

## Legacies of Enlightenment: Diderot's *La Religieuse* and Its Cinematic Adaptations

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### Article abstract

*La Religieuse* is a classic French Enlightenment work in its elucidation of forced religious vocation as well as the hypocrisy and abuses of the Catholic Church. In reviving and effectively re-envisioning the novel, filmmakers Jacques Rivette and Guillaume Nicloux succeed in bringing Diderot's ideas to bear on contemporary issues such as the image and role of the Church post Vatican II, and the effects of patriarchal and religious oppression on the individual. This article examines the context and reception of all three works (the original text and two film adaptations) and their engagement with specific historical circumstances as well as more universal concerns; by extension, this project represents an effort to probe the perhaps unexpected, continued interest in Diderot's writings in popular culture today. An analysis of the literary and cinematic posterity of *La Religieuse* underscores the ongoing pertinence of French Enlightenment thought while illuminating the linked political and aesthetic inheritance of Diderot's novel.

# Legacies of Enlightenment: Diderot's *La Religieuse* and Its Cinematic Adaptations

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In the past several years, the works and ideas of French Enlightenment philosophers have made a resurgence on both sides of the Atlantic. In 2015, following the tragic *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in Paris, Voltaire's 1763 *Traité sur la tolérance* became a bestseller in France.<sup>1</sup> In his articles "Diderot, an American Exemplar? Bien Sûr!" published in *The New York Times*, and "'Beware the Affluence of Gold': On Reading Diderot in the Age of Trump," published in *The Guardian*, scholar Andrew Curran has shown how Denis Diderot's philosophical ideas shed light on the political and social climate in the United States.<sup>2</sup> For scholars and teachers of the French Enlightenment, this public recognition of the continued importance of the era's authors—and of the revolutionary ideas that helped form the basis of modern democratic society—could not come at a better moment. As university administrators, students, and tuition-paying parents question the value of a

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I am grateful to editor Stephen Ahern and the anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions for revision, which I have incorporated here.

1. See Frédéric Joignot, "Le 'Traité sur la tolérance,' best-seller inattendu," *Le Monde*, April 8, 2015; available online at the following URL: [https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2015/04/09/le-traite-sur-la-tolerance-best-seller-inattendu\\_4612241\\_3246.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2015/04/09/le-traite-sur-la-tolerance-best-seller-inattendu_4612241_3246.html), accessed April 15, 2021.

2. Andrew Curran, "Diderot, an American Exemplar? Bien Sûr!" *The New York Times*, January 24, 2013, available online by subscription at <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/25/opinion/diderot-an-american-exemplar-bien-sur.html>, accessed April 15, 2021; and by the same author, "'Beware the Affluence of Gold': On Reading Diderot in the Age of Trump," *The Guardian*, December 15, 2018, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/dec/15/denis-diderot-america-donald-trump>, accessed April 15, 2021.

humanistic education in general, and the study of subjects such as French literature in particular, such acknowledgments helpfully point to the continuing relevance of Enlightenment thought in promoting a rational and informed citizenry.

Eighteenth-century French thinkers like Voltaire and Diderot used their writings to expose contemporary tyrannies and injustices such as religious persecution and intolerance, corruption within the Church and state, and the gap between the rich and poor—conditions which, regrettably, are ever present in society. Calling up these writings in modern times has served an important purpose in both sparking and shaping debate on controversial topics; nonetheless, those instigating these discussions avail of their distance from the topics themselves—much in the same way Enlightenment authors made their fictional characters spokespersons for their own controversial opinions. One might even posit that popular references to Enlightenment authors and works serve as a cultural barometer of sorts. Certainly, the (r)evolving interest in works such as Pierre-Ambroise Choderlos de Laclos’s novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), a trenchant commentary on the corruption and decadence of the wealthy aristocracy in the years just before the French Revolution, seems revelatory. Director Roger Vadim’s *Liaisons dangereuses* was produced on the cusp of the cultural revolution in the 1960s, and Stephen Frears’ and Milos Forman’s cinematic adaptations during the high-rolling 1980s; in the past twenty years, successful film versions have appeared in the United States (*Cruel Intentions*, 1999), Korea (*Untold Scandal*, 2003), and China (*Dangerous Liaisons*, 2012), suggesting that the novel’s reflections on power and manipulation, and related sociopolitical critiques, resonate with audiences at particular cultural and historical moments. As the website of the recent “Legacies of the Enlightenment” project observes: “At least since the last century, philosophers and the public have turned to the Enlightenment, as a way of navigating moments of social and political crisis.”<sup>3</sup>

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3. The quotation is from a CFP posted on the website: see <https://legaciesoftheenlightenment.hcommons.org>, accessed April 15, 2021. The “Legacies of the Enlightenment” project was co-founded by scholars Valentina Denzel (Michigan State University) and Tracy Rutler (Pennsylvania State University) with funding from the Mellon Foundation’s Humanities Without Walls initiative (2017–2018); their

