

The *Inoubliables* (The *Unforgettables*) of Lucile Bertrand

“and all the people who often
struggle alone
and whose death
go unnoticed
who are rarely celebrated
and yet remain
unforgettable”

May Ayim, *blues in black and white*

In 2014, many of us were literally gripped by the power and density of Lucile Bertrand's debut film, *amnesia* ⁽¹⁾. It dealt with the haunting question of the possible erasure of memory in the face of the tragedies of History. We listened to twelve commented texts linked to twelve historical events delivered in as many different languages. The filmic device of the split screen, whose caesura marked both the border and the mental link – as Muriel Andrin ⁽²⁾ analyses with great acuity – showed successively, on the one hand, readers and photos linked to the tragedies, and on the other, a woman who – in response to the question ‘Do you remember?’ and its answer ‘No’ that punctuated each of the film's chapters – falls and rises again, as a possible embodiment of a form of resistance.

Ten years later, as the traumatic ‘WITHOUT END’ opening credits of *amnesia* suggested, Lucile Bertrand is preparing her second film, *Les Inoubliables*. Conceived as a long, multilingual conversation based on poems by deceased women poets from the four corners of the world, *Les Inoubliables* weaves a modulated chorus whose eight-act libretto evokes literature, war, struggles... In other words, a never-ending repetition.

“What happened in the world after the war and the post-war period? Normality. (...) And the poet's rage against this normalization – the consecration of power and conformism – can only escalate. What makes the poet so discontent? An infinite number of problems that no one is capable of solving, and without the resolution of which true peace, the poets' peace, is impossible.”

These words by Pasolini are the opening line of *amnesia*. They resonate particularly with what I know about the ambitious film you are preparing, which is the subject of this conversation. It is also striking to note that this first film was already made up of texts by poets from different countries, each linked to a traumatic story, and among them a single woman, Anna Akhmatova, who is featured in the new film.

Can you tell us about the genesis and necessity of this first film project and, if so, link it to the second film you are about to start making?

As you mentioned, *amnesia* already featured a large amount of poetry, although not exclusively.

To the question, why all these women in this second film? I answer that, as you know, I am a poetry reader and the more I read poetry, the more I realised that many women were completely ignored, and sometimes even the wives of poets, themselves poets, could be just as ignored. One example is René Guy Cadou, whose wife, Hélène Cadou, is virtually unknown. Then there is Emily Dickinson, who is very well known but whose poetry is much less so. I don't know whether it is also possibly linked to the #MeToo era and the openness it is engendering, because I myself have been a feminist for a very long time.

On the other hand, I really wanted to put all these women in conversation, which is the opposite of the way I conceived *amnesia*. This previous film was based on individual cases that conveyed specific points of history. For *Les Inoubliables*, I wanted to present the originality of each poet's writing and form, but at the same time highlight their common concerns, and that their issues and interests are linked in time and space and that they respond to each other.

And then I wanted to get away from the clichés around women's writing, to show that they can be incredibly subversive. I am thinking, for instance, of the Persian poet Forough Farrokhzâd, who completely overturned the tradition of classical writing, the ghazal, in terms of both form and themes.

I also think it necessary to show that these women are themselves very concerned about issues of war and resistance, but from a different perspective. The way they talk about it emanates from their point of view as women, and I embrace it. So I thought it would be particularly interesting to put them in dialogue with each other and to notice that they are fairly in tune with each other, while not ignoring the disagreements that may arise. There is a scene that deals with writing and the making of poetry, in which they express their disagreements, but in an argumentative way. These are often brilliant women.

