



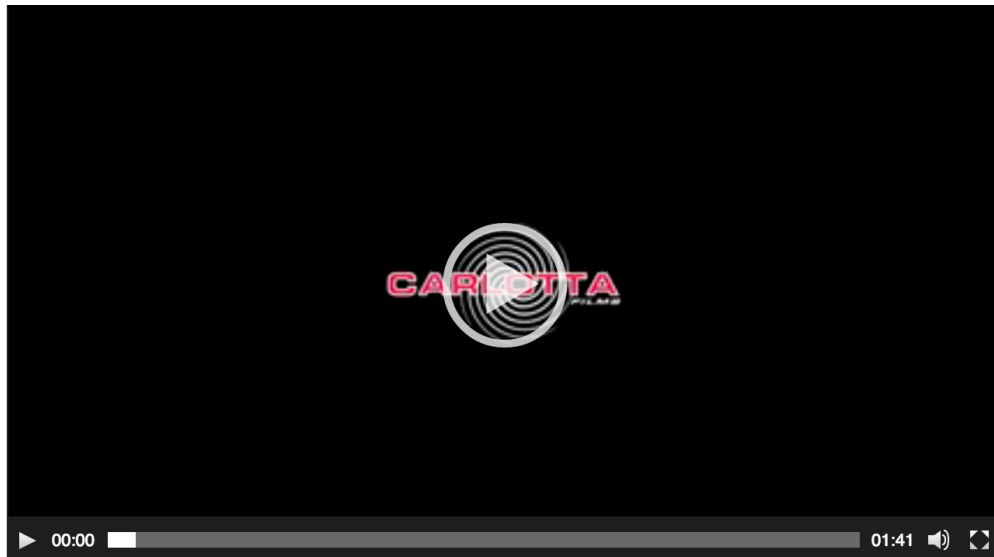
## Workshopping for Ideas: Jacques Rivette's *Out 1: Noli Me Tangere*

Laura U. Marks

Like most cinephiles, I abhor the theater. The incantatory treatment of presence, and the performers' straining to be raw and in the moment, embarrass me. My role as an audience member to witness and complete the performance makes me cringe. I much prefer to witness human performance as one event among others, in the passage of time, that the cinema captures and expresses. Meanwhile, being a Deleuzian, I airily dismiss the Derridean critique of presence.<sup>1</sup>

A film about the theater would seem to offer a middle ground on which to work out these prejudices. Jacques Rivette's theatrical cinema, and in particular Rivette's rarely seen, dauntingly long movie *Out 1: Noli Me Tangere* (1971, restored 1990), invites a journey to the belly of the beast. I got to see this 773-minute (12 hours 53 minutes) eight-part film at the Pacific Cinematheque in Vancouver, with a small crowd of other dogged cinephiles, in four installments over the course of a week in January 2016.

In *Out 1*, made in 1971 and set in spring 1970, any hope of organized political action appears utterly defused after the failure of May '68.<sup>2</sup> Improvisatory, performative, nonsensical, and very very long, the film exemplifies the post-'68 anti-discursive tendency in philosophy that gave rise to our current interest in theories of affect. The very first shot of Episode 1 is butts in your face—an acting troupe doing yoga—and the episode includes an excruciating forty-five minutes or so of theatrical primordial ooze. (Rivette imagined *Out 1* might screen on French television, but this never materialized, and it is easy to see why.) The characters occupy classes whose association with revolution is suspect: artists, professionals, scammers, and one or two who seem to be independently wealthy. The would-be radicals who occupy Emilie's hippie boutique are lazy sponges who argue for hours about the format of their magazine while she serves them tea.



*Out 1* de Jacques Rivette: bande-annonce (*Out 1*, Jacques Rivette, 1971) via Criticalcommons.org

*Out 1* follows two experimental theater troupes preparing productions of plays by Aeschylus: *Seven Against Thebes* and *Prometheus Unbound*. The film announces its rejection of politics early on. In Scene 3, Rose, a member of Thomas' theater troupe, plays the cool, slyly laughing goddess Prometheus. She sits cross-legged, enjoying herself as the guards burn incense, fan her, brush her hair, hand her cigarettes and biscuits, and permit supplicants to approach. An aggressive visitor asks, "What political thinking underpinned your action?" Prometheus clucks and shakes her head. "No politics." "Are you in favor of violence?," the visitor persists. Prometheus thoughtfully swigs on a proffered bottle and replies affirmatively. "Violence is a political action," the visitor insists. The goddess repeats, "No politics." When the visitor learns that the goddess's successor will be, of course, Prometheus, she denounces her angrily. "You spoke of freedom, of bringing fire to mankind, in other words knowledge, and you're telling me no politics. It's a farce! Bastards! Imperialists!"

