# *Voir venir* the New Wave: Plasticity in Jacques Rivette's Film Criticism

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**Abstract:**
This article shows that Jacques Rivette's film criticism recalls the Hegelianism of Catherine Malabou's formulation of plasticity in *The Future of Hegel*. Enlarging the scope of a previous article on Hegel's influence on Rivette (Douglas Morrey's "To Describe a Labyrinth"), and taking a cue from Rivette's distinction between analytic and synthetic directors (the latter being those who work on the dialectical bond between contingency and necessity, accidents and essence, the conceptual and the sensuous and so forth), I argue that Rivette considered true *auteurs* only those directors capable of expressing through their films a specific kind of temporality (thus, by extension, of cinematic action) that is reminiscent of the self-dividing temporality which Malabou highlighted in her take on Hegel's substance-subject (i.e. a temporality which already in Hegel's own formulation subverted what Heidegger would later call, contra Hegel, "vulgar time"). This calls, among other things, for a revision of Rivette's conception of mise-en-scène.

**Keywords:** Plasticity; authorship; criticism; dialectics; Rivette; Malabou.

It is well known that, in the 1950s, before the French New Wave was born, some of its key filmmakers (Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, François Truffaut) worked as film critics for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. In that journal, they spearheaded the famous *politique des auteurs* (henceforth: *politique*), a critical trend identifying authorship as the most important criterion for films' aesthetic evaluation. Rivette's

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writings in particular were profoundly influenced by G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy – as demonstrated, for example, by Douglas Morrey's illuminating scholarship in "To Describe a Labyrinth: Dialectics in Jacques Rivette's Film Theory and Film Practice" (2012). In this article, I argue that Rivette's Hegelianism here is close to Catherine Malabou's in her elaboration of the notion of "plasticity". I suggest that Rivette and, later, Malabou look at Hegel from a similar angle. Drawing primarily, though not exclusively, on her *The Future of Hegel*, and on articles by Rivette from that *Cahiers* period, my aim will not be to refute Morrey's arguments (which I find entirely convincing), but rather to expand their scope – in a plastic reconfiguration, giving them new form while receiving form from them – to reveal a hitherto overlooked side of Rivette's philosophy of film. By reading the *politique* through the lens of Malabou's plasticity, this article sets out to identify the philosophical concepts underlying its claims, and suggest that once key concepts (particularly, Rivette's distinction between "analytic" and "synthetic") are abstracted from the most outdated sides of the *politique* (e.g. the latter's provocatively neo-Romantic attachment to authorship), they can still be usefully applied to more contemporary frameworks for the study of film.

## The Plasticity of Substance-Subject

What makes Rivette's film writings Hegelian is their frequent reference to the "dialectical structure of an idea that is unfolded and developed in and as a material reality" (Morrey, 2012, p. 37). For Rivette, film is ideally the unfolding of a concept, and manifests its content through an "organic relationship" (Morrey, 2012, p. 37) with its form. The Idea (unity of *concept* and *reality*) comes to the fore through mise-en-scène: "the most suitable form for the content or idea that is being expressed in the film such that the exposition of that idea, the playing out of that content takes on an irrefutable logic, an imperishable sense of *rightness*" (Morrey, 2012, p. 38). Hegel's *concept* is "an idea that plays itself out through a logic of dialectical reversal and, in the process, is incarnated in being" (Morrey, 2012, p. 34). This incarnation is the task of mise-en-scène, that is the director's capability to strip the film's appearances down to their essence.

As with everything in Hegel, essence is dialectically bound to its opposite, that is the accidental, and this is what Malabou's approach to plasticity tries to address. Plasticity is the "capacity to receive form and [...] to produce form", designating "those things that lend themselves to being formed while *resisting* deformation" (Malabou, 1996/2015, p. 9). Such is the case of Hegel's substance-subject. "Substance" is universal being, which "withdraws from itself in order to enter into the particularity of its content. Through this movement of self-negation substance will

posit itself as subject" (p. 11). This is the process of substance's self-determination, as "substance affirms itself as at once *subject* and *predicate* of itself" (p. 11). Substance achieves this identity by relating to the accidents into which it withdraws, and whose etymological meaning is "what follows" (from substance) as much as "what happens" (to substance) (p. 12).

There are two versions of the plasticity of substance-subject in *The Future of Hegel*: one for the classic era of Greek art and one for Christianity's modern era. Ancient Greece's plastic individualities are "grown independently on the soil of their own inherently substantial personality, self-made" (p. 9), thus "exemplary for the way spirit's universality, in its different moments, acquires concreteness and actuality through its incarnation in those individual forms" – rather than necessarily individual persons, as they "ultimately can apply also to a nation, an artistic epoch, a philosophy" (p. 73). Crucially, "the form in which the spiritual is translated into the materiality of sense" is a form that the particular gives to the universal as much as the latter gives it to the former: plasticity is this reciprocity. "'Plastic individuality' makes it possible to imagine the 'conformity' of singularity with the universal by means of a perspective totally different from that of pure and simple subordination" (p. 26). Such is the "becoming essential of the accident" (p. 160). The modern, Christian era, by contrast, is characterised by "the becoming accidental of essence" (p. 160). The Christian God becomes inessential through his incarnation, that is by self-emptying and becoming mortal. God appears "in time before itself"; that is, God faces up to his incarnated human version and thus "see[s] himself in [a] momentary form": no longer as the totality of the absolute Idea, but merely as "a necessary moment [...] of the development of the absolute Idea". God and humanity "are now united by a common fate: they see themselves pass by" (p. 119). God's form is now no less momentary than human form.

