

## **Three Houses With Neither Beams Nor Rafters: Jacques Rivette's *Merry-Go-Round* from Crime Serial to Surrealistic Fable**

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The eighteenth century satirical rhyme “Cadet Rousselle” is a whimsical ditty about an eccentric, even ridiculous man whose life is full of would-be markers of social success—houses, wives, sons, weapons, and domestic animals—that are all rendered useless by some fatal flaw (e.g., his sword is rusted, his clothes are made of paper, and his houses are poorly constructed). Popularized by the French Revolutionary Army and referenced by everyone from Victor Hugo to Tchaikovsky, the song is given an important symbolic function in Jacques Rivette’s *Merry-Go-Round* (1981) when it is quoted on a postcard that takes the form of a mysterious clue. The card—which reads, “Rousselle the bailiff has three houses with neither beams nor rafters, which provide lodgings for swallows. What do you make of Rousselle the bailiff?”—is the hinge upon which Rivette balances the film’s opposing themes.

On one hand, the film is a surrealistic fable structured around secret messages and cryptic codes, where the childlike protagonists must solve a mystery to find a missing girl and a hidden fortune. In *Manifestos of Surrealism* André Breton proclaimed: “Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.”<sup>1</sup> Rivette borrows from this cultural movement and manipulates the narrative by contrasting imagery and themes: his fable has no easily digestible moral, onscreen violence is offset by a series of games, and his mystery has no obvious solution. Like the ridiculous protagonist of “Cadet Rousselle,” many of the events that occur seem inherently nonsensical and the atmosphere is dreamlike, even languid.

This contrasts with a constant sense of tension and plot elements that include crime, betrayal, and murder. While Rivette’s other efforts from the period, like *Duelle* (1976) and

*Noroît* (1976), are similarly somber and feature tragic conclusions, *Merry-Go-Round* lacks the overt supernatural or fantastical elements of either of those films. Unlike *Duelle*'s duel between two goddesses or *Noroît*'s focus on pirate treasure, in *Merry-Go-Round*, "X" does not mark the location of a buried fortune, though for a time, the characters search in abandoned homes for just that. Instead, it serves as a signifier of mystery itself, one that is existential in nature. The film's oneiric sense of logic—such a crucial element of Rivette's work in general and here, at least in part, a clever solution to production difficulties—and vague approach to its central mystery is a subversion of crime and mystery genre tropes.

## I. Crime and Criminality

*Merry-Go-Round* is generally remembered as one of Rivette's most neglected and misunderstood films. In a 1990 filmed interview," the director himself made this observation:

*Merry-Go-Round* was an unfortunate film. François Truffaut coined the phrase "great sick films" about films such as *Under Capricorn* by Hitchcock, films which have a lot of problems and which the filmmaker is unhappy with, but which thanks to their ambition or certain passages in them, despite being setbacks in the oeuvre of their makers are fascinating because they attempted things...<sup>2</sup>

The film was even called "abortive"<sup>3</sup> by one of his staunchest critical supporters, Jonathan Rosenbaum, but, despite the chaotic nature of the production, it is a compelling exercise that reworks some of Rivette's key themes in the form of a melancholic mystery, themes introduced in the director's first feature, *Paris nous appartient* (*Paris Belongs to Us*, 1961)—paranoia, mystery, and madness—subverting the crime genre tropes he first began to explore with that film to tell a tale of personal revenge, familial conflict, and betrayal.

Though it wasn't released until 1983, *Merry-Go-Round* was actually filmed in late 1977. The long, difficult shoot was beset by difficulties, including the personal problems of actress Maria Schneider and Rivette himself. After Schneider left the production prematurely, Rivette determinedly kept filming; according to a recent interview with co-star Joe Dallesandro, the actors encouraged Rivette to finish the production, but were also instrumental in letting him know when it was time to stop filming once and for all.<sup>4</sup> The director himself recounts the difficulties he encountered: "We started work with the two actors, and after eight days, things were going very badly. It was like a machine that, once set in motion, must continue running despite changing regimes, forced or arbitrary accelerations, until the energy was all burned up, exhausted."<sup>5</sup>

The film's oppressive sense of exhaustion, loneliness, trauma, and grief has a more palpable weight than his more whimsical films, but is less of an obvious break from these fantasy films than it may seem on the surface; many of them dealt with similar issues of violence, death, betrayal, and revenge, often through fraught sibling relationships, which appeared in *Paris nous appartient*, where the protagonist often seeks counsel from her half-brother, but are at the hearts of *Duelle*, *Noroît*, and *Merry-Go-Round*. The latter actually came in the wake of a failed, four-part series, "Scènes de la vie parallèle" ("Scenes of Parallel Life"), which was to include *Duelle* and *Noroît*, despite dramatic genre differences. The failure of this project, which spiralled Rivette into a depression that resulted in a breakdown during the late 1970s, is perhaps responsible for the bleak tone of *Merry-Go-Round* and its nihilistic take on crime genre themes.

