

Forever Young: The Films of Jackie Raynal

Adrian Martin

The faces of the stars don't interest me at all. I get them all confused, and forget them very quickly. But I can remember the beautiful, decisive face of Jackie Raynal looking into the camera at the start of her film Deux Fois ... (1)

Beginnings

A text in nine points by Michael O'Pray on the legendary American avant-gardist Maya Deren offers this as its second key observation:

Not a small part of the myth of Maya Deren is her beauty. To ignore this on sexist grounds would be a distortion. The fact that she appears as the protagonist in the early films has made her physical presence an important factor in any study of her films, and has been a prime element in the uncanny fascination they have held for generations of viewers. (2)

It is likewise hard to begin an appreciation of the work of Jackie Raynal (born Poilhes, France, 1940) without paying tribute to her beauty. Like Deren, she has made herself the star of her best work. And again like Deren, her personality helped galvanise several lively cultural scenes around the globe, from the 'Zanzibar' group of experimental filmmakers in France in the late '60s and early '70s, to the radical cinephilia nurtured by the Carnegie Hall and Bleecker Street Cinemas in late '70s New York (where Raynal extensively programmed and promoted the French Nouvelle Vague, Straub & Huillet, etc). In more recent years, Raynal has been a regular presence at events such as the Rotterdam Film Festival. In a profile written in 1980, Amy Taubin paid fond tribute to Raynal's "loveliness", judging it as "much more than a matter of her strikingly delicate looks and charming French accent. Raynal is generous, enthusiastic and dedicated to film." (3)

Raynal's trail through cinema as a *passer* (the term comes from Serge Daney, who was her friend) is indeed a remarkable one. In an interview with Jonathan Rosenbaum and Sandy Flitterman, she discusses her early experiences as a stills photographer, assistant editor on Jean Renoir's *Le Caporal épinglé* (1962), then as editor for Eric Rohmer (the shorts *La Boulangere de Monceau* [1962], *La Carrière de Suzanne* [1963], *Nadja à Paris* [1964] and the feature *La Collectionneuse* [1966]). Her hands-on encounter with experimental cinema began with the editing of Jean-Daniel Pollet's highly influential classic *La Méditerranée* (1963), which taught her that "editing is like a film's second breath":

I worked for seven months on the film, and he'd already been working for a year before I started! It was an ideal film for an editor, because it's a film about editing – voice, music, sound. And it wasn't always clear what was narrative and what was non-narrative. (4)

Raynal's first credited work as director is *Merce Cunningham* (1965). As a documentary about an artist, it anticipates her most recent work, and in its connection with experimental dance it prefigures her '80s collaboration with cinematographer Babette Mangolte, who frequently worked with Yvonne Rainer during the '70s and beyond. Co-directed by Étienne Becker and Patrice Wyers, *Merce Cunningham* is a film which, although it circulated widely, triggers an unhappy memory for Raynal:

We did the film with no money at all; then, when we had a \$2,000 bill at the lab, a producer came along and took over the control of the film entirely – I'll never make that mistake again, I was very inexperienced. (5)

Seen today, *Merce Cunningham* is a striking work for more than simply historic reasons. The editing of image and sound, in relation to Cunningham's choreography of simple, rhythmic gestures, makes it a major example in the broad (and today burgeoning) genre of the dance film. Beginning from simple shooting procedures – observational glimpses, performance documentation – it finds its form in the montage.

Despair and Ecstasy

The cultural scene which was the Zanzibar group was an assemblage of artists who shook up a potent cocktail of influences, including hippie mysticism, 'erotism', radical politics, Artaud-style psycho-theatrics, Situationism, multiculturalism and hyper-formalist avant-gardism. (Raynal herself spent a night in prison after police arrest during the street riots of May '68.) Its key members included Serge Bard, Caroline de Bendern, Pierre Clémenti, Olivier Mosset (who had spent a year in Warhol's Factory), Daniel Pommereulle and Patrick Deval (Raynal's companion of the time). Today, Philippe Garrel is undoubtedly the best known and most acclaimed artist to have been associated with Zanzibar. Peter Wollen has pointedly criticised the historical occlusion that Garrel's cult fame has generated: "Historians and theorists at present speak a lot about Philippe Garrel, who is certainly important. But they neglect to discuss the true pioneer of the epoch, Jackie Raynal." (7)