At the end of the film, Adrienne Rich's text comes full circle with the first scene, in which the desire to escape from something that oppresses and locks them in is expressed. They have been talking about this for a very long time. There are poems that I did not include in the film but that date back several centuries. Vietnamese and Chinese women poets in one instance were already talking about this oppression of women. Unfortunately, I was not able to connect their poems with the others. In the first scene of the film, there is a poem by the Argentinian poet Alfonsina Storni, which describes in an extremely sensual, vibratory way, the feeling of a telluric force that drives her in her relationship to life, which we find again in Adrienne Rich's text, in the final moments of the film, and particularly in the relationship to the body that she expresses there. This text speaks of something gigantic, of a galaxy of women, of being traversed... It may even, according to its interpreter in the film, be reminiscent of giving birth...

In a sense, a return to oneself as a being in the world?

Yes, absolutely. In this last scene, these women are evoking a memory of women, already evoked in the first scene, and just as much a physical memory. It is about feeling how experience passes through the body, which is perhaps more specifically linked to women's writing in the sense that it is another way of talking about experience, through a very embodied experience, whereas many of the poems I have used are also quite intellectual.

And powerfully political too...

Where do you situate the power and contemporaneity of poetry, given that it seems to be making a strong comeback today? Do you see poetry, by virtue of its very nature, as an essential tool of thought? The place par excellence for questioning our realities?

I really like that you speak of an essential tool, in the sense that in poetic writing there is, in fact, something essential. I feel that each word is weighed so carefully and that what this type of writing conveys can be both perfectly situated in time and, on the contrary, timeless in its ability to remain, over time, as modern and powerful as any other artistic discipline. Poetry possesses this power. It can both address a very specific issue at the time it was written, and continue to resonate and affect us today. This is particularly true in the case of war.

The wars we are currently witnessing are often linked to events buried in the past. We need to bring them to the surface so that we can revisit them with the necessary distance and hindsight. It is this kind of intelligence that I sense in poetry in particular, coupled with the fact that this form of writing dispenses with decorum and frills.

Historical criticism reminds us that this issue of our relation to history is a perpetual failure. Despite our knowledge of the past, tragedies are inexorably repeated...

Indeed! I would add that, strangely enough, despite the obvious fact that I have always worked on these issues in art, I am unfortunately well aware that I am not going to change anything... And yet I feel an absolute need to tackle them, to work on them...

A necessity to speak out...

Yes, we have that power and that powerlessness too. It is constantly being rewritten.

Some might also say that I'm partial, like a lot of poets... I'm perfectly comfortable with that.

What do you mean by being partial?

There are accusations in these poems and that was also the case in *amnesia*. Perhaps I have never been so clearly partisan as in my films. I have often kept myself much more at a distance and in the background. Here, I feel that by borrowing other people's texts, I can more easily assert and assume my points of view.

In your films, you pay great attention to the distinctive sounds and rhythms of the languages you portray. And you choose the people who will embody these texts so that they respond as closely as possible to the language of each poet. If poetry also appears to be a place for inventing forms, how do you work on the resonance of the sounds, rhythms and forms you decide to bring to life?

There is a relatively intuitive part to it, since some texts require translations to access the language, as I don't master all the languages conveyed by the texts. The translations cannot always respect the musicality of the original language. There is also the challenge of choosing among the various translations themselves, because something is inevitably lost in the transition to translation. Everyone knows that. Either you lose something in terms of sound and rhythm, or you lose something in terms of meaning. Every translation involves choices that necessarily affect the way the text is understood.

In my research, I sometimes read several translations to be sure of what I understood, and it was this process that sometimes guided my choices to keep this or that particular text, depending on the versions I had. Similarly, for the subtitles, I selected certain translations rather than others. In terms of musicality, I chose non-professionals, as I did for *amnesia*. Interpreters who feel concerned by the issues raised by the film. Then we rehearse a lot. We read the texts together, we analyze them, we discuss about them, which often leads to wonderful discussions.

Any work that enables your performers to make the texts their own.