It is within this framework of strategic recurrence that I consider Diderot's novel *La Religieuse* and two cinematic adaptations based on it: Jacques Rivette's 1966 version starring Anna Karina, and Guillaume Nicloux's 2013 remake featuring Pauline Etienne and Isabelle Huppert. Originally composed by Diderot around 1760 as a series of letters to spur his friend, the Marquis de Croismare, to return to Paris from his country estate in Normandy, and subsequently expanded into a novel, *La Religieuse* is a classic French Enlightenment work in its exposure of the phenomenon of forced religious vocation and the hypocrisy and abuses of the Catholic Church. From the original through its literary and cinematic transformations, *La Religieuse* offers a powerful example of artistic engagement with the text, its reception, and contemporary realities and ideologies. In reviving and re-envisioning Diderot's work, modern filmmakers have effectively brought Diderot's ideas to bear on timely issues such as the image and role of the Catholic Church post Vatican II (Rivette), and the effects of patriarchal and religious oppression on the individual (Nicloux)—ironically earning the directors the same controversy and criticism that Diderot sought to avoid in his lifetime. In the pages that follow, I examine the context and reception of all three works and their engagement with specific historical circumstances as well as with concerns of a more general nature, in an effort to probe the continued interest in Diderot's work in popular culture today. An analysis of the posterity of *La Religieuse* underscores the ongoing pertinence of French Enlightenment thought and illuminates the linked political and aesthetic inheritance of Diderot's novel. The author's cultural legacy can be found both in the narrative and visual techniques of the films and in their critiques of institutions and practices, which develop and diversify Diderot's own.

The genesis of Diderot's work is well documented. In 1760, Diderot, along with his friends Frédéric Melchior Grimm and Mme d'Épinay, designed "un horrible complot" in order to lure Croismare back to Paris after an absence of more than a year.<sup>4</sup> Two years earlier, Croismare had interceded in a failed legal case on behalf of a nun, Marguerite Delamarre, who was forced against her will to take religious vows.

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website "explores the legacies of the Enlightenment by gathering material on topics that continue to inform, and even haunt, our current worldview."

4. See Georges May, *Diderot et "La Religieuse": Etude historique et littéraire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 36.

Diderot, drawing on this nun's story, invents the fictional Suzanne Simonin, who supposedly has escaped the convent and taken shelter with one Mme Madin; from there she writes a series of urgent and moving letters to Croismare pleading for his protection. Entirely taken in by the ruse, Croismare makes arrangements for Suzanne to occupy a position in his household—a benevolent gesture that eventually forces Diderot to “kill” Suzanne, but only after he and his co-conspirators have enjoyed evenings laughing at the expense of the poor marquis.<sup>5</sup> In 1770, Grimm published the entire correspondence, along with a preface outlining the hoax, in the *Correspondance littéraire*, a periodical that circulated among a small number of elite readers outside of France. In the meantime, Diderot worked to turn Suzanne's letters into a novel, which was published serially in the same periodical from 1780 to 1782 (although without the unique document that has come to be known as the “Préface-Annexe”). It was only in 1796, after Diderot's death, that the unfinished novel was published, along with a revised edition of Grimm's text.<sup>6</sup>

Diderot's account of Suzanne's plight was informed by the eighteenth-century French obsession with the *vocation forcée*, which was fuelled by the judicial cases of Marguerite Delamarre and Marie-Michelle de Couhé de Lusignan (who also protested her vows in the 1750s but won her case), as well as by multiple oral and written narratives circulating during this period. In creating Suzanne, Diderot drew upon and developed the sensationalized figure of the victimized nun, which, as Mita Choudhury has suggested, played on growing anxiety about authority (in addition to drawing on anti-clerical sentiment) and on a desire to reconceive the family as more tolerant and loving.<sup>7</sup>

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5. “Préface du précédent ouvrage tirée de la *Correspondance littéraire de M. Grimm, année 1760*,” in Denis Diderot, *La Religieuse*, ed. Robert Mauzi (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 269–71.

6. For summaries of the genesis and publication history of Diderot's work, see Andrew Curran, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* (New York: Other Press, 2019), 267–68; Florence Lotterie, introduction to *La Religieuse*, by Denis Diderot, ed. Florence Lotterie (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), i–vi; and May, *Diderot et “La Religieuse*,” cited above, 35–46.

7. For a discussion of the interplay of myth and reality in accounts of the *vocation forcée* in eighteenth-century France, see Mita Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century French Politics and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 98–128.

Diderot was aware of the power of his work—his letters had not only moved Croismare to action, but the author himself was moved to tears when composing the novel.<sup>8</sup> Questions of reliability aside, Suzanne, as a narrator, was irresistible—an innocent, helpless, eloquent young woman horribly abused and in desperate circumstances, one who has subsequently been interpreted by critics as a Christ-like and even profeminist figure.<sup>9</sup> Suzanne's vivid descriptions of her psychological and physical suffering and her moving entreaties to Croismare (“Monsieur, hâtez-vous de me secourir”; “Monsieur, ayez pitié de moi”) are complemented by the rhetorical arguments of lawyer M. Manouri that enumerate the dehumanizing and hypocritical aspects of claustral life.<sup>10</sup> Although Suzanne never questions her faith—only the injustice of her forced vocation—the exposition of the cruelty and (sexual) perversion of two of her mother superiors and her sister nuns, ostensibly caused by the “unnaturalness” of cloistered existence, was shocking and controversial. Due to the inflammatory nature of the work, Diderot avoided publishing it during his lifetime. Indeed, in the “Préface-Annexe,” Grimm calls the work “[un] ouvrage d'une utilité publique et générale, car c'était la plus cruelle satire qu'on eût jamais faite des cloîtres”—while taking care to highlight the “dévotion angélique” of Suzanne “[qui] conservait dans son cœur simple et tendre le respect le plus sincère pour tout ce qu'on lui avait appris à respecter.”<sup>11</sup>

