

If Jacques Rivette remains the least known of the most celebrated directors of the French New Wave, it is because he continues to be remembered partly as the fifth member of the Cahiers du cinéma group and partly for his relatively long and enigmatic films. Open and reserved, lucid and opaque, personal and uncompromising, and the object of a cultish worship by his followers: One of the many challenges of Rivette is that his films can only contradictorily be assembled into a single oeuvre in any traditional and easily marketable sense. From his debut in 1961 and at least until the mid-80s, each film represents a quantum leap in a new and unpredictable direction, while Rivette continued to deconstruct the myth of the auteur (with its monomaniac implications of artistic genius and supreme creative control) which he himself had helped to introduce as a critic in the 1950s.

His very different films, however, can be considered as modulations on certain thematic obsessions that nevertheless make them unmistakably Rivettian: His fascination with the theatre, the plot and with women (on screen and as creative collaborators) tie up the many loose ends in his life-long engagement with cinema, and usually in the form of an idiosyncratic pastiche of classic Hollywood genre templates.

Rivette began his career as a critic after reading Jean Cocteau's diary from the filming of *La Belle et la bête* (1946), which had sparked his interest in film. Like a Heraclitus of film criticism, he paid tribute to his cinematic role models (Renoir, Rossellini, Lang, Preminger) in the columns of Cahiers du cinéma in an ambiguous prose, while refining his eclectic taste in an ongoing confrontation with exclusive criticism (the breadth of Rivette's taste is evident in his defence of Fritz Lang's marginal *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956) as well as Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* (1995)).

Truffaut has rightly described Rivette as the Cahiers group's most cinephilic member and the one who was most impatient to make films himself. After three short films, which were considered lost for decades but which were recently rediscovered (under Rivette's bed, according to rumour), he directed the ironic short film *Le Coup du berger* (1956) before embarking on his debut feature *Paris nous appartient* (Paris Belongs to Us) in 1958.

*Paris nous appartient* is a modern noir with roots in Fritz Lang. The film follows Anne, a young student who becomes involved in a circle of intellectual Parisian existentialists and their theatre production of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, as well as in a mysterious, worldwide conspiracy of an apocalyptic nature that has already killed one of the group's members. However, the (com)plot exists only in the dialogue. It remains out of sight in the film itself, which instead focuses on the characters' reaction to an intangible threat, the scale and consequences of which are only hinted at: "I tell you, the world is not what it seems. ... It's the whole world that is threatened without realising it. It's all nothing but pretence and deception. Those we think are in power are nothing more than puppets. The true leaders rule in secret. ... They have no names. I speak in riddles, but some things can only be said in riddles."

This last sentence, as if spoken straight out of Rivette's own mouth, stands as a motto for both this and his following films. *Paris nous appartient* is monumental in its introversion, but its complexity becomes a point in itself in a film that, in the words of film historian Georges Sadoul, "precisely and lyrically described the ambivalent causes of modern anxiety".

It is the all-encompassing nature of the threats that weighs on the characters and shrouds the film's labyrinthine, black-and-white Paris. There is an icy paranoia in *Paris nous appartient* that is a far cry from both the standard thriller and the Paris we associate with the New Wave; which - if we are to believe Charles Péguy's paradoxical quote which opens the film - "belongs to no one". Only the flight of the white swans in the final shot of the film heralds the much freer and lighter creativity that characterises Rivette's work process in his later films.

