



Prismatic Music: Films by Joseph Bernard & Germaine Dulac Curated by aemi & Dean Kavanagh

A DISCUSSION ON THE FILMS OF JOSEPH BERNARD & GERMAINE DULAC BETWEEN AEMI'S ALICE BUTLER & DANIEL FITZPATRICK AND CO-CURATOR DEAN KAVANAGH

AB: With both Germaine Dulac and Joseph Bernard there is a clear pleasure found in looking and in capturing or distorting the qualities of a human gaze through the singular capabilities of the camera. Can you talk a little bit about what inspires you about seeing the work of these two filmmakers together in a single programme?

DK: Both filmmakers are exploring movement in different ways: Dulac with composition, lighting, performance and forms of optical printing, while Bernard obstructs his lens and also utilises time-lapse and various in-camera as well as camera-less techniques. In many ways their approach liberates the composition from the fixture of the tripod, to poorly paraphrase filmmaker Maya Deren. The idea of seeing and looking is very important to the work of both filmmakers. The idea of these films dancing and making music together is so remarkable and exciting. Here we are presented with two very distinct voices operating outside the industry at different sides of the century, it's a programme celebrating the language of cinema more than anything else.

DF: The programme combines material from the period at the end of the silent era (a particularly fervent period which is now referred to as the historical avant-garde when artists from other disciplines began to take up the film camera) with work from the 1970 and 80s, an often overlooked period of experimental film. What is missing here is the more canonised period in the 1960s and early 70s, dominated by figures like Stan Brakhage. While the 60s was dominated by 16mm the 1970s and 80s saw artists working in film drift towards other mediums including Super8 and video. Joseph Bernard is obviously part of this shift but work from this period is often seen as being motivated by a necessary break with the past and figures like Brakhage. Is that the case with Joseph Bernard do you think?

DK: Bernard came to filmmaking at the age of 34, which by his own admission is quite late. Before this he had set-up a successful practice as a painter, an artform he'd been developing since he was 15. In the mid 1970s while this whole shift was taking place he was just getting started. His influences came from painting and the abstract expressionists, and in cinema he drew much counsel from work by that earlier period of artists, filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Stan Brakhage and Maya Deren. And these debts are forever acknowledged by Bernard, in particular *Full Circle* (1984) being a touching tribute to Brakhage whom he studied under for an MFA program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago at the earlier part of that decade. Super8mm stock was readily available and a modest expense but still an expense nonetheless for someone operating outside any financial support. I don't think Bernard held a strong interest in the popular trends of the time or the shifting media landscape. He wanted to chase the light and see where it



Still from *Etude cinematographique sur une arabesque*, Germaine Dulac, 1929



Still from *Intrigues (V)*, Joseph Bernard, 1981

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could take him. It's worth noting that while his films are populated with friends, family, vacations and diurnal excursions there is something resolutely nocturnal about it all; the outside world is glimpsed through windows and crevices created by bodies, prisms, shadow, paint and bleach. His films frequently feature the workshop environment and document their own creation, in some cases forming an infinite loop of making and unmaking. I think what motivated him more so than any trend or turn in the scene was an idea of what cinema could be and how he could contribute to that personally, as Bresson said "*make visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen.*" Joseph Bernard is now considered by many to have been *the* filmmaker working in Detroit during that time. It is interesting to note that he has remarked on that decade of film production as "*ten years of solitary confinement*". He was an outsider to the outsiders, in many ways.

DF: Do you think there is still relevance in the notion of a 'pure cinema', that with which Dulac is often associated? And do you think this would be configured differently now?

DK: The notion of returning to a more expressive form of film grammar is a welcome thought. There are many artists working today in the fringes of the commercial model and beyond who would harmonise with the philosophy of 'pure cinema'. The beauty of the impressionist films from the 1920s is rooted in Kuleshov, or in some cases challenging that model. The universality of a visual language, simplistic or complex in form, is an important aspect with regard to these very elemental films, and these notions are very close to many ideas held in music. Beyond the work undertaken by the experimental and underground filmmakers that followed, not much has changed between the cinema of today and a film from 1927, for example. The current wave of 'immersive experiences' like 3D, 4DX, BarcoEscape, Dolby Atmos etc, were all preconfigured in the early half of the 20th century, and forms of 3D are obviously pre-cinema. Once again we can consider our relationship to music. Today you can do just about anything in music and it is acceptable- even in the pop charts. Cinema is not even two hundred years old but there is a strict pressure for it to be this one specific thing. Holding any medium to ransom in this way greatly reduces the gamut of expression but also creates an underground. And so, technology has evolved but little else has changed, what remains is a resilient desire to fill the screen rather than think about it. But that's mainly within the commercial model, outside of that are many exciting films being made but access and dissemination are what is lacking.

DF: When we were programming this screening we played around with different combinations of silence and sound/music considering at one point a configuration that would have had a song or piece of music play before each film in order to set the tone for what the spectator would then encounter silently. We finally came to the conclusion that there is enough 'music' already present in what is an entirely silent programme and that by introducing other elements we were in danger of distracting from the written-in-musicality of the films themselves. What is your sense of the musicality of the programme and how do you feel it differs across the two artists' work?