Modern critics such as Georges May have emphasized that Diderot's book is not anti-religious. However, earlier readers seem

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8. “Préface du précédent ouvrage tirée de la *Correspondance littéraire*,” cited above, 271.

9. Numerous critics have emphasized the inconsistencies in Suzanne's story, most notably concerning her innocence and naïveté at the moment of narration; see Alan J. Singerman, “Desperately Seeking Suzanne: The Semiotics of Sound Track in Jacques Rivette's ‘La Religieuse,’” *Diderot Studies* 28 (2000): 142n3. For interpretations of Suzanne's character, see May, *Diderot et “La Religieuse,”* 195–231.

10. Diderot, *La Religieuse*, ed. Mauzi, cited above, 265, 267. (Subsequent references to the text of *La Religieuse* will refer to Mauzi's edition.) An excerpt from Manouri's *plaidoyer* reads: “Faire vœu de pauvreté, c'est s'engager par serment à être paresseux et voleur; faire vœu de chasteté, c'est promettre à Dieu l'infraction constante de la plus sage et de la plus importante de ses lois; faire vœu d'obéissance, c'est renoncer à la prérogative inaliénable de l'homme, la liberté. Si l'on observe ces vœux, on est criminel; si on ne les observe pas, on est perjure. La vie claustrale est d'un fanatique ou d'un hypocrite” (152–53).

11. “Préface du précédent ouvrage tirée de la *Correspondance littéraire*,” 272.

to have viewed the work differently.<sup>12</sup> During the post-Revolutionary period, pro-Revolutionary critics praised the anti-monastic aspects of the novel. As one Andrieux wrote in October 1796: “Ce singulier et attachant ouvrage restera comme un monument de ce qu’étaient autrefois les couvents, fléau né de l’ignorance et du fanatisme en délire, contre lequel les philosophes avaient si longtemps et si vainement réclamé, et dont la révolution française délivrera l’Europe.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, counter-Revolutionaries, such as a certain Clément, lamented the assaults on the Catholic religion and its institutions launched by Diderot and his fellow atheists: “[I]l n’est pas étonnant qu’ils aient versé par flots leurs mensonges calomnieux sur les autels, sur leurs ministres, sur les cloîtres, sur toutes les personnes religieuses et vouées à la piété.”<sup>14</sup> The potency of Diderot’s critiques was so well established that, in the nineteenth century, the author was incorrectly credited with having inspired the February 27, 1790 decree abolishing religious orders in France.<sup>15</sup> During the Restoration, when Louis XVIII brought about the return of convents and monasteries, *La Religieuse* found renewed popularity—and was subsequently banned in 1824 and 1826.<sup>16</sup> The book was judged harshly for its anti-clerical, anti-religious, and “pornographic” aspects well into the twentieth century. In 1949, Henri Lefebvre declared it “scandaleux et significatif” that the novel had only been perceived as a libertine work and had not yet been elevated “à sa vraie place: celle d’un grand roman psychologique, très moderne.”<sup>17</sup> Such assessments opened up a new critical appreciation of Diderot’s novel as a work of literary merit rather than as an inflammatory “pamphlet,” as demonstrated by Georges May’s 1954 study. In

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12. May, *Diderot et “La Religieuse,”* 164; and Ira Konigsburg, “Cinema of Entrapment: Rivette’s *La Religieuse* (1966),” in *Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation*, ed. Andrew Horton and Joan Magretta (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), 117n4.

13. Quoted in J. Th. De Booy and Alan J. Freer, eds. “*Jacques le Fataliste*” et “*La Religieuse*” devant la critique révolutionnaire (1796–1800) (*Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* XXXIII; Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1965), 132; Lotterie, “Dossier,” in her edition of *La Religieuse*, cited above, 267–68.

14. Quoted in De Booy and Freer, “*Jacques le Fataliste*” et “*La Religieuse*” devant la critique révolutionnaire (1796–1800), 226; Lotterie, “Dossier,” 268.