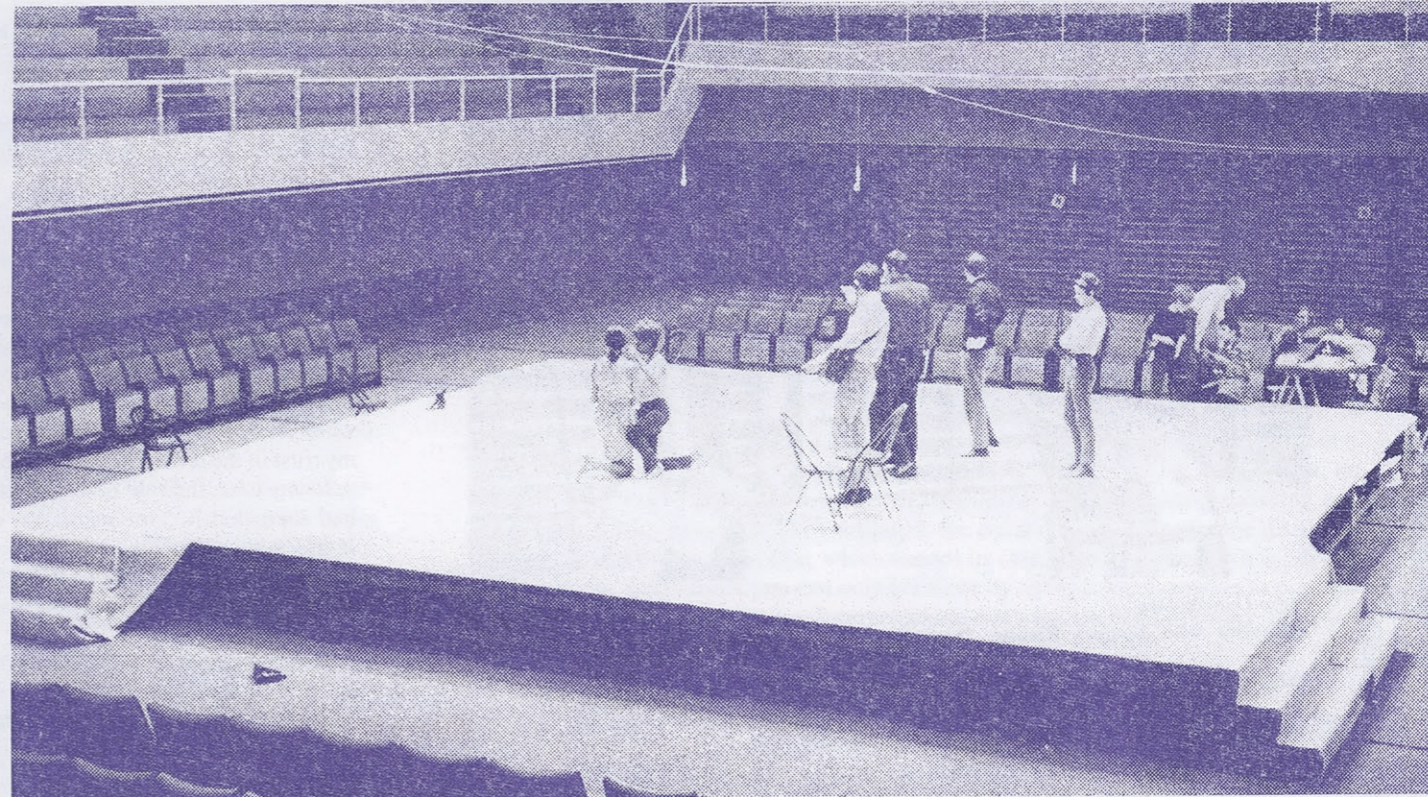
Rivette, as predicted by Truffaut, was the first of the Cahiers critics to embark on a feature film. However, his debut film was also the last to premiere. When it finally did, in 1961, the New Wave via Chabrol, Truffaut, Rohmer and Godard was already well established. *Paris nous appartient* was met with mixed reviews from a narrow and elitist audience.

In 1963-65, Rivette took over as editor-in-chief of Cahiers du cinéma from Eric Rohmer, and in 1965 he made perhaps his most conventional, if deeply satirical, film: *La Religieuse*, based on Diderot and starring Anna Karina as a young girl forced into a convent in 18th century France. The French censors banned the anti-authoritarian *La Religieuse*, which was not released until the following year, at a time where revolutionary currents were rising to the surface.

In 1969, Rivette channelled these currents into his most experimental and innovative film to date, *L'amour fou* (the title of which echoes chief surrealist André Breton), a film he maintains is deeply political, reflecting the moral choices of its makers in a constant process of becoming. Considered at the time as a defining work of the post-'68 moment in French cinema, *L'amour fou* is ripe for rediscovery as a contribution to modern cinema in general, unavailable as it was for decades on anything but scrappy video bootlegs (the 35mm negative was destroyed in a fire in 1973) until it was recently, finally restored.

*L'amour fou*, like *Paris nous appartient*, follows a group of young theatre professionals in rehearsals, this time for Racine's tragedy *Andromaque*. The director of the play falls out with his cast wife (Bulle Ogier) when he insists on letting a film crew follow their work. She leaves the performance, whereupon he hires his mistress to take over his wife's role, in turn sending her into a jealousy-fuelled, infectious frenzy. The couple end up destroying their apartment during an orgy, and when the play finally opens, it is for an empty stage to an audience of no one.

At just about four hours in length, *L'amour fou* is shot without a script in a collective improvisation led by Rivette, who in practice distanced himself from the auteur philosophy he had contributed to in theory as a critic, in favour of something far more risky, open-ended and exciting. A study in jealousy, collectivity and the creative tension between control and chaos, the film observes its two parallel events - the theatre rehearsals and the unravelling of a romantic relationship - while challenging our basic assumptions about fiction and documentary, performance and authenticity, art-making and improvisation. The dialectical tension between chaos and control is turned into a visual principle by alternating between handheld vérité-style 16mm cinematography by the documentary crew in the film, and the disciplined 35mm work by the film's (and Rivette's) own camera.



*L'amour fou*  
Jacques Rivette,  
1969, 252 min.,  
35mm and 16mm to 4K

As an experiment in collective creativity and improvisation, *L'amour fou* paved the way for both the legendary, almost thirteen hour long *Out 1: Noli me tangere* (1971) and for that free-spirited, free-wheeling tribute to the liberating power of the imagination, *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974) wherein all his main characters—similarly in all his subsequent films—were women.

*L'amour fou*, however, remains the film in which Rivette most obsessively examines the theatre as a metaphor not only for life itself, but - in a more paranoid bent - also the world and the others around us. Rivette's characters seem to share a subconscious, almost Shakespearean understanding of the world-as-stage which leaves open the question: Where does the performance begin and end? At a time where the boundaries between reality and fiction are increasingly blurred not only on screen, but very much in the world we live in too, the many other open questions posed by Rivette and his co-creators in this mad, magnificent film are as urgent as ever.

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# L'AMOUR FOU

Wednesday, November 22, 2023, 18:30  
Dagmar Teatret (sal 3), Jernbanegade 4  
Free entrance