Rivette's early films, *Paris nous appartient* and *Out 1* (1971), both explore mystery and crime tropes with plots based on cryptic clues, conspiracies, and cabals. But *Merry-Go-Round* is a more intimate look at these themes; instead of secret organizations manipulating events behind the scenes, betrayal is personal, familial. Like the majority of Rivette's films, *Merry-Go-Round's* abstruse plot is only loosely sketched. Ben (Joe Dallesandro) in New York and Léo (Maria Schneider) in Rome are called to France by Elisabeth (Danièle Gégauff)—Ben's girlfriend and Léo's estranged sister—after she sends out frantic telegrams asking for help, but she is nowhere to be found when they arrive. They follow a series of vague clues and eventually find her at a house in the country that belonged to Elisabeth and Léo's father, who allegedly died in a mysterious plane crash after hiding a fortune a few years prior. When Elisabeth is kidnapped, Ben and Léo reluctantly team up to rescue her.



Figure 1. Léo (Maria Schneider) contemplates her sister's disappearance in *Merry-Go-Round*.

In some sense, *Merry-Go-Round* functions as a sort of inversion of Rivette's debut feature, *Paris nous appartient*. In a *Senses of Cinema*'s piece, Saul Austerlitz observes, "Its free-floating paranoia looks back to high-modernist antecedents like Kafka and Borges while anticipating the paranoid cinema that has come to dominate the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster. Many of Rivette's preoccupations and recurrent themes are prominent in this first feature. Paranoia, plotting, and the essential mystery of the Other are constants in his films."<sup>6</sup> While *Merry-Go-Round* is similarly preoccupied with paranoia and plotting, "the essential mystery of the Other" is a force that is not directed outwards at some unseen, potentially malevolent cabal, but rather towards intimate relationships and even further inwards; self-doubt and psychological torment are powerful motivating forces within the film as individual identities take on increasingly complex dimensions.

While much of the plotting is explained as Elisabeth's revenge against her father—who may have faked his own death and is described as emotionally distant at best and psychologically abusive at worst—Léo's deep mistrust of her sister even as she longs to keep her safe is a constant source of tension within the film. Similarly, Ben learns that his own sister, Shirley (Sylvie Matton), who is also Elisabeth's best friend, was having an affair with the sisters' father and fuels a significant amount of the general machinations.

With the release of major titles from directors like Sidney Lumet and Jean-Pierre Melville to Claude Chabrol and Kinji Fukasaku, the 1970s was a watershed decade for crime cinema, and *Merry-Go-Round* stands as one of Rivette's most overt nods to that genre. While it is only superficially a crime thriller, Ben and Léo's adventures are set in motion with Elisabeth's cryptic telegram asking for help. Rivette admitted that it was the concept of bringing two strangers together in potentially dangerous or violent circumstances to see what transpired that fascinated him. In a 1981 interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*, he confessed, "I like that idea: two people get together because a third, who has arranged to meet them, does not show up. There have no choice but to get to know each other. It's a situation I imagined in the context of the Resistance. Thinking about it again later, I think it was the subject of Robert Hossein's *Nuit des espions*."<sup>7</sup>

*La nuit des espions* (1959), also known to English-speaking audiences as *Double Agents*, was written, directed by, and starred Hossein and his then wife, Marina Vlady, as two spies, only referred to as "He" and "She," much like Alain Resnais's war-themed film from the same year, *Hiroshima mon amour*. Hossein's couple rendezvous in Normandy during WWII, at an isolated country cabin, and fall for each other, but it is unclear whether or not one or both of them are German spies—or double agents. Like Rivette's films, Hossein's have a fluid use of genre as well as a theatrical quality—likely from his time as an actor and director in the Grand Guignol—which *Merry-Go-Round* shares. As with Ben and Léo, tensions arise in *La nuit des espions* from the time the couple spends in isolation, which includes an elaborate dinner scene (which is one of *Merry-Go-Round*'s most quietly

compelling moments), fighting, and raw, vulnerable discussions of identity and personal history. In both films, it's nearly impossible to separate the mask and the performance from reality.