15. May, *Diderot et “La Religieuse,”* 23.

16. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

17. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 34.

this monograph, May praises “l’art du romancier” in the creation of a doubly modern novel through its exposition of human psychology and exploration of narrative techniques.<sup>18</sup>

While scholarly appreciation is manifest, it is unclear what exactly drew film director Jacques Rivette to Diderot’s work in the late 1950s. Critic Kevin Jackson notes that the French director’s various accounts of his own motives to adapt *La Religieuse* are cryptic, but that making the motion picture, which was originally presented as a play, ostensibly intrigued Rivette due to his “formal ambitions” and his desire to bring some of the qualities of theatre to film—and not specifically as a means to critique Catholicism or Gaullist politics.<sup>19</sup> Whatever Rivette’s motives, the production of the film importantly coincided with the creation of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) announced by Pope John XXIII in 1959 and held from 1962 to 1965. It was within this pivotal context—of assessing and redefining the role of the Catholic Church in the modern world—that Rivette’s 1966 film was conceived and interpreted. The director immediately encountered obstacles to production: his script, co-written by Jean Gruault, was rejected three times by the board that issued production visas before finally being approved in a bowdlerized version. When word got out about the project, Catholics bombarded officials in Charles de Gaulle’s government with letters and petitions of protest, leading to the revocation of Rivette’s permission to film at the abbey of Fontevraud. Rivette’s attempts to appease critics by changing the film’s title from *La Religieuse* to *Suzanne Simonin, la Religieuse de Diderot*, as well as his fulfillment of a promise to include an introductory text emphasizing that the film was a work of historical fiction, did not stop it from being judged as “un film blasphématoire qui déshonore les religieuses” and from being banned by the Minister

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18. *Ibid.*, 236–37.

19. Kevin Jackson, “‘Carnal to the Point of Scandal’: On the Affair of *La Religieuse*,” in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction on Screen*, ed. Robert Mayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 150. As Jackson and Alain Ménéil have noted, *La Religieuse* was seen as an exception and even an aberration within Rivette’s *œuvre*, and a film with which the director was dissatisfied artistically. See Alain Ménéil, “Réflexions sur une ‘erreur séduisante’: *La Religieuse* de Rivette,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 25, no. 1 (2001): 104.



of Information on March 31, 1966.<sup>20</sup> The film was finally released in Paris in November 1967.<sup>21</sup>

Rivette's film is deeply disturbing, even nightmarish, in its depiction of Suzanne's desperation and torture. It is difficult to watch, being long (140 minutes), full of shadowy visual effects, and emotionally jarring. The film's explorations of the darkest aspects of human psychology are rendered more acute by the use of abrupt editing techniques such as jump cuts and an unnerving soundtrack. At key moments throughout the film, church bells toll loudly, disrupting the action on screen and at the same time symbolically elucidating it. Near the beginning of the film, when Suzanne's mother insists that Suzanne consecrate her life to the Church, the sound of clanging church bells drowns out the characters' voices while a large crucifix hanging on the wall visually separates the figures; as Alan Singerman has noted, the bells mark the intrusion of the Church into Suzanne's life—and indeed the shattering of it.<sup>22</sup> Natural sound effects such as wind, animal noises, and loud heartbeats unsettle the viewer and evoke Suzanne's inner turmoil and anguish.<sup>23</sup> In the last scene of the film—an episode not in the novel but added by Rivette—dissonant percussive notes play while a masked Suzanne moves erratically through a gathering of courtesans before suddenly making her way to the window and jumping to her death to the sound of blowing wind. The film ends with a shot of Suzanne's lifeless body on the ground.

Rivette described his film as “cellulaire,” or conceptualized around the nun's cell, which is imaged as a hostile and frightening space of

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20. Quoted in Jean-Claude Bonnet, “Revoir *La Religieuse*,” in *Interpréter Diderot aujourd'hui*, ed. Elisabeth de Fontenay and Jacques Proust (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1984), 60; see also Jackson, “‘Carnal to the Point of Scandal’: On the Affair of *La Religieuse*,” 144–47. The on-screen text reads: “Librement adapté d'une œuvre polémique de Diderot portant le même titre, ce film est une œuvre d'imagination. Il ne prétend pas présenter une peinture exacte des institutions religieuses, même au XVIIIe siècle. Les spectateurs ne manqueront pas de le replacer d'eux-mêmes dans cette double perspective historique et romanesque et de s'interdire toute généralisation hâtive, injuste et évidemment indéfendable.”

21. For a detailed timeline, see Bonnet, “Revoir *La Religieuse*,” 160–62.

22. Singerman, “Desperately Seeking Suzanne: The Semiotics of Sound Track in Jacques Rivette's ‘*La Religieuse*,’” 145–48.

23. *Ibid.*, 148. Bonnet similarly remarks that such incongruous sounds, emanating from spaces off-screen, “accompli[ssent] la coupure vécue par Suzanne entre son corps qui est ici et son cœur qui n'y est pas” (“Revoir *La Religieuse*,” 73).

