shots, notes, interview, filmography, bibliography, and index. \$22.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-252-03665-1.

Review by Thibaut Schilt, College of the Holy Cross.

Jacques Rivette is the second book in Illinois's well-established Contemporary Film Directors series to concentrate on a French director of the New Wave generation, after Nora Alter's 2006 monograph on the nonconformist film essayist and documentarian, Chris Marker.^[1] The series' stated objective is to "provide concise, well-written introductions to directors from around the world and from every level of the film industry;" and it aims to "broaden our awareness of important artists, to give serious attention to their work, and to illustrate the variety and vitality of contemporary cinema" (p. iii). Although the oeuvre of *Cahiers du cinéma* film critic turned director Jacques Rivette is lesser known than that of his contemporaries François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, and Eric Rohmer, the importance of his cinema is undeniable. His prodigious longevity may be compared to that of the other French-based veteran director, Agnès Varda. Now in his eighties, Rivette directed his first short, *Aux quatre coins* in 1949; his feature film début, *Paris nous appartient* in 1960; and his most recent full-length film, *36 vues du Pic Saint Loup*, was released in 2009.

Wiles' task to provide a relatively concise overview of Rivette's sixty-year career, though necessary, is certainly an arduous one.^[2] She chose "Moving Backstage" as the umbrella title of her commentary on Rivette's films, emphasizing the director's unrelenting and lifelong interest in the relationship between theater and cinema. Her roughly chronological discussion is divided into eight subsections of films that are thematically similar. The first section focuses on four early shorts from the 1940s and 1950s, while the overview concludes with a joint treatment of Rivette's latest two features, *Ne touchez pas à la hache* (2006) and *36 vues du Pic Saint Loup*. In the second section, Wiles draws comparisons between existentialist theater and the new wave classic *Paris nous appartient*; the subsequent films the author discusses represent "varied dimensions of theatricality in Rivette's work" (p. x). Examples of these theatrical dimensions include the use of the tableau in the initially banned *La religieuse* (1965-1966), the combined use of the *policier* genre and Greek tragedy in *Secret défense* (1997), and what the author terms "occult theatricality" (p. 98) in four feature films from various periods of Rivette's career, including *La bande des quatre* (1988) and *Histoire de Marie et Julien* (2002-2003).

What makes this book particularly interesting in my mind is the special place accorded not just to the world of the theater (and other arts, such as literature, painting, music, and dance), but also to the primordial importance of female characters in the master's output. In Wiles's words: "Upon close analysis of these films, it becomes evident that Rivette's authorial signature is not merely discernible in the way in which theatricality inflects his films, but also in the manner in which women's lives are portrayed" (p. xi). For example, when discussing one of Rivette's most famous opus, *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974), which Wiles terms a "feminist story" (p. 98), the author insists on the film's anti-patriarchal qualities, as well as on its intertextual connections with other films of female defiance, such as Dorothy Arzner's American classic, *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) (an influence of Rivette's for *Céline et Julie*), and Erick Zonca's *La vie rêvée des anges* (1998) (in turn influenced by Rivette's classic). Wiles'

knowledge of world cinema is evident throughout this study, and she makes many relevant connections between the work of the very cinephilic Rivette and films directed by others in France and beyond.

Although it was done twelve years prior to the release of the present monograph and thus does not discuss the last decade of Rivette's filmography, the interview Wiles conducted with the director in 1999 is both useful and informative. It includes candid and sometimes detailed discussions of important films, as well as some that are less widely available (such as *Secret défense*). Also of particular interest is Rivette's almost poetic commentary of the difference between cinema and the theater, and his opinion of his own films as well as French and American cinema. We also learn from the conversation regarding *Haut bas fragile* (1995) about Rivette's strong connections with a particular group of actresses, and the artisanal ways in which some of his films were still made long after the experimental French New Wave period had ended. The translation into English of the exchange is generally satisfactory, with some exceptions; for example, the translation of what I am assuming is the French film industry term "avances sur recettes" simply as "the advances" (p. 149) is unsatisfactory and would mean little to an English-speaking reader. The term actually refers to a type of financial backing awarded by the government-run Centre National du Cinéma (or CNC) to certain French film projects that would otherwise struggle financially.

In conclusion, Wiles's study is well-researched, and the discussions of the individual films are pertinent and thorough. As a matter of personal taste, and despite the obvious restrictions of the exercise in terms of length, I wish the book had included more extensive biographical information on Rivette's life beyond his work as a film director (his family history, his socio-economic background, his early work as a movie critic, for instance), as well as a more in-depth exploration of his career as seen through the theoretical and cinematic context of the *politique des auteurs*. Nevertheless, this monograph will be most helpful to film enthusiasts, scholars, and in a classroom setting for students of French or European cinema.

NOTES

[1] So far, the series has published a total of six monographs on francophone filmmakers. With the exception of Marker and Rivette, they focus on directors who began their careers much more recently: Thibaut Schilt, *François Ozon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), *Jean-Pierre Jeunet* (Elizabeth Ezra, 2008); and Judith Mayne, *Claire Denis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

[2] The French Film Director series issued by Manchester University Press released in 2010 a book-length study on Jacques Rivette co-authored by Douglas Morrey and Alison Smith. Previous French-language books on Rivette include H el ene Frappat's *Jacques Rivette, secret compris* (Paris: Les cahiers du cin ema, 2001) and H el ene Deschamps' brief *Jacques Rivette: th eatre, amour, cin ema* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003). I have not read them and am not be able to compare them to Wiles' monograph.

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