"Becoming Image": Deleuzian Echoes in Jacques Rivette's "La Religieuse"

Fabienne-Sophie Chauderlot

In an extensive article published in 1984, "Revoir *La Religieuse*," Jean-Claude Bonnet asserts that a reconsideration of Jacques Rivette's film demands two preliminary gestures. First the film's scandal should be retraced in detail. Second, its place within the New Wave should be forcefully acknowledged. If Bonnet is to be believed, a review of the film therefore has to be voiced over by a stereophonic discourse. On the one hand, it should be surrounded by the clamor of the legal and political issues it raised. On the other hand, it should recall the theoretical texts of New Wave writers-turned-directors to whom Rivette himself belongs.

Such a logocentric emphasis is to be expected. In the mid-eighties, when Bonnet was writing about the classical novel's cinematographic adaptation, a developing film theory largely relied on semiotics, that is a decoding of cinema seen as text, or *ecriture*. In the spirit of Metz and Barthes, numerous French film critics attempted to translate a predominantly linguistic apparatus and adapt it to the visual and mobile signs of cinema. Hence the importance of the textual polemic surrounding Rivette's film, the emphasis put on the camera being a "pen" (in Astruc's sense), the relating to the narrative in terms of a syntax and the parallels to Diderot's text which both articulate and limit Bonnet's approach to the film within a reading process.

Considering the extensive and fruitful work that has been accomplished in film theory since then, it may be possible today to release the film *La Religieuse* from such strict structures. I would contend that these approaches might have played a part in its remaining relatively undervalued and therefore intend to explore the film from a much more visual perspective. In order to do so, I propose to reconsider it in the context of the dense but extremely rich work of Gilles Deleuze on cinema. Surprisingly, the concepts that Deleuze develops around and within images have, so far, had but little impact on film criticism. For

instance, even though the exhaustive survey by Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis referred to attempts to lead the reader "beyond" structuralism, they never allude to Deleuze's own endeavor to carry film theory beyond semiotics. It appears therefore that what Dudley Andrew, had already acknowledged at the time when "Revoir *La Religieuse*" was published, namely that "it is the literary critics who control the discourse about film," remains the case in the present period. Which does not mean that it should do so exclusively.

The question of such preponderance is easily answered by the obvious fact with which art critics have been confronted for centuries: regardless of its object, the sole medium of criticism is language. The only way of elaborating beyond the physical impact of images is through the use of words. As Barthes and Benveniste have shown, language is a great semiotic matrix. But what Deleuze suggests in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* is that using language to deal with visual matter does not necessarily mean imposing linguistic structures upon them. In his two volumes, the philosopher oscillates between H. Bergson's conception of memory, matter, and consciousness and C. S. Peirce's taxonomy of signs to propose numerous concepts that ultimately allow a radically different approach to and reception of images. The purpose of this essay is to focus on the optical dimension of Rivette's *La Religieuse*. I propose to see *La Religieuse* as an illustration of the "affection-images" that Deleuze defines in opposition to "action-images" and "perception-images." I will show that this film's primordial quality is what Deleuze, speaking about Bacon's paintings, calls a "haptic function," namely the power that sight has to touch.

The postulate that grounds Deleuze's otherwise elaborate and puzzling broad survey of Russian, North-American, French, and German cinema masterpieces is simple: "The great directors of cinema may be compared, in our view, not merely with painters, architects or musicians, but also with thinkers. They think with movement-images and time-images as philosophers do through concepts." What films articulate, for Deleuze, is an original process of thinking. It is traced through critical language but it is nevertheless intrinsically linked to a non-linguistic, new, and specific technology. In order to embark on a Deleuzian apprehension of cinematic images, it is therefore first crucial to understand what he means by the term "concept." For Deleuze, philosophy cannot be a reflection on something else, it is pure creation and creation of concepts. These are therefore not concepts 'of'; they do not refer to an external object of thinking, but are concrete manifestations of thought, not means but ends in themselves. The philosopher thus approaches filmmakers as peers. The latter produce images; they have a different form, but they fulfill the same conceptual function as philosophical concepts; that is to rethink becoming.