On both sides, "substantial necessity is experienced as necessity within the chance (*Zufall*) and contingency (*Zufälligkeit*) of the accidents" (p. 161); not simply in the sense that only substance determines its accidents and only necessity determines its contingencies, because the reverse is also true. Necessity cannot be its own essence, therefore "the essence of necessity is contingency" (p. 162). Malabou suggests that, for Hegel, "to ground or to cause oneself creates a relation in which one element *repels* the other, causing one to be an active self and one a passive" (p. 161). Far from eliminating contingency, the very fact that necessity cannot but be self-grounded makes contingency necessary, because this self-grounding splits necessity in two: active and passive. Necessity qua grounding (active) and necessity qua grounded (passive) cannot coincide, so contingency

must arise. And because contingency cannot but be entailed by necessity's self-splitting, making necessity passive in relation to itself, "a point of sheer randomness dwells within essential being, within the 'original substance'" (p. 162). But if necessity can ground itself only by self-splitting, how can we identify this ground? Is it on the side of necessity or on the side of contingency? Should the foundation of what occurs be located in an essence or rather in contingency? Malabou's answer is: *both* – that is, in their reciprocal implication. "It would be futile to want to determine some ontological priority of essence over accident, or accident over essence, for their co-implication is primary" (p. 163). The essence does not give form to its accidents without receiving form from them as well.

## The Universality of the Singular

As an accident-ridden project, *¡Que viva México!* (Sergei Eisenstein, filmed in 1931, unfinished) is a good place to start. In that footage (unedited by Eisenstein, edited only later by others in various versions), Morrey finds "the singular logic of the idea [that] determines the chain of montage" (2012, p. 39). He continues: "the film unfolds through an organic process where montage is to be found not only between fragments, but also within each fragment, the whole producing a total image which is the final, overall idea of the film" (p. 39). By including montage within itself, each fragment is an independent entity, a totality of its own – "Each shot closes in on itself as a fist", Rivette says in his review (1958/2018a, p. 190)[1] – so that, as Morrey observes, "The idea is present in each fragment – each is independent and necessary unto itself" (2012, p. 39). After a master shot in which peasants look at dancers in the middle of the frame (centripetally, horizontally), the subsequent close-ups show faces looking up and down (centrifugally, vertically): "Eisenstein does not let go of any of these moments until he has brought each to absolute independence" (Rivette, 1958/2018a, p. 191). The connection established between shots by montage is inseparable from the formal independence of each shot, because totality is in two places at once: the whole formed by montage weaving together all fragments, and the wholeness characterising each individual fragment in itself. But, as Rivette notes:

> if what matters is no longer the two shots brought together but the idea that draws them close, the idea then moves back inside each one of them to join its own movement, and to regain the world's soul all over, present in the soul of each distinct fragment. (p. 191)

1 Unless otherwise specified, translations from the French are courtesy of Zahra Tavassoli Zea.

This "logic of the idea" (as Rivette himself put it) corresponds to the self-differentiation of absolute substance, in Hegel's *Doctrine of Essence*, into self-identical universal (i.e. all-encompassing totality qua causal substance) on the one hand, but on the other hand also into a different version of the same totality, that is as the negativity that a self-identical universal cannot but be as well. By denying itself (if it did not encompass its own negation, it would not be a real totality), totality becomes the singular qua "*self-identical negativity*" (Hegel, 1813/2010, p. 505). Or, as Malabou explains, "from a distance spirit looks on at the determinatenesses in their self-movement, as they take on the form of essential accidents, in other words, of *singularities*" (1996/2005, p. 165). To be sure, she is talking about subjectivity and not cinematic forms, yet the point of plasticity is precisely the coincidence between subjectivity and form: "It is now the *subject* that is said to be *plastic*" (Malabou, 2000, p. 9). The end of Hegelian system ("Absolute Knowledge") is not when substance becomes a final, definitive subject, but when the transcendental perspective is discarded and subjectivities are revealed as forms, that is, as "spontaneous organization of fragments" (Malabou, 2005/2010, p. 7) that are totalities through and through but always precarious ones. Their very existence as forms comes with the imprisonment of energy that will only be released once the form is dissolved; then, another form comes receiving its shape from that dissolution while also giving to it a shape that in turn may be dissolved ("The new form itself emerges as a possibility of its own self-destruction" [Malabou, 2000, p. 10]). The totality of the Idea, in *¡Que viva México!*, is in the relation between fragments as well as in each self-enclosed fragment. Totality is not just what awaits the dialectical process at the end of the road: it is always there, embodied in each of the singularities.

But if the whole formed by the fragments disappears behind each of the fragments, what is left of Eisenstein's overtly Hegelian-informed organicism (the evolution of the whole through progressive disruptions and reorganisations)? Luka Arsenjuk has shown that in various places in Eisenstein's oeuvre, "an inorganic life, a sort of sterile or monotonously productive vitality" lurks as a foreign body of sorts, undermining his "organicist, evolutionist idea" (Arsenjuk, 2018, p. 202) and subverting it from within. Eisenstein's implacable dialectical machine partly sublates this spurious component dialectically, and partly leaves it non-sublated, as a non-sublatable remainder ecstatically breaking the consistency of representation. Whilst always gravitating toward one another, ecstatic deformation and dialectical reconfiguration can never be sublated dialectically themselves and the gap between them always remains (Arsenjuk, 2018, pp. 186–189; also, Olivero, 2017, pp. 101–190), so that "neither of

the two possibilities can assume primacy" (Arsenjuk, 2018, p. 202). The two can only co-exist non-dialectically through that most dialectical of Eisensteinian tools: montage.

Much like this Eisensteinian twofoldness, Malabou's own version of Hegel's system is caught in an "agonism between form and its dislocation, between systematic unity and the explosion of the system" (Malabou, 2005/2010, p. 6). Dialectical negativity and deconstructive negativity are the two sides of plasticity, glued to one another while always remaining distinct: difference is dialectically sublated and at the same time remains impervious to sublation (Malabou, 2005/2010, pp. 1–21). Yet what keeps the dialectical process both always-already closed and always-already open is, for Malabou, something different from Arsenjuk's Eisensteinian montage: rather, it is the act of reading. Subjectivities are formed plastically only as they encounter other subjectivities: thereby, a subjectivity reads another through an active readership of sorts, disassembling and reassembling it in a different way (Malabou, 1996/2005, pp. 167–193), giving form to it while receiving form from it. Form is thus not deconstructed or disseminated, but always produced plastically anew: the formation of organic totality is never accomplished, and simultaneously it always is. Organic totality is always present as a precarious singularity, before its explosion gives rise to another precarious singularity.

