

Rivette and Strong Sensations

Hélène Frappat

I always dreamed of the musical comedies that Rivette would have made in the fifties, if he had been American (Quine or Walters), for his watchword would have been “the show must go on.” Yes, but what show? —Serge Daney, *Trafic* no. 1

A young woman emerges from Montsouris Square and turns onto Avenue Reille; she begins to run, suddenly taking flight; soon she will move beyond the frame where a static shot would still be able to capture her; the horizon line of the avenue becomes the black background for the final credits. Thus, *Haut bas fragile* (*Up Down Fragile*, 1995) comes to a close, the last film of Jacques Rivette, with a rapid departure motivated not by panic but by intense relief, a pure gesture of freedom acquired after three hours, and also eighteen films. Ida's flight is the end point of a search in which the essence of Rivette's entire oeuvre is reflected; her quest for a mysterious filiation (Ida is an adopted child) is the flip side of all the investigations undertaken by Rivette's characters to uncover secrets, which are formidable to the extent that they are hidden.



Figure 1. Ida takes to her heels

In *Haut bas fragile* the curtain is finally lifted on all the mysteries of the earlier plots. The unimaginable lightness that this unveiling brings about brutally contradicts the Rivettian adage (this time vocalized by Anna Karina) according to which there is no sensation stronger than fear. *Haut bas fragile* is thus an equivocal film, which provides us with the key to Rivette's art, but in the very act of doing so changes the rules of his game.

What secret is hidden from two of the three heroines of the film, and encircles their story with a halo of mystery? The secret, at once unspoken and unspeakable, of a *real* filiation. Louise must substitute a real father (guilty of lies and betrayal) for the idealized representation that she has created, and Ida must renounce dreaming of a (false) true mother. How then does one go about transforming these two phantasms into the object of a representation? By an ingenious use of sound: a phantasm becomes a voice that has no body, whether one can talk to it without wanting to see it (the voice of Louise's father amplified by the telephone speaker) or whether one can see it without being able to speak to it (the voice of Anna Karina in her cabaret number, which surprisingly does not tally with the memory). All sensations in the present come from real things: the rocking chair that affects Louise, the man whom she kisses, the irresistible urge that stirs Ida to take to her heels. This is why the last part of the film makes the denouement possible: *Haut bas fragile*, as its title indicates, is a delimited (oriented) work and thus complete. There is nothing surprising about this, for Rivette has abandoned the serial genre for that of the musical comedy.

In his "Letter on Rossellini"¹, Rivette distinguishes between two types of films, "films which begin and end, which have a beginning and an ending, which conduct a story through from its initial premise until everything has been restored to peace and order, and there have been deaths, a marriage or a revelation" (Hawks, Hitchcock, Murnau, Ray, Griffith), and those which "recede into time like rivers to the sea" (Renoir and Rossellini). Now, the indecision characterizing the denouement of *Paris nous appartient* (*Paris Belongs to Us*, 1961) (a slow and melancholic travelling shot along the Seine), of *Out 1: Spectre* (1974) or of *Pont du Nord* (1982), situates them among those films that seem to begin prior to the film screening, continuing their mysterious life after the spectator has gone home: films constructed in the imperfect past tense, the time indicated by a title placed at the beginning of *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (*Céline and Julie Go Boating*, 1974) to signify that the first *image* of the film is not the first *episode* of its story: "Usually, it began like this~". Completely contrary to this, *Haut bas fragile* consists of a beginning and an end, part of the pure American tradition that demands that "the end" match up with the final image; Rivette thus shifts, for the first time, from Renoir to Hitchcock, from the lineage of *The River* to that of *Vertigo*. In the process, he has resolved the central problem that was at stake in *L'Amour par terre* (*Love on the Ground*, 1984): how does one conclude a film? In *L'Amour par terre*, the denouement is all the more uncertain because it is arbitrary. As in the theater, a moment has to come when the curtain falls, when the actors and spectators depart. Yet whereas one

of the *metteurs en scène* in *L'Amour par terre* (André Dussollier) is a clairvoyant who doesn't see anything (this is unsurprising: there is nothing to see or to understand), the set designer in *Haut bas fragile* (André Marcon) commences a game that is much more serious than the role-playing or *marivaudages* of the theater. The questions that trouble him (the pang of a Rivettian conscience: should one wake a sleepwalker given the risk that she might fall?) indicate that, in truth, questions of life, love and death are at stake.



