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Secrets and Lies, or How (not) to write about Jacques Rivette

It has become a critical commonplace for writers on Jacques Rivette to lament – in addition to the difficulty of accessing some of his films – the paucity of critical writing on his work.

Writing about Jacques Rivette is certainly scarce compared to the amount of criticism devoted to the leading lights of the New Wave, Godard and Truffaut, and even to the critical work on their less celebrated peers Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer and Agnès Varda. Where the first monograph on Godard was published in 1963, the first on Rivette did not appear until 2001.¹

The current collection of articles aims at redressing that balance, and contributors to this issue are also responsible for the first English-language books on Rivette.² It is also true, however, if less frequently pointed out, that much of the existing writing on Rivette, though sometimes evocative, is often singularly unhelpful to the scholar seeking to understand something of the director's work. Writing about Jacques Rivette, rather like the director's films, has a stubborn tendency to go around in circles: in other words, just as Rivette's films, such as *Paris nous appartient* (1961), *Out 1* (1970) or *Le Pont du Nord* (1982), are often described as turning circles around an absent centre, whether physically, metaphorically or narratologically, so too Rivette criticism tends to build a self-referential discourse that contains the films within a kind of closed circuit of analysis, often without engaging much with their material or cinematographic reality. The present article does not have the scope to lay claim to an exhaustive review of the literature on Jacques Rivette; nor does it seek to provide the textual analysis of Rivette's films lacking from so much existing literature (work I have undertaken elsewhere). Rather, I shall seek, in what follows, simply to tease out some of the most common tropes of Rivette criticism, necessarily focusing on a handful of the director's most prominent commentators: among others, these will include Hélène Frappat, inevitably, but also Serge Daney's writing in *Libération*, Marc

¹ Jean Collet, *Jean-Luc Godard* (Paris: Seghers, 1963); Hélène Frappat, *Jacques Rivette, secret compris* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2001).

² Douglas Morrey and Alison Smith, *Jacques Rivette* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Mary Wiles, *Jacques Rivette* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

Chevrie's in *Cahiers du cinéma*, and the early championing, in the Anglophone world, of Jonathan Rosenbaum.

Writing about Jacques Rivette is often more descriptive than analytical. This is, perhaps, fatally the case with a film like the legendary *Out 1: Noli me tangere* (1970), which is so long – twelve hours forty minutes – that a satisfactory analysis would require a book in itself, such that commentators are effectively reduced to summarising *what happens*. It may be the case that Rivette's famous experiments with cinematic duration work against close reading in other ways: in films that last for three, four, six or twelve hours the elements of film style are in a sense *spread out*, dispersed or diluted, which may make them harder to see, at least initially, compared to the condensed *mise-en-scène* of a ninety-minute film. At the same time, though, the lack of textual detail in writing about Rivette perhaps also relates to the assumption that very few readers will have seen a film like *Out 1*: the full-length version has only received a handful of theatrical screenings; a VHS box-set was briefly available in the 1990s, distributed by Les Films de l'Atalante, and consultation copies are available for viewing at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Bibliothèque du Film in Paris. In addition, though, discussion of films themselves is often replaced by exhaustive description of Rivette's working practices, as in Marc Chevrie's lengthy, and admittedly fascinating, report from the set of *L'Amour par terre* (1984).³ In a nutshell, as Chevrie indicates, Rivette works by gathering together a group of actors in a chosen location and then devising a scenario, typically in collaboration with the actors, as the shooting proceeds. Since he began working with scriptwriter Pascal Bonitzer on *L'Amour par terre*, the tendency has been to write the following day's dialogue at the end of each day's shooting.

Now, although a detailed examination of working practices is clearly a valid approach to the study of film, it tends to preclude the analysis of textual evidence from the completed films. It is this evidence that is most singularly lacking from writing on Rivette, which is perhaps ironic

³ Marc Chevrie, "Jacques Rivette: La ligne et l'aventure", *Cahiers du cinéma*, 364 (October 1984), pp. 19-24.

when one considers the stress that Rivette himself placed, as a film critic, on the technical organisation of films and on reasoned proof.⁴ Commentators will sometimes offer detailed examples of analysis without building them into a wider interpretation of the film at hand, as in Frappat's discussion of point of view in the opening shots of *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974).⁵ Or they will focus obsessively on tiny details, as when Evelyne Jardonnet discusses the clown who, in *Céline et Julie*, occupies the screen for a matter of seconds in this 185-minute film.⁶ Another favourite ploy is to identify stylistic traits that recur across Rivette's œuvre, without necessarily analysing how they operate in the context of individual films. Thus Frappat notes the use of frontal framing in *La Religieuse* (1966) and *Céline et Julie*, and later in *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991) and *Jeanne la Pucelle* (1994), without reflecting on how it might signify differently in these very diverse films.⁷ (Just to offer the most perfunctory such reflection, we might suggest that each of these four films contains a meditation on a type of framing found in a different artistic field: theatre, cinema, painting, and historical documentary.)

