

To Describe a Labyrinth: Dialectics in Jacques Rivette's Film Theory and Film Practice

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Jacques Rivette is perhaps the most important of all the critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s who went on to become the celebrated film directors of the French New Wave. Rivette published less than his contemporaries, but his articles have arguably played a greater role in defining some of the key concepts associated with this era of film theory and criticism. Rivette's film writing may be less polemical than Truffaut's, less theoretical than Rohmer's, less playful than Godard's, but, as Antoine de Baecque suggests (1991, 233), his articles are often the most carefully thought out, and provide the most elegant formulation of some of the *Cahiers's* fundamental beliefs regarding cinema. More precisely, in the same way that his later films would often appear to be on the one hand languid improvisations around a theme and, on the other hand, tightly-controlled intrigues, Rivette's articles on films are both verbose and incisive, at the same time carefully worked-out analyses and blunt statements of adoration. This article will focus on the recurring and crucial role of Hegelian dialectics in the elaboration of Rivette's theory of film across his articles and interventions in *Cahiers du cinéma*. This appeal to philosophy can be seen as part of the *Cahiers's* concerted effort to defend the artistic legitimacy and seriousness of cinema, and not only avant-garde or art cinema but, first and foremost, popular Hollywood cinema (de Baecque 1991, 174-5). But, where a critic like Rohmer, with his references to classical art, seeks to canonise the artistic achievements of the cinema, Rivette's vocabulary of dialectics seems to covet, for film criticism and film making alike, the status of a science. We will see repeatedly how his articles return to an idea of precision in the work of the filmmaker, but also, implicitly, in the interpretation of the critic. He goes as far as to compare Chaplin, Renoir and Buñuel to physicists or entomologists, observing experiments conducted upon humanity (Rivette 1963, 43). At the same time, in what is his longest and most celebrated article, the 'Lettre sur Rossellini', Rivette scurrilously writes: 'le dialectique (*sic*) est une fille qui couche avec le tout-venant de la pensée, et s'offre à tous les sophismes; et les dialecticiens sont des canailles'² (Rivette 1955a, 20). But this is in the context of an impassioned defense of Rossellini who, as Rivette explains, 'ne démontre pas, il montre' ('does not demonstrate, he shows'). And the hasty dismissal

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² 'Dialectic is a whore who sleeps with all odds and ends of thought, and offers herself to any sophism; and dialecticians are riff-raff' (in Rosenbaum 1977: 61).

of dialectics is consistent with Rivette's grand proclamations and sweeping generalisations elsewhere, while being constantly belied by the structure of his analyses. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if sober reason and blind faith enter into a dialectical relationship of their own in Rivette's writing, as though the patient demonstration of a film's unfolding logic could only be confirmed through negation, with a reckless and unjustified statement of belief. This article will explore and explain the use of dialectics in Rivette's film criticism through close reading of a number of his most intriguing articles before going on to see what place these same concepts and structures have in Rivette's own debut feature *Paris nous appartient* (1961), whose lengthy gestation and tortuous production accompanied much of this film writing.

Time and Becoming: *Splendor in the Grass*

If dialectics helps us to understand cinema, or if cinema lends itself to a dialectical understanding, it is perhaps first and foremost because cinema is an art created of, and in, time. For Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, dialectics describes the evolution of truth in what he calls 'the process of time': if philosophy is to be considered as a scientific system, he suggests, it is because 'the temporal process would thus bring out and lay bare the necessity of [this aim], nay, more, would at the same time be carrying out that very aim itself' (Hegel 1964, 71). One of Hegel's most simple thought experiments, in which the inscription of the true statement 'It is noon' very quickly becomes false through the passage of time, demonstrates, in Alexandre Kojève's reading, that 'real being can transform a human truth into an error'. And, since truth can thus become error, it is also assumed that error can become truth, and indeed that 'every *truth* in the proper sense of the term is an *error* that has been *corrected*' (Kojève 1969, 187-8). Hegel explains this further through the concept of *now*: if I point out the existence of now, in the moment of pointing it out, it has ceased to be; if I then point to the moment as *having been*, I negate it as *being now*; but, in pointing out as much, the *having been* has also been superseded because what *has been is not*; in this way, the *having been* is cancelled and we are returned to the first position: that *now is*. In other words, 'Showing, indicating, pointing out [the now] is thus itself the very process which expresses what the Now in truth really *is*: namely a result, or a plurality of Nows all taken together' (Hegel 1964, 157). This is what Hegel calls a 'universal'. In Charles Taylor's gloss, what the universal demonstrates is that 'the particular is doomed by its very nature to disappear' whereas 'what is permanent is the concept' (Taylor 1975, 144). If this notion is extended to organic existence, it implies that 'life's fullest manifestation is in the continuous cycle of death and reproduction. As an inner reality which can only exist embodied, and yet must also cancel this embodiment in order to

be, life is a prefiguration of spirit' (Taylor 1975, 151). This, for Hegel, is the unending process of appearing and falling-away, but if individual appearances cease to be, the *process* itself does not since it 'constitutes reality and the life-movement of truth' (Hegel 1964, 105). Or, as Jean-Luc Nancy comments, this becoming is not a process that leads to something else, rather it is the condition of all things (Nancy 1997, 19).

This notion of truth as a process of becoming is at the heart of one of Rivette's finest late articles, 'L'art du présent', in which he interprets Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) as a film about time and specifically about the transformation, and ultimately the destruction, of all values that necessarily ensues with the passage of time. Rivette speaks of a 'dialectics of the moment and of duration' (Rivette 1962, 36): the destructive labour of time is demonstrated, in the film, through the lavish attention to detail and the sheer beauty of each individual moment. What Rivette calls the 'quasi-maniacal characterisation' of each figure in the film is undone by the slow work of the whole: the psychological turmoil and ardent emotion of the young lovers (Natalie Wood and Warren Beatty) will dissipate and die away, just as the authoritarian father (Pat Hingle) will finally lose his nerve in the stock-market crash of 1929 and commit suicide. Rivette describes the resulting film as a closed, self-determined universe, governed by 'the reciprocal necessity of its parts', and yet open on all sides since, in its dialectical movement, *Splendor* can be seen to allegorise any and all social or organic processes.