Figure 2. Questions of life, love and death at stake

It is thus impossible to understand *Haut bas fragile* without considering the Rivettian filmic strategies, which, since *Le Coup du berger* (*A Fool's Mate*, 1956), have reflected a certain idea (the Rivettian definition of *mise en scène*: "To possess a strong and logical idea of what must be on the screen"²) In changing his strategy, has Rivette changed his ideas?

"Deaths, a marriage or a revelation": this typology of an Americanesque denouement modulates the three parts of *Haut bas fragile*, which opens with a violent scene of murder, is followed by two romantic idylls, and finishes with the unveiling of different mysteries. For the first time ever, Rivette dispenses with the state of uncertainty and waiting, which had governed the intrigues of his previous films. Such uncertainty is predicated upon the indeterminate nature of the plots and conspiracies that systematically constitute their principal theme: what certainty do we have of the existence of a worldwide conspiracy at the end of *Paris nous appartient*, of *Out 1: Spectre* or of *Pont du Nord*? The uncertainty prevents any closure in these films, and expands duration: longer and longer sequences, and scenes where one has the feeling that they may never end (above all when, in *Out 1: Spectre*, they are identically repeated), contribute to the construction of a unique perception of time (which Serge Daney calls "the realized fantasy of a continuous cinema"³). Rivette's films play with stretching out time, and the rule of this game is implicit: the apparent freedom of the rhythm is governed, from within, by the necessity of watchful waiting. All of the characters in

Rivette's films—until *Haut bas fragile*—wait for something to (finally) happen, for the conspiracies to produce acts, events. Because of this, they enter unwittingly into the anguished condition of a subject in love, for whom each delay is experienced as a small bereavement. In *Out 1: Spectre* the character Igor's mysterious disappearance places his former associates within a contradictory dilemma that resembles being in love: to despair of an absence is by the same token to hope that this absence will come to an end at any cost. As one of the protagonists remarks, "Igor must be off somewhere doing something," a phrase that is more comic than he realizes, since it sustains a Rivettian character through the anguish of waiting. Due to this indeterminate delay, the present stretches out indefinitely—but it is extendable because it consists in waiting for an event that has *already* taken place. This is why the universe of Rivette is not absurd: it is dominated by the anguish of the past, which entraps all the characters and prevents them from living in the present. The scene from *Out 1: Spectre* in which two of the presumed conspirators (Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Michael Lonsdale) ask each other whether, given the example of Igor, they shouldn't also be off doing something somewhere, is essentially filmed in static shots; each one of these prolonged static shots exposes the truth of the conversation as the spectator gradually understands that the conspirators have been talking much more than acting—the image is far more credible than the sound, for it exposes a powerlessness to act that contradicts the energy of the words. Until *Haut bas fragile*, Rivettian characters were incapable of mourning the past; the rule of the game was that the past would catch up with them inevitably, that it would kill them as it does Marie (Bulle Ogier) in *Le Pont du Nord*, or that it would send them back to the Moon and the Sun as it does the two heroines of *Duelle* (Bulle Ogier and Juliet Berto), who are condemned to immortality (their incapacity to die being the faithful reflection of the difficulty that Rivette's films have in ending). The truth of conspiracies is that they have *already* taken place: the explicit echo of fascism in *Paris nous appartient*, the terrorist struggles of the seventies in *Le Pont du Nord*, or the police machinations in *La Bande des quatre* (*Gang of Four*, 1989).

