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# JACQUES RIVETTE

## *Babel and The Void*



VA SAVOIR

*"At once the most cerebral and playful of filmmakers, delighting equally in puzzles and ontology, magic and metaphysics, conspiracy theories and the knottiest conundrums of modernism." - Nathan Lee, The Village Voice*

For better and for worse, and principally the latter, Jacques Rivette has been singled out as the former *Cahiers du Cinéma* film critic who makes the least commercial films, as well as the longest ones. But for the record, the films of the always-neglected Luc Moullet [screened in Cinematheque Ontario's Spring 2006 season - ed.] are generally less commercial than those of Rivette. And even what we mean when we say "longest films" is open to some debate. (After all, the over twelve-hour *OUT 1: NOLI ME TANGERE* was conceived as a TV serial, and Jean-Luc Godard's own first TV series, made a few years later, was just as long.)



The problem with such caricatures is they generally function as excuses for why some spectators won't deal with Rivette's films rather than as viable descriptions of what they offer. Yes, his features tend to be long and they work with duration. Furthermore, when two versions have been made of some of them – unauthorized in the case of *L'AMOUR FOU*, authorized in the cases of *L'AMOUR PAR TERRE* and *LA BELLE NOISEUSE/DIVERTIMENTO* – the longer version is almost always superior. (The only arguable exception to this rule is the two versions of *OUT 1*, both authorized, which are too distinct as well as too complementary in conception to be profitably regarded as competitive.)

Let me propose a few other traits that make Rivette stand out among his former critical colleagues. According to François Truffaut, he was the one who was most determined to become a filmmaker. He's also the one most interested in actors – even if this only started to become apparent with his second feature, when he could afford to hire professionals. I'd also argue that, along with Godard, he is the only one who has continued to be a critic as well as something of a theorist while functioning as a filmmaker – someone whose memory of other films and filmmakers often shapes his meanings, so that, for instance, *GIVE A GIRL A BREAK* served as a kind of working model for *HAUT/BAS/FRAGILE*, just as *THE SEVENTH VICTIM* was a starting point for *DUELLE*. (Regarding Rivette's appreciation of Hollywood, the 1974 *CÉLINE ET JULIE VONT EN BATEAU* offers especially exuberant testimony.)

This latter tendency is already apparent in his first feature, *PARIS NOUS APPARTIENT* (1960), when a group of friends are screening a print of *METROPOLIS*. Not only does Lang's Tower of Babel sequence comment on the complex paranoid plot of Rivette's film; once the film breaks and we're briefly confronted with a blank screen, this detail is equally pertinent. And in a way the dialectic present here between multiple languages and gaping void – too much significance and too little – is basic to Rivette's cinema as a whole.

His second feature, *LA RELIGIEUSE* (1966) provoked a scandal when it was banned by the Gaullist government for its adaptation of Denis Diderot's anticlerical novel. Yet apart from its modernist soundtrack, it seems like a throwback to classical narrative in relation to the radical experimentation that precedes and immediately follows it (which for me still figures as the most potent and exciting stretch in Rivette's work – roughly 1968–81). But insofar as this film highlights Rivette's interest in what might be called "classical" *mise en scène*, which has dominated his work over the past quarter of a century, it no longer looks like a detour; among its most obvious successors are *JEAN LA PUCELLE* (1994) and *SECRET DÉFENSE* (1998), both vehicles for Sandrine Bonnaire, and *HURLEVENT* (1985) – another period literary adaptation, this time of *Wuthering Heights*.

But it's only with Rivette's three-part TV documentary *JEAN RENOIR, LE PATRON* (1966) that his formal agenda shifts and the creative contributions of actors become central, yielding the bold experiment of *L'AMOUR FOU* (1969). By Rivette's own account, it was partially the experience of editing Renoir clips that prompted this

change, though his work with André S. Labarthe – co-producer of the Renoir series, who shot the 16mm footage of *L'AMOUR FOU* – also clearly played a role. Alternating between Labarthe's 16mm *cinéma-vérité* footage of theater rehearsals of *Andromaque* directed by Jean-Pierre Kalfon and Rivette's 35mm footage of the same rehearsals, meanwhile inviting Kalfon and Bulle Ogier to play a tormented fictional couple and generate much of their own characters and dialogue (which was also shot in 35mm), Rivette deliberately made his own position as spectator relatively passive, postponing his role as final arbiter to the editing stage. One might therefore postulate that Renoir and his own love of actors stands for the Babel side of the Rivettean dialectic, dominant during shooting, where too many meanings fight for supremacy, and the more misanthropic Lang stands for the void, articulated during editing, when most of the meanings get pared away.

