



Article

The Flesh Made Word: Bodily Inscription and Religion in *Celine et Julie Vont en Bateau*

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Abstract: In *Celine et Julie Vont en Bateau* Jacques Rivette works through his discomfort with the theological function of the author, a discomfort stemming from the material effects of authorship on the bodies of his actors. Examples of bodily incision and bruising proliferate throughout the film, part of a process of violent characterization imposed by an authoring demiurge. The film explores several methods of escape from this process, starting with exotic travel and fairy tales, but culminates around repeated allusions to the crucifixion of Christ. The film advances a heretical Christology by positing God as a sadistic author and the wounded body of Christ as the paradigmatic example of being inscribed as a character against one's will. As this characterization obviously engenders being inscribed in a narrative as well, the structure of the film probes at the notion of both Christianity and narrative cinema as means of escape.

Keywords: Rivette; Christianity; Artaud; inscription; the body; spectatorship

1. Introduction

Is it possible to create without implicating theology? In the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin articulates this distinctly modern anxiety: "My thinking is related to theology as blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain." (Benjamin 2002, p. 471) On one level, this could be read as an expression of Benjamin's Marxist ambivalence towards the religious allusions which crop up, almost pathologically, in the content of his work. But what if he has also revealed something inherently theological in the materiality of writing itself? The intertwined nature of writing and theology is what I propose to investigate in *Celine et Julie Vont en Bateau*, as Jacques Rivette works through his own discomfort with the theological function of the author, a discomfort stemming from the material effects of authorship on the bodies of his actors. Examples of bodily incision and bruising proliferate throughout the film, part of a process of violent characterization imposed by an authoring demiurge. The film explores several methods of escape from this process, starting with exotic travel and fairy tales, but culminates around repeated allusions to the crucifixion of Christ. The film advances a heretical Christology by positing God as a sadistic author and the wounded body of Christ as the paradigmatic example of being inscribed as a character against one's will. As this characterization obviously engenders being inscribed in a narrative as well, the structure of the film probes at the notion of both Christianity and narrative cinema as means of escape.

In contemporary English usage, the word "character" still possesses two meanings: to become a character is to assume a dramatic role *but also to become a letter or symbol*. In tracing this etymology, one is reminded of Benjamin's blotting pad, as "character" derives from the Greek *kharaktēr*, a "stamping tool" that also implies a "distinctive mark". Similar in both its polysemy and etymology, the word "type" also derives from the Greek *tuptein* which translates as "to strike". While the French translation for "character", *personnage*, doesn't preserve this double meaning, its descent from the

Latin *persona* retains another aspect of the actor's submission: the mask a thespian dons in playing a theatrical role. *Celine et Julie* is a film that lives in the anxiety around both of these processes, material and socio-political.

Most scholarship on the film, however, has focused on the latter aspect of this characterization process, examining theatricality and performativity from perspectives traditionally feminist (Wood 1981; Lesage 1981) or psychoanalytical (Rodowick 2014). While these analyses have become foundational in Rivette criticism, none of them address the materiality of the characterization process or examine the rich symbolism present in the interaction of bodies with material objects. Partly as a consequence of this, the religious allusions in the film remain unremarked upon. Due to the anti-clerical nature of Rivette's earlier film *La Religieuse* (adapted from the Diderot novel of the same name), and his self-professed position as a materialist, the idea has persisted that his subsequent films are largely unconcerned with religion. While *Celine and Julie* engages with Christianity in a subversive manner, reminiscent of Antonin Artaud, it does so pointedly, much as Rivette also engages with authorship—the world is saturated with it, even if one would like to be rid of it. Following Douglas Morrey's injunction in "Secrets and Lies, or: How not to write about Jacques Rivette", this essay is an attempt to broaden the literature on Rivette beyond a small cluster of themes—games, paranoia, play—and towards a broader engagement with cultural and historical traditions.

After Celine and Julie meet in a Montmartre park in the opening scene (it is unclear if they already know each other) and begin a spontaneous, playful chase across the neighborhood, Celine moves into Julie's apartment, and the women sabotage each other's social connections to the world outside (a process that is also an issue of language, as I will demonstrate). They become drawn to a mysterious house, where a chamber drama featuring automaton-like players unfolds on loop, and the women are able to relive the story through magic candies that appear in their mouth after leaving the house. The candy allows them to relive their experience in the house, in which they take turns playing a nurse who takes care of a young girl named Madlyn (Nathalie Asnar); Celine and Julie also have hazy memories of having lived/worked inside the house, respectively. They gradually piece together the story to learn that it ends in the murder of Madlyn by two women (Ogier and Pisier) competing for the affections of her father, the widower Olivier (Barbet Schroeder). Aided by a magic spell, Celine and Julie intervene in the story, rescuing Madlyn from the house and her gory fate.

I will begin by demonstrating how the film lampoons the metaphysical and theological presuppositions of authorship through the escapist means of exotic travel and fairy tales, in conjunction with the work of Artaud, one of Rivette's major inspirations who wrestled with similar questions of authorship and religion. I will then proceed to examine how the author-function is condensed in the Christian passion. Throughout, I draw on a philosophical-theological lineage that begins with Hegel and continues through Benjamin, Heidegger, and culminates in the "messianic" film theory of Giorgio Agamben. This tradition is perfectly poised to illuminate Rivette's own ambivalence towards theology, as he frequently invoked dialectics and idealist thought while also identifying as a materialist.