Haut bas fragile is thus the story of a triple liberation, which in Rivettian terms means: the story of three young women who, assisted by an enigmatic mentor (the Rivettian figure of the forty-year-old man), decide to change the game, to invent new rules by which they can conduct their lives. None of this would be unusual in itself, except that to the unpublished rules a new rule was added: to banish terror from the game. In brief, to put an end to the complicity between play and terror, which together sustain most of Rivette's films in the uncertain equilibrium of a children's game on the verge of going awry. We are terrified only by what we are unaware of, and what is hidden from us: assumed parents, family secrets, old press clippings in a blue notebook, an identity more or less usurped, betrayals and lies. It is not important that the disclosed secrets are insignificant (the father that one had believed to be honest is actually a crook, the club that one had considered shady is a popular dance hall, for the truth is to be found on another level: a secret is insignificant only when it ceases to be a secret, and revelation puts an end to the apprehension that has been fueled by

silence. It is thus only at considerable cost that Louise (Marianne Denicourt) can be cured of vertigo (which, along with the furtive apparition of Rivette in the role of a witness from the past, pays tribute to a Hitchcockian lineage), that Ninon (Nathalie Richard) can confess to the theft that she committed, that Ida (Laurence Côte) can take to her heels—and that Rivette can shift to the genre of musical comedy.



Figure 3. Rivette's appearance as Monsieur Paul, a tribute to Hitchcock

What is Anna Karina singing when her unlikely daughter comes to listen to her at the cabaret, and when a very elegant shot/reverse-shot underscores the ambiguous space that separates them (it is hard to know whether what Ida is listening to is the maternal voice that has always obsessed her—or the echo of a misperception)? That she is a girl “upside up and upside down,” an idiosyncratic musical refrain that says more about the relationship between the spectator and Rivette’s films, than about the enigmatic rapport between a girl and her mother. “*Duelle*” could also be identified as a keyword to the Rivettian universe, because it comprises the recurrent motif of the double and of the feminine. “I only see the underside of the fabric I am weaving,” says Pierre, the hero of *Duelle*, before being sacrificed to the Moon (Leni/Juliet Berto) and to the Sun (Viva/Bulle Ogier). Rivettian mise en scène always plays out on two levels: it moves beyond the opposition between realism and fairy tale in its representation of parallel lives. “*Scènes de la vie parallèle*” (*Scenes from a Parallel Life*) is the diptych comprising *Noroît* (*Northwest Wind*, 1975) and *Duelle* (*Duel*, 1976), but it is also a good definition of what is shown in the lens of Rivette’s camera. This leads us to a hypothesis, which could help to clarify the project of *Haut bas fragile*: musical comedy is the *logical* outcome of Rivettian mise en scène in that it permits us to dis(entangle) its upside and its downside, the arbitrariness of the dance and the necessity of the idea.

“Try to construct a film so that it resembles a large curve”: this is how Rivette, in an interview published in *Libération*, summarizes his work as a director. What does the curve give us to

think about? That it doesn't represent the shortest path from one point to another (a second Rivettian adage, summarized by Daney: "Always complicate what one can do simply"⁴), and also that its complexity is equaled only by its completion. A complementary proposition: "the inevitability of the end of the curve" of *Haut bas fragile* is the progeny of an old Rivettian formulation, its serious and dark side. The bereavement experienced by Ida, Ninon and Louise recalls the wake that the protagonists of Rivette's first feature film, *Paris nous appartient*, found so hard to take and that had filled them with such dread. To film terror, to uncover the mystery behind the spectacle of terror, this then is the idea, the problem from which Rivette's cinema is born, heir to Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard*. How then can one faithfully represent the conditions of modernity, given the cruelty and the disaster which engendered it? And how can one show the dimension of mystery, which is indissociable from the experience of evil? Rivette's article on Pontecorvo's *Kapo* also throws light on the project of *Paris nous appartient*: "There are things that must only be approached with fear and trembling; death is doubtless one of them; yet how, at the moment of filming such a mysterious thing, can one not feel like an imposteur!"⁵