Sally Shafto stresses the 'dandy' lineage, the Wilde-Baudelaire bohemian side of Zanzibar – "a fine name discovered by Serge Bard in a Rimbaud poem", as Raynal recalls – because glamour and style were central to its code of ethics and aesthetics. As well, the group was founded on a splendidly bourgeois contradiction: for avant-gardists they were handsomely funded, due to the largesse of their self-appointed patroness, Sylvina Boissonnas. Raynal recalls her, "cheque book often open on the table" at the Coupole; "anyone could present themselves, anyone at all, with a project in painting, photography, film, music, publishing – and they would receive a cheque from this unbelievably grand, curious and eccentric woman." In the same memoir, Raynal describes the dream of Zanzibar to be "an ideal production house", mixing all gauges (Super 8, 16 and 35mm) and even almost branching into the running of a cinema, the Luxembourg. But the group recoiled from this ultimate step in self-sufficiency, leading Raynal to drolly speculate: "Maybe that's why, unconsciously, I agreed to program cinemas in New York?" (8)

Raynal worked on many Zanzibar productions in various capacities, including Bard's *Détruisez-vous* (1968), Deval's *Acéphale* (1968) and two of Garrel's celebrated silent works, *Le Révélateur* (1968) and *La Concentration* (1968) – both filmed in elaborate sequence-shots "while everyone (actors, cameraman, assistant and me, the editor) was on LSD." (9) From Garrel, Raynal has said, "I was learning ... how much you could change a scene through the lighting." (10)

Deux Fois (1971) – roughly, 'twice upon a time' – is Raynal's remarkable Zanzibar feature. Wollen rightly regards it as "one of the most astonishing films of the period". (11) Raynal began it as "a filmed diary of my encounter with a stranger in Barcelona, in the company of a cameraman-accomplice, André Weinfeld, the camera operator on Garrel's *Marie pour Mémoire* [1967]." (12) *Deux Fois* spontaneously draws into itself many influences, histories and traditions. It has been analysed as a deconstructive film and a feminist essay on 'woman as sign', but Raynal also uses less modish sources, such as the Surrealism of Buñuel and Cocteau, as well as a theatricality inspired by Rivette. The film is not only a formalist tour de force, but also mytho-poetic, ritualistic, incantatory – not to mention ironic, performative and mocking (its Warholian side). Beyond what we will never know or understand about this often deliberately cryptic film, the core, phantasmal logic which holds it together is built from various motifs – storytelling, theatre, the couple, dreams and fantasy, the figure of the child – that suggest a new version of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. A woman enters into a perpetual metamorphosis, in which she becomes a child. She steps into this self-perpetuating, auto-erotic ritual via all the masks and motions of artifice. However, such regressive liberation into the imaginary realm is always threatened by instability and danger: this woman is constantly drawn back to the public, societal scene of adult sexuality, with its threatening, mysterious, alluring masculine others, its set roles and burdens. *Deux Fois* is about the difficult trials and passages of the 'single woman' – her absorption into herself and her relations with others, both modes of being viewed as equally impossible. (13)

Deux Fois was, for many years of its existence, virtually unseeable – more legend than reality. However, the resurgence of avant-garde cinema culture in France in the late '90s, and a subsequent rolling international tour of Zanzibar films, has brought the film back into circulation, and Pip Chodorov's small video (but defiantly non-DVD) label *Re:voir* in France has made it available in recent years.

Perhaps the last gasp of the Zanzibar adventure – Raynal dates the group's dissolution at 1973 – was her lost and unfinished project *Shiva Puri* (1975). Like several of the group's major efforts (including *Deux Fois*), it was filmed across several countries, as an exploratory exercise in a sort of 'visionary anthropology': "It was like *Lawrence of Arabia*, and I was Lawrence! I wanted to film a sort of ceremony in each country, and to participate in the ceremony in each case. It was a mixture of autobiography and fantasy." (14) America beckoned to her because "Paris rejected me. Every director except Rohmer and Godard had forgotten me, or considered me a little crazy" – and also because "it's easier to be accepted penniless in New York than in Paris". (15)