2. Overnaming

Hegel's thought was omnipresent in French intellectual circles of the 1950's and served as the foundation for Rivette's criticism at *Cahiers du Cinema* during this period (Morrey and Smith 2015, p. 17); Heideggerian existentialism found a receptive fanbase in Paris as well, and Rivette portrayed a student writing a dissertation on the philosopher in *Va Savoir*. I wish to draw on Hegel's concept of *nullification*, which casts the creation story of Genesis in a more complicated light than traditional ecclesiastical accounts: "The first act, by which Adam established his lordship over the animals, is this, that he gave them a name, i.e., he nullified them as beings on their own account" (Hegel 1979, p. 221). Naming thus inflicts violence on beings, removing them from their natural state and positioning them within a language foreign to them. While this process is a necessary part of Spirit's advancement for Hegel, later commentators such as Benjamin go further in parsing out the ethical implications contained in this Adamic naming. Benjamin writes: "Things have no proper names except in God.

For in his creative word, God called them into being, calling them by their proper names. In the language of men, however, they are overnamed.” (Benjamin 1996, p. 73). Here it is implied that Adam’s act of naming is an usurpation of God’s creative act; all conventional human language, then, is overnaming, an unnecessary imposition and burden on God’s creatures. Heidegger shares a similar concern for the named thing, and also prizes a state of freedom prior to naming. This “essence of language” based on “showing” is anterior to the fallen, lapsarian notion of overnaming outlined by Benjamin, and also foreign to any human or authorial control over beings:

We dare not attribute showing either exclusively to human doing. Self-showing as appearing characterizes the coming to presence or withdrawal to absence of every manner and degree of thing present. Even when showing is accomplished by means of our saying, such showing or referring is preceded by a thing’s letting itself be shown.

(Heidegger 2008, p. 410)

Like Benjamin’s divine language, this “self-showing” gives beings autonomy in how they present themselves. They are not instrumentalized towards human ends, as they are in Hegelian nullification. However, Heidegger also describes a linguistic modulation, which he historically pinpoints to the Hellenistic period, where “showing” gives way to “designating”. This shift resembles the authorial control of overnaming, as he writes, “Designation is no longer a showing in the sense that it lets something appear” (Heidegger 2008, p. 402). Instead, how and when beings appear is subordinated to a system outside of their control.

Throughout the film, Rivette and his actors examine the tension between these two modes of language—the proper name that reveals itself through showing versus the overnamed thing that an author designates. The film depicts a world where the author function of Adamic naming is omnipresent; echoing Hegel’s Adam, Rivette even referred to his actors as “animals”, calling Berto “cat-like” (Rivette 1974). However, he sought to retain and encourage this animalistic, non-psychological approach to acting, and as Morrey outlines in an examination of the influence of Hegel on Rivette, his films consistently refuse the mastery of absolute knowledge that is the endpoint of Hegel’s system (Morrey 2012). This can be seen in the genesis and production of the film—Rivette began the writing process by having Juliet Berto and Dominique Labourier come up with the names of their characters, Celine and Julie, and the two actors collaborated on much of the story of the film as well. Berto emphasized how Rivette’s working method preserved her freedom as an actor, as opposed to constraining her within a preordained characterization: “Avec Godard, j’étais un personnage . . . pas une actrice. Avec Rivette, j’étais une actrice, parce que je jouais des personnages” (Berto 1986, p. 30)¹. Rivette underwent the same collaborative process with Bulle Ogier and Marie-France Pisier, (Camille and Sophie), who serve as both phonetic and diegetic doppelgängers; the story of the film can in some senses be seen as an attempt to break free from the designating power of names and the narratives they implicate. Throughout, the film juxtaposes the designated, overnamed being of the characters trapped within the house versus the autonomy of Celine and Julie in the world outside, although they are often impinged upon by these same forces of authorial control.

Celine and Julie’s self-sovereign, autonomous mode of language is demonstrated with great bravado in the opening scene in the Montmartre park. Sitting on a park bench, Julie attempts to cast a magic spell, only to see Celine come traipsing across the park, dropping a scarf and glasses, initiating a game of hide and seek. The utopian aspect of this scene accords in multiple ways with this prelapsarian notion of divine language elaborated by Benjamin and Heidegger. As it is the utopia from which the women are torn and to which they seek to return, the setting of the Montmartre park evokes an edenic quality in its tranquility, which also verges on muteness when Celine appears and

¹ “With Godard, I was a character . . . not an actress. With Rivette, I was an actress, because I was playing characters.” (Translation my own.)

begins a silent gag with Julie. Celine's entrance is an *appearance* in the most Heideggerian sense of the word—we get the sense that she has “let herself appear” after being summoned by Julie's spell, and the following chase, playfully alternating between withdrawal and approach, concealment and unconcealment, preserves her autonomy against the power of names. No psychological markers of character are established during the scene, and there is nothing to suggest it's not a documentary about two women, as Berto and Labourier were close friends in real life. As the chase progresses and mutates in form, it appears the women know something we don't, or are at least able to read each other's bodily gestures in an immanent manner we are unaccustomed to but may learn through watching the film.

