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Rivette's The Nun: Religion between Sadism and Masochism

Abstract

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Author Notes

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I. The Plot

The Nun (original title: *Suzanne Simonin. La Religieuse de Denis Diderot*) is a 1966 French Film directed by Jacques Rivette and based on the homonymous novel written by Denis Diderot, first published in 1796.[1] Following the plot of Diderot's novel (which echoed the real story of Marguerite Delamarre), the film relates the story of Suzanne, a young woman who is forced by her family to take the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, and become a nun.[2] Actually, the film starts out with Suzanne who, dressed in a wedding gown, refuses to take the vows and causes a public scandal. Back at home, however, Suzanne discovers that she is not a legitimate daughter and that her mother is forcing her to become a nun because she does not want her husband to discover her betrayal. Moreover, Suzanne is told that her family cannot afford her marriage. In a moment of despair, she writes a letter that says that she will take the vows and enter the convent.

During her stay in the convent, Suzanne has three different Mothers Superior. The first one, Mme de Moni, is sympathetic to her. She knows Suzanne's story and her absence of vocation. Nonetheless, she tells her to await God's help and pray. Suzanne finally makes profession of faith, albeit unwillingly and unconsciously (she has no memories of it). During this time, both Suzanne's mother and Mme de Moni die. The new Mother Superior, Sister Sainte-Christine, is less sympathetic. The first step she takes is to reinforce the discipline and reintroduce the use of the cilice. Having opposed the new rules, Suzanne is punished and locked in a cell. However, what causes Sister Sainte-Christine's anger the most is Suzanne's determination to be legally released of her vows. Punishment soon turns into sadistic cruelty. The Mother Superior mistreats Suzanne in any and every way possible: she accuses Suzanne of being possessed by the devil, isolates her and forbids the other sisters to interact with her. She also forbids her to pray and deprives her of her clothes. The other sisters, far from begging for mercy,

[1] Diderot began writing his novel in 1760. He completed the manuscript in the early 1780s. *La Religieuse* first appeared in installments in the journal *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique* between 1780 and 1782, and then published posthumously in 1796.

[2] The young woman forced to take the vows represents a typical motif of European literature of the 17th-19th centuries. Together with Diderot's *La Religieuse*, the most famous examples are the anonymous *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1669) and the episode of The Nun of Monza, narrated in Alessandro Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed* (1840; the novel is, however, set in the 17th century).

aid the Mother Superior in inflicting pain on Suzanne and seem to sadistically enjoy contributing to Suzanne's suffering.

Meanwhile, the Church decides not to absolve Suzanne's vows. Suzanne is subsequently transferred to another convent. Unlike Sister Sainte-Christine, the third Mother Superior, Mme de Chelles, is light-hearted and almost frivolous. She immediately displays a preference for Suzanne, causing the jealousy of Sister Thérèse, Mme de Chelles' former favorite. Mme de Chelles soon displays homosexual tendencies towards Suzanne and when Suzanne avoids any and all contact with her, following the advice of Father Lemoine, Mme de Chelles goes insane.

In the meanwhile, Father Lemoine is replaced by Dom Morel who tells Suzanne that like her, he has also been forced into religion. Dom Morel convinces Suzanne to escape with him, but the following day, once they are far from the convent, she soon realizes that the man desires her. Suzanne runs away and later finds refuge nearby, working as a laundress. While working, she learns that Dom Morel has been caught and now faces life in prison. Frightened and scared, Suzanne flees the small village and ends up begging on the street. A woman gives her money and a place to stay. However, when Suzanne realizes that the woman's intention is to make a courtesan out of her, she asks God to forgive her and commits suicide.[3]

II. The Sadistic Spatiality

One of the elements that strikes the readers of Diderot's novel or the audience of Rivette's film the most is the conflict between the Christian values of compassion, mercy, benevolence, respect and charity, which are expected to be shared by the sisters of the convent of Longchamp, and the sadistic pleasure with which they seem to enjoy the pain inflicted on Suzanne. How is this conflict to be explained? As Lars von Trier's

[3] As will be shown in detail later, the conclusion of Rivette's film is more pessimistic than that of Diderot's novel. At the end of the novel, Suzanne is still alive. She certainly threatens to commit suicide, but only if she is forced to go back into a convent (see Diderot, 2005: 152). As Marc Buffat (2001: 68) points out, "Il [Rivette] termine en somme le récit, il le dote d'une fin et ce faisant, passe du drame […] à la tragédie. Cette fin 'noire' scelle en effet définitivement le destin de Suzanne: sa mort apparaît comme la nécessaire conséquence de son enfermement, et Rivette filme la trajectoire de ce destin et la prise de conscience par la jeune fille de son caractère inéluctable." Guillaume Nicloux's recent cinematographic adaptation (*La Religieuse*, 2013) on the contrary, has a happy ending: after her escape from the convent, Suzanne is brought to the house of her real father, the Marquis of Croismare (who, incidentally, was the "victim-addressee" of the original mystification represented by the Diderotian novel; on this, see Diderot, 2005: xii-xiii).

