F.J. OSSANG: PUNK CINEMA AND THE SUBVERSION OF FILM NOIR (EDITED VERSION)

by José Sarmiento Hinojosa

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Into the eternal darkness, into fire and into ice.
Dante Alighieri – Divine Comedy

The saying goes “no man is an island” but FJ Ossang could be easily an archipelago on itself: Poet, musician, filmmaker, and actor; the expressive capacity of Ossang has transcended beyond the blurry lines of genres and disciplines, not digressing in each one of his attempts, but achieving a magnificent articulation that projects the identity of his art: a post-apocalyptic sci-fi punk noir universe, a classification that, paradoxically, defies any classification. Ossang’s subversion of the concept of film noir is as revolutionary as the poetic recitative cadence in the lyrics of Messagers Killers Boys (his band) and the punk prose/diary/manifesto style of his poetry. The synergy or interaction between music, poetry and cinema is undividable here. Everything belongs to one another, everything merges and dialogues: Part diary, part manifesto, a work of curiosity and rebellion.

ZONA INQUINATA: A POLLUTED UNIVERSE

Ossang’s first student film, was based in La Dernière Énigme (1982), a political manifesto about state terrorism inspired by Gianfranco Sanguinetti’s On Terrorism and the State: As for us, the subversives, who support the opposition of the workers and do not support the State, we will prove ourselves to be so, above all and on every occasion, by continually unmasking all the acts of terrorism perpetrated by the secret services of the State, to which we willingly leave the monopoly on terror, and by making the State’s infamy more infamous by publicizing it: the publicity that it merits.

This essay quickly became a primary headstone that Ossang would revisit constantly, a manifestation of a punk movement which also was a driving power for his first’s attempts on film: the apprehension of the tyrant concept, the revolt or escape against repressive powers, state terrorism, conspiracy theory, big brother, All-Seeing Eye: Ettore, Ponthans, Angstel, Stan van der Decken, are all rebellious characters, brought from noir cinema with a baggage of demons, imperfections, obsessions, violence and anxiety. From visiting a toxic wasteland to get ahold of a new energy power source, to be involved in a network of art forgery, science fiction, crime, the apocalypse, again, the end of the world, the revenge of the earth on its habitants.. An implosion and explosion of genres, colliding into a massive black hole, a universe of its own: maintenant, maintenant, maintenant!

Shot using two cans of Kodak XX 16mm film, La Dernière Énigme (a pamphlet film) feels like a student film but carries so much compromise in it, the potential of a future career that would give birth to masterpieces such as Le Trésor Des Îles Chiennes. An appearance of public protest in shape of poetic manifestos also
gives place, an element that will reappear in *L'affaire Des Divisions Morituri*, with the long monologues of Ettore, the lead character. This realm of recitation, of public discourse, of universal declaration is an element of punk that Ossang drives to perfection in the monologues on *Morituri... and Dernière Énigme*. It is a call to anarchy, a political stance, an anti-establishment cry, a search for the self. In his next films, this kind of discourse would find a proper narrative stance, as shown in the relentless antics of dialogue in *Docteur Chance*.

A year after, a second short emerged like a resurrection of sorts. *Zona Inquinata (1983)* already showed the silent film resource of intertitles which worked not as a mere resource, but as a poetic affirmation of what was projected on the screen. Of course, expressionism takes place here and it’s fundamental. As an influence on noir, and as a spiritual influence on Ossang films, which also feed and disembody noir into a mythical creature of its own. The resource of *intertitling* as a poetic manifesto serves its expressive means and contributes to the overall experience of watching. Thus intertitles carry no narrative weight but a subliminal and sensorial space, a metaphysical weapon to help us understand the apocalypse, ripped fragments of a poetry book which land in a desolated space, devoid of images or inserted despite the images. *Zona inquinata (Life is nothing but a bad cowboy story)* was Ossang’s student first year film. Shot in three days, it's a low budget effort, a guerrilla film with a guerilla mindset.