It's telling that what brings the chase to a close is an act of writing. Celine checks into a hotel, where a male proprietor instructs her to fill out a form listing her name, profession, birthplace, and nationality, which she hesitates to do. It's here that Benjamin's divine language is replaced by Adamic naming and Hegelian nullification. Celine is now “designated” according to a signifying identity and the social world it entails, as the ambiguity of her persona in the park scene begins to dissipate.²

The association of male characters stabilizing identity through designative writing reappears later in the film, when the women read a letter written by Julie's suitor Guilou. With Guilou serving as a diminutive for Gregoire, he is literally “overnamed” as well. Guilou's letter, reminiscing about their shared past, is both an assertion of masculine identity (“l'enfant est devenu un homme”)³ and also an imposition of biography onto Julie's character, as she seems ambivalent about his advances: “Il m'écrit, j'attends. Mais il veut que c'est bien blanc . . . dans l'église”.⁴ It's no coincidence that this subplot will involve nothing but humiliation and miscommunication for Guilou: Celine sabotages his advances by assuming Julie's identity via disguise; Julie, unaware of this, is perplexed by his angry phone call, where he states he is joining a monastery. She then retaliates by ripping up his photograph and mocking his letter: “L'enfant est devenu une nonne.”⁵ This process is mirrored when the women, playing with a male doll, rip the legs off, laughing that he no longer possesses a penis. This association of the wounded body with female religiosity, occurring as the result of the women's retaliatory *authoring*, foreshadows the dangers they themselves will fall prey to in the House of Fiction. However, in the present instance, Guilou's reliance on speech and the word is incommensurate with the women's self-immanent, material gestures of retaliation.

3. Exoticism and Flaying

It is these interactions that the women seek to escape from when they move in together—the fact that Julie also takes leave from her job at the library underlines that this retreat from the world is a retreat from language. However, the alternatives they explore are often just as much if not more threatening, as the process of overnaming becomes more explicit and material.

We can trace this development all the way back to Celine leading Julie on the chase in the park, which Rivette intended as an allusion to the white rabbit leading Alice down the rabbit hole in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Rivette 1974). In Carroll's novel *Wonderland* ends up being a place of terror and violence just as much as transformation and fantasy, and Celine and Julie's exploration of exoticism, primitivism, and fairy tales will function in a similar manner. This process also resonates with the life and work of Antonin Artaud, with whom Rivette is frequently compared. Artaud had a similar concern with liberating actors from the inert text of an author, and instead attempted to create an immanent, self-sovereign language of embodied gesture. He turned to the traditional theater

² It's worth noting that the name she writes, “Celine Cendrars”, is a reference to the French writer and adventurer Blaise Cendrars, and her birthplace “Saint-Gapour” is a playful homonym in French for Singapore. But just as her profession (“magicienne”) is both an escape from the quotidian world and a re-submission to another instance of the male gaze, as later scenes in the nightclub reveal, so too are these playful gestures towards exoticism and travel doomed to reinscribe her within the sociolinguistic structures she seeks to escape, as I will soon demonstrate.

³ “The boy has become a man”.

⁴ “He's written, I'm waiting. But he wants a white wedding in a church . . . ”

⁵ “The boy has become a nun.”

of Bali for inspiration, railing against what he saw as an explicitly theological structure governing theater and representation in the West. Artaud's legacy attracted newfound interest in the 1960's, inspiring experimental theater practitioners like Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook (two of Rivette's stated influences) as well as a new generation of French theorists, most notably Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. Critics picked up on Rivette's affinity with Artaud soon after the release of *Celine et Julie*—James Monaco simply states "If Godard is the New Wave's Brecht, Rivette is its Artaud" (Monaco 1976) while Lauren Sedofsky perceptively draws attention to both artists' interrogation of the theological structure of authorship: "Like Artaud, Rivette has created a 'nontheological space' . . . which admits the tyranny of neither text nor auteur. It is a space in which the actor's grammar of gesture and voice may play creatively, without impediment." (Rivette 1974) In this confrontation between the theological control of the auteur versus the freedom of the actor, we again find the distinction between overnaming and showing. Through a brief examination of Artaud's writings, I hope to highlight how this theological struggle takes on distinct material and historical-cultural manifestations that inform Rivette's film. This can be seen in both artists' shared emphasis on exotic travel and violent bodily incision, through which they elaborate a vision of an authorial God whose power to designate or overname is explicitly sadistic.

References to foreign travel are numerous throughout the film, accumulating around Africa and Asia, creating a correspondence with Artaud's fascination with traditional Balinese theater. Artaud prized the physicality of the Balinese actors, a mode of performance predicated on a resistance to discursive language:

Le théâtre Balinais nous en propose une réalisation stupéfiante en ce sens qu'elle supprime toute possibilité de recours aux mots . . . et qu'elle invente un langage de gestes faits pour évoluer dans l'espace . . .

(Artaud 1964, p. 105)⁶

While this style of theater provided Artaud with necessary inspiration to re-think the boundaries of theater in the Parisian avant-garde, throughout *Le Theatre et son Double* he indulges in the Orientalist fantasy of the East as an embodied, authentic Other of the West alienated through language. In this context, Rivette probes and questions the specifically French genre of the Orientalist travelogue, as his characters' attempts to "find themselves" through various exotic practices, or foreign languages, are as dangerous and self-shattering as they are liberating.