Spotting thematic trends – that oldest and most facile of auteurist games – is itself a commonplace of Rivette criticism. To cite just one example, Frappat points to various images of entrapped women in Rivette's oeuvre, from Suzanne Simonin (Anna Karina) confined to a convent, through Claire's seclusion in the apartment in *L'Amour fou* (1969), to Constance Dumas in *La Bande des quatre* (1989), who never seems to leave the theatre where she works (both the latter women are played by Bulle Ogier).⁸ It may be that something about Rivette's cinema – his tendency to re-use the same actors and re-visit the same themes – encourages this type of approach. For instance, Rivette's cinema is full of *returning women*, both in the sense of actresses like Ogier and Anna Karina (who reappears in *Haut bas fragile* [1995]) and in the

⁴ Frappat talks of “la violence et l'évidence de la preuve” in Rivette's criticism. *Jacques Rivette, secret compris*, pp. 75-6.

⁵ Frappat, p. 185.

⁶ Evelyne Jardonnet, *Poétique de la singularité au cinéma: Une lecture croisée de Jacques Rivette et Maurice Pialat* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), pp. 274-5 and 288-9.

⁷ Frappat, p. 43 and p. 163.

⁸ Frappat, pp. 31, 34, 39.

narrative sense of the women obsessively reliving the past in the old house of *Céline et Julie* or the twin sister seemingly returned from the dead in *Secret défense* (1998).⁹ Thus, when Rivette made this the explicit theme of *Histoire de Marie et Julien* (2003), that is, a “revenante” or woman returned from the hereafter, and played by an actress – Emmanuelle Béart – with a past in Rivette’s cinema, critics were quick to seize on the film as a confirmation of their cherished interpretation, such that “la revenance” itself comes to serve at once as a theme, trope, and (inevitably) recurring *figure de style* in Rivette’s work.¹⁰

Is it possible that this preference for the somewhat elementary form of analysis that consists in spotting trends is related to a lingering sense that Rivette’s œuvre is *unfinished*? If so, this surely has less to do with the reality of the director’s body of work, which by now amounts to over twenty features and, by the nature of things, will not continue to grow forever, and more to do with Rivette’s own taste, within those films, for unfinished narratives, unresolved plots and undisclosed secrets. Critics love to remind us of the endless scenes of theatrical rehearsal in Rivette’s films, which so rarely seem to give rise to a finished performance (*Va savoir* [2001] is an exception, but rarely discussed as such¹¹), or of the fact that the many secrets in the great conspiracy films are never entirely divulged or dispelled to the audience’s satisfaction. This perhaps explains, then, why writing on Rivette is sometimes rather fragmentary, as though the author wanted to allude to an interpretation rather than develop it in full, maintaining some of the mystery that the films themselves relish. Marc Chevré’s long article “Supplément aux voyages de J.R.” is divided into twenty-two discrete paragraphs headed with cryptic keywords like “Fantôme”, “Happening”, “Accidents” and “Innocence”.¹² Similarly, Frappat’s book is broken down into short sections and interspersed with brief testimonies from Rivette’s collaborators,

⁹ On this theme, see Frappat, pp. 220-1 and 231.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Jardonnet, p. 265.

¹¹ In passing, we might note that Rivette’s occasional literary adaptations and costume dramas, which constitute a significant sub-genre within Rivette’s œuvre (*La Religieuse*, *Hurlevent* [1985], *Jeanne la Pucelle*, *Ne touchez pas la hache* [2007]), have received fairly short shrift within Rivette criticism. Typically they are either discussed in the very same terms as the other films, or they are simply cited as exceptions, rather than being analysed on their own merits.

