

## Encounters with Contemporary French Film

Wednesday, March 11, 2009 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

curated and presented by Sandra Davis

***Eclats D'Orphee (Thunderbolts of Orpheus)*** (2002) by Patrick Bokanowski; 16mm, color, sound, 4.5 minutes, print from Light Cone

“Source images from a contemporary theatrical rendition of the classic myth here exist entirely in filmic form. Actors are rendered as puppet-like, in a fusion of eastern/western theatrical styles. The use of highly stylized makeup and top hat dress suggests the French schools of Mime. It is not an ‘interpretation’ of a play; it strives to be an encounter between the actors/play and film, with an intriguing use of sound. The kinetic energy of the editing reminds us that the filmmaker works also in animation.”(Sandra Davis)

“Patrick BOKANOWSKI challenges the idea that cinema must, essentially, reproduce reality, our everyday thoughts and feelings. His films contradict the photographic ‘objectivity’ that is firmly tied to the essence of film production the world over. Bokanowski’s experiments attempt to open the art of film up to other possibilities of expression, for example by ‘warping’ his camera lens (he prefers the term ‘subjective’ to ‘objective’ - the French word for ‘lens’), thus testifying to a purely mental vision, unconcerned with film’s conventional representations, thus affecting and metamorphosing reality, and thereby offering to the viewer of his films new adventures in perception.” (Pierre Coulibeuf, Light Cone catalogue)

***K (Reves/Berberes)*** (2006) by Frédérique Devaux; 16mm, color, sound, 5 minutes, print from Light Cone

“[A ] subjective chronicle...an experimental biography about Kabylie in Algeria. It's about berberian people dreaming to go far away and wanting at the same time to stay on their land, so poor land...I'm dealing with the relationship of the Kabyles with the dream of elsewhere. To reach that aim, I shot a lot in Kabylie, and also in other countries. Through the superimposition, the rapprochement between positive and negative, tape-to-film work, a research on the colour, an editing sometimes really short in which i intercalate some articles about the ‘kabyle cauldron’, among other effects used, I try to give shape to these visions of an elsewhere, that are passing, changeable, often false. While printing the film, I worked a lot on the diaphragm, going voluntarily from overexposure to underexposure, in order to render ‘the blindness’ (that is the fever) and the ignorance of some populations about this elsewhere they believe as an El Dorado.” (Frédérique Devaux)

“Devaux’s work has moved from a single-layered investigation of film materials into extraordinary multi-textured works which use photographic reality (artifacts of voyages through the Middle East, Algeria and Afghanistan), and elegant surface work to create sensations of synthesis of photographic/painting modalities. Here the addition of found text (from news journals) enhances the collage of images and musical as well as “found” sounds –ambient sounds of crowds, children.

LA CHAUDRAN KABYLE (the Kabylie cauldron)

BARRICADE KABYLE (Kabylie barricades)

SOIXANE MORTS KABYLE (sixty deaths Kabylie)

VIOLANTES EMEUTES (violent street manifestations)

In *K*, the totality of the fabric of the collage suggests oppositions and confrontations—the cauldron of cultures in which boil the explosive residues of colonialism, of dreams and desires of individuals faced with the harsh realities of enduring multi-generational conflicts.” (Sandra Davis)

**Holy Woods** (2008) by Cécile Fontaine; 16mm, color, sound, 8 minutes, print from Light Cone

“Cécile Fontaine works with what can be called margins, the excluded parts of cinema,, revindicating scratching, soaking, de-collage and so filmmaking passes as a primarily plastic activity, with almost no material resources, renewing at once with the first major steps of the Dadaists in their collage – principally in the works of Schwitters and especially the collage of Hannah Höch executed with a kitchen knife and the work of recycling or how to make art without having the air to have touched it.” (Yann Beauvais)

“Fontaine was born in France and grew up on Ile de la Reunion, Indian Ocean. She has lived and traveled in the east and in the west, including the US (she studied at Mass College of Art and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, in Boston) and Europe --these experiences seem to inform her aesthetic. She has lived in France since 1986.”

“Fontaine carries on the tradition of completely ‘hand-wrought’ works, poetically inspired and composed. She reworks and paints over the photographic surface, at times actually lifting off and collages morsels of emulsion to form new surfaces.

