

PROOFS STEPHANE BERARD AND FRIENDS PLAY AT "LET'S PRETEND"

A text by
Jean-Marc Chapoulie

The first thing you want to do with a film by Stéphane Bérard is to subject it to film criticism; to expose it to the apparatus of film criticism the way *À bout de souffle* was in its day.

When thinking about an artist's film, for a long time I doubted that the theoretical elements we have on cinema in general (from Bazin to Metz via Labarthe) were appropriate. And after that I felt perplexed about the place of these artist's films within, or on the edge, of cinema in general. But with the three films by Stéphane Bérard—*Mortinsteinck*, *L'Écart*, and *Les Ongles noirs*,¹ there can be no hesitation.

I would even say that Bérard is the only person making cinema today. Paradox or exaggeration? Let's say that he is one of the only people who makes films that need spectators and, even more, a cinephile audience in order to really exist. The full theatre and voluble critics go with films that don't need them. Cinema films already have their spectators and their critics within them. These are bundled with the film. In kit form. You have the film stock with poster and also with the audience—the age and the number with a margin of error of 30%—and the reviews of the film, split 50-50 between good and bad.

Bérard is an artist who makes films. There are several artists who occupy this terrain of fiction or documentary alongside other film-makers. Valérie Jouve with *Grand littoral* and Ariane Michel with *Après les pluies*, for example, have renewed the genre of documentary. They are feeding it with other experiences. These two films open up different aesthetics for this genre that is forcefully guided by the aesthetics of TV entertainment. They prove the existence of a contemporary form of documentary. On his side, Bérard "proves" the

quality of his cinema with his three films. I am therefore going to play the role of critic to try to offer this “proof of cinema”. But this does not lie in a simple factual presentation. Proof is a process of reasoning.

Let’s start at the beginning. An artist, writer, musician and filmmaker, Bérard has the respectful desire to bring in “things as they are”, to use Rohmer’s expression about Isidore Isou.² Filming *things as they are* means the joyous process of taking the material of everyday life—his wife Nathalie Quintane, his friends Alexandre Gérard, Xavier Boussiron and Jean-Yves Jouannais, his house in the Alps, his parents, his motorbike, his mountain, his bike, his travels—to feed his film. Rohmer spoke of Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité* as a “disquiet [...] since everything had been destroyed or called into question, there remained for art nothing from which it made its substance”. This is a fairly conservative vision. For Bérard, *taking things as they are* is no longer a worry but, on the contrary, a free act of filming one’s surroundings as the noble seed of one’s art. His everyday life is the substance of these films, just as the studio and stars are the substance of a Hollywood film. Nathalie Quintane is his Ava Gardner, Alexandre Gérard his Belmondo; his skateboard is his thoroughbred, his Fiat Regata his Cadillac convertible and his valley in the Alps is his Grand Canyon. Everything is a functional equivalent. Each character and each place in Bérard’s films is expressed in its most simple representation, simplified into a function. Purity and simplicity. The characters are the handsome man, the baddie, the beautiful blonde (with wig), the legionnaire, the night club bouncer, the artist, the mother, his wife, the Romanian émigré, the nurse, etc. The places are as limited as the functions. The mountain is made for walking and rock-climbing, the sky is peopled by aeroplanes, helicopters and parachutists. All the elements, characters and sets materialise the idea of a concrete practice. Functional form is underscored by a position (the legionnaire has a helmet, the mother is in the kitchen, the doctor wears a white coat) and by an action (the nurse gives injections, the musicians make music and the legionnaire war). Bérard eliminates anything that does not relate to this. He works on clarity: a nurse gives injections and nothing but injections. This rigour drives him to use the nurse sequence in two different films where the hero needs a jab. This is where things get really interesting. By virtue of its function, each sequence becomes a piece from the puzzle. The *nurse* piece is used in two puzzles. But there is also the *sky* piece, the *helicopter* piece, the *my wife* piece (Nathalie Quintane), the *hero* piece (Alexandre Gérard), the *DJ Philippe* piece, the *Voyage en Amérique* piece. As with the nurse piece, these pieces can all be interchanged from one film to the next. These three films are in fact one single puzzle. The primary characteristic of Bérard’s films is that they characterise, and offer a model of the figure and landscapes by reducing them to functions, that is to say, to minimal roles and actions that they must perform in order to exist in the film. Bérard’s films are not parodic films but

