

BOKANOWSKI PATRICK

In the model of Norman McLaren, enthusiastically celebrated as a Canadian filmmaker, Patrick Bokanowski, born in Algiers in 1943, has long been the sole French experimental filmmaker recognized by a broad fringe of viewers and critics. The creator of *L'Ange* is a sort of demiurge—a pugnacious artisan and sworn enemy of all orthodoxy who has garnered abundant followers, though never seeking to impose a doctrine or spawn imitators.

Until 1970, Patrick Bokanowski studied photography, optics, chemistry and drawing with the painter Henri Dimier, to whom he dedicated the highly personal documentary *La Part du hasard* (1984). In a 1991 text, *Réflexions Optiques*, Bokanowski advocates intervening in the very construction of cameras and lenses as a means toward a vision different from that propagated by traditional cinema. In a way, it's a matter of taking everything back to its essentials through an attack on the instrument itself. This simultaneously artisanal and utopist aspect is essential to understanding the poetics of this singular innovator.

What renders Bokanowski's films so interesting, beginning with his first short, *La femme qui se poudre* (1972), is that he deforms and reforms everything: the shot, the actors' appearance, their makeup, the set design, even the film emulsion. In his work, space and time become plastic elements, from which he weaves subtle links between the visible, sights, dreams and nightmares.

Though his films aren't narrative, they are, for the most part, figurative. They don't contain dialogue, but are structured around music—most often made by the artist's wife, Michèle Bokanowski—that bolster the film's hypnotic impact. What connects these works over the course of his career, which can be haphazardly divided into three phases, is the desire to chart out a new topography of formal sensibility, where the filmmaker's experience of reality and the experience of creation reflexively constitute a whole.

We can delineate a first, oneiric phase, produced in the studio and anti-naturalistic, that includes *La femme qui se poudre*, *Déjeuner du matin* (1974), and Bokanowski's sole feature film, *L'Ange* (1982). It was followed by a period of shifting reality, essentially comprised of *La Plage* (1992) and *Au bord du lac* (1994). The work finally turned to theatrical matter with *Éclats d'Orphée* (2002) and *Le Canard à l'orange* (2002). There are links running between all the films.

While Bokanowski's films employ a vast palette of esthetic approaches (frame-by-frame shooting, over- and under-exposure, slow and fast-motion, chemical treatments to the emulsion, etc.), they always appear like waking dreams, endowed with such an internal logic that we forget the mechanism and let ourselves become hypnotized by these intricately-fabricated film-hallucinations.

A number of references jump out: Rembrandt's lighting; facial distortions recalling paintings by Francis Bacon; a stuttering animation of grotesque, farcical figures that hearken to the Polish school made famous by Jan Lenica and Walerian Borowczyk. Bokanowski has also concocted a panoply of recurring figures, emerging from a typically surrealist universe (the surveyor, the actor applying his makeup, the librarian), in which close-ups of unidentifiable faces are often paired with very long shots of tiny, gesticulating shadows.

The director has acknowledged giving primacy to vision over meaning and/or message. However, for lack of a developed narrative in *L'Ange*, the film is in no way short on trajectory. We quickly apprehend that the film is a kind of ascent, in which multiple characters—already present in his first short films—give themselves to various mimed dramas: a swordfighter backing around a rag doll; a servant offering pitchers of milk that invariably break; librarians arguing in a shambles worthy of Kafka. All of these semi-autonomous sequences are situated around a staircase as we mount it. The higher we reach, the more intense the rays of light become. Toward the end, we glimpse the back of something resembling an angel. The film carries us from a nightmare to likely transcendence.

After nearly ten-years of silence, Bokanowski returned to directing with *La Plage* (1992). No more made-up actors or overload of material: the film is entirely shot in exteriors. The filmmaker distorts, optically this time, the physiognomy of vacationers and the contours of the location, employing new lenses and filming through ground glass. We slide from grimacing figuration toward the border of the abstract. In the highly enigmatic *Flammes* (1998), Bokanowski even brushes up against total abstraction. Nevertheless, we catch fleeting moments of made-up figures, arisen out of his first films.

Éclats d'Orphée brings impressionistic treatment to François Tanguy's staging of *Orphéon*. This new familiarity with the world of theater allowed the filmmaker to create his most "readable" film in *Canard à l'orange*, which makes playful allusion to *L'Ange* in sketching an artistic autobiography of the director. Here, Bokanowski leans on the comic element that pervades some of his earlier films. Dressed as a cook, the artist tries to make the best of a mischievous duck. This duck, along with all the other ingredients (vegetables, sauce), slips away and flies about the room, the mirror of a malleable world, slipping away from the filmmaker toward its own autonomy.

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