What initially strikes the reader of Rivette's article today, upon viewing Kazan's film, is the apparent misfit between such an abstract conceptualisation of the work and the film itself which overwhelms the viewer with a powerful physicality and sensuality. *Splendor in the Grass* opens with Deannie Loomis (Wood) resisting the advances of Bud Stamper (Beatty) in a car parked by a waterfall, her mouth saying one thing while her body language and orgasmic moans appear to deliver a very different message. The film essentially explores the consequences for these young people of denying their libidinous urges in conservative small-town Kansas in the 1920s. Deannie is informed by her mother that 'Boys won't respect a girl who goes all the way' and that 'A woman doesn't enjoy those things the way a man does', while Bud's father advises him to find 'a different kind of girl' in order to 'get a little steam out of his system'. The consequences of giving in to sexual urges are demonstrated by Bud's sister Ginny (Barbara Loden), a 'headstrong little flapper' and a 'freak' who is at the centre of a disturbing scene in which it is implied she narrowly escapes gang rape after getting drunk at a party. But the consequences of sexual frustration, for Bud and Deannie respectively, are physical sickness and mental breakdown. The imagery of water constantly provides the focus for the sexual symbolism of

*Splendor in the Grass*³: almost all of the teenagers' trysts take place by the waterfall and water is the site and sign of Deannie's mental collapse: she is in the bath when her mother enquires as to whether she has been 'spoiled' by Bud and Deannie's insistence that she has been a 'good girl' is belied by the image since, as Nina Leibman puts it, 'Natalie Wood is nude, and "good girls" don't pose naked for the camera' (Leibman 1987, 35). Subsequently Deannie, half mad with unrequited lust, submerges herself in the river, seemingly hoping to be carried over the falls.

In the face of such delirious sexual imagery, it is, then, somewhat surprising that Rivette should produce such an apparently dry, sober account of the film. Certainly the cumulative effect of several decades of psychoanalytic film criticism makes this symbolism unmissable for today's spectator, but the psycho-sexual narrative is so close to the surface of *Splendor in the Grass* that it is impossible to believe it was not intelligible to a contemporary audience. Now Rivette's modesty when it comes to matters of sexuality is well known, and affects his critical writing as much as his subsequent films, but it is perhaps the real strength of Rivette's critical insight to see beyond all this sensational imagery to the real subject of the film, which is the insidious and irresistible encroachment of time. Yes, this is a film about bodies and their appetites, but *Splendor* presents the healthy young body only to undermine and critique it. Rivette recognises that water – the river and its falls – is the key image in the film, but, in addition to the force of desire, it also signifies the flow of time, 'flux vainqueur de toutes les apparences',⁴ each moment the same, yet each irreplaceable (Rivette 1962, 36). Like all films about time, Rivette suggests, this one needs to be seen more than once in order to understand how, between the first and the last image, the world has changed. And the importance of re-viewing films is a recurring trait in Rivette's film criticism just as it would become for his own films: he was known as the most assiduous filmgoer of the *Cahiers* team, often spending hours in *cinémas permanents* watching a film three or four times in a row. Finally, this film about time provides Rivette with a definition of characterisation that would be valid for any film: it is the search for 'ce qui dure d'un être et de ce qui en lui n'est que passager, instantané, transitoire: dévoilement de sa courbe et de son devenir'⁵ (Rivette 1962, 36).

³ But in fact the title itself partakes of this constant metaphorisation of sexuality: taken from Wordsworth's ode on 'Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', it is the focus of a scene in Deannie's high-school English class in which the teacher asks about the meaning of such expressions as 'splendour in the grass' and 'glory in the flower': Deannie says it's a poem about growing up and forgetting the ideals of youth, but in the context of the film's hysterical sexual imagery, the rather crass anatomical symbolism of these images is hard to miss.

⁴ 'a flow that vanquishes all appearance'

⁵ 'that which lasts in a being and that which is only fleeting, momentary, transitory: the revealing of its trajectory and its becoming'

Idea and World: *Monsieur Verdoux*

In this definition of characterisation, then, what Rivette is getting at is the *essence* of a character, or what Hegel might call its *concept*. For Hegel, every being contains within it a principle or purpose – a concept – that determines its becoming. As he writes, ‘The realised purpose, or concrete actuality, is movement and development unfolded. But this very unrest is the self’ (Hegel 1964, 83). As Taylor explains, Hegel’s dialectic always operates with three terms: ‘the true purpose or standard, an inadequate conception of it, and the reality where they meet and separate’ (Taylor 1975, 134). The dialectic describes a circular logic since, for Hegel, the beginning – the purpose or concept – is already present in the end and vice versa. For instance, any action that can be undertaken and accomplished by a conscious being already exists as purpose, yet the subject can only become conscious of this purpose through action. The nature of the subject is to be ‘beginning, means, and end all in one’ (Hegel 1964, 422). As Kojève comments, ‘The structure of thought, therefore, is determined by the structure of the Being that it reveals [...] Thought is dialectical only to the extent that it correctly reveals the dialectic of Being that *is* and of the Real that *exists*’ (Kojève 1969, 170-1). For Hegel, then, being, or the subject, posits itself through negation and is thereby ‘the process of its own becoming’ (Hegel 1964, 81). The subject is not to be understood as a fixed point to which predicates are attached but rather as ‘self-movement, self-activity’ (Hegel 1964, 85). As Jean-Luc Nancy explains, the object of interest for philosophy – whether it be a stone, a person, or a concept like ‘being’ – is not the simple, mute, always-already there *thing*, but rather the thing as it presents itself to us, the thing giving itself, the thing in its *manifestation*, which is, first and foremost, a manifestation *of itself to itself* (Nancy 1997, 48-9). But this manifestation is already a dividing or negating of the object, what Hegel calls ‘the abstraction of itself from itself, [...] its own want of identity with itself and dissolution’ (Hegel 1964, 113). This power of separation or negation is what Hegel refers to elsewhere as ‘the energy of thought’ (Hegel 1964, 93). Ultimately, then, negation for Hegel is a creative power since, as Kojève explains, ‘to negate the given without ending in nothingness is to produce something that did not yet exist’ and further, by extension, ‘one can truly create only by negating the given real’ (Kojève 1969, 222-3).

