

***Out 1* or Suspended Meaning**

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Jacques Rivette was a young provincial when he journeyed to Paris, like so many characters in his films and those of the New Wave. This rite of passage, which would later surface in his oeuvre (and was present in Balzac's novels) lends itself to sequences of walking, of searching or of pursuit. . . and gives his films their unique configuration. After arriving in Paris, he met screenwriter Jean Gruault and in a few weeks came into contact with his "family" (Rohmer, Truffaut, Godard. . .), a band of cinephiles who would form the New Wave and who from 1951 would write criticism for the journal *Cahiers du cinéma*. Rohmer later likened them to the "Thirteen," the conspirators in Balzac's 1835 novel.

Alone, reserved, haunting dark cinemas, and frequenting the underground metro, Rivette remained the least conspicuous of this celebrated group, even though he was, in the opinion of all of them, their intellectual leader. It wasn't just a question of temperament, though, it was his relationship to the world that influenced his work. He avoided the center; he did not want to belong; he sought escape, or the margins, and he fled the pre-established (like film genres to which his films hardly ever conform).

The Rivettian creation resembles *work in progress*, for it precipitates a reversal of what ordinarily (in "classical" cinema) one does not see or what one seeks to conceal, as conveyed by the expression "outside the frame." Rivette actually places the work of preparation at the visible center of the film. The periphery becomes the center. The means of filming (audition, rehearsal, improvisation, experimentation) are all there. It is thus a cinema of filmic experience, in the strict sense. With Rivette, the all-controlling director withdraws, though he still watches for the powers of the indeterminant or the aleatory, waits for the sudden appearance of what he will use, and captures a reality that is not the standard realism of fictional verisimilitude. The inventiveness of Rivette issues from this process, as does the enigma of his films.

I. A concern for mise en scène

Paradoxically, this refusal of mastery allows the principal notions of "mise en scène" and of "auteur" to emerge, as well as that of "modernity." They contribute to the Rivettian conception of film analysis as well as that of filmic creation, most notably for *Out 1*. "Mise

en scène” lies at the heart of the theory of the *Cahiers du cinéma*. Rivette uses this term not to denote content (the film’s theme), but what is essential in a film and what signals/signifies that there is an “auteur/author” (another major critical term of *Cahiers du cinéma*, which finds a place within the appellation, “auteur theory”): an “auteur” is deduced from the mise en scène, and not vice-versa.

At several crucial transitional moments in the course of his critical activity, Rivette fine-tuned what is understood by “mise en scène”/ “put on stage.” The term appears to have come from the theatre (a domain that interested Rivette because it allows us to differentiate theatre from cinema—thanks in particular to that which binds the two domains: the actor), and it also appears to assign a place to literary heritage (notably with its reference to the text being “put into place” for the theatrical spectacle). However, Rivette would repeatedly affirm that “mise en scène” is the “modern” place where thought is formulated, or “put into form.” Mise en scène is the place of mystery that is unique to the cinema, the place where thought is incarnated differently. This imposes fine lines of distinction between cinema and the other arts—not only the theatre. There is a modernity of thought that emerges from a modernity of form and is unique to the cinema with respect to its interactions with the other arts (irrespective of the question of adaptation of a text by the film). The modern mise en scène of thought, in general, will assume cinematic forms.

