

Imilleocchi 2009 – Nico Papatakis: il cineasta ama nascondersi

Papatakis the Refractory

by Michel Ciment

An exceptional and frugal cinema expert (6 films in 30 years), Nico Papatakis appears today, when interest in politics is coming back and exclusion is more relevant than ever, as an essential author. That he is unclassifiable that no label can define him surely contributes to his marginalization within the “big cinema family” as well as the critics. Yet being a man of the shadows must not displease this discrete creator who has never claimed a place among the professionals of this profession. It isn't only because his projects are scary or because they bother some (an adaption of Georges Michel's *Jouets*, a film about Lumumba, and another *Oracle Perforé*, a philosophical reflection on productive crime) that Papatakis hasn't given us a more ample filmography. For him, every film comes from a profound necessity and his political activism activities, the time for reflection or, simply, the private sphere count, in his eyes, much more than chasing a career.

Born in 1918 in Addis Abeba to a Greek father and an Ethiopian mother, split between two cultures, rejected by both communities, Papatakis will always be sensitive to scissions, injustice and the errors of the earth's damned. Participating in all of the revolutionary struggles, during his youth against Mussolini's armies, then in his father's country, against the Metaxas dictatorship; in France he will experience the German occupation but won't create “leftist fictions” where a clean conscious and a tepid humanism are to be found. Instead he constructed a conception of demanding art, inseparable from a rigorous moral code, in contact with surrealists and existentialists (two spiritual families that, however, were often opposite). The leader of the *Rose Rouge*, the most famous cabaret in Saint-Germain-des-Prés in the post-war period, that hosted Gréco, Mouloudji, the Jacques Brothers, Yves Robert, was close to Prévert and Sartre and even closer to Genet, whose only film *Un Chant d'amour* he produced, before being inspired by an episode in his own life for *Les Équilibristes*. It is this interest in cinema that brings him to consider the idea of producing Herni Alleg's *La Question*, realized by Resnais or to go to New York to work with Cassavetes on *Shadows*.

When, at 45, he made his debut as a director with *Les Abysses* (inspired by the same events that gave origin to Genet's *Les Bonnes*), already rich in artistic, intellectual and

political experience, he was congratulated by the same people that had shown him the way. Prévert and Sartre applaud the success of the film. Genet declares: “We could investigate the tenacity that Nico Papatakis gathered and exercised for this two-hour paroxysm. Yet I think that one has to accept with eyes wide open when an acrobat executes a mortal jump”. And Brenton: “Eros and the instinct of death, an indissoluble couple exposed to such a social pressure that the two machines charge one another to incandescence: with *Les Abysses* we test the immensity of human passions”. Because it was a hard-fought battle. After being rejected by the Cannes Festival selection committee, the film was imposed by André Malraux, Minister of Culture and sensitive to the importance of the film like his peers. The president of the French producer’s union, Francis Cosne, quit in protest and *Les Abysses* provoked a scandal on the Croisette. Our times of lame consent can’t imagine the violence of the reactions that Papatakis’ first works triggered, *Gloria Mundi* pulled from the cinemas after a bomb devastated a multiplex, just as *Les Pâtres du désordre* shocked high society.

Why Papatakis is refractory. Escaping from both psychology and realism, his films are just as much fables of the world where class relations (and struggles) are represented, where the sexual and the social are deeply tied. Every film is a picture of humiliation and a shout of rebellion; in *Les Abysses* two maids get revenge on their masters (which was interpreted as metaphor for the Algerian struggles against the French colonialists) under the eyes of Mademoiselle, a liberal and scoffing woman. In *Les Pâtres du désordre*, the director flips the stereotypes of pastoral drama and a touristic Greece. The hero, an illiterate pastor, coming back to his home country, clashes with the forces that want to destroy it. Family, religion and the police rage against a lacerated man that transgresses the limits because of the irrational love that ties him to a woman and that will lead to his death, like the heroes in the American noirs (for example, *High Sierra*) that are so dear to Papatakis. In *Gloria Mundi*, there is a reflection on torture, the hero is humiliated by everyone that surrounds her, by a sculptor and all of the mundane people that invited her. In *I Fotografia*, a young Greek man who has come to France for work invents an imaginary sister who has remained in their country for the people that host him and who fall in love with her. The staging of the lie that feeds the ghost of the exile puts a slow process of destruction into motion. In *Les Équilibristes*, a great writer makes his young lover an object and through him exercises his willpower, transforming him into an amazing acrobat.

We know very well how this type of summary can be reductive because in Papatakis, to the contrary, the complexity of the approach that he mixes with severity and irony need to be appreciated. All his films are sealed by the obsessive and the ritual. The Easter holiday in

Les Pâtres du désordre, the numbers under the capital in *Les Équilibristes*, the servant's intriguing choreography in *Les Abysses*, the imaginary games of the two Greek workers in *I Fotografia* are fed by the theater culture and the philosophic reflections of their author. His cinema is that of excess, but an excess that progressively develops from a scrupulous attention for the real. Claude Levi-Strauss already noted, talking about *Les Pâtres du désordre*, that the film presented "a considerable interest for an ethnologist because he starts from the most concrete, most minute, most veracious observation of a society's customs to progressively develop everything into the splendor of a mythology". Every Papatakis film testimonies, in fact, to a passage from the real to the imaginary.

In a certain sense, all of his characters are directors themselves, some of them to the point of meticulously organizing their own suicide. In Papatakis we see a return to tragedy, but it isn't the art of the ancient gods, but of all the psychological and social alienation that hypocrisy and political, moral and religious conformism generate. Every hero could shout, like the pastor in *Les Pâtres du désordre*, "the admirable hour when death chose me". Because Papatakis refuses final reassurances. His subversion is believing that hope comes from negation. In this sense, he is only similar to one other person in this trade: Luis Buñuel, the other irreducible, the other artist with an exemplary trajectory, hostile to all compromises. We share the same distance, the same refusal of identification in respect to the characters, moreover, the same conception of a performance that never falsifies the technique that dramatic movement uses through the fusion of actors, the script and the plasticity, so that none of the constitutive elements of the film draw attention to themselves.

