

H-France Review Vol. 19 (December 2019), No. 274

Marco Grosoli, *Eric Rohmer's Film Theory (1948-1953): From "École Schérer" to "Politique des auteurs."* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 302 pp. 40.95€. (pb). Notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 9789462985803.

Review by Leah Vonderheide, Oberlin College & Conservatory.

A decade older and more conservative than his famously youthful and often irreverent colleagues Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer and his extensive oeuvre--both on screen and on the page--is nonetheless (and perhaps all the more for it) a treasured enigma of the French New Wave for contemporary scholars. C.G. Crisp's *Eric Rohmer: Realist and Moralizer* (1988) was a relatively early contribution to the scholarship on Rohmer's evolving body of work.[1] Crisp's analysis begins with an examination of some of Rohmer's early writings, indicating an ongoing interest in Rohmer's criticism alongside his film work, while a decade later, Derek Schilling and Keith Tester signified Rohmer's status as a man (quite) apart from his New Wave cohort.[2] After Rohmer's death in 2010, there has been a marked uptick in publications on his life and life's work, including *The Films of Eric Rohmer: French New Wave to Old Master*, a collection of essays edited by Leah Anderst, with an entire section devoted to Rohmer as a critic and philosopher.[3] Similarly, as the title suggests, Vittorio Hösle's *Eric Rohmer: Filmmaker and Philosopher* promotes Rohmer as a philosopher of film as much as he is a practitioner.[4] Likewise, Rohmer's biographers, Antoine de Baecque and Noël Herpe, insist that Rohmer has an important "place in critical thinking about the seventh art," as "he is a genuine *écrivain de cinéma*." [5] Yet, even in this context, Marco Grosoli's *Eric Rohmer's Film Theory (1948-1953): From "École Schérer" to "Politique des auteurs"* delves to far greater depths into a consideration of Rohmer as a key film theorist, one who offered not only insightful film criticism throughout his career, but also critical leadership as his cohort of cinephiles developed the foundations of auteur theory.

While Grosoli's primary project is to investigate Rohmer's influence on the *politique des auteurs*, he also contends that this concept to date "has been outlined in a simplistic way, and reduced to a reactionary nostalgia for the aesthetic preponderance of the subjective vision of the artist" (p.14). Instead, Grosoli proposes that a close reading of articles written by Rohmer and his cohort at the *Cahiers du cinéma* reveals that "a much more complex and interesting theory and aesthetics of cinema lies at the core of their auteurism" (p. 14). This particular volume focuses on the philosophical underpinnings of the "école Schérer," a little-used name--granted with affection by the film critic Pierre Kast in 1952--to describe the initial sway of Maurice Schérer (better-known by his pen name Eric Rohmer) on the men who would ultimately be responsible for not only the *politique des auteurs*, but also the French New Wave: Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and François Truffaut. Grosoli argues that the école Schérer was the "incubation phase"

of the *politique des auteurs*, and concentrates on Rohmer's written production beginning in 1948 (when his first articles were published) in publications such as *La Revue du cinéma*, *La Gazette du cinéma*, *Cahiers du cinéma*, and *Arts*, as well as the writings of Godard, Rivette, and Truffaut up until the end of 1953, just before the publication of Truffaut's "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema" (p. 16).<sup>[6]</sup> Chabrol's publications do not appear until 1953, so his contributions will be more apparent, reassures Grosoli, in his proposed second volume, which will interrogate the *politique des auteurs* in the years after Truffaut's polemical piece.

From the outset, Grosoli makes clear that the école Schérer must be defined by a key fracture: Rohmer's 1950 rejection of a Sartrean perspective on a theory and aesthetics of cinema in favor of "a return to Kant's transcendental turn and to the philosophical idealism born in its aftermath" (p.23).<sup>[7]</sup> The conversion occurred at a screening of Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli*, which Rohmer himself described in an interview with Jean Narboni <sup>[8]</sup>, cited in Grosoli: "Rossellini is the one who turned me away from existentialism. It happened in the middle of *Stromboli*. During the first few minutes of the screening, I felt the limits of this Sartrean realism, to which I thought the film was going to be confined. I hated the way it invited me to look beyond that. Right then and there, I converted. That's what's so great about *Stromboli*. It was my road to Damascus: In the middle of the film, I converted, and I changed my perspective" (p. 108).

