

The Experimental Night: Jackie Raynal's *Deux Fois*

by Adrian Martin

Cinema 'au féminin' makes us rediscover what the imperialism of the eye had repressed: other modes of montage of impulses where what is seen and what is heard change perspective.

- Serge Daney, 1977 (1)

Let me see your beauty broken down
Like you would do for one that you love

- Leonard Cohen, 'Take This Longing'

Deux Fois (1971) begins with an apocalyptic announcement, uttered directly to camera by Jackie Raynal herself: "This evening will be the end of signification". Henceforth, her film will enact what Stephen Heath once dramatically called "the ruin of representation". Narrative will be deconstructed; bodies will be disfigured; all sense will drain away into stillness, silence and black frames...

And yet, is this all there is to see today in *Deux Fois*, this charming, strange, haunting 'cult classic' of the French avant-garde? Only ruins and 'transgressions', broken codes, heroic gestures of cancellation and defiance? Only "a documentary about the spectator's place in the theatre" (Daney), with its scattered 'apparatus' paraphernalia (cameras, projectors) and stark, dazzling, reflected movie lights? (2) Only an anarchistic, even masochistic exercise in feminist cinema, out to deface the monolith of 'woman as sign'?

In the opening fragment of the film, Raynal adds another statement to her apocalyptic decree concerning the end of signification. Cinema may be about to die this very night, but Raynal, with a twinkle in her eye and an almost 'screwball' comic lilt in her posture and voice, invites us, nonetheless, to sit back and enjoy the show: "Ladies and gentlemen, good evening".

Deux Fois spontaneously draws into itself many influences, histories and traditions. Some commentaries present it as an essentially formalist experiment. Louis Skorecki noted its paradoxical premise: a former editor takes on "a dare (based on what was, in its day, a terribly terrorist constraint): to make a film (...) in which there was practically no editing". (3) Taking this idea further, Noël Burch praised it as "a deliberately elementary meditation on certain basic film functions which may be said to underlie editing as such - expectation, frame-scanning, perceptual memory, relationships between on- and off-screen space, all explored in a series of autonomous shot-sequences of exemplary simplicity". (4) Four years later, the feminist collective of *Camera Obscura* magazine, in a detailed textual analysis, broke the film down into its multiple transgressions of the laws governing space, 'looking', legibility, narrative cues, functions of filming landscapes and bodies...

These accounts are just - but only up to a point. It's true, aspects of *Deux Fois* might well have been inspired by the work of Kurt Kren, or a delirious reading of Burch's own classic '60s text *Praxis du cinéma* (later rewritten as *Theory of Film Practice*)(5) - reducing cinema to an incessant, maddening play of entries and exits, off-screen spaces, lights dim and bright, still and moving shots, a kind of anti-illusionist 'practical demonstration' of all the parameters of representational form, taking them right to the edge of abstraction and dissolution. Or maybe the film was deliberately designed to offer a wild, feminist 'chiselling' of the dominant cinematic apparatus (in a spirit akin to the Lettrists, mixed with a little Valerie Solanis ...). Raynal: "Of course, it's been advertised as a feminist film because of my being there on the screen 98% of the time". (6)

But there is more. Raynal cites Surrealist influences, Buñuel and Cocteau, as well as a theatricality inspired by Rivette (here, the text used is Calderon's *Life is a Dream*, later a source for Ruiz). There are traces of 1960s Warhol in many scenes - especially in Raynal's droll self-presentation, an instant 'superstar' - and, equally, traces of other 'underground' figures of that period, like Dwoskin and his hard, steely, erotic gaze. And Garrel, with whom Raynal collaborated in the Zanzibar adventure ("At that time, I was learning from Philippe Garrel how much you could change a scene through the lighting"). (7) Of *Deux Fois* it could be truly said - as Deleuze said of Garrel's cinema - that "it spreads an 'experimental night' or a white space over us (...) it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension". (8)

What is at stake in this dazzling inventory of historic names, influences and movements? At least this: *Deux Fois* is not only a formalist tour de force. It is also surrealist, mytho-poetic, ritualistic, incantatory. And also ironic, performative, mocking, comic. Formalist analyses tends to ignore the 'content' of many scenes in the film - or rather, they only retain the tokens of content that flatter the ideological orientation of the analyst, such as 'sexual violence' (as in the remarkably intense shot where Raynal, windblown, is assailed by two bare hands, and violently pulled out of the frame by her hair), or the perverse circuit of scopophilia, sadism and exhibitionism (tightly knit and powerfully staged in the tableau where Raynal agonises, stares into the camera and urinates, while a devilishly laughing man effaces her image). Such analyses find only second-degree 'signs' everywhere, like the literal computerised, billboard animation of a man and woman locked in extravagant, dance-like combat.

But the film's content - both superficially and profoundly - is richer than merely this grim, gothic scenario of the sexes clashing in the shadow of patriarchy. What of the little girl; Raynal's skipping and falling; the sounds of music (flute and guitar) and breathing; the landscapes, streets and homes; the glimpses of communal sociality; the birds caged and free?

