

If Jacques Rivette remains the least known of the most celebrated directors of the French New Wave, it is because he continues to be remembered partly as the fifth member of the Cahiers du cinéma group and partly for his relatively long and enigmatic films. Open and reserved, lucid and opaque, personal and uncompromising, and the object of a cultish worship by his followers: One of the many challenges of Rivette is that his films can only contradictorily be assembled into a single oeuvre in any traditional and easily marketable sense. From his debut in 1961 and at least until the mid-80s, each film represents a quantum leap in a new and unpredictable direction, while Rivette continued to deconstruct the myth of the auteur (with its monomaniac implications of artistic genius and supreme creative control) which he himself had helped to introduce as a critic in the 1950s.

His very different films, however, can be considered as modulations on certain thematic obsessions that nevertheless make them unmistakably Rivettian: His fascination with the theatre, the plot and with women (on screen and as creative collaborators) tie up the many loose ends in his life-long engagement with cinema, and usually in the form of an idiosyncratic pastiche of classic Hollywood genre templates.

Rivette began his career as a critic after reading Jean Cocteau's diary from the filming of *La Belle et la bête* (1946), which had sparked his interest in film. Like a Heraclitus of film criticism, he paid tribute to his cinematic role models (Renoir, Rossellini, Lang, Preminger) in the columns of Cahiers du cinéma in an ambiguous prose, while refining his eclectic taste in an ongoing confrontation with exclusive criticism (the breadth of Rivette's taste is evident in his defence of Fritz Lang's marginal *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956) as well as Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* (1995)).

Truffaut has rightly described Rivette as the Cahiers group's most cinephilic member and the one who was most impatient to make films himself. After three short films, which were considered lost for decades but which were recently rediscovered (under Rivette's bed, according to rumour), he directed the ironic short film *Le Coup du berger* (1956) before embarking on his debut feature *Paris nous appartient* (Paris Belongs to Us) in 1958.

Paris nous appartient is a modern noir with roots in Fritz Lang. The film follows Anne, a young student who becomes involved in a circle of intellectual Parisian existentialists and their theatre production of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, as well as in a mysterious, worldwide conspiracy of an apocalyptic nature that has already killed one of the group's members. However, the (com)plot exists only in the dialogue. It remains out of sight in the film itself, which instead focuses on the characters' reaction to an intangible threat, the scale and consequences of which are only hinted at: "I tell you, the world is not what it seems. ... It's the whole world that is threatened without realising it. It's all nothing but pretence and deception. Those we think are in power are nothing more than puppets. The true leaders rule in secret. ... They have no names. I speak in riddles, but some things can only be said in riddles."

This last sentence, as if spoken straight out of Rivette's own mouth, stands as a motto for both this and his following films. *Paris nous appartient* is monumental in its introversion, but its complexity becomes a point in itself in a film that, in the words of film historian Georges Sadoul, "precisely and lyrically described the ambivalent causes of modern anxiety".

It is the all-encompassing nature of the threats that weighs on the characters and shrouds the film's labyrinthine, black-and-white Paris. There is an icy paranoia in *Paris nous appartient* that is a far cry from both the standard thriller and the Paris we associate with the New Wave; which - if we are to believe Charles Péguy's paradoxical quote which opens the film - "belongs to no one". Only the flight of the white swans in the final shot of the film heralds the much freer and lighter creativity that characterises Rivette's work process in his later films.

Rivette, as predicted by Truffaut, was the first of the Cahiers critics to embark on a feature film. However, his debut film was also the last to premiere. When it finally did, in 1961, the New Wave via Chabrol, Truffaut, Rohmer and Godard was already well established. *Paris nous appartient* was met with mixed reviews from a narrow and elitist audience.

In 1963-65, Rivette took over as editor-in-chief of Cahiers du cinéma from Eric Rohmer, and in 1965 he made perhaps his most conventional, if deeply satirical, film: *La Religieuse*, based on Diderot and starring Anna Karina as a young girl forced into a convent in 18th century France. The French censors banned the anti-authoritarian *La Religieuse*, which was not released until the following year, at a time where revolutionary currents were rising to the surface.