Dogville or Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* exemplarily show, sadistic attitudes typically develop in closed and isolated communities. The isolation of these communities psychologically protects the perpetrators against any possible external moral judgment, even God's, and encourages the awakening of sadistic feelings.[4] After all, it is no coincidence that Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* is set in the secluded Castle of Selling, or that the frame of Pasolini's 1975 adaptation of Sade's novel (*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*) is constituted of a similarly isolated palace near Salò, which as The Duke (one of the libertines) puts it, is "beyond reach of any legality."

Both Diderot and Rivette emphasize the claustrophobic character and the isolation or remoteness of the convent of Longchamp. In Diderot's novel, Suzanne often describes the convent as a "prison", a prison which is "a thousand times worse than those which hold criminals."[5] (Diderot, 2005: 53) At the beginning of her memories, she defines herself as "a young victim, close to death" (*ibid*.: 13), a "poor, wretched girl [...] who's to be buried alive" in the convent.[6] (*ibid*.: 5) Similarly, her companions are "prisoners" (*ibid*.: 90) – cruel and malicious prisoners, but still prisoners – and, as Mauzi (see Diderot 1972: 38) has pointed out, the basements of the convent of Longchamp are as dreadful as those later described by Sade.[7]

In Rivette's film, the sensation of claustrophobia and segregation is even more oppressive. These sensations are communicated to the audience first of all by means of visual images.[8] The film starts out *in medias res* with Suzanne who is forced to take her vows. The unbridgeable distance between the world of the convent and the outer world is emphasized by the metallic grille that isolates Suzanne from her family. Moreover, as Rivette himself recognized in an interview from 1968 (see Rosenbaum, 1977: 32), one

[4] Another clear example of how closed spaces favor the awakening of sadistic feelings or attitudes is represented by José Saramago's 1995 novel *Blindness*, a novel that clearly recalls the experiences of Nazi concentration camps.

[5] The comparison of convents with prisons can also be found in section VII of Diderot's *Philosophic Thoughts* (*Pensées philosophiques*, 1746). See Diderot, 1916: 29f.

[6] The imagery of the prisoner buried alive was later used by Dostoevsky to describe his experience in a prison labor camp in Omsk, Siberia. See the letter to his brother Andrey on November 6, 1854: "And those four years I consider a time during which I was buried alive and locked up in a coffin." (Dostoevsky, 1988: 201) See also his work *Notes from the House of the Dead* (published in installments from 1860 to 1863).

[7] See, for instance, the labyrinthine abbey in *Justine*.

[8] According to Bonnet (1984: 68), "la référence au théâtre, dans le film de Jacques Rivette, impose […] une règle de modération qui consiste à se maintenir un peu en deçà du texte [….] parce que le cinéaste est conscient de la très spéciale vulnérabilité psychique du spectateur de cinéma astreint à son siège et au dispositif contraignant du film. Représenter intégralement les supplices et les attitudes érotiques, c'était risquer des effets de série B ou une violence éprouvante."

of his intentions was to convey the idea of imprisonment by means of violent contrasts (such as the chiaroscuro lightening effects and the sharp distinction between the darkness of the convent and the brightness of the inner courtyard). However, the sensation of segregation and oppressive claustrophobia is transmitted not only by means of visual elements but also by acoustic elements, which play an equally important role. The sound of the bell, which is omnipresent and often deafening, can be interpreted as symbolizing the oppressive presence of Catholic institutions and the inescapability of Suzanne's fate.[9] Similarly, Suzanne's anguish can be thought of as "regularly translated by strange percussion sounds [...] or by dissonant music and other sound effects with metaphorical overtones."[10] (Singerman, 2000: 148)