Before anything, *L’Affaire des Divisions Morituri (1985)* is a consolidation of whatever was hinted in Ossang first short films: A story about underground punk gladiators led by Ettore, a messianic figure who threatens the stability of a repressive state utilizing “sensory deprivation” methods. *Morituri* is also the M.K.B. Fraction Provisoire last album (before merging into Messagero Killer Boy, or Messagers Killers Boys –there isn’t a consensus) and it links perfectly with the film. In fact, *Morituri* shares with *Bitch Islands* two of the most fantastic soundtracks ever recorded for film. If it was Messagers Killers Boys that made the fantastic sonic experience (very close to a drug experience session), in here we get Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret Voltaire, among others, setting an hallucinogenic stance for celluloid. There’s no sonic archetype here: It’s a fluorescent mass of pure industrial sounds set against the backdrop of the Armageddon. Ettore loses his mind and decides to inform to the press about the gladiator business. He seems to be unaffected by repression, even when cracking down, as if the punk spirit that dwells within has consumed him entirely: Pure detachment, no deliverance, eternal damnation, while gladiators perform dance rituals and a journalist runs away in a car chase scene dripping down from the fountains of film noir, a futuristic noir, the *Alphaville* of punk.

A tribute to silent cinema (more precisely German expressionism) is to be found in the closing of the camera iris, not just as a romantic tribute but also as a way of reinvent the genre: Ossang uses the iris without discretion, as a plastic element, as an emphasis of emotion, but overall, as an extension of the eye which focuses on the elemental. The camera as the human eye, as the extension of the body.

**LYSERGIC ROAD MOVIES: DUST ACCUMULATES IN OUR WINDSHIELDS**

*Le Trésor Des Îles Chiennes (1990)* is Ossang’s masterpiece. A film about drugs, about the representation of the female as an object of desire, a catastrophic post-atomic nightmare, a trip into the guts of the underworld, of an island that signifies their doom, the *Bitch*, the woman, the perdition of men. A film about intrigue and treachery, about desolation and desperation, charged with static electricity in every moment, a delirious ride into oblivion, a trip of five men led by a contemporary Ulysses (which carries the same name) and driven by blind ambition into an island that is doomed with catastrophe. A film about a mega corporation. A tarkovskian sci-fi film on speed.
There’s a metallic aftertaste when watching *Bitch Islands*, the same sensation that comes from licking a dusty coin, something filthy and disgusting, alien to the taste. Ossang *mise en scène* is so powerful that the movie becomes a synesthetic journey: one can smell and feel the texture of the images, feel the dust accumulate in the throat and become part of that drug induced experience that is the trip of its adventurers. There’s no treasure in itself, no wealth, no real “money”: there is the island, the drug shots, the white pills, the quintessential femme fatale of film noir, in form of a quiet woman, or of an island that oozes lava and sulfur in the middle of the Azores. Ossang says: *Cerberus being bitches, the guardian of underworld... So it’s a bit of a descent into hell.*[6] This descent into hell, a confined space, knocks down the players in the board of chess that is this film. The final check mate comes when king and queen disappear into the rocky landscape. Earth devours them, takes what it’s hers and ends the cycle. The strategy was unimportant, since The Bitches claimed their victims as Cerberus did in the gates of hell.

Seven years after, Ossang returned with *Docteur Chance* (1997), which wasn’t supposed to be a color film (problems with supply of black and white film) This event was a blessing though, since the development of the celluloid reels gave as a result a gamut of colors that any noir film would envy. Thus, the chromatic spectrum gives a unique expressiveness to the film, something that black and white wouldn’t have achieved otherwise. The color in Docteur Chance allows it to be of an expressionist nature (the hints are clear: one of the character’s called Georg Trakl), whether we’re located in the streets of Portugal or in the desert of Chile, a miserable wasteland, or a territory of doom. Docteur Chance is also an *ouroboros film*, where head and tail unites in a cyclic narrative that begins and ends in a flight among fleeting lovers, Ancetta, the prostitute (a first appearance by Elvire, Ossang’s muse and a true force of nature), and Angstel, a trader of forged paintings which is forced to leave the country and embark in a journey in which the noir films mutates into a road movie, only to finally meet not other than Joe Strummer (Vince Taylor) in his private bunker.