¹² Marc Chevré, “Supplément aux voyages de J.R.”, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 416 (February 1989), pp. 20-25.

film *Marie et Julien* in 1975. Rivette's very personality is presented as contradictory: solitary and reserved, he was nonetheless a forceful debater at the very centre of the *Cahiers du cinéma* group. Hélène Frappat sums him up in these terms: "Intransigent, absolu, secret, ascétique, solitaire, tour à tour volubile et en retrait, souriant et réservé, Jacques Rivette est, de tous les 'monogames', le plus determine".¹⁹

Another common gesture in writing on Rivette, then, is to describe the dual influences upon his work, what is often rather loosely referred to as the 'dialectic' of Rivette's cinema. This focus on duality colours all areas of the discussion of Rivette's work. It affects the description of his working methods and the organisation of his films: Marc Chevré suggests that *L'Amour par terre* is a very masterful film, of great virtuosity, requiring a high degree of technical organisation, and yet at the same time giving off an impression of total freedom, as though the film were being improvised at random before us.²⁰ Serge Daney encapsulates the same idea in a neat formula when he suggests that the two poles of Rivette's work are "conspiration et improvisation".²¹ This, in turn, affects the uncertain generic placement of Rivette's films. Several critics have noted that much of Rivette's work hesitates, or fluctuates, between the comical and the frightening. Jonathan Rosenbaum, for instance, called *Céline et Julie* Rivette's "first horror-comedy", describing its experience as akin to "a game of catch played over the [...] void".²² The influences that have had a determining effect on Rivette's filmmaking practice are similarly identified as uniting opposing poles of film history: Chevré suggests that Rivette draws as much from Jean Rouch as he does from Jean Cocteau²³; Rosenbaum, meanwhile, offers "Rouch spiced with a dash of Minnelli"²⁴; a more common reference, building on some of Rivette's own critical predilections, is to the twin poles of Lang

¹⁹ Frappat, p. 64.

²⁰ Marc Chevré, "Masques et prodiges", *Cahiers du cinéma*, 364 (October 1984), pp. 41-2, p. 42.

²¹ Serge Daney, "L'Étoffe des Éros", *Libération*, 17 October 1984.

²² Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Work and Play in the House of Fiction: On Jacques Rivette", in *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 142-52, quotations from pp. 151 and 148.

²³ Chevré, "Supplément aux voyages de J.R.", p. 21.

²⁴ Rosenbaum, "Work and Play in the House of Fiction", p. 149.

and Rossellini.²⁵ Naturally, these dual influences are then reflected in the thematic and stylistic organisation of Rivette's films. Hélène Frappat points to the undecidable relations between innocence and perversity in Rivette's cinema, or between what she calls the frontality of absolute honesty and the duplicity of organised deception whereby the honest disclosure of perversion seems to render it innocent, while the appeal to innocence conceals duplicitous intentions.²⁶

But this argument about the innocence or duplicity of the characters in Rivette's films tends then to be folded back into an argument about the duality or duplicity of cinema itself, especially as it relates to theatre, that recurring presence in Rivette's œuvre. Where theatre is immediate, honest, upfront (if only in the sense that the performers are *here before us now*), cinema is duplicitous, deceptive, perverse (if only in the sense that the reality on screen is always already *past*, and may never actually have existed as such, but only been reconstructed through editing).²⁷ Meanwhile, the ambiguous characters of Rivette's fictions are often interpreted as allegories of the filmmaker himself. As Frappat points out, Rivette's films are full of (typically male) manipulators, often specified as theatre directors, who are at once tyrannical and naive, machiavellian and childlike.²⁸ At the same time, Chevie suggests that the importance of absent or peripheral male figures in Rivette's films reflects the desire of the director to "Créer les conditions du surgissement de l'imprévu puis faire mine de s'éclipser, littéralement: *s'effacer*".²⁹ But the director cannot simply disappear: it is in the nature of the role to be at once facilitator – he who elicits performances from the actors – and manipulator – he who shapes, controls and chooses those performances through editing. And generations of Rivette's actresses have

²⁵ See, for instance, Adriano Aprà, "La Géographie du labyrinthe", in Giuffrida (ed.), *Jacques Rivette: La Règle du jeu*, pp. 145-50, p. 145.

²⁶ Frappat, pp. 14-15.

²⁷ Frappat, pp. 18, 22.

²⁸ Frappat, p. 48.