As mentioned earlier, Lars von Trier's *Dogville*, Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, Saramago's *Blindness* and Diderot's or Rivette's *The Nun* have two interesting elements in common: first, they take place in isolated and closed places; second, they describe the unexpected awakening of sadistic feelings and attitudes. The corresponding relationship between the first and the second element seems to indicate the possibility to identify a very peculiar "sadistic spatiality", that is, a spatiality in which sadistic feelings and attitudes tend to be developed more easily, although, *nota bene*, not necessarily. The reading according to which convents are potentially a sadistic spatiality is indirectly supported by Diderot's philosophical anthropology, as it is presented in his novel *The Nun*. According to Suzanne, who in this case is the spokesperson of Diderot's ideas, man is a "social being" (Diderot, 2005: 74) and freedom is "man's inalienable prerogative." (*ibid*.: 75) A life cut off from society and lived in seclusion has alienating and dangerous effects on human beings.[11] Our animal instincts are "stirred up in the silence, constraint, and idleness, and with a violence unknown to people in the world outside who are swept along by a host of distractions."[12] (*ibid*.: 74) Docile, innocent and gentle creatures can be turned into wild animals, "a strange metamorphosis to which one is all the more susceptible the younger one enters religion and the less one knows of life in society." (*ibid*.: 56) In short, if the convent is a prison, the young women who are

[9] On bell symbolism in Rivette's *The Nun*, see Singerman (2000:145-148).
[10] On this, see section 5.
[11] As Mauzi (1972: 35) points out, Diderot considers the convent as a world *contra naturam*, which provokes hysterias and neuroses. According to this reading, Suzanne's three Mother Superiors would all suffer from a hysteria caused by the seclusion. The only difference would lie in the nature of the hysteria: mystical (Mme de Moni), sadistic (Sister Sainte-Christine) and erotic (Mme de Chelles).
[12] On the reading of *The Nun* as Diderot's response to the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, see Diderot, 2005: xvii-xviii.

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forced to live within it are prisoners (victims) at the mercy of their guards (sadistic executioners), and this to such a point that, when they join the ranks of those who control, they punish the new victims and give origin to a new cycle of tyranny and oppression.[13]

III. Religion between Sadism and Masochism in *The Nun*

Diderot scholars have been careful in pointing out that Diderot's *The Nun* must not be read as a general critique of religion or, more specifically, Christian religion, but rather as a specific critique of cloistral life.[14] Still, taking into account the analysis developed in the previous section, we could ask whether the awakening of sadistic feelings and attitudes (contrary to the Christian spirit) in the Mother Superior Sainte-Christine and the sisters of the convent of Longchamp can be uniquely explained with reference to the milieu (the sadistic spatiality mentioned above) or whether there is an element peculiar to religious practice which may favor the emergence of sadistic behaviors. It has been pointed out, for instance, that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, one can find examples of physical punishment inflicted in the context of the salvation and preservation of the human soul.[15]

In Diderot's *The Nun*, the word "sin" (French: *faute*) recurs often. In order to convince Suzanne to take the vows, her mother not only makes her daughter maliciously feel guilty (Suzanne is poisoning her life in that she constantly reminds her of her betrayal[16]), but she also convinces her that, "God saved us both so that the mother might atone for her sin through her child..."[17] (Diderot, 2005: 20) As in the case of

[13] The case of the four prostitutes of Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* – whose narratives inspire the sexual abuses and tortures of the victims – is in this sense exemplary. Another typical, although less sadistic case is represented by Manzoni's *The Nun of Monza*.

[14] As Goulbourne (2005: xvii) puts it, "*The Nun* is an attack on enforced vocations, an attack on the unjust collaboration of Church, state, and family, an attack on the convent as a silencing mechanism and a means of social control."

[15] On this, see Hamman (2000: 320-322).

[16] See Diderot (2005: 19): "[...] you remind me of a betrayal, someone else's ingratitude that I find so utterly odious that I can't bear to think about it any more. I can't help seeing this man standing between us; he repels me, and I end up feeling for you the hatred that I feel for him."

[17] The concept of a vengeful God who punishes the children for the sins of their parents is conveyed in the Ten Commandments' warning, "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me." (*Exodus*, 20:5) In Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, the little Sigi (the handicapped child who has been cruelly tortured) is discovered with a note in his hand containing precisely the same passage from the Bible.

Manzoni's *The Nun of Monza*, an alleged sin is used to justify the forced seclusion of a teenager.