The Hegelian notion of a concept, an idea that plays itself out through a logic of dialectical reversal and, in the process, is incarnated in being, is central to Jacques Rivette’s writing on film. Rivette repeatedly suggests that cinema is capable of making complex philosophical arguments through the simple recording of beings moving in time and space. In so doing, Rivette’s critical vocabulary oscillates, as mentioned in the

introduction, between the quasi-scientific and the bluntly prosaic. In assessing Alexandre Astruc's film *Les Mauvaises Rencontres* (1955), for instance, Rivette insists that the film is not seeking to *prove* anything, but merely to describe and relate an experience with precision. Such is the function of art: 'qu'en fixant, il prouve; qu'en montrant, il démontre'⁶ (Rivette 1955b, 46). Astruc's film, according to Rivette, is led by 'an abstract idea', by the 'very movement of its guiding thought' and is articulated around 'the geometric precision of its figure'. It is, in short, 'un enchaînement rigoureux où l'arbitraire n'a aucune place'⁷ (Rivette 1955b, 47). No other sequence of shots or scenes would be possible in this film because, for Rivette, 'Le monde de l'art est celui de la nécessité [...] Et le sublime naît enfin d'un accord entre la justesse et la logique'⁸ (Rivette 1955b, 47). The lyricism of Astruc's mise en scène, then (and this is an idea to which we will return below), results from the fact that 'Tous les mouvements de caméra se soumettent aux mouvements de l'âme': what we witness on screen in *Les Mauvaises Rencontres* is 'la réalité quasi corporelle des idées'⁹ (Rivette 1955b, 47).

This idea of cinema is given one of its most concise expositions in 'Revoir Verdoux', a text written by Rivette on the occasion of the revival of Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) at the Cinémathèque Française in 1963. This is one of Rivette's last published articles, and comparatively short, but of a particular density and difficulty. Rivette begins by suggesting that Chaplin's cinematic style, in common with that of other great directors like Renoir, Rossellini, Mizoguchi and Buñuel, has such an astonishing 'strike rate' that it can sometimes come across as rather schematic, but that this conceals the richness of his more profound contradictions. Rivette goes on to formulate one of his most elegant definitions of the dialectical operation of cinema: 'quel est le but du cinéma?' he asks. 'Que le monde réel, tel qu'offert sur l'écran, soit aussi une idée du monde. Il faut voir le monde comme une idée, il faut le penser comme concret'¹⁰ (Rivette 1963, 42). Rivette explains that a filmmaker who starts from the world risks an uncomprehending gaze, with little more understanding than a cow watching a train flash past a field; on the other hand, beginning with an idea most often leads to a sterile, cerebral film with none of the gravity of real life. It is only the most gifted filmmakers, those cited above, who succeed, because their idea is not fixed and determined, but rather 'figure dynamique, et que

⁶ 'that in staring at something, it proves; in showing, it demonstrates'

⁷ 'a rigorous unfolding in which there is no place for the arbitrary'

⁸ 'The world of art is one of necessity [...] And the sublime is born of a harmony between rightness and logic'

⁹ 'All the movements of the camera are subordinated to the transports of the soul [...] the almost bodily reality of ideas'

¹⁰ 'what is the goal of cinema? That the real world, such as it is offered up on the screen, become also an idea of the world. We must see the world as an idea, we must think it concretely'

la justesse de son mouvement, de sa dialectique interne, recrée peu à peu, sous nos yeux, un monde concret: autre et expliqué, mais plus ambigu d'être à la fois idée incarnée, puis réel transpercé de sens'¹¹ (Rivette 1963, 43). In *Monsieur Verdoux* this process is enacted through a mise en scène that is based entirely around Chaplin's body and performance, 'centre moteur et regard à la fois'¹², a performance in which Chaplin integrates and interrogates his own legend in order to produce 'un corps neuf, irradié par son activité'¹³.

As in so many of his articles, Rivette's style here is at once elliptical and densely allusive and dispenses with such trivialities as description and explanation of plot, such that it is necessary to return to Chaplin's film in order to tease out the sense of Rivette's appreciation. *Monsieur Verdoux* is broadly based on the life of Henri Landru, the French serial murderer who seduced and married several widows before killing them to inherit their money. The idea behind *Verdoux* would seem to be a rather general critique of capitalism, the titular character's brutal greed appearing as a mirror of and response to the rigours of the market. In the film, Verdoux is a banker who, after many years of loyal service, is unceremoniously laid off during the Depression and resorts to 'liquidating the opposite sex' in order to feed his family. This central conceit is played out through a series of dialectical reversals in the main character who is incarnated in Chaplin's commanding, physical performance around which the mise en scène gravitates. Although Chaplin plays the role for laughs, there is clearly a sinister edge to the characterisation, as Verdoux's incinerator belches out the smoke from his latest victim while he prunes his immaculate roses, or in his lugubrious and falsely submissive 'Yes, my dear' as he enters the darkened bedroom of one rather shrewish wife, only to emerge on the other side of the fade counting her money. It is in these early scenes, in particular – such as the bravura sequence in which he shows a prospective victim around his house, improvising a seduction – that Chaplin plays with his own star persona. For in such moments, as Rivette points out, Chaplin *plays an actor*, that is a character who invents the scene around him, acting and watching himself act. At the same time he challenges the spectator to sympathise with a mass murderer by inhabiting him with the familiar, bungling charm of the slapstick Chaplin, and in addition calls upon extratextual knowledge of his own, infamous serial womanising. But this portrayal is overturned when Verdoux travels to the South of France to visit his *real* family and is suddenly revealed as a gentle, caring husband and father who has been

¹¹ 'a dynamic figure. And, by the rightness of its movement, of its internal dialectic, it recreates little by little, before our eyes, a concrete world: another, explained world, but all the more ambiguous for being at once an incarnated idea and a real shot through with meaning'

¹² 'centre of motion and gaze all at once'

¹³ 'a new body, irradiated by his activity'

driven to extremes by difficult circumstances. The redemptive arc to this characterisation is continued when Verdoux resists the temptation to murder an unfortunate young woman, charmed by her naïve and selfless philosophy. Finally, though, in what Rivette refers to as a sudden stepping back of Chaplin from his character, Verdoux is arrested and proves unrepentant, delivering cold sermons from jail about how mass killing is ‘encouraged’ by a world in which robbing and murdering are ‘all business’. With this sudden emptying out of the warmth from Chaplin’s character, the horror of Verdoux’s crimes breaks through the comic routines, and the tying of economics to atrocity, initially admitted as a hypothesis, abruptly becomes a chilling reality.