What Papatakis reveals to us is a beauty without closings, fed by a moral consciousness. His stories are equally infernal machines where solitary characters are trapped. The breath that runs through his films is something lively provided by mestizo cinema. Papatakis won't be neither the first nor the last foreigner (from Buñuel to Ruiz and Ferrari) that make the paths fork in the sometimes all too ordered gardens of French cinema.

Michel Ciment, *Papatakis le réfractaire*,
in Festival international du film de La Rochelle 23,
Hommage Nico Papatakis, 1995, pp. 62-63

Les Abysses

by Simone de Beauvoir, André Breton, Jean Genet, Jacques Prévert and Jean-Paul Sartre

35 years ago the Cannes Festival refused Nico Papatakis' dazzling first film, *Les Abysses*. 5 French writers – among the most important ones – got pen and paper to declare their admiration in the newspaper Le Monde. André Malraux, then minister of Culture, forced the film to be shown and imposed, with much courage (*Les Abysses* can be interpreted as a metaphor for the Algerian War), that it represent France in the competition. The sulfurous and violent piece made a scandal. We are still waiting for a television channel or a movie theater to host this black diamond that dominated the public at the La Rochelle festival during its homage to the director in 1995.

Simone de Beauvoir A strange and magnificent film whose reason is on the side of madness, paradise in the depths of hell, where love is painted with the looks of hate. It shows raw revolt. Only the violence of the crime committed by the two heroes can make us measure the atrocity of the invisible crime that they were victims of. Society has them trapped; struggling, they strangle themselves, every gesture brings them closer to this end, fatal as in an ancient tragedy. This is what gives this story a nearly unsustainable tension, because Nico doesn't ever show anything that can physically act on our nerves. He managed, in his talent, to save the horror through beauty without betraying it: without it ceasing to be horrible. One of the best films I have ever seen.

André Breton Eros and the instinct of death, an indissoluble couple exposed to such a social pressure that the two machines charge one another to incandescence: with *Les Abysses* we test the immensity of human passions. In Nico Papatakis and Jean Vauthier, who start with the same shocking events, the attention to the veracious testimony find a gift of lyric expression to match it, that leaves space to the inhibitions, making the conventional moral frame fall to pieces. Behind the horrible aprons, Francine and Colette Bergé are as beautiful as lightning.

Les Abysses; is one of the hights of cinematographic art in virtue of the “Emerald Table” and, in my opinion, of all modern art.

Jean Genet “All the world's pain” ... this celebrated phrase could also express the tornado constituted, from one side to the other, by *Les Abysses*. One would have to be deaf to not distinguish, through the echoes, the minute but precious lament of the two girls who, despite themselves, would be torn from their slow degradation.

The two sisters (only they count in the film) are seen for the first time in the middle of the brazier, already bitten by fire.

We could investigate the tenacity that Nico Papatakis gathered and exercised for this two-hour paroxysm. Yet I think that one has to accept with eyes wide open when an acrobat executes a mortal jump.

Jacques Prévert The Furies: infernal goddesses that torment the wicked.

It is just these infernal goddesses, in Nico Papatakis' film, that torment the wicked.

And these goddesses, these Furies are two sisters, but these two sisters are maids, maids for everything.

A filthy kitchen is their hell.

Heaven is the other rooms of the house and the canteen, the chicken coup where the wicked come and go, who in this case are what we could conveniently call honest men, simply burdened with small, frightening money problems.

"Two sisters love each other, they were two girls, both one and the other". The film could start with such a summary, inspired by an all too recent bloody event.

"And their insanity was hunted by the *raison d'être* of other people of a ridiculous and ruthless mediocrity".

It happens today, and the Furies, the sister of the story narrated by this film, are two sisters in reality too.

They are beautiful like day and night, insane, cruel and tender, like life often is.

They don't carry the swords of the archangel, but they fulfill their destinies putting an end to someone else's, simply with what they find on hand: bottlenecks, kitchen knives, irons, common and familiar objects.

But the cries they throw, cries of anguish, desperation, are the same cries of the tragedy and, in the same way, in their eyes, their dances, their tears and their unrestrainable laughter.

In this film, what is most striking is not its unsustainable savagery, its insolent aggressiveness, nor its furtive humor, nor its hidden tenderness. It isn't even its photography, its technique, its simple and fascinating style, but simply its beauty.

Jean-Paul Sartre Cinema has given us its first tragedy: *Les Abysses*. Its theme: Evil. The game is lost from the beginning for all the characters because they are all damned; yet it needs to be played, from the beginning to the end, until the final double murder, foreseen by the first image, premeditated, waiting.

The inflexible rigor of this piece even cancels out the memory of the slow loquacious rivers that flow across the screen. The rhythm is new: cracked, broken, jumpy, stagnated,

syncopated according to the situations, and yet it keeps moving ahead without respite, without any digression, toward the final catastrophe that is the immobile motor of the whole film. Every gesture prepares it and at the same time incarnates it: two frustrated maids rebel against their masters, three bourgeois in ruin, daunted, helpless. The kitchen is the place of torture: the knives, the pans are tools for torture; peel the potatoes, for the two insane women, is pulling eyes out. The objects, dull and commonplace, acquire disturbing powers; in the two sisters' hands, two admirable actresses, there is nothing that isn't an omen and that doesn't confide, at the same time, the truth. It is what tells us the future of a small group whose contradictions guarantee beforehand the explosion.