Beyond the apparent abstraction of the comparison, if one assumes that there could be a "becoming-film" of the image, as there is a "becoming-philosophy" of the concept, one can see how Deleuze's reworking of Bergson and Peirce can apply to film. Although composed of twenty-four still frames per second, images are perceived in a constant motion and each film unfolds along a moving line. In fact, cinematic becoming follows "a figure which is always in the process of being formed or dissolving through the movement of lines and points. "(*Cinema 1*, 5 [14]). This is the reason why a film presents to our consciousness a series

of movement-images or time-images and not sequences of images to which movement and time are added. Consequently, to seize movement -- and time-images in their becoming process may be better served by retracing how images move in and out of each other rather than by refining a way to anchor them within more rigid semiotic grids. *La Religieuse* allows and, in my opinion, invites such an approach.

Although a respectful adaptation of Diderot's 1760 epistolary novel, the film opens with an ambiguous disclaimer. A white on black paragraph states that Diderot's work has been freely adapted. It denies that the film is an exact depiction of religious institutions, be they those of the eighteenth or any other century. And it asks that the spectators refrain from making broad generalizations regarding that issue. Yet, as a somber voice-over recalls Diderot's speedy writing process and explains the routine of life in the convents, the following nine shots focus on historical drawings representing various convent scenes and rituals. The cover of Marguerite Delamarre's *Memoirs*interrupts the pictorial representation of the convent's rites and constitutes her as a model for the heroine, Suzanne Simonin. Eventually, a view of the Longchamp Abbey where she will first reside brings the slide projection to its final three close-ups: the cover of a very old edition of *La Religieuse* is followed by its modern counterpart edited in the 10/18 paperback collection. Finally, an extract closes the textual bracketing and gives the spectator ample time to read a passage of Louis Bourdaloue's "Sermon sur le devoir des p□res par rapport a la vocation de leurs enfants." Fathers are warned not to sacrifice their daughters and anger God by forcing them to become nuns.

The upcoming story is thus authenticated by historical engravings of convents, and the spectacle is legitimized by its literary sources. But the books also function at a more visual and physical level: the material presence of their jackets seems to replace or hide Delamarre's and Diderot's words under an opaque surface. Rivette invites the spectator to look at the texts as a visual object. What the film proposes to do is not to retell their story but to rethink it in terms of images. The credits appear after the traditional three knocks which, in French theaters, summon the audience's attention before the curtain is raised. If the unexpected sounds are reminiscent of Rivette and Gruault's prior adaptation of the novel for the stage, they also operate a transition between the written and the visual and herald a passage from the static reading experience to the essentially dynamic exposure to filmic images. Moreover, they prepare for the opening master shot. The spectators will find themselves within the audience of friends and family having come to attend Suzanne's official vows and symbolic wedding with God. But that is part of the literary story. Visually, the ceremony is re-presented behind vertical bars that force the spectator to grasp it in spatial terms. Clearly evoking those of a jail, the lines both block the vision of Suzanne, and draw the spectators' attention to the film's object of focus: enclosure. Numerous other scenes will be framed or traversed by some form of grids. They are only one of the linear elements which concretely delimit the already closed convent spaces. Indeed, all the locations are striated by vertical, horizontal, or diagonal lines, be they the actual bars separating the nuns from their visitors, the walls of the corridors and hallways, the omnipresent candle holders which often bracket Suzanne's body, the small window panes, the crucifixes further dividing the few smooth surfaces, or even the maze of drying sheets surrounding Suzanne while she works as a laundress. In his 1967 review of the film, Jacques Aumont

summarized this aspect of Rivette's film quite accurately: "As regards the subject, it is presented in a set of grids which facilitates the cinema's total control over the background -- signs of premonitions or of reminiscence, formal or gestural constants (opening or closing of doors, Suzanne's kneeling and lying face down on the ground, etc.) which, being used throughout the film repeatedly but on different modes, constitute the structure of the very bars behind which Suzanne will be locked" (translation mine).