Concept and Form: Mise en scène and Montage

Rivette’s film writing, then, repeatedly evokes the Hegelian dialectical structure of an idea that is unfolded and developed in and as a material reality. But how does all this relate to the more well known aspects of *Cahiers du cinéma* criticism: to the *politique des auteurs*, the development of mise en scène criticism, the debates around montage? The link becomes clear if we accept Jean-Luc Nancy’s argument that, in Hegelian dialectics – and in a tradition stretching back to Plato – the *idea* in fact designates *form*. Nancy writes: ‘La forme n’est pas l’extérieur d’une chose, superposé à son contenu intérieur. La forme est cela par quoi le contenu se présente, et puisque sa présentation n’est pas étrangère à lui, puisqu’elle est sa manifestation, la forme est bien plutôt ceci: *que* la chose *se* manifeste. La forme est le contenu se révélant’¹⁴ (Nancy 1997, 73). This neat formulation – form is content revealing itself – is not only an adequate definition of the relationship of concept to material reality in Hegelian dialectics; it also sums up very precisely the sense of the term ‘mise en scène’ as it is employed by Jacques Rivette. For the pragmatic use of the term within anglophone film studies as a kind of shorthand encompassing sets, props, costume, lighting and performance – what John Gibbs (2002, 5) summarises as ‘the contents of the frame and the way they are organised’ – tends to ignore the more polemical, not to say evangelical function that ‘mise en scène’ has for the *Cahiers* critics of designating a kind of *organic* relationship between form and content. And it was Jacques Rivette who most forcefully laid out this vision of what mise en scène is or should be. As Antoine de Baecque points out, Rivette’s role at *Cahiers du cinéma* was to be essentially ‘le critique de la mise en scène’, which, for Rivette, was

¹⁴ ‘Form is not the exterior of a thing, superimposed on its interior content. The form is that by which the content presents itself, and because its presentation is not foreign to it, because it is its manifestation, the form is much rather this: *that* the thing manifests *itself*. The form is the content revealing itself’ (Nancy 2002, 48-9)

above all else a question of performance, that is of the movement and relations of bodies in space (de Baecque 1991: 234). Rivette's film writing repeatedly praises an apparent simplicity or transparency in *mise en scène*. He declares that the mark of Howard Hawks's genius is what he calls 'évidence', the *obviousness* of Hawks's filmmaking (Rivette 1953). In the work of Otto Preminger, he admires a cinema reduced to (as the title of Rivette's article has it) 'l'essentiel' (Rivette 1954). If Rivette admires classical Hollywood cinema so much, it is for the efficiency and economy of its *mise en scène*. For in this way, the best of these films are able to convey a sense of necessity to the events unfolding on screen, and to the order of their unfolding. This is ultimately what *mise en scène* means for Rivette (and, as such, it remains a poetic concept that cannot be neatly categorised in terms of lighting set-ups, colour design, performance style or what have you): the art of *mise en scène* is simply finding the most suitable form for the content or idea that is being expressed in the film such that the exposition of that idea, the playing out of that content takes on an irrefutable logic, an imperishable sense of *rightness*.

It is in this sense, too, that *mise en scène* is tied to the notion of the auteur. A critic like John Gibbs recognises that *mise en scène* and authorship are necessarily linked in as much as 'mise en scène encompasses the areas of decision making for which the director is responsible' (Gibbs 2002, 56). But, for the *Cahiers* critics, and for Rivette more than most, this is not just a question of technical competence or artistic expression, but also of moral responsibility. When Rivette writes of an author he designates not so much the creative individual who directs actors and makes decisions about camera placement, but rather a unique point of view on the world (or, in more Hegelian terms, a concept or idea) that is expressed in and through *mise en scène*. It is this stance that allows Rivette to condemn as morally reprehensible the author of *Kapò* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1959) since, in his now-famous analysis, an emotive tracking shot on to the arrested hand of a dying woman is grotesquely inappropriate in the context of a film about the Nazi concentration camps (Rivette 1961). In a curious sense, then, the fundamental interpenetration of the concepts of *mise en scène* and the auteur in Rivette's film criticism works to take agency away from the director since the personality of the author, in Rivette's view, must be subordinated to the material. An author (the greatest of them: Hitchcock, Lang, Renoir) is only an author to the extent that he allows his subject to dictate his creative decisions, thereby effacing his particular personality; or, more exactly, his unique authorial signature is guaranteed only through his ability to let the material speak for itself. As Marc Cerisuelo has remarked, there is something like an 'intransitive discourse' of film operating in Rivette's criticism whereby the film itself would dictate its own realisation,

as though there were a pre-existing, correct way to film a subject that it is the director's responsibility to uncover (Cerisuelo 1998, 19).¹⁵

If Rivette is 'le critique de la mise en scène', that does not preclude him from commenting perceptively on montage in elaborating his dialectics of film practice. There is no place in Rivette's writing for the lazy, binary thinking that would seek to align mise en scène and composition in depth on one side of a fence under the guard of André Bazin and Jean Renoir, while Sergei Eisenstein reigns supreme over montage on the other. Indeed, it is in writing about some of the greatest artists of cinematic montage – Eisenstein and Alain Resnais – that Rivette makes some of his most unequivocal statements about film and dialectics, but in terms that remain very close to his discussions of mise en scène. Reviewing the rushes of *Que viva Mexico!* (filmed in 1931) projected at the Cinémathèque, Rivette argues that it is the singular logic of the idea that determines the chain of montage in Eisenstein, even as the idea is present in each fragment – each is independent and necessary unto itself (Rivette 1958). In this, Rivette is close to Eisenstein's own theoretical concept of organic montage in which the film unfolds through an organic process where montage is to be found not only between fragments, but also within each fragment, the whole producing a total image which is the final, overall idea of the film (Bordwell 1993, 182). Here, too, Rivette gives voice to a more traditional version of auteurism when he argues that, with Eisenstein dead, *Que viva Mexico!* remains uneditable since we can only guess at what the unifying idea behind all his footage might have been. This implies that the ruling concept or purpose behind a film, or at least this film, emerges from the director's mind, rather than as an organic necessity from the images themselves, and the relations between them.