Figure 2. Ben (Joe Dallesandro) and Léo forage for dinner in *Merry-Go-Round*.

## II. Hitchcockian Suspense and Langian Guilt

At an early point in the film it is Ben who suggests to Léo that perhaps it was Elisabeth who brought the two of them together. Certainly, the film is at its most vital when these two characters are forced to interact, which includes lengthy scenes in which they are working out the mystery, confronting personal frustrations, or simply waiting. From the standpoint of a conventional narrative, this is the ideal time for exposition, when the characters can reveal individual traits, desires, and motivations, but here their identities remain inaccessible; it is difficult to tell who is lying and who is telling the truth. In almost every case, this relationship is more compelling than the central mystery, and in this sense, *Merry-Go-Round* borrows some subtle, unexpected cues from earlier crime and suspense films.

While early French serials like Louis Feuillade's *Fantômas* (1913) would provide one point of reference, to which I will return later, it is difficult not to think of Alfred Hitchcock's MacGuffin, especially when we recall Rivette's role in the band of *Cahiers du cinéma* critics that André Bazin dubbed the "Hitchcocko-Hawksians." Essentially a red herring plot device that serves no real purpose, MacGuffins provided the narrative motivation in many Hitchcock films. For example, in *The 39 Steps* (1935), a vaudeville performer is sought out

for the plans for an airplane engine, while in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), the titular lady is in danger because she's memorized music that contains a code.

Hitchcock himself discusses the MacGuffin in the seminal *Hitchcock/Truffaut*.

It's the device, the gimmick, if you will... The theft of secret documents was the original MacGuffin [from Rudyard Kipling spy stories]. [It] is the term we use to cover all that sort of thing: to steal plans or documents, or discover a secret, it doesn't matter what it is. And the logicians are wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a MacGuffin, since it's beside the point. The only thing that really matters is that in the picture the plans, documents, or secrets must seem to be of vital importance to the characters.<sup>8</sup>

Of course it is also a staple of film noir and can be found in both early and late examples of the movement, like *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), where the device is a falcon statue, to *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), where a mysterious briefcase becomes known as "the great whatsit" and its contents are never truly revealed.

Rivette's MacGuffin in *Merry-Go-Round* is not the missing fortune, but the identity of Elisabeth and Léo's father and the mystery of whether he is dead or alive. The film is far more concerned with another film noir preoccupation, guilt, than it is with solving this mystery. Ben is a key example of this; while he is a sympathetic, even likable character, it's apparent early in the film that he either has conflicting motivations for why he wants to rescue Elisabeth, or is openly lying to Léo. Rivette shed some light on the theme of guilt with his seminal essay on Fritz Lang's *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956), entitled "The Hand," where he discussed the value of loosely sketched characters. He affirmed that "all men are guilty a priori"—a sentiment that applies to the characters of *Merry-Go-Round*, particularly as the layers of double-crossing come to light—and that "the same movement takes us into a pitiless world where everything denies grace, where sin and penalty are irremediably bound together, and where the only possible attitude of the creator must be one of absolute contempt."<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not Rivette has "absolute contempt" for his characters here is debatable, but the tone of the film is undoubtedly downbeat, the conclusion is violent, and no one is depicted as innocent, in part because the director refuses to allow much explanation for their actions on screen. Everyone's complicity in the conspiracy is equally plausible, though the MacGuffin-like nature of the mystery makes it clear that Rivette is more focused on developing the relationships between characters and manipulating the depictions of their identities. Again, this observation about *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* applies: "the characters have lost all individual quality, are not more than human *concepts*. But in

consequence they are all the more human for being the less individual. Here we find the first answer: what remains of humanity?"<sup>10</sup>



Figure 3. Ben and Léo begin to unravel in *Merry-Go-Round*.