From this, the introduction of the notion of “modernity” to/of the cinema. Modernity is not equivalent to avant-gardism or modernism, nor to experimental cinema or *underground* cinema, which the *Cahiers du cinéma* always deeply mistrusted. Among those at the journal, Rivette was the principal theorist of “modernity.” Being a highly cultured person, he deepened it by drawing on everything being done in diverse artistic fields, not simply contemporary but also from the past: literature, theatre, painting, music. Affirming that modernity is a “phenomenon of reciprocal information,” he believed in the dynamic community of forms of expression or forms of thought. Thus, Rivette would insist that the *Cahiers du cinéma* team should call upon external contributors such as Levi-Strauss, Boulez and Barthes.¹ According to André Labarthe, “Rivette was thinking of modernity both in terms of opposition to classical culture and integration of new artistic forms.” And Labarthe recalls, “we were also in the era of the New Novel” and also the literary movement *Tel Quel* and the development of the human sciences... Labarthe concludes, “Everything was moving at the same tempo.” Rivette was most concerned with contemporary music; he frequented the concerts of Boulez and claimed musical influences for his films (Bartok apropos of *Paris nous appartient* or Stockhausen, “this mix of the constructed and the aleatory.”) Rivette also envisioned an atonal cinema, which underscores the wide gap between his project of cinema and other conceptions! This reflection of André Labarthe applies specifically to Rivette: “Basically, the New Wave was not the movement as scholars have defined it, but an ensemble of exceptions. And these exceptions speak the language of modernity, as their commercial failures testify!”²

Thus, Rivette's conception of criticism begins to resonate with the filmmaker's work of creation (a formula of Godard expresses this: "for us, to write criticism was already to make films"). The objective is to obtain "the essential."³ This comes back to privileging the mise en scène that produces the idea of the film, which is to say, the idea-form or image-idea "which is first a function of a precise idea of the cinema." For Rivette the mise en scène is opposed to the scenario, for what matters is not the plot but obtaining "the secret figure, the goal of all works of art."⁴ Moreover, he differentiates between the composite actor-character of a film and the theatre actor, because the rapport between them does not arise from a fiction written in advance but from a fiction which is created during the shoot. This lesson of depersonalization is also directed at the spectator when Rivette affirms that "emotion is not the purpose of art."⁵ In this way, he distinguishes his cinema of waiting from the art of spectacle, and he eschews all identification associated with the art of representation; in the same way, he would seek to show (in *La Belle noiseuse*) that the model of the painter is the non-model of the cineaste.

In doing this, Rivette introduces another strong distinction, he opposes the "*metteur en scène*" to the mere *réalisateur*/director: the latter, as the root of the word indicates, is concerned with the real, otherwise called verisimilitude, whereas the *metteur en scène* is a creator of the form that produces the truth of the film's secret figure (which the critics must discover by detaching themselves from the level of plot or the apparent situation).

II. Suspended Meaning or the Work of the Film in *Out 1*

Out 1: Noli me tangere (1970-71, duration: 12h40m) is inspired in a very unique way by Balzac's *The Thirteen*. The film comprises eight episodes that form a daisy chain by means of the repetition of the protagonists' first names.

The title is derived from a previous project that was never achieved, which Rivette called *Out zéro*: "after *L'Amour fou*, I had the idea of making a film about a group of about ten or so young men and women in a university town in the provinces. . .like Aix en Provence. . .We would trace this group for 3 or 4 years: in theory, we would be dealing with the same group throughout, but in fact, all the people in the initial group would have disappeared, their rendezvous spots would no longer be the same ones, their daily rituals, their codes of language would have changed. It would have a very Chekhovian theme. . .This project remained entirely in my head, I did not write down a word of it, but it very quickly had a very precise title, *Out*....End of the parenthesis about *Out zéro*."⁶

The filmmaker suggests (in his slang usage of the word in French) that being "out" means being outside or at the margins, as are these characters and their lives in a group on the

outskirts of society. Moreover, the word conveys the sense of time passing, since everything changes people and transforms them into “has beens” (as French slang also implies!) those who are no longer “with it,” whose outmoded attitudes have become unfashionable. Thanks to this title, the meaning behind the young people’s undertaking is placed in question, for what can this group be seeking if its entire mission is anachronistic? The question of being outside time or outside of the game is thus primordial.