Such a careful demarcation of space effectuates a conversion from text to image, and it also reveals a shift in the narrative. While Diderot's first person narrative tells the story of a person, Rivette's film demonstrates the process of a confinement. The early founding scene where Suzanne tries to discuss her fate with her mother shows them in a narrow and dark staircase out of which she exits only to be locked up for three months in her bedroom, then be transferred from one convent to another. Rivette will then multiply the construction of a very limited number of enclosed and reduced spaces in which Suzanne is mostly centered and very often framed by the internal dividing lines that dark windows, candleholders, or crucifixes trace to further delimit her surroundings.

But the filmic apparatus is also efficient in displaying the power plays and coercive strategies that Foucault would describe so well less than a decade after the film's debut. If the novel allowed an in-depth psychological analysis of Suzanne's ordeal, the film's images are able to give volume and matter to the concrete means that restrain individuals who resist disciplinary normalization. Aesthetically, in *La Religieuse*, space and time are not elements of or in the world; they are tools to both confine the character and contain the spectator within an unbearable feeling of claustrophobia and suffocation. Which is why the text becomes images through a deliberate *parti-pris* of slowness, repetition and overall somberness.

Due to their main subject matter, the vast majority of the scenes serve therefore to both construct and fragment the unlivable space in which Suzanne is cloistered. Mostly taken by a fixed camera or with very restricted dolly movement, the sequences are nearly always interior scenes -- only twenty scenes out of two hundred and forty-nine are outside. They further the sense of claustrophobia by limiting severely our view of the surrounding space. The convents are never presented in long shots; they appear to be a series of segments of hallways, stairs, arches, a refectory or a chapel which the spectator cannot picture as any sort of cohesive whole. The depth of the garden scenes is barred by trees or the convents' arches. Similarly, the characters' bodies are divided by the lines of the veils. In the chiaroscuro light of interior scenes, the nuns' heads appear to be severed from the rest of their bodies by the brightness of the cloth and the shoulder piece of the habits. Their faces are virtually split in two by the white horizontal line that traverses their forehead. Rivette's manipulation of lighting keeps most of the surrounding volumes in the dark or in a gray shade, which blurs their content, while, by contrast, all the white elements appear to be neatly circumscribed, even more detached from a bluish sinister mass reminiscent of the non-discernable but powerful latent forces that inhabit gothic atmospheres. Alternating primarily between medium close-ups and medium shots, the camera only rarely allows the entire body to

occupy the frame. The *cadrage* thus tends to estrange the characters from their own physical totality while it locks convent life in a complete isolation from the rest of the world.

Such alienation is emphasized by the intense agitation with which Suzanne moves throughout the convents. Although she is often rushing, or displaced from one cell to another, her mobility allows her no progress. On the contrary, it offers an image of energy spent to no avail and reinforces the impression of paralysis associated here with convent life. Most of the time, Suzanne simply "bounces" from wall to wall. She is shown at one point running down the corridor, ziz-zagging from one side to the other. But her movement is always barred by some form of wall, be it her parents' decision, the denial of her plea to be released, or a series of persons literally standing in her way. The scene where she is being persecuted by a group of nuns, after a novice has fainted for fear that Suzanne would hurt her, is emblematic of the human elements that take part in the construction of a maze around her. Although she runs, she never arrives anywhere else than in her cell, the dungeons or communal spaces. From a Deleuzian standpoint, based on theses developed by Bergson, movement should no longer be comprehended in terms of the space that has been covered. Instead, Deleuze proposes to perceive movement within the interval between two positions: "space covered is past, movement is present, the act of covering" (*Cinema 1*, 1 [9]). Suzanne's permanent in-between position illustrates the process characterized by the gerund in the concept of "covering."