### III. Criminality vs. Horror: Giallo Films and the Theatre of Absurd

The film essentially answers the question posed by Rivette by depicting the characters in two worlds: the first, where crime and mystery are the order of the day, while the second resembles a parallel fantasy plane, possibly psychological in origin, where a strange woman hunts Ben through a forest. The first world is devoid of neat resolutions and some of its more nonsensical crime elements borrow from the German *krimi* or Italian *giallo* cult film subgenres. The *krimi*, which refers to *Kriminalfilm*, is a genre of West German crime thrillers based on the novels of British writer Edgar Wallace. They generally follow a Scotland Yard detective who pursues a costumed criminal mastermind through seedy bars, London dives, mansions with secret passageways, and even Gothic castles. Sex, drugs, and blackmail are often motives for murder and while there are moments of gruesome violence, this is generally offset by campy humor and a dizzying array of red herrings.

The *krimi* subgenre is an important stepping stone between German Expressionism and the *giallo* film, an Italian subgenre popular in the '60s and '70s known for its highly stylized, often garish violence and elements borrowed from both literary mysteries and horror films. *Merry-Go-Round's* premise that a manipulative man (the girls' father, named David Hoffman) may or may not have died on a plane crash due to a fortune he possesses is a plot device used in both *krimi* and *giallo* films, as is the concept that clues about the

traumatic past can be located in a long-abandoned childhood home. Many of *Merry-Go-Round*'s plot details, like an empty grave, a crumpled newspaper headline about a shocking death, a missing safe combination, a psychic used to find clues, and potential facial surgery that allows a character to go into hiding, appear in *giallo* films like Mario Bava's *6 donne per l'assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace*, 1964), Sergio Martino's *Lo strano vizio della Signora Wardh* (*The Strange Vice of Mrs. Wardh*, 1971), and Lucio Fulci's *Sette note in nero* (*The Psychic*, 1977). These elements recall Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's line from *The Sign of the Four*: "when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" (itself quoted in a later *giallo* film, Argento's *Tenebre* from 1982).<sup>11</sup> As with *Merry-Go-Round*, *giallo* directors frequently emphasized the crime-solving journey rather than attempting to provide particularly coherent solutions.

But *Merry-Go-Round*'s sense of horror is far more oneiric than either the *krimi* or the *giallo* film. Its bleak, at times frustrating, tone seems to be a reflection of something Rivette said of cinema in general. He wrote, "I believe more and more than 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."<sup>12</sup> The sense of horror in the film borrows as much from the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd as it does from crime films; the characters find themselves in situations far more inexplicable than those presented in the average *giallo* or B-grade thriller. Events seemingly exist solely to inspire frustration and even madness. In his study, *A History of the French New Wave*, Richard Neupert wrote of the absurdist influence on many of its directors: "Theatre of the Absurd, defined as tragicomic, joyously pessimistic plays evoking godless worlds with no pertinent answers or guidelines to help the surreally lost characters."<sup>13</sup> In discussing Rivette's films in particular, Neupert described characters "who are both guilty and innocent and dead men... who are both murder victims and suicides. The paranoia of the characters is so pervasive as to infect and undermine the audience's ability to understand them or their world."<sup>14</sup>

Neupert was specifically referring to *Paris nous appartient*, which focused on a mysterious suicide that is possibly murder, a widespread conspiracy, a missing but sought after musical recording, and even hints of apocalypse. It shares a key influence in common with *Merry-Go-Round*, in the form of the crime film serials of the 1910s and 1920s. The director Louis Feuillade, in particular, had a profound influence on the French *fantastique* genre—a nebulous literary and cinematic tradition that combines horror, fantasy, and magic realism and plunges characters into uncertain, ambiguous worlds—and left a lasting impression on crime films and thrillers, which can be felt in the work of major directors like Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock.



#### IV. Fantômas: Synthesis of Fantasy and Reality

In order to understand the influence of early crime serials on *Merry-Go-Round*, it's necessary to briefly discuss what is perhaps the quintessential example of the format, *Fantômas*. Created by writers Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre in 1911, the character is an arch-villain who spans a number of novels (initially published in serialized form) and was quickly adapted to the screen by Feuillade, as well as a number of other directors over the years. A sociopath, murderer, and devious criminal mastermind, Fantômas is bound by neither morals nor loyalties. His identity is seemingly fluid—he adapts personas and disguises at will—and his crimes are motiveless and include improbable, even absurd details that would go on to influence later comic book villains like *Batman's* the Joker. A detective, Juve, is his archnemesis, and Juve is aided by Jérôme Fandor, a young journalist who was also once a victim of Fantômas.