The multiplicity of the film's references and influences also matters in an unfolding way: each new shot or segment takes us somewhere else in this experimental night, starts the cinema over again, renews what Godard called 'the world and its metaphor'. The first two shots of the film contain this unfolding pattern in a crystalline microcosm. Shot 1 (Raynal's recited introduction) is fully theatrical, posed, staged: this is the cinema of actors, artifice, props, the frame - all proudly re-discovered, like a virgin, in the way every naive, beginning, 'amateur' filmmaker does. Shot 2 presents another kind of birth: here, with the little child on the train, is the beginning of spontaneity, of movement, of a landscape that flashes past uncontrollably; here is the fleeting magnificence of the daily world as only the obsessive gaze of avant-garde cinema can capture it.

At the same time, this second shot also marks the birth of a documentary regard, and an approach to phenomenal reality that oscillates between patience and restlessness (as the camera moves, lifts itself, re-frames). Through the shots to come, this existence of documentary cinema will force itself forward often: as much in the static street scenes ("reminiscent of primitive cinema [Nadar, Lumière]") (9) as in the repeated circular pan amidst traffic, which could almost be 'establishing shot' footage from some lost, forgotten, purely conventional feature. But this 'documentary drive' will always come head to head, once again, with the theatrical and the artificial - as if each contained the secret or the lack of the other. This is an instance of what Daney called (inspired by the example of Raynal's "magnificent film") a "montage of impulses".

Deux Fois segments easily into separate 'blocks', many of them single, prolonged 'sequence shots' (the dossier established by *Camera Obscura* notes 32 such blocks). The film takes the form of a collage, or perhaps "an unfinished film diary". (10) And like many films of this kind, it trembles on the brink of incoherence, of pure arbitrariness, too much 'multiplicity'. Its fragments give subtle evidence of several languages, diverse locations on different continents, mysterious traces of sensations and experiences spread out over perhaps a number of years. Raynal insists on this material heterogeneity: shooting took place in Barcelona as well as Paris. (11) And who know what fragments of autobiography are possibly buried in this procession, this secret, scattered ceremony of bodies, gestures and voices?

But, beyond what we will never know or understand about this often deliberately cryptic film, can we intuit a core logic, a phantasmal logic, which holds it together? Various motifs, figural echoes, and symmetries have a fugitive presence in the film: they come and go, never entirely gathering all the fragments into a reassuring whole. Like many collage-diaries, *Deux Fois* is haunted by loss and oblivion, an 'writing of disaster'. But nonetheless, the film vibrates with an aura of connections - potential, shadowy but deeply felt connections, what Jonathan Rosenbaum calls "sexy forms of duplicity (...) secret forms of agreement and accord, as well as (...) points of tension". (12) So, laying out the various motifs may help to approach better the unique spell cast by Raynal's film.

- **Storytelling.** The title, *Deux Fois*, is a pun on the line which begins all fairy tales: 'il était une fois...', or 'once upon a time'. So this film sketches a narrative space that forms itself 'twice upon a time'. This means all at once: a new kind of story; a story told in a different way; a story constantly lost and re-found; and a story always re-starting itself (as in the segments where we see several different 'takes' of the same action: Jackie with the hand mirror; Jackie at the pharmacy). In the first sequence-shot, Raynal 'foretells', previews the film we are about to see and hear: gathering up the fragments like this into an 'order' presumably only arrived at the completion of the filmmaking process, and announcing that order at the outset (as if it were all preordained, pre-planned), makes watching the film a strange, comic, uncanny process (as in James Benning's *Grand Opera*) - naturally, the inventory does not exactly match what follows, and we are constantly, naggingly trying to align the two 'texts'.

- **Theatre.** The proscenium arch is never far away in *Deux Fois*. A scene between Raynal and a man plays out in a dumbshow in a doorway, like a ritualistic re-enactment of an everyday scene. A passage from Calderón's *Life is a Dream* is staged and performed. It is hard to see where domestic arrangements end and the play or the stage begin: this is the childlike thrill of the sequence-shot (also evoking the early 'trick films' of Méliès) in which Raynal appears in two places at once in the same panning shot of a lounge room. Daily life becomes, at a first remove, theatre, and then at a further remove, pure graphic signification: hence the animated sequence filmed from a neon billboard, showing a man and woman in an erotico-violent dance.

- **The Couple.** Rosenbaum describes the film as being "about a couple, and about coupling". (13) The man-woman couple is there simultaneously in its hippie-era ideal (the "adventure of the couple", as Daney called it) and in its breakdown. The hands that maul at Raynal's hair and head; the demonic laughter of a male face into camera, blotting out the woman's presence; the extravagant pantomime of passions on the neon billboard. Both the ideal of the couple and its breakdown function as formal figures: the film is full of, on the one hand, rhymes, mirrorings and repetitions; and, on the other hand, shards of surplus material, stranded fragments never 'folded in' to a cohering pattern.