Figure 1. Frédérique (Juliet Berto), at the margins

The analysis of a Rivette film calls for a fundamental formula. It is articulated in the first feature film, *Paris nous appartient*: “It is rather disconnected, but it all comes together on another level.” (*C’est un peu décousu mais tout se lit/lie sur un autre plan.*) Spoken in the film by the *metteur en scène* of a theatre play, the remark plays on the homonymy in French of *lire/lier* (to read/to link) in the third person. It suggests that the essential does not happen at the most visible level (*lire*/to read) or that it is necessary to envisage several levels (*lier*/to link). Rivette plays with the words and this mode of thinking can lead to what he calls the idea of the film, which he conceives as a formal configuration, an idea-form. Thus apropos of *Paris nous appartient*, he says that he “tried with the aid of police drama to tell the story of an idea” (there would thus be an idea to discover that takes the form of a crime under investigation); for *L’Amour fou*, he confides that he could have made “a film that was based purely on the mechanics of the calendar but that he also had wanted it to unfold in a circle”; for *La Religieuse*, he declared “the initial idea was a play on words, it was to make a cellular film since it was about the cells of the nuns,” etc. As the homonym *lit/lie* indicates, a double reading is required with Rivette.

In the same way, he introduces the idea of the secret, the conspiracy, the hidden, with the help of the organisation and of groups, in other words with the help of the false evidence provided by the conspiracy theme. The idea of the film is not a thematic content (a political intrigue), but the arrangement of material, which is recorded and assembled within the form of the film. In fact, a reversal is even mentioned at the end of *Paris nous appartient*: “The organization is an idea, it only ever existed in your imagination.” (*l’organisation est une idée, elle n’a jamais existé que dans l’imagination.*) and thus, the intrigue disappears that had served only to shape the idea, to produce the place of an unformulated secret.

The idea of the film is an idea-form whose meaning remains always suspended through the force of the signifier. In Rivette’s interview with Barthes, the literary theorist remarks: “The power of a signifier derives not from its lack of ambiguity, but from the fact that it is perceived as a signifier—I would say that things matter less in isolation, whatever their meaning may be, than in their relation to other things.”⁷ Thus, the power of the signifier provokes the awakening of meaning or the desire for meaning, but this meaning, which is totally bound to the form, remains suspended; what is important is the awakening of the possibility of meaning (and not the production of a precise meaning). The absence of fixed meaning ensures that the work is inherently plastic, malleable, a kind of question. This can lead to a consideration of the title “Out” as a declaration of a place beyond commonly understood meaning, moving all explicit themes into the background, in other words the work is a question, held in suspension, to be conceptualized by each person.

If we return to the cumulative composition of the film, we note that there is a series of episodes with numerous characters. Within this ensemble, two theatre troupes of amateur actors emerge who are performing in long rehearsal sessions, using varied exercises that include breathing, screaming, vague gesturing, crawling...while each group refers to a text, with certain actors holding a book in their hands. Yet they are not at the stage of reciting or interpreting the text.



Figure 2. Lili's (Michèle Moretti) troupe



Figure 3. Rehearsal sessions

Additionally, two other characters appear: the actor Jean-Pierre Léaud (called Colin) plays the part of a deaf-mute who busks in the terraces of Parisian cafés. And there is Juliet Berto (called Frédérique), a more or less experienced thief. And we also recognize the actresses Bulle Ogier, Bernadette Lafont, Françoise Fabian, etc. in roles that are not easy to identify. Indeed, narrative conventions are scarcely respected. We are plunged without preparation into the middle of a flux of beings and of unfolding events rather than into a story (with a beginning, middle and end). Considerable time goes by without our being able to name/define the roles or establish their relation with others. The actions and their motivations often remain obscure while an inquiry continues into the fate of a certain Igor and a certain Pierre, who remain absent from the film...Enigma, mystery and secrets drift about with something vaguely political in an atmosphere populated by collectives, groups, associations, sects (this was a feature of Balzac's *Histoire des Treize*). The formal dimension of the film stems from the circle of characters and disparate human groups (hippies, Europeans from Madagascar, a political group publishing a journal, thieves, chess players...), the aimless meanderings along the streets and the perception of a shattered Parisian cartography. The work of this form is derived from the power of the signifier perceived as such; a precise meaning will not necessarily be associated with it but an interrogation will have been generated without necessarily providing a response.