**Docteur Chance** is also an orphic journey: the snake biting the ankle of the dame in distress. *A girl and a gun*. The orphic nature of Ossang’s films is more present here, in *Sky’s Black Out!* and reaching its apex in *Dharma Guns*. This is a manifestation of an obscure romanticism, and Ossang is a punk romantic, a decadent romantic who merges with the shadows. Here, the confictive nature of the relationship of both leads plays like a dance with death, a reconfiguration of noir codes, in dialogue, narrative and intention. How does the film become a Road Movie by configuration? When lovers are expelled from its territory, the personal journey begins: This abstraction of the *path* becomes parallel with the inner journey of its characters. Thus the setting (the desert) plays an effective analogy for the psychological desolation, the desperation of the travel. Both lovers escape, become hooked in drugs, get persecuted and disappear into the atmosphere, this time the sky devours them, not the earth, as it happens into *Le trésor des îles chiennes*. Coincidentally (or not) lovers are devoured by the sea in *Dharma Guns*. The earth has its way of claiming back what belongs to her, no matter the element.

**THE LANDSCAPE TRILOGY: SILENcio, VLADIVOSTOK AND SKY’S BLACK OUT!**

“The Landscape Trilogy”, as Ossang calls it, are a series of short films that came between *Docteur Chance* and *Dharma Guns*, and that signals a new phase in the filmmaker’s oeuvre. This territorial trilogy starts with *Silencio* (2007), scored by Throbbing Gristle, a nuclear apocalypse experimental short of monoliths, a journey through a vast landscape, a road movie of sorts. *Silencio* is a meditation on Ossang’s favorite subjects, a contemplation of the catastrophe, of the end of the world. He isn’t preaching the apocalypse anymore; he is simply contemplating it, watching the aftermath like a wise man who predicted it. A masterpiece of a short, *Silencio* marks both an end and a beginning. *Vladivostok!* (2008) is a commissioned film for the Vladivostok film festival. Openly experimental, it owes much of its pulse to expressionism and silent cinema (maybe even more than his other films). A voyage, a death, a
contemplation of disjointed fragments, Vladivostok! Is Ossang’s gift to the Russian, a poetic film magnificently photographed, a film that carries old nitrate in its veins, a tribute of sorts, a manifestation of love for cinema. Ciel Éteint! (2008), a love letter for detached lovers, is a sonata drawn in a landscape of sorrow, a film of wondering in the depths of distance. The earth is frozen, the hearts are frozen and again, the setting conveys an analogy of human emotion. Sky’s Black Out is a proper introduction to what Dharma Guns would become, the new stage of Ossang’s work, and a new level of masterful cinema.

DEATH AND LIFE AS PARALLEL DIMENSIONS

Dharma Guns (La succession Starkov) (2010) is FJ Ossang latest film and it is a dantesque descent into the underworld. The questions of what is behind death, and beyond consciousness merge. What is reality and what isn’t? A magnificent opening shot switches color to black and white and traces the line between two open universes. Dante himself could’ve written the liner notes of Dharma Guns: The man who lies asleep will never waken fame, and his desire and all his life drift past him like a dream, and the traces of his memory fade from time like smoke in air, or ripples on a stream. (8)

Stan van der Decken (Guy McKnight), an heir to Professor Starkov, is a scriptwriter trapped in something he can’t start to comprehend: Part of a clone experiment, Lazarus resurrected, tortured poet, guinea pig. Délie (Elvire), his girlfriend, who was killed in a water ski accident resurrects and appears again in Van der Decken life. Is she also a clone of Professor Starkov cruel experiment? Clues are again in the chromatic spectrum: colored flashbacks of life past and a black and white odyssey into the inferno, oneiric sequences of a daydream fever. A conspiracy sci-fi film with orphic strata, Dharma Guns is the feverish counterpart of Docteur Chance, a hallucination which is reflected in the low shot of the stairs in hotel Splendor, the portal gate to Dante’s hell.