Sins must be atoned for and suffering redeems.[18] A scene from Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) explains this peculiar logic in an exemplary way. When Bernadette, one of the "fallen" women who have been forced into the Magdalene Asylum, finds Crispina's holy medal (a medal which has a profound emotional significance for Crispina), instead of giving it back to her, she decides to hide it. When asked for the reason of her cruel behavior, Bernadette simply replies: "'Cause she didn't suffer enough. We're penitents, remember? We're supposed to suffer."

Suzanne atones for her mother's sin by taking the vows and, thereby, sacrificing her life. The lack of vocation, however, causes her rebellion to the new rules imposed by Sister Sainte-Christine. This disobedient attitude produces new sins which, once again, must be atoned for. The harsh discipline imposed by the Mother Superior is, therefore, justified in that it produces the suffering necessary for the atonement of Suzanne's sins. As Sister Sainte-Christine puts it: "You have made a great show of praising my predecessor in order to belittle me, of pouring scorn on the customs she had outlawed and the laws she had abolished and which I have thought it necessary to reinstate, of stirring up the whole community, of breaking the rules, of setting people against each other, of failing to perform your duties, and of forcing me to punish you and those whom you've seduced, and that hurts me most of all." (Diderot, 2005: 40)

Discipline, which fulfils the function of *easing* the atonement of sins, soon becomes harsher and harsher, until it overtly turns into sadism. For the reader of *The Nun*, it is difficult to say whether sadism is a consequence of harsh discipline or whether harsh discipline becomes a justification for giving free rein to the sisters' latent sadistic impulses: "When I could not be found to be at fault, faults were invented. I was given orders that contradicted each other, and I was punished for not carrying them all out. […] Things reached such a point that to torment me became a game, a source of fun for fifty people in league against me. […] I was held responsible for everything, and my life was one long series of real or fabricated wrongdoings and punishments." (Diderot, 2005: 35)

Could Suzanne masochistically enjoy the sadistic suffering which is inflicted upon her? Severin, the hero of Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870), clearly points

[18] As Nietzsche (2006: 44) puts it in his *Genealogy of Morality*, "the Christian [...] saw in suffering a whole, hidden machinery of salvation."

out that enjoyment can be found in suffering and that martyrs sought out tortures as others seek joy. A similar point is made by Diderot in *The Nun* with relation to religious people in general: "People in the religious life only find happiness by making a virtue before God of the crosses they bear. Then they find joy in them and they invite mortifications: the more bitter and frequent they are, the happier they make them feel. [...] When they have suffered much, they say: '*Amplius, Domine*, Lord, give me more...' And this is a prayer that God rarely fails to answer." (Diderot, 2005: 138-139)

As Deleuze (1991: 39) points out, Severin peculiarly feels a "need to expiate." As we have seen, her mother and the religious institution try to inculcate the same need in Suzanne. However, her attitude towards her condition of scapegoat is ambiguous.[19] On the one hand, at first she tries to accept her fate and bear the cross. Suzanne's identification with Christ (recall that she sacrifices her life for the atonement of her mother's sin) is repeatedly suggested in Diderot's *The Nun* and powerfully symbolized in a key scene from Rivette's adaptation in which the Christ figure on the wall stands between the mother and the daughter, clearly conveying an "image of martyrdom." (Singerman, 2000: 146)[20] On the other hand, Suzanne rebels against the oppressive and claustrophobic monastic life and is far from passively accepting the suffering inflicted upon her by the Mother Superior and the others sisters. Instead of admitting her (more or less alleged) sins and increasing her guilty condition (as we would expect from a masochist personality), Suzanne claims to be blameless.[21] Despite the identification with Christ (emphasized by the reference to the "folly of the cross"; see Diderot, 2005: 65) and the decision to bear the cross, Suzanne does not invite mortifications, nor does she feel a need to expiate.

IV. The Three Cells

In his 1989 review of Rivette's *The Gang of Four* (*La bande des quatre*, 1989), Deleuze talks about three circles which, in this film, would stand in a "complex relationship"

[19] As Singerman (2000: 146) points out, Suzanne can be considered as a scapegoat "in both the literal and the Girardian senses of the term."

[20] As remarked by Konigsberg (1981: 125), "Suzanne seems to move through a whole series of ritualized dramatic actions which emphasize her Christ-like suffering and sacrifice."

