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Life in Film

Tamar Guimarães is a Brazilian-born artist who lives and works in Copenhagen. Her latest project – a 16mm silent film made in collaboration with Kasper Akhøj – is part of 'Il Palazzo Enciclopedico' (The Encyclopedic Palace) the 55th International Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, on show until November 24, 2013. She is currently preparing a commission for the Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid.

The first film I remember seeing was a horror film. I must have been four. I remember the armrest of the sofa where I sat as well as the menace of a hook in place of a hand. I don't remember the film's title but it wasn't *Peter Pan*. As a result I was to inspect behind every door of every room I entered alone at night for years to come.

In September 2007, I had a first meeting with a friend whilst living in New York, and her auspicious suggestion was to meet at a screening of *Vampir – Cuadecuc* (1970). Pere Portabella's film was shot in stark black-and-white on the set of *Nights of Dracula*, a B-movie made the same year by Jesús Franco and starring Christopher Lee. *Vampir – Cuadecuc* was meant as a political fable and an allegory of Franco, the *Generalissimo*. It weaves alternative takes of the film's production with behind-the-scenes images of the crew, merging these fragments into an eerie nearly-silent version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) set in a world where horse carriages, cars and aeroplanes coexist.

Given the familiarity of the plot, *Vampir – Cuadecuc* needs no dialogue. Passages are referred to in shorthand, without narrating in detail. But details emerge with full force – the extreme high contrast of a film sometimes shot on reverse black and white makes characters and places appear all the more haunting, like supernatural apparitions or half remembered fragments of a dream. But its eeriness doesn't preclude humour. We see Lee taking a swipe at the camera and smiling as he enters his coffin; Maria Rohm winking at the camera; Soledad Miranda hanging about the set in modern dress and sunglasses to the sound of kinky '60s chill-out music, and the momentary annoyance of Fred Williams when fake blood is squirted onto his face with a little syringe from inside a coffin, an effect of bursting vampire flesh during a close-up in the ceremonial stake-driving scenes.

Dialogue scenes are shown without sound and the only human voice is heard on the final scene in which Lee sits in a dressing room, reflected in multiple mirrors, reading the closing paragraphs of the book narrating his downfall. The sound, by Carles Santos, is rarely diegetic, and more like a counterpoint to the images; Portabella calls this 'image-sound collision'.

I don't know when I first saw Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's *Macunaíma* (1969) in its entirety but I must have been around it many times. A comedy, an allusion to the Brazilian myth of its three constitutive races (black, white and indigenous), and an allegory for the bleak military dictatorship Brazil was experiencing at the time, the film is an adaptation from the eponymous 1928 book by Mario de Andrade. It narrates the misadventures of Macunaíma, a 'hero without character', born a fully-grown black man to an indigenous woman (played by a man). Weirdly, Macunaíma turns white half way through the film after encountering a magic spring. That sets him laughing from the jungle towards the city of Sao Paulo.

There was no beach on the town where I grew up and that pushed us into the cinemas. I saw films by Bergman, Bunuel, Tarkovsky, Truffaut, and Tati and had films recounted in great detail by a friend who had seen them in

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Germany. Later there was the VHS library at Goldsmiths College, and a world of other films opened up. I remember the impact that Patrick Keiller's *London* (1994) had on me, and if I say nothing of Chris Marker it is because there is too much to say.

I watched Jean Eustache's films together with Kasper Akhøj, with whom I often collaborate. There was a retrospective at the London BFI in 2000 and with a friend of a friend working there we got a lot of free tickets. We saw the fabulously long and beautiful ramble about love, sexual freedom, and post-'60s jadedness which is *La maman et la putain* (The Mother and the Whore, 1973), a few of his shorts, *Mes Petites Amoureuses* (My Little Loves, 1974) and the two documentaries *La Rosière de Pessac* (The Virgin of Pessac, 1968 and 1979), a document of Pessac's festival crowning the village's most virtuous young woman, with the second part exploring the change in moral and social values since the first film was made. Eustache made *La Rosière...* for television, but said that he did it in opposition to TV shows and news.

Eustache's utopian ideal for a film revolution was to 'not make steps forward in cinema, but to try to make big steps backwards to return to the source. The goal I was trying to attain since my first film was to return to Lumière...' He also said 'if you shoot, you don't need to make a movie, it makes itself. As soon as the camera is rolling, movies make themselves on their own. If you're obliged to run with the camera, something really isn't working.'

But it wasn't until I moved to Copenhagen in 2002 that I saw *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer) – a collaboration between sociologist Edgar Morin and ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, made in the summer of 1960. At first Morin proposed to Rouch that they make a film about love. Later, when this seemed too difficult, they took on a simpler theme: 'How do you live?' 'How do you manage in life?' For this purpose they would conduct interviews with ordinary people.

The film begins with a conversation between Rouch, Morin and one of the film subjects, Marceline Loridan, on whether she, and by extension the other participants in the film, would be intimidated by the presence of the camera and whether this would render their performances artificial. They ask Marceline to partly do what she already does for a living (market research) and partly stand in for them conducting the by then much used format of street survey while mildly subverting it with the unusual yet perennially baffling question 'Are you happy?'

Eventually, the film expands to political issues, including the then ongoing Algerian War, racism and the holocaust – as it inquires into the lives of a small cross-sections of the Parisian population; artists, factory workers, white collar workers, an Italian émigré, politically engaged French students, an African student and a Saint Tropez starlet. Questions shift from 'Are you happy?' and 'How do you live?' to the more complicated issue of how we could live together. The protagonists' conviviality in the film sets the stage for its experiment: to test the capabilities of film as a medium of social change. If film could make different social groups hear and see each other, they might be more sympathetic to each other, they might better understand their shared stakes.

For me, the film peaks in the awkward rock climbing efforts of the Gautrat's family day out, a scene crowned by their out-of-tune picnic sing-along. Then come the two revolutionary last scenes; the first, in which Rouch and Morin screen the film to its participants and the second, in which they discuss their reactions in the corridors of the Musée

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de l'Homme in Paris. The accusations and unsympathetic reactions which divided rather than united the protagonists ('I was sincere, you weren't', 'the film is in part boring and in part obscene', 'you acted for the camera', or else, 'you showed too much') lead to the corridor-pacing finale in which Rouch and Morin reconfigure the film's premises from the *cinéma vérité* it first proposed to the reflexive cinema it de facto installed. A cinema of ambiguity, doubt and hesitation, in which truth is posed as a problem and not a given. As Morin says 'It's a job getting anything across. We're in for trouble...'