

I, Pierre Riviere...[An Interview with Michel Foucault, 1976]

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Q. If you like, we can begin by discussing your interest in the publication of the dossier on Pierre Riviere and in particular your interest in the fact that, at least in part, it has been made into a film.

MF. For me the book was a trap. You know how much people are talking now about delinquents, their psychology, their drives and desires, etc. The discourse of psychiatrists, psychologists and criminologists is inexhaustible on the phenomenon of delinquency. Yet it is a discourse that dates back about 150 years, to the 1830s. Well, there you had a magnificent case: in 1836 a triple murder, and then not only all the aspects of the trial but also an absolutely unique witness, the criminal himself, who left a memoir of more than a hundred pages. So, to publish a book was for me a way of saying to the shrinks in general (psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, psychologists): well, you've been around for 150 years, and here is a case contemporary with your birth. What do you have to say about it? Are you better prepared to discuss it than your 19th century colleagues?

In a sense I can say I won; I won or I lost, I don't know, for my secret desire of course was to hear criminologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists discuss the case of Riviere in their usual insipid language. Yet they were literally reduced to silence: not a single one spoke up and said: "Here is what Riviere was in reality. And I can tell you now what couldn't be said in the 19th century." Except for one fool, a psychoanalyst, who claimed that Riviere was an illustration of paranoia as defined by Lacan. With this exception no one had anything to say. But I must congratulate them for the prudence and lucidity with which they have renounced discussion of Riviere. So it was a bet won or lost, as you like...

Q. But more generally, it's difficult to discuss the event itself, both its central point which is the murder and also the character who instigates it.

MF. Yes, because I believe that Riviere's own discourse on his act so dominates, or in any case so escapes from every possible handle, that there is nothing to be said about this central point, this crime or act, that is not a step back in relation to it. We see there nevertheless a phenomenon without equivalent in either the history of crime or discourse: that is to say, a crime accompanied by a discourse so strong and so strange that the crime ends up not existing anymore; it escapes through the very fact of this discourse held about it by the one who committed it.

Q. Well how do you situate yourself in relation to the impossibility of this discourse.

MF. I have said nothing about Riviere's crime itself and once more, I don't believe anyone can say anything about it. No, I think that one must compare Riviere with Lacenaire, who was his exact contemporary and who committed a whole heap of minor and shoddy crimes, mostly failures, hardly glorious at all, but who succeeded through his very intelligent discourse in making these crimes exist as real works of art, and in making the criminal, that is Lacenaire himself, the very artist of criminality. It's another tour de force if you like: he managed to give an intense reality, for dozens of years, for more than a century, to acts that were finally very shoddy and ignoble. As a criminal he was a rather petty type, but the splendor and intelligence of his writing gave a consistency to it all. Riviere is something altogether different: a really extraordinary crime which was revived by such an even more extraordinary discourse that the crime ended up ceasing to exist, and I think that this is what happened in the minds of the judges.

Q. Well then, do you agree with the project of Rene Allio's film, which was centered on the idea of a peasant seizing the opportunity for speech? Or had you already thought about that?

MF. No, it's to Allio's credit to have thought of that, but I subscribe to the idea completely. For by reconstituting the crime from the outside, with actors, as if it were an event and nothing but a criminal event, the essential would be lost. It was necessary that one be situated, on the one hand, inside Riviere's discourse, that the film be a film of memory and not the film of a crime, and on the other hand that this discourse of a little Normand peasant of 1835 be taken up in what could be the peasant discourse of that period. Yet, what is closest to that form of discourse, if not the same one that is spoken today, in the same voice, by the peasants living in the same place. And finally, across 150 years, it's the same voices, the same accents, the same maladroit and raucous speech that recounts the same thing with almost nothing transposed. In fact Allio chose to commemorate this act at the same place and almost with the same characters who were there for 150 years ago; these are the same peasants who in the same place repeat the same act. It was difficult to reduce the whole cinematic apparatus, the whole filmic apparatus, to such a thinness, and that it is really extraordinary, rather unique I think in the history of cinema.

What's also more important in Allio's film is that he gives the peasants their tragedy. Basically, the tragedy of the peasant until the end of the 18th century was still hunger. But, beginning in the 19th century and perhaps still today, it was, like every great tragedy, the tragedy of the law, of the law and the land. Greek tragedy that recounts the birth of the law and the mortal effects of the law on men. The Riviere affair occurred in 1836, that is, twenty years after the Code Civil was set into place: a new law is imposed on the daily life of the peasant and he struggles in this new juridical universe. The whole drama of Riviere is a drama about the law, the code, legality, marriage, possessions, and so forth. Yet, it's always within this tragedy that the peasant world moves. And what is important therefore is to show peasants today in this old drama which is the same time the one of their lives: just as Greek citizens saw the representation of their own city on the stage.

Q. What role can this fact play, the fact that the Normand peasants of today can keep the spirit, thanks to the film, of this event, of this period?

MF. You know that there is a great deal of literature about the peasants, but very little peasant literature, or peasant expression. Yet, here we have a text written in 1835 by a peasant, in his own language, that is, in one that is barely literate. And here is the possibility for these peasants today to play themselves, with their own means, in a drama which is of their generation, basically. And by looking at the way Allio made his actors work you could easily see that in a sense he was very close to them, that he gave them a lot of explanations in setting them up, but that on the other side, he allowed them great latitude, in the manner of their language, their pronunciation, their gestures. And, if you like, I think it's politically important to give the peasants the possibility of acting this peasant text. Hence the importance also of actors from outside to represent the world of the law, the jurors, the lawyers, etc., all those people from the city who are basically outside of this very direct communication between the peasant of the 19th century and the one of the 20th century that Allio has managed to visualize, and, to a certain point, let these peasant actors visualize.

Q. But isn't there a danger in the fact that they begin to speak only through such a monstrous story?

MF. It's something one could fear. And Allio, when he began to speak to them about the possibility of making the film, didn't dare tell them what was really involved. And when he told them, he was very surprised to see that they accepted it very easily; the crime was no problem for them. On the contrary, instead of being an obstacle, it was a kind of space where they could meet, talk and do a whole lot of things which were actually in their daily lives. In fact, instead of blocking them, the crime liberated them. And if one had asked them to play something closer to their daily lives and their activity, they would have perhaps felt more theatrical and stagey than in playing this kind of crime, a little far away and mythical, under the shelter of which they could go all out with their own reality.

Q. I was thinking rather of a somewhat unfortunate symmetry: right now it's very fashionable to make films about the turpitudes and monstrosities of the bourgeoisie. So in this film was

there a risk of falling into the trap of the indiscreet violence of the peasantry?

MF. And link up again finally with this tradition of an atrocious representation of the peasant world, as in Balzac and Zola...I don't think so. Perhaps just because this violence is never present there in a plastic or theatrical way. What exists are intensities, rumblings, muffled things, thincknesses, repetitions, things hardly spoken, but not violence...There is none of that lyricism of violence and peasant abjection that you seem to fear. Moreover, it's like that in Allio's film, but it's also like that in the documents, in history. Of course there are some frenetic scenes, fights among children that their parents argue about, but after all, these scenes are not vey frequent, and above all, running through them there is always a great finesse and acuity of feeling, a subtlety even in the wickedness, often a delicacy. Because of this, none of the characters have that touch of unrestrained savagery of brute beasts that one finds at a certain level in the literature on the peasantry. Everyone is terribly intelligent in this film, terrible delicate and, to a certain point, terribly reserved.

Translated by John Johnston