In his comments on Resnais, too, Rivette suggests that the French director, like Eisenstein, is seeking to recover a unity through fragmentation and paradoxically (or rather: *dialectically*) by accentuating each shot's individuality, its fragmentary quality. Just as he does in relation to Hawks or Lang, Rivette declares that every shot in Resnais's *Muriel* (1963) is necessary: 'chaque plan est l'exposé d'un indice' and, by their own internal movement, these shots create 'une sorte de multiplication des indices par

¹⁵ In a recent book, Daniel Frampton (2006) has proposed a new way of approaching film studies – what he calls 'filosophy' – in which, rather than attributing shots to a director, we would conceive of the film thinking for itself, and visually and aurally expressing its own thoughts about its world and its characters. But this is essentially a pragmatic solution to teaching and writing about film that avoids the knotty problems of artistic agency and intention in order to deal more immediately with the expressivity of the film text. I am tempted to argue that Rivette's conception of mise en scène is more rigorous as a philosophy of film since, so far as I am aware, he never actually refers to the film 'thinking', but nor is its idea entirely the work of the director. Rather, as in Hegel, the realisation of the idea occurs in a dialectical relationship between an apprehending consciousness and a material reality manifesting itself according to its own internal purpose.

eux-mêmes'¹⁶ (Rivette in Comolli et al 1963, 23). For Rivette, Resnais's montage is dialectical in the strictest sense of the word, 'mouvement qui consiste à la fois à présenter la chose et à prendre de la distance vis-à-vis de cette chose pour la critiquer, c'est-à-dire la nier et l'affirmer'¹⁷ (Rivette in Domarchi et al 1959, 10). And, in a comment that anticipates his later remarks about the idea becoming world in *Monsieur Verdoux*, Rivette goes on to insist that this dialectical approach, far from resulting in a dry, academic exercise, actually increases the realism of the world represented. He gives the example of the anti-nuclear parade in *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) which, through the critical distance of Resnais's montage, appears not as a scene invented by a filmmaker, but rather 'un fait objectif que refilme une deuxième fois le metteur en scène'¹⁸ (Rivette in Domarchi et al 1959, 10). (One might equally point to the various scenes of family meals in *Muriel* which, filmed in long shot with abrupt, discontinuous edits, similarly give the sense of an objective reality that is subject to a critical regard.) It is in this sense, too, that montage becomes politically significant, as Rivette points out in a round-table discussion of the subject at *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1969, a time in which the discussion of cinema, as of other cultural matters in France, had taken on a considerable charge of political urgency. What montage demonstrates, for Rivette, is that the pre-existing text, or reality, the *given* which is re-presented and critiqued through montage *is itself fabricated*, if only as a historical construct. Which in turn implies that any refusal of montage is tantamount to complacent 'theological' thinking (Rivette in Narboni et al 1969, 26-7).

Rivette's reliance upon dialectical thinking is further demonstrated in a comment evoking the spiralling structure and meaning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: discussing the circular form of *Hiroshima mon amour*, Rivette argues that, in Resnais's film, reflection describes a circle, but that progress is nonetheless achieved since the circle is each time inscribed at a higher level of consciousness (Rivette in Domarchi et al 1959, 17). Later, in his comments on *Muriel*, Rivette applies the same structure to the question of artistic influence when he suggests that it is impossible to begin from the point at which great artists (be they Renoir or Beethoven) left off: we can only – and we *must* – retrace their steps; each artist must complete the journey himself, only knowing the inheritance of his great antecedents in the form of a forgetting (Rivette in Comolli et al 1963, 34). Finally, when Rivette sketches out the history of montage, it appears as a dialectical process in itself. Rivette identifies four stages, each of which affirms the former by negating it, in order to describe an ascending circle: 1) the invention of montage (Griffith, Eisenstein); 2) the 'deviation' of

¹⁶ 'each shot presents a clue [leading to...] the clues multiplying themselves'

¹⁷ 'a movement which consists at once in presenting something and taking a distance from that thing in order to criticise it, that is to say negating it and affirming it'

¹⁸ 'an objective fact that the director is filming for the second time'

montage (Pudovkin, classical Hollywood editing); 3) the refusal of montage (Renoir, Rossellini, Welles); 4) the recuperation of montage (Resnais, Godard) (Rivette in Narboni et al 1969, 29).

Guilt and Destiny: *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*

The full sophistication and import of Rivette's use of dialectics in his film criticism can perhaps best be demonstrated through a close reading of another of his most famous articles, 'La Main' (Rivette 1957), a review of Fritz Lang's *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956). In this film, Lang's last Hollywood movie, the astonishingly schematic narrative tells the story of two men who conceive a plan to demonstrate the folly of capital punishment: the newspaper editor, Austin Spencer (Sidney Blackmer), deliberately frames his future son-in-law, the writer Tom Garrett (Dana Andrews), for the murder of a nightclub dancer. Spencer holds the proof of Garrett's innocence but is killed, and the evidence destroyed, in a car accident, leaving Garrett on death row. At the last minute, a document turns up in Spencer's will that is sufficient to save Garrett from the electric chair, but he inadvertently lets slip a detail that reveals, unexpectedly, that he really *did* commit the murder: the dead girl was a figure from Garrett's past that he wanted eliminated, and he took advantage of Spencer's idea in order to provide himself with an alibi.

The first thing that Jacques Rivette notices about this film is what he calls the 'pure objectivity' of its *mise en scène*, a strict elimination of any element of the picturesque, and even of verisimilitude, in favour of the clinically efficient unrolling of the narrative logic. Such traditional markers of realism in the fictional world as scene-setting and character development are disposed of and everything is subordinated to the relentless playing out of the film's governing idea. Tom Gunning has described *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* as 'more like a demonstration of Langian narrative principles than a film in itself': it is 'a supremely inhuman film' (Gunning 2000, 454). Rivette then interprets the final *coup de théâtre* of Lang's film as a dialectical reversal. It is tempting to see this last plot twist as a rather gratuitous step too far, since there have been no apparent clues to prepare for it in the rest of the narrative, no suggestion that Tom Garrett had a previous life in which he might have been involved with a nightclub dancer. But, for Rivette, if the terms of the problem are suddenly changed at the end of the film, '*the proportions remain unchanged*, and, all the conditions thus being fulfilled, poetry makes its entry' (Rivette in Rosenbaum 1977, 66). This, then, is another film that needs to be seen more than once for its true artistry to be appreciated. And Tom Gunning (2000, 453) has neatly explained what Rivette merely intimates: that, on second viewing, all of the evidence that is carefully compiled in order to prosecute Garrett when we believed him to be innocent, actually serves to demonstrate his real guilt.