In 1969, Rivette channelled these currents into his most experimental and innovative film to date, *L'amour fou* (the title of which echoes chief surrealist André Breton), a film he maintains is deeply political, reflecting the moral choices of its makers in a constant process of becoming. Considered at the time as a defining work of the post-'68 moment in French cinema, *L'amour fou* is ripe for rediscovery as a contribution to modern cinema in general, unavailable as it was for decades on anything but scrappy video bootlegs (the 35mm negative was destroyed in a fire in 1973) until it was recently, finally restored.

L'amour fou, like *Paris nous appartient*, follows a group of young theatre professionals in rehearsals, this time for Racine's tragedy *Andromaque*. The director of the play falls out with his cast wife (Bulle Ogier) when he insists on letting a film crew follow their work. She leaves the performance, whereupon he hires his mistress to take over his wife's role, in turn sending her into a jealousy-fuelled, infectious frenzy. The couple end up destroying their apartment during an orgy, and when the play finally opens, it is for an empty stage to an audience of no one.

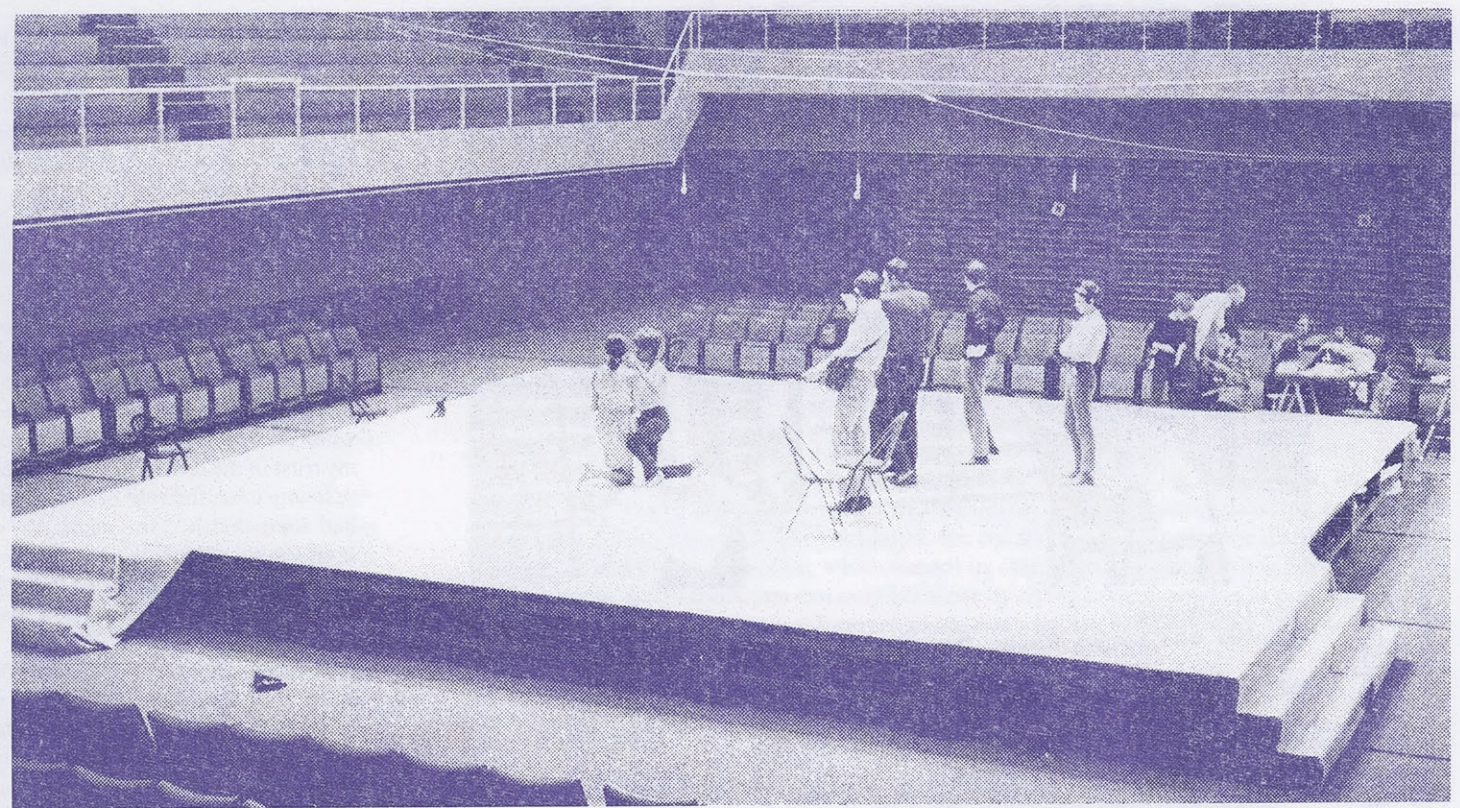
At just about four hours in length, *L'amour fou* is shot without a script in a collective improvisation led by Rivette, who in practice distanced himself from the auteur philosophy he had contributed to in theory as a critic, in favour of something far more risky, open-ended and exciting. A study in jealousy, collectivity and the creative tension between control and chaos, the film observes its two parallel events - the theatre rehearsals and the unravelling of a romantic relationship - while challenging our basic assumptions about fiction and documentary, performance and authenticity, art-making and improvisation. The dialectical tension between chaos and control is turned into a visual principle by alternating between handheld vérité-style 16mm cinematography by the documentary crew in the film, and the disciplined 35mm work by the film's (and Rivette's) own camera.



