

Dave Kehr

Playing along with Rivette

Fill-in-the-meaning movies from a funny French filmmaker

You think of a story, you write a script, you hire some actors, you shoot some film, you put your footage together at the editing table, and you're through. For 80 years, films have been made like this, but in France there is a filmmaker who has spent his career looking for another way. At 55, Jacques Rivette remains the least celebrated member of the original New Wave group, the band of critics-turned-filmmakers (Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer) who shocked the world in the late 1950s by taking their movies out of the studios and into the streets, abandoning the storytelling techniques of the classical Hollywood film in favor of a range of radical alternatives. If Rivette has never shared the fame of his colleagues, it's because his alternatives were the most radical of all. After making two films in the conventional way (*Paris Nous Appartient*, 1960, and *La Religieuse*, 1965), Rivette launched *L'Amour Fou* (1968) with only a sketchy outline of the action, determined to let the story take shape (or fail to) as it was being filmed. The 252-minute film that resulted baffled audiences everywhere, but Rivette continued his research with a series of increasingly difficult (and difficult to see) experiments: *Out One: Spectre* (1973), *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974), *Duelle* (1976), *Noroi* (1977), *Merry-Go-Round* (1979), and *Le Pont du Nord* (1981). On December second, Rivette (with his producer, Stéphane Tchalgadjieff), will visit the Film Center of the School of the Art Institute as part of a complete retrospective of his work (which will continue through the middle of the month); it's a perfect opportunity to get to know this fascinating filmmaker, whose work has been hidden for far too long.

What makes Rivette's obscurity difficult to justify is the fact that his films, once accepted, are fun. His films are animated by a sense of play—of fantasy, freedom, and wonder—that in some ways is very like Steven Spielberg's. The difference is that Rivette lets the audience play along, while Spielberg only lets us watch and admire the end result; we're participants in Rivette's films, passive observers in Spielberg's. Both men begin from similar premises: Their sensibilities are rooted in children's adventure films, particularly serials, though where Spielberg cites the Republic



Celine and Julie Go Boating

chapter plays of the forties, Rivette goes back to the silent serials of Louis Feuillade, with their greater emphasis on mystery and the subversive habit of placing the most outlandish action in a perfectly naturalistic context of everyday life. Both men enjoy the arbitrariness of the serial, the lack of psychology that makes every action plausible, and the lack of physical limits that makes every action possible. But while Spielberg tries to excuse his arbitrariness (disguising it with the mystical themes of *Close Encounters*, or reducing it to the camp of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), Rivette embraces it as an aesthetic principle—a value in itself. The missed connections, confused motivations, and unresolved plot strands that the early serial makers achieved through naïveté are self-consciously accepted by Rivette as ways of breaking through the oppressively efficient machinery—the overperfection—of classicism. These intentional “mistakes” open holes in the film, letting in elements that the film can't account for—elements that belong to other worlds (even the real one, perhaps) or to other fictions. It's left to the audience to make sense of these gaps or not; if we're willing, we can supply the story, or at least the emotional sense, that lies beyond Rivette's story. Spiel-

berg's work ties everything up, giving a closed, logical form to fantasy. Rivette's work is open, erratic, irrational, and—much more profoundly than Spielberg's—inviting.

Spielberg gives us a complete serial, all 15 chapters, in the two-hour running time of *Raiders*. But Rivette films, though they may run from two hours to 12, seem like single chapters from serials that, mysteriously, have been lost; they're the surviving fragments of stories and cycles that no longer exist as wholes. (Many of Feuillade's early serials have come down to us only in bits and pieces.) The premises were explained in an opening chapter that no one has seen; the resolution of the plot was contained in a concluding episode that has long since crumbled into dust. The films themselves seem suspended, caught in the process of assuming a final form that never arrives. It's this idea of an intermediary state, of a process, that fascinates Rivette, on the levels of both story and technique.

Rivette begins not with a plot but with what he calls a “generating principle”—a collection, more or less arbitrary, of written texts, story ideas, structuring principles, particular actors or particular qualities of an image that, with luck, will develop over the course of the actual filmmaking—growing either through interaction or through the remote, indirect intervention of the filmmaker. *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, for example, is based on the friendship of two actresses, Juliet Berto and Dominique Labourier, crossed with two forgotten early works of Henry James, *The Old House* and *A Romance of Certain Old Clothes*. *Out One: Spectre* has a remote basis in a pulpy work of fiction by Balzac, *L'Histoire des Treize*, filtered through two rival theatrical groups rehearsing productions of Aeschylus. *Le Pont du Nord* takes its structure from a game of Snakes and Ladders, and the course of the action is largely determined by the severe restrictions of Rivette's tiny budget (*i.e.*, no interior scenes that would require expensive lighting, no locations outside Paris). Instead of dividing writing, shooting, and cutting into separate stages of production, Rivette lets them flow together: A plot point may be determined by the way that an actress walks across a room or, weeks later in the editing room, by the accidental juxtaposition of two unrelated



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sequences.

Duelle, the 1976 film with which Rivette will appear, is obscurely based on Celtic myth, with a three-part structure somehow tied to the cycle of the moon. Out of this arcania emerges a moon goddess (the dark-haired Juliet Berto) doing battle with a sun goddess (blond Bulle Ogier) for possession of a magic stone that will grant its owner the power to remain on earth beyond the 40 days allowed per year. Rivette might as well have taken all this from a comic book, but enough of the mythic basis remains to grant the story, if not the "meaning," something perhaps rarer and more intriguing—a residue of meaning, a shadow of substance. The action takes place in contemporary Paris, and it is filmed as Feuillade might have filmed it: in deep-focus long shots that closely link the characters to the décor, rooting them in a definite physical world. The grubby everydayness of the settings—a dance hall, a racetrack, a hotel lobby—at first seems to contradict the magical qualities of the characters, but as the film continues a productive tension grows between them: The sets, littered with mirrors and sheets of reflecting glass, seem to take on some magical properties of their own; the characters, stranded in a semblance of reality, acquire a weight and authority they would never possess in a fairy tale. The sound is all live, direct, and realistic, including the musical score, which is improvised by a pianist who can be seen, quite plainly, sitting at his instrument in the background of the scene. By bringing the music into his movie, Rivette is making a joking reference to the pianists who accompanied silent films, but it also works on another level, introducing another tension, another "process." The pianist plays in response to the action, amplifying and commenting upon it, but the action—still improvised—also plays in response to the music, catching its changing moods and rhythms, leading the actors into a stylized movement something like dance.

So what is *Duelle* about? I don't know for sure, and I'm not sure that it matters. The complicated intrigues may well have an allegorical dimension (I'm told that *Le Pont du Nord*, for instance, translates into a fairly dense parable on Parisian politics), and the elements that recur from other films (themes of conspiracy, performance, and domination) clearly have some personal significance for Rivette. But Rivette's work is less a matter of content than of texture, the sensuality (a sensuality that does not exclude the intellect) of shifting forms, contrasting rhythms, different dimensions of myth and fact coming together and enriching each other. Ultimately, of course, the subject of *Duelle*, a film about two fantastic beings fighting to become real, is *Duelle* itself. It's the story of a story taking shape, a fiction coming into the world. ■

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