Figure 4. Chess players, Juliet Berto and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze

This takes many forms. Thus, at the level of representation, Rivette's Paris does not truly resemble the Paris of the New Wave. It is more enigmatic while being quite realist. Departing from the other auteurs of the New Wave (Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer, Chabrol)

and from their films' reputation as 1960s "portraits of youth," his Paris is enriched by a more complex understanding of time. This has nothing to do with Rivette making historical films or costume dramas (apart from *La Religieuse...*) or futuristic films. The perspectives that he reveals are absolutely current; the décors are not fake; we see Paris such as it was at the moment of filming, and yet these images obey an aesthetic choice. Rivette conforms to a tradition, which includes the Parisian narratives imagined by Balzac but also popular narratives, melodramas of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the beginnings of the silent cinema, the fantasies like *Fantômas* imagined by Souvestre and Allain and brought to the screen by Louis Feuillade.... This bestows a fanciful quality onto the real Parisian décor.

Drawing on the world of the silent cinema serial or of Balzac, Rivette's aesthetic is more ambitious in its relationship to temporal duration. The film aims to absorb what is possible in the present: the cineaste looks for a point of indiscernibility between the real and the possible, in a manner that is very open, fanciful, implausible, since the plausible derives from realism, which stands in contradiction to the possible that is as yet unknown. Isn't this what the long sequence shots of *Out 1* permit us to hope for? What will come of this gestation; what can emerge; what is going to follow, or what will become of this chaos, these screams, these wanderings? All the while the rehearsals and the retakes, the recoveries and enjambments of actions contribute to the annihilation of all oriented dramatization, of all ordered progression leading toward a precise finality, a classical resolution of the situation.

In part, this impression is due to a combination of two poles⁸ (recalling what Rivette said on the subject of Stockhausen). There is a "hyper-organized pole" testifying to perfect mastery, and a pole of "let it go and let it happen" that can be generally identified with the improvisation allowed to the actors. This combination produces the disjunctions that Rivette seeks. We thus move from reality to the postulation of the possible, which exceeds fictional verisimilitude. To conceive of a cinema that is not narrowly narrative, realist and representative is the concern of an important part of modern cinema. We know that Gilles Deleuze proposed the "bal(l)ade form" as one of the objectives of cinematic modernity due to its capacity to supplant narrative with a purely visual and sonorous image. As in other Rivette films, there are sequences of walking or running in *Out 1* that forfeit their finality, that are sufficient unto themselves as signifiers and that engender another perception of the city.

A Baudelairean idea, the form of a changing city, intersects with a Balzacian thread of Paris proceeding from things that develop and then vanish. Disappearance is the characteristic of Lewis Carroll's cat (Jean-Pierre Léaud writes this name...). Like the Cheshire Cat, the vanishing evocation of the Thirteen is a mysterious signifier in its mode of presence. Rivette calls upon Eric Rohmer, well known connoisseur of Balzac, to play the

character of the Balzacian who explains the importance of the Thirteen, paradoxically, by their disappearance! Having become too explicit, the group eventually bothers the novelist who dissolves it in order for the signifier to acquire more force. On the subject of conspiracy in his films, Rivette points out: "There is something hidden, we are all agreed on this (...) The theme of the conspiracy is a pretext. It is a subject that is constructed in order to be pulled into pieces (...) you need to read Balzac attentively in order to understand what the issues are because he is a mysterious author, who hides things that are truly important."⁹ A secret surrounds the world of Rivette. If it is difficult to read (*lire*), this secret is linked (*lier*) to the organisation of the film and to its mode as *work in progress* (a mode that precedes or anticipates all completed forms of meaning). The intriguing form of Rivette's cinema inspires a desire for meaning that will generally be deferred or eluded.