The experience of *Out 1* illuminates recent shifts in the understanding of the politics of affect. Once believed by us Deleuzians to be liberatory in itself, affect has followed signs and senses to be instrumentalized by neoliberal capitalism. The "autonomy of affect" is now only a flicker, a black hole; it rarely generates enough energy to produce a line of flight. Deleuze valued affections as signs that we still have a body, and wrote with guarded hope that bodily knowledge could form the basis of political action.<sup>3</sup> But many of his writings, informed by the failure of organized politics post-'68, doubt that the shift from molecular to molar scales of politics could succeed.<sup>4</sup> Deleuze's Spinozan philosophy of expression, however, gives us tools to achieve such a shift (note the Spinozan terms *affectus*, the continuous variation of capacities, and *affectio*, states of bodies as they affect and are affected by others). Spinoza himself, rather than valuing

affects in themselves, argued that the purpose of thought was to calm affects by replacing them with knowledge that can explain the causes of our joy or suffering.<sup>5</sup>

To analyze *Out 1*, I applied my method of affective analysis, which postpones analysis in order to take time experiencing affects and percepts; it then compares affects and percepts in order to arrive at concepts, or what Spinoza termed adequate ideas. It might seem redundant to pursue such a method with a film like *Out 1*. Like the theater troupes, which abandon any deeper meaning of the Aeschylus plays in favor of experimental techniques that will, it is hoped, give rise to new knowledge, the film postpones meaning and rolls around in affect. At the end of the 775 minutes we, the audience, staggered out of the theater, blinking and muttering. Maybe the simple fact that the audience endured the film together for twelve hours and forty minutes, the performative act of witnessing in solidarity, is the truth of the film. But I find this inadequate indeed. Could *Out 1* model a way to produce adequate ideas, the immanent connections between words and bodies fundamental to Spinoza's thought?

Affective analysis of *Out 1* taught me a great many things. First, by enduring the film's improvisatory content and structure, I learned about the agonistic relationship between life and meaning. Many hours of the film are devoted to the two theater troupes' exercises of this agony, and improvised performance extends from the theater troupes to all the characters. The con artist Frédérique, for example, uses charm and quick wit to improvise scams; she devises solitary exercises in her garret apartment. Rivette's actors improvise dialogue given, it seems, only the fuzziest outlines of what the story might entail. Rivette allowed actors to invent contexts for characters and develop them as they wished; at the same time, he kept them unaware of other characters' stories.<sup>6</sup> This makes for some very frustrating moments of miscommunication.

Next, I learned it is very painful to remain open to scenes that evacuate meaning and focus only on bodies. Near the beginning of Episode 1, Thomas' troupe, workshoping *Prometheus Unbound*, has determined that Prometheus was in constant pain. Six actors in the studio carry out the god-man's descent into abjection. They crawl, cluster together, move apart; they gather around a plastic mannequin, adorning and attacking it; they whine, giggle dementedly, stick their fingers in each other's faces, grab a dirty plastic helmet from each other, and so resemble an idea of "retards" that I wondered if this scene inspired Lars von Trier's *The Idiots*. Everything mingles with everything else. The actors smear gray paint on each other's faces. A woman presses another's fingers to her protruding tongue. I felt nauseated. I wanted to look away, and did for some long moments. I tried to see the screen as an abstract composition of colors. But the scene lasts for so long that such defenses were eroded.

Gradually the actors begin to make sounds like language. One or two squeeze out a statement from Aeschylus' Prometheus: "Do not think that because I do not speak I am indifferent." Their post-exercise discussion reveals that there was more structure and meaning going on during the improvisation than were evident.

Meanwhile, Lili's troupe is working in a more "semiotic" way: dancing, singing, vocalizing, growling. It is less painful to endure, but feels somehow more dated. Beginning at a more structured level, they are unable to tap primordial energies.