Nico Papatakis' extraordinary art was showing the sisters in their fit; their incredible aggressiveness doesn't ever come undone, not even for a second; they incarnate raw violence, hate and the desire to kill. Like a black jacket said about them: curing them doesn't matter, they are Evil itself. But, slowly, the turnaround comes: the inconsistent victims reveal themselves as the true executioners. Through their weakness and insignificance, these three bourgeois represent the iron order that has condemned these two sisters since their births. When Evil is unleashed in these young hearts, we understand that it is interiorized oppression and that, like Babeuf said, the executioners have taught them their bad habits. However, its enough that the other just as weak bourgeois knock at the door: we see that the explosion of insanity, in the kitchen, wasn't effective; the goods are sold, the donation cancelled, the sisters will be hunted. And all this calmly, without effort, only by virtue of the pre-established order. The murder remains. The girls kill their master because they are attached. But in the moment when – and the images are extraordinary – we feel that they are about to decide to strike, we don't fear for the two bourgeois, it is for the unfortunate girls who execute themselves the sentence expressed against them and go, all at once, at twenty years of age, outside of the law forever.

Between sight and sound, the tension is maintained until the end, it is the very substance of this tragedy. And this new relation, this unity contrasted by the word and the visible open directions still unexplored by cinema.

Simone de Beauvoir, André Breton, Jean Genet, Jacques Prévert, Jean-Paul Sartre
(Le Monde 1963) now in *Positif* n. 415, 09/1998, pp. 57-58

Nico Papatakis speaks about *Les Abysses*

Q. Should we limit ourselves to the anecdote of *Les Abysses* or go beyond it?

N.P. We absolutely shouldn't limit ourselves to the anecdote because it is practically inexistent. Beyond what I wanted to deal with the theme of humiliation and rivolt, I had it based on the relation between boss and maid and in a certain social class, where teachers represent everything that is oppression.

Q. Can your film be interpreted as a representation of the Algerian war?

N.P. Yes, in that it is an aspect of the general theme, but I didn't particularly want to deal with the problem of the Algerian war, otherwise I would have gotten Algerians...

Q. You had some problems with Francis Cosne. To make up for it, did you get support from the producers?

N.P. Yes, for example the producer of *Hiroshima mon amour* and from Gouze-Réнал.

Q. Do you intend to do more violent films?

N.P. For the moment no, if not for making personal films. I don't know if I'll make another film, so I know even less if it will be violent.

Niko Papatakis "Les Abysses"
in Image et Son - La Revue du Cinéma n. 164, 07/1963, p. 12.

Depth War by Pierre Kast

In this profession there is something akin to fables. Once upon a time, in Paris, there was a young, handsome and good Greek boy. He played the police chief in *Voyage-Surprise* by Pierre Prévert, had 50 friends that adored him because his generosity and goodness were unmatched. He founded La Rose Rouge and helped two great theater directors, Michel de Ré and Yves Robert debut. He earned money, he lost money. He went to America. He was interested in producing films. So, I don't exactly know how, he was involved in the production of *Shadows* and *Connection*. He was a friend, I was fond of him. In reality, I didn't know him. Behind Nico there was Papatakis hiding. Coming out from seeing *Les Abysses*, when I saw it for the first time, I had to tell him: "I thought you were charming, funny, made for the night life and vacations. I was wrong. I didn't know who you were". I have an extraordinary respect for him and a great admiration.

For the most part of the slightly ambitious films today, the director has to move mountains. Nico Papatakis, for months, maybe a year, with the patience and stubbornness of

an ant, he put together scarce production means and made his film, for and against everyone. Making the film, paradoxically, he had to be a kind of resting go-between. Then, for months, he worked to have the film come out, before the lightning struck that made the selection commission decide to send the film to Cannes, under a firestorm of protest, that went so far as public defamation, by the traditional producing community. This Herculean task has become commonplace. It is important to know that it happened and how. So, there is a film that, again, betrays the habitual declarations and the intellectual laziness of those who hypocritically whine about a crisis in cinema.

What most strikes me about this film is the cohesion of the form and content. The images, the realization and the direction of the actors have a unity of tone and style that makes one reflect. That this impression of mastery belongs to a beginner is a kind of supplementary crucial test of the fact that the making of a film is more a question of precision of thought and reflection than a “trade skill”. It is undoubtedly true that directing actors, like style or grace, is something that one has or doesn’t have and it can’t come little by little. The two Bergé sisters, undoubtedly, have stunning character, Pascale de Botsson a noteworthy presence and effectiveness. But the very principle of reciting and the general quality of the actors come from an evidently voluntary and intentional practice: from the greatest violence, in a paroxysmal movement, that for an hour and a half never diminishes in tension, which is, in itself, a performance. For the first ten minutes, you vaguely wait for the violence to recede. Then you forget. In the same way, the rigor and the simplicity of the realization, completely disciplined, submissive to the text, are moving for the way that the system is maintained for the entire film and give the film a kind of block that accuses the brutality of the shock produced. Amongst the amenability, the variety and the ease of most French films, *Les Abysses* shines for its dark splendor of a wild and aggressive greatness that in France resounds in a completely new way.

Nico Papatakis’ initial idea was to adapt his friend Genet’s *Les Bonnes*. Then, following the difficulties of such an endeavor, because the admirable *pièce* came together in an inadaptable theatrical form, simply went back to the real events that inspired the *pièce* and asked Jean Vauthier to write a completely new script based on them. Lovers of aesthetics can reflect on this double procedure that, from the same point, leads to an equally impressive *pièce* and film. Vauthier’s text, of a rare literary quality, probably cleared up Nico’s own intentions.

The film was read as a parabola where meanings more complementary than divergent are found. From the master-slave dialectic to the wars of private liberation, or to anarchic rebellion, the great thing is the fact that the result was a series of projectors that then illuminate a film so rich that it can support all of them. The accumulation of violence, like the vapor in a boiler from which the final explosion is born, it is shown in a way that the spectator can't escape the weight of this logic. The parents' burlesque and grotesque nature, which reaches the best admonishments of the heads of state with irreverence, reinforces the ineluctable progress that is tragedy. Instead of being distracting these qualities are deep in the dramatic construction, which seems to me really remarkable. And extremely rare in cinema.

