



Vindication of Jacques Rivette

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Jacques Rivette: *Céline et Julie vont en bateau*

1. There are films one knows one will never make, or will make in another time and with another desire. Those films, however, are the ones in which we get used to thinking more, perhaps because we know that are fragile and defenceless, subject to an intimate memory. If we did not think of them, they would end up disappearing or fading away. As long as we do so, they will have a real existence, they will remain woven into a moral life. Perhaps that is what Jean Renoir was referring to when he said that a director spends “all his life making the same film over and over again”. It is not so much, as has been said at times, that the films made by an auteur are like one another because of what has been crystallised or filmed —because of the stylistic or thematic reiterations—, as that the same ideal fictions reverberate in them, that they are a partial, fragmentary accommodation of images dressed in other clothes, transformed or buried, the echo of unmakeable or dreamed images. And so, some day somebody should explain the history of the cinema from the absences or failures —from the images that will never be up on the hoardings—, showing that in cinematic creation filmed works are as important as the ones that were never made, since the former are in part the flotsam of ships that were wrecked or never built at all, and that the ones would never have existed without the others.

I am thinking of a history of silences or fragility, but also of sweetness, reminiscences or secret beauty: in each hand Bresson filmed we evoke Adam’s hand resting on Eve’s, those hands which, after the director died, we shall never be able to see, as Florence Delay said. I am also thinking of the presence of God, the touch between the Son and the Father glimpsed in the light Dreyer loved so much to film whilst he was meditating on his script about the life of Christ; or the waking dreams of experimental images Hitchcock had in mind —or put on celluloid: some footage he had to abandon in the sixties because it was artistically risky have been discovered— and which eventually became the seeds of more mature or saleable fruit; or the weight of brightness in Welles, men gazing at starry night skies (might this not be “the theme” for a director who filmed magic for its ephemeral, nostalgic condition, because it is a celebration of a

trap for fleeting, irrevocable time: in other words, the sleight of hand that shows that those hands are empty?). When, in one of the most famous and memorable passages in American literature, Scott Fitzgerald describes the instant at which the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* sees the eponymous millionaire for the first time, he must have thought that “that current” that drags boats towards the past was the same one that any Western man with an artistic temperament recognises in any gaze. Let us read the extract once again: “I decided to call to him. Miss Baker had mentioned him at dinner, and that would do for an introduction. But I didn’t call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone - he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward - and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness”.

Has there ever been a brave gaze in the cinema that is not directed at its own particular “green light”?

2. Jacques Rivette’s films dot the narration with images that seem to open up to other fictions or which point to the other side of the film we are watching. It is a cinema full of cracks and hints, a cinema that usually needs a good deal of footage to capture that relaxed flow —day and night— of events, the cadence of a shoot that is usually permeable to improvisation and last minute changes on set. A work, in short, that conceives the gesture of creation as a synecdoche: to explain the stage of the world - which includes cinema, theatre and magic— from a few movements, looks and touches. In that way *Céline et Julie Vont en Bateau* is a game in which there is a constant opening up to invention, whether by the audience or the characters’ discoveries. Each image seems to go out of focus and break up into beams of quite different shades. The finished film thus refers to the films that fell by the wayside, protected by memory. Rivette invents the rules of his films, even though, strictly speaking, he is no player. (We should first point out that after the last showing of *Céline et Julie Vont en Bateau* in Barcelona —in late October at the Instituto Francés— few young members of the audience liked the film. Let us therefore acknowledge that the setting justifies this vindication).

What exactly does making up the rules mean? It means placing the pieces on the board, assigning a value to each one and letting the game begin. And there the player or the spectator come in; they have to think of a strategy to confront their adversary. What adversary, if we have said that it is not Rivette? That is the mystery: in his cinema we have to locate a series of visual and sound associations —“a web of relations, an architecture of contacts, animated and as if suspended in mid air,” as Rivette put it— which are too plural and ambiguous for us to believe that they are animated by a single hand. In Rivette’s art the spinners have started work together at the same time of day. The spectator who does not take part in the match, who refuses to move a piece, will be slumped in lethargy, staring at banality. Eco called that game “open work”; he could also have called it “free match”. It is an example of Rivette’s intelligence.

When Céline and Julie taste the magic sweets, they visualise a familiar fiction played out by unknown characters. They remain seated at a table, laughing and commenting on what they see; in countershot, Rivette shows us the setting for that imagined or real story. The passages of that hermetic, discrete fiction appear fragmentarily, repeating themselves or withdrawing, without proposing an explicit dramatic juncture. *Céline et Julie Vont en Bateau* is the story of a three-hour journey or trip enlivened by references to Lewis Carroll. In one sequence, one of the girls bemoans the number of “holes” in the story. And then comes a revealing scene: the girls enter the story like beings of flesh and blood, but the characters remain unchangeable; when the girls laugh, they do not hear anything; when the girls move, they do not see anything. It is a beautiful idea. It has always been said that filmed men are ghosts or spectral figures from a time retrieved by the spectator, but following the thread of Rivette’s film, we can advance certain playful hypotheses: might it not be that the ghost is the spectator, doomed to wander through fictions without casting a shadow or rebuffing the wind, stripped of all carnal power, magical object of the gaze of presences embodied on screen? Might it be the cinema that is looking at the audience and not vice versa? Did not Jean Louis Schefer, in a book published years after *Céline et Julie Vont en Bateau*, speak of those films that had “looked at our childhood”, a phrase which Serge Daney quoted at the slightest prompting?

Be that as it may, nobody will convince me that in that doubles match there is not somebody who depends on somebody else; and, if we are sincere, we should not think of ourselves as a reality lived by someone else, since without the joint existence of both their would be no breath or heartbeat. If things are seen like that, we have to return to the “green light” which, according to this last point of view, would be the wish for fulfilment or the wish for the specular. The wish to possess the other always starts from the mirror. And so, whatever we look at, or whatever we film, nothing will free us from the evocation of a vessel which —without out knowing where or why— was wrecked in uncharted seas. On this point let us say that that “green light” is the ideal or perfect match that will never be played, since at the moment it was played, the game would cease to exist: so let us celebrate the malicious doom that binds us to destiny - or to the “conspiracies”, if we abide by the most characteristic narrative tension of Rivette’s films.

3. Among the films I would like to make there is one I think about again every time I see a film by Rivette: it would be a short about a chess player, about the movements of his hands on the chessboard. Since thought is invisible I suppose that its other side or shell is found in gestures, the vestige of a logical reasoning, the caress of thought. Since I cannot film the abstract I would settle for its track or residue. Behind the visual surface of *Céline et Julie Vont en Bateau* there is a subterranean structure of associations, secret rules, dark reflections and prefigurations. I remember that Rivette himself noted that the cinema was “the interplay of actor and actress, of hero and setting, of word and face, of hand and object.” We have to heed that structure of strata—in a similar reading to the one an attentive reader makes of Mallarmé or Flaubert—if we want to unweave some splendour from films whose enigma is always buried like a chest whose gold paint has been worn away, first by the sea and the salt and then by

the sand; but we would also have to concede that a wave might cover the mysterious chest with foam once again and wait for the sunrays to show it as a freshly polished or found object.

Gilles Deleuze wrote that *Céline et Julie Vont en Bateau* was one of those great French comic films, with the work of Tati. We should add that it is also a mixture of Jean Vigo and Racine, a glacial abyss with magic sweets that represent the opening of that chest: the journey or the artist's eternal search for invisible beauty. Why does beauty so enjoy playing hide and seek on the far side of the mirror?