What the film's dialectical reversal shows, then, for Rivette, is that this is not another film about a 'wrong man' (Hitchcock's film of that title had been released in France earlier that same year – 1957 – and was much admired, notably, by Jean-Luc Godard, though less so by Rivette): there can be no 'wrong man', suggests Lang's film, because *all men are guilty*. Or at least – and this is the final, dialectical overcoming of the plot's sudden negation – guilt and innocence are seen to be merely differences of appearance, fundamentally related and co-dependent. Hegel argues that guilt is usually understood as an attribute of the subject to which the act would be attached, as a predicate. But this is illogical for it implies that, if the subject is guilty, the act itself is innocent. For Hegel rather, action is a process whereby the act splits itself off from the subject's intention and manifests itself as an external reality and it is this process of separation, or negation, that installs guilt. In this interpretation, then, *all* action is necessarily guilty action: 'innocence is an attribute merely of the want of action, a state like the mere being of a stone' (Hegel 1964, 488). Hegel goes on to explain that the deed splits the knowing self from the external reality but at the same time implicates the former in the latter: it 'consists in setting in motion what was unmoved, and in bringing out what in the first instance lay shut up as a mere possibility'. In this way, 'it is an essential reality divided in sunder, whose other aspect consciousness experiences and also finds to be its own aspect, but as a power violated by its doing, and roused to hostility against it' (Hegel 1964, 490). Or, as Charles Taylor glosses this passage, to act 'is necessarily to incur guilt' because action constitutes a 'defiance of the universal'. Action is nonetheless inevitable, since this process of separation or negation is the only way in which a concept, or internal purpose, can be played out and the only way that consciousness can proceed to a higher level of development and therefore, to couch this whole argument in Christian terms, 'sin is necessary for salvation' (Taylor 1975, 174).

Rivette adds an extraordinarily long footnote to his article on *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, in which he expands his argument in order to apply it to the art of cinema more generally. Rivette argues that the same structure of dialectical reversal can be found in all recent great films – he cites *Mr. Arkadin* (Orson Welles, 1955), *Ordet* (Carl Dreyer, 1955), *Le Carrosse d'or* (Jean Renoir, 1953) and *Stromboli* (Roberto Rossellini, 1950) – all of which feature a final overturning necessitated only by the internal movement of the film's own logic. This is also what is missing, for Rivette, from lesser films, even when they are made by great directors, such as Robert Bresson's *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956) or Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1956). Finally, and with another dialectical reversal of his own, Rivette suggests that if the greatest directors (again: Rossellini, Lang, Renoir) seem to insist so much on logic and necessity, if their films apparently deal in questions of *destiny*, it is in fact 'the better to affirm the freedom of the

characters and, quite simply, to make [freedom] possible' (Rivette in Rosenbaum 1977, 67). Philippe Demonsablon, writing in 1959 (and it is a mark of Rivette's prescience and acuity as a critic that the terms in which he wrote about Fritz Lang have been adopted by subsequent generations of Lang interpreters, from Demonsablon to Gunning), notes how frequently, in Lang's films, characters will enjoy scenes of rest and relaxation immediately before falling prey to their most terrible trials: for instance, it is when Tom Garrett has been released from prison and saved from seemingly certain death that he commits the error that condemns him for good. As Demonsablon comments, 'destiny is invariably the product of man's weakness – as though man, in the dialogue with the world which constitutes the compulsive form of his actions, could not relax his will for a moment without finding the equilibrium around him shattered' (Demonsablon 1981, 21-2).

Film Practice: The Two Secrets of *Paris nous appartient*

These questions of innocence and guilt, freedom and destiny are also at the heart of Rivette's debut feature as director, *Paris nous appartient* (1961) and in the final section of this article I would like to consider how Rivette's dialectical conception of the operation of cinema was manifested in his own directorial work. It is not my intention to suggest that all of Rivette's films somehow ascribe to a dialectical methodology, or build dialectics into their structure. Such an argument, in addition to being far beyond the scope of the present article, would doubtless be rapidly disproven. However, since *Paris nous appartient* was in production during the period when Rivette was still actively engaged in writing film criticism – filming took place during the summer and autumn of 1958, editing in 1959 – it is intriguing to see how the ideas that we have found to be fundamental to Rivette's film writing come to inform the narrative and formal organisation of his own film practice.

In his articles on film, Rivette repeatedly suggested that great works of cinema are governed by a central idea whose ineluctable unfolding determines the form and meaning of the film. *Paris nous appartient* turns this conception into the conscious, surface-level *subject* of the film. Rivette's debut feature is about the way that an idea can take on a life of its own, gathering momentum as it unspools with its own infernal logic, ultimately having a determinate effect on the material world. In the opening scene of *Paris nous appartient*, Anne Goupil (Betty Schneider), a literature student, is in her room reading aloud (in English) from Shakespeare. She reads Ariel's 'Full fathom five' speech from *The Tempest*: 'Nothing of him that doth fade/But doth suffer a Sea-change/Into something rich and strange'. The placing of the film's opening under these lines already suggests that it will be a film about time and change, about the mysterious

operation of a process of transformation. There follows a series of scenes in which the insidious idea that will effect this sea-change is introduced and begins to exert its control over the narrative. Anne's reading is interrupted by the sound of crying through the wall and, when she goes to investigate, she finds a wild-eyed and hysterical young woman who seems to know her brother, but who talks mysteriously of someone named Juan being killed and insists that no one is safe, the entire world is threatened. That evening, Anne is taken to a party populated by artists, intellectuals and exiles where Juan's death, now labelled a suicide, is further discussed. The tone is initially flippant – someone suggests that to kill oneself with a knife is 'terribly Spanish' – but rapidly becomes more serious. The party's host accuses Juan's entourage of causing Juan's death, with their perfidious mixture of nihilism and anarchism; one of Juan's Spanish friends insists that the dead man 'wasn't what he seemed to be'; Philip Kaufman (Daniel Crohem), a political refugee from the U.S.A., mentions the Russian futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky whose own suicide was interpreted by some as a Stalinist murder conspiracy. Later, when Juan's former girlfriend, Terry Yordan (Françoise Prévost), arrives with her new beau Gérard Lenz (Gianni Esposito), Philip slaps her around the face, accuses her of killing Juan and warns Gérard that he will face a similar fate if he stays with Terry. The next day, Anne is taken coincidentally to watch the rehearsals for Gérard's production of *Pericles* and finds herself drafted into the cast. Afterwards, she bumps into Philip again (he who doesn't believe in coincidences) who tells her that the world is being secretly run by faceless, nameless figures who threaten everyone alive; that Juan killed himself, or was 'helped' to die, because he knew a secret too terrible to bear; that Gérard will be the next victim, sooner rather than later; and that if Anne wishes to help him, she must find her own way of doing so.