incarceration.<sup>24</sup> The director draws on the visual symbolism of the grille from the very first scene of the film, which begins some fifteen pages into Diderot's narrative; the spectator views Suzanne through the convent bars, which she grasps in passing before refusing to take her vows. At other times, such as when Suzanne meets with M. Manouri, the spectator views the scene from Suzanne's side of the bars. Ira Konigsberg has argued that Rivette's film is an example of the "cinema of entrapment," whereby the director recreates Suzanne's experience of imprisonment for the spectator by exploiting the spatial dimensions of cinema. Konigsberg notes that Rivette maximizes dramatic effect by using full-length shots and rarely angling his camera, by holding shots, and by employing minimal cutting and camera movement; as a result of these techniques, viewers "are often made to feel the solid weight of the real physical world, the still reality of the convent walls, the surrounding enclosure of [Rivette's] space, and within this space the relationships of his characters."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the most impactful sequence of the film occurs when Suzanne, lying across the barred threshold separating her from the mass she has been forbidden to attend, is ignored by the other nuns and stepped over as if she were dead at the order of the mother superior. A few scenes later, the viewer sees a pale and wide-eyed Suzanne, driven to the brink of insanity by hunger and persecution, staggering through the grey, prison-like corridor and reaching out to a nun who runs away from her, terrified, as thunder rolls; other nuns then descend on Suzanne, calling her "Satan" and "impure," and spitting on her as she struggles to escape. Conscious of the need for restraint in his filmic storytelling, Rivette changes Diderot's passage in which the nuns walk on, and not over, Suzanne, as Jean-Claude Bonnet remarks, "[t]out effet est sans commune mesure plus intense au cinéma qu'à la lecture."<sup>26</sup>

Vividly powerful, the film was seen by some viewers as a direct attack on the Catholic Church and religion. The various protests, counter-protests, petitions, public meetings, open letters, etc., surrounding the film came to be known as *L'Affaire de la Religieuse*,

24. Bonnet, "Revoir *La Religieuse*," 74.

25. Konigsberg, "Cinema of Entrapment: Rivette's *La Religieuse* (1966)," 124.

26. Bonnet argues that Rivette tempers his representation for fear of violating the spectator or falling into the realm of exaggerated violence (see "Revoir *La Religieuse*," 68).

which was also the title of a special daily feature in *Le Monde* recapping the latest developments in the scandal.<sup>27</sup> Two centuries after Diderot's death, Rivette's film succeeded in generating the heated ideological debate that the philosopher's private practical joke could not spark during the Enlightenment. While opponents of the film, such as the writer François Mauriac, focused on its alleged anti-Catholicism, proponents of the work defended it on the grounds of preserving individual liberty and freedom of expression, principles that would not have been misplaced in Diderot's time. An impassioned Jean-Luc Godard published two open letters in *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* condemning censorship—"that gestapo of the spirit"—and emphasizing the irony of banning a film based on a novel that evoked a French citizen's right to independence.<sup>28</sup> These arguments drew rhetorical power from references to the Enlightenment and 1789, as well as to painful events in the recent past (notably the rise of Fascism and Hitler as well as his treatment of Jews) and contemporary specters such as Soviet totalitarianism. The controversy mobilized thousands of intellectuals, filmmakers, writers, and even nuns and priests to come to the defense of Rivette and his film. Minister of Culture André Malraux was eventually forced to save face by allowing the film to be shown at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1966.

Given the status and impact of Rivette's work, it is perhaps surprising that director Guillaume Nicloux would try his hand at another adaptation fifty years later. Rivette's film and its reception had an influence on Nicloux's version, as the later French director explains in a 2013 interview in *Télérama*:

Le livre a laissé en moi une trace profonde, pendant des années, voire des décennies. Mais entre le désir de franchir le cap et la faisabilité de l'adaptation, il peut s'écouler un certain temps. Il m'en a fallu pour envisager le roman sans l'étiquette anticléricale qu'on lui collait. Dans le contexte géopolitique de l'époque, il est normal qu'on ait vu ce destin brisé de jeune fille comme une charge frontale contre l'institution religieuse. Et c'est en songeant aux scléroses de la France gaulliste, et à la toute puissante ORTF, le clergé d'alors, que Jacques Rivette et Jean

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27. For recaps of the affair, see Jackson, "'Carnal to the Point of Scandal': On the Affair of *La Religieuse*," 144–47; and Bonnet, "Revoir *La Religieuse*," 62–65.

28. Jackson, "'Carnal to the Point of Scandal': On the Affair of *La Religieuse*," 146.

Gruault avaient repris cet axe pamphlétaire. Mais il m'a semblé qu'au cœur du roman, il y a surtout un réquisitoire contre l'intolérance et une ode à la liberté.<sup>29</sup>

Nicloux suggests that he conceived his film as a return to the essence of Diderot's novel, freeing it from the anti-clerical label imposed by its eighteenth-century critics and his cinematic predecessors. At the same time, however, he frames his own adaptation as having a distinctly contemporary viewpoint. In the same interview, Nicloux states how he saw the novel as resonating with present-day audiences:

Si l'on veut bien regarder plus loin que notre petite France rassurante, on s'aperçoit que des sociétés patriarcales moyenâgeuses continuent d'opprimer à tout-va. Quand ma fille adolescente a lu *La Religieuse*, elle a été frappé [sic] de voir combien l'actualité lui faisait écho. A ce moment-là, on parlait beaucoup d'une jeune femme à qui son mari avait coupé le nez et les oreilles, en toute légalité. On pourrait multiplier les exemples: en Inde, au nom d'une tradition hindouiste, des femmes sont encore brûlées vives sur le bûcher funéraire de leurs défunts maris. Vous voyez beaucoup de différences avec certaines pratiques d'il y a deux siècles? Diderot a pointé deux grands maux qui persistent encore aujourd'hui: l'impossibilité de vivre sa religion comme on l'entend et l'hégémonie masculine.<sup>30</sup>