These references in the film form a repetitive and deliberate constellation of place names centered around East and South-East Asia: Java crops up repeatedly (as a travel destination for both Julie and her absent mother), and the Sunda Islands, Borneo, Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Macao, Japan and Madagascar are referenced as well. As Bali is located directly to the east of Java, with both islands, along with Borneo, comprising the Sunda islands, there is a tantalizing convergence here, one that invites speculation as to whether Rivette was drawn to this area of the world through Artaud's popularization of it. Regardless, what's instructive is the way in which a specifically violent and foreign mode of material inscription develops through these references. This is first introduced when Celine, showering in Julie's apartment, regales her with tales of her exotic travels. She speaks of an African safari, hunting animals on the savannah, and being gifted a tiger-skin by the "pygmy king", which makes his giantess wife, Zouba, attempt to skin her out of jealousy. After losing her hair from fright, she then travels to Hong Kong, where a Japanese man performs acupuncture on her in order to make her hair grow back. The recurrence of bodily incision in this tale recalls Artaud's preoccupation with flayed skin in *Heliogabalus* and *Le Theatre et son Double*; this trend is also intimately tied up with exoticism, as Derrida argues:

⁶ "The Balinese offer us a stupefying realization, suppressing all possibility of recourse to words . . . inventing a language of gesture to be developed in space . . ." (Artaud excerpted from Derrida (2001, p. 227)).

On le voit dans certaines civilisations non occidentales, celles qui précisément fascinaient Artaud, l'analphabétisme peut fort bien s'accommoder de la culture la plus profonde et la plus vivante. Les traces inscrites dans le corps ne seront donc pas des incisions graphiques mais les blessures reçues dans la destruction de l'Occident . . .

(Derrida 1967, pp. 282–83)⁷

Artaud's opposition to writing is a desire to destroy alphabetic, designative writing entirely—yet his embodied alternative, entailing the wounding of the body, seems far from liberating. When Celine later spins a similarly fanciful tale of a rich American woman supporting her, she gets flustered and claims “Elle veut me faire son pyg . . . pyg . . . ma . . . lion”⁸ associating the “pygmy king” from earlier with the sculptor of Greek myth, while the isolated syllable “lion” implies a hierarchical human-animal relationship reminiscent of her African safari. She also describes how the woman has a “slant-eyed” masseur give her a massage, in a racist resonance with the Japanese acupuncturist. In all of these instances, a shadowy, foreign figure has the power to “write” Celine's body—to deface it, shape and heal it, and even mold it into being.

Celine and Julie's activity in and around the house—their ambivalent attraction towards film spectatorship—is a continuation of their exploration of exoticism in the world outside, and they will again fall prey to the very violence they seek to escape. The fantastical and menacing aspect of inscription also appears within the house in the form of a fairy tale Sophie tells Madlyn. Although interrupted, the story references “un arbre avec des poignards”⁹ guarding a bewitched prince in a tower; a “méchante sorcière a mis tout au long du feuillage des lames de rasoir et des poignards.”¹⁰ It's possible to see this fairy tale as an allegory for Celine and Julie's attempt to rescue Madlyn, trapped in a “tower” guarded by Sophie; as she sedates Madlyn with poison from a syringe, she effectively functions as the wicked witch deploying “hidden knives and razor blades”. More important, however, is the way in which the threat of literal and figurative incision is an obstacle Celine and Julie must overcome—in this film, words are first and foremost wounding.

These allusions to bodily incision and fragmentation culminate in the virtual crucifixion of Madlyn. Rodowick argues that Madlyn's fate is what Celine and Julie seek to escape when they reject Guilou and the cabaret club in the world outside (Rodowick 2014, p. 136); Madlyn's murder, then, sets up a series of allusions to Christ's body as a persecuted female body. When the camera discovers Madlyn's dead body in her bedroom, the girl is splayed out, Christ-like, her face covered by a pillow marked with a bloody red hand-print. Although not visible in this shot, a crucifix hangs on the wall above Madlyn's bed. It's almost as if the pillow is a stamp, or *kharaktēr*, pressing her body into a seal or crucifix-hieroglyphic. Here we have a morbid satire of the Pygmalion myth invoked earlier—the artist-God is a murderer who leaves his signature on the body he has molded into a symbol. And in order to signify, this body has to be murdered, has to become the dead letter detested by Artaud. Derrida writes:

Artaud redoute le corps articulé comme il redoute le langage articulé, le membre comme le mot, d'un seul et même trait, pour une seule et même raison. Car l'articulation est la structure de mon corps et la structure est toujours structure d'expropriation.

(Derrida 1967, p. 234)¹¹

⁷ “As can be seen in certain non-Western civilizations, precisely the ones that fascinated Artaud, illiteracy can quite well accommodate the most profound and living culture. The traces inscribed on the body will no longer be graphic incisions but wounds received in the destruction of the West . . . ” (Derrida 2001, p. 237).

⁸ “She wants to make me her pyg . . . Pygmalion”.

⁹ “A tree with daggers”.

¹⁰ “A wicked witch has hidden knives and razor blades in the trees.”

¹¹ “Artaud is as fearful of the articulated body as he is of articulated language, as fearful of the member as of the word. For articulation is the structure of my body, and structure is always a structure of expropriation.” (Derrida 2001, p. 234).