As a result, but also as a symptom of Suzanne's situation, her trajectory is reduced in the film, before her ill-fated escape from the convent, to her passing between a series of hermetic spaces. She goes between her parents' house and the convent. In Longchamp, she constantly traverses the convent's corridors to get to her cells, the chapel or the parlor. She leaves one convent only to enter another one. Later at Saint Eutrope in Arpajon, she mostly moves between two landmarks: her cell and the Mother Superior's suite. Even in the important scene in the park, when both Suzanne and the Mother Superior are sitting outside, Suzanne seems to be torn between two places. She tries to stay away as the Superior gets closer and closer to her. At the same time, her attention is also called upon the group of nuns who are playing blindman's bluff with a young novice. Suzanne's action in finally breaking away from the Superior to run at the novice's rescue further inscribes her between various forms of traps: the "trap" of seduction that Mme de*** is trying to set for her and the trap the game sets for the blindfolded novice. Even after she has physically fled from the convent, she is still unable to escape her mental training. While working as a farm hand or as a laundress, her reflexive ritualistic words and gestures still prevent her from participating in a solely civil life. She remains caught in an indeterminate transitory space. Finally, Rivette's daring departure from the novel is also symbolic of her aimless displacement. I am inclined to differ with critics who consider this ending "forced." If one accepts the hypothesis that the film, contrarily to the novel which gives priority to characterization, is as much about the process of confinement as it is about its victim, Suzanne's strength becomes secondary to that of the forces which oppress her. Suicide does not appear to be a weak alternative but the only one, after she has tried everything else. The film focuses on her strength in contrast to society's power to control and regulate bodies, a force exemplified by Sister Sainte-Christine. The sado-masochism of Suzanne's second Mother

Superior is an understandable behavior for those who have incorporated the repressive structures and occupy, as Philip Stewart beautifully puts it, "a topology of suffering." Suicide is an acceptable option for those who cannot tolerate such structures. Far from being a sign of weakness that would be contradictory to her character, Suzanne's final gesture may be perceived as the sole possible opening within the film's leit-motiv of enclosure. Suzanne finally liberates herself from all frames.

Thus the cinematic experience of movement within fixedness duplicates and objectifies Suzanne's trapped motion. As it becomes images, The Nun shifts from telling the intense and varied emotional turmoil of its heroine to showing the mechanisms of enclosure that generate her emotions. The novel focused on "the story of a young girl who is forced into the convent by her parents, and in spite of great obstacles, maintains (with a suspicious obstinacy) her ignorance and its attendant 'innocence,'" as Rivers summarizes it. But it also offered a strong indictment of all physical and material forms of confinement, discipline, censorship, and control. Rivette's adaptation forcefully restores to the text the physical and material dimensions of the "*enfermement*" -- especially since, technically, "the place only exists on the screen: it is the film's movement which constructs the background." Consequently, Bonnet's characterization of the film as an "anthology of pathetic scenes where emotion is contained in a strict frame" misses the focal point (P. 67). Rivette's objective is not to depict a pathetic destiny but to materialize the conditions of pathos through images. In this sense, they fall under a type that Deleuze, adapting a Peircian concept, calls "firstness." Deleuze explains that:

Peirce does not conceal the fact that firstness is difficult to define, because it is felt rather than conceived: it concerns what is new in experience, what is fresh, fleeting and nevertheless eternal...these are qualities or powers considered for themselves, without reference to anything else, independently of any question of their actualisation. It is that which is as it is for itself and in itself (*Cinema 1*, 98-99 [138-40]).

For Deleuze, firstness, or primeite, is a category which provides an immediate and instantaneous consciousness of a possibility (p. 98). It does not represent a sensation, feeling, or idea but the quality of a sensation or a feeling. Peirce refers to the signs of this category as "qualisigns"; that is, "any quality in so far as it is a sign" when a "quality is whatever it is positively in itself"(Peirce, 19).

One finds numerous images in The Nun that are characterized by firstness, and these are primarily what Deleuze calls "affection-images." Affection-images add to but do not change the character's control over her or his environment. For instance, Suzanne is repeatedly shown in the center of the frame, kneeling and praying. While she implores quite a few different people: God in her parents' house, various priests, her mother, her Mother Superiors, it is always in vain. The repeated images recall and reaffirm an ageless common ritual, they contribute to remind us of Suzanne's genuine faith, but none of the prayer scenes bring about any personal event. Paradoxically, in this religious universe, praying remains powerless. Affection-images thus are opposed to action-images, which result in a modification of the situation. By definition,