In another interview Nicloux adds: "Maintenant, 'La Religieuse' traite de la dominante patriarcale à une époque où on viole les manifestantes en Egypte, où le remboursement de la pilule fait toujours polémique aux États-Unis et où l'Église catholique continue d'interdire le préservatif."<sup>31</sup> So for Nicloux, *La Religieuse* still carries a highly political message, but with an added twenty-first century humanitarian scope that was noted with appreciation by film critics such as *Le Monde's* Thomas Sotinel: "La mère Christine (Louie Bourgoïn) est là pour rappeler la nocivité de l'intégrisme, sa collègue du couvent de

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29. Mathilde Blottière, "Guillaume Nicloux: 'La Religieuse, c'est une ode à la liberté,'" *Télérama*, March 18, 2013, available online at <https://www.telerama.fr/cinema/guillaume-nicloux-la-religieuse-c-est-une-ode-a-la-liberte,94980.php>, accessed April 15, 2021.

30. Ibid.

31. Alexandre Boussageon, "'La Religieuse,' histoire d'une adaptation hautement inflammable," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, March 15, 2013; <https://www.nouvelobs.com/cinema/20130321.CIN4686/la-religieuse-histoire-d-une-adaptation-hautement-inflammable.html>, accessed April 15, 2021.

Saint-Eutrope (Isabelle Huppert) est l'effigie de tous les adultes qui profitent de leur autorité pour abuser des enfants et des adolescents."<sup>32</sup> Tellingly, despite widening his intended targets to include religious intolerance and the abuse of women, and partnering with a Catholic publication, Nicloux—much like Rivette—was denied his request to film in two French convents and was forced to film in Germany instead.<sup>33</sup>

As with Rivette's film, Nicloux's screenplay, written with Jérôme Beaujour, reproduces many of Diderot's scenes and dialogues. However, Nicloux's film consciously diverges from Diderot's text as well as from Rivette's version in which Suzanne, victimized and abused from the opening scene onwards, commits suicide. Nicloux sees Suzanne as "une combattante plutôt qu'une souffre-douleur."<sup>34</sup> While convinced of the injustice of her situation, she also recognizes her role in it, having professed to her mother her love of Christ at the start of the film. The director emphasizes Suzanne's psychological trajectory through close-up and medium close-up shots that are meant to convey her struggle and resistance. When Suzanne tells her mother superior that she wants her freedom, the protagonist's range of emotions highlights the strength of her convictions—as she repeatedly exclaims "je veux sortir d'ici!"—a contrast to the violent desperation and descent into folly seen in Rivette's scene. Nicloux's Suzanne is both resolute and rebellious.<sup>35</sup> We see her stoically enduring the punishment she is forced to suffer for having stolen paper and ink—picking glass out of her bare feet, having to urinate on the floor, shivering and breathing hard as she sleeps without a mattress or blankets—and then immediately resuming her writing when she is released from solitary confinement. She throws her hairshirt into the fire, declaring it an instrument of torture and inviting her sister nun to

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32. Thomas Sotinel, "'La Religieuse': L'héroïque novice de Guillaume Nicloux," *Le Monde*, March 19, 2013; available online at [https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2013/03/19/la-religieuse-l-heroique-novice-de-guillaume-nicloux\\_1850480\\_3246.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2013/03/19/la-religieuse-l-heroique-novice-de-guillaume-nicloux_1850480_3246.html), accessed April 15, 2021.

33. Boussageon, "'La Religieuse,' histoire d'une adaptation hautement inflammable."

34. Blottière, "Guillaume Nicloux: '*La Religieuse*, c'est une ode à la liberté."

35. See also Houda Landolsi, "Les Tableaux de *La Religieuse*: du roman de Diderot au film de Nicloux," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur "L'Encyclopédie"* 50, no. 1 (2015): 251.

do the same. Nicloux's message is clear, voiced by the priest who helps Suzanne at the end of the story and explicitly praises her revolt, telling her, "le monde vous attend, Suzanne. Il a besoin de gens comme vous." Nicloux refuses the patriarchal sexual exploitation present in both the novel and Rivette's film—this director's Suzanne is neither exposed to the indecent advances of the Benedictine monk, nor does she end up in the brothel of Rivette's version.<sup>36</sup>