Given the emphasis placed on this event, Grosoli includes a detailed analysis of Rossellini's film, reading it in two parts, the first half through a Sartrean theoretical lens, and the second half through "Kant's notion of the sublime and his views on ethics more generally" (p. 105). Grosoli asserts that the film--and Rohmer's viewing of it--find resolution in "unmistakably Kantian territory" (p. 105).

Yet before Grosoli explores Rohmer's conversion back to Kant, he maps out, in chapter one, Sartre's ontology, as well as Rohmer's ongoing struggle with (and against) it in his first writings, beginning with "Cinema, an Art of Space" (1948).<sup>[9]</sup> Grosoli identifies a key point of difference between Rohmer's innate perspective on cinema and the Sartrean point of view. According to Grosoli, "Rohmer's conception of cinema is marked by a strong anti-linguistic bias. Cinema is emphatically not a language; its nature is not at all linguistic" (p. 51). Furthermore, as Grosoli emphasizes, "What Rohmer had in mind, in contrast with Sartre's perspective was a *chiefly spatial* ontology *as opposed to* language" (author's emphasis, p. 53). In this way, Grosoli asserts, "Cinema, an Art of Space" "interweaves Sartrean stances with others announcing the 'conversion' to come" (p. 64).

In chapter two, and still before the 1950 conversion, Grosoli examines the influence of Alexandre Astruc on Rohmer's thinking. Although Astruc's most-known influence on the *politique des auteurs* is "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra Stylo" (1948)<sup>[10]</sup>, Grosoli contends that his lesser known "Dialectique et Cinéma" (1949)<sup>[11]</sup> also had an important impact on Rohmer and the école Schérer, particularly in its mobilization of Kant. Like Rohmer, Astruc also seemed to be grappling between a Sartrean, linguistic understanding of cinema and a Kantian approach, whereby "film is the mechanical embodiment of human imagination" (p. 89). Grosoli thus summarizes Astruc's argument in this way: "cinema is more novelistic than the novel itself, because instead of conveying meaning through language, it inscribes the temporal sequentiality, bringing about meaning *in space*, i.e. in a series of visual relationships" (author's emphasis, p. 99). In this way, Astruc's analysis echoes Rohmer's logic in "Cinema, an Art of Space."

To illuminate Rohmer's ultimate conversion back to Kant during the screening of *Stromboli*, Grosoli begins with a detailed synopsis and analysis of the film in chapter three. In the film, a young woman, Karen, is brought to live on a small, isolated Italian island, having married a local fisherman. Karen finds island life both alienating and oppressive (finding herself always under the watchful and judgmental eyes of the villagers), and—despite being pregnant—resolves to run away. In her flight from the village, she becomes exhausted on the slopes of the island's volcano and collapses. When she awakes, she seems newly reconciled her situation, but the final scene offers no clear indication about where Karen will go next—only that she is committed to protecting her unborn child with the help of God. By Grosoli's analysis, "The freedom she chooses is the Kantian one, as opposed to the Sartrean one, consisting of 'nihilating' from her environment to pursue a self-chosen project" (p. 119). Grosoli also reasons that Rossellini "finds an answer to the question that obsessed Rohmer at the end of the Forties, namely 'how can cinema not be literary? How can it show instead of telling, in a non-literary way?'" (p. 124). Rossellini's approach, explains Grosoli is "to stick to appearance for appearance's sake," a strategy approved by Rohmer as it eschews "literary gimmicks" (p. 124). It is also crucial to note, as Grosoli does, that in his review of the film, "Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*" (1950)[12], Rohmer (known as a devout Catholic) "seems to *designate God as the ideal of the 'art of space' itself*" (author's emphasis, p. 127). Grosoli concludes that, in Rohmer's view, "'God' is primarily that which Kant postulated as the actual condition for beauty and freedom to exist," a way for Rohmer to affirm the "positive connection between consciousness and Being" over Sartrean negativity (p. 131).