- **Dreams and Fantasy.** "The images of our imaginations are real". This statement, spoken by Raynal, arouses the Surrealist legacy underlying the film (as does the title of *Life is a Dream*). It is a rich and ambiguous utterance. Does it mean that all the images in the film are 'images of the imagination'? If so, whose imagination - Raynal's unconscious or some 'collective unconscious'? And what does it mean to say that these images 'are real'? Do these images take a place alongside or within reality, like a 'parallel world'? Do they resist reality, struggle against it, sometimes losing and sometimes winning? Or have they already absorbed reality? If *Deux Fois* shows a dream-world, it is only a broken, stuttering, intermittent vision. Some images of the film seem heightened, romantic, expressionist, oneiric (like the phantasmal image of Raynal struggling against the wind). But they 'rise up' in the middle of more mundane, documentary-type material. In-between these poles, everything we see and hear (Raynal uses the cherished nouvelle vague style of sound design: usually only one key sound, post-dubbed and floating above the image, for each cinematic 'event') seems disturbed, uncanny, half in and half out of the real or the imaginary. "If Nerval needs to see, and to walk in the Valois, he needs this like some reality which has to 'verify' his hallucinatory vision, to the point where we no longer have any idea what is present or past, mental or physical" (Deleuze). (14)

- **The Figure of the Child.** The second shot of the film, showing the little girl, seems crucially, suggestively placed between two shots of Raynal. Is this, phantasmatically and elusively, the child she once was; or the child she wishes to have; or the child she wishes to again become? Later, in the country, she skips along like a child (before falling like Isadora Duncan, brought down by her own scarf). The title of a fable for children - Achilles and the Tortoise - is abruptly, irrationally flashed (prefigured) during the pharmacy scene; later, a fragment of its typewritten text fills the screen. Even with her various dark, seductive, menacing men, Raynal often seems 'girlish': whispering and giggling, or pounding her fists and craving attention.

How might these various motifs hold together? To try to spell out the string of associations is a trap, perhaps, but nonetheless ... *Deux Fois* is a new version of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. A woman enters into a perpetual metamorphosis, in which she becomes a child. She enters into this self-perpetuating, auto-erotic ritual not so much through hallucinogenic drugs or other Dionysian props (as other filmmakers of the time did) but across the bridges of storytelling, performance, theatre: all the masks and motions of artifice. However, such 'regression' or 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 not devoted to the elevated phantasy of the 'Holy Family', the mythic and iconic trinity of mother-father-child familiar from Garrel; it is more (as in Akerman) 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.

As Skorecki proposed, *Deux Fois* is "one of the most precise films about paranoia". (15) Inhabiting a world where 'the images of our imaginations are real' means also facing (as in Rivette's *Pont du Nord*) glaring, staring eyes at every turn, eyes seen and unseen, the eyes of men, of children, of all the billboards, signs and screens of the 'society of spectacle'. And also, of course, the eye of the camera itself as an 'apparatus of aggressivity', with so cold a gaze that it can only solicit from the woman fixed in its barrel a hysterical gesture of self-abasement (the silent 'primal scream' of urination).

From *Meshes of the Afternoon* by Maya Deren (another mistress of the trance-theatre-ritual) and Raynal's *Deux Fois* through to the contemporary psycho-gothic-horror-thriller films of Mary Lambert (*Siesta*), Marina Sargenti (*Mirror, Mirror*) and Kathryn Bigelow (*Blue Steel*, 1990), the cinema 'au féminin' has always shown us this in its "montage of impulses where what is seen and what is heard change perspective": the terror of the womanly masquerade, the fatality and reversibility of its seductions, the wild fluctuation, insecurity and mutability of personal identity. Yet, it is exactly in the dark eye of this mortal storm that it also finds its beauty and poetry, its droll wit and wild radicality.

© Adrian Martin April 1999

NOTES

1. "Les Cahiers du Cinéma 1968-1977: Interview with Serge Daney", *The Thousand Eyes*, no. 2, 1977, p. 28.
2. Quoted in "An Interrogation of the Cinematic Sign: Woman as Sexual Signifier in Jackie Raynal's *Deux Fois*", *Camera Obscura*, no. 1, Fall 1976, p. 12.
3. Louis Skorecki, "*Deux Fois*", *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 276, Mai 1977, p. 51.
4. *Cinema Rising*, no. 2, 1972; quoted in Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Film: The Front Line 1983*, Denver: Arden Press, p. 155.
5. London: Secker & Warburg, 1973.
6. *Film: The Front Line 1983*, p. 156.
7. Op. cit., p. 158.
8. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, University of Minneapolis Press, 1989, p. 201.
9. "An Interrogation of the Cinematic Sign", p. 33.
10. Op. cit., p. 12.
11. *Film: The Front Line 1983*, p. 156.
12. Op. cit., p. 152.
13. Op. cit., p. 152.
14. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, p. 11.
15. "*Deux Fois*", p. 52.