Ossang’s characters are often on the verge of insanity: Their primal impulses drag them through the story as mere consequence of a higher determination. In that matter, they are all victims of fate, uncharted heroes, mythical beings whose fate is set, who revolt against the inevitable. Dharma Guns is a masterpiece of a film because it carries this level of insanity in the same structure of its narrative construction: Reality/not reality realms collide with each other relentlessly, sepia crashes with black and white, black and white crashes with color. Flashbacks, consciousness, and abyss, absoluteness: it’s a disorienting experience of transit from life to death, the opposite experience of emerging from a coma.

FJ OSSANG CLOSING STATEMENT: A PUNK MANIFISTO

Why cineastes, to what end in this time of withdrawal? (...) When the word devours itself and tears the surface of the brain close to registering what remains visible, obvious, of the symptoms of discomfort or from the insanity of phenomena, the camera records exactly what the writer don’t want to listen anymore: to the pretexting emancipation and to see through the atoms of his own language. But this tongue is contaminated; it loses itself on amends in abstraction, still far to find the tricks necessary for the eyesight, the vision. (9)

Notes:
1, 9. FJ Ossang, “Mercure Insolent” La Fabrique du Sens (France, 2013) And the film in all of this, virtual just like the rest – close to disappear in the magnetic storm which arises... To ends with the “Judgement of God” no way! It’s too late... Where it smells like shit, it smells being!
5. Quoted on Desistfilm 004 “Punk intervention: A conversation with FJ Ossang” ©Desistfilm (2013)
In my Trial of Joan of Arc I have tried to avoid “theater” and “masquerade”, but to arrive at a non-historical truth by using historical words.

- Robert Bresson (1)

Released in 1962, and receiving mild-hearted reviews from the press, Bresson’s Procès de Jeanne d’Arc (The Trial of Joan of Arc, 1962) remained for a long time one of the French filmmaker’s most overlooked films. 40 years later, and in light of other adaptations of the trial that preceded and succeeded it – notably Carl T. Dreyer and Jacques Rivette’s masterpieces La passion de Jeanne d’Arc (1928) and Jeanne la Pucelle II – Les prisons (Joan the Maid: The Prisons, 1994) – Bresson’s film, featuring low-key mise en scène detailing the precise period in which the Maid of Orleans lived, stands up as one of the most particular and transcendent works of his oeuvre.

Whether or not we agree with Bresson’s statement that Dreyer’s mise en scène and notions of expressionist acting were “grotesque buffooneries”, we can consider this controversial statement as a starting point for examining his own construction of the film. This relentlessly edited, minimalist, sparse film, almost shot in automatic mode, is a direct affront to what he considered the “terrible habit of theater”(2), the “over expressive” (as he would say) method that he successfully avoided throughout his career.

In Procès de Jeanne d’Arc, Florence Delay’s presence plays a fundamental role in communicating Bresson’s intent. A 20-year-old university student (listed as Florence Carrez in the film), she gives a bleak but paradoxically powerful performance as Jeanne across her trial, sentencing and final demise. Her expressionless performance gives her character a sense of stoicism that fits perfectly with the portrayal Bresson was aiming to achieve.

Comparisons with Maria Falconetti’s Jeanne are inevitable, and Bresson was clear to express his feelings about her: “For want of truth, the public gets hooked on the false. Falconetti’s way of casting her eyes to heaven, in Dreyer’s film, used to draw tears.” (3)Again, Delay “performing” as Jeanne, plays things exactly the opposite way: her eyes are always looking down (just shedding tears at the very beginning of the film; her attitude is impassive; her responses are strong – seemingly in control, at peace, we nevertheless feel the immense burden that is upon her. Delay is not Falconetti, but not for lack of talent. But she’s not meant to be Falconetti, and her portrayal has little to do with what Dreyer intended to do with his protagonist. If Bresson saw a film as a work of art one has to become immersed in, and in which his actors (models) were the objects that served this purpose, Dreyer saw in performance and expression (the label “expressionism” wasn’t free) the tools he needed to achieve, if not the same thing, something very similar. Both reached their goals in a masterful but very different way.