Grosoli's analysis of Rohmer's conversion marks the midpoint of this first volume. The second half of the work is thus devoted to the continued exploration of the impact of Rohmer's return to Kant on his criticism, and on the writings of Godard, Rivette, and Truffaut. Accordingly, in chapter four, Grosoli turns his attention to the intricacies of Kant's "unity of nature" to illuminate Rohmer's perspective that "whereas arts are normally confined to artistic beauty and its aesthetic ideas, leaving (as per Kant) natural beauty to nature alone, cinema has indifferently access to artistic *as well as* to natural beauty" (author's emphasis, p. 160). Grosoli continues: "Cinema's strong bias towards natural beauty caused Rohmer to assume that since cinema is supposed to tackle nature and reveal its beauty, one of the main tasks of film criticism lies in highlighting the moments in a film when the beauty of nature appears, that is, those moments when cinema's potential is best used" (pp. 160-161). As a result, argues Grosoli, Rohmer's writing style, along with that of his colleagues, was to focus heavily on details—a quality that would become synonymous with cinephilia more generally.

Another significant point of analysis is Grosoli's examination in chapter five of the concept of the *solitude morale*, which he argues (while also employing John Hess's "*La politique des auteurs*: World view as aesthetics"[13]) is at the center of the true *politique des auteurs*. Grosoli argues that the école Schérer critics (on their way to articulating the *politique des auteurs*) "thought that there was only one story worth being brought up on the screen" (p. 220). Citing Hess, Grosoli explains that this story, or story pattern, consists of "a man or a woman, the social animal, trapped in a state of *solitude morale* because he or she is neither in touch with his or her lowest human depths, nor with other people, nor with the spiritual dimension of life" (author's emphasis, p. 221). In this way, Grosoli proposes that "*solitude morale* consists of the discovery of others and/or God the very moment one's solitude is taken to the extreme" (author's emphasis, p. 223). This observation provides a theoretical underpinning to one of Rohmer's best-known film series, *Six contes moraux*, in which morality is less a matter of didacticism and more a question of philosophy.

For his part, Grosoli never draws the connection between Rohmer's mounting philosophy of cinema and the films he would eventually make. Instead, he keeps his analysis rooted in Rohmer's film criticism and therefore in the films Rohmer watched. Grosoli thus uses the conclusion of this first volume to explore Chabrol and Rohmer's monograph on Alfred Hitchcock, *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films* (1957)[14], which he argues is an "undeclared manifesto" of the *politique des auteurs* (p. 284). For Chabrol and Rohmer, Grosoli explains, Hitchcock was the "epitome" of auteurism, because his cinema revolves around the central, "very Catholic" theme of the "transfer of guilt" (p. 285). Tying Rohmer's embrace of Kant to his elevation of Hitchcock to the status of auteur, Grosoli concludes: "Kant...was precisely the philosopher that eventually provided Rohmer with the theoretical framework that would more fittingly suit what cinema seemed to embody so well: external perception as the only accessible seat of consciousness, which cannot access itself through self-reflection. Hitchcock was the director who more than any other was able to sing this externality of consciousness, this foreignness to the subject itself, by insisting on the 'transfer of guilt'. Hitchcock's emphasis on visual appearance appealed either aesthetic or ethical needs: on the one hand, it proved that cinema could do without the burden of literature and could rely on appearance for appearance's sake; on the other hand, it showed that the eternal fight between freedom and necessity did not take place inside the heart and consciousness of man, but outside, in terms of appearances, on the surface; consciousness only had to accept and endorse this foreign, external necessity (in Hitchcock's catholic terms: to assume one's inevitable sins, for which one is not responsible for [*sic*]) in order to attain freedom (that is, salvation, by overcoming those sins)" (p. 293).