As an experiment in collective creativity and improvisation, *L'amour fou* paved the way for both the legendary, almost thirteen hour long *Out 1: Noli me tangere* (1971) and for that free-spirited, free-wheeling tribute to the liberating power of the imagination, *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974) wherein all his main characters—similarly in all his subsequent films—were women.

L'amour fou, however, remains the film in which Rivette most obsessively examines the theatre as a metaphor not only for life itself, but - in a more paranoid bent - also the world and the others around us. Rivette's characters seem to share a subconscious, almost Shakespearean understanding of the world-as-stage which leaves open the question: Where does the performance begin and end? At a time where the boundaries between reality and fiction are increasingly blurred not only on screen, but very much in the world we live in too, the many other open questions posed by Rivette and his co-creators in this mad, magnificent film are as urgent as ever.

Terrassen



L'amour fou
Jacques Rivette,
1969, 252 min.,
35mm and 16mm to 4K

L'AMOUR FOU

Wednesday, November 22, 2023, 18:30
Dagmar Teatret (sal 3), Jernbanegade 4
Free entrance



Time Overflowing
Interview with Jacques Rivette, from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 204, 1968*

What gave you the idea of making *L'Amour fou*?

The film didn't start with an idea, it's difficult to answer that.

Had you been thinking of it for a long time?

No, it was simply a question of making a film within certain given economic circumstances. Beauregard kept on saying, 'Do you know someone who might have a script that we could shoot for 45 million francs?' I vaguely looked around; I think I even sent him one or two guys, but he didn't like their scripts. So finally I told him I had one. And that's when I started trying to think what could be filmed for 45 million francs. Which meant there had to be very few actors and very few changes of scenery.

How exactly did the filming of the more 'intimate' scenes take place?

The 'theatre' part was to come first, so that Jean-Pierre and the actors could rehearse a little before the shooting started, so that they wouldn't start completely from scratch on the first day. We started out making it purely as a documentary, first trying to get used to the system of filming with two cameras, and it was only after two days, after getting used to the collaboration between the Mitchell camera and the Coutant, having got all the crew and the actors used to each other, filming a lot quietly, from corners, and intervening as little as possible in the work of the play, that we started to bring in 'acted' scenes (Bulle's departure), while trying to keep as much as possible the same documentary spirit; that is, by planning only the outlines of the scene, what the cameras would do, the 'tactics' of the moment to be filmed, but never premeditating the details – or how the shot should end, which was almost always left very open and depended a lot on people's moods during each take. I only said to cut when there was really nothing else that could be done, and it was often the end of the reel which took care of deciding how to end the shot, instead of me. Then, after that, when we went into the flat, we tried to keep this documentary tone as much as possible; we tried never to hurry things, and the main way we did this was by filming chronologically and by anticipating. That made it possible to discuss each evening the next day's shooting, any points that were still not clear, and any we would try to decide on a bit ahead of time – at least to plan the basic ideas – and any we preferred to decide on or improvise during the shooting.

