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Antoine de Baecque and Noël Herpe, *Éric Rohmer: A Biography*. Translated by Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. vi + 637 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0231175586; \$27.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0231175593.

Review by Laure Astourian, Bentley University.

In this age of distraction, it is a distinct pleasure to witness a sustained conversation—not a heated political debate or competitive battle of wits, but rather the slow interplay of minds and moods, glances and gestures. In *Claire's Camera* (2017), the South Korean filmmaker Hong Sang-soo provides a sparkling example of this power of conversation—to amuse, confuse, connect. Starring Isabelle Huppert and Kim Min-hee and filmed in Cannes, the movie is conducted mostly in English and Korean. *Claire's Camera* is also strikingly reminiscent of the work of French filmmaker Éric Rohmer. In addition to its title, which alludes to Rohmer's 1970 film *Claire's Knee*, the film's structure and spirit are markedly Rohmerian with their subtle yet suspenseful tangling of meandering conversations and relationships.

Rohmer's palpable influence on Sang-soo and other active international filmmakers—including Greta Gerwig, Cristi Puiu, and Mia Hansen-Løve—attests to the timelessness of his signature style and to his continued relevance. And yet, though he remains popular among respected filmmakers and hip cinephiles alike, Rohmer is a mystery. This is, in part, because, despite his long and prolific career, Rohmer remains closely associated with the French New Wave, the late 1950s-1960s movement, the most prominent members of which were far more outspoken and outwardly dynamic than he. But Rohmer's elusiveness was intentional, and indeed cultivated. In an effort to keep his personal life separate from his filmmaking career, he hid behind multiple masks and pseudonyms, as Antoine de Baecque and Noël Herpe demonstrate in this comprehensive biography, originally published in French in 2014.[1]

This biography provides an insider's view into Rohmer's life and work. Fluidly translated by Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal, the tome is full of anecdotes about Rohmer and his collaborators and includes an array of black-and-white images—family and behind-the-scenes photographs, film posters, and drawings by Rohmer himself. De Baecque, France's foremost specialist of the New Wave, is also the author of a biography on Godard and co-author, with Serge Toubiana, of a biography of François Truffaut.[2] Herpe, a writer and film historian, previously edited the volume *Rohmer et les autres*. [3] As the authors describe in their introduction, five months after Rohmer's death in June 2010, his family deposited his archives at the Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine. In the course of their research De Baecque and Herpe dug through almost one hundred and forty boxes of documents and met with more than a hundred people from Rohmer's broad circle—friends, family, collaborators, technicians, artists, intellectuals.

The main text is divided into fourteen more or less chronological chapters, with some thematic chapters covering a broad period (e.g., chapter seven, “On Germany and the Pleasure of Teaching: 1969-1994”) and others focusing on brief, distinct periods of Rohmer's life (e.g., chapter four, “Under the Sign of

*Cahiers: 1957-1963*").

Taken together, the introduction and first two chapters provide an essential framework for understanding Rohmer's preoccupations throughout his life and oeuvre. Rohmer, whose real name was Maurice Schérer (hence his nickname, "le grand Momo"), was born in Tulle in 1920 to conservative, bourgeois, devout Catholic parents. A voracious reader, gifted in languages and mathematics, Rohmer was passionate about all of the arts--theater, literature, music, drawing, painting--except for one, which hardly influenced him: film. His parents' mistrust of film is key to understanding Rohmer's secrecy throughout his career. He was "determined to protect his mother by hiding from her [...] the fact that her son, who she thought was a professor of classics in a lycée, was one of the most admired French filmmakers" (p. 2). Whereas many of his future colleagues of the French New Wave were seasoned cinephiles, Rohmer was not; cinema was the forbidden fruit.