they only convey affects, which, for Deleuze, are impersonal, and they remain independent from "all determinate space-time; but [it is] nonetheless created in a history which produces it as the expressed and the expression of a space or a time, of an epoch or a milieu (99). Praying is constitutive of Suzanne's upbringing as linked to the history of religion, but it has no bearing on her story. In the film, Suzanne's prostrated body becomes a vessel for images of rituals, but she hardly ever is an agent. Rivette's careful exposure of Anna Karina's face emphasizes the importance of affects. The whiteness of her make-up and the flatness given to her features by the lighting transform her face into a surface on which emotions seem to be projected from the outside rather than reflecting an interiority. Indeed, affects, as Deleuze specifies, "can be grasped in two ways: either as actualised in a state of things, or as expressed on a face, a face-equivalent or a 'proposition" (p. 99). The editing in *La Religieuse* forces the spectator to alternate between these two poles. Rivette conveys, for instance, the inescapable confinement that define the state of things surrounding women in the society of that period through a variety of strategies. The lines, bars, and grids internalize and reduce the possibility of affects to a small category: claustrophobia, fear, hopelessness, injustice. While they delimit Suzanne's emotions and her range of actions, they also constrict the spectator's field of vision. Rivette's images are rarely long shots, and they further represent enclosure through a form of bareness; we do not get an ample view of the scenes, which are generally pretty devoid of objects to view as well. Rivette opts for a minimalism which goes well beyond that of the religious context. Deleuze's remarks concerning possible uses of visual and auditory effects in affection-images clarify the effects achieved in Rivette's film, which creates

a purely optical and sound situation [which] does not extend into action any more than it is induced by an action. It makes us grasp something intolerable and unbearable. Not a brutality as nervous aggression, an exaggerated violence that can always be extracted from the sensory-motor relations in the action-image. Nor is it a matter of scenes of terror...It is a matter of something too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful, and which henceforth outstrips our sensory-motor capacities (*Cinema 2*, 18 [29]).

Deleuze seems to say that the power of affection-images thus reside in their intensity, and not, as could have been expected, in their blatantly spectacular dimensions. Rivette's *parti-pris* of not only pictural but also dramatic minimalism illustrates Deleuze's theoretical description. The film is devoid of all the extreme scenes that Diderot had felt necessary to include to secure the Marquis de Croismare's sympathy. The most overt forms of torture, like the glass thrown under Suzanne's feet or the sisters stepping on her body outside the chapel, as well as the explicit sexual gestures have been deliberately toned down in the visual representation. Bonnet suggests that the director's restraint was an attempt to avoid the B films effect or to be easier on the "spectator's psychological vulnerability" (68). I rather see such editing as coherent both with the general *depouillement* of the direction and the particular will to emphasize the impact of each object, scene, or the general ambiance by giving to a minimal number of affects an overpowering quality. Like Suzanne's cell which is gradually emptied of all objects of comfort every time she is punished by her second Mother Superior, the images seem to be cleared of any superfluous element, and the violence of her treatment rid of any gratuitous demonstrations. The anxiety and sympathy

that Suzanne's character is able to mobilize in the spectator are therefore never melodramatic. Visually, and in keeping with typical affection-images, the scenes present little variety and therefore very few possibilities of action: a small amount of furniture, candleholders, crucifixes and the nuns' tunics compose most frames. They are invariably drowned in various shades of the blue of the walls, light, and habits or the gray of the stone buildings. Few colors appear and these have a simple emblematic function: the extremely rare use of red generally denotes the presence of a male superior while the few touches of pink and yellow in the flowers, seen only at the very end, emphasize the female control of Saint Eutrope. The red of male authority, and the pink of female negotiation with it, thus bracket the indeterminate bluish-gray of Suzanne's unbearable intermediate position.

Moreover, within each frame, large geometrical spaces are left plain and empty so as to effect a better visual transformation of objects and bodies into a raw materialization of the power of the confrontation. As Deleuze notes, such rarefaction generates an inorganic presence in these elements, the very absence of life to which Suzanne is intensely sensitive. Even the cuts are clean: no dissolving or fading which could attenuate the overall harshness of the *ambiance*, but strict passages from one scene to another. Rivette has eliminated the narrative violence only to better replace it by the passive aggressive sharpness of a succession of minimal vignettes. His visual universe is often painfully dry.