What we have isn't a film within a film, but the cinema filming the theatre and filmed by the cinema. That creates the curious impression that the 16mm camera is taking the cinema's share over completely and that the 35mm camera doesn't exist except as a transparent filter.

I'm glad that's the impression one gets, because, precisely, the 35mm camera is giving a completely 'cow's eye view' of things. In a strict sense, it's the person who came in on tiptoe, the intruder who doesn't come too close because he'll get yelled at if he comes any closer, who watches from the corners, who looks down from the balcony, always hiding a bit. It has its oppressed voyeur side to it, like someone who can never come up as close as he would like to, who doesn't even hear everything. The Mitchell and the Coutant are two opposite forms of indiscretion, a passive one and an active one, one sly and one bossy; but it's the same idea, that reality is pre-existing, when it is not being filmed, as well as when it is.

That gives a strange effect, because in the scenes where there is a mixture of 16 and 35mm, it's the 16mm that comes off as being cinema, with clear sound; and when it's the 35mm, we have the impression of watching a play, of being in the audience. In the flat, because there's only the 35mm, you no longer have the impression of watching a play, of being the audience.

Yes, that's what I wanted, to some extent, and that's why I tried to make the 35mm cameras as invisible as possible. We only track three times inside the flat, for completely functional reasons. And the whole technical crew felt very oppressed during the whole shooting, precisely because of that, because I wanted the 35mm camera to be nothing but a completely neutral recorder. I had practically no dealings with anyone but the actors; it was with them that I decided which way to take a scene; then afterwards, I would say, 'Let's put the camera here and "Action!"', checking a bit to see whether what I wanted to show was in frame. Quite often, towards the end, when we were shooting in a great hurry, even even did the framing himself. I placed my trust in the technicians but my dialogue was solely with the actors.

In any case, the role of the 16mm camera wasn't really premeditated. Of course I had seen that it came across as 'cinema'. And I was even sort of pleased when Jean-Pierre talked about having seen the rushes of Labarthe's programme. At one point, I'd even thought of filming him looking at those rushes; then I changed my mind – since he was saying it anyway, there was no need to film it.

You talk about a film within a film, but actually it is more a film outside a film. When you see a camera in a film, you usually get the impression that it is an element of the film that you're watching. But here, on the contrary, one gets the impression that there is a generalised sickness called the cinema and that it all centres itself in the 16mm camera. The 35mm camera, which was the intruder, isn't any longer; we no longer 'feel' it, and now it's the 16mm that gives a strong impression of being the intruder.

That is to the extent that the 16mm camera is active, while the 35mm camera tries to be as passive as it can be, with even a hypocritical side to it. From time to time it moves around a bit, but independently of what it is filming, in accordance with a principle which I didn't invent, of setting up the movement of the camera completely independently of what is being filmed and then letting the camera operator take care of adapting them to each other. But as I said, it's an old trick. And I never did that inside the flat.

Was this intensity which the theatre has throughout the film, and which almost counterbalances what is going on between Kalfon and Bulle, actually intended?

Yes, I wanted the two things to be as interesting as each other, equally, if possible. The story is about someone who is in between two places, two separate enclosures, one where he rehearses and the other where he is trying to save – so to speak – the couple which he forms with his wife, without anyone being able to tell whether it is because the couple is not working out that the play is not working out or vice versa. In fact, for him, it's all connected; he is caught in a muddle, being pushed into a corner from both sides.

Listening to you, one gets the impression that Sébastien is the main character...

It's true, he is the central character. But the same way that there is a balance for him between the theatre and the flat, I tried there to be a balance between the two of them. But the point of departure was that we were only to see her in relation to him. What we see of Claire is perhaps Sébastien's own idea of her: there are passages about her, especially towards the end, where one may think that he is imagining it all. In any case, it is necessarily a man's idea of a woman.