“An aspect of the manipulation of original found footage is the creation of a constant perceptual movement between foreground (the film’s surface) and background (the photographic image itself). The consciousness of the viewer floats between these layers. The result is an extremely dynamic filmic space. False eye matches, created by the editing, mimic the techniques of narrative films.” (Sandra Davis)

**Nûr: Cosmos Spiritus/Nûr Version 1** (2005) by Olivier Fouchard; 16mm, color, silent, 7 minutes, print from Light Cone

“An approach to the different beliefs and representations of God assimilated to light, light being associated with Spirit in the Koran. The issue of God being represented in human shape is solved by the assimilation of God with the light of the Cosmos.” (Olivier Fouchard)

“Fouchard works with various processes to transform “image”, from the original by rephotography and direct surface work on the emulsion. His painterly works in film and video have been produced in the micro labs L’Abominable and L’Atelier (Grenoble).” (Sandra Davis)

**Cote Jardin** (2007) by Rose Lowder; 16mm, color, silent, 4 minutes, print from Light Cone

“Lowder was born in Lima Peru and was educated there and in London as a painter and sculptor. She worked in London as an artist while earning a living in the film industry as an editor. Working with Jean Rouch in France, her thesis was ‘The Experimental Film as an Instrument Towards Visual Research’ (1987). She is the founder of The Experimental Film Archive of Avignon.

“Her films such as the *Bouquets* series have been screened widely in the US and internationally. These extraordinary works fuse a sense of nature/place and a geometric/numerical sense of form, which intoxicates in its rich visual display of natural event. In tonight’s work, Lowder moves outward from the filming method she has become known for – her trademark “A/B roll in the camera” shooting, where she works on the single frame, exposing frames, then progressively skipping frames (unexposed) in rhythmic patterns throughout the roll, then backwinding the films and “filling in” those still unexposed frames with a new line of imagery. In *Cote Jardin*, she explores the merging of this technique with “real time” shots, that is, continuous shots. The break in the rigid numerical alternate image shooting produces spaces of luxurious chronological sensuality, resulting in a new experience of a multiplicity of times/actions/seasons. It also treats the viewer to the sequences of frogs mating. She speaks about the importance of her dedication to an ecological consciousness in her work. The inherent human relationship with the natural world has always been important in her filmmaking; the importance of preserving a relationship with the natural world seems even more pronounced in recent work.

“Her working method is based on a completely respectful (and dependent) interaction with nature’s events and timing, as described by the filmmaker:

‘*Côté Jardin* gives a brief interpretation of three remarkable organic gardens in the South of France. By modulating the photographic process in the camera during filming the film works on the link that could be established between the subject and what can be made evident cinematographically on a screen. The challenge is to cope with the difficulties to control optical subtleties created by the

overlapping of visual features during projection confronted by nature's ways. For example, aspects of an image can be modified according to the time of day in relation to the degree of light or the position of the sun in the sky. If light goes in and out, how long the in and out is depends on what is being done cinematographically, one waits for the clouds to go and then the sun is in the wrong place in relation to subject matter, etc.. In this case, light was as dreadful as time was short.” (Sandra Davis)

**Fone Für Follies** (2007) by Vivian Ostrovsky; digital video, color, sound, 10 minutes, tape from Light Cone

“ A felinosophy of life. Visually speaking, this film is a carbon copy of telepathy, with a new soundtrack destined for English speakers.” (Vivian Ostrovsky)

“Vivian Ostrovsky was born in New York and attended high school in Rio de Janeiro before studying psychology and cinema at the Sorbonne University in Paris. Her film activities began with her involvement in Ciné-Femmes, a diffusion organization striving for feminism and its visibility. She became a filmmaker herself in 1980 and relinquished her militancy. She took part in the organization of festivals, notably in Jerusalem. Her films explore the theme of transit, and can be situated (according to Yann BEAUVAIS, filmmaker and co-founder of Light Cone Distribution Cooperative and Scratch Cinema, Paris) between ‘film journal’ and ‘ film collage ‘. *Fone Fur Follies* is a recent work in her continuing series of explorations of the comedy/tragedy of human/animal existence.”

Of the use of the cell phone as her original camera source in this and *Don't Ring*, Ostrovsky writes:

‘Is that the future of cinema?’ I was asked by a friend who runs a cinematheque, when I told him that I had just finished a film, which I had shot with my cell phone camera. Yes indeed; it's one of its many evolutionary processes. Movie theater audiences are shrinking, young people are abandoning television for other types of imagery, such as web streaming (You Tube, Daily Motion, Myspace, Facebook &c), video games, DVDs which they watch at home and iPods which they watch everywhere else.

For my part, I have always filmed on Super-8mm film and the occasional use of cell phone camera comes naturally to me. The only difference is that it is even more intimate, even smaller and I don't need to change cartridges every 3 minutes - although I do have to remember to recharge the battery.