The sound track is, similarly, rather meager. Contrarily to what the spectator would expect from a historical movie, it features little of the classical music which normally accompanies this genre. The typical musical score is here replaced by instances of dissonant and rather progressive compositions. Although at times complemented by strange noises -- water permeating the walls, thunder, frogs, and crickets -- the sound mix is mostly reduced to a minimum of unidentifiable sounds that recur over and over again throughout the film. In complete harmony with the bareness and repetitiveness of the images, the sound elements do not enrich the film's narrative as they usually do. On the contrary, they accentuate its raw but potent and more sensorial than psychological impact. Rivette explains that he wanted as little music as possible; he worked with Jean-Claude Eloy to "relay it by ambiances, more or less fabricated sounds, presenting different degrees between pure sound and pure music, including a mixture of real sounds, some slowed down, inverted, more or less precise percussion, and a music recurring at various speeds" (interview by Aumont et al., 17). Like the predominance of purplish-blue and grayish tints which tends to render the images matte and opaque, the disturbing dissonance of music and sound effects reinforces the senselessness of the state of things. The fact that Suzanne, repeatedly, is refused release from the convent and is deprived of a meaningful voice is simply as incomprehensible as the discordant and clashing music which, at times, drowns out the character's words. Moreover, the recurrence of such dissonance counteracts the theatricality of the dialogue, with which it is at odds and asserts its more sophisticated filmic quality. Not only does the soundtrack overpower the actual content of the discussions at moments, but it constantly reminds the spectator that what is constitutive of the filmic adaptation is not the narrative but the sounds and images which convey it. Although they remain close to their literary source, the oral exchanges are subdued by visual and sound signs. Confronted to and covered by such dissonance, the

dialogues lose their impact while their constant formality reveals the absurdity of the religious and social rhetoric. Eventually, the meaning and form of discourse are leveled under the pressure of chaotic sounds.

Even when they are perfectly audible, the conversations are vain as well: Suzanne's attempts to defend herself by a rational use of language have no deep impact. The superfluousness of argumentation is duplicated by the flatness of the camera shots and Rivette's obviously deliberate refusal to give his scenes depth of field. Beyond the concept of physical enclosure that Rivette elaborates, his filming choices reveal an aspect which is much less clear in the text: the temporal limitation of Suzanne's consciousness. For Deleuze, depth of field is not only spatial; it also opens up a region in time, especially in the past:

Our point is that depth of field creates a certain type of direct time-image that can be defined by memory, virtual regions of past, the aspects of each region. This would be less a function of reality than a function of remembering, of temporalization: not exactly a recollection but an invitation to recollect. . . (*Cinema 2*, pp. 108-9[142]).

The lack of depth of field in *La Religieuse* seems indeed to coincide with Suzanne's lack of memories: she knows nothing of her real father, she remembers hardly anything about her life "in the world," as she was sent to the convent at the age of seventeen, and she completely blacks out her vows ceremony. Cropped frames, frontal camera angles, rarity of long shots contribute to restrain her to spatial intervals as well as to restrict her to bracketed moments in time. Her past is severed from her, separated from her by the religious cloth whose intimate framing of her face locks her up in present suffering.

Moreover, as Suzanne was destined to the convent, she was not prepared for a normal social life. She is thus also unable to construct from a storehouse of mental images a possible future for herself. In this sense, the recurrence of images and sounds duplicates her own total lack of imagination and her condemnation to repetition. There is no depth of field, because for Suzanne there is nothing beyond the limited horizons of a few years at her parents' home and the gates of the convents. Even the few crucial scenes set outdoors promise an opening that is soon frustrated. One of the longest sequences in the film, mentioned above, takes place in Saint Eutrope's park where Suzanne watches the other nuns playing blind man's buff as she speaks with Madame de ***. The lesbian Mother Superior is trying both to guess how much Suzanne understands about what is going on in the convent and to lead her to explore her desires. Alternating between medium close-ups and longer shots of the nuns' running after the blindfolded one in the background, the juxtaposition of the shots suggests Suzanne's inability to open her own eyes. She clearly states to the Mother Superior that she cannot guess what she is alluding to, nor does she wish to be educated in the matter. Although the lengthiest outside shot in the film, it ultimately only suggests a double form of blindness, both forced upon her by the institution and self-imposed. Even if Suzanne could see some form of compensation beyond the deprivation of her existence in the convent, she would not want