Both the novels and film adaptations of *Fantômas* soon took on a richer cultural currency when art and literary figures like poet and forefather of Surrealism, Guillaume Apollinaire, embraced the character as a symbol of subversion. In *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth Century Paris*, Robin Walz observes:

In the twilight of the Belle Époque, *Fantômas* was a crime-fiction sensation, creating popular entertainment out of indeterminate identities, incoherences of time and space, technological gadgetry, and unmotivated violence. During the interwar period, the surrealists and other avant-garde aesthetes incorporated Fantômas imagery and iconography into their own works. What the surrealists added to Fantômas was a critical perspective, an ambivalent relationship with popular crime fiction that attempted to release the more fantastical elements of detective stories from their bourgeois social moorings.<sup>15</sup>

*Fantômas's* reliance on “indeterminate identities” manifests itself not only in the characters' shifting biographies, but in the presence of the inexplicable parallel universe where Ben is being chased through the forest. Schneider's departure from the set resulted in a disruption in Rivette's plans for this segment of the film and thus the unnamed female character in this parallel reality, who is the primary antagonist, can be read as an alternate Léo. She is played by Hermine Karagheuz (*Out 1, Duelle, Secret Défense*), who bears more than a passing resemblance to Schneider. Eventually, as the film winds to a close and their antagonism comes to a head, the tables turn and Ben pursues the woman through sand dunes. Tom Milne asserts: “Originally, the idea was for the couple gradually to rediscover their childhood in the sort of regression planned, but never finally realized, for *L'Amour fou*. Instead, their fear now creates a sort of parallel universe.”<sup>16</sup> This recalls

Rivette's persistent use of *mise-en-abyme*, which most often appears as a play-within-the-film in works like *L'amour fou* and *Out 1*. This fantasy world is also similar to parallel universes found in *Céline et Julie vont en bateau*, where the two leads discover a house with strange goings on that repeat themselves in a time loop, and *Duelle*, where the lives of a brother and sister are disrupted by a battle between two goddesses.



Figure 4. Ben is hunted in the parallel world in *Merry-Go-Round*.

As in the early serials, the fluidity of identity in *Merry-Go-Round* is not confined to this parallel world and is hazily constructed in general. Walz affirms, "One peculiarly modern aspect of *Fantômas*, then, is that masks and identities are interchangeable, continually changing, and essentially equal."<sup>17</sup> This sense in *Merry-Go-Round* results from the lack of backstory given for Elisabeth, Léo, Ben, or his sister Shirley, and, with the possible exception of Léo, the rapidly transforming motivations for all three; it isn't so much that the characters are fickle or dramatically change their priorities throughout the film, but rather that Rivette reveals seemingly conflicting layers of personality as if he is peeling back the layers of an onion. Ben is at once in love with Elisabeth and determined to keep her safe; attracted to Léo, with whom he has an obvious connection and with whom he attempts to pursue a sexual relationship; manipulated by his sister Shirley's plotting; and is strongly financially motivated, though this sense of greed results in plenty of self-loathing on his part.

Yet if there is any one character of *Merry-Go-Round* most inspired by the crime serial villains, it is the girls' absent father, David Hoffman. A recent introduction to the English-language translation of *Fantômas* could apply just as easily to the criminal mastermind as it does to the largely unseen Hoffman:

It is impossible to say exactly or to know precisely who Fantômas is. He often assumes the form and personality of some definite and even well-known individual; sometimes he assumes the form of two human beings at one and the same time. Sometimes he works alone, sometimes with accomplices; sometimes he can be identified as such as such person, but no one has ever yet arrived at knowing Fantômas himself. That he is a living person is certain and undeniable, yet he is impossible to catch or to identify. He is nowhere and everywhere at once, his shadow hovers above the strangest mysteries, and his traces are found near the most inexplicable crimes.<sup>18</sup>