[21] See the passage in which Suzanne says to the Archdeacon that, "All I have done wrong is not to be called to the religious life and to seek to rescind the vows which I made against my will." (Diderot, 2005: 70)

(Deleuze, 2003: 356) with one another. It is useful to bring about this discourse with regard to Rivette's *The Nun* for at least two reasons. First, the way in which these three circles "communicate" (Deleuze, 2003: 358) in *The Gang of Four* can tell us much about the three different worlds which are to be found in this film. Second, in this very short text Deleuze explains, in a more general way, how Rivette's cinema works. We will linger on this second point, which is strictly related to the first one, in the final section of this paper.

According to Deleuze, *The Gang of Four* is articulated in three circles. Every circle is a *space* which has its own specificity, tone, and sense, and its own possibilities as well. This space is not only to be regarded as a static spatiality, an *objective* and measurable one, but also as a virtual dimension in which one has the possibilities to make various moves. From this point of view, the question to be raised in order to characterize a place (a circle) would then be: what can I do from here? What trajectories can I follow within this circle?

From the very beginning, in *The Nun* we are forced to deal with circles of constriction. On the basis of what has been already suggested, it is possible to distinguish three different kinds of circles: a sympathetic, a sadistic, and an erotic one. These circles, whatever their dimension may be, are cells (we spectators are invited to see into one of these cells through the metallic grille we are able to "grasp" with our gaze[22] in the very first scene). It is possible to characterize the interaction between the three cells in *The Nun* in the same way in which Deleuze characterizes that of the three circles in *The Gang of Four*: "In short, the three circles are interwoven, acting on one another, progressing to one another, and organizing one another without ever losing their mystery." (Deleuze, 2003: 357) Certainly, the three cells in *The Nun* are distinguishable from one another (we previously referred to them in terms of three different worlds). However, these cells are intertwined in some critical points.[23]

The way in which Rivette characterizes the circles is not psychologically connoted. As Singerman (2000: 142) points out, unlike Diderot's text, here the spectator does not have access to the "interiority of the heroine", to the *interior* of Suzanne's

[22] On the "haptic function'" in *The Nun*, *"*namely the power that sight has to touch", see Chauderlot (2001: 89f.).

[23] As we have seen, in these cells Suzanne is forced to seek her vocation. Although she lacks this vocation, she is nonetheless supposed to try to listen to the voice of God. More precisely, even before she could possibly listen to His voice, she is supposed to bow her will to chastity, poverty and obedience. For her, who did not choose to submit to these rules, the convent becomes a prison.

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body, to her *hidden* feelings. This change of perspective, however, is not only due to the different means of expression (from novel to theatre[24] and from theatre to movie). Rivette rather tries to express these feelings without *explaining* them from a psychological point of view. He does not need to show what there is *inside* Suzanne in order to explain her gestures. Similarly to what Proust wrote about Flaubert, images here are not "accessories" for the "narration".[25] Correspondingly, in Rivette the visual dimension does not have to translate a certain state of mind, but it rather expresses an atmosphere that pertains to each circle, to each cell, and that can still cast its shadow – or its peculiar light – on the other circles.

In order to explain in a more detailed way this expressive – rather than semiotic – character of the Rivettian image, let us take a closer look at some passages from Rivette's interview for *Cahiers du cinéma* concerning both his general idea of cinema, and, particularly, *The Nun*. In this interview, Rivette specifies that the two convents represented on the screen are "completely built" through imagination, with "bits of walls, corridors, stairways". These fragments create an *effect of reality*: the spectators experience "places" which "exist only […] in the film". To put it in another – more interesting – way: these places are "create[d]" by "the movement of the film." (Rosenbaum, 1977: 30) Nevertheless, this does not turn Rivette, as it were, into a "liar": he is "a creator of artifice (and not […] of lies)." (Rosenbaum, 1977: 43)

What participate in such a creation are not only visual images, but also what could be defined as *sound images*. As already noted above, music plays a major role in this film, and, to be more precise, it contributes to the process of the creation of space.[26] But what is more important for the point we want to make is that Rivette "had planned to have very elaborate sound because it would help [him] to accentuate the breaks from one cell to the next. The original idea of *La Religieuse* was a play on words: making a '*cellular*' film, because it was about *cells full of nuns*." (Rosenbaum, 1977: 30, our italics)

What Rivette says sheds new light on the interplay between the three cells in *The Nun*. Each cell demands a proper construction, a different atmosphere which has to be

