

‘Jeune, Dure et Pure ! Une histoire du cinéma d’avant-garde et expérimental en France’. Programming as a Montage of Films and Thinking about Film: a Gaie Audiovisual Science

Emilie Vergé

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the retrospective of experimental and avant-garde French film ‘Jeune, Dure et Pure !’ (Cinémathèque Française, 2000) as an example of pragmatic thought on film. Film programming is here considered as a way of producing thought on filmic forms and the history of film that uses repetition and variations of images with reflexive and meta-historical ends, as well as aesthetic ones. The forms and procedures of this form of thought on film deserve to be analysed and questioned: is it even possible to speak of an act of theory? What is most striking about this programme is the reevaluation of a theoretically, but also socio-economically problematic term such as ‘experimental film’. The relationships between the use of this term in film and in science have not been sufficiently studied so far. The programme introduces the distinction between ‘experimental’ and ‘avant-garde’ film, thus suggesting different forms of subversion. This form of comparison implies an underlying filmic thought based on the precise relationships established between the films programmed.

KEYWORDS

Programming, montage, aesthetics, experimental cinema, science, technique, invention, avant-garde, French cinema.

The film programme analysed here announces with significative vigour its ambition by using the title of a film radical film-maker and provocateur Maurice Lemaître : from 3 May until 2 July 2000 'Jeune, Dure et Pure !' offered to the spectators of the Cinémathèque Française, Paris a total of 82 screenings that composed a strong and beautiful experience of *gaie* audio-visual science. Comparable to a gigantic found footage film, the programme re-actualised the cognitive and aesthetic capacities of film montage – such as the selection and arrangement of the films – in order to rethink the history of experimental and avant-garde film in France. In addition to such pragmatic heuristics, the programme fulfilled a fundamental patrimonial role: to make visible films rarely seen and, at times, never before screened in public. A crucial task of the project, which extended over the two years preceding the screenings, consisted in locating, or re-locating, the films themselves.

'Jeune, Dure et Pure !' was conceived by film professor, writer and programmer Nicole Brenez and film-maker and editor Christian Lebrat, both actively involved in valorising experimental cinema.¹ The project was initiated by Dominique Païni, then director of the Cinémathèque Française, who had wished to consecrate a great retrospective to experimental cinema in France for some time. The fact that the institutional director of the project was a writer and exhibitions curator so committed to finding new and original ways to present film, was undoubtedly a favourable condition for this audacious corpus of film and thinking on film. The catalogue of the retrospective opens with an essay by each of the three contributors to the programme, followed by a discussion of the contents outline by Brenez, of a great value both in terms of film curating and thinking about film, since she defines and explains the lines of

thought that structure the programme, implicit in the selection and organisation of the films. This 600-pages publication, chiefly composed of texts and a few images (stills from some of the films included in the programme), brings together numerous texts of different nature such as essays commissioned from critics and theoreticians or reprints of writings by, and interviews with, film-makers. Given its volume and ambition, this book is one of the fundamental references on experimental and avant-garde film – too often and unfairly considered as marginal – alongside the writings of Dominique Noguez, such as *Éloge du cinéma expérimental*. However, the latter is not focused on French cinema as much as US underground cinema, an area to which Noguez also consecrated his *Une Renaissance du cinéma* and that has been profusely studied by US academics such as P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film*, or Annette Michelson in *New Forms in Film*.

It is instructive to compare the catalogue *Jeune, Dure et Pure !* To the catalogue of the experimental film collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, founded by Jean-Michel Bouhours and Peter Kubelka, which presents a panorama of international experimental film comparable in scope. The latter is presented as an inventory, classified alphabetically by the film-makers' names, whose films are selected and mostly screened in monographic and autonomous screenings. In contrast, I would like to argue that both the programme and the catalogue *Jeune, Dure et Pure !* articulate a form of thinking about, and through, film.

The singularity and strength of this project lies, on the one hand, on the effort and exhaustivity of its selection, which aims to represent the diversity of experimental and avant-garde film in France, from its origins up to the present time; and, on the other, on the theoretical propositions

1. Nicole Brenez is a professor at Université de Paris-3 and has written and coordinated a number of publications on experimental cinema; she also programmes the screening series 'Cinéma d'avant-garde' at the Cinémathèque

Française, Paris. Christian Lebrat is a film-maker and responsible for the book series Paris Experimental; three of his films were included in the programme.

that sustain the construction of the programme, founded on their planning and cohesion, either through a thought put into practice or a theorisation in action. In fact, a historical logic organises the programme in its whole, as indicated in the subtitle of the programme: 'Une histoire du cinéma expérimental et d'avant-garde français'. Hence the first screenings showed historical films, moving further chronologically up until the contemporary films, which were screened in the last events. However, this principle is not set in stone, since the journey allows for certain and significant turns; consider, for instance, the last screening, which brought together *Visa de censure* (Pierre Clémenti, 1968) and *Le Lit de la vierge* (Philippe Garrel, 1969) – hence altering the the chronological progression of the preceding sessions, including films from the 1990s and 2000s, in an attempt perhaps to bring the programme to an end with a beautiful historical leap. This 'histoire du cinéma expérimental et d'avant-garde français' claims as well its singularity, 'Une histoire'. It may be aiming to set a dialogue, an echo, a corrective figure or a discrete homage to the godardian ambition of the 'histoires du cinéma'. In any case, it is not a matter of agreed humbleness; it is rather an affirmative endeavour. What are, then, the challenges of this gaie audio-visual science, of this significant re-montage of the history of cinema? An alaysis of the programme may allow us to clarify certain principles and glimpse at certain sparks of thought produced by the encounter of the films.