Though Hoffman lingers in the background of *Merry-Go-Round*, he is ever-present, as Ben and Léo come to understand that events have been set in motion by him, or possibly by Elisabeth's desire to get revenge upon him. In addition to an early scene set at his grave (which Léo insists is empty), where they discover a newspaper reporting his untimely death, he is given a double—there's a fake David Hoffman—who makes his presence known through telegraphs, red marks on the wall of one of the old Hoffman homes, and conflicting reports from Shirley, who claims to be his lover and insists that he survived the plane crash. And just as in *Fantômas*, there is no big reveal at the end of the film disclosing Hoffman's true identity—as there would be in a conventional thriller or even a *giallo* film—as the mystery folds back in on itself. As Walz observes, "In contrast to the nineteenth-century popular novel, there is no real 'unmasking' in *Fantômas*, because there is no real 'someone else' behind the mask."<sup>19</sup>

Hoffman essentially becomes a MacGuffin—like the titular character of Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), a corpse in the woods who unites a series of characters when they discover the body and then try to hide it—as Rivette moves the film's focus from the mystery of his identity and the location of the missing money to the subconscious conflict within Ben himself; as such, the film lacks a defined conclusion that puts an emphasis on the ephemeral nature of the proceedings and a profoundly frustrated sense of desire. Léo believes she has killed her father, but has really only murdered his double, and though Ben thinks he has been reunited with Elisabeth, he is unable to prevent her sudden, inexplicable death. This sense of frustrated justice again evokes the crime serials. Walz affirms: "Moral restitution was fundamentally denied through the motif of the escape of *Fantômas* at the end of each episode. All the reader was left with was an endless, yet predictable, string of murders, thefts, disguises, pursuits, traps, confrontations, arrests, and escape—and not a bit of it plausible."<sup>20</sup>

## V. *Merry-Go-Round* as Cinematic Fable

Rivette juxtaposes these crime serial elements with notes of the fable. A literary genre often associated with the ancient world—and figures like the Greek fabulist Aesop—these brief tales often featured animals, creatures of myth and folklore, and nature anthropomorphized. Though *Merry-Go-Round* lacks any such characters, it has elements of both the medieval interpretation of fables and the later seventeenth century forms. For *New Literary History*, Howard Needler writes of the overlap between the traditional fable, chivalric romance, and the medieval epic:

The forest, with its incalculable contents, is an established convention of the genre: knights riding through it regularly encounter giants, deformed or bizarre creatures of all kinds, beasts both natural and fantastic. Yet in all such encounters, what the knight commonly seeks to grapple with [...] is *the other*. Even the other knights with whom he fights, encased in armor with visor lowered, are representations of the unknown, instances of the nominally human transformed into the nonhuman.<sup>21</sup>

A direct parallel can be drawn to *Merry-Go-Round* and the alternate world where Ben races through the forest and must inexplicably battle a knight, a pack of dogs, and a girl shooting arrows at him. Needler describes that in these medieval fables, the focus was really on man's own confrontation with himself; Ben similarly seems to confront inner anxieties and his own base impulses for violence in this alternate reality.

Like *Merry-Go-Round*, the fable “lacks many characteristics of the larger forms and established genres: characterizations, motivation, distinctions of foreground and background, circumstantial detail, narrative amplitude, and so on,” and the plots are “embryonic.”<sup>22</sup> Needler argues that, at their core, fables represent the expression and frustration of desire, and that the frustration results, ironically, from desire being attained. Similarly, *Merry-Go-Round* is constructed around Ben and Léo's shared desire to find Elisabeth; though their motivations are arguably different, and though they locate her several different times within the film, these meetings are marked with frustration and disappointment.

At its heart, *Merry-Go-Round* seems to have a simple moral about the fundamentally corrupt nature of humanity, not unlike the later fables. Needler affirms, “The world of nature, nominally the ambience of fable, turns out to be the world of human nature—which seems to have less to do with nature than with folly and vice.”<sup>23</sup> This sense particularly emerged in the late seventeenth century with the fables of French writer Jean de la Fontaine, when he transformed these pithy tales into poems of deceptive scope. In the

guise of presenting simple stories for children, he was able to include political criticism and satire, and his stories were populated with nearly as many human characters as animal. He adapted classical fables, like those of Aesop and Phaedrus, but also wrote his own unique tales inspired by writers like Rabelais and Boccaccio, instilling his works with previously unknown complexity and a breadth of literary influences.