For me, what crystallised it at the beginning was the idea of Pirandello's life, because he lived for fifteen years with his wife, who was mad. The scene with the pin comes straight from Pirandello's life. I had read it three months before in the programme notes of one of his plays which I'd been to see – I don't remember which – *She Wanted to Find Herself*, I think. Obviously, the same thing that had taken fifteen years couldn't happen in the weeks; it didn't have the same weight or the same meaning, and I didn't feel I had the strength, or even the desire, to make a film where the woman would really bend. So this would only be a crisis, a bad patch, as everyone has. And that's when became clear that she would be no more mad than he was and even that of the two was clearly the one who was more sick. The main feeling was also expressed in a sentence from Pirandello that I happened to find when I was reading a bit before starting to write anything at all, which I had even copied out at the beginning of the scenario: 'I have thought about it and we are all mad.' It's what people commonly say about the beauty is precisely in stopping to think about it.

Do you believe that the cinema is useful? Or that a revolutionary cinema can exist?

I think revolutionary cinema can only be a 'differential' cinema, a cinema which questions all the rest of cinema. But in France, in any case, in relation to a possible revolution, I don't believe in a revolutionary cinema of the first degree, which is satisfied with taking the revolution as its subject. A film like *Terra em transe** which does take the revolution as its subject is also really a revolutionary film; it's always stupid to make assumptions, but I don't think that could exist in France now. Films that content themselves with taking the revolution as a subject actually subordinate themselves to bourgeois ideas of content, message, expression. While the only way to make revolutionary cinema in France is to make sure that it escapes all the bourgeois aesthetic clichés: like the idea that there is an *auteur* of the film, expressing himself. The only thing we can do in France at the moment is to try to deny that a film is a personal creation. I think *Playtime* is a revolutionary film, in spite of Tati: the film completely overshadowed the creator. In films, what is important is the point where the film no longer has an *auteur*, where it has no more actors, no more story even, no more subject, nothing left but the film itself speaking and saying something that can't be translated: the point where it becomes the discourse of someone or something else, which cannot be said, precisely because it is beyond expression. And I think you can only get there by trying to be as passive as possible at all the various stages, never intervening on one's own behalf but rather on behalf of this something else which is nameless.

Do you believe that a cinema which takes directly political elements for its theme has the power to mobilise people?

Less and less. I believe more and more that the role of the cinema is to destroy myths, to demobilise, to be pessimistic. Its role is to take people out of their cocoons and to plunge them into horror.

One can do that very well using the revolution as a theme.

Yes, but on the condition that the revolution is just a theme like any other. The only interesting film on the May 'events' (obviously, I haven't seen them all) is one about the return to the Wonder factories, filmed by students at IDHEC – because it is a terrifying and painful film. It's the only film that was really revolutionary. Maybe because it's a moment when reality is transforming itself at such a rate that it starts to condense a whole political situation into ten minutes of wild dramatic intensity. It's a fascinating film, but one couldn't say that it mobilises people at all, or if it does, it's by provoking a reflex reaction of horror and rejection. Really, I think that the only role of the cinema is to upset people, to contradict structures which pre-shadow those ideas: it must ensure that the cinema is no longer comfortable. More and more, I tend to divide films into two sorts: those that are comfortable and those that aren't. The former are all vile and the others positive to a greater or lesser degree. Some films I've seen, on Flims or Saint-Nazaire*, are pitifully comfortable; not only do they change nothing, but they also make the audience feel pleased with themselves. It's like *Humanité*! demonstrations.

Obviously, it's difficult to believe in political films which think that by showing 'reality' it will denounce itself.

I think that what counts isn't whether it is fiction or non-fiction, it's the attitude that the person takes at the moment when he is filming; for example, whether or not he accepts direct sound. In any case, the fiction is actually direct sound, because there is still the point when you are filming. And with direct sound, ninety times out of a hundred, since people know they are being filmed, they probably start to base their reactions on that fact, and so it becomes almost super-fiction. All the more so because the director then has complete freedom to use the material that's been filmed: to tighten up, to keep the long bits, to choose, not to choose, with the sound faked or not. And that is the real political moment.

Do you think the film-maker takes a moral position with regard to what he is filming?

Without any doubt, that's all there is. First, with regard to the people he is filming,

and then again with regard to the audience, in the way he chooses to communicate to them what he has filmed. But all films are political. In any case, I maintain that *L'Amour fou* is a deeply political film. It is political because the attitude we all had during the filming and then during the editing corresponds to moral choices, to ideas on human relationships, and therefore to political choices.

Which are communicated to the audience?

I hope so. The will to make a scene last in one way and not in another – I find that a political choice.