In September 1937 Rohmer moved to Paris to attend the Lycée Henri IV. Two years later he passed the written exam for admission to the École Normale Supérieure but failed the oral examinations that July. He was briefly drafted into the French army between 1940 and 1941. In 1943 he and his brother René returned to Paris to study. In 1946 Rohmer published his first novel, *Élisabeth* (Gallimard), under the pseudonym Gilbert Cordier. It went unnoticed. During those years he also wrote short stories; several of these were early "drafts" of films he would make two decades later.[4] Chapter two, one of the richest and most entertaining chapters of the book, highlights Rohmer's entry into the film world. In 1945 he met Alexandre Astruc, who had made a name for himself as a journalist, and who introduced him to the microcosm of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

De Baecque and Herpe describe how 1947-1948 marked Rohmer's initial conversion to cinema, a year after the influx of American films that resulted from the Blum-Byrnes Agreements. In 1948 Rohmer published his first article, "Le cinéma, l'art de l'espace," in *La Revue du Cinéma*. That year he also became a film club organizer for the *Ciné-club du Quartier Latin*, of which he would become president in 1950. This chapter also underlines his "disengagement" and right-wing sympathies, notably through his friendship with Paul Gégauff (p. 31).

In May 1950 Rohmer created *La Gazette du cinéma*. It is in the September 1950 issue of that publication that the pseudonym "Éric Rohmer" first appeared. According to his biographers, "The idea of creating a double [...] shield him from the eyes of his students, friends, and especially his family. In particular he wanted to spare his mother--who was so frightened by his examination failures, so concerned about his teaching career, so preoccupied with having a good reputation and with Catholic humility--the shame of knowing that her son was an artist or a bohemian" (p. 55).

Rohmer made his first film, *Journal d'un scélérat*, in 1950, but this was not as consequential as the developments in his career as a critic. Following the second Festival du Film Maudit de Biarritz in September 1950, a "virulent polemic" emerged on the pages of the *Gazette* (p. 61). This led to a break between the old guard and the new guard of cinephiles, and eventually to the birth of the film journal *Cahiers du cinéma*. Rohmer published his first contribution in June 1951 and established himself as an authoritative critic, writing forty articles for the journal between the summer of 1951 and the spring of 1957. Notably, his obsession with classicism is ever apparent in the article "Le Celluloïd et le Marbre" (1955). To Rohmer, cinema is a Western and Christian art: "Cinema is not made for children but for old, solidly civilized people like us" (p. 86). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that he completely shunned Western guilt with respect to colonized peoples. He spurned the view that was critical of colonization and respectful of difference. He was, it should be noted, a subscriber to *La Nation française*, a royalist weekly.

When he wasn't reading royalist weeklies or comparing Hollywood to a "land of classical and spiritual creation," (he was inspired by the sheer economic and political power of the United States), Rohmer made what the biographers refer to as the first New Wave film, *Les petites filles modèles* (1952) (p. 86).

During this period he also wrote many articles for the publication *Arts*. Lastly, on the personal front, he married Thérèse Barbet in 1957.

These introductory sections offer the foundation for the structure and content of the rest of the chapters, which comprise detailed descriptions of the genesis, production, and reception of Rohmer's films. This structure--and the biographers' orderly method of recounting his life--is very much a result of the subject, the notoriously private Rohmer. There are simply no behind-the-scenes scandals to report--the farthest Rohmer got was "chaste" tea parties with his pretty actresses, that is to say, not very far at all. Nor is there excitement or even engagement on the political front, for Rohmer had no desire to be in step with his time. In fact, the one cause he was committed to was environmentalism, and there he was actually *ahead* of his time.

The third chapter describes the genesis and production of Rohmer's film *Sign of Leo*. The film--made in the summer of 1959 but distributed only in spring of 1962--was also the New Wave's biggest commercial failure. Chapter four details Rohmer's tenure as editor-in-chief of the *Cahiers du cinema*, from March 1957 until his dismissal in May 1963. The reasons for his dismissal were political: according to Jacques Rivette, "Rohmer's *Cahiers* had become a right-wing outfit, and some of the articles it published came close to being fascist or racist" (p. 159). The *Cahiers* of the early 1960s seemed distant from the New Wave phenomenon, even though it was the site of its origin.

As he neared the end of his tenure at *Cahiers*, Rohmer got a fresh start as a filmmaker when, at the end of 1962, he and Barbet Schroeder co-founded Les Films du Losange. Through that company he would make some of his best-known films. Chapter five begins with a description of Rohmer's discontent following his dismissal from *Cahiers*, as well as his concern regarding his financial future--he now had two sons to support. Thus, in addition to contributing an excellent segment to the omnibus film *Paris vu par...* (1965), in November 1963 he began making programs for educational television. Between 1964 and 1970 Rohmer conceived and made approximately four programs a year, in doing so becoming an active filmmaker. He also participated in the television series *Cinéastes de notre temps*.