This thief who expropriates the body is always God, as Artaud asks, “ET QU’AS-TU FAIT DE MON CORPS, DIEU?” and then answers “dieu m’a salopé vivant” (Artaud 1964, p. 227)¹². God is the Demiurge, the Author who turns his actors into slaves bound to the inert text. Susan Sontag devotes a large section of her introduction to Artaud’s *Selected Writings* to claiming him as a Gnostic, a tradition noteworthy for portraying the creator-God or Demiurge as a force of evil. Unsurprisingly, this cosmology confronts a problem of authorship and characterization: Sontag sees the body’s transformation into “psychological man, with his well-dissected character and feelings” as a process of being “persecuted, invaded, and defiled by alien powers” (Sontag 1976, pp. xlvi–xlvii).

Madlyn’s murder is foreshadowed by another Christ allusion in the house, one that also reveals characterization as a traumatic process: Camille’s donning of her dead sister Nathalie’s dress. When Camille goes into the attic to retrieve the dress from the locked chest, the scene, conducted in eerie silence, has the solemn air of a religious ritual or criminal heist. The dress is literally and figuratively fetishized, even appearing like a shroud, as Camille gazes at it longingly, caressing its folds. When she enters Madlyn’s room wearing the dress, Madlyn shouts “Maman!”¹³, believing in the resurrection as if she is one of the disciples. With the crucifix looming on the wall above her, Camille then grips her champagne glass too tightly, out of shock, giving her a stigmata-like wound that confirms Nathalie’s “return from the dead” and also inscribes her as a recognizable character or symbol. The nurse then takes Camille to the sink where she narrates a psycho-biography explaining her relationship with Nathalie. This monologue, the only part of the film solely written by the screenwriter Eduardo de Gregorio (Rivette 1974), is distinguished by its literary quality and psychologism. It is the only instance in the film of dialogue designed to elicit pathos, as Camille is forced to confess a self and biography, becoming a psychologized character precisely through the marking of the stigmata. Camille’s status as a Christ figure is further underlined in the final scene in the house, in which Celine and Julie place a crown of thorns on her head. This image both emphasizes the body of Christ as a wounded and pierced body, and also recalls the fairy tale castle guarded by thorns—Camille is doomed to remain trapped with the confines of narrative and character. Thus, in turning away from Camille/Nathalie in terror, Madlyn displays her fear of returning as a type, serialized as a repetitive signifying letter against one’s will. This indeed foreshadows what happens to Madlyn in the story—she is repeatedly *typed* over and over again.

The equation of women with Christ in the film serves to underline the degree to which the author is a function of patriarchal control. Jenny Blesdoe argues that during the late medieval period, “‘feminine’ characteristics were most expressive of the human nature of Jesus” due to their association with self-sacrifice (Blesdoe 2011) and Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that medieval women often saw the body of Christ as an object of identification (Bynum 1984). This tradition continued up to the present, as feminist writers in the 19th and 20th centuries, and especially during the Victorian period, identified with the ambivalent nature of Christ as both passive victim and herald of power. On the one hand, as Julie Melnyk writes, “the model of the suffering Savior was an effective tool for controlling women and encouraging their self-sacrifice in the service of patriarchy” (Melnyk 2003, p. 132). Yet she also describes Victorian feminists who “instead of imagining individual salvation in an afterlife, create a vision of communal salvation by emphasizing the doctrine of the millennium, Christ’s earthly reign.” (Melnyk 2003, p. 133) This ambivalence is the ground in which Celine and Julie will rethink the narrative of the film, as Madlyn’s fate is revealed to be malleable.

The possibility of renegotiating the meaning of the Christian body often comes down to how it is displayed. In surveying performance artists who invoke the suffering of Christ through self-harm, Mary Richards examines the ways spectatorship negotiates longstanding tropes of Christian devotion. Although “the presence of pictures of Christ’s suffering in medieval times largely served to support

¹² “And what have you done with my body, God?”; “god has flayed me alive” (Derrida 2001, p. 227).

¹³ “Mummy!”

and uphold the status quo”, the physical presence of the spectator at the scene of the performance affords them a more active role in their response: “The presence of these witnesses serves perhaps to disrupt the Christian necessity of the crucifixion and its violence; the performer’s message is a product of a personal script or agenda and designed to promote and/or to challenge preconceptions.” (Richards 2008, p. 109) This altering of Christian eschatology recalls the Gnostic tradition of Sontag’s Artaud, a corpus of apocryphal texts in which the crucifixion is largely absent. Richards calls this subversive injunction to the spectator “a lesson worthy of Brecht” as the wounded body of the performer unlocks “the productive potential of his audience, who, in receiving the sacrifice offered, are implicitly expected to do more than just stare.” (Richards 2008, p. 116) In this deconstruction of Christianity it becomes possible to question the necessity of the inscription and characterization process—what happens to the body displayed, and what effect does it produce in the spectator? As Richards has suggested, we are often inured to violence mediated by images. But in being present as witnesses, we are able to take up a more active and thus political role as spectators, as demonstrated by Celine and Julie’s physical intervention in the story in the house.