In the same way, the fact that the myth of property is, directly or indirectly, the essential motive of the actions of all of the characters and secretly penetrates in the dark consciences, reinforces, instead of diminishing, this infernal logic that inevitably ends in murder. The construction therefore impedes finding any other result beside massacre. The spectator, faced with too many films, often finds himself in the position of the armchair strategist ("and what if, at that moment, I would have used my artillery, what would have happened? Von Kluge would have been defeated".) to be able to go ahead with such little fear to be able to rewrite another script as the film develops. Here it is impossible. This is where the impression of force and power comes from. Obviously it is due to the violence of the tone, the brutality of the images. But in a secondary way. The essential is a logic of steel. A truism, evidently, if we analyze a tragedy. But a performance, yet again, if we are talking about cinema, that rarely affirms itself in such a courageous way in tragic greatness.

Nico Papatakis pondered for months over this fist against the moral order and created a classic tragedy. In the current situation of cinematographic production, I think that, above all, having given this tragedy the necessary and irreplaceable form of a film is an extraordinary *exploit*. An exploit that is double thanks to this film's dark beauty from which one leaves dazed, overwhelmed and devastated. But also vindicated.

Pierre Kast, *La guerre des profondeurs*,
in Cahiers du cinéma n. 144, June 1963, pp. 44-46

Les Pâtres du désordre by Nico Papatakis by Jean-André Fieschi

Coherence : started late, it is under the sign of this primary virtue that the interesting cinematographic carrier of Nico Papatakis continues. Here is a moviemaker who is clear

obsessed by the project that was already fully present in *Les Abysses*: violence as an aesthetic method to reveal the world and how it's provisory fulfillment in this world struggling against the most opaque forces of inertia (social, political and moral inertia). The closed space of *Les Abysses* leaves gives way to the open skies of the Greek planes, the employer-maid relationship to the property owner-pastor relationship, Vauthier's "poetic" word to a more specifically (or differently) defined historical situation: modern day Greece, prey to the ascension, and then the victory, of the military regime. For the rest, the same parabolic force, the same argument of a sexual unleashing tied to the sudden and brutal transgression of taboos, the same attempt to ritualize the dramatic performance that pushes the actors to the limits of bodily expression. While the opening of the film briefly threatens an excessive rhetoric exercise, a frantic dramatization of traditional realism and all social cinema derived from it. To the contrary, Papatakis affirms, as the piece continues, the points that his cinematographic originality shines for with even more evidence: if *Les Pâtres du désordre* contains an aspect of analysis and ascertainment, it is a profoundly lyrical analysis where every situation is brought to a level of nearly irrational incandescence, only to better be subdued by naturalist codifications, thus reaching, indirectly, the last tradition of soviet cinema during the revolutionary years. There is something of Dovjenko here, but also, in a more subtle way, a little bit of Barnett: an explosive mixture of dramatic exasperation and corrosive humor.

As soon as the film develops the description of the long Easter night when the present forces free themselves and face one another over the background of dark mystic and social rites, they abandon the splendid and surprising scenes that only end and culminate in the final "insane love" worthy of Buñuel in *Abissi di passioni*: all of the "revealing" forms of spectacle, from the choreography of the happening, seem to unite to forge Papatakis' passionate and new research interest: the controlled theatricization of a claim that is much more effective in the way it goes back over the Brechtian ideas "where only violence can help...". What do some tension relievers, some heavy moments or some awkward slips count; Papatakis cose the difficulty so sincerely and totally that his false steps along the way can't hide the greatness of the scope that he reaches thanks only to his strength of conviction.

Jean-André Fieschi, *Pâtres du désordre de Nico Papatakis*,
in *Cahiers du cinéma* n. 195, novembre 1967, p. 33

CONVERGENZE PARALLELE

Murderock

by Roberto Curti

Filmed just before an illness that would keep the director away from the set for a couple of years, *Murderock* is a significant work not so much in the Fulcian filmography (it's own director quickly dismisses it as "a good American television film and nothing more") as in the panorama of Italian cinema, after the hangover at the beginning of the decade. It was really the end of an epoch, and Fulci has to be recognized for having foreseen the risk of saturation that fluttered around the most brutal horror films, and for having adapted himself: "At that point I felt the need to renew my style" he confessed a few years later in an interview, "that type of such a terrible and unrestrained horror was finished". No sooner said than done: four external New Yorkers, and away with interminable ballets in cheap TV-style to counter scenes of decidedly cruel homicides. "You have to grit your teeth and dance even if one of your companions die!" shouts the beautiful dance instructor Olga Karlatos to her students who are targets of a maniac armed with chloroform and a sharp spike. "You can't be human because in show business there no time for it!". This almost seems like a bitter paraphrase of what was happening in the Italian cinematography industry, hit in the heart not by spikes but by the low-blows of con men and swindlers: the fact that someone actually believed in the commercial potential of an impossible hybrid between the dance-aerobics of *Fame* and *Flashdance* and autochthonous thrillers is symptomatic of the persistence of an illusion stupidly impermeable to the facts – that is, to the market.