[24] Let us recall that Rivette's *The Nun* "was based directly on the 1963 stage adaptation of Diderot's novel written primarily by Rivette's later co-screenwriter, Jean Gruault." (Singerman, 2000: 141)
[25] Proust makes this point clear through a very significant example: "Mme Bovary wants to warm herself at the fire. Here is how it is put: 'Madame Bovary (it has nowhere been said that she felt cold) approached the hearth…'." (Proust, 1988: 90)
[26] Music itself, Rivette says, was the very "origin" (Rosenbaum, 1977: 30) of *The Nun*.

recognizable and at the same time can share some aspects with other cells. Thus, a specific element can be thought of as a principle of association between two cells. The same element can also have a different sense depending on what cell it is to be found in. This is, for instance, the case of the wind, which plays a similar role in both the sadistic and erotic cells. Indeed, as Singerman (2000: 149) has pointed out, the wind is "associated with Suzanne's persecution by a Mother Superior and underlines the fundamental similarity of her situation at Longchamp and at Sainte-Eutrope, despite apparent differences: in both cases Suzanne is a victim of abuse of power, whether it take the form of sadistic persecution or sexual harassment". However, "the precise symbolism of the wind seems to change as Suzanne changes convents", just as "the visual sign of hair, a signifier of Suzanne's independence at Longchamp" becomes "a signifier of sexuality at Saint-Eutrope."[27] (*ibid*.)

V. *Becoming* Sadistic and Masochistic

The reading according to which Rivette makes use of visual and sound images to create virtual spaces (circles) goes hand in hand with what has been previously said about the sadistic spatiality. The hypothesis that we want to formulate is that the sadistic relationship of the second cell is not the result of the encounter between a sadistic person and her victim (that is, between two individuals which are *a priori* defined as tormenter and victim), but rather the result of a *process of individuation*. In other words, in Rivette's film Sister Sainte-Christine and Suzanne are not *a priori* destined to be the tormenter and the victim, respectively. On the contrary, their roles are the result of the sadistic spatiality which Rivette has created.

The places created by Rivette are circles and cells in which claustrophobic forces interact[28], affecting bodies and forging new *subjects*. What is threatened by these

[27] According to Singerman, the function of the music in *The Nun* is basically semiotic and essentially a sign of "the interiority of the heroine." (Singerman, 2000: 142) According to this idea, this function would fill the gap of a lack of perspective on Suzanne's inner world, a "perspective which is ostensibly sacrificed by Rivette's choice of third person 'narration' in his film." (*ibid*.) This reading leads us to consider the elements that we see and hear before the screen as composing a "semiotic system", as "signs of Suzanne's psychological state." (Singerman, 2000: 143) Contrary to Singerman's reading, one could try to characterize the music role differently, that is, by pointing out that what Rivette seems to be most interested in is the question of both the *intensity* and *rhythm* of the sound.

[28] See Konigsberg, 1981: 120: "Rivette's film creates for us the experience of entrapment itself. […] We watch the character from outside and experience along with her the experience of incarceration." Indeed, according to Konigsberg, "Rivette's *La Religieuse* belongs to a subgenre of cinema which I shall call 'entrapment films,' a group of works which deal with characters incarcerated in some way." (*ibid*.: 119)

claustrophobic cells is the production of possibilities. Recall that, as mentioned above, the essential question that can be raised in order to characterize a specific circle is the question concerning the possibility to move within its spatiality. In *The Nun*, the question would then be: "What *can* Suzanne do in the circles in which she finds herself imprisoned?" Or, to put it with Deleuze: What 'lines of flight' [*lignes de fuite*] (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986: 14) are possible for her? The sadistic cell, for instance, could drive her to surrender and even to repent for her alleged sins: what if the only line of flight, the only possibility open to her, would be to take a *role* in the imprisoning machine?

The roles of the three Mothers Superior, who rule the cells, can be seen as forged by power. The sadistic and lesbian Mothers are "individuated" by this constrictive machine. More specifically, the roles the second and the third Mother assume can be connoted in terms of "strategies of desire". Desire too, as it were, needs possibilities of expression and, if suffocated, it might give rise to sadistic or masochistic lines of flight, that is, to alternative ways of finding satisfaction. In the second circle, the spectator sees Suzanne (branded as *Satan*) falling on her knee out of despair before the sadistic Mother, embracing her legs: a *tableau* representing the oppressor and the victim at her mercy. When the same *tableau* occurs in the third circle[29], this time it is Suzanne who stands up and the Mother Superior (it is her turn to be branded as *Satan*) who lies on her knees, worn out by the impossibility of satisfying her own desire.