4. Sacrifice

This emphasis on the live performance invokes Benjamin’s influential notion of the aura, the “here and now” physical presence of the work of art. While theater preserves the immediacy of the aura, film is the culmination of processes of technological reproduction—the printing press, lithograph, and photograph—aimed at exhibition to as wide an audience as possible in diverse locales. Stripped of this ability to serve as witnesses, what happens to the spectator and their relationship with the actor? For an actor trained in the theater, this process of becoming a *type* could be unnerving; Benjamin quotes one of Rivette’s greatest influences, the playwright Luigi Pirandello, who articulates this anxiety in a manner reminiscent of Artaud:

The film actor feels as if exiled. Exiled not only from the stage but from his own person. With a vague unease, he senses an inexplicable void, stemming from the fact that his body has lost its substance, that he has been volatilized, stripped of his reality, his life, his voice, the noises he makes when moving about, and has been turned into a mute image that flickers for a moment on the screen, then vanishes into silence . . . The little apparatus will play with his shadow before the audience, and he himself must be content to play before the apparatus. (Benjamin 2008)

The author now not only has control over the actor’s bodily gesture, but also the way that body is presented to the spectator and disseminated in the world. In examining the characters in “Phantom Ladies Over Paris” together with discourses of Rivette’s contemporaries surrounding the cinematic apparatus, it’s perhaps fitting that we find yet more explicitly theological language.

It’s these notions that Rivette satirizes in having Bulle Ogier and Marie-France Pisier, at the time two of the biggest stars in French cinema, appear as lifeless automatons in the film-within-the film. Jean Baudrillard hints at the darker side of cinematic characterization dramatized here: “And in truth, the biggest stars were women. They were, however, no longer beings of flesh and desire, but transexual, suprasensual beings, around whom crystallized stern rituals . . . ” (Baudrillard 1990, p. 95). This is indeed the case for the women in the House, as the repeated injunction “Il faut renouer les liens du sang”¹⁴ implies the “stern ritual” of the plot is Madlyn and Camille’s *sacrifice*. Baudrillard too invokes a notion of sacrifice inherent to all cinematic characterization as he continues, “The death of the stars is merely punishment for their ritualized idolatry. They must die, they must already be dead—so that they can be perfect and superficial, with or without their makeup.” (Baudrillard 1990, p. 95) The star is

¹⁴ “Blood ties must be renewed”.

thus removed from their flesh and blood reality and revived in a “perfect” representation through the static, ghostly image.

For the prior generation of French critics and filmmakers, such as André Bazin and Robert Bresson, death and sacrifice are part of the proper functioning of the cinematic apparatus. It’s perhaps no coincidence that both men were devout Catholics, and greatly impacted Rivette and his fellow *Cahiers* critics—Bazin as an editor and mentor, and Bresson as an early inspiration and fellow traveler of the *Nouvelle Vague*. However, Rivette, like his fellow critics turned filmmakers, significantly revised and critiqued many of these 1950’s idealist positions through his filmmaking practice in the 60’s and 70’s.

In his foundational essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, Bazin implicates a religious notion of sacrifice in the production of the cinematic image itself. He draws an analogy between the photographic capture of a living body on celluloid with the ancient Egyptian process of mummification: “To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.” (Bazin 1967, p. 9) For Bazin, photography’s “preservation of life by a representation of life” is founded upon this “religious use”. But what if this attempt to neatly stow away the body from the hold of time is itself a form of death, even murder? This notion of the apparatus finds further support in a description of the filmmaking process by Bresson. Bresson was a filmmaker diametrically opposed to Rivette, both in his determination to separate cinema from the theater and his disdain for actors, which manifested in his desire to control them through editing that fragments the body. His filmmaking practice is therefore explicitly theological:

Mon film naît une première fois dans ma tête, meurt sur papier; est ressuscité par les personnes vivantes et les objets réels que j’emploie, qui sont tués sur pellicule mais qui, placés dans un certain ordre et projetés sur un écran, se raniment comme des fleurs dans l’eau. (Bresson 1975, p. 24)¹⁵

Here “les personnes vivantes . . . tués sur pellicule” makes explicit the violence which was glossed over in Bazin. Jean-Luc Nancy points out that *pellicule*, like its English equivalent “film”, also denotes other membrane-like surfaces, deriving from the Latin *pellicula*, meaning “skin” or “hide”. The process of becoming an image then takes on a distinctly Artaud-ian resonance, as Nancy goes so far as to link the *pellicula* to foreskin, evoking the creation of the image to a ritual extraction from the living body (Nancy 2001, p. 47). Most important, however, is the way in which Bresson’s apparatus functions theologically—through resuscitation and his actors returning from the dead. But returning in what form? In being “placed in a certain order and projected on to a screen” it is easy to imagine them as wooden blocks in a printing press, inert characters or types made to signify into words against their will. In Hegelian terms, we could say they are nullified as beings on their own account, and returned as divine, ghostly representations.

