



WHILE THE CITY SLEEPS

By Dennis Lim

Even when Jacques Rivette's films end up in a fictional hall of mirrors, they never lose sight of the flux of the real world, the secret vibrations of the living city. Rivette may be the greatest of all Paris filmmakers, or at least the one most attuned to its dream life. His first feature, titled *Paris Belongs to Us* (1960), opens with an epigraph that declares: "Paris belongs to no one." The contradiction sums up his sense of the city both as a playground and a source of forbidding mystery. Many of his films — *Out 1* (1971), *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974), and *Up, Down, Fragile* (1995) — alternate their interior passages with open-air escapades. But his greatest depiction of Paris — the one that ventures furthest beyond the picturesque — can be found in *Le Pont du Nord* (1981), which transforms the city into a life-size board game, filled with roll-of-the-dice surprises and traps.

Because Rivette shares the surrealist ambition of making everyday reality strange, his films often test the possibilities of fiction as well as of documentary. Dense with codes and conspiracies, they thrive on the generative potential of stories, which seem to become autonomous forces, taking on lives of their own. But Rivette has also famously noted that "every film is a documentary of its own making," and he has often ceded control to his actors in a bid to harness their spontaneous energies. As Jeanne Balibar, who starred in two of his later films, described his method: "There are some people in a room, and we'll see what happens. You let the unconscious of the actors do the work." The overall effect is of something being conjured before our eyes and somehow extending beyond the screen. Rivette's best films induce a participatory trance. His signature special effect is the uncanny impression that the story is being generated by the characters as we watch, or by the very act of our watching.

Like *Céline and Julie*, his best-known and best-loved film, *Le Pont du Nord* chronicles the shared adventure of two female co-conspirators who seem to be searching for the story as they go along. Marie (Bulle Ogier), a 40ish blond in red with a dark past and a severe case of claustrophobia, has newly arrived in Paris from a stint in prison, looking to reunite with a lover, Julien (Pierre Clémenti). Baptiste (Pascale Ogier), a dark-haired, leather-jacketed wild child, speeds around the city on her



scooter, armed with a compass and a switchblade that she uses to gouge out the staring eyes on advertising posters. The two women keep running into each other, and Baptiste insists it's fate: "One time, that's an accident. Two times, that's chance. Three times, that's destiny" (The mother-daughter casting adds subtextual intrigue and heightens the poignancy: Pascale would die three years later of drug-related causes, a day before her 26th birthday, not long after her breakthrough performance in Eric Rohmer's *Full Moon in Paris* (1984)).

Rivette's ingenious solution to budget constraints was to shoot entirely outdoors, and mostly in broad daylight, eliminating the costs of locations and lights. The pretext is Marie's claustrophobia, which first registers as an odd superstition — she refuses to enter a bakery, asking for two croissants to be brought to her at the doorway (She also has a feline habit of basking in the sun, and some of the film's most indelible images, beautifully captured on 16mm by the great cinematographer, William Lubtchansky, are of faces in sunlight). Wandering the city, Baptiste and Marie call to mind earlier Paris psychogeographers: the Surrealists, who roamed the streets in a state of *disponibilité*, leaving themselves open to chance, and the Situationists, who cultivated the practice of urban drifting (*derivé*). The drift becomes more purposeful when the women discover a map of the city, on which a spiral has been drawn,



divided into squares. Marie interprets this grid through the lens of a children's game, the Game of the Goose, a variation on Snakes and Ladders. Although an early encounter takes Marie to the top of the Arc de Triomphe, much of the action in *Le Pont du Nord* unfolds far from the touristy precincts of Paris, amid half-demolished buildings and construction sites on the outskirts and in the semi-industrial areas along the Canal Saint Martin. William Burroughs characterized his Interzone, another marginal space, as a place where "nothing is true, everything is permitted." So too in Rivette's in-between spaces, where anything can happen and where ruptures in the fabric of reality are most likely to reside.

If *Céline and Julie* implies that what we see is provisional, subject to variation and repetition, *Le Pont du Nord* is more concretely anchored in its time and place. "October or November 1980 — already a long time ago," reads the opening title. This was the end of the first term of President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (who would be ousted by Francois Mitterand the following year), and Rivette has said that one impulse behind the film was to capture the mood in France. The French capital was still tense after bombings at a Jewish student canteen and a synagogue. Julien's briefcase, which the women swipe at one point, contains a dossier of clippings on various, mostly political, crimes, including Marie's fictional one and real-life assassinations and insurrections. This was, in other words, a jittery time, a season for paranoia.

If *Céline and Julie* borrowed its narrative engine from a Henry James novel, here the plot, such as it is, has been lifted from spy and gangster movies. Baptiste, who breaks frequently into kung fu moves

and charges, Quixote-like, at the city's lion statues, sees cloak-and-dagger intrigue everywhere. The question, as in so many Rivette films is whether it is more alarming to think that everything is connected, or that nothing is. The film itself echoes her paranoid point of view, with its multiple circular pans, suggesting the surveillance of a rotating security camera. Or is it just a heightened awareness of the world, a transformative way of looking that reveals what is hidden in plain sight? Baptiste envisions an amusement-park attraction as a fire-breathing dragon, which in turn helps us imagine an excavator in the following shot as a rapacious predator.

Marie and Baptiste's urban adventure makes literal the quest of Rivette's other heroes and heroines. They try to impose a shape on the shapelessness of existence, to find a story that accounts for the "reign of terror" that is "real life," to use Baptiste's formulation. Their enigmatic map turns everyday life into a game, and the city into a maze, but Rivette knows well that the labyrinth has long been associated with death. For a few sunny days, the map serves as a guide to reality, but it's drawn on top of an abyss.

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