Chapter six chronicles Rohmer's coming into his own, with a particular focus on some of his greatest successes, films from his *Moral Tales* series: *La collectionneuse* (1967), *My Night at Maud's* (1969), and *Claire's Knee* (1970). The first of these drew more than 300,000 spectators to the cinemas. It won over the critics as well. *My Night at Maud's* tackled a Rohmerian subject *par excellence*: the hesitation between fidelity and independence in love. It was the greatest commercial success in Rohmer's career. Lastly, *Claire's Knee* won the prestigious Louis-Delluc Prize in 1971.

Chapter seven describes Rohmer's predilection for German culture as well as his intellectual and pedagogical activity in the 1970s--in 1972 Rohmer defended a doctoral thesis on F. W. Murnau's *Faust*. The next chapter covers the brief period (1978-1979) during which Rohmer adapted Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century text *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*. Chapter nine covers his 1980s cycle of films, the six *Comedies and Proverbs*. As he had during the making of *Perceval*, Rohmer used "an informal troupe of young actors chosen for their beauty and spontaneity rather than for their experience" to great effect (p. 323).

Chapter ten, one of the best in the book, highlights the "spatial obsession" which was fundamental to Rohmer's thinking about cinema, from the early 1970s to the mid 1990s (p. 380). Chapter eleven primarily discusses Rohmer's next cycle of films, the *Tales of the Four Seasons*, while the following chapter covers the period from 1998 to 2004, specifically Rohmer's interest in making highly accurate historical films. The sections on the filming of *The Lady and the Duke* (2001) --in particular Rohmer's "realist obsession" and "fetishizing of the truth"-- are especially interesting (p. 489).

Chapter thirteen focuses especially on *The Romance of Astrée and Celadon* (2007), Rohmer's adaptation of

the seventeenth-century novel by Honoré d'Urfé. Finally, the last chapter, titled "In Pain," highlights Rohmer's declining health in his final years. Rather poignantly, it was only at his deathbed that the director's two families--the Schériers and his filmmaking collaborators--would finally meet, and it was not with open arms that the latter were welcomed. Rohmer died the following morning, at the age of eighty-nine.

*Éric Rohmer: A Biography* is a meticulously researched, vividly detailed, clearly written biography that will appeal to film scholars, filmmakers, students, and lay readers alike. It is a fantastic reference tool for anyone interested in Rohmer, his collaborators, and French cinema in general. At its best, it draws the reader into an engrossing narrative. If anything could be modified, it would be the sub-headings in each chapter, which sometimes sacrifice clarity for poetry. Whereas some serve as useful signposts ("Adventures in 16 mm" on p. 177), others are vague ("Where Does Life Begin?" on p. 340). Perhaps it is the combination of these two types of sub-headings--one direct, the other evocative--that is disorienting, rather than the sub-headings themselves. Some of the longer quotations, particularly in the later chapters, could be shortened or omitted. At times they slow the flow of the narrative.

These are minor criticisms, though, of an excellent biography that admirably succeeds not only in telling the life story of its guarded subject, but also in conveying his spirit. De Baecque and Herpe open the door to Rohmer's world by treating the reader as an interlocutor to whom they are excitedly relaying delightful nuggets from the life of "le grand Momo": that time he and an actress ate cookies and listened to Tahitian music in pious silence (p. 343); the other time when the American comedian Chris Rock remade his film *Chloe in the Afternoon* (p. 257). In other words, reading *Éric Rohmer: A Biography* feels like having a long conversation--a nourishing and satisfying one.

## NOTES

[1] Antoine de Baecque and Noël Herpe, *Éric Rohmer: Biographie* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2014).

[2] Antoine de Baecque, *Godard* (Paris: Grasset, 2010); Antoine de Baecque and Serge Toubiana, *François Truffaut* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

[3] Noël Herpe et al., *Rohmer et les Autres* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007).

[4] De Baecque and Herpe co-edited these previously unpublished writings in a volume titled *Friponnes de porcelaine* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2014).

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