Whereas Rivette's adaptation was shaped by New Wave aesthetics, Nicloux's film is decidedly more mainstream. The director states that he saw in the novel "la possibilité d'un film de genre et les prémices du roman gothique."<sup>37</sup> To this end, the film adds a "romanesque" family storyline that frames and punctuates Diderot's narrative, in which Mme Simonin is a caring mother whose unhappy marriage led to an affair with the rich and cultured Baron de Lasson, who loved her.<sup>38</sup> Although Suzanne is unaware of her biological father's identity, she knows he is alive and dreams of paternal tenderness. In the final scenes of the film Suzanne learns that the dying baron, the protector who saved her from the convent with the help of M. Manouri, is her father; the last sequence of the film shows Suzanne waking up in a luxurious bed, putting on a silk dressing gown, and walking down an elegant staircase and through a grand salon to the terrace of the family's château. The last scene shows her looking out onto the gardens, protected by the warmth of the velvet cloak offered by her half-brother, the Marquis de Croismare, and safe in the knowledge of her wealthy noble paternity—and comforted by the revelation that her father had waited to see her before he died. With its family drama, historical costumes and décors, classical soundtrack, natural lighting, and fairytale ending, the film is more period piece than social documentary. Some reviewers have criticized this lack of faithfulness to Diderot's model. Historian Lisa Jane Graham, for example, takes issue with Nicloux's ending, stating that it "severs his film from the novel's social context and distorts Diderot's skepticism regarding the outcome of

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36. Diderot, *La Religieuse*, 261.

37. Boussageon, "La Religieuse," histoire d'une adaptation hautement inflammable."

38. Landolsi further qualifies the storyline as "epic," consisting of a plot in which Suzanne evolves as a character and reaches maturity. See her article "Les Tableaux de *La Religieuse*: du roman de Diderot au film de Nicloux," cited above, 251.

Suzanne's struggle"; she remarks further that "[it] erodes the agency of Diderot's heroine by making her fate depend on men like Manouri and Croismare."<sup>39</sup> In adapting the novel for twenty-first century audiences, Nicloux may have indeed—as Graham puts it—dismayed *dix-huitièmistes*.<sup>40</sup>

Nicloux said that his intention in making the film was to “trahir le plus fidèlement possible’ le roman” by being faithful to the spirit of Diderot's novel, if not exactly to its content.<sup>41</sup> Although both adaptations stray from Diderot's text, they can also be considered true to his work in terms of their generic effects. Much like the novelistic form in the eighteenth century, which was a relatively new and developing genre that was perceived as exerting strong and even dangerous power over the reader's emotions and senses, film as a medium has been credited with “the [potentially hazardous] power ... to stir unruly emotions” that “puritans ... instinctively dread.”<sup>42</sup> Diderot articulated his aesthetics of the dramatic *tableau* (an onstage moment so “natural” and “real” that it evokes painting and engages the sensibility and subjectivity of the spectator) around the same time as he began composing *La Religieuse*. The author himself noted in a letter to his friend Jacques-Henri Meister that “le roman est rempli de tableaux pathétiques.”<sup>43</sup> As Jay Caplan has argued, pathetic *tableaux* punctuate

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39. Lisa Jane Graham, “A la recherche du père perdu: Guillaume Nicloux's *La Religieuse* (2013),” *Fiction and Film for Scholars of France: A Cultural Bulletin*; <https://h-france.net/fffh/the-buzz/a-la-recherche-du-pere-perdu-guillaume-nicloux-la-religieuse-2013/>, accessed April 15, 2021.

40. Ibid.

41. Blottière, “Guillaume Nicloux: ‘*La Religieuse*, c’est une ode à la liberté.”

42. Jackson, “‘Carnal to the Point of Scandal’: On the Affair of *La Religieuse*,” 154.

43. Diderot quoted in Landolsi, “Les Tableaux de *La Religieuse*: du roman de Diderot au film de Nicloux,” 243. Diderot defined the *tableau* in his *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* (1757): “Une disposition des personnages sur la scène, si naturelle et si vraie, que rendue fidèlement par un peintre, elle me plairait sur la toile, est un tableau” (quoted in Pierre Frantz, *L'Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998], 7). As noted, Rivette's film was based on a stage adaptation, adding a further layer to these “*tableau* aesthetics”; see Singerman, “Desperately Seeking Suzanne: The Semiotics of Sound Track in Jacques Rivette's ‘*La Religieuse*,’” 141. Bonnet similarly links Rivette's film with Diderot's theatrical *tableau*, stating that “le film est une anthologie de scènes pathétiques où l'émotion est contenue dans un cadre strict” (“Revoir *La Religieuse*,” 67). See also Méné, “Réflexions sur une ‘erreur séduisante’: *La Religieuse* de Rivette,” 108–09.

and motivate Diderot's narrative: seeing a *tableau* of a mad nun impels Suzanne to refuse her vows and tell her story; the *tableaux* of Suzanne's trials throughout her autobiographical testimony "call upon the reader to be moved by the tears and suffering of an innocent victim, and to be moved from tears to action."<sup>44</sup>

As Caplan's term "moving pictures" intimates, the aesthetics of the *tableau* are not far removed from those of film.<sup>45</sup> Jean-Marie Apostolidès agrees, observing: "Si le tableau vise à fixer un instant, une scène, à saisir un affect à l'intérieur d'un cadre, l'ensemble des tableaux permet une mise en mouvement totale, comme un film. A la fixité du tableau s'oppose la circulation de l'ensemble."<sup>46</sup> The enduring quality of Diderot's text in contemporary times can be attributed to the ease with which it lends itself to cinema's moving images (in both senses), as well as the continued resonance of its themes—which are conveniently open to both strict and wide interpretation. Significantly, a restored version of Rivette's film saw a limited U.S. run in early 2019, prompting yet another round of critical commentary. It is perhaps unsurprising that the film's subject—in the age of Trump, of the Catholic abuse scandal, of the Taliban, of Kim Jong-un—was seen as "the nature of social control, the totalitarian demand for unquestioning obedience and the capricious application of power."<sup>47</sup> In other words, as Justin Chang of the *Los Angeles Times* put it, "[i]ts portrait of totalitarian authority and