Eventually, this shift would mean that Rivette's films would become defined mainly by their actors – and, in particular, their actresses. Arguably, *LA BELLE NOISEUSE* (1991) becomes even more a film about Emmanuelle Béart than a Balzac adaptation or a film about painting. *L'AMOUR PAR TERRE* (1984) is basically a meditation on Jane Birkin and Geraldine Chaplin, *LA BANDE DES QUATRE* (1988) is above all a film about Bulle Ogier, Laurence Côte, and Nathalie Richard, among others, and *VA SAVOIR* (2001) ultimately has more to do with Jeanne Balibar than with Luigi Pirandello.

The experiment of *L'AMOUR FOU* was expanded in the two versions of *OUT 1* – a post-1968 meditation on solitude and collectivity that returned to the themes of Rivette's first feature, focusing again on both theater rehearsals and fantasies and/or intimations of conspiracy, but this time inviting all the actors to generate their own characters and dialogue. And the experiment underwent further developments once Rivette decided to edit the results into two quite different features in which the placement, function, and meaning of certain shots differed.

By now, it might be said that actors had taken over Rivette's cinema during the shooting stage – a freedom underwritten by the radical premise that anything and everything an actor does is potentially interesting, so that even a "bad" performance in *OUT 1* can potentially be as interesting for what it reveals as a "good" one, and mixing seemingly incompatible acting styles becomes part of the interest. (This also has some effect on Rivette's framing, discussed with Serge Daney in Claire Denis' excellent 1990 documentary, *JACQUES RIVETTE LE VEILLEUR*.) Enlisting actors as co-writers – as he would do again in *CÉLINE ET JULIE*, his most popular film of this period, as well as in the much later *HAUT/BAS/FRAGILE* (1995) – was then succeeded by obliging actors to stick to a fixed text in most of the subsequent features while seeking to solicit their creativity in other ways. In *DUELLE* and *NOROÎT* (both 1976), where live improvising musicians share screen space with the actors, the creative expressiveness becomes gestural.

Conceived as the second and third parts of a projected four-feature series entitled *SCÈNES DE LA VIE PARALLÈLE*, which were meant to be shot in swift succession, each film belonging to a separate genre, *DUELLE* and *NOROÎT* both employ the same invented mythology involving goddesses of the sun and moon who struggle competitively for the means to remain on Earth past an allotted forty-day period.



Suffering a nervous collapse shortly after he began shooting the projected first part, entitled *MARIE AND JULIEN*, with Leslie Caron and Albert Finney, Rivette was forced to abandon the series, though his subsequent *MERRY-GO-ROUND* (1983) and *HISTOIRE DE MARIE ET JULIEN* (2003) represent separate attempts to bring this unrealized project to some sort of closure. The latter in particular – in which Béart figures as the designated goddess/ghost, and the hero (Jerzy Radziwilowicz), Rivette's surrogate, is a solitary figure who repairs clocks – offers a suggestive combo that seems to bring certain aspects of Rivette's cinema full circle. – **Jonathan Rosenbaum**

Jonathan Rosenbaum is film critic for the *Chicago Reader* and author of several books, including *Moving Places: A Life at the Movies* (Harper & Row, 1980), *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (University of California Press, 1995), *Movies as Politics* (University of California Press, 1997), *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Films We Can See* (a cappella Books, 2000), *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), and, forthcoming in 2007, *Discovering Orson Welles* (University of California Press).

## NEW 35MM PRINT! PARIS NOUS APPARTIENT

(PARIS BELONGS TO US)

Director: Jacques Rivette • France 1960 140 minutes • Cast: Betty Schneider, Gianni Esposito

A seminal work of the French New Wave, *PARIS NOUS APPARTIENT* incited Godard, Resnais, Truffaut, Chabrol, Demy, Varda and Melville to issue a statement proclaiming this, Rivette's first feature, "a film of foremost importance for us." A young woman from the provinces moves to Paris and becomes involved with an American journalist, an exile from McCarthyist persecution in the States. He draws her first into a circle of intellectuals and artists, and then into a sinister conspiracy involving a group who want to control the world (Paris belongs to whom?). Influenced by Fritz Lang, and studied with droll cameos by Godard, Demy, Chabrol and Rivette himself, *PARIS* is "exemplary . . . a masterpiece of Left Bank paranoia" (J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*). "One of the ten best films of 1961" (Jean-Luc Godard).