The global composition of the corpus, described as 'cinéma expérimental et d'avant-garde français', already implies a thesis on the representation of cinema. The use of both terms, rather than one or the other (Nicole Brenez is also the author of a monograph titled *Cinemas d'avant-garde*), identifies not only what distinguishes certain films within the programme, but also what brings them together and distinguishes from other films, exterior to this corpus – and which can be called as 'Industrial-Narrative-Representational (I.N.R)', as does the film-maker Claudine Eizykman, also featured in the programme, or Mode of

Institutional Representation (M.R.I.), as does the film scholar Noël Burch in his book *La Lucarne de l'infini*. In any case, when the filmic form transgresses or denaturalises the representative norm of dominant cinema in a socio-economical level, also surpasses or reveals, at the same time, its limitation, either with or without a critical intention (or simply creative or inventive in this case). This is why the programme brings together a range of different kinds of films whose common feature is their ability to surprise, even though, or perhaps because, they don't belong to the world of mainstream representation. A programme, for example, brings together the phantasmagories by Georges Méliès and Émile Cohl with Jean Comandon and Lucien Bull's scientific observations: imaginative or analytical, they both surpass ordinary representational realism, exploring the possibilities of the medium (tricks, painting on film, slow motion, fast-forward, etc.). Surrealism and naturalism both oppose the effect(s) of realism. The faculties of human perception are amplified (*Expanded Cinema*, per Gene Youngblood's definition in his homonymous essay) in relation to the capacities of the cinematographic medium. Furthermore, as an epigraph to the screening, a quote by the 'visionary' film-maker Stan Brakhage enables us to think about the dialectic resolution of the apparent contradiction between the different films. Such use of a quotation-epigraph-dialectic tool, is used throughout the whole programme, with the merit of producing thought, or at least an agreement between the filmic forms and the operative text in the mind of the spectator. That is, without closing down meaning or reducing it to a rigid theoretical label, especially taking into account that most of the quotations come from film-makers – albeit some of them also theoreticians, such as Brakhage.

The opening up of the works, as shown in the examples above, reactivates the original meaning of the term 'experimental cinema', too often used as a comfortable but generic label, which doesn't address the use of the term in the context of Claude Bernard or Émile Zola,

for instance. This decompartmentalisation also implies bringing together, in the same or nearby programmes, scientific, militant or artists' films. The distinction between 'experimental' and 'avant-garde' is what is at stake here. This can no longer be reduced to the opposition between the two tendencies usually dividing the (aesthetic and political) avant-garde, as if one had to decide between being an aesthete or a militant; furthermore a third pole is added: the technical tendency, in the case of 'the inventors (even the industrial medium is represented via the vistas by the Lumière brothers). One would be tempted to conclude that there are then as many fields, with their respective borders, as juxtapositions of films able to dynamite them. The radical critique of (spectacular) images of Situationist and Lettrist cinema – so present in the programme via Isidore Isou, Guy Debord, Maurice Lemaître and Gil J. Wolman – would suffice in its own to transgress these categories. But its juxtaposition with aesthetic and political avant-garde films is even more eloquent. Maurice Lemaître's films, for instance, are situated next to Marguerite Duras's as well as to those by the Grupo Medvedkine. Iconoclasm (Lemaître), the beautiful aspect of the literary image (in the relationship between images and voice-over in Duras) or the images of political struggles (Medvedkine and other collectives), share one and the same critical front, fighting for a new order of image-making. Their meeting in the projection room offers us the opportunity to encounter a series of complete, thoughtful and deeply felt aesthetic appreciations; and the revelation of their affinities, beyond the differences that meet the eye. And even something more surprising: the juxtaposition of explicitly militant films with scientific ones. Something never seen before? The same programme includes a selection of films committed to the political and social struggle and films such as *Formation de cristaux aux dépens d'un précipité amorphe* (Dr. Jean Comandon and M. De Fonbrune, 1937) (even

if we may perceive there an echo of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's *From the Clouds to the Resistance* [*Dalla nube alla resistenza*, 1979]) or *L'Hippocampe* (Jean Painlevé, 1934). We can identify here a common thread in the mastery of conquered visibilities: from making images censored by power structures to surpassing limitations of the 'unarmed' human eye (as Dziga Vertov would write, of the naked eye) thanks to the power of the scientific instruments and that of the 'cinema-eye'. Not satisfied with creating a happy *melting pot*, or simple effects of contrast, the programme, then, went on to suggest more profound and unexpected affinities, at times perplexing and always productive in the creation of a subversive thought on representation and image-making. In this sense, we may compare the montage of films conceived by the programmer and theoretician Nicole Brenez with the montage of images in the journal *Documents* by Georges Bataille: a pragmatic thought, produced by the clash of different forms.