In this situation, Suzanne is given the opportunity to play a sadistic role, enjoying both her power on the devastated lesbian Mother and her superiority on Sister Thérèse, namely the Mother Superior's former favorite. Suzanne, instead, firmly resists this process of individuation which pushes her to find her place in the cell. In her affected ignorance, she *claims* to know no *desire*: she *claims* she does not feel guilty (she no longer feels the need to atone for her mother's sin). She thus seems impervious to the effects of the play between *power* and *desire*. Her only desire is to escape from these cells, and she cannot resign to choosing the convent as *her* own "home".[30]

As Suzanne's reaction clearly shows, Rivette's intention is not to convey the idea that the sadist is necessarily determined to become a sadist, and the masochist a masochist. It is rather the process of individuation that can turn a person into a sadist or a masochist. In other words, there is no deterministic constriction. Besides that, to say

[29] Not only music themes recur from one cell to another, but some *tableaux* as well, with – once again – similar and yet different meanings.

[30] As mentioned, Suzanne finally escapes the convent. As the tragic ending of the film clearly shows, however, this escape does not guarantee her a line of flight.

that the process of individuation "individuates" individuals is not to say that these individuals are not to be considered responsible for what they have become. Still, in the specific sense we have just outlined, the three Mothers Superior are more effects of "forces" than "persons." (Deleuze, 2003: 358)

By showing us the functioning of this "imprisoning machine", Rivette's film shows that it has a broader target than that of Diderot's pen (which manifestly was the "deleterious effects of the cloistered life"; Goulbourne, 2005/1796: xvii). Indeed, Diderot's novel ends with Suzanne affirming that she could not cope with her going back into a convent, and threatening to kill herself if ever forced to return into a cell (Diderot, 2005: 152). Once outside the convent, Suzanne has a hard time learning how to live in society as a result of the habits she cannot get rid of. Her body cannot forget the cloister's habits (Diderot, 2005: 79, 151), but there is still some hope for her to start over and learn how to find a new place in society.

Instead, Rivette's film strongly suggests that Suzanne's hope of escaping the constraints of a life that goes against nature is nothing but a delusion: not so much for the habits that Suzanne cannot easily break, as for the fact that the circles of constraint do not disappear outside the convent. After all, Dom Morel persuades Suzanne to escape with him only because he desires her and, as soon as he is alone with her, he tries to possess her (in this respect, not unlike the third Mother Superior). Suzanne discovers that without protection and money[31] the walls of her cell can reach far beyond the walls of the convent. Even when a woman seems to rescue her from begging in the street, that happens only because the woman wants to force Suzanne to be part of a new circle with new constrictive rules. This time, in a completely pagan rite and outside the religious walls, we behold Suzanne's body surrounded by other feminine bodies, dressed with a mask (a new "mask" of desire, as it were), a sign of the different role they are trying to force her into, namely that of a prostitute. Suzanne's last line of flight is through the window, towards her death. Before jumping from the window, she makes the sign of the cross asking God to forgive her: the last image we see on the screen is her lifeless body, drawing a cross on the ground.

[31] Monsieur Manouri, to whom Suzanne would want to address in order to be rescued, is dead, as well as Suzanne's Mother.

VI. Paris, 1760?

In his review of Rivette's *The Gang of Four*, Deleuze makes the following statement that also holds true for Rivette's vision of the world[32]: "We are all rehearsing parts of which we are as yet unaware (our roles). We slip into characters which we do not master (our attitudes and postures). We serve a conspiracy of which we are completely oblivious (our masks). This is Rivette's vision of the world, it is uniquely his own." (Deleuze, 2003: 357) We can find this peculiar vision of the world in *The Nun*, in its – so to say – *theatre of constriction*. Rivette expresses all that in both a fascinating and effective way: "After a while, *La Religieuse* was no longer an adaptation of Diderot at all. […] I was really trying to rediscover Suzanne Simonin". Following Rivette's words, we could ask: what did it mean to rediscover Suzanne Simonin in 1966? And, what does it mean to rediscover Suzanne Simonin today?