New York Shuffle

Raynal: "When I made *Deux Fois* I didn't really know what I was doing. It took me years to be able to talk about it." She adds that, for a long time, she never thought of herself as a real filmmaker, "only a specialised worker". (16) In the period years following *Deux Fois*, she travelled, relocated to America, married Sid Geffen (owner of the Carnegie and Bleecker Street Cinemas), and worked on a script (still unrealised) about the experiences of her parents as Communists active in the French Resistance. A new filmmaking adventure began in 1980 with the project *New York Story* (1980), a 29 minute short which became, in a very different form, the 63 minute short feature *Hotel New York* (1984). The films begin from an autobiographical basis: Loulou (Raynal) moves to America, has to scratch out a living by editing a porno film (in reality, "an atrocious commercial feature, *Saturday Night at the Baths* [1975]"), and falls in love with an entrepreneur (Geffen). Like all Raynal's films, there is a generous sense of a community of friends: the dialogue was partly written by the famous novelist and essayist Gary Indiana (who also appears), and in a hilarious post-screening discussion where Loulou defends a film that is surely *Deux Fois*, Jonathan Rosenbaum delivers a thundering pastiche of '70s film-theoryspeak.

These two films belong to a unique and largely forgotten period in cinema – the brief but glorious era in the late '70s and early '80s of the experimental narrative feature, which was eventually both capped and eclipsed by the success of Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and the rise of so-called independent distributor-producers like Miramax. Raynal's work of this time joins with many extraordinary features, such as Mark Rappaport's *The Scenic Route* (1978), Michael Oblowitz's *King Blank* (1982) and Bette Gordon's *Variety* (1984). As an Australian, I can testify to the direct influence of this body of work on a generation of critics, cinephiles and artistically inclined Super 8 filmmakers: *New York Story* won an award at the Melbourne Film Festival in 1981, inspired the title for an unforgettable season of films at the National Film Theatre of Australia called "New York Stories", and finally *Hotel New York* achieved a brief theatrical release. (It had similar runs in France and the UK.)

In that period, smallness of budget – *New York Story* was made for \$11,000 and *Hotel New York* for \$33,000 – accorded, paradoxically, with grand dreams of commercial 'takeover': "I thought when I made *Hotel New York*", says Raynal, "that it was a very commercial film!" (17) This was a time when guerrilla filmmakers like Bette Gordon and her Australian compatriot Tim Burns spoke seriously of the prospect of collaborating with Oliver Stone, and Taubin was encouraging Raynal to pitch her Resistance script to Coppola. This utopia did not eventuate, alas, but the works of the period capture a zany form of populist experimentation that is still inspiring: deliberate Warholian amateurism and daring formal structures co-exist with loopy comedy interludes and mangy thriller plots. Raynal's own performing presence, which is once again central to the effect of her '80s films, "manages to be deadpan and madcap at the same time". (18)

Raynal refers to *Hotel New York* as “like a ‘mobile’ of *New York Story* – they can be seen together or separately”. (19) *New York Story* is a more concentrated poetic piece, offering itself as a mock tourist-guide to a luxury hotel in which strange things happen. Its magical and surreal effects, in their intoxicating and haunting simplicity, look back to Cocteau and forward to Raúl Ruiz. There is less story (obviously) than in *Hotel New York*, but more elaboration of a splendid sequence in which the characters enter a Buster Keaton-*Sherlock, Jr.* (1924) fantasy. *Hotel New York* develops the comic and sociological side of the project, adding more characters and vignettes of New York life. Together, the films add up to a rich tribute to a lost spirit of ‘80s cinema.

Rebeginnings

Raynal programmed the Bleecker Street and Carnegie Hall Cinemas until 1991, and then from 1994 to 1998 did the same for the Angelika Film Center. After the death of Geffen she married again, to Joseph J.M. Saleh, a real estate businessman who produced three James Ivory films in the ‘70s and ‘80s. According to *Libération*, Saleh had proposed buying the Bleecker Street cinema from Raynal; “she refused to sell, but agreed to marry him”. (20) Raynal and Saleh published Shafto’s booklet under the label of ‘Zanzibar USA’. Later, Raynal became (alongside Susan Sontag) the ‘curator at large’ for the YWCA-NYC Cine-Club. Eventually, she and Saleh figured out a way to live part of each year in Paris, and the other part in New York.