While Grosoli's deeply considered position is the result of his meticulous reading of both theory (namely Sartre and Kant) and criticism (predominantly Rohmer, but also Godard, Rivette, and Truffaut), there are moments when it seems he is not merely "reading" Rohmer's criticism for Kant, but rather "reading Kant into" Rohmer's prolific body of work. Phrases such as "Rohmer, in a Kantian vein..." (p. 215) or "What he had in mind, though..." (p. 222) or "even though Rohmer does not name Kant overtly, everything suggests that he implies so" (p. 268) begin to accumulate and betray Grosoli's insistence on his own argument. That said, Grosoli provides impressive evidence to support his claims (well over one hundred of Rohmer's articles alone are cited in the chapter bibliographies, many of which have gone overlooked in previous scholarship), and at the very least, Kant is a useful, if not powerful theoretical lens through which to read Rohmer's criticism, particularly given Rohmer's resolute rejection of Sartrean existentialism during the *Stromboli* conversion, and his own admission of being under the "patronage of Kant." [15]

In many ways, Grosoli's work is less a continued observation of Rohmer as a film theorist and more a radical--though scrupulously defended--reconsideration of the foundations of auteur theory itself. This is a much-needed contribution to the area of auteur theory, given the many questions raised by (and contradictions inherent in) even the most straightforward attempts to describe the stakes of what was eventually deemed the *politique des auteurs*. For example, was it meant to describe films written from the personal perspective of the director, thus implying an autobiographical approach? Or does it indicate films made within the Hollywood system that somehow bear the mark or signature of their director? Or is it simply a method of organizing a new canon? Also, how can a film have an author if even independent productions are often made by hundreds of people? And finally, why might film theory take up notions of authorship at the same moment postmodern literary theory declared the author "dead"? Grosoli's current investigation of the école Schérer is a thrilling initial step toward rethinking these questions and contradictions, and I look forward to his promised second volume, which will take as its main

focus the writings of Chabrol, Godard, Rivette, and Truffaut (all after the publication of Truffaut's milestone "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema"), as it hopefully continues to upend the very premises of the above inquiries altogether.

## NOTES

[1] C.G. Crisp, *Eric Rohmer: Realist and Moralizer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[2] Derek Schilling, *Eric Rohmer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Keith Tester, *Eric Rohmer: Film as Theology* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[3] Leah Anderst, ed., *The Films of Eric Rohmer: French New Wave to Old Master* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[4] Vittorio Hösle, *Eric Rohmer: Filmmaker and Philosopher* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

[5] Antoine de Baecque and Noël Herpe, *Éric Rohmer: A Biography*, translated by Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 3.

[6] François Truffaut, "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français," *Cahiers du cinéma* 31(1954): 15-29.

[7] Grosoli draws from the following works by Immanuel Kant and Jean-Paul Sartre throughout his analysis (original publication dates are included in brackets): Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, translated by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) [1790]; Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2002) [1788]; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1996) [1781/1787]; Jean-Paul Sartre, "American Novelists in French Eyes," *Atlantic Monthly* 178(1946): 114-118; Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957) [1943]; Sartre, *Critical Essays (Situations I)*, translated by Chris Turner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) [1938-1946]; Sartre, *Saint Genet*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) [1952]; Sartre, *The Transcendence of Ego*, translated by Andrew Brown (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) [1937]; Sartre, *What is Literature?*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen & Co., 1950) [1937].

[8] Jean Narboni and Eric Rohmer, eds., *Taste of Beauty*, translated by Carol Volk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1-18.

[9] Eric Rohmer, "Cinema, an Art of Space," in Jean Narboni and Eric Rohmer eds., *Taste of Beauty*, translated by Carol Volk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 19-29.

[10] Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo," in Peter Graham and Ginette Vincendeau eds., *The French New Wave Critical Landmarks* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 31-37.

---

[11] Alexandre Astruc, *Du stylo à la camera... et de la caméra au stylo: Écrits 1942–1984* (Paris: L'Archipel, 1992), pp. 339-40.

[12] Eric Rohmer, "Roberto Rossellini: Stromboli," in Jean Narboni and Eric Rohmer eds., *Taste of Beauty*, translated by Carol Volk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 124-127.

[13] John Hess, "La politique des auteurs: World view as aesthetics," *Jump Cut* 1(1974): 19-22.

[14] Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer, *Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films*, translated by Stanley Hochman (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1979).

[15] Eric Rohmer, *De Mozart en Beethoven* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1998), p. 52; cited in Grosoli, p. 149.

Leah Vonderheide  
Oberlin College & Conservatory  
[leah.vonderheide@oberlin.edu](mailto:leah.vonderheide@oberlin.edu)

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172