In Rivette's first films, the conspiracies are the trace of an event that is neither shown nor recounted, but that must be filmed and transmitted. This double constraint establishes a universe of fear and silence, ruled by secrecy and pacts of alliance. The Rules of the Game: "Rule One of the Organization: secrecy. Rule Two of the Organization: the least sign of treason, and you are condemned." Corollary: with Rivette the rules are not made to be respected, but rather to be uncovered. Thus, during one of the first sequences of *Paris nous appartient*, Philip Kaufman, the American in exile, tries to confide his secret to Anne, during a nocturnal walk across Paris: "The world isn't what it seems. Some people have guessed what I'm going to say, but I know it. It's no longer a matter of a few million people. It's the whole world that's threatened, yet doesn't know it. ...— Who are they?—They have no names. I speak in riddles but some things can only be told in riddles." Face to face with Anne, the American is confronted with the same dilemma that Roland (André Marcon) must face with Louise: whether to reveal a secret, which not only places the other person in danger but alerts her to the danger that menaces her. Such is the ambiguous connection at the heart of Rivettian dialogues: on the one hand, a sleepwalker who only half sleeps (sufficiently awake to have a presentiment that something is being hidden from her) and on the other hand, an initiate who only half manages to keep the secret (driven by an irresistible urge to reveal what is being hidden). "One can't live alone with such a secret" says Terry, the mysterious femme fatale of *Paris nous appartient*.

Then what is the difference between the dramatic logic of *Haut bas fragile* and that of *Paris nous appartient*? In *Haut bas fragile*, the mysterious conspiracy—the "terrifying" club—is a screen that masks the only important secret, even if no one dies from it, that of filiation. The conspiracy becomes an act of transmission, which ties the secrets of the past to the desires of the present. "Everything was true. Everything is true." *Haut bas fragile* opens up a

passageway, which permits free circulation, in allowing the heroines access to their memory. It isn't surprising that Rivette appears as Monsieur Paul, a witness from the past, who literally helps Ida to land on her feet, to steady herself on solid ground after having experienced it collapsing beneath her. "Behind me, there is nothing, as if I had no past, Ida has no feet..." Nor is it surprising that the story of Louise is that of inheritance: the inheritance of a house that she manages to take over bit by bit (the opposite story to that of *Merry-go-round* [1978, released 1983], where houses either are put up for sale or fall into ruin). Rivette again, in *Libération*: "This perhaps explains why my films are too long (you are finally going to find out why!), because I want to see all the rooms of a house, that the house be visited metaphorically in its entirety, from the cellar to the attic, so that the film has delivered all that it had to say to us and that it is finished."

Haut bas fragile is thus the story of a double loss, that of its three heroines (we can talk about a coming-of-age film, as there are coming-of-age novels), and that of the secrets that haunt the Rivettian conspiracies. Liberated from secrets, from the obligation to keep them and from the anguish of revealing them, not only are the characters able to speak but above all to act; the heroines take possession of a new space, and move in to it. Rivette invents a tone and a new idiom for them.