Rivette is ostensibly on the same page. His opinion, that the rushes of *¡Que viva México!* should not be edited in a narrative sequence but rather left as they are, no matter the order, is not – as claimed by Morrey – due to "a more traditional version of auteurism" (2012, p. 39). True, for Rivette, "we can only guess at what the unifying idea behind all his footage might have been" (Morrey, 2012, p. 39); yet this unifying idea is also "a question with no answer, which however positions us immediately at the origin of Eisensteinian creation, whose finished work, likewise closed in on itself, turns us away [*nous détourne*]" (Rivette, 1958/2018a, p. 190). Eisenstein brings forth a totality by putting fragments together, *while totality is already in each singularity.* This is why, in front of a finished work, the audience would not be as close to the source of Eisenstein's creation as in front of the unedited rushes of *¡Que viva México!* The point is not that the ruling concept behind the film, as again claimed by Morrey, "emerges from the director's mind" only (2012, p. 39), but that the totality of the idea, which the audience is forced to reconstruct from the rushes, is *always lying ahead and right here at the same time*. Sensitive to the inherent tensions of Eisenstein's organicism, Rivette considers him at his most organic precisely when he is most fragmentary, so that each fragment can be a totality of its own and plastically reshuffled over and over by the audience as well: putting them in a similar position to the director.

Authorship, spectatorship and criticism are not so distant after all, as the plastic journey from singularity to singularity "is the work of *no one*" (Malabou, 1996/2005, p. 165).

**Analysis and Synthesis**

This is not to say that Rivette, the *éminence grise* of the *politique*, did not care about authorship, but rather that his requirements for a director to be an *auteur* are more stringent than just being a creative genius. His first published article (Rivette, 1950/2011) lays them out unambiguously: true *auteurs* are synthetic, false ones are analytic.

To unpack this distinction, a philosophical digression is in order. Kant's analytic judgments are those whose predicate is contained in the subject: "All bodies are extended" (Kant, 1781/1787/1998, A7/B11). "Being extended" is a priori part of the definition of "body". That definition, however, does not encompass a concept like heaviness, so "all bodies are heavy" (A7/B11) is a synthetic judgment because it can only be validated a posteriori, through experience. Kant also contemplated synthetic a priori judgments: apparent contradictions – *if a judgment relies on experience because its predicate is not included in the subject, how can it be a priori?* – which, however, delimit the very perimeter of metaphysics. Synthetic a priori judgements are the product of transcendental imagination, that is "the power of presenting an object in intuition even without the objects being present" (B137), mediating between sensibility and understanding, synthesising the manifold of sensation into the unity of an image. Whilst lamenting Kant's misuse thereof, Hegel embraced, and further elaborated on, the idea of synthetic a priori judgments, as the mediation between the concept and the sensuous. As Malabou explains, "The pure image produced by creative transcendental imagination allows the concept to appear phenomenally, and the phenomenon to show itself as categorically structured by the concept" (2017, p. 196).

Rivette's synthetic directors are those who can marry the concept and the sensuous. In their films, "an act as simple as drinking, walking or dying possesses a density – the plenitude of meaning and the confused evidence of the sign – that always transcends interpretations and limitations" (Rivette, 1950/2011). When Jean Simmons sits on an armchair in *Angel Face* (Otto Preminger, 1952), her shrivelled attitude does not signify anything in particular: it might be mischievous premeditation, fragility, cluelessness or something else, but there is no way to determine what exactly it signifies (Rivette, 1954/1985, p. 135). The image is not the illustration of a meaning, but a set of potential meanings that are nowhere but in what appears. The sensuous is the predicate that determines its subject (its concept) much like the opposite. Thus, that image is not a sign

because a sign is by definition distinct from what it signifies. Here, form and content are inseparable: "the whole object is in the act of appearing" (Rivette, 1950/2011). Conversely, the images of analytic directors are just signs pointing to conventional meanings. Images are used as raw matter to express a point that is not in the images, and only suggested from without by some visual rhetoric. Form is separated from content. Linguistic abstraction replaces the "concrete signs which resist being reduced to formulas" (Rivette, 1950/2011).

Clearly, Rivette's thinking here is imbued with the metaphysics of Eric Rohmer: his mentor at the time and director of *A Tale of Springtime* (*Conte de printemps*, 1990), a film famously featuring a conversation on Kant's synthetic a priori judgment at the dinner table. As I have shown elsewhere (Grosoli, 2018, p. 88), the idea that cinema is the exteriorised form of Kant's transcendental imagination lies at the core of Rohmer's film theory. For Malabou, transcendental imagination ensures a reciprocity between the concept and the sensuous: "The concept does not exist without revealing itself, and the sensuous is never independent from its speculative form. Their difference exists in and as their *a priori* identity or synthesis" (2017, p. 196). This reciprocity is at the core of plasticity: as opposed to passively receiving its predicates (its accidents) from outside, subjectivity for Malabou "is never passive". Elsewhere she argues:

> in a way it receives its predicates, it receives the form [...] but it fundamentally and paradoxically participates in this reception. As such, it wards off its own passivity. It is spontaneous in its very receptiveness. Thus, each individuality is always both receiver and giver of its own form. (2000, p. 9)

Similarly, for Rivette, "the universe commands the [director's] gaze, and yet the gaze itself both imposes and creates this universe [...] without anteriority or causal relation" (1950/2011). Ultimately, "synthetic" means "plastic": a "shot always remains on the side of the accidental, of a momentary success that cannot be repeated" and that decisively contributes to the essence to be conveyed, as "the fact of passing into being, into appearance, shapes [interior being] automatically" (Rivette, 1950/2011). Essence and accident merge into one another because the absolute, whether Aristotle's classical divine *Nous* or modernity's Christian God, is essentially negative. Substance cannot but self-negate and self-differentiate, thereby being pushed toward what it is not, that is the accidental, in order to be what it is.

What divides itself and negates itself in the works by synthetic directors is, first and foremost, *time*. One of Malabou's key points is that Heidegger's critique of vulgar time (for Aristotle, a mere linear sequence

of nows [Malabou, 1996/2005, p. 2]) can already be found in Hegel's philosophy: the idea comes to the fore not just through time, but specifically through time qua self-differentiating.