**Friday, February 9 6:30 p.m.**

PARIS NOUS APPARTIENT



This series has been made possible with the generous cooperation of the Cultural Services of the French Embassy (New York), Le Bureau du cinéma, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Paris), the British Film Institute and the National Film Theatre, (London). The North American tour has been coordinated by David Schwartz, Chief Curator, and Livia Bloom, Assistant Curator, Museum of the Moving Image. Our very special thanks to them, as well as to Fleur Buckley, National Film Theatre and Sue Jones, British Film Institute (London), Charlotte Brial and Guillaume Offroy, Consulat de France à Toronto, Danielle Rosencranz, SUNSHINE FILMS (Charenton), Sarah Finklea, Janus Films (New York), Artificial Eye (London), Todd Wiener, UCLA Film & Television Archive (Los Angeles), Rob Tregenza, Parallel Films, Peggy Parsons, National Gallery of Art (Washington), Gaelle Duchemin, Pierre Grise Productions (Paris), Jim Sinclair, Pacific Cinematheque (Vancouver), Lise Zipci, Les Films du Losange (Paris), Philippe Chevassu, Connaissance du cinéma (Paris), AMIP (Paris), Linda Duchin, New Yorker Films (New York), Mark Peranson, VanCity Film Centre (Vancouver), Mimi Brody, UCLA Film and Television Archive (Los Angeles), Juliet Clark, Pacific Film Archive (Berkeley), and Jonathan Rosenbaum. Organized for Cinematheque Ontario by Andréa Picard. Programme notes by James Quandt.

## LA RELIGIEUSE

(THE NUN)

Director: Jacques Rivette • France 1966 137 minutes • Cast: Anna Karina, Liselotte Pulver

"No one with a serious interest in the cinema should miss it" (Dave Kehr). Rivette's masterpiece includes ten minutes originally shorn from the film, which was initially banned both within France and for export by the Gaullist government. Based on a Diderot novel, *LA RELIGIEUSE* is about Suzanne, the teenaged daughter of a once rich family, who is forced into a convent when the money for her dowry runs out. She finds the atmosphere harsh and punitive, the sisters collusive, conniving, and cruel. A second nunnery to which she absconds is the opposite: permissiveness trumps piety and the wanton Mother Superior lusts after the cowering novice. When Suzanne escapes over the convent wall with the aid of a rapist priest, she discovers that her only other option is another form of captivity, prostitution. Rivette elicited an exemplary performance from Anna Karina, who embodies the contrasting qualities of Suzanne with touching simplicity. Influenced by the films of Mizoguchi (particularly *THE LIFE OF OHARU*), Bresson, Preminger, and Cocteau, *LA RELIGIEUSE* qualifies as cinematic manna. "Beautiful and mesmerizing" (*Newsweek*).

preceded by

## ARCHIVAL PRINT! LE COUP DU BERGER

(FOOLS MATE)

Director: Jacques Rivette • France 1956 28 minutes • Cast: Virginie Vitré, Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut

Like many of his New Wave colleagues, Rivette began his directorial career with a series of short films, including this, his debut film, which was produced and co-scripted by Claude Chabrol, who also loaned his apartment for the shoot. Inspired by a news item about a divorce, the film portrays marital manoeuvres as a game of chess. With Godard and Truffaut in supporting roles, *LE COUP DU BERGER* was a seminal inspiration for many directors: "The example of *LE COUP DU BERGER* made me decide to shoot *LES MISTONS*, and Claude Chabrol to be adventuresome enough to make a full-length film from *LE BEAU SERGE*; and at the same time it moved the most prestigious short-subject filmmakers, Alain Resnais and Georges Franju, to try their first full-length films" (Truffaut).

**Saturday, February 10 6:30 p.m.**

Special ticket prices apply. Please see page 26 for details.

LA RELIGIEUSE