Tone is another modality of *mise en scène*; it is the cinematographic development of an idea. Rivette poses this principle of modern cinema apropos to *Kapo*: "What counts, is the tone, or the accent, or the nuance, as one would call it—which is to say the point of view of a man, the author, a necessary evil, and the attitude that this man takes with respect to what he films, and thus with respect to the world and to all things: this can be expressed by the choice of situations, the construction of the plot, the dialogues, the play of actors, or pure technique."⁶ What constitutes tone (the right tone) varies according to cinematic genres; up until *Haut bas fragile* the Rivettian tone had been in essence loose and disconnected, which means that it oscillated between heterogeneous genres, without ever settling in completely, without ever marking its territory. This is why the dialogues of numerous Rivette films are often situated at the border not only of randomness or of fantasy, but also of cliché. Cliché is an extreme instance of establishing a tone well-suited to a certain cinematic genre. Its significance lies in its dynamism: it pushes a genre to denounce itself (as perhaps ridiculous, but above all as incapable of expressing the main idea of the film), thereby enabling movement between genres, circulation. Thus, an overarching idea, such as the vague and indeterminant theme of the conspiracy, could just as well engender a science-fiction film (*Duelle*) as a spy film (*Paris nous appartient*, *Merry-go-round*), a gangster film (*Le Pont du Nord*) or a fantastic comedy coming from the tradition of Feuillade serials (*Céline et Julie vont en bateau*, whose secondary title is *Phantom Ladies Over Paris*). Such a multiplicity of tones, corresponding to heterogeneous cinematic genres, characterizes Rivettian invention; the indeterminant aspect of conspiracies and other interplanetary plots permit him to hedge

his bets and to experiment with different mechanisms of intrigue and dialogue as the situation demands.

Thus, such is the meaning behind the seemingly disconnected tone of his films: it displaces the problem, which is cinematographically not relevant, away from the opposition between the real and the imaginary (“They have worn us out for several months with false problems [...] of realism and fantasy”⁷) by suppressing the border between heterogeneous cinematic genres. In doing so, Rivette aligns himself with the legacy of Howard Hawks, whose genius had consisted precisely in maintaining comedy alongside tragedy “in a perilous kind of equilibrium, a stimulating uncertainty, which only adds to the strength of the drama”⁸ Because the conspiracies are fantasies, and—a third Rivettian adage—fantasies are always clichés, the universe of Rivette, which is similar to that of Hawks on this point, dissolves terror into a smile, and the presentiment of danger into derision. Thus, *Paris nous appartient* strings the clichés of a spy film together in order to surpass them more effectually: as Philip Kaufman says to Anne, “in a spy film, nabbing Degeorges would suffice” (one of the Machiavellian bosses of the conspiracy). Other ripostes such as “Juan was more than he seemed”, “Forget all I’ve said, if you can!” (*Paris nous appartient*) contribute to the general climate of indecision; the inconsistent character of these clichés is the main reason why the spectator doubts the reality of the conspiracies.

Céline and Julie Go Boating is the film in which Rivette pushes this process the furthest, since the fantastic universe of mysterious plots is truly *represented* in the film. The phantom house which Céline and Julie enter is the scene of a conspiracy, which, for the first time, no longer evades our gaze: consultations on the staircase, dark machinations, family secrets (“Blood ties must be renewed”), betrayals and poisonings—in short, all the ingredients of the worst fictions (“It’s just as I’d imagined”). The imaginary and fantasy have a comic function here for they place on display only a burlesque accumulation of clichés. Julie’s account to Céline of her first voyage into this prototype of a bad film script gives rise to this dialogue between the two magicians, who have understood that they have been led down the garden path: “I’ve no idea where they came from. – It’s a mishmash. It’s like four petrified images of puppets, they shout, eat sweets, faint, swoon...”. The inhabitants of the mysterious house “talk so strangely”; they have a bloodless look and talk in tragic alexandrines (“Must I go on till this ghastly story ends?”) Marie-France Pisier asks her terrified audience.

Since *Paris nous appartient*, Rivette has situated this in-between world, halfway between comedy and film noir, improvisation and declamation, in the theatre: its mise en scène, its body movements, its décor. The décor is the only remaining trace of the theatre in *Haut bas fragile*: only *the space* of the scene (Roland’s studio, the two nightclubs, the garden pavilion in Parc Montsouris) minus *the time*, the specific duration that in the other films accompanies it (the fragmented time of repetitions, of the waiting between scenes in *Paris nous appartient* or *L’Amour par terre*, the parallel time of consultations and muttered conversations in *La*