By contrast, analytic directors stick to vulgar linear time. Drawing from the famous quarrel with Eisenstein over montage (but raising it at a more general level), Rivette targets Vsevolod Pudovkin as one of the quintessential analytic directors on several occasions: such as the article deprecating Marie Seton's montage of *¡Que viva México!* rushes for being arranged sequentially, in a linear narrative of sorts (Rivette, 1958/2018a, p. 191). Through time, a totality is formed: analytic directors use bricks to build a wall, one after the other, as means to the end of the overall image resulting from their linear succession. As recalled by Rivette and André-Sylvain Labarthe in an interview with Alain Resnais and Alain Robbe-Grillet, "for Pudovkin, shots were the words of the sentence; for Eisenstein, every single shot remains a living entity" (Labarthe & Rivette, 1961, p. 8). For synthetic directors, each brick is already a wall, a totality in itself, an end in itself "that can exist independently of any narrative progression" (Rivette, 1958/2018a, p. 190). Thus, Eisenstein opts for a discontinuous montage style, contrasting shots with one another, jerkily leaping from singularity to singularity as opposed to creating a seamless stream.

Eisenstein's is, of course, not the only way of handling temporality synthetically. The analytic-synthetic divide must be defined in terms other than linearity v. non-linearity or continuity v. discontinuity. Ellipses break narrative linearity, but they are still analytic: by inserting a gap in a sequence, an ellipsis calls for the intervention of a reader or viewer filling it up, so all the emphasis is on an incomplete totality to be eventually filled up for good (cf. Rivette, 1950/2011). This is the opposite of *¡Que viva México!*'s totality-qua-singularity; the film's active readership/viewership disassembles and reassembles a full-fledged and complete form, as opposed to filling up an originally incomplete elliptical form. Accordingly, in Howard Hawks's films there is "no flashback, no ellipsis; the rule is continuity" (Rivette, 1953/1985, p. 128). Hawks's "obsession with continuity" (p. 129), however, is dialectical, as it relates to its opposite in several ways.

Firstly, Hawks "is a Teutonic spirit, attracted by bouts of ordered madness which give birth to an infinite chain of consequences. The very fact of their continuity is a manifestation of Fate" (p. 128). In the first part of his article, Rivette had described Hawks's universe as one ruled by reason and logic (and thus by continuity), until they are reversed into barbarism (e.g. in *Monkey Business*, 1952), which is also, as implied above, their origin in the first place. Later in his article, Rivette makes

another reference to Fate ("Always, the heroes' movements are along the path of their destiny", p. 129), and the examples he brings up seem to imply that by "Fate" he means the intrusion of a non-temporal (i.e., spatial) dimension where the temporal had hitherto reigned supreme. We meticulously follow the heroes' trajectories, yet they are always counterbalanced by spatial confinement, for example the hut of *The Thing* (1950), or the library of *Ball of Fire* (1941). "Drama is always expressed in spatial terms, and variations in setting are parallel with temporal variations" (p. 129). Temporal continuity is unbroken, yet reversed into space.

Secondly, continuous movement is both abstract and concrete. It always has a bodily, organic quality: "Logic is not some cold intellectual activity, but proof that the body is a coherent whole" (p. 131). And thirdly, beneath continuity:

> feelings are slowly ripening, developing step by step towards a violent climax. Hawks uses lassitude as a dramatic device – to convey the exasperation of men who have to restrain themselves for two hours, patiently containing their anger, hatred, or love before our eyes and then suddenly releasing it, like slowly saturated batteries which eventually give off a spark. Their anger is heightened by their habitual sangfroid; their calm façade is pregnant with emotion, with the secret trembling of their nerves and of their soul – until the cup overflows. A Hawks film often has the same feeling as the agonizing wait for the fall of a drop of water. (p. 129)

Continuity always continues, until it no longer does. Reversal happens, as both a disruption of all that preceded, and its logical accomplishment.

Analytic directors stick to teleology, while synthetic directors – whatever the chosen forms – lead them to explosion so that they are dialectically (that is, plastically) metamorphosed into different ones. Rivette likely had in mind Eisenstein's own formulation of dialectical cinema (1929/1949) but interpreted in a daringly dialectical way: since dialectics consists in abolishing and preserving, the dialectical sublation of Eisenstein's dialectical cinema would consist in the preservation of its underlying, plastic formal principle while abolishing the primacy that Eisenstein attributed to a specific form (typically, montage).

This analytic-synthetic divide can be better understood by referring to Malabou's opposition between plasticity and rigidity/flexibility. In *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, Malabou traces an implicit affinity between the rigidity of the traditional, centred subject of Western metaphysics that regards teleological time as the necessary condition for enabling self-realisation, and the flexibility imposed by the newer forms of neoliberal network capitalism, according to which the capability to indiscriminately

adapt to any circumstances is imperative for survival. Analytic temporality is similarly both too rigid and too flexible: it provides the linear, teleological template that can accommodate any content, provided that it adapts to it. Instead, plastic (i.e. synthetic) temporality looks at once ahead and back, toward preservation and change simultaneously. Teleology's linear continuity is preserved only by way of disruption. Plastic subjectivity consists precisely in that tension:

> The plasticity of the self, which supposes that it simultaneously receives and gives itself its own form, implies a necessary split and the search for an equilibrium between the presentation of constancy (or, basically, the autobiographical self) and the exposure of this constancy to accidents, to the outside, to otherness in general (identity, in order to endure, ought paradoxically to alter itself or accidentalize itself). What results is a tension born of the resistance that constancy and creation mutually oppose to each other. (Malabou, 2004/2008, p. 71)

Four years after the article on Hawks, Rivette explained in a long footnote (Rivette, 1957/1977, p. 67) that reversals like the ones singled out in that piece – breaking with film's logical and causal concatenation only to accomplish it at a higher level – can be found in most of the *auteurs*' films of the decade, such as Roberto Rossellini's *Fear* (*Angst*, 1954) or Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955). Other films like Joseph Losey's *Chance Meeting* (1959) were criticised for refusing these *coups de théâtre*, "i.e. accident, rupture, change, life sweeping in" (Rivette, 1961/2018b, p. 370), while *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (Fritz Lang, 1957) was praised for including them. In Lang's film, novelist Tom Garrett (Dana Andrews) disseminates clues that prove he is guilty of a murder, so that during the trial he can reveal that all evidence had been fabricated, and thereby prove that the death penalty is inherently wrong because mistakes can happen without any chance to be rectified after the execution. Right before the end, however, a sudden (and narratively unjustified) slip of the tongue reveals Garrett as in fact guilty. In an ironic twist, then, this reversal accomplishes the interchangeability between innocence and guilt that the protagonist had wanted to prove.