Next, I learned that solutions must arise immanently; there's no way out of the mess but through it. In Episode 2, Thomas' troupe is workshoping again, in an unbearable scene that brought to mind the tortures at Abu Ghraib. Gentle Bergamotte lies as though unconscious while the others torture her in every way—make awful sounds in her face, shake her body, tickle her, push her around in a crazily moving cart, almost drop furniture on her, and finally say, "You're a bitch. Everyone hates you." Somehow Bergamotte remains calm, eyes closed, throughout the ordeal. At the conclusion of the exercise she explains how she survived: breathing deep, smiling, and at times leaving her body. Because I was able to quell my desire to flee the theater, I learned that the cruel exercise was not arbitrary: it constituted the troupe's research into how Prometheus survived the daily torture the gods inflicted on him. The discovery that Prometheus is human suggests that any solution Thomas' troupe finds, and that by extension the film finds, must be an immanent one.

As the film continues to shamle along, patterns begin to emerge: promising, irritating patterns suggesting an algorithmic structure. I learned that patterns are dangerously seductive. Conspiracy is, of course, a time-honored algorithmic structure for moving a plot along. Colin (Jean-Pierre Léaud), a monkish con artist who pretends to be deaf-mute, receives two cryptic messages typed on big sheets of paper. For the rest of the film he labors to decode them. He detects references to Carroll's *Snark* and Balzac's novella, *The Thirteen*, and ingeniously follows a clue in the message that leads him to Émilie's shop, Le Coin du Hasard.

As it emerges that *The Thirteen* is an actual conspiracy that links many characters in the film, I am on edge with anticipation and suspicion. The idea of a conspiracy motivates Colin to ever more complex feats of decryption. In episode 6 he marches through the Paris streets, oblivious to the gaggle of kids who have attached to him (and the camera crew), obsessively reciting the words of the enigmatic poem, especially "Équipage, équipage, équipage." Back at his monastic apartment he takes another stab at deciphering a word produced by the last letters of each line. He stares at the disappointing result, "K A N O E"—then grabs his Carroll and finds that the English word for *équipage* is "crew." Putting that in, the E terminating *équipage*

switches to the W of *crew*; Colin reverses the letters and the name WONAK results. Wonak, another member of the mysterious Thirteen! For me a great relief set in again, the sense that a secret meaning, a structure underlying all the painful nonsense, is being revealed. Simultaneously I felt disappointed at this cheap resolution.

By the end of episode 6, as the characters continue to spin their wheels, a mild irritation settled back in. I felt the secret is that there is no secret: just a lot of delay techniques and the endless process of *recherché* experimental-theater methods. Performativity has become a kind of bureaucratic method for dealing with complexity, and *Out 1* is becoming a film about information management. No truth, no depth, only algorithmic strategies for keeping the balls in the air. Mary Wiles notes that Rivette adopted techniques of “guided chance” from avant-garde composer Pierre Boulez.<sup>7</sup> Yet even in retrospect, learning this only irritates me more. Rivette, his actors, and his characters are just messing about with algorithms, recipes, techniques: stalling until meaning arrives or the grant runs out, whichever comes first. In episode 6 Thomas asks Étienne the businessman about the second installment of his *subvention*. We get why the actors are able to luxuriate in this long period of theatrical devising: they have funding! Lili’s troupe doesn’t, though, so when Quentin wins the lottery they rejoice, only to have the money stolen by the suspiciously handsome new member, Renaud.

Earlier I disavowed the Derridean critique of presence. However, Deleuze’s acknowledgement that performativity rides on power relations affirms Derrida’s argument. As we know from Spinoza and from Austin, few performances succeed in bringing about a new state.<sup>8</sup> Although *Out 1* celebrates the ex-nihilo creativity of performance, its struggles to raise a story from the primordial ooze rely not only on immanent force but on social power. For Spinoza, effective acts are those that align our powers with nature or God. But Deleuze and Guattari point out that social power intervenes in this alignment, as order-words or performatives attain their effectiveness through living collective action at best, inert political institutions at worst.<sup>9</sup> Unfunded, Lili’s troupe loses energy in appealing but unproductive exercises. Unsupported, individual conspiracy theories lead to madness for Colin, death for Frédérique. In episode 7 Colin barges into Wonak’s apartment and denounces the conspiracy of The Thirteen as a scheme that raised, then dashed, his hopes that the world made sense. After he leaves, Wonak, a professor, and Lucie, a lawyer, reflect that the group (which does exist!) has been dormant too long since the 1968 abandonment of political action. “We could really do something, you know,” they say. This depressed me: as though social change, abandoned by the arguing hippies, the artists writhing on the studio floor, and the con artists in their lonely imaginings, now falls to well-groomed members of the enlightened bourgeoisie.