As for Lucio, he uses wide-angle lenses, POV techniques and long tracking shots, other than an obsessive attention to reflective surfaces and dancer's snow-white nudity. In the first homicide sequence, he then decides to roll up his sleeves and, for the Italian critic, there is nothing left to do but to recognize that Italian cinema has clamorously been left without a generational renewal (the fans of Bava Jr. and Fragasso don't want to do it). But the script, conceived and written with the trusted Clerici, Mannino and Gianciti is a difficult problem to resolve: it steals left and right (the nightmares of Karlatos come straight out of *Occhi di Laura Mars* and we would need a good half page to list the antecedents of the surprise ending) and hits the suspension of believe hard: the scene of the second homicide, with Christian Borromeo who skillfully appears and disappears from the victims home, is wholly irritating in this sense. Then, just for the fun of it, we have the usual suspects who don't fool anyone and a

hard boiled lieutenant by the name of Borges (wow!) who, between one interrogation and another, goes around munching on pistachios (or peanuts? or cashews? we'll leave the arduous dilemma to the philologists...): better than the hard boiled eggs that Jeff Blynn stuffs down his throat in *Mystery in Venice*, at least.

Certainly the music of Keith Emerson puts everyone's eardrums – both Fulcians and non-Fulcians – to the test; and in the end we miss the tunny killings of *The New York Ripper* (there were those who appreciated the turning point: according to Claudio Carabba “one of the most gracious inventions is the red flower of death, the symbol of the stake under the candidly nude breast of the girl that was to die”). The cast is nostalgic: Al Cliver (called “Rufus” by Fulci) appears briefly as a scientific expert, Cassinelli is an extra, Olda Karlatos undresses with a certain taste and the director himself, according to custom, gets a spicy cameo: he appears as an agent consulted by the protagonist to find a part for Ray Lovelock, and that justifies his refusal with the priceless phrase: “You know how it is... in this business we are all a little bit puritan...”.

In Nocturno Dossier, n. 3, settembre 2003

A Conversation with Nikos Papatakis by Andrea Pastor and Bruno Roberti

I find that your film is above all a film about betrayal, which is a theme from Genet. But in the film, betrayal becomes a dramaturgic and even stylistic question because in the second part there is a rupture, a refusal, a difference in respect to the first part played on the relationship between Piccoli and the tightrope walker. So there is a betrayal of the image, – I'm thinking about the mirror that betrays the boy during the tightrope exercise. When Piccoli moves the reflectors onto the boy, it is a little like the director who, shooting a film, “betrays” his images. It is also as if Piccoli was the director of the boy's life and when, in the second part, the boy is left without Piccoli, he becomes his own director a little bit.

Yes, there is the rupture of linearity. When the boy becomes his own director he also becomes Spadice (the writer, interpreted by Piccoli), he is Spadice, completely. He already begins to be him when he talks with Spadice using the words from his book. There are three people that speak: me, who wrote the film, Spadice who speaks through his books, and the boy that speaks through Spadice, who speaks as Spadice.

So the double, theme contained in betrayal, is part of the dramaturgic construction of the film?

Absolutely, I betrayed the character, inserting betrayal into the very construction of the film because I treated betrayal in a different way that Genet treats it.

The mirrors in the film are very important, Piccoli constructs a “décor” for his pupil, there is a metaphor for cinema, of the set, the boy falls when the light isn't on him anymore...

Probably, there is a dramaturgic metaphor. But there is something else... Do you know Genet's text “Le Funambole”?

It is a poetic text, not dramaturgic...

Exactly, Genet wrote some texts at the margins of his pièces, “How to Recite Le Balcon” etc., I tried to show in the film how it is impossible “to recite Le Funambole”, what Genet writes in “Funambole” is absolutely unrealizable, and the impracticability of the Funambolic “performances” is a poetic idea of the text. What I wanted to show in the film is this idea: the dichotomy between the dream and writing.

The impossibility of the “mise en scène”?

Certainly. So, the metaphor contained in Piccoli's line “It is the tightrope that guides you” is the metaphor of this impracticability because the boy is forced to look at himself, to check himself in the mirrors. If the boy is guided by the tightrope and the mirrors at the same time, his gaze can't be univocal, it is impossible. The mirror is like the dream, the tightrope like writing.

The tightrope is the dramaturgic writing but also the film – “le fil” is “le film”. Another metaphor of your position, but also of the spectator, it is impossible to follow the plot [le fil], to do the film and watch the screen at the same time.

Absolutely. But this impossibility has to be worked on, it has to be shown.

How much did you want to do a Genetian film?

Genet is the artist that most intrigued me, but on the other hand I, as an artist, tried to eliminate him every time, to kill him. For example in the first film *Les Abisse*, which was a film inspired by the same events that *Les Bonnes* is based on, but there I wanted to make something that didn't have any relation with Genet's pièce. It was difficult to get close to Genet through the same event that inspired him and nevertheless make a personal expression that was separate from Genet. I had already eliminated, killed Genet then. And I continued, for example, in *Fotografia*, where there was nothing left of Genet, but the subject hinted to an episode in Genet's life. I have always been in some way obligated to get near Genet's

aesthetic, but trying to do original things that we're just copies. I took up Genetian themes (betrayal, the mirror, the double...) to make a personal cinematographic expression.

In Rivette it is about constructing a masterpiece while destroying it and hiding it too, in Rivette Piccoli continually looks, draws, speaks and gets angry with his model. There is a relationship with the "model" in your film and with the construction of a masterpiece, a "living" masterpiece that self-destructs in the end too. Does the destruction of the work have a relation with the stylistic rupture in the second part of the film?

In Rivette's film, that I haven't seen however, the character is an artist, a painter. In my film no, it isn't the story of an artist, a writer, but the story of a relationship. Spadice is "relative" to Franz Ali's character, there is a flip-flop. I suppose that in Rivette the approach is to the artist with a capital "A", here the artist is not seen as an artist but as a "being" under an existential light.

Nevertheless the work on the gaze, the almost theatric directness of Rivette's film seems to come back in the scenes with the tightrope walking exercises. Speaking of the work with the actor that interprets Ali, who wasn't a professional tightrope walker, you in some way repeated the work on the set that Piccoli does in the film, Genet and the tightrope walker, the director and his actor...