If, on the one hand, Lang's style strips everything down to its essence (cf. Morrey, 2012, p. 41), on the other hand accident plays no smaller role because necessity "must be able to contradict itself without losing its reality" (Rivette, 1957/1977, p. 67). Rivette explicitly asks whether "anything human [can] subsist in such an atmosphere" where there is only space for essence (p. 66). He wonders, "What part of life, even inhuman, can subsist in a quasi-abstract universe which is nevertheless within the range of possible universes?" (p. 66). His answer is, precisely,

that final slip of the tongue. Its occurrence at that crucial moment implies that even when humanity is excluded, the person remains central; even when there is nothing but essence, the accidental is right there. The film's climax is literally an accident, a mistake whereby "what seemed at first to be in the order of arbitrary dramatics is in fact necessity" (p. 67). This is the *ne plus ultra* of the unity between essence and accident, necessity and contingency. For Rivette, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* is the "*coup d'état* of absolute understanding" (p. 66; a mistranslation for absolute knowledge) because absolute knowledge lies precisely in acknowledging the impossibility to determine what is prior to the other, whether essence or accident, necessity or contingency (cf. Malabou, 1996/2005, p. 163). Free subjectivity emerges from the negativity of the absolute: that is from the necessity, for substance, to self-negate and negate its own necessity. Freedom is the result of necessity's inherent inconsistency, necessity's necessary self-negation.

*Coups de théâtre* such as this are among the best examples of how time, in the films of those synthetic *auteurs*, accomplishes itself only by going outside of itself (i.e., detouring from the path it was seemingly tracing) whereas analytic directors use time and narrative merely to smoothly deploy what is already contained in the initial premises, without allowing the latter any detour in the process of its own unfolding. Synthetic directors do not simply negate the logical concatenation of narrative, but rather affirm it by negating it. As shown earlier, a similar dialectical perspective is shared even by someone with a completely different style like Eisenstein, as he accomplished the totality of the idea through its opposite, that is in the singularities. It would therefore be in vain to look for a principle distinguishing synthetic from analytic in terms of montage v. long take or linearity v. non-linearity, for example. Whatever the styles, the forms and the techniques, a director is synthetic only if she uses them *dialectically*: a continuity-obsessed director like Hawks encountering the discontinuous along the way, Eisenstein letting his montage rely on self-enclosed singular totalities, and so forth.

This dialecticity, with which directors are required to comply in order to be deemed "synthetic", can best be understood by reference to the inherent dialecticity of time according to Hegel as interpreted by Malabou. Jean-Paul Martinon (2007, pp. 39–40) derives the temporality of Malabou's plasticity from the differentiation between chronological time and logical time. Chronological time is a "teleological movement" (p. 39) from point A to point B, where the latter is ideally already included in the former in the first place. Logical time is the time of representation, that is a "synthetic mode of comprehension or assimilation that bases itself on a previous experience or perception" (p. 39). Synthetic films are those

giving, whatever their aesthetic means, some kind of shape to the differentiation between these two times. Eisenstein's cinema thrives in the tension between the chronological time woven by montage, and the logical one of the singularities. The *coups de théâtre* films play on the contrast between narrative concatenation (chronological time), and a reversal which brackets this concatenation and shows it in a new light. Conversely, ellipses are analytical tricks because they ask the viewer to fill in the gaps of the sequential order, that is to concoct a representation that would complete an originally incomplete teleological movement, heading linearly and unequivocally toward completion. Ellipses analytically integrate the two times, whereas only a form shaping the *differentiation* between them would be synthetic.

Many of these synthetic (i.e. *plastic*) temporalities inform films appreciated by Rivette, but it must be pointed out that this is not about deconstructing vulgar time. Teleological time is not simply deferred in the sense of Derrida's trace: as *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* repeatedly emphasises, plasticity is *form* along with deferral. "There is no exceeding of form that does not assume the plasticity of form and hence its convertibility" (Malabou 2005/2010, p. 46). Derrida's trace resists form because it "comes before presence, [...] is always ahead of that which it traces, always more originary than the form that is supposed to leave a trace" (p. 11); Malabou's plasticity is the unfailing reabsorption of the trace's constitutive gap within form (p. 45). Plasticity designates the forms given to deviations from teleological time that are dialectical, that is ensuing in something reconstructed on top of disruption. The soul of cinema for Rivette is "motion which, by displacing the lines, creates them" (1957/2018, p. 189): the perturbation of teleology (the displacement of the lines) goes in tandem with the form representing whatever stands in lieu of it (the creation of the lines).