Yes, absolutely. It is very important in the process of making the film. I know almost all the texts by heart because I work with each of the interpreters, alone or in groups. So even when the text is in Arabic and I don't understand anything, I hear it while I read the translation, and it is from that listening that we can work together again. Hearing it in the original language is almost a revelation, in the sense that I really hear what I had perceived in the translations. The text explodes in my ears and that's fantastic. It also triggers the possibility of further refining all the nuances conveyed by the language. This collective work is a remarkable shared adventure.

Reading your script and watching the first film tests, I had the impression that a chorus was being orchestrated in the sense of Greek tragedy.

Definitely. And, in this regard, I like the idea that cultures have their own specificity but that, within each of them, women question the universal fundamentals, with, of course, different ways of addressing them and responding to them.

At the heart of your work, languages are active modalities. What is at stake here?

I believe that for poetry, more than for prose, it is more than beneficial to be able to hear it in the language in which it was written and, from then on, in its own musicality, its own construction, which are often very particular. And orality seems to me to be one of the modalities of poetry. In fact, when I read poetry, I say it out loud in my head, without necessarily reading it out loud. I need to make it resonate, even when I'm reading translations.

The question of translation also inevitably arises when it comes to subtitles. As with *amnesia*, I have chosen to have them scroll continuously like a ticker, even under the French texts [or under English texts with the film version subtitled in English]. It is very important to me, as you will have guessed, that we have this dual access to the various languages, both orally and in writing.

A dual access to meaning?

Exactly. This relationship with the physicality of a text, the way in which it has been thought out, seems to me to be inescapable. After all, we think in our own language, based on our own culture. In fact, I have done some work on the disappearance of languages, which is a way of preserving them, or rather, not forgetting them altogether.

There are three Arabic-speaking poets in my film. It took me a long time to find the right interpreter. In Brussels, we are more in touch with the North African culture, and all the women I contacted said 'no'. They all added, "Your poets are Syrian, Iraqi, Palestinian, you need to work with women from those regions because we don't speak the same language. It is Arabic, but we don't say it in the same way, and you have to make it heard". So I am trying to be as accurate as possible when it comes to language.

We will also see and hear several women who will be speaking two languages. Anne, the Luxembourg interpreter, will perform in German and French. Anna, who has dual nationality, will tell poems in English and German. Hala, the young Palestinian woman, will also interpret poems in French, as she speaks it perfectly. She speaks also English and Flemish, as well as French and Arabic. And Anne-Marie will perform in French and Kirundi. I really like to point out that languages circulate, which is precisely what one of the scenes of the film is about. The circulation of people and cultures is a preoccupation that runs through my artistic practice. When we discussed this with the interpreters, we realised that when you have several languages and therefore several cultures, it is not 'one plus one equals two' but 'one plus one equals three'. It is like acquiring a third entity. It is exponential, it is not just additional.

Where does the specific choice of texts come from, and what does this selection imply about the diversity of eminently political voices that emerge in your new film?

Since I have chosen to put these texts in conversation, I have had to find a way of linking them together from a very vast corpus that I have reduced or increased as necessary. I am on the 22nd version of the script and, in the end, my film editor and I will see what we retain. I wanted an overall coherence and, a priori, eight specific scenes, about the inner frontier and the mental frontier, the war, which is a recurring theme in my artwork, the question of literature...

What would that overall coherence be?

I would like this film to make people want to read poetry, to let them realize that it is both dense and accessible, but also to help bring these women poets out of the closet, as they are not always highlighted as they should be, even though there are more contemporary women poets nowadays, and we can only be pleased about that. Perhaps we can even hope that some of them will be republished.

I would also like this film to convey the idea that there are thoughts that circulate. That, on a global scale, things can be thought of from different geographies and in concordant ways.

As a visual artist, what is the formal orientation of this new film? On seeing the first footage, it appears to be formally very different from the first. I have also noticed that it pays a great deal of attention to gestures, movements and situations. What is it about these different devices that activate the conversation(s)? What are your sources of inspiration?

I didn't want a secondary narrative to be added to the one formed by these literary exchanges. These conversations constitute the narrative of the film.