“The noises must become music.” (4)Aside from the almost aggressive “anti-expressionism” portrayed deployed in Procès de Jeanne d’Arc, Bresson – like Dreyer – used the exact words recorded from the original trial (as is stated at the beginning of the film), making this a powerful dialogue driven movie, unlike most of
his other works. There is little space to reflect here, as the dialogue is relentless, and the editing works wonderfully to keep this constant verbal action going throughout the whole film. In such films as Un condamné à mort s’est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut (A Man Escaped, 1956), we are confronted with very different types of camerawork, a slower rhythm, and the space to think about what is taking place – shots of the cell window, of walls, etc. But to achieve what he called “a non-historical truth” in Procès de Jeanne d’Arc Bresson makes a smart move, displaying only that which needed to be portrayed: the trial; the words; focusing on the process (therefore, the film runs the strange length of 65 minutes) to explore what lies beneath.

Another important aspect of the film is that the power of the visible is contrasted with the power of what we can’t see, what is suggested by only sound. Following his initial principles, Bresson avoids showing the people in the court, only suggesting their presence by their shouting voices – “Burn the witch!” – or by the rumours overheard between gaps in the interrogation. As such, we don’t see the faces of Jeanne’s condemners behind the cell walls in which she is imprisoned – only an eye, a part of a face – and we hear a conversation that takes place in both French and English.

This absence plays an important role in the film. The people, having nothing to do with the process, are not shown. Again, Bresson focuses on process. As such, we don’t see the priests’ faces at all, since they don’t share the same internal processes as Jeanne: in solitude, in her cell, in her torture. They distance themselves from it, creating two different spaces. Whether Bresson directly intended this – perhaps just him being truthful to the written description of the trial – is irrelevant, the final result produces this particular outcome.

In the end, we are confronted with the burning of Jeanne. Even in this Bresson remains true to his overarching style, in stark contrast to Dreyer’s film. While Dreyer chooses to show the people revolting, and the guards engaging in a terrible fight in an apotheosic ending, Bresson insists on not portraying the people, making us concentrate on Jeanne’s final destiny at the stake. Both construct powerful and compelling endings to accompany the final demise of our heroine.

A final reflection arises from all this: Do the hidden faces of the priests behind the cell walls and the absent voices (present, but floating in space, devoid of interlocutors) of the people in court serve as an analogy for Bresson’s ultimate irony? We can’t hear the voices, neither can we see the faces, and indeed, that something that is not shown ultimately serves a bigger purpose, contributing to the emotional impact of the film and its overall feeling of emptiness, abandonment and emotional sparsity. As such, the acting (or the non-acting), devoid of any palpable emotion (“the limit of the unexpressive” (5), as Susan Sontag, an admirer of Bresson but not of this film, once wrote), and the contrived and almost mechanical rhythm of the film do exactly that. They are all elements of the same paradox: subtract to add, deplete to fill, the ultimate Bresson experience. “The thing that matters is not what they show me but what they hide from me and, above all, what they do not suspect is in them.” (6) The aim, to create an emotional experience from the plainest field possible. And in that, the master excels.

Endnotes

2Bresson, p. 2.
3Bresson, p. 65.
4Bresson, p. 10.
5“With Florence Carz in Procès de Jeanne d’Arc, Bresson has experimented with the limit of the unexpressive. There is no acting at all; she simply reads the lines. It could have worked. But it doesn’t – because she is the least luminous of all the presences Bresson has ‘used’ in his later films.” See Susan Sontag, “Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson”, Against Interpretation, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 185.
6Bresson, p. 2.
7Procès de Jeanne d’Arc/The Trial of Joan of Arc (1962 France 65 mins)