²⁹ Chevie, "Supplément aux voyages de J.R.", p. 23. Among the absent, or largely absent, men in Rivette's œuvre, we might name: Juan in *Paris nous appartient*; Pierre and Igor in *Out 1*; the fathers in *Merry-go-round* (1983), *Haut bas fragile* and *Secret défense*; Cécile's mysterious boyfriend in *La Bande des quatre*; the dead boyfriend in *Histoire de Marie et Julien*.

expressed their surprise upon seeing, in his films, performances that they were not aware of having given, or at least interpretations of their performances that they had not anticipated.

The problem with this kind of interpretation, seductive though it often is, is that it tends to lead into the impasse whereby Rivette's films are always and only interpreted as being *about themselves*. Take for instance Hélène Frappat's consideration of the role of Balzac's *Histoire des treize* in *Out 1*. Frappat suggests that the primary role of the *Histoire des treize* is simply to provide Jean-Pierre Léaud with a script: the Balzac text has little real relation to the narrative of Rivette's film and instead serves as a textual anchor for an actor who was anxious about improvised performance (and indeed Léaud spends long scenes walking the streets of Paris declaiming the text aloud).³⁰ Now there may be some anecdotal truth to this, but it is surely reductive, dispensing, as it does, with the French cultural significance of Balzac, notably to the New Wave directors, and also with the theme of conspiracy which, inherited from Balzac, takes on a particular resonance in post-'68 France. Adriano Aprà says bluntly, of *Out 1*, "Rien n' 'existe' hors du film"³¹, and his subsequent qualification, that the film is not so much a self-enclosed universe as the documentation of the emergence of cinema as a self-enclosed universe, is a matter of semantics that does nothing to alter the fundamental fact of the total occlusion of the social context in which the film was made. In a similar way, the recurring figures of the ghostly, the undead, the absent and the returned in Rivette's films, rather than inspiring any reflection on the nature of possession and loss or the relationships of power and influence played out between men and women (which these films are always also about), automatically lead into discussions of the "spectral" nature of cinema itself, such that Rivette's films can necessarily only be populated by what Chevré calls "des disparus, des revenants et des mediums".³² I would not seek to deny that Rivette's films almost always do incorporate an element of reflection on the nature and operation of cinema. But to focus so insistently upon this as the final truth of

³⁰ Frappat, p. 36.

³¹ Aprà, "La Géographie du labyrinthe", p. 150.

³² Chevré, "Supplément aux voyages de J.R.", p. 20.

Rivette's work risks ignoring the nuanced analyses of human behaviour that make his films, along with those of Chabrol, Rohmer or Truffaut, an invaluable catalogue of evolving social relations in the France of the past half-century.

Once again, though, this way of talking about Rivette's cinema, in which his films are always seen to be about themselves, can be related back to the director's working methods: since Rivette's films are effectively made up as they go along as a function of the relationships established on the set, they necessarily become, in a sense, about themselves. Or, as Frappat puts it, quoting Rivette himself, "*la méthode crée les sujets*"³³: the indeterminacy of the situation on set comes to be reflected in the open-ended narratives of the films. The film, as Marc Chevré adds, does not simply take itself as its own object, but also as its own material, that is the film can be about nothing other than its constituent elements, actors and decor, relationships in time and space. In this way, says Chevré, "Un film de Rivette est la recherche de ce qu'il sera". It is like setting out on a voyage with actors and technicians uncertain of their destination: "*partir – comme pour une aventure au cours de laquelle la vérité du film et de l'histoire vont se découvrir peu à peu*".³⁴ The danger of this approach, though, as Serge Daney saw, is that Rivette films "*toujours la même histoire*".³⁵ And, as both Daney and Chevré have suggested, as Rivette's method becomes more familiar, to both performers and spectators, the trick becomes harder to sustain: a director cannot so easily expect to steal a performance away from his actors without their knowledge when those actors belong to a cine-literate generation that comes post-Rossellini and indeed *post-Rivette*.³⁶ Which is why Chevré, writing in 1989, expresses the hope that Rivette will once again work with a source text as in *Hurlevent*, as though, contrary to most filmmakers, for Rivette it would be more challenging to adapt pre-existing material than to embark upon a film without a script³⁷ (this is, of course, precisely what Rivette did with *Jeanne*

³³ Frappat, p. 49, original italics.

³⁴ Chevré, "Supplément aux voyages de J.R.", p. 21.

³⁵ Serge Daney, "Le Pont du Nord de Jacques Rivette", *Libération*, 26 March 1982.