**Determinism's Vulgar Time v. mise-en-scène**

This concern for temporality also has ethical implications. For Rivette, ethics and aesthetics are inseparable, as famously attested by his rejection of Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapò* (1961) as immorally turning the death of one of the characters into a spectacle through an emphatic tracking shot. It is, however, worth considering more closely the gist of Rivette's argument, centring on the heresy of "total realism" in filming concentration camps. He states:

> every attempt at reenactment or pathetic and grotesque make-up, every traditional approach to "spectacle" partakes in voyeurism and pornography. The director is bound to make it tasteless, so that that which he dares present as "reality" is physically tolerable for the viewer, who cannot

> help but conclude, maybe unconsciously, that, of course, it was troublesome (those Germans, what savages!), but ultimately not intolerable, and that if one were just wise enough, with a bit of cunning or patience, one ought to have been able to get away with it. At the same time everyone unknowingly becomes accustomed to the horror, which little by little is accepted by morality, and will quickly become part of the mental landscape of modern man; who, the next time, will be able to be surprised or irritated at that which will in effect have ceased to be shocking? (Rivette, 1961/2009)

Here we find flexibility, again, as the flipside of determinism. The problem with reenactment is the weaving of a consistent narrative fabric where nothing escapes the mechanics of causes and effects; images are nothing but means to an end, and spectators are merely the recipients of Pavlovian, pornographic manipulation of feelings. Analytic directors like Pontecorvo and Pudovkin are imposters because they think that anything can fit a chain of causes and effects, whereas some things cannot be understood rationally: "There are things that should not be addressed except in the throes of fear and trembling; death is one of them" (Rivette, 1961/2009). *Night and Fog* (1955) demonstrates this in juxtaposing images of the camps according to a logic that is neither causal nor finalistic.

In Pontecorvo's deterministic world, there is no place for the non-rationalisable excess of trauma, so human beings are implied as infinitely flexible. In *The New Wounded*, *Ontology of the Accident* and elsewhere, Malabou has attempted a post-Freudian redefinition of the relationship between trauma and causality. With all due consequences drawn from the paradigmatic case of those brain lesions erasing subjects' former personalities completely, the centrality must be acknowledged of *contingency* in the causality of trauma (that is, in the instances in which the brain fails to protect the system against external disturbances). Traumas cannot be reduced to a deterministic causal network because contingency plays too big a role in their coming into being. In dealing with the camps, then, Pontecorvo fails to address trauma because he relies on an unproblematically consistent causal chain, where everything holds ("total realism").

As such, those brain lesions are paradigmatic, more generally, of subjectivity per se, as previously outlined in *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* Subjectivity is nothing but the plastic handling of the countless traumas of life: the handling of contingencies between preservation and change. Those traumatic instances in which nothing is preserved (i.e. the aforementioned brain lesions) define subjectivity insofar as they are its non-transcendental delimitation, borderline cases which tell us what

subjectivity is by showing the limits beyond which subjectivity is not there. Causality is no longer a Kantian transcendental principle but the point where essence and contingency coincide, in that its essence *is* contingency: the fabric of causality *as such* is inconsistent and determined only through subjectivity's original tension between preservation and change in the navigation of contingencies. Causality's consistency coincides with its own contingent disruption. Subjectivity is the very interdependence between that consistency and that disruption.

Therefore, Rivette's "On Abjection" does not simply pit directors with no subjective bias on their matter (Pontecorvo) against directors with distinctive signature styles (Resnais). The subjective imprint of *auteurs* strictly depends on refusing determinist "total realism". He claims, "To make a film is to show certain things, that is at the same time, and by the same mechanism, to show them with a certain bias" (Rivette, 1961/2009); objectivity in film can only consist in the acknowledgement that no causal reconstruction is ever objective, that a structural incompleteness characterises any attempt at objectivity, and thus subjective bias is inevitable. This point was adumbrated particularly in Rivette's review of Alexandre Astruc's *Les mauvaises rencontres* (1955), a film whose author and characters find objectivity not in causal determinism ("[the film] not being constructed like most to deceive the spectator through the gears of dramatic machination" [Rivette, 1955/2018b, p. 131]), but in the objective acknowledgement of their own subjective bias, through a subjective involvement that is the very opposite of a pseudo-objective detachment verging on cynicism: "[The film] only wants to be the report of an experience: 'here is what I saw, what I thought I understood, what happened to me'" (p. 131). Rivette observes:

> The lucid look they each constantly take at themselves and at others is only matched by the look the camera takes at him [...] the result is an atmosphere of debate and courtly discussion, where each character puts his or her own little personal ethics at stake – which strikes me as very exciting. (1955/2018a, pp. 115–116)

The *auteur* is a "mal nécessaire" (Rivette, 1961/2018a, p. 224) (a "necessary evil", mistranslated as "badly needed" [Rivette, 1961/2009]): the point of auteurism is not subjectivity as such, but rather subjectivity as emerging out of the self-negating of substance (substance-subject). Subjectivity, in other words, emerges out of the negation of the pseudo-objectivity of determinism: it is the form given to the mismatch between chronological and logical times, a mismatch that would otherwise be fully conflated under determinism as explained away by causal chains. Thus, the *auteur* is less a directorial genius in the strictest sense than the generic

placeholder of subjectivity as such, emerging whenever a film reproduces the movement of substance-subject.

In this view of authorship, spectatorship is part and parcel of that movement. Only through the negation of determinism is logic affirmed in the idea qua unity of thought and object; this does not mean that the idea *actually* materialises on the screen, but rather that it cannot be objectified on the screen without bouncing back this side of it, towards the viewing subject contributing to its emergence. As to whether *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*'s Garrett is guilty or innocent, "to each, then, to create for himself his own truth, however unreasonable it may be" (Rivette, 1957/1977, p. 68). As in "Que Viva Eisenstein!", authorship, spectatorship and criticism seem to strangely converge, as confirmed by Rivette's frequent claims that a film's only possible criticism is another film (1958/2018b, p. 209), and more generally that one needs to be a filmmaker to be a real critic and vice versa: "as Cézanne, despite all the journalists and reviewers, was slowly imposed by the painters, so the filmmakers (*les cinéastes*) will impose into history Murnau or Mizoguchi" (Rivette, 1961/2009).

In this regard, it is hard to agree with Morrey that *Paris Belongs to Us* (*Paris nous appartient*, Jacques Rivette, 1961) "dramatises, in a demonstration of Rivette's own understanding of cinema, the unravelling of an idea [but] there is little sense of the process leading to closure or greater understanding" (Morrey, 2012, p. 49). Granted, many questions are left unanswered by the film, but at least one definite answer is there: the protagonist, after investigating on an opaque conspiracy (whether imaginary or real, it remains unclear) and being faced with the consequences of the investigation (including a couple of deaths), is told that "it is all your fault. You had to have something sublime". That *is* a closure. The protagonist discovers nothing certain about the conspiracy, but does discover something definite and tangible about herself, that is her own desire for something grand, for mystery and drama. Conspiracy takes shape not by being revealed as actual, but by being reflected back into the subject. Whether the conspiracy objectively exists or not is not the point: the point is that the protagonist, a patent placeholder of the film's viewer, objectively wishes that the conspiracy exists. The film returns this desire back to the viewing/investigating subject.