By this stage, thirty minutes into the film, all the elements of the intrigue are established and the momentum behind this sinister idea has become unstoppable. Anne will spend the rest of the film investigating the circumstances behind Juan's death, attempting to identify the people responsible and specifically seeking to locate a recording of guitar music that Juan is believed to have made to accompany Gérard's production of *Pericles*. However, she finds that the characters who initiated her into the mystery are now reluctant to help and instead try to dissuade her from probing further: her brother Pierre (François Maître) tells her not to be 'childish' and warns her to stay away from this crowd; Philip says, 'Oubliez tout ce que j'ai pu vous dire'¹⁹ and 'Ne cherchez pas trop à comprendre',²⁰ advice echoed by Terry ('Vous vous battez dans le vide'²¹) and the shadowy economist de Georges (Jean-Marie Robain) who exerts considerable

¹⁹ 'Forget everything I may have told you'

²⁰ 'Don't try to understand too much'

²¹ 'You're stumbling around in the dark'

influence over this group ('Inutile de chercher davantage, vous ne trouverez rien'²²). Naturally, such denials serve only to strengthen Anne's conviction and reinforce her determination for the quest. It is in this sense that the development of the idea in *Paris nous appartient* is dialectical: following its initially urgent but elliptical utterance, the idea is strenuously denied by all concerned and, in the process, takes on the disturbing weight of reality. Or, if the *specific* conspiracy identified by Philip is dismissed as a fantasy, this negation itself serves to shore up the very concept of a conspiratorial organisation that might be controlling events from the shadows. Thus, every event that takes place in the film takes on a double significance: one prosaic and unremarkable, the other adding further evidence to the existence of a conspiracy. When Anne's neighbour disappears a few days later, has she simply moved to another room or is her erasure the sign that her fears have been realised? When Anne finds Philip collapsed on the floor of his room, is he drunk (as he was at the party), suffering from the effects of an old war wound (as he claims) or has he received a visit from the Organisation? When Pierre tells Anne to keep him informed of what she is up to, is this mere brotherly concern, or is he spying on behalf of someone else? When Gérard describes *Pericles* as a world in which 'tout se lie sur un autre plan',²³ one that is perhaps chaotic, but not absurd, and is obeying a certain direction, is he only discussing the play or can his words themselves be understood on another level?

For there are, in a sense, two ideas determining the shape of *Paris nous appartient*, but so densely interpenetrated that they become practically indistinguishable. There is, so to speak, the idea *in* the film and the idea *of* the film. There is the secret which Philip and Terry withhold from Anne and from Gérard and there is the secrecy with which the film itself operates, the uncertainty into which it plunges the spectator. Rivette's *mise en scène* is necessitated by the subject of the film in as much as it operates, like the characters, at once to hint at a secret and to deny it, to reveal a little and to conceal a lot more. This it achieves not through any trick photography or deceptive focalisation, but through subtle markers of angle, editing and performance, through the use of space, light and sound. As Claude Ollier has written, in terms that recall Rivette's description of *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (and Ollier will evoke the name of Lang at the end of his article), this is 'un cinéma mobile et rigoureux, tendu au fil d'une apparente intrigue, et d'une sous-intrigue constamment audible en filigrane [...], et où jamais les interprétations proposées n'épuisent la substance de l'univers décrit. Sa technique déconcerte: insensible, précise, dépourvue de fioritures, de tape-à-l'œil, d'exhibitionnisme'²⁴ (Ollier 1981, 52-3). In this way, then,

²² 'There's no use looking any further, you won't find anything'

²³ 'everything is connected on another level'

²⁴ 'a rigorous and mobile cinema, balanced on the wire of an apparent plot, and of a subplot that can be constantly discerned between the lines [...], and where the interpretations

Rivette's film seems to record two worlds at once: the real world of Paris in the summer of 1958 during which these young artists and intellectuals pursue their projects; and another side of this world, its shadow, its double, or its negative, shot through with the unshakable idea that there is some other, unnamed and unfriendly purpose at work. The unease that takes hold of the film is present in its use of space, from the claustrophobic rooms and courtyards that the characters inhabit, through unlikely spatial connections which take us, for instance, from the corridor of an apartment building into the large rehearsal space of a theatre, and finally to the rooftops from where Gérard's surveying of the city takes on a megalomaniacal edge. Uncertainty is instilled by performances, such as that of François Maistre as Pierre, whose blunt, rapid delivery always suggests that he is a little too impatient with Anne's questions and a little too hasty to deny her assertions; or in the unexplained quirks of bit-part characters like de Georges's 'ward' who listens at the door, plays with her shoes and hums to herself during Anne's interview with the economist, or Tania Fedin, who answers the door tied to a backboard and asks Anne if she has been sent by the lamb or the dragon. Suspicions are raised by the frequent, inaudible whispering of characters in the background of a shot, such as Pierre and de Georges at the party, or Pierre and Terry during one of Gérard's rehearsals.

This pervasive sense of another, imperfectly understood world inhabiting just below the surface, or within the cracks, of the visible world finally results in a lengthy sequence that might be attributed to a different plane of experience altogether. Toward the end of the film, Anne, who has recently rejected Gérard's advances, receives a note declaring that he will kill himself if she does not call before midnight. As the hour is already past, she sits down to wait until morning. She wakes after a fade and hurries over to Gérard's place where there is no answer. She calls her friend Jean-Marc (Jean-Claude Brialy) and together they visit Terry's apartment, where Anne is given further warnings about 'le plus vaste complot qui ait jamais existé'.²⁵ Eventually, returning to Gérard's address, Anne finds him on the street with Laurence, another actress from the theatre troupe. He denies writing the note and tears it up. But later that evening, while Anne is at a film projection, a telephone call informs her that Gérard has, after all, committed suicide. Although there are no unequivocal signals to this effect, it is tempting, as Ollier has pointed out (Ollier 1981, 58) to regard this entire sequence as a dream: it takes place after it is implied that Anne has fallen asleep; her race through the deserted streets of Paris at dawn has an unreal, oneiric aspect to it; Terry here delivers one of her most detailed and

provided never exhaust the substance of the world depicted. Its technique is disconcerting: unnoticeable, precise, without embellishment, ostentation or exhibitionism.'

²⁵ 'the greatest conspiracy there has ever been'

frightening accounts of the Organisation and its iron law of secrecy; in this same scene, Juan's music – the otherwise unlocateable object of Anne's quest – seems to be playing in Terry's apartment; Gérard's amused dismissal of the idea of suicide seems inconsistent with the subsequent revelation; and, when asked how she is feeling after the film projection that evening, Anne tells Pierre, 'J'ai l'impression de sortir d'un mauvais rêve'.²⁶ The film will never categorically confirm or deny the reality status of this sequence and the spectator is obliged to hold open both possibilities at once, both of which, in a sense, are equally disconcerting: if the events really happened, then Gérard's inconsistent behaviour makes it seem more likely that his subsequent suicide was faked, and it is meanwhile revealed that Juan's tape has never been missing but in the hands of Terry all along, whose continued combination of knowing superiority and abject terror serves further to confirm the likely existence of the conspiratorial organisation. If, on the other hand, the sequence is to be understood as a dream, then the ontological status of the rest of the film is thrown into question: if what we see and hear in these few scenes cannot be trusted, then how can we be sure we have not been deceived by the rest of the film?