Beyond everything, they are long tracking shots... so they are even more difficult, the actor had to learn not only to walk the rope but also to recite the errors, he was formidable... he is still completely possessed by this film, by this character.

The light work. The final death and suicide are shot in full light, the boy's first fall is conditioned by the light, he falls when the light isn't shining on him anymore...

I work a lot with light, I discuss at length the décor, the costumes, the colors. I have heard for example of the dramatic necessity of the girl's red dress, and her change in hair color. It is a question of aesthetic necessity of the mise-en-scène, it wasn't planned. I am the one that shots it, I do all of the camera movements, I do a lot of practice runs before shooting and I repeat the shot a lot of times. Speaking of the light changes and the shooting rhythm, there is an acceleration when Franz meets the girl...

A melodramatic acceleration... and together wit another somewhat surrealist stylization, I thought about Bunuel: Belle de Jour, the driver, the unifrom, the car...

At the beginning there is a relation between two people, two gazes, and together the work on the very mise-en-scène, so its a little bit of a documentary style, up until when Franz falls. From that moment on Ali is another character, he is already Spadice, he is already

completely possessed and held by Spadice. The relationship alternates, it is as if Spadice is talking to himself, as if Spadice asked his own double to come back... When Spadice is no longer in the film there is an overlapping and therefore an acceleration, Spadice isn't there anymore, but is there, inside Ali, he is present and absent, and the relation with the women repeated with an kind of acceleration between Marcel and Ali, when Ali becomes the "other", there is a rotation of couples, the relationship is repeated and moved, so is the relationship with the mother who, at a certain point, disappears too... the only constant of Ali's movements.

So for you is it Franz Ali's film from the very beginning?

Yes, it is Franz's film, not Spadice's...

In this change over of gazes, in this negation and migration between the self and the other, you also become Spadice, a "other" being.

The first tightrope walker is me, it is very complicated to do a film like this...

The film's dialogues are extraordinary. Did you write the script and dialogues, are the dialogues original or did you use Genet's words?

In a certain sense the film is like this because it has those dialogues, the texts is very elaborate, there is a rhythm for every scene, for every phase, for every dialogue; its very elaborate. In the passage from the script to the film there isn't any change, I filmed what I wrote one-hundred percent. And this is an element as important as the images.

Is there a relation between your theater work and your work on the film?

I believe that theater is a form that belongs to "dramatic art", it involves three things: text, plastic, and space. Cinema for me puts these three elements into motion and so is something that is separated from dramatic art but, at the same time, like a tightrope walker's art, putting the three elements into motion cinema "returns" to dramaturgy.

The details of Genet's writing thrown away, and the details of opening towards shit... but where there are jewels too... why are these two details on paper thrown in with shit and on the jewels that have fallen on the shit?

It is something that came to me while writing the film, there is nothing in the film that wasn't written down first.

The element of physical humor, the mud on the fighting mother's body, the sweat and blood on Franz's white costume, is very present in the film... it is as if the body in the film is transposed to another level, in the great beyond, where there isn't any possibility of living in bodies...

There is a kind of ellipsis of the corporeal relationships, I used detail for this too, for example the intact croissant, and then the eaten croissant, on the bed where Franz and Ali meet, speak and love one another.

The whole film is a game of hints and mirrors, Franz's gaze toward the car fire where another boy dies is connected to the fire of the suicide as if Franz wanted to die like him, like he became Marcel but also the other boy... the woman becomes Genet, Franz becomes Genet and the other boy... in a continuous movement.

In a game of balance...

in *Filmcritica*, nn. 417-418 (1991), pp. 442-447

A Blind Desire by Serge Daney

Other than this silent short, made in 1950 by the writer Jean Genet and banned from the public for the next 25 years, most films with "of love" in the title risk sounding like what they are: bogus.

Un Chant d'amour is the story of three holes. A kind of reduced model of the derisive mechanism through which the eye (both of those who oversee and those of the spectator) thinks it can dominate what it sees.

Between two prisoners, a wall and, in this wall, an imperceptible hole that only a straw can fit through, chosen with love from the infected straw bed (the song is exactly this, this choice). Too small of an orifice to see through but big enough to blow cigarette smoke from one mouth to another thanks to the straw (slash, copula).

Between the prisoners and the guards, the second hole is the true peephole that the guards use to control their prisoners (their visual objects), and so stimulated, prey to the most violent of desires.

Between the guards and the possible spectator (this film was banned for so long), the very screen, the last skylight, this rectangular hole open onto the prison space and through which the spectator can anchor himself to what he sees.

In the film there is an idea, pursued with the greatest tenacity, a kind of story of the eye (but certainly not a story to the eye's glory).

Every time that the spectator risks being overwhelmed by the position of voyeur, in the brutality of the background and *like a call to order*, the guard's glaucous and concupiscent

eye intervenes. Every time the spectator, having forgot his own situation, gets ready to enjoy what is recited in this little theater of desire (blind desire: they see and touch each other only in daydreams, but they feel, they breath), is immediately transformed into a guard. A prison guard, a spectacle guard: an inevitable figure of suspense, the same condition of the song, the condition that makes the song possible, and it lasts (the song lasts).

Moreover, when the guard, who fears his own desire, penetrates into a cell to impose his pleasure onto one of the prisoners, it doesn't have anything to do with the figure of the "executioner-that-reveals-to-his-victim-that-he-wants-to-be-raped". This image, which hints to Sartre, *Portier de nuit*, is based on the quick idea that there is nothing easier than imposing one's pleasure on another. In *Un Chant d'amour*, more simply, the guard-voyeur intervenes for the prisoner like an instrument of pleasure, a tool that the prisoner negates any existence to, that he negates as subject, that he takes as prosthesis.

What is a spectator? Nothing more than the guard of his images. What copulates between them in of no concern to him.