³⁶ See Daney, "L'Étoffe des Éros" and Chevré, "Supplément", p. 24.

³⁷ Chevré, "Supplément", p. 24.

la Pucelle and *Ne touchez pas la hache*, and precisely why those films would merit more attention than they have so far received in Rivette studies).

But, even if Rivette's films are often necessarily about themselves, that does not prevent elements of external reality from infiltrating and infecting them. On the contrary, given the number of people and properties involved – given the amount of *money* implicated – there is no such thing as a closed system in cinema, which is probably more open than most other art forms. As an example of the closed circuit of Rivette criticism, we might consider another comment by Hélène Frappat. Frappat suggests that, in Rivette's films, the conflicts turning around secrets and lies, confession and denial are typically gendered in a certain way: a male character seeks to deny the reality of a situation, which the woman or women must then recover through speech and dialogue, in particular, often (notably in *Céline et Julie*), through story-telling, compulsive lying, mythomania.³⁸ This analysis rejoins, to a large extent, Daney's intuition that Rivette's cinema could be divided into “la triste paranoïa masculine et la joyeuse hystérie des femmes”.³⁹ But, predictably enough, Frappat's automatic reaction to the discovery of this recurring structure in Rivette's films is to interpret it as a reflection of the situation on set: the male figure seeking to deny or conceal his manipulation of events is *the director* and the women telling lies in an effort to slip from his control are *his actresses*. Doubtless this is true, but it is disappointing that Frappat's insight could not also have provided the spur for a gender-political analysis of the way in which Rivette's films reflect and interrogate real power relations operative in wider society, the ways in which men seek to refute their own continued hegemony and the ways in which women use the power of speech to craft creative solutions of resistance. If such an observation may in itself appear banal, a detailed analysis of the modalities by which these power relations are played out in individual films by Rivette would surely be a rewarding, and long-overdue, enterprise. And, on the subject of gender, we might ask why Rivette's countless heroines – so unanimously approved as a good thing in a male-dominated film industry – have remained, for

³⁸ Frappat, p. 195.

³⁹ Serge Daney, “Revoir *L'Amour fou*”, *Libération*, 22 August 1982.

the most part, so sexless.⁴⁰ It is as though the self-creating will and imagination so prized by Rivette's heroines remained attached to the playfulness of childhood and were incompatible with a mature sexuality.⁴¹ But on this point, a comment made by Jonathan Rosenbaum in 1977 remains just as true over thirty years later: "these and related matters raise serious political and philosophical questions that most writing about Rivette has tended to avoid".⁴²

Instead of relating the director's films to issues in wider society, much writing about Rivette tends to leave us with a rather romantic and ahistorical conception of *mise-en-scène* as a heroic struggle. This is how Frappat defines *mise-en-scène* in *Jacques Rivette, secret compris*: it is a struggle to overcome obstacles, a war on discouragement and anxiety, a fight to create the world of the film against unforeseen hazards and with the assistance of fortuitous accidents.⁴³ This allows Frappat grandly to declare that *mise-en-scène* is a mystery: "La mise en scène est le secret du cinéma, son mystère, le lieu même où s'exerce sa pensée".⁴⁴ But, with this declaration, her argument comes full circle. Consider the logic of the following sequence of ideas: Jacques Rivette's cinema is a mystery; it is a mystery because it (and he) is dual, seemingly paradoxical, at once carefully constructed and totally free, honest and duplicitous, the site of childlike games and adult terrors; but this duality is part of the operation of cinema itself (cinema is always a duplicitous re-staging of an original, innocent reality), therefore Rivette's films are films about themselves; Rivette's method of working makes his films into films about the experience of filming; but *mise-en-scène* is nothing other than the over-coming of obstacles in the experience of filming, in other words, since it is unpredictable, it is a mystery; Jacques Rivette's cinema is a mystery... The circularity of the argument is clear and it is difficult to believe that Rivette himself could approve of this conception of *mise-en-scène*. For, although Rivette, in some of his writing on cinema, occasionally made mystical, or at least mystifying remarks about *mise-en-*

⁴⁰ Rivette's most astute commentators have, in fact, pointed out this peculiar asexuality in his work, but without seeking to analyse it. See Daney, "L'Étoffe des Éros" and Chevré, "Supplément", p. 22.

⁴¹ As ever, there are exceptions, most notably *L'Histoire de Marie et Julien*, Rivette's most sexual film to date.

⁴² Rosenbaum, "Introduction", p. 2.