The film seems to suggest, then, that Madlyn’s sacrifice via the *kharakter* is what the cinema is always already doing in producing images of bodies. In other words, the diegetic content of “Phantom Ladies Over Paris” is itself merely a dramatization of cinematic form. It is for this reason that the red hand branded upon the murdered body of Madlyn also appears on Celine and Julie’s shoulder when they exit the film of “Phantom Ladies Over Paris” after having played the role of the nurse, stumbling out the house, traumatized, as if awakening from a coma. In this sense, Celine and Julie’s bodies literally are the film. The house operates as a camera, pulling the *pellicula* of the women’s bodies through itself and exposing them to its images, and then expelling them with these images literally and figuratively branded upon them. This double implication of the filmed body in the cinematic apparatus is mirrored by Nicole Shukin’s description of how film stock is produced from gelatin (“a protein extracted from the skin, bones, and connective tissues of cattle, sheep, and pigs”), invoking

¹⁵ “My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper; is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but, placed in a certain order and projected on to a screen, come to life again like flowers in water.” (Bresson 2016, p. 6).

the hierarchical human-animal relationship of Adamic naming as well as Artaud's flayed skin (Shukin 2009). This hierarchy extends to the spectator as well—as Celine and Julie's activity conflates the roles of actor and spectator, the red hand is also a commentary on how images impose themselves on audiences. Despite sharing the same fate as Madlyn, the women as spectators are unable to stop her or themselves from succumbing to the *kharakter*. This is because their relationship is an alienated one; it is only once they consciously take control of their dual status as spectator-actors that they are able to overturn the inscription process.

The focal point of this alienated relationship in the film is the magic candy. Celine and Julie find themselves in possession of these candies when they are expelled from the house, and by placing them in their mouths they are able to relive and re-enact the story of "Phantom Ladies Over Paris". As the candy contains a record of events that have already transpired, the women relive them only as passive actors, playing the role of the nurse unquestioningly. When the candy breaks into five pieces, Celine and Julie then consume the story in corresponding fragments. In this sense, the film is given a material, even embodied form.

This body, I'd like to suggest, is none other than the virtual body of Christ. In this sense, the mode of alimentary spectatorship engendered by the candy parallels the practice of Christian worship through the communion wafer (it is worth noting that Artaud described communion wafers as "candy on a stick" (Artaud 1964, p. 117)) Eating the candy thus prompts Celine and Julie to commemorate, revive and re-enact the ritual sacrifice of Madlyn through this embodied, synecdochical mediation. This function of the candy is implied and foreshadowed in multiple instances within the house as well. Most suggestively, after Camille receives her stigmata wound, Sophie immediately gives Madlyn a candy to eat. Prior to this, she had injected the candy with poison from a syringe, invoking the body of Christ pierced with a lance, and the candy is further anthropomorphized when Celine and Julie later unwrap it from a tissue, exclaiming that it has "petits poils"¹⁶ on it. Celine also remarks that the story of the film is "plein de trous . . . comme un Gruyère"¹⁷, invoking the liturgical notion of Christ's body being full of holes. This body of Christ is accompanied by "blood" as well—before Camille arrives wearing the dress, Madlyn is narrating the scene in *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice drinks a psychoactive liquid from a bottle labeled "DRINK ME", foreshadowing the psychedelic "herb wine" Celine and Julie will drink before entering the house. Similarly, Camille's appearance in the dress prompts Olivier to bring out bottles of champagne in celebration. The intertwining of blood and alcohol becomes even more explicit and overdetermined when, soon after bringing Celine into her apartment, Julie accidentally shatters two bloody mary glasses on the floor. All of these alimentary activities thus serve as profane satires of the wine and eucharist as the blood and body of Christ.

The candy-communion wafer is a culmination of the murderous process of resurrection that goes into the image, as the living body is killed on film and returned as a communion wafer ready to be *consumed*. It also connotes an unquestioning, devoted belief in the story—the fact that Sophie injects candies with a sedative lends credence to a Marxist reading of "Phantom Ladies Over Paris" as an opiate-like spectacle. Like the image of Pirandello, the candy is a condensed iteration of authorial control. But as a sugary confection with no nutritional value, what the author offers us is unsatisfying. The embodied immediacy of Christ's suffering that was available to the witness, potentially provoking protest, is now diffused into an image, mobilized into signifying a transcendent meaning. In other words, the author has control over the spectator just as much as the actor, as the Christ figure is a specter that haunts his audience and provokes only a single fixed meaning. Celine's remark that the story is "full of holes" could just as well apply to the body of Christ and the believability of his entire crucifixion and resurrection narrative.

¹⁶ "Little hairs".

¹⁷ "Full of holes . . . like Gruyère cheese".

The “holes” in “Phantom Ladies Over Paris” are literally and formally demonstrated by the fragmented candy and narrative, and it is no coincidence that recomposing this virtual body will return us to the scene of the crime and give Celine and Julie a chance to rescue the literal body of Madlyn from inscription. It is thus by returning the *aura* to film that Rivette subverts this double characterization process, restoring the power of both the spectator and the actor and freeing them from their alienated relationship via the transcendent meaning of an author. Deleuze is apt when he claims “Rivette invente une théâtralité du cinéma tout à fait distincte de la théâtralité de théâtre” (Deleuze 1985, p. 253).¹⁸ Rivette himself refers to theater as “le refoulé du cinéma” and as “la scène primitive de l’inconscient du cinéma” (Rivette 1982, 1996).¹⁹ The bodily trauma of the characterization process, normally repressed and hidden in the cinema, will become available to Celine and Julie via theatrical aura. Indeed, it is only when Celine and Julie physically enter the “theater” of the house that they are free to observe scenes left out of the film contained in the candy, allowing them to solve the whodunit of the plot. The proper narrative completion of “Phantom Ladies Over Paris” will then lead to a restoration of the body’s integrity and a putting to rest of the Christ figure as haunting specter.