Paris nous appartient has no answers to these questions. As Claude Ollier puts it, what does Anne, and what do we really learn by the end of the film? 'Rien de bien certain, sinon la persistance du mystère'²⁷ (Ollier 1981, 57). For, if Rivette's film, in the manner the critic so admired in Fritz Lang, offers a final dialectical reversal, it is this: that, after first affirming and then denying the existence of a conspiracy, the film *seems* to end by confirming it. After all, Philip's prophecy has come true: Gérard Lenz is dead, in an apparent, but nonetheless suspicious suicide, just like Juan. Pierre is dead too, shot by Terry. Or is he? We see it happen, but again, its status is uncertain: the film cuts from a close-up on Anne's horrified face to another, unspecified space, where Terry shoots Pierre. But here there is snow on the ground whereas the ground in Antony, where Anne waits at the group's country retreat, is carpeted only with autumn leaves (which leads Ollier to suggest that this image might be a mere premonition (1981, 57)). Terry *says* she has killed Pierre, but why, by this stage, should we believe this any more than we believe her final, categorical insistence that the Organisation only ever existed in Philip's head? Prosaic explanations are available for these deaths: Gérard killed himself out of a mixture of romantic disappointment and artistic despair; Pierre was working for de Georges, who bought out Gérard's production of *Pericles* and thus can be seen as indirectly responsible for Gérard's death and punished as such by Terry. But these explanations seem a little too neat and self-contained after the film has hinted with such insistence at a network of intrigue and responsibility

²⁶ 'I feel like I have awoken from a bad dream'

²⁷ 'Nothing much for sure, apart from the persistence of the mystery'

connecting all these characters inextricably. All we know for sure is that Anne has lost a brother and a potential lover and is left without answers, stumbling helplessly through the grounds at Antony as though bleary-eyed from a nightmare; that, in choosing to act and set in motion a series of events, she has ripped her own world apart: ‘Tout est de votre faute,’ Terry tells her, ‘Il vous fallait du sublime’.²⁸

Conclusion

Jacques Rivette’s film writing is consistently organised around a dialectical conception of thought that he finds operating in cinema and is, at the same time, dialectical in its own process of argumentation. Rivette’s patient, meticulous demonstrations frequently find their boldest conclusions in grand and indemonstrable articles of faith that somehow add a further character of authority to his analyses. For Rivette, no art is better placed than cinema (‘celui du vingt-quatrième de seconde’,²⁹ as he puts it (Rivette 1962, 36)) to show the dialectical process of becoming, of universal concepts incarnated in ephemeral material reality. In Rivette’s film criticism, all great films are animated by an organising concept that plays itself out, manifesting itself in and as material being, through a process of dialectical reversal or negation. *Mise en scène* is nothing other than the exteriorisation of this concept – it is content revealing itself. In montage, meanwhile, each shot incarnates the guiding idea, yet each negates the previous shot in the process building to an overall or absolute image of the film. It is perhaps in his discussions of montage that Rivette’s writing appears at its most purely Hegelian; it is here, too, that he employs the Hegelian figure of the ascending spiral or circle in describing the progress of film history. However, in Rivette’s work there is no sense of finitude or closure to this process. Hegel’s dialectic, at least in traditional interpretations, has an end point where the evolving process of consciousness can go no higher, where appearance coincides perfectly with essence both in and for consciousness, and where absolute knowledge – ‘the organised whole of determinate and complete knowledge’ (Hegel 1964, 79) – has been attained. This has often been interpreted as implying an end to history: Alexandre Kojève, for instance, argues that historical action as we know it would come to an end:

If Man is truly and fully satisfied by what *is*, he no longer desires anything real and therefore no longer changes reality, and thus he himself ceases really to change. The only ‘desire’ which he can still

²⁸ ‘It’s all your fault. You had to have something sublime.’

²⁹ ‘that of one twenty-fourth of a second’

have [...] is the 'desire' to *understand* what is and what he is, and to reveal it through discourse. (Kojève 1969, 192)

In this interpretation, the dialectical process does not stop, but merely repeats its final cycle indefinitely. But, for Jean-Luc Nancy, in his radical post-structuralist reading of Hegel, the fact that the purpose already contains in it the end implies that the dialectical process has always already begun, but also that it has always already ended. If Hegel certainly tries to conceive of the totality of truth, says Nancy, this totality – the absolute – is not to be found in any global form or determinate figure but only in *the process itself* (Nancy 1997, 13-14). In this sense, the absolute is the fact that the process is always already underway, 'opening the present, opening space and time, opening the world and the "I", and throwing existence into its restless exigency' (Nancy 2002, 24). It is this, I suggest, that is communicated by Jacques Rivette's film practice. For if a film like *Paris nous appartient* dramatises, in a demonstration of Rivette's own understanding of cinema, the unravelling of an idea, there is little sense of the process leading to closure or greater understanding. *Paris nous appartient* is, to a degree, a circular narrative, but only to the extent that characters repeat the same mistakes without seeming to learn from the past. If not all of Rivette's films appear as pessimistic as *Paris nous appartient*, all share the same refusal of a final figure that would contain, or manifest absolute knowledge: on the contrary, in film after film, Rivette gestures at such a figure before withholding it from characters and audience alike, whether it be a conspiracy (in *Paris nous appartient* or *Out 1* (1970)), a work of art (in *L'Amour fou* (1969) or *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991)) or a family secret (in *Haut bas fragile* (1995) or *Secret défense* (1998)): even when such figures do take on a definite shape at the end of the film, they inadequately account for, or explain away, the complexity of the formal and character relations that have been built up over the course of the film. As a result, Rivette's cinema has affirmed itself, perhaps more than any other, as a cinema of process in which the value is in the inevitable and often circular playing out of an idea, rather than in the solution offered to a problem. Perhaps the true proximity between Jacques Rivette's film criticism and his film practice can be summed up by this line from Philippe Demonsablon, discussing the work of Fritz Lang, but which could be equally applied to the whole of Rivette's cinema: 'the film's task is to describe a labyrinth, not to deliver its secret, which is none of its concern' (Demonsablon 1981, 24).

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