The *politique*'s name for what makes cinema dialectical – in having subject and object, form and content come together, as in the example of *Paris Belongs to Us* above – is mise-en-scène. Whilst analytic directors cling to vulgar time, mise-en-scène subverts it by opening up a gap between chronological and logical times. This has nothing to do with sequential order (as in v. syuzhet) or its disruption, but rather with

finding a form (other than the vulgar sequence of nows) for the coming together of a temporal whole through its parts dialectically: that is through a unity of unity and division. Such unity is what defines the Idea of the beautiful in Hegel's *Aesthetics* (1842/1975, pp. 106–115), and what Rivette explicitly opposes to classic sequentiality (as cited in Domarchi et al., 1959/1985, pp. 60–61), in which unity is simply the final sum of the divided parts.

There are countless ways for mise-en-scène to allow time to detour from its own path: for instance, through the deliberate imbalance between moments of disruptive action and moments of extended contemplation characterising the best young American directors (Rivette, 1955/1985). An exhaustive survey is impossible here, but one of the most frequent among those ways is doubtlessly the individualisation of fragments qua self-enclosed totalities already highlighted in *¡Que viva México!*, and spotted by Rivette even in several Hollywood films such as the smooth transitions from and to individual monads in *Violent Saturday* (Richard Fleischer, 1955) (Rivette, 1956/2018).

Another film in which "ineluctable, the fragment is [...] the sign of the whole" (Rivette, 1962/2018, p. 229) is *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1961). The real subject of the film is twofold: "that which lasts in a being and that which is only fleeting, momentary, transitory: the revealing of its trajectory and its becoming" (Rivette, as cited in Morrey, 2012, p. 33). A gap between chronological and logical times is opened by that duplicity: on one side the abstract, invisible, "insidious and irresistible encroachment of time" (Morrey, 2012, p. 33), on the other side the concrete fragments going through change, in all their physicality and sensuality ("ultimately, the physical can never be avoided: the body is there at all time, with its illnesses, its instincts, its nourishments" [Rivette, 1962/2018, p. 228]). In this "dialectics of the moment and of duration" (Rivette, as cited in Morrey, 2012, p. 32), moment and duration are mutually inseparable.

Accordingly, "profound chanting can only be born from this rubble, or dust" (Rivette, 1962/2018, p. 227): essence can only be born from accidents. The trajectories of change "can only be grasped through slivers, and time shreds" (p. 229). They are made of stages that remain independent and cannot be deduced analytically from the trajectory as a whole ("There is nothing but the present [...] this present must also be built and inhabited, and this other present too, and this is precisely progress" [p. 228]). *Splendor*'s structure is broken and uneven; it is the succession of discrete moments that builds the narrative arc, not the abstract movement of drama. As essence and accidents switch places, "any dramatic progression surrenders here to the order of simple

temporal succession" (p. 229). Normally, drama is the very form of change; through drama-driven change, the essential is reached in the end by processing and "essentialising" the narrative accidents along the way. The accidental side of the accidents passes, while that which is essential for the sake of drama is taken up and developed through the narrative arc. In *Splendor*, drama is relegated to the background, and "only some characters, precisely those who object and refuse, are 'dramatic', even theatrical at times, but this is because their ideas reign over them as if on a stage; these ones will finally be defeated, broken, returned to simplicity" (p. 229). By way of what Malabou would call "becoming accidental of the essence" (1996/2005, p. 160), Rivette downplays drama qua invisible operator of essentialisation, and sees it instead as embodied in single characters who are specifically dramatic (that is, driven by abstract ideas and their prospective teleological accomplishment), like the protagonist's father, a patriarch eventually committing suicide because too rigid to cope with the 1929 crisis. His rigidity (for Malabou, the opposite of plasticity no less than flexibility) leads him to destruction, preventing him from attaining the qualitative leap toward an affirmative change.

This nod to Eisenstein ("qualitative leap") is deliberate. His name turns up in Rivette's third sentence, and is indirectly echoed in passages like: "to the mutilated visions of *corpore sano*, whether family-oriented or athletic, [the film] opposes a critique (and at the same time an explanation) of the phenomenon: namely, puritanism. Which is first and foremost rupture, judgment and privilege" (1962/2018, p. 228). *Splendor*, says Rivette, is an "absolute criticism of the notion of identity" (p. 228). Morrey rightly interprets this absolute criticism in terms of a critique of "the healthy young body" (2012, p. 33): as time dissolves any identity, the young body's health shall pass too. He stops short, however, of recognising the main implication ensuing from the film's critique of identity, namely the critique of a certain kind of organicism. Following the film, Rivette's review implicitly yet unmistakably opposes two different kinds of organicism. Puritan "healthy young body" (*corpore sano*) is a mutilated vision: as an organic totality consisting simply in the harmonious sum of its parts, the healthy young body is the image of a false totality because it leaves something out, namely negativity itself. Because it does not negate itself, that kind of body is ultimately a non-total and thus false, "analytic" conception of totality, leading to a fixed, non-dialectical conception of identity: puritanism postulates the healthy young body as a divisive social brand. To this, the film opposes *by way of its own form* a kind of organicism which, like Eisenstein's, negates itself: thanks to mise-en-scène, the essential and the accidental, necessity and contingency, the isolated fragment and the overall arc systematically switch places. It is

thus an organicism that is not only dialectical and synthetic, but also fully *plastic*.

### Plasticity at the Heart of *politique des auteurs*

Rivette welcomed *Splendor* as a significant step toward the future of cinema as *atonal*. In the 1960s, Rivette's interests were drawn to modernist music and its possibilities for application in cinema: particularly the possibilities for mutual integration between chance and structure derived from aleatoric music. *Amour Fou* (1968), *Out 1* (1971) and other films by Rivette draw on these musical experiments to achieve a mutual combination of planning and improvisation.