⁴³ Frappat, p. 55.

⁴⁴ Frappat, p. 77.

scène, he also had the practical sense to remind his reader that to have ideas about cinema means having ideas about camera placement, about framing, about the succession of shots.⁴⁵ For Rivette *mise-en-scène* was about finding the most appropriate form for a given subject. But if, according to Frappat, the subject of a film is simply a reflection of its form, then how could a form ever be anything less than perfectly appropriate? Her circular argument tends to disallow the very possibility of a critical judgement or reflection on film (and on Rivette's films, first and foremost) whereas, for Rivette himself, the concept of *mise-en-scène* was designed to facilitate judgement, as in the famous example of his dismissal of Pontecorvo's *Kapò* (1960) as "obscene": obscene because the style was obscenely inappropriate for a film about the Nazi death camps.⁴⁶ Admittedly, academic film studies has traditionally been reluctant to take on the role of critical evaluation of individual films, a task devolved to professional film critics. But the overlap between the two professions is considerable, and the will to evaluate is rarely eradicated altogether from academic film writing. It is not uncommon, for instance, for writers on Godard to dismiss certain periods of his filmmaking (the 'radical' Marxist-Leninist years of the late '60s, for example, or the 'difficult' work of the late '80s) as less successful applications of his signature style. Most writing on Rivette – and this is the case *whether academic or critical* – seems yet to have attained this evaluative perspective over the whole *œuvre*.

Another, and related, tendency of Rivette criticism's wilful disregard for *the films* is the frequency with which writers choose to discuss their own spectatorial investment in the films, in other words discussing *themselves* in preference to *the work*. Commentators have long sought to explain how Rivette's films, if only by virtue of their extraordinary length, offer a different kind of spectatorial experience. This can result in critics listing their reactions or emotions during a screening – Frappat describes herself, while watching films by Rivette, as "Déroutée, enchantée,

⁴⁵ See Jacques Rivette, "De l'invention", *Cahiers du cinéma*, 27 (October 1953), pp. 59-60. It should be clear, here, that, in this article, I am using "mise-en-scène" in the broader French sense (as most thoroughly developed by Rivette himself) and not in the narrow Anglo-American sense of the "look" of a film that excludes camera movement and editing.

⁴⁶ See Jacques Rivette, "De l'abjection", *Cahiers du cinéma*, 120 (June 1961), pp. 54-5.

curieuse, solitaire, émue, agitée de pensées, inquiète, simultanément joyeuse et triste, fascinée, aux aguets, active”.⁴⁷ Elsewhere, critics discuss their deep sense of identification with Rivette’s characters, their difficulty in accepting them as less than real people. Frappat’s book on the director could be interpreted as one long exercise in identification with the world of Rivette’s films. Throughout the book, but especially at the beginning and end, Frappat insists upon the frequency with which Rivette’s films seem to document a passage from childhood, or youth, to adulthood or, in some cases, like *L’Amour fou* and arguably *Céline et Julie*, the reverse. This thematic material is then combined with a very French cinephile tradition in which watching movies is understood as an education about life that facilitates the transition from the passive receptivity of youth to the active productivity of adulthood. This notion of cinephilia is surely tied to the specific historical generation of the *Cahiers* critics who spent a decade teaching themselves about cinema by watching it, before, in several cases, making the successful transition to filmmaking at around the age of thirty. André S. Labarthe, interviewed by Frappat, sums up this sense of film-going as a rite of passage when he says “Être cinéophile, c’était une façon de ne plus avoir de parents”.⁴⁸ Thus, when Frappat concludes her book on Rivette with a section devoted to “la femme de trente ans”, the self-referential circle is closed, since she, herself, was around thirty at the time of writing the book.

The ease with which writing about Rivette can get caught up in autobiographical considerations is also demonstrated in Frappat’s first novel, an “autofiction” published in 2004 entitled *Sous réserve*. *Sous réserve* is a short text made up of fragmentary observations – some no longer than a line, none bigger than a paragraph – taking in Kant and Rousseau but also the author’s (or narrator’s) own sentimental history. Included in the text are a handful of cryptic remarks about Rivette including the dramatic assertion: “À l’âge de vingt-six ans *Haut Bas*

⁴⁷ Frappat, p. 190.