Serge Daney, *Un chant d'amour (Jean Genet)*,
Cahiers du cinema n. 264, février 1976, p. 60

Nico Papatakis: Prosecutable by Law – An Interview by Jane Giles

Q. *Un Chant d'amore* seems to be a cursed film in that it has never really be shown at the theaters nor in public. Nico Papatakis, you closely participated in making this film and you were friends with Genet: we would like you to tell us the story of this film.

N.P. The production went like this: at the time we had a space that was called *La Rose Rouge*, a cabaret, where every night for two hours there was a show. Genet came often; I had met him at the end of the war and, when I ran this place, I thought I'd ask him if he'd like to finance a film: "You know, I want to make a film like my usual ones, so an erotic film". I said okay. He said: "Think about it, because it's pretty risky", and at the time it was really hard because that kind of film was prosecutable by law. Everything that came close to pornography (which isn't the case, but it could be grouped with that kind of film) was very dangerous, even with jail time. So he elaborated his project and came back. We made the sets at the Rose Rouge. The cabaret was underground and there was a bar over it. That's how I participated. In reality, I was the financier, or the producer.

There were a lot of problems. First of all, we had to find trusted people to participate in this film. It would have been easy to blackmail us afterwards since it was prosecutable by law. We had to find a laboratory that would do the printing and developing work. This was a second difficulty. Then, the third difficulty was projecting the film, because it couldn't come out in a normal way. The only way was to find rich people who loved Genet's work and sell them copies. I remember having to go to Milan, to a filthy rich Italian that had bought a copy. I had to cross the border with the copy. In Italy it wasn't particularly difficult, but I was also in England, with this English Lord that had a house in the country, a gentleman farmer, and I had to get by the Bobbies at the English customs, it was really hard. With this film everything was always really adventurous, but I really liked it, the film resisted.

Q. Did you meet Genet at the Rose Rouge?

N.P. I met him before I had the Rose Rouge, at the Café Flore. We went there often and I met a whole group of people, for example Jacques Prévert, then Genet, in 1943, towards the end of the war. I had just written *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and I was starting to spend time with Sartre. We became friends right away and I saw him often. He was always needing money, he told me how he did his "jobs" and he had me do a few with him. But he had a very particular relationship with money, a little bit perverse. I remember a time that we got into an argument over it. I was living with a girl, and we were both dying of hunger. One day he invited us to a restaurant where he treated us well, and then I didn't see him for a bit. In the end I ran into him at the corner of Boulevard Saint-Germain-des-Prés; he had been to the Gallimard publisher, he knew perfectly well that I didn't have a penny (I had told him that I was broke and that I hadn't eaten in two days). He pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket that he showed me with an provocative look. When I saw this and his challenging look I got really angry. I came up to him and wanted to bust his face. He ran, across Boulevard Saint-Germain, up Rue de l'Échaudé and Rue de l'Abbaye; for him it is a ghost of betrayal, he wanted to take me into a strange delinquency, he went to the police accusing me of wanting to steal his money. I had just enough time to hide behind a door and get away to Place Furstenberg. I saw him pass with a cop, they were looking for me. Without any I.D. on me, I would have been arrested. After that, he didn't come to the neighborhood anymore, it was over. Then I had the Rose Rouge, I started to make some money and they invited me to premier of *Bonnes* at the *Athénée*. It was a really tumultuous, I argued with people because I had enjoyed the piece, I defended it and I called Genet to tell him so. We made up, so he came to Rose Rouge and I produced his film. So those are the episodes of my life with Genet. This incident reflects the whole mental mechanism, the perversion, the morality of Genet, his betrayal complex.

Q. Was *Poursuite* the first title of *Un Chant d'amour*?

N.P. It's the title that Jean found to shuffle the cards; he didn't want any erotic connotation so that the lab people would think that it was a police film for example. Then the title became *Un Chant d'amour*.

Q. As far as the setting, were all the prison scenes shot in the same place?

N.P. When I found a financier for the *Rose Rouge*, we got this place in Rue de Rennes. On the ground floor there was an empty bar, big enough. A well-known guy, now that he's dead, Maurice Colasson, built the sets of the cells and the hallway.¹

Q. And the sets outside?

N.P. The yard is a wooded area near Paris. Everything that happens on the outside, the two boys' chase scene, was filmed in the forest.

Q. How long did the shooting last?

N.P. A professional cameraman, called Jacques Natteau, well known then and now, started shooting in 16mm; a week later, seeing the results, Jean Genet and the cameraman decided that it wasn't working and that they had to shoot in 35mm; we started all over again. We didn't organize the shooting in a regular way; we only shot when we found the actors: they were part of the ambiguous area of Pigalle, we had to look for them, they could never come when we needed them, so the shooting lasted about a month, then we started the editing.

Q. Were the actors more of Genet's friends than professional actors?

N.P. The younger of the two is Lucien Sémamaud. He was a friend of Genet, "the fisherman of Suquet", that he fell in love with after the war. Genet had him come to Paris and they lived together. Later they got married. The taller one, a Tunisian, was a barber and a pimp at the same time. So the two protagonists were, Sémamaud and this Tunisian kid from Pigalle. The others were people that Genet knew more or less from Pigalle, some kids who were a little crazy.

Q. Were the people who worked on the editing, on the sets, on the images professionals?

N.P. All of them. And you can tell. The film couldn't have been what it is if the team wasn't made of professionals. Even the laboratory work was done well. It was by *Éclair*, they ran some risks too. They were also prosecutable by law. They did a great job.

¹ Maurice Colasson: born 7 May 1911 in Paris. Studied at School of Fine Arts, an assistant to Georges Wakhevitch, most notably he made the sets for *Eugénie Grandet* (Mario Soldati, 1946) ; *Dédée d'Anvers* (Yves Allégret, 1947) ; *Une si jolie petite plage* (Y. Allégret, 1948) ; *Un homme marche dans la ville* (Marcel Pagliero, 1949) ; *Les Amants de Bras-Mort* (M. Pagliero, 1950).