Raynal’s film work since the ‘80s has been modest. Three documentaries made for French television – *Bandes à part* (2001), *Cinéastes de notre temps: Jonas Mekas* (2001) and *Autour de Baratier* (2002) – revisit, like some of Robert Kramer’s later work, the diverse artistic communities she has experienced, showing the effects of time and history on figures such as Bard – now Abdullah Siradj, “an international businessman living in Paris and Mecca”(21) – and the filmmaker Jacques Baratier. Shooting digitally, Raynal has discovered a lighter touch; these films have a sense of wandering, chronicling (in the Mekas style) and random encounters, as in the appearance of Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Autour de Baratier*. Raynal has also revisited her past in *Zanzibar* (2006), produced as an extra on the French DVD of Garrel’s magisterial *Les amants réguliers* (2005), itself a novelistic recreation of the events of 1968. *Zanzibar* is a modest collage of photos, interviews (conducted by film critic Philippe Azoury), (22) and charming footage of Raynal and Deval socialising on a set – although, apart from the strange bleach-out effect superimposed on the whole, it is a little hard to see Raynal’s true artistic touch in this intriguing, informative but swiftly-produced piece. Her long-nurtured project for a ‘family film’ based on memories of her parents and other relatives returned in 2004: Raynal offered an archival image and some words on this project perpetually ‘in progress’ for the on-line journal *Rouge*. (23)

Another project that Raynal has nurtured over a long period is a free adaptation of *Lokis* (1869) by Prosper Mérimée – the strange tale of a man who is half-human and half-bear, and enjoys feasting on human flesh. In 2004 she completed a short which is also a kind of trailer to help raise funding for this feature project: like the other shorts of the past few years, it moves, elegantly and drolly, between test scenes from *Lokis* (staged in period-costume style) and the behind-the-scenes interplay of the present-day cast and crew, with its small intrigues and quizzical, ephemeral incidents and sights. This short – another exercise in a form that Raynal has made her own – looks forward to Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s fully conceptual version of a behind-the-scenes conceit in his splendid video *Worldly Desires* (2005).

In the past few years, Raynal has also worked on a portrait (so far, it seems, unfinished) of a one-hundred-year-old man, who financed the project as a gift to his family. Filming him, Raynal says, made her feel youthful. And the richly-deserved attention at last paid to her work has helped her to “finally rediscover” her vocation as a director. The best filmmakers are forever young ...

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Notes:

1. Christian Lebrat interviewed by Françoise De Paepe (25 May 2001) for the website *Cinérivage*, which was withdrawn from the Internet after De Paepe's death in 2003.
2. Michael O'Pray, "Meshes, Trances and Meditations: Maya Deren 9 Times a Life", *Monthly Film Bulletin*, no. 653 (June 1988), pp. 183-4.
3. Amy Taubin, "Jackie Raynal", *The Soho News* (24 September 1980), p. 31.
4. Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Film – The Front Line 1983* (Denver: Arden Press, 1983), p. 157.
5. Ibid.
6. Cf. Sally Shafto, *The Zanzibar Films and the Dandies of May 1968* (New York: Zanzibar USA, 2000); reprinted in February 2007 by Editions Paris Experimental.
7. Quoted in Jackie Raynal, "Le Groupe Zanzibar", in Nicole Brenez and Christian Lebrat (eds.), *Jeune, dure et pure! Une histoire de cinéma d'avant-garde et expérimental en France* (Paris: Mazzotta, 2001), p. 300. (All translations from French are mine.)
8. Ibid, p. 299.
9. Raynal, "Le Groupe Zanzibar", first draft (unpublished).
10. Rosenbaum, *Film – The Front Line*, p. 158.
11. Wollen quoted in Raynal, "Le Groupe Zanzibar", p. 300.
12. Ibid, p. 299.
13. This is a condensation of my analysis in "The Experimental Night: Jackie Raynal's *Deux Fois*"; a French translation appears in *Jeune, dure et pure!*. For other accounts of this film, cf. Editorial Collective, "An Interrogation of the Cinematic Sign: Woman as Sexual Signifier in Jackie Raynal's *Deux Fois*", *Camera Obscura*, no. 1 (Fall 1976); and Louis Skorecki, "*Deux Fois*", *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 276 (Mai 1977).
14. Rosenbaum, *Film – The Front Line*, p. 159.
15. Raynal, "Le Groupe Zanzibar", p. 300.
16. Jackie Raynal, personal correspondence with the author (March 2002). A screenplay has been published: Jackie Raynal and Gary Indiana, "*New York Story*", *Framework*, no. 18 (1982).
17. Ibid.
18. Taubin, "Jackie Raynal".
19. Personal correspondence (2002).
20. Richard Dumas, "Tout en Carlton", *Libération* (11 May 2000).
21. Shafto, *The Zanzibar Films*, p. 42.
22. Cf. Azoury, "Un Zeste de Zanzibar", *Libération* (6 June 2001); and his forthcoming book on Garrel (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma).
23. Cf. "The Image Issue", *Rouge*, no. 5 (2004), <http://www.rouge.com.au/5/raynal.html>