Often deeply critical of society, La Fontaine's fables reveal man's base nature, and this fixation on "folly and vice" can similarly be found in Rivette's characters in *Merry-Go-Round*. For example, La Fontaine's "L'avare qui a perdu son trésor" (known in English as "The Miser and His Gold"), adapted from Aesop, follows a man who consolidates his wealth into a mound of gold, which he buries.<sup>24</sup> But because he obsessively returns to the spot every day, his gold is stolen. A neighbor remarks that he could bury a stone to come and observe every day and it would have the same effect on his life as the missing treasure. The fable speaks to the nature of miserliness and the value of owning possessions versus being owned by them; Rivette also underscores greed as the downfall of several characters in *Merry-Go-Round*, such as Ben and Shirley.

Ben and Léo are also reminiscent of characters in La Fontaine's "L'homme qui court après la fortune et l'homme qui l'attend dans son lit" (known in English as "The Man who Runs after Fortune"), which follows two men.<sup>25</sup> One obsessively travels the world in search of fortune, but returns home empty-handed. The second man, who has stayed at home in bed, finds that fortune has come to him. La Fontaine's own original tale asserts that chasing fortune is an unreliable and often troublesome pursuit and Ben's greed—or at least his desperation for a financial windfall—causes a permanent rupture in his developing relationship with Léo.

In the sense that *Merry-Go-Round* evokes La Fontaine's fables, especially of its loosely shaped plot and bleak moral undercurrent, it is connected to a few other films from the period with similar themes: titles like Louis Malle's *Black Moon* (1975), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Chinesisches Roulette* (*Chinese Roulette*, 1976), Rivette collaborator Eduardo de Gregorio's *Sérail* (*Surreal Estate*, 1976), and Claude Chabrol's *Alice ou la dernière fugue* (*Alice or the Last Escapade*, 1977). All are set in eerie country houses and replete with fabulist elements—and sometimes fantastical creatures or dreamlike narrative breaks—and plots involving tense family dynamics, emotional cruelty, and sudden acts of violence, as well as secret codes, riddles, and games.

Though not as overtly influenced by crime serials—several of these 1970s French and German films actually borrow more heavily from literary sources like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), the Gothic novel, and parlour room melodrama—they are all concerned with mysteries, violence (or the potential for it), dreamlike logic, and a fluid approach to establishing characters' identities. What Jonathan Rosenbaum said of *Out 1*

not only applies to Rivette's film, but also to the surrealistic titles by Malle, Fassbinder, Chabrol, and others. He wrote, "No one is merely who he or she initially appears to be but a palimpsest of separate guises and identities, a series of improvisations that makes each character essentially a 'work-in-progress,' a text undergoing successive and almost continuous revisions."<sup>26</sup> The protagonists of *Black Moon*, *Chinesisches Roulette*, and *Alice ou la dernière fugue* are loosely sketched young women—though *Sérail* follows a male writer into a home occupied by one, or possibly two, young women and an older housekeeper—and there is a coming-of-age element to each film. In each case, there is something nightmarish to this process of maturation, and in all these films the fabulist moral seems to be the revelation of the fundamental cruelty of human nature and meaninglessness of life.



Figure 5. Ben and Léo attempt to decipher a postcard in *Merry-Go-Round*.

## VI. Surrealistic Designs and Objective Chance

In *Alice in Wonderland* and many of these surrealistic country house films, as well as in crime serials, characters are often forced to navigate a series of inexplicable or nonsensical encounters. This is especially crucial to *Merry-Go-Round* and calls to mind Breton's notion of objective chance. Breton "[delivered] himself incessantly to chance" and went "in quest of bizarre objects answering his desire, and roaming Paris in a dream-like state during which he was subject to a strange delusion of interpretation that discerned hidden meanings everywhere."<sup>27</sup> In Rivette's film, Breton's surrealist legacy ensures that identity is fluid, unfixed; reality has an ephemeral quality, and there is even a parallel, dream universe; events are seemingly dictated by objective chance. It can be thought of as "an active synthesis of the subjective and the objective," and in *Merry-Go-Round*,

unpredictable moments and coincidences intrude on reality in such a way to make the mundane seem oneiric.<sup>28</sup> This concept is also central to Rivette's earlier films like *Paris nous appartient* and especially *Out 1*, as well as to his fantasy efforts, such as *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* and *Duelle*, where seemingly random occurrences and haphazard coincidences are treated as weighty portents; everything is, or can be, a sign.