For Agamben, narrative incompleteness invites a “messianic” intervention designed to restore the freedom of the body through gesture. He describes paintings which “could be seen not as immovable and eternal forms, but as fragments of a gesture or as stills of a lost film wherein only they would regain their true meaning.” (Agamben 2000, p. 56) This is true of the manner in which “Phantom Ladies Over Paris” initially introjects itself into Julie’s memory as fragments, one of which is an image of Camille’s stigmata wound. Just like the interrupted fairy tale about the wicked witch hiding knives and razor blades in the trees, this violent film is by its nature incomplete. Likewise, the morbidity of depictions of the crucifix, serving to reinforce the institutional and patriarchal power of the Church, are not final statements but rather incomplete images capable of being altered into a more proper completion. In his discussion of Godard together with Rivette, Deleuze articulates this relationship between the body and the cinematic image:

La formule de Daney quand il définit *Ici et ailleurs*, restituer les images aux corps sur lesquels elles ont été prises, vaut pour tout le cinéma de Godard et pour la nouvelle vague. *Ici et ailleurs* le fait politiquement, mais les autres films ont au moins une politique de l’image, rendre l’image aux attitudes et postures du corps. Une image caractéristique est celle d’un corps appuyé contre un mur, qui se laisse aller et tombe assis par terre dans un glissement de postures.

(Deleuze 1985, p. 252)²⁰

It is not hard to imagine this “image caractéristique” as the body of Christ dismounting from the cross, abdicating from the injunction to play a character in a narrative. Restoring “images to the bodies on which they have been taken” is thus the paradoxical task of the film, an attempt to reverse Bazin’s embalming process. But how does one restore the image to the body by means of the image?

Agamben’s answer to this question is *montage*. Also inspired by Godard, he argues that montage fulfills the “messianic task of cinema” through its characteristics of repetition and stoppage, both of which are evident in Celine and Julie’s salvation of Madlyn from “Phantom Ladies Over Paris.” Allegorically, it is also the possibility of returning to the scene of the crucifixion and halting it. Repetition is not simply a return of the same, but “the return of the possibility of what was.” In cinematic terms, it is the “memory of that which was not.” (Agamben 2014, p. 26) This accords with Celine and Julie’s

¹⁸ “Rivette invents a theatricality of cinema totally distinct from the theatricality of the theater” (Deleuze 1989, p. 194).

¹⁹ “The unconscious of the cinema” and “That which the cinema represses” (Morrey and Smith 2015).

²⁰ “Daney’s formula when he defines *Ici et Ailleurs*—restore images to the bodies on which they have been taken—applies to the whole of Godard’s cinema and to the new wave. *Ici et ailleurs* does it politically, but the other films have at least a politics of the image, to restore the image to the attitudes and postures of the body. A characteristic image is that of a body leant against a wall, which lets itself go and falls to a sitting position on the ground in a sliding of postures.” (Trans. Tomlinson and Galeta 1989, p. 193).

hazy memories of having worked or lived within the house from “Phantom Ladies Over Paris”, and it is this undecidability of the past that will inform their resistance to it. Stoppage is this act of resistance, “the ‘revolutionary interruption’ of which Walter Benjamin spoke” (Agamben 2014, p. 26). When Celine and Julie, aided by the magic potion, decide to re-enter the house to save Madlyn, Celine invokes both this notion of repetition (“Il était que cette fois . . . ça se ne passera pas comme ça”)²¹ as well as stoppage, as she remarks that their task is to “stopper les machines”²² in effect ceasing the serial reproduction of the type.

All of these efforts amount to a return of the *aura* to the image—in laying bare the process of montage, Celine and Julie return a sense of present-tense performance to the creation of the film. Agamben’s remark that Godard’s films are “an unveiling of the cinema by the cinema” (Agamben 2014, p. 25) is equally true of *Celine et Julie*. The restoration of the aura creates a “theatrical cinema” where spectators, actors, and directors can swap roles, free of the secretive control of the author. Rivette’s theatrical cinema is distinct from the theater, as Deleuze says, because it can itself upend the original theatrical characterization. Film can show us the backstage of the theater, as the earliest “backstage musicals” did for audiences far away from New York; yet theater can reveal to us the backstage, “live” element of the filmmaking process.

What Rivette protests, first and foremost, is separation: actors separated from themselves in becoming characters; an audience cut off from the actors on stage; the audience and actors both separated from the world outside the theater; the image containing a world removed from the audience in both space and time; and, as I’ve hopefully demonstrated, the body of Christ harboring a divinity and destiny removed from mortal spectators. This final example reveals the material violence of inscription as the root of these processes, an inscription guaranteeing the control of an author over bodies. Part of the film’s utopian conclusion is the implication that this mode of narrativity is not inevitable, and that collaborative and collective fiction-making can be a restorative tool against the former’s violence. This sheds new light on the relationship between myth and secular narrative forms, and I hope that scholars will see this discourse implicated in other instances in Rivette’s oeuvre. Likewise, I intend for this essay to broaden scholarship on film and religion beyond the usual suspects of Bergman, Bresson, and Dreyer and towards filmmakers who may engage with religion in a more oblique, but no less fruitful manner. The most obvious examples are Rivette’s fellow *Cahiers* critics who developed the *politique des auteurs*. But I also hope that religious studies will become an increasingly useful lens in examining the ethical dimensions of director–actor relationships in general.

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²¹ “Only this time, it won’t happen like that”.

²² “Stop the engines”.

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