In each scene, the actions and gestures of the performers do not illustrate the texts but hold them together, participating in the shifts that take place as in any conversation. They also add a layer of meaning, like a subtext. For example, in the scene featuring texts about the war, the longest in the film and the one with the most languages, we see hands placing, displacing and superimposing photos printed on polyester calque on a long white surface. These photos can evoke archive images, reminding us that wars have been started here and there, that they have sometimes been forgotten, only to resurface once again... Sometimes hands search for one of the photos buried under another, reminding us of the buried memory that the poems are trying to restore.

Unlike *amnesia*, the books are present, used and manipulated. But above all, the women are moving together, moving, crossing paths, meeting each other... just like their texts. And there are glances that are exchanged, glances of women listening and listening to each other.

I would like to underline the wonderful and productive chemistry with the director of photography, Marie Merlant, with whom we chose to film in black and white, which is at once graphic, modern and timeless. For me, black and white also contributes to the equality of all the performers. I think it also allows them to be better integrated into the spaces they inhabit and move through.

To answer your last question, I must say that I try to avoid watching too many films by others, even though I have watched films with very long shots, because I quite like the slow pace. And I have been interested in the question of eye contact, because looking at someone who is watching can help the listener more than looking all the time at the person who is talking.

The rare camera glances are extremely strong because they are in places in the text that emphasize their main function, that of taking us as witnesses, which creates a very appropriate porosity for the viewer with regard to the film's subject matter.

Enunciating a poem requires a strange blend of interiority and address. It is this skill that the camera captures. It has to be said that, in rehearsals alone, each performer is so invested in and by her texts that there are moments of great intensity. Indeed, the texts are important to them, have an impact on them, and sometimes concern them directly. I should add that, in a nod to my first film, two of Akhmatova's texts were already included in *amnesia*.

What does the eloquent poem in the first scene inaugurate? From the outset, something precise and active is at play here, between images and voices, between forms and words. This first scene is almost programmatic, like an echo of some of the key themes in your multi-faceted practice...

This is a poem by Chika Sagawa, a Japanese poet who died very young. Her writing is almost surrealistic and I find it deeply moving. It was very important for me to get it heard, read and discovered, because it is not even translated into French. So I translated it from English. The Japanese interpreter didn't know it and it was a wonderful discovery for her too.

For me, this first scene evokes the blank page, which is not blank given that it is a window (smeared with whitewash). There is the relation to the surface, which may be reminiscent of writing, but which is just as much a visual surface, which may evoke Robert Ryman's paintings. We are both in the image and in the text. The question arises of what to do with all these images and texts. For me, it is a sort of preamble. The fragility conveyed by the text and the voice leads, I think, to the start of a journey, which goes through the camera following the drips of lime on the window. In this way, a connection is established

with the image plane, but also with something that will rip apart, offer another way of hearing, and unfold till the end of the film like the fern that Chika Sagawa describes.

Your film project seems to weave a fabric from the point of view of history. A framework that gives women a place in the development of a way of looking at the world. Is this one of the main lineaments of the film?

Totally. In this respect, the last poem in the film, by Adrienne Rich about Caroline Herschel, is exemplary. If I ask scientists if they know the astronomer William Herschel, they all say yes. But if I ask the same question about Caroline Herschel, also an astronomer, the answer is no. She was William's sister, collaborated with him for a long time until his death and then continued their work alone. She also taught her nephew, who went on to become a great physicist himself. John and William have a place in scientific literature. Caroline does not, or only vaguely, for her teaching, even though she was just as much a discoverer as the other two. Her story also echoes that of Emily Dickinson, the earliest poet mentioned in the film. In her time, as I mentioned at the beginning of this interview, she too was ignored or misunderstood. All the publishers urged her to rewrite her poetry. Her poetry is still misunderstood and complicated to translate.