to. Suzanne is incapable and unwilling to imagine any form of alternative environment, lifestyle, or behavior, since such an alternative has never been presented to her. Much has been written about Suzanne's paradoxical sexual innocence. Often presented in conjunction with criticisms of Diderot's apparent disregard for narrative cohesiveness, Suzanne's character has undergone a broad spectrum of judgments, from the charge of total hypocrisy to a presumption of genuine innocence. Rivette refuses to enter into this debate. In the film, the objective data, what the camera offers in terms of circumscribed spaces, is strictly equivalent to the subjective universe represented by what the heroine sees. The game scene is exemplary: it presents a "blinded" woman who is a mirror image of Suzanne. No wonder she runs at the novice's rescue.

In this sense, the transition from text to images reduces the number of possible interpretations. The visual techniques delimit the imaginary space as Rivette's perspective fixes the image of an innocent Suzanne in our minds. Her suicide, for instance, though unthinkable within Diderot's problematic, imposes a final barrier to spectatorial wondering. When Suzanne finally acts, committing suicide, it is to suppress any further possibility of action. By contrast, yet as a complement to the rest of the images in which Suzanne's face was always carefully centered within the frame, the camera's unusual downward tilt movement operates the ultimate closure. Dressed in white, Suzanne is lying with her face down on the ground and her arms in a cross. While we were used to seeing her surrounded by crucifixes, we are left with the vision of her body as a cross, incorporating Christ's martyrdom although, paradoxically, being persecuted by Catholicism.

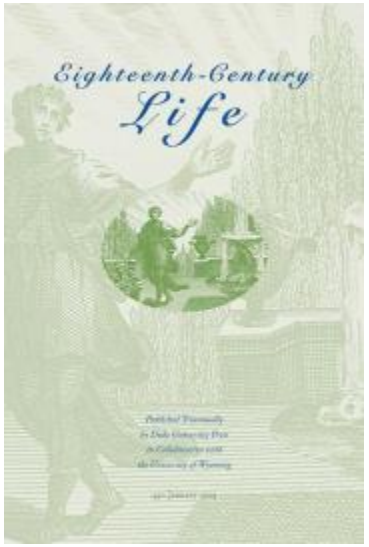
The volume of discourse that this film has generated echoes all too well the dissonance of sounds and the impossibility of communication between Suzanne and the other characters. But words never overwhelm the power of the images in *La Religieuse*. What is at stake in Rivette's film is answering Deleuze's "most marvelous question in the history of painting: how can one render invisible forces visible?" (*Franics Bacon*, p. 40). The question, Deleuze insists, is to create figures that are figural but not figuring: figures who are not caught in motion but who render movement; figures which show deformation without transformation as they enter in contact with social, political, institutional, or even aesthetic forces (pp. 39-43).

I think that this is exactly what Rivette succeeds in doing in *La Religieuse*. He allows us not only to perceive the forces that deform bodies, enclose spaces, and confine minds but to apprehend them in a quasi-tactile (Deleuze would say "haptic") way. Through Rivette's cinematic vision, we are able to feel the presence of the surrounding walls and to hear the madness of social structures that contain life. While Diderot first allowed Suzanne to escape from the convent, and then encouraged the reader to dismiss her as a doubly fictional character (of the novel and of a hoax), Rivette's gradual process of visual enclosure silences interpretations about Suzanne but incorporates oppression within her. Perhaps this is also what Deleuze wanted to accomplish through his own critique of cinema. By exploring the medium's non-linguistic semiotic apparatus: the lights, spaces, movements, and milieux that are the movie-makers' signs and

"concepts," we can inscribe their thoughts as they become images.