Such an aesthetic thought is often incredibly precise – perhaps because of its pragmatic mode. Furthermore it leans towards a stylistic thought. By bringing together different works by very different film-makers, the programme reveals their style through effects of analogy and contrast. Such associations are at times due to the initiative of the programmer, and at others to the groupings of the film-makers themselves, as in the case of the Group Zanzibar². Consider, for example, the grouping of *Vite* (1969) by Daniel Pommereulle with *Deux fois* (1969) by Jackie Raynal. Whereas *Le Révéléateur* (1968) by Philippe Garrel, related to the same group, is screened together with *L'Homme qui tousse* (1969) and *L'Homme qui lèche* (1969) by Christian Boltanski, and preceded by a screening of the *ciné-tracts* made by a collective of film-makers in 1968, which gave place to a revealing montage, conceived by Brenez. The aesthetic question of figuration (as a model and

2. See LEBRAT, Christian (ed., 2007). *Zanzibar. Les films Zanzibar et les dandys de mai 1968*. Éditions de Paris

Experimenta. Paris.

allegory) and the historical contexts of May 68 and the Shoah, mildly suggested in Garrel's film, are enlightened by this context. Programming may thus be considered as a form of film criticism or analysis. Similarly, the screening of Garrel's *Athanor* (1973) with *Tristan et Iseult* (1972), by Yves Lagrange, suggests an iconographic set of relations. These eloquent raccords of the montage-programme seem to imply a precise idea, or perhaps even constitute an equivalent of Eisenstein's intellectual montage: for example, the screening of the abstract painted film *Ere Erera Baleibu Icik Subua Arnaren* (1970) by José Antonio Sistiaga after *Le Pain quotidien* (1970) by Philippe Bordier, finds a common thread in the idea of transubstantiation, thus qualifying the materialist and mystic process of the Basque artist. But the raccords tend to be more versatile: they produce a multiplication of meanings rather than one single wave of signification. When seeing Jean Painlevé's *La Pieuvre* (1928) followed by *La Marche des machines* (1928) by Eugène Deslaw, one is first struck by the formal and thematic contrast between the organic and the manual; as one takes on the reflective character of Deslaw's film, however, such opposition is mitigated, since the filmic procedures of the blow-up and the slow motion are so present in Painlevé; finally, both are united by avant-garde film (surrealism, in Painlevé). In short, we are invited to meditate, and we could extend much further on these relations, as it happens with most of the programme, given

its originality, at times perplexing, which enables viewers to renovate or reinvigorate our gaze even when looking at well-known films such as *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, Alain Resnais, 1955), screened together with Robert Breer's graphic experimentations on the film strip, the naturalist observations of *Locomotion chez Cyclostoma Elegans* (1954) by Jean Dragesco, or the ethnography of Jean Rouch's *The Mad Masters* (*Les Maîtres fous*, 1954) and the pop film-poem *Défense d'afficher* (1958) by Hy Hirsh, all screened in the same session. The clash between all of these films, so different in their forms and modes, may suggest complex thoughts on representation, but these are in no case imposed upon the viewer, since it is in any case justified by the heterodox relationships at the base of the history of cinema. In any case, 'Jeune, Dure et Pure !' encouraged an active experience as a viewer, giving place to an original thought around images, beyond its function as an anthology or a mere spectacular entertainment. We may thus compare this programme with filmmaker and curator Peter Kubelka's periodical programmes at the Filmmuseum in Vienna, which aimed to ask «Was ist Film», which used unprecedented relationships between films to put into play a subversive thought on history and filmic forms. Aesthetic thought, in its core sense of the word aesthesis ('to feel, to perceive') finds in the montage of the filmic forms themselves its ideal medium of expression. ●

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EMILIE VERGÉ

Emilie Vergé is a doctoral candidate and lecturer at the Université Paris-3 Sorbonne Nouvelle. She is now in the sixth and last year of her PhD, on the work of American experimental film-maker Stan Brakhage. During her PhD, initiated on 2007, she received a research grant from the Universidad Paris-3, a PhD grant from Fondation Terra pour l'Art Américain, and was invited as a visiting researcher at New York University and Colorado University, in Boulder, where she studied the film and non-

film archives of Anthology Film Archives, the MoMA in Nueva York, the Brakhage Center in Boulder and Canyon Cinema in San Francisco. She contributes to international publications on avant-garde and artists' cinema. Her classes on film aesthetics have so far focused on film theory, light in cinema, black and white and colour.

verge.emilie@free.fr