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44. Jay Caplan, *Framed Narratives: Diderot's Genealogy of the Beholder* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 49–50. The vision of the mad nun provides an excellent example of the Diderotian *tableau* in its vivid description of the scene and Suzanne's emotional response: "Je n'ai jamais rien vu de si hideux. Elle était échevelée et presque sans vêtement; elle traînait des chaînes de fer; ses yeux étaient égarés; elle s'arrachait les cheveux; elle se frappait la poitrine avec les poings, elle courait, elle hurlait ... elle cherchait une fenêtre pour se précipiter. La frayeur me saisit, je tremblai de tous mes membres, je vis mon sort dans celui de cette infortunée, et sur-le-champ il fut décidé, dans mon cœur, que je mourrais mille fois plutôt que de m'y exposer." See Diderot, *La Religieuse*, 53–54; quoted in Caplan, *Framed Narratives*, 49–50.

45. Caplan, *Framed Narratives*, 49.

46. Jean-Marie Apostolidès, "La Religieuse et ses tableaux," *Poétique* 137, no. 1 (2004): 85.

47. J. Hoberman, "'La Religieuse,' a Culture War Casualty of 1960s France," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2019; available by subscription at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/02/movies/la-religieuse-film-forum.html>, accessed April 15, 2021.



the reckless abuse of clerical power is as scaldingly resonant now as it ever was.<sup>48</sup>

That Diderot's *La Religieuse* still speaks to audiences some 250 years after its inception is at once heartening and demoralizing. If the work highlights difficult truths concerning the abuse of power, the corruption of institutions, and the vulnerability of women, it also underscores the possibility for resistance and the capacity of narrative—of “moving images” in particular—to touch audiences and incite change. Above all, for scholars and teachers of French literature, this endurance points to the fact that the eighteenth-century worldview, in both its positive and negative manifestations, remains highly relevant today. Diderot and the Enlightenment still have much to teach us, about questioning authority and accepted social practices, human rights and dignity, as well as liberty and the freedom of expression. While *dix-huitièmistes* may take issue with aspects of the directors' artistic license, these films have unquestionably made Diderot's humanitarian ideas more accessible to our increasingly visually oriented students as well as to a larger global audience.

Importantly, Diderot's work and its legacy also elucidate the functions and limitations of “the Enlightenment” as a model for understanding eighteenth-century France and a movement that ostensibly exemplifies the universal values of liberty, equality, and tolerance. The cinematic adaptations highlight the challenges inherent in expanding Diderot's premises beyond a Western framework; despite Nicloux's assertions about the multicultural reach of its messages, his film is decidedly Eurocentric in its cast and setting. Furthermore, the sexualization of Suzanne's plight—communicated through the novel's lesbian motifs and her seductiveness as narrator—is perpetuated in both films by the framing of female bodies and desires for the male or erotic gaze, underscoring the persistent (and pernicious) ties between women's issues and (homo)eroticism.<sup>49</sup> In both versions, the camera focuses

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48. Justin Chang, “Review: Jacques Rivette's Masterful ‘La Religieuse’ Still Speaks Truth to Abusive Power,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 2019; <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-la-religieuse-the-nun-review-20190117-story.html>, accessed April 15, 2021.

49. Diderot addresses this seductiveness in the postscript of the novel, in which Suzanne refers to the marquis de Croismare as follows: “si le marquis ... venait à se persuader que ce n'est pas à sa bienfaisance, mais à son vice que je m'adresse, que penserait-il de moi? ... En vérité, il aurait bien tort de m'imputer personnellement

on the physical beauty of (the actresses playing) Suzanne: Nicloux's film includes gratuitous shots of Suzanne's naked form; Suzanne's periodically unbound hair in Rivette's film at once embodies her desire for freedom and her allure. Moreover, if Rivette is restrained in his portrayal of the mother superior's lust for Suzanne, other acts, such as the playful glances, caresses, and embraces that are exchanged among the young nuns at Sainte-Eutrope, seem more suggestive of (male) fantasy than Diderot's narrative. Perhaps most strikingly, Nicloux's film features a multilayered voyeurism in which the viewer watches other characters watching an objectified Suzanne—notably mère Christine as she observes Suzanne being stripped naked at her order. Viewed from this feminist perspective, the divergent endings of the films—suicide and family (re)union, which are reminiscent of two of the classic narrative closures for female protagonists in eighteenth-century novels, death and marriage—serve not only to show that the cultural impact and relevance of Diderot's *La Religieuse* are still potent, but also point to the cultural work that remains to be done to liberate women and their stories from patriarchal structures and viewpoints.

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un instinct propre à tout mon sexe. Je suis une femme, peut-être un peu coquette, que sais-je? Mais c'est naturellement et sans artifice." (*La Religieuse*, 267)