⁴⁸ Frappat, p. 62. As a not dissimilar example, we might point to the way Serge Daney isolates Rivette’s article on *Kapo* as the inspiration behind his own subsequent vocation as a critic. See Daney’s autobiographical text “Le travelling de *Kapo*”, *Trafic*, 4 (1992), pp. 5-19, reprinted as the first chapter of *Persévérance* (Paris: P.O.L., 1994).

Fragile m'a sauvée".⁴⁹ *Sous réserve* turns out to be a profoundly Rivettian story about family secrets and characters who are haunted by the lies they have told and the secrets they have concealed. The narrative culminates with Frappat's discovery that her father, a painter, committed suicide. Hence the significance, at that time in her life, of *Haut bas fragile*, a film about women reinventing their lives in order to throw off the spectre of absent, unreliable, or criminal parents. But, if writing *Sous réserve* enables Frappat to come to terms with her own past, it also allows, in parallel, for an intriguing meditation on Rivette's films, since the narrative is largely built around a reflection on the unstable relationship between secrets and lies, so often the material of Rivette's cinema. Not only that, but the book begins to ask questions about the relationship between secrets, lies and *politics*, a stage of enquiry too often absent from commentary on Jacques Rivette. Remembering her past in militant activism (specifically targeting Holocaust deniers, in other words *political liars*), Frappat begins to wonder whether her own political commitment may itself have been a lie, an identity created in order to conceal emotional secrets that she couldn't admit, to herself or to others.⁵⁰ In thus interrogating her own political motivations, Frappat perhaps unwittingly uncovers what is the subject, or at least the subtext, of some of Rivette's most significant films: *Paris nous appartient*, *Out 1*, *Le Pont du Nord*, but also, perhaps less obviously, the 1990s works *Jeanne la Pucelle*, *Haut bas fragile* and *Secret défense*, are films about how social, political and commercial engagements are tainted and undone by the lies that we tell ourselves and the secrets we keep.

It is significant, then, given the curiously peripheral nature of much writing on the director, that perhaps Frappat's most illuminating commentary on Jacques Rivette is to be found in a book that is ostensibly not about Rivette at all! Eschewing close reading, Rivette criticism tends to model itself upon the strange and seductive world of his films: the analysis itself sometimes takes the form of a *game* (spot the recurring theme!), but a game that can *never be finished* (hence the incompleteness, the fragmentary quality of much of this writing); it is

⁴⁹ Hélène Frappat, *Sous réserve* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2004), p. 109.

⁵⁰ See, in particular, Frappat, *Sous réserve*, p. 27.

secretive, not giving too much away, anxious to preserve the mystery of Rivette's films; and, just as these are *films about films*, writing about Rivette is often *criticism about the critic*, the exploration of the film's effect on the spectator becomes an excuse for *talking about oneself*. It is intended that the articles in this issue, while occasionally maintaining affectionate ties to a sometimes charming and no doubt well-established tradition of writing about Rivette, should concern themselves more both with the substance of the film texts and with the real connections that exist between Rivette's films and external realities, be they physical, social or artistic. Thus Roland-François Lack's painstaking mapping of the physical locations in *Paris nous appartient* demonstrates how the precision of the film's geography paradoxically contributes to the disconcerting ambiguity of its dénouement. Mary Wiles enumerates the breadth of cultural influences operating in *Out 1*, from the serial narratives of Balzac and Feuillade to the artistic modernity of Pierre Boulez and Eugène Ionesco, while Alison Smith reveals the decisive influence of Luigi Pirandello over Rivette's work, not only where he appears most obviously (in *Va savoir*), but also the hidden influence that determines much of *Céline et Julie vont en bateau*. Meanwhile Patrick ffrench analyses the group dynamics and logic of number in Rivette's films, implying that it may be his interest in *networks* that sets the director's work apart from that of his New Wave colleagues. Garin Dowd discusses the many meanings and configurations of incompleteness in the "Filles du feu" films of the 1970s and shows how *Histoire de Marie et Julien* could only ever represent a partial completion of their project. Oliver Speck explores the use of duration in Rivette's work, suggesting that Rivette makes explicit action or footage that would be excised from classical narrative cinema and that we can think of this not just in the empirical terms of actual footage that would otherwise have been left on the cutting room floor, but in terms of the limitless *virtual* footage associated with other points of view. Finally, Margaret Ozierski investigates the idea of the 'original' in *La Belle Noiseuse*, finding parallels between Rivette's discourse on art and major currents of twentieth-century aesthetic philosophy.