For Rivette, films and novels are not – properly speaking – works of an *auteur*. The author must, rather, disappear in order to let the work of art appear. As Rivette himself put it: "Of course there was a pre-existing text, but precisely, it existed as a text, as a reality which was completely independent of the existence of an author named Diderot." (Rosenbaum, 1977: 32) According to this logic, Rivette's film could exist as a film completely independent of the existence of an author named Rivette (it could exist as an *anonymous* process) and the author would then be a "*seer*" (Rosenbaum, 1977: 59) who, so to speak, must let the film be, let it come to appearance and show us something new.[33]

As far as *The Nun* is concerned, "the film had to be this hostile and disagreeable thing, this machine which imprisons Suzanne." (Rosenbaum, 1977: 32). Inasmuch as it is conceived of as a hostile machine, whose action extends beyond the convent, *The Nun* can speak to the 1966 spectators at any level. In other words, everything that the spectators see on the screen reflects a process of individuation, a process relating *discipline* and *desire*: "Everything reveals itself as something else; here, visible to our eyes" are ideas, such as, "beauty, maternity, death, God." (Rosenbaum, 1977: 60-61)

[32] As mentioned above, the focus of Deleuze's review is not only Rivette's *The Gang of Four*, but also Rivette's cinema on a more general level.

[33] For both Deleuze and Rivette, for example, Rossellini is a *seer*. In Rivette's early *Letter on Rossellini*, the Italian director is a *seer* insofar as he possesses "the faculty of seeing through beings and things to the soul or the ideal they carry within them […]." He is a seer insofar as he "does not demonstrate, he shows." (Rosenbaum, 1977: 60-61). See, also, Deleuze, 1989: 2.

For the spectators, then, the "imprisoning machine", which erases Suzanne's every possibility and turns desire into sadism and masochism, far from being considered as the sole consequence of a Christian – or Catholic – way of life, can be perceived as the result of the action of powers that can take many forms and shapes. After having seen Rivette's film, every spectator can see reality with new eyes and recognize the process of individuation everywhere it takes place. Spectators' eyes are, as it were, *recreated*[34] by the seer.

Therefore, when at the end of the film (just after Rivette has shown Suzanne's lifeless body lying as a cross on the ground) spectators read on the black screen "Paris, 1760", they are directly questioned about the temporal distance existing between them and Rivette's *The Nun*. Not only are they confronted with the fact that the "imprisoning machine" created by Rivette also regards the places and the new cells that Suzanne gets to know outside the convent, but they are also invited to ask themselves whether the forces that Rivette's film makes them feel cover the temporal distance between them and the imaginary Rivette's Paris.[35]

It is no accident that *The Nun* was initially banned by what Jean-Luc Godard (1966) – in a famous letter to the then-minister of culture André Malraux (qualified as "ministre de la Kultur") – defined as "Gestapo de l'esprit", namely, censorship.[36] The film was finally released in Paris in November 1967, more than two centuries after the time in which it was set (1760) and less than one year before the events in France of May 1968. At that very moment, Rivette's film represented something more than a direct attack on religious institutions.[37] Through his "work of imagination", Rivette did not want to give rise to undue "generalization" directed to cloister life in itself (something that, as stated on the screen from the beginning, would have been indefensible).[38] The Rivettian power of *imagination* brought the spectators to the point at which they recognized that the "imprisoning machine", as well as the sadistic and masochistic spaces on the screen, could shed new light on everyone's own cell. It is

[34] As Diderot said referring to the power of the great painter Chardin (see Diderot, 1984: 117).
[35] It is now clear why at the beginning of our paper we recognized the presence of a sadistic process in Lars von Trier's *Dogville* and Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, which represent closed and isolated communities that can be qualified in terms of cells.
[36] As Goulbourne (2005: xv) points out, "the decision of the right-wing Gaullist government, driven as much by electoral concerns as moral ones, did not prevent the astute Malraux from allowing the film to be screened at the Cannes film festival". The paradoxical result was that in 1966 *La Religieuse* was a French film that was "shown to the world but not in France." (MacCabe, 2005: 201)
[37] On the role played by Catholic Church in the decision to censor *La Religieuse*, see Pettinaroli (2012).
[38] Notice that such statement cannot be ascribed to mere reasons of avoiding censorship.

probably no coincidence that the same year Deleuze felt the need to come back to Sade and Masoch and to delve deeply into the relationship among law, guilt and desire. In 1975, Foucault famously showed how specific disciplinary machines can take over human education in many fields and forms (Foucault, 1995). But before that, the upcoming protests and strikes of May 1968 were going to put into question – at every level – concepts such as *vocation*, *desire*, *discipline*, and, above all, *freedom*.

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