The improvisations that barely hold together the rest of the film continued to be painful to watch until the very end. In the final episode several of the characters have ended up at the seaside house they call the Aubade. Sarah and Emilie, sitting on the bed in Emilie's room, engage in an improvised ten-minute dialogue. Some writers celebrate this scene as the film's triumph; for me it was just excruciating, a barely-varied repetition for ten minutes of Emilie: "Why are you looking at me like that?" Sarah: "You should lie down and go to sleep." Still plot-hungry twelve and a half hours into the film, my brain asks, why doesn't Émilie mention to Sarah, who we know is a fellow member of The Thirteen, that she and Lili murdered the courier a couple of episodes ago? Rivette's methods to diminish causality succeed all too well.

By contrast, the actors in Thomas' (well funded) troupe have developed more and more sophisticated and well-grounded exercises. The last one we see is a group improv where one actor is assigned to initiate an action—a mental hospital, a group of tourists lost in Marseille, a holdup—and the others quickly take it up and transform it. It's wonderful to see how alertly they respond to each other and inventively flow from situation to situation. The assiduous work of the actors in Thomas' studio has borne fruit, and it demonstrates the steps required to gain an adequate idea. You need to strip away all assumptions, cultivate deep awareness of self and others, and develop strength; then you can engage with alertness and spontaneity in acts of collective creation. As the rest of *Out 1* shows, if you can't carry out all these steps, you're doomed to sleepwalk, or to be always in passive, reactive mode.

Rivette's films deploy two of the seeds for crystal-images that Deleuze remarks, theater and conspiracy.<sup>10</sup> While the latter fails miserably, so that the film ends by canceling out all the findings of its loose plot, some of the theatrical exercises do in fact succeed in producing the sturdy crystals of adequate ideas.

Simple affections do play a strong role in the movie's capacity to make us, the audience, stay, remain open, and keep hoping. There's the pleasurable fatigue after hard work, a fatigue the audience shares with the actors. There are splashes of color: Marie (Hermine Karagheuz)'s raspberry ensemble, Faune (Monique Clément) in head-to-toe tangerine. There's the surprise of kindness, as when Lili's newly impoverished troupe pulls together a simple meal in Quentin's meager apartment, rounding out the spaghetti with a roast chicken and a pineapple.

And there is the satisfaction of solidarity against all odds. As that scene continues, the actors map sectors of Paris and assign themselves to search for the thief Renaud at the end of each metro line, each in his or her own fashion. Their methods seem endearing but hopelessly inadequate, especially those of the brave Marie, who strides into traffic waving a photograph of Renaud at each passing driver. Never mind that she

is supposed to be a member of the dormant conspiracy, The Thirteen, and that it was she who precipitated much of the film's doomed plot by handing one of the mysterious missives to Colin: it is Marie's loyalty and raspberry-clad determination that win my heart. The last shot of the whole film shows her still searching, a golden winged figure behind her, oblivious that the other characters have abandoned the search for meaning.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Derrida argued that the self is never fully present in performative utterances, whose force is guaranteed by the threat of violence: Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. Alan

<sup>2</sup> Mary Wiles, "In 'Permanent Revolution': Jacques Rivette's *Out 1: Noli Me Tangere*," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 47:2 (2010): 149.

<sup>3</sup> See for example "Cinema, body and brain, thought," in Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 204-215; Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); and Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari argued, following Spinoza, that energies operating at the molecular level, speeds and intensities, are creative in themselves before they are captured and pressed into meaning at the molar level. See Elena del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, "On the Nature and Origin of the Mind," Prop. VII, and part III, "On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions," Prop. LVI. See Laura U. Marks, "What Can a Body Do?," *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 307-344.

<sup>6</sup> Wiles, "In 'Permanent Revolution,'" 149.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-148.

<sup>8</sup> J.L. Austin, "Lecture II," *How To Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 12-24.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 79-80; Gregg Lambert, "Expression," in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Charles J. Stivale (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 37-39.

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<sup>10</sup> In a crystal-image, actual and virtual images encounter each other in a way that obviates which is the “true” image. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 68-71, 76-77.