This plastic model of filmmaking was anticipated in Rivette's earlier critical writings, approaching cinema from a Hegelian angle that recalls Malabou's plasticity, as well as a further dialecticisation of Eisenstein's dialectical cinema, freeing it from any ossified theoretical predilection for a specific cinematic component (e.g. montage). To Morrey's summary of the conception of cinema implicit in Rivette's film criticism – that film is the unfolding of an idea, materialised through an organic relationship between form and content called mise-en-scène – it should be added that the idea is attained by way of time going outside of itself, opening up the gap between chronological and logical times against the vulgar time of determinism, and enabling the mutual interplay between contingency and necessity, accident and essence, the sensuous and the conceptual, which Rivette labelled synthetic (as opposed to analytic), and which corresponds to the movement of the substance-subject. As a result of that movement, subjectivity (in a broad sense encompassing spectatorship as much as authorship) emerges as a crack in the fabric of determinism.

The New Wave was already well underway by the time of *Splendor*'s release in 1962; it was a filmmaking trend that was, we might say, *seen coming* beforehand by the *politique*. "To see what is coming" (*voir venir*) is a turn of phrase much insisted upon in *The Future of Hegel* (Malabou, 1996/2005, p. 11). It means that one simultaneously does and does not know in advance what the future is going to be like. Against the opinion that there can be no future in Hegel's system, because everything necessarily fulfils a strictly teleological design, Malabou demonstrates that Hegel's future is a blend of teleological necessity and surprise. What happens, happens out of necessity, but in a way that is dictated by contingency as inseparable from necessity. "To see what is coming" is an anticipation of the future so that what comes does so in a way that is simultaneously expected and unexpected. We can know the essence in advance, but not the accident that will determine that essence and make it real. All the *politique* critics wanted to be filmmakers, and prepared for the

contingency that would eventually make the New Wave possible by denying, in a sense, any future to film history: that is by having the transhistorical category of auteurism equate both classic and modern. In the same way that classic Hawks and Hitchcock belonged to the same family of *auteurs* as modern Renoir and Rossellini, *The Future of Hegel* conceived of plasticity as a transhistorical category shared by both classic Greek and modern Christian eras.[2] Thus, the very same individuation of a transhistorical *telos* on the one hand denied a future for film history as such (or at least the opportunity to draw a neat distinction between classic and modern), but on the other hand prepared these critics' own future as filmmakers.

A full-fledged demonstration of Rivette's key role in shaping *politique* would far exceed the scope of this article. However, if Truffaut's "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" (1954/1976), customarily regarded as the *politique*'s main manifesto, is reread with the previous description of the analytic v. synthetic/plastic divide in mind, then it is easy to recognise that Truffaut's distinction overlaps with Rivette's: bad directors (what Truffaut called "metteurs en scène") are those who slavishly follow the teleological track of the script (i.e. the rigid, overarching temporal model analytic directors flexibly modelled their films after), while good directors (Truffaut's *auteurs*) reinvent it on the screen as a movement, both jerky *and* seamless, from synthetic/plastic singularity to synthetic/plastic singularity. More generally, a thorough reassessment of the analytic-synthetic distinction (not only Rivette's key idea, but also the *politique*'s more broadly) in light of Malabou's plasticity shows that the *politique* was never really interested in distinguishing films marked by the subjective imprint of a creative genius from those which were not. Rather, they bestowed the brand of subjectivity only on those films breaking in some way with a teleological filmmaking approach and focusing instead on how synthetic forms emerge, disappear and make way to other forms through the gap between the logical and the chronological. In other words, the *politique*'s real divide was: the vulgar time of determinism v. subjectivity intended as the very form of form's own metamorphoses.

For Malabou, this is *the* battleground of our present day. Flexibility and rigidity alike are the reproduction, under the shiny new guise of network capitalism, of old systems of repression resting upon, and enforcing, a

2 Also not unlike *Paris Belongs to Us* using the structures of classical tragedy (Watts, 2005) in a late modernist context.

"vulgar" conception of time: that is a non-dialectically teleological determinism. This, however, can always be subverted by plasticity every time that a singularity (subjectivity, self-consciousness qua form) emerges from the gap between the logical and the chronological, thus embodying the possibility of a future: of an alternative to the status quo, by departing from the conception of time it relies on. Cinema remains likely to reproduce this divide, encompassing instances of rigidity/flexibility as well as of plasticity. How, then, are we to distinguish today the instances of cinematic plasticity from those of rigidity/flexibility? This is where a closer, plasticity-informed look at the *politique* and at its analytic v. synthetic/plastic divide could help.

Of course, there is no question of transplanting the *politique* verbatim into our present day: rather, it should be read as dialectically as Eisenstein was read by Rivette. One should, in other words, discard those elements that now come across as inevitably outdated (e.g. the *politique*'s aversion to the script as a means to keep dramatic necessity apart from contingencies, and crush the film under predetermination), while still retaining the underlying opposition between analytic and synthetic/plastic, so that it can be adapted to our contemporary contexts. In doing so, one should not forget that, for the *politique*, auteurism was never a matter of opposing classic to modern, Hollywood mainstream to niche art cinema, in that the analytic v. synthetic/plastic divide bisects *each* of these domains internally. It cannot be a question of contrasting, say, the Marvel cinematic universe with festival-oriented "World cinema" (arguably the branch of contemporary cinema harbouring most of what remains of auteur cinema). This is all the more so since the latter is no less modular and flexible than the former: suffice it to mention the manifold, highly bureaucratised, interconnected institutional agencies that most film projects aspiring to the festival circuit must go through to get made (development labs, funding programmes and so on and so forth) and the ensuing, manifold pressures those projects must accommodate, whether flexibly or plastically. As for the specific formal mechanics whereby the flexible/modular/analytic status quo of the Marvel worlds, of the festival circuit, or of whatever else, can be occasionally subverted into a plastic/synthetic exception, this can only be the object of further study; at any rate, the dialectical intricacies of Rivette's writings look like a good starting point to familiarise oneself with that distinction.

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