These images are reprocessed, re-edited, the sound is recreated and, in the end, this long thread of telephonic 'film' generates a little nostalgia, a hint of incommunicability and a pinch of solitude.’ “ (Sandra Davis)

**Peribole** (2007) Marc Plas; digital video, color, sound, 2 minutes, tape from Light Cone

“Plas’ subject matter and his working methods attest to his particular interest in the relationship between cinema and video. His practices of painting and drawing are applied to his filmmaking both directly—in the working method—and thematically. In another work *Un Doute*, Plas pays a refracted homage to American cinematic giant Charles Chaplin, in an abstract ode to his dancing through cinematic space. In *Peribole*, his interest is more metaphoric, while his technique is equally synthetic.” (Sandra Davis)

**Mer** (2003) by Martine Rousset; 16mm, color, sound, 20 minutes, print from Light Cone  
From the artist’s text in the LightCone catalogue (English translation printed as unedited)

‘ The sea is a language of which we have lost the sense ‘ J.L. Borges

The Mediterranean, this one. The sun.

Any Writing on the water ?

The violent rumor of the wind on the sea.

The wild voice of the writing on the sea.

Some childlike fictions in the writing of the sea , certainly very cruel,

Some games of war.

Lost language.

Supreme Childhood

It is the sea which wins. Well Done.

“Rousset is an artist strongly influenced by literature and poetry, yet her film work remains strongly grounded in the imagistic – her strength lies in merging her literary impulses and thought patterns in text with the fabric of her imagery. This piece is somewhat different than others (which utilize actual text from literary sources and scripted over-voice) in that the sound is collaged from ambient sources. She moves outward from the inspiration of the Borges text into the body of the film.

As in all her work, the filmic rhythm is marked by an extenuated, slow movement. The sensation of entering the film is one which mimics the yogic practice of slowing one’s breathing. The film invites one to enter a consciousness akin to lying on the beach, eyes closed, as sounds of sea and children and wind form the track. The increasingly abstract images move through translucent silence, color, b/w drained of color, and back to sound and color.”(Sandra Davis)

**Fenice** (2003) by Marcelle Thirache; 16mm, color, silent, 3 minutes, print from Light Cone

“An elegant, sumptuously lyrical work by one of the finest colorists of the contemporary French avant-garde. Original footage is photographed on Super-8, then, as in medieval manuscripts, scrupulously hand-painted, often using a brush with just a few hairs. The painting brings out the abstraction of image and form, color, and rhythmic dimensions, that, as the filmmaker herself describes, recall her feelings and experience in the original space—here, the church. Many of her works are silent; in her mature works, sound is added to her repertory of filmic sensations.” (Sandra Davis)

**Cristaux Liquides** (1978) by Jean Painlevé; 16mm, color, sound, 7 minutes, print from Light Cone

“The biography of Jean Painleve is long and intricate, well worth investigation to understand the source of his remarkable opus. Recent years have produced a wealth of articles and books for those interested in such research. In short, he was son of a two-time minister of France and decorated mathematician, who himself studied math, medicine and zoology. He was fascinated by the new medium of film and by the late 20’s was making films that from our perspective might be called “scientific” films. However, true to his anarchic nature (he married one of three sisters of a well-known family important in the anarchist movement): his films are unclassifiable. They were criticized by scientists as too poetic, and by artists sometimes as too descriptive. But his work was embraced by others – he counted Bunuel and Vigo among his friends and admirers. Leger admired the balletic quality of his underworld sea creatures captured in the films, Bataille published still frames in his magazine DOCUMENTS. Man Ray borrowed Painlevé’s underwater film of starfish for his 1928 film *L’Étoile de Mer*. He prepared the narration for *Blood of the Beasts* from Franjo’s script.

“It was difficult to choose a favorite for tonight – his Seahorse film, depicting, among other things, the process of a male seahorse giving birth (‘I wanted to re-establish the balance between male and female.’) was tempting for a contemporary programmer. In *Le Vampyr* (*The Vampire*, 1945) Painleve explored the vampire bat as a biological archetype and allegory for Nazism His choice of soundtrack here was typically surprising and exact -- Duke Ellington's 'Black and Tan Fantasy' and 'Echoes of the Jungle'.

“In *Cristaux Liquides*, he collaborated with his wife Genevieve Hamon as on his almost 200 other films. It was chosen for its strange beauty, and eternal freshness. As Brakhage created *Text of Light* through the watchful interaction of the optical characteristics of his lenses and that big crystal ashtray, Painleve interacts with actual crystal formation using macro lens / microscope to watch the actual process in ways that both present the literal and suggest the metaphor, balancing on the sharp edge between his scientific eye and his aesthetic vision.” (Sandra Davis)

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