Reprinted from *Eighteenth-Century Life* 23 (Winter 2001): 88-100.

Fabienne-Sophie Chauderlot
Eighteenth-Century Life (2001) 25 (1): 88-100.
https://doi.org/10.1215/00982601-25-1-88



"Becoming-Image": Deleuzian Echoes in Jacques Rivette's *La Religieuse*
Fabienne-Sophie Chauderlot
Eighteenth-Century Life
Duke University Press
Volume 25, Number 1, Winter 2001
pp. 88-100
ARTICLE
View Citation
Additional Information

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Eighteenth-Century Life 25.1 (2001) 88-100

[Access article in PDF]

"Becoming-Image": Deleuzian Echoes in Jacques Rivette's *La Religieuse*

Fabienne-Sophie Chauderlot

In an extensive article published in 1954, "Revoir *La Religieuse*," Jean-Claude Bonnet asserts that a reconsideration of Jacques Rivette's film demands two preliminary gestures. First, the film's scandal should be retraced in detail, and, second, its place within the New Wave should be forcefully acknowledged. [1] If Bonnet is to be believed, a review of the film therefore has to be dubbed with a stereophonic discourse. On the one hand, it should be surrounded by the clamor of the legal and political issues it raised; on the other, it should recall the theoretical texts of New Wave writers-turned-directors to whom Rivette himself belongs.

Such a logocentric emphasis is to be expected. In the mid-eighties, when Bonnet was writing about the classical novel's cinematographic adaptation, a developing film theory largely relied on semiotics, a decoding of cinema seen as text, or écriture. [2] In the spirit of Metz and Barthes, numerous French film critics attempted to translate a predominantly linguistic apparatus and adapt it to the visual and mobile signs of cinema. Hence, the importance of the textual polemic surrounding Rivette's film, the emphasis put on the camera being a "pen" (in Astruc's sense), the relating to the narrative in terms of a syntax and the parallels to Diderot's text that both articulate and limit Bonnet's approach to the film within a reading process.

Considering the extensive and fruitful work that has been accomplished in film theory since then, it may be possible today to release the film *La Religieuse* from such strict structures. I would contend that these approaches might have played a part in its remaining relatively undervalued, and therefore intend to explore the film from a much more visual perspective. In order to do so, I propose to reconsider it in the context of the dense but extremely rich work of Gilles Deleuze on cinema. Surprisingly, the concepts that Deleuze develops around and within images have, so far, had but little impact on film criticism. For instance, even though the exhaustive survey by Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis referred to attempts to lead the reader "beyond" structuralism, they never allude to Deleuze's own endeavor to carry film theory beyond semiotics. It appears, therefore, that what Dudley Andrew had already acknowledged at the time when "Revoir *La Religieuse*" was published, namely that "it is the literary critics who control the discourse about film," remains the case in the present period. [3] Which does not mean that it should do so exclusively.

The question of such preponderance is easily answered by the obvious [End Page 88] fact with which art critics have been confronted for centuries: regardless of its object, the sole medium of criticism is language. The only way of elaborating beyond the physical impact of images is through the use of words. As Barthes and Benveniste have shown, language is a great semiotic metric. But what Deleuze suggests in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* is that using language to deal with visual matter does not necessarily mean imposing linguistic structures upon them. In his two volumes, the philosopher oscillates between H. Bergson's conception of memory, matter, and consciousness and C. S. Peirce's taxonomy of signs to propose numerous concepts that ultimately allow a radically different approach to and reception of images. The purpose of this essay is to focus on the optical dimension of Rivette's *La Religieuse*. I propose to see the film as an illustration of the "affection-images" that Deleuze defines in opposition to "action-images" and "perception-images." [4] I will show that this film's primordial quality is what Deleuze, speaking about Francis Bacon's paintings, calls a "haptic function," namely the power that sight has to touch. [5]

The postulate that grounds Deleuze's otherwise elaborate and puzzling broad survey of Russian, North-American, French, and German cinema masterpieces...