Q. Did you see the editing?

N.P. Yes. I had my work, I had to take care of the *Rose Rouge*, but I often went up to see how it was going. Even Cocteau came to see us.

Q. Some say that there is some original Stravinsky music...

N.P. At the time Jean had said that, if he had to add an accompaniment, he would have asked Igor Stravinsky to write the music. I don't know if he had it recorded, if he asked or not. At this point, I don't know what to say about this score, I don't think it exists. Maybe Jean sent some music to the lab? It seems that there are some musical elements in the lab, but this needs to be verified.

Q. Was there some official showing done at the time?

N.P. Never, it wasn't possible. Henri Langlois, after expurgating it, or after taking out all of the hard scenes like we say today, tried to give it to the Cinémathèque and that created a huge scandal with the Minister of Protection (I don't know if it was the Minister of Culture or what), the newspapers... They blocked the projection, the people left and we didn't see the film. No, it wasn't possible to show it.

Q. In Henri Langlois' biography, he declared that he produced *Un Chant d'amour*.²

N.P. No. It's a lie. The proof that I produced the film is that the negative is deposited at the laboratory in my name. It isn't possible to contest this.

Q. In this book it says that *Un Chant d'amour* was commissioned by Langlois' festival in Antibes, in September 1950, that Langlois commissioned a film to Genet and one to Sartre.

N.P. That a joke. What film by Jean-Paul Sartre does he say he commissioned?

Q. It doesn't give the title; it only says that the film was commissioned, but that it was never finished. The Cinémathèque told me that they didn't have any copy of *Un Chant d'amour*.

N.P. Its true, they don't have it. The other day I met the Cinémathèque representatives in the occasion of an event in the honor of Mankiewicz; I was there by chance and they asked me for a copy. Langlois [*laughing*], how can you say you commissioned the film and not have a copy of it? I'll have to give him one.

Q. Did the film go before the Censure Commission?

Q. The film went before the Commission in 1975. It seems that it even got permission but later Genet was against projecting it normally, so it never helped anything. I think that if we'd ask today, there wouldn't be any problem showing it normally at the cinema.

² Patrick Langlois and Glenn Myrent, *Henri Langlois...*

Q. Jean Genet never made any more films, why?

N.P. It's not that he didn't want to, but I think he was a little afraid of everything that the production of a film entails, all of the pressures that it generates: the producers, deadlines to make... So he didn't, but I know that he wrote a bunch of scripts. He wrote one for Anouk [Aimée] as a wedding gift when I married her. He wrote other scripts, but none of them, I think, were ever filmed. Every time there were problems, I don't know what kind. But it's a shame because people like Genet, poets like him, are the ones that should have made films. *Un Chant d'amour* overflows with beautiful inventions from a cinematographic point of view, poetic inventions. As far as I'm concerned, he would have made a better cinema than Cocteau.

Q. Did being the producer of this film influence you to become a director yourself?

N.P. Yes. Before Genet made this film I had produced two cartoons for the shows at the Rose Rouge. I was interested in trying new things, in the theater and in cinema. Later I produced Jean Genet's film, and then I gave up the Rose Rouge. I went to the U.S. and I was the co-producer of John Cassavetes' first film, *Shadows*. I wanted to become a producer to produce avant-garde films, things that aren't done. That's why I wanted to have a script written based on Genet's *pièce* called *Les Bonnes*; I went to see Genet in Germany to ask him to write it. At the time he was working on *Paravents* and he told me: "I can't right now, but why not start from the real events and find someone who can write the script so that you can produce it?" I looked around for a long time and I found someone whose theater was similar to Jean's, it was Jean Vauthier. He wrote the script for *Les Abysses*. I tried to produce it but I couldn't find a director who wanted to shoot it. One day I dined with a friend, Florence Malraux, who said to me: "You speak so well about this film, why don't you shoot it yourself?" And so I did. That film made a scandal at the time too.

Q. What happened in 1975 when *Un Chant d'amour* won the "Centre national de la Cinématographie" award?

N.P. I knew a French producer, the president of the Producer's Union, Anatole Dauman. When the censorship was liberalized, he said: "You have the rights to Genet's film, why not go through the censorship to obtain the permission to show it?" I said okay thinking that Genet wouldn't have any problem with it and since I didn't ever make the money invested in the film back. We presented the film like it was new, Anatole Dauman took care of all of this, I didn't (at the time I was shooting *Gloria Mundi*). He handled the question well because it was well known by the CDC. He declared that the film had just been finished, while everyone knew that I had been filmed 25 years before. Michel Guy was the minister of Culture. We got

the censure's permission; more precisely, the whole commission pretended like the film had just been made and gave the film an award for quality.

We had made an agreement with Anatole Dauman to split the prize money if the film passed for being new. We got the award and it was announced in the press. Genet was furious because he thought the award was from the minister of Culture. He wrote a statement for the newspapers proclaiming that he wouldn't accept any award from anybody, etc. That's how everything began. I found myself in court. Genet got a lawyer. I was considered responsible for the whole thing. I told him: "What's wrong with you? It's not part of your philosophy to sue people, whatever the reason". We couldn't come to an agreement. Paule Thévenin did all he could for the situation. A catastrophe. I gave the money back to the CNC and that was it.

That's the whole story. It's sad; we never spoke again. I knew that I would have to give the money back, he wanted to give me some. I refused, saying: "I don't want your money, you hurt me and ruined our friendship". When he died I was very sad, I would have wanted to... He was probably my best friend, apart from his lovers... But he got involved in politics. He was close to the communists and it all became an immense waste.

Jane Giles, *Un Chant d'amour. Le cinéma de Jean Genet*,
Macula, Paris, 1993, pp. 141-147