Bande des quatre, the elastic time of interpretations of texts in *L'Amour fou* [Mad Love, 1969]). Whereas in these other films the theatres are precarious places from which the actors are, in the end, cast out (the theatre: a metaphor, a *mise en abyme* recurrent in Rivette that points to the way in which the powers of money conspire to dispossess the artist of his domicile), in *Haut bas fragile* the passage from the theatre to the musical comedy is an act of moving in, of taking possession. Each musical number, as opposed to the scenes of theatrical performance, takes on a double function of resolution and transaction: the dramatic resolution of a conflict and an ambiguity always transpires through a symbolic transaction. Thus, the first number, in the course of which the body movements of the two actors (André Marcon and Nathalie Richard) are imperceptibly prolonged in dance, has at issue the bestowing of a kiss (Can the fake kiss that Ninon previously planted on Roland to prevent him from denouncing the theft that she had just committed be returned on another level: that of truth, of the innocence of the feeling of love?). With Rivette, the musical comedy is born of a disturbance in identity, which contaminates language: Ninon begins to sing only because she believes that Roland wants to blackmail her. But the transaction is a resolution insofar as Ninon learns that the *metteur en scène* is not a blackmailer. Resolution signifies thus revelation and closure (the songs of Enzo Enzo, filmed in long take, sum up in their own way all the small intrigues of *Haut bas fragile*, taking us from the beginning to the end), and the transaction goes hand in hand with an initiation: the last musical number between Louise and Roland is motivated by the need that the young woman feels to retrieve her documents (the blue folder containing the proof of paternal betrayal), in other words, her past, a memory where absence amounts to death.

The gesture of the dance is the means by which a witness can move forward: after having danced with her blue folder, Louise can finally tear up the papers enclosed in it. The gesture of the dance is an appropriation, a repatriation: different from the unusual gesturing, theatrical or paratheatrical, which animated the characters of Rivette's preceding films with surprising poses, the choreography of *Haut bas fragile*, even in its awkwardness, comes to terms with the everyday. There are no more magic or hallucinations; the street combat against stone lions in *Pont du Nord* has come to an end; the exaggerated gestures of *Céline and Julie* (and its memorable game of Grandmother's Steps signalled by the count of "one, two, three") are suspended indefinitely: the musical comedy permits its characters to go back into the world, theirs and ours. Repatriated within our common world, they discover the rules of its game. Each musical number is built upon the exploration of one of these rules, upon an initiation as jubilant as it is simple and moving: an apprenticeship in the dynamics of strength, in declarations of love and friendship, in conversation (the lovely dance of Louise and Ninon), in adulthood (Louise's dance to recover her past). A subterranean progression reunites the dual parallel trajectories of Louise and Ninon, and Ida: all three leave behind a solitary world, populated by those false friends that are fantasies and lies, moving past them through dance or through flight, to be finally reunited with memory, which is life itself. The

cinema of Rivette has laid to rest these phantasms, and the *Phantom Ladies* have come back to live among us.

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Notes

1. Jacques Rivette, "Letter on Rossellini," in *Rivette, Texts and Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Rosenbaum, trans. Tom Milne (London: British Film Institute, 1977), 54-64 (p. 56). Rpt. of "Lettre sur Rossellini," *Cahiers du cinéma* 46 (April 1955) : 14-24 (p. 16).
2. Jacques Rivette, "Entretien de Jacques Rivette avec Gerard Léfort, Marcus Rothe et Olivier Séguret," *Libération* (Wednesday 12 April 1995).
3. Serge Daney, "Journal de l'an passé," *Trafic* 1 (Winter 1991): 11.
4. Ibid.
5. Jacques Rivette, "De l'abjection," *Cahiers du cinéma* 120 (June 1961): 54.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Jacques Rivette, "The Genius of Howard Hawks," in *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s, Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier, trans. Russell Campbell and Marvin Pister (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 126-131 (p. 126). Rpt. of "Génie de Howard Hawks," *Cahiers du cinéma* 23 (May 1953): 16-23 (p. 16).