In her poem, Adrienne Rich talks about a galaxy of women and of women who have been silenced for centuries, whose thoughts have been frozen. Women were sometimes called monsters as soon as they expressed themselves a little louder than the average. That's why I think it is so beautiful to end my film with this text and this image of a community of happy women, even though many serious issues are raised throughout the film. To come back to the potential and power of women and their rightful place.

How do *amnesia* and the forthcoming *Les Inoubliables* fit into your body of work as a visual artist? Can these two films be linked to your work on birdsong – *Chanter comme des oiseaux (Singing like birds)*, installation (2020) and performances by dancer, choreographer and vocalist Johanne Saunier and opera singer Éléonore Lemaire (2023)?

When I am involved in a research and questions arise, at some point it becomes obvious that I should use one medium rather than another. Just as the need for a performative dimension became apparent at some point for *Chanter comme des oiseaux*. So I do not start from the medium, the medium imposes itself and then I have to acquire the means to implement it because, as you know, I was not familiar with the film medium before making *amnesia*. It is obvious, particularly in *Les Inoubliables*, that we can find important elements of my practice, such as the use of drawing, the body and the voice. Black and white is also highly visual. The lighting and framing that are characteristic of the language of film are also part of my approach as a visual artist.

***Les Inoubliables* will be unveiled for the first time as part of the second exhibition of LOSANGE, a project developed by the artist Evelyne de Behr. The main thrust of this project is to pay particular attention to the visibility of women artists in a unique, heritage and domestic setting.**

How will it be displayed?

I am planning a large-scale screening. It will be accompanied by an installation, which emanates from the film, and which will offer the possibility of handling the books and notebooks that I have made when the books are not available, making the texts accessible in their original language with their translation into French and English. In other words, the material of the film that was worked on throughout the filmmaking process. I will also offer the complete bibliography (to be taken away), because I know from the outset that it will be a recurring and legitimate request.

For most of us, this means opening up to previously unknown worlds and universes.

This is precisely what I hope to achieve.

In the words of Véronique Wautier: “Writing is not about knowing, it is tactile.”

What is it like for you in your writing?

There is indeed a physicality to writing. When you talk to writers, they often say that writing is a physical commitment. They don't just refer to the handwriting, but also to the whole body, and to the knowledge stored in and by the body that engages with the text. For me, tactility is also induced by the embodiment of the texts by these women on screen. The texts are said with the voice, the tongue, the face... It's the whole body that speaks!

I just remember that the pebbles placed on the books in one of the scenes are probably a reminiscence of a poet who said something like “Writing poetry is like polishing a pebble”. Each word is so heavy with meaning, like a stone that has been polished and chosen. It is this one and no other that needs to be used. Unconsciously, I echo it.

Like the pebbles in the sea that are polished by time, poetry is not just flashes of brilliance, although of course they do exist. It is also about working and making...

Interview by Pascale Viscardy, 4 May 2024

(The interview took place before the film was shot. Beforehand, Pascale Viscardy had read the script and watched the filmed rehearsals.)

—

(1) *amnesia*, 2014-2018

Video. Format 16:9. Blu-ray audio stereo.

Length 52mn. VO subtitled in French (or in English).

Solo exhibition *Tu te souviens ? (Do you remember?)*

(2) Muriel Andrin, *Nous qui n'entendons pas que l'on crie sans fin (We who do not hear the endless cries)*, in *l'art même 77*, 1st trimester 2019.

—

The video amnesia will be screened

in the group exhibition *Diffractioned Self*

Irène laub Gallery, 29 rue Van Eyck, 1050 Brussels

07 November-21 December 2024

https://irenelaubgallery.com/news_exhibitions/diffracted-self/

The 1st scene of *Les Inoubliables* will be screened

in the duo exhibition *I dwell in Possibility*

(with Lucile Bertrand and Natalia Blanch)

LOSANGE, 51 rue Forestière, 1050 Brussels

14 November-08 December 2024

<https://www.artlosange.com/i-dwell-in-possibility>