The result is that *Out 1* seems to be a deepening of Rivette's interview with Roland Barthes.¹⁰ At a certain moment, Barthes evokes his experience with Brecht (which greatly complicates the relationship of Rivette's cinema with the theatre): "I remember Brecht suggesting to us on the journal *Théâtre Populaire* that we should organize an exchange of views (...) the idea would have been to "play" the putting together of an imaginary play, that is to say a series of situations, as one would a game of chess; the first person would have put forward a situation, the second would have chosen the following one (...)" What can be gleaned from this piece of information is the importance of length, the accumulation of points of view and situations in the film, the plural participation of actors, the divergences that it engenders, and thus the formal and temporal labyrinth from which the film emerges. A creation that is not so much orderly as hypothetical.

However, Barthes continues, and this permits us to pose the question of meaning with a more general social perspective:

... He [Brecht] was very aware of the techniques of meaning (...); he knew how even the most humble signifiers, like the color of a costume or the position of a projector, take their full share of responsibility; (...) and of course, all these reflections on technique were geared to a political meaning. *Geared to* but perhaps not *determined by*; and it is here that we begin to see ambiguity in Brecht from the other side; I wonder if the *committed* meaning of Brecht's work isn't finally in its way a *suspended meaning* (...): it is for the work to ask questions (in the author's own terms, obviously—this is a responsible art), and for the audience to find answers (...) there is indeed a meaning in Brecht's theatre, and this meaning is very powerful, but it always takes the form of a question. Which perhaps explains why this theatre, while being critical, polemical and committed, stops short of being militant.¹¹

We can apply these remarks of Barthes to the work of Rivette in order to conceive of a cinema of “suspended meaning,” not gratuitous but generating an idea-form for us to interrogate.

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Translated by Mary Wiles and Peter Low

Notes

1. The introduction to the interview with Roland Barthes conducted by Jacques Rivette and Michel Delahaye is explicit: “We are beginning a series of interviews with certain notable witnesses of contemporary culture. The cinema has become a fact of culture in much the same way as the others; all the arts, all contemporary thinkers, have to refer to it, as it does them. It is this phenomenon of reciprocal information, which is at times obvious (and these are not always the best cases) other times diffuse, that we would like, among other things, to try to talk through in these conversations. The cinema, always present, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background, will be situated within a much broader perspective than archivism or idolatry, which, while having their role to play, can tend to obscure what is important.” *Cahiers du cinéma* 147 (September 1963): 21.

2. "‘Comment peut-on être moderne?’ Interview with André S. Labarthe by Antoine de Baecque et Charles Tesson (7 décembre 1998)," *La Nouvelle Vague*, Petite Bibliothèque des Cahiers du cinéma, (1999).
3. "L’Essentiel" by Rivette devoted to *Angel Face* by Preminger, *Cahiers du cinéma* 32, (February 1954).
4. "‘De l’invention:’ à-propos of Nicholas Ray," *Cahiers du cinéma* 27, (October 1953).
5. Ibid.
6. "Trois films fantômes de Jacques Rivette," *Cahiers du cinéma/Fiction* (2002), 8-9.
7. "‘Towards a Semiotics of Cinema’: Barthes in interview with Michel Delahaye, Jacques Rivette", Jim Hillier (ed.), trans. Annwyl Williams. *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1960-1968, New Wave, New Cinema, Reevaluating Hollywood*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 276-285 (p. 279) Rpt. of "Entretien avec Roland Barthes", *Cahiers du cinéma* 147, (September 1963).
8. "Interview by Serge Daney and Jean Narboni, with Rivette," *Cahiers du cinéma* 323-324, (May 1981).
9. *La Nouvelle Revue française* 520, Spécial cinéma: (Rivette, May 1996), p. 68.
10. "‘Towards a Semiotics of Cinema’: Barthes in interview with Michel Delahaye, Jacques Rivette", pp. 280-282. Rpt. of "Entretien avec Roland Barthes," *Cahiers du cinéma* 147, September 1963, pp. 26-27.
11. Ibid.