DK: Those were exciting dialogues and it would be a very different programme if we included sound material. Work by these filmmakers has screened with a musical pairing in the past but something about these particular films and the combination of artists demanded silence in this case. I think we came to the right conclusion because the silence is such an integral part of the experience. According to biographer Tami Williams, Dulac described music as her earliest and most profound love and in it she found "*joys of a magnificent intensity*". The attention to detail, rhythm and mise-en-scène in her films produce something that is almost audible. Bernard studied music in his formative years and he explores images in an expressively fragmented nature with seemingly opposing elements, which develop and often resolve like polyrhythm in music. Dulac and Bernard's films are often referred to as visual music; concertos for the eyes. It's quite clear that both filmmakers were deeply influenced by the world of sound with Dulac being inspired by the work of Chopin and Wagner, and Bernard drawing inspiration from John Cage and his writings.

AB: What do you think films by Dulac and Bernard can offer contemporary audiences that isn't otherwise available to them elsewhere in visual culture? What is it ultimately that marks them both out for you, that makes them worthy of this focused attention at this time? Joseph Bernard talks about using the camera to speak his mind 'not cerebrally but visually'. This is somewhat in contrast to a shift we've seen in more recent years towards a more intellectual or academic focus in artist moving image and experimental cinema.

DK: This is the dominant infrastructure. In art schools you are shaped and prepared to fit and

function within the outside world, like an astronaut going to the moon. Everything is packaged very carefully and the work is mostly concept driven, which may not be a total negative, but of course it must function in this way so that it can be accepted. This is very similar to film school where you are told “this is Central Conflict Theory and this is the box office readings from last year” and “here is *Angela’s Ashes* and *Doctor Zhivago*...well, that’s the limit of cinema, off you go now.” Personally I am seeking work that functions in an associative way rather than a strict narrative logic; a return to the visual, to the craft and skill of image-making.

What draws me to Bernard and Dulac is the singularity and uncompromising quality of their vision and also the inherent skill and craft that they honed. Dulac formed her own production company and maintained strong control over her work, while Bernard worked on the periphery with little means but with complete control and would turn his limitations to his advantage. These are highly technical filmmakers and what they achieved in their time is a testament to their talent and the raw power of cinema. These films will excite anyone and everyone because what marks them is an absolute openness, there is no real prerequisite or elitist gesturing, you just have to be able and willing to see. As Brakhage once advised “man must transcend the original physical restrictions and inherit a world of eyes.”

AB: Joseph Bernard has worked for a greater portion of his life as a painter rather than a filmmaker. The films he produced were made in a spirit of creative obsession, one perhaps that couldn’t have lasted beyond the ten year period in which he made all of his film work. What do you think this relatively short-lived aspect of his film career brings to his moving image work?

DK: Bernard’s film production reveals a truly obsessive period of creation where all of the films absorb and communicate this intense energy. He made films until he simply couldn’t continue and in 1985 he quit filmmaking. That same year he was hired by his old friend Michael Mann, to work as a concept artist on *Manhunter* (1986), where he would create blood work and spatter effects as well as the development of Blake’s The Great Red Dragon for tattoo and other transfers. In the years that followed his departure from filmmaking he quit painting and the production of art in general. It’s interesting that his final film *Her Moves* (1985) is a relatively calm, poetic and conceptual film, but also rich with many of the idiosyncrasies that marked his earlier work. The film juxtaposes numerous vignettes of women performing physical tasks, sewing them through time and space into a montage-dance of angular compositions and movements- a potential correspondence with Dulac’s *Thèmes et variations* (1928). While the energy that enforced his previous films had somewhat subsided *Her Moves* provides a powerful last transmission. The final frames of his filmography are of a young woman smiling and laughing bashfully against a backdrop in a dark film studio, with Bernard behind the camera talking to her and presumably laughing along. These are perhaps the most silent moments in his filmography which once again reveal the constant making and unmaking of his work. Writing on Bernard’s films for Cinema Scope magazine Phil Coldiron eloquently remarked that “American experimental cinema is considerably poorer for both the brevity and obscurity of his career”.

As I write these words it is 9am in Troy, Michigan and Joseph Bernard is presumably descending the steps to his windowless workshop with a cup of coffee. Today, like most days, he will spend a couple of hours cleaning and repairing the remaining fifty of his films. And so, the work on his films continues and in the coming years when the Academy Film Archive in Los Angeles collect these remaining titles for preservation we can further comprehend this incredible period between 1975 and 1985, when Joseph Bernard was making films.

Alice Butler (AB), Daniel Fitzpatrick (DF), Dean Kavanagh (DK)

FILM INFO:

Icon, Joseph Bernard, 1978, 5 minutes; *Celebration: The Loving of Things Seen*, Joseph Bernard, 1978, 6 minutes; *Aelf-scín*, Joseph Bernard, 1979, 5 minutes; *Intrigues (V)*, Joseph Bernard, 1981, 3 minutes; *Variant Chants*, Joseph Bernard, 1983 16 minutes; *Disque 957*, Germaine Dulac, 1928, 6 minutes; *Étude Cinématographique sur une Arabesque*, Germaine Dulac, 1929, 8 minutes; *Thèmes et Variations*, Germaine Dulac, 1928, 11 minutes

TOTAL 60 MINUTES