"Cadet Rousselle" is key to understanding how objective chance works within *Merry-Go-Round*. Events are set in motion because Elisabeth sends out postcards asking for help, which are echoed by later messages and clues, namely the postcard from Hoffman that references Cadet Rousselle and suggests an important clue: "Cadet Rousselle has three houses that have neither beams nor rafters. They give lodging to the swallows." Hoffmann indeed owns (or owned) three houses that seem to be abandoned, and the childlike nature of the rhyme suggests that Léo should mine her painful memories, but this is essentially a dead end, and Rivette suggests that the truly important experience is her time spent in each of the houses with Ben. Rosenbaum observes, "The narrative underpinnings of both *Tih-Minh* [another Feuillade serial] and *Out 1* are largely traceable back to secret messages and documents that can be read as both gratuitous and arbitrary."<sup>29</sup> A missing bank account number becomes the focus of several scenes, and Léo discovers it one morning because she happens to open her eyes at the right time and glances in the right direction. The frost that begins fading with sunrise reveals "168109" stencilled on a window, as if recently written by a fingertip.

Ultimately these symbols are temporary mooring points in a narrative that becomes increasingly surrealistic and perhaps the real revelation behind "Cadet Rousselle" is that, like the song, events within the film are inherently nonsensical and there is no method behind the apparent madness. Walz argues that the serial "operated outside logic and deduction, and it offered no moral or social restitution. Instead, it was a *récit impossible*, an impossible story of displaced identities, detours, paradoxes, and violence."<sup>30</sup> In *Merry-Go-Round*, as the motivations and identities of characters begin to change direction and shape, the film's fundamental sense of anxiety and violence is reflected in the parallel forest world—where Ben is both hunter and hunted—and in the increasing focus on cruelty and violence. The absurdist, though dramatic conclusion does not necessarily detract from this. Ben's sister, Shirley, who claimed to be Hoffman's lover and accomplice and seemed likely to be the primary architect behind the conspiracy in lieu of Hoffman himself, reveals that everything was Elisabeth's elaborate plan, including her own kidnapping. She hoped to trick Léo to come to France, win her sympathy and trust after years of estrangement, and get her to reveal either the location of the bank or the account number.

Elisabeth's elaborate plot seems too complex—and involves too many moving parts—to be plausible and as Walz said of the serials, it leaves behind a sense of "unmotivated criminality." The film, then, seems to ultimately take on the structure of a basic fable, with

the moral lesson that no one can be trusted, particularly not those who are the closest to us, a sense shared by many of the other surreal country house films where childhood homes and families are the site of cruelty and violence. According to Rosenbaum, every Rivette film has an “impulse to design and plot, dominate and control... an impulse to ‘let things go,’ open one’s self up to the play and power of other personalities, and watch what happens.”<sup>31</sup> The film’s real depth is in the moments when Ben and Léo come together reluctantly and eventually fall back apart. But there is something of a reprieve from the torment and the frustration in the parallel world, where Ben tracks the woman across the dunes and, instead of taking the opportunity to finally vanquish his foe, they sit down on the sand, facing each other, in a somber moment of peace.

## VII. Conclusion

Though *Merry-Go-Round* may not have been the film Rivette initially intended to make—either in the sense that he had planned to be working on the “Scènes de la vie parallèle” series, or in terms of how he conceived of its script and Schneider’s participation in the film—the failures in its production resulted in a complex blend of his earlier influences and subversions of crime genre tropes. “Cadet Rousselle” remains a poignant bit of the film’s mythology, as its central question, “What do you make of Rousselle the bailiff?,” is never answered, particularly if Rousselle can be seen as a symbol for David Hoffmann. The ending of “Cadet Rousselle” offers a parallel to Hoffmann’s identity: “Cadet Rousselle will not die,/ Because before taking the plunge,/ They say he’s learning how to spell,/ To write his epitaph himself.”

Instead of resolving the mystery around Hoffmann, Rivette is far more concerned with exploring the film’s shifting worlds; for instance, there are occasionally scenes with two musicians (Barre Phillips and John Surman), who provide *Merry-Go-Round*’s downbeat, jazz score. This footage was added after the production was completed, but heightens the sense that Rivette is intentionally breaking through the fourth wall to balance out the journey from crime film to surreal fable to domestic tragedy, proving that even one of the director’s supposed missteps can result in a fascinating piece of cinema. After all, it was Rivette himself who said, “Long live misunderstandings and long live chaos, because cinema lives only from them!”<sup>32</sup>



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