topical films. Bérard bends Hollywood scenarios to his own schemes. He squeezes them like lemons, as hard as he can, he gets rid of the juice and keeps the beaten-up skin of the fruit as a memory of the gesture and as a representation not of a form but of an inner movement. Watching *L’Écart* we are watching *The Man from Rio* or *Le Magnifique*. Watching *Mortinsteink* we are watching *Fitzcarraldo*. For *Les Ongles noirs*, it is *Candy Mountain*. But I’m not saying that we are seeing copies or even fakes of those films. Bérard’s films bring out the general structures of movie genres: the adventure film for *L’Écart*, the war film for *Mortinsteink*, the “cultural” film for *Les Ongles noirs*. The films are on show, doing the red carpet for some big Hollywood soirée. With their home-made production values, the films strut their stuff, show themselves like real movies. The big lesson in movie-making that Bérard offers is to present the action of making films; that is to say, to make movie-making the equivalent of a playground game with schoolfriends. Like playing cops and robbers. This is the game played in *Mortinsteink*, where Alexandre Gérard is the robber (killer). He hides away among the legionnaires (under the covered area, a free zone for thieves) in order to avoid the cops waiting for him at the exit. In this courtyard, the robber

¹ His first film, *De l’Indéfendable théâtre balinois*, is a short film composed of brief sketches.
² In *Le Goût de la beauté, Isou ou les choses telles qu’elles sont*, Paris: Flammarion, Champs Contre-Champs, p.80.



Stéphane Bérard, *Les Ongles noirs*, film, 1999-2004.

meets the formatter, the master of the game (Bérard) and his wife (Quintane). There (now in a mountain setting) the three of them decide to play tag. A new rule extends the first: not to get caught. Playing tag, you have to climb, scramble, get down and climb up again in order to be saved. *Mortinsteink* is this game of cat and mouse, full of jumps and starts. *L’Écart* can be compared to the game of the goose: square one is “the adventure”, then there is the square for amorous encounters, the square for riding motorbikes, the square for making music with my motorbike to impress him, the square for

splitting up, the square for setting off in a boat to be with him, the square for falling in the water and going back to square one, the square for holidays in Martinique, the square for tourism in Thailand, the square for playing French billiards in Thailand, and the last square is the Happy Ending: you marry your Romania, in Romania. *Les Ongles noirs* is “Un, Deux, Trois, Soleil” (Red Light, Green Light). Bérard is facing the wall, then turns towards us to give us snatches of heterogeneous images. The vision of the game is highly elliptical: whenever he turns around to see his playmates in the same position, the image he sees has been changed, manipulated. All the original images in the first scene of the game have been transformed without us seeing it happen.

This manipulation of images will be developed later on. The demonstration of cinema as a playground game highlights the “let’s pretend” that is an essential rule of this art form. Nathalie Quintane *pretends* that she is the wife of the commandant, who himself (Stéphane Bérard) *pretends* he is the legionnaire husband; the mother *pretends* that she is the mother of Alexandre Gérard who *pretends* he is her son, a killer on the run. It’s a role-play. Jean-André Fieschi made a very fine film about Jean Rouch called *Mosso Mosso*, which can



Stéphane Bérard, *Les Ongles noirs*, film, 1999-2004.

be translated as “*let’s pretend*”. It simply describes the practice, based on an African tradition, that Rouch applies in his own films. In *Moi un noir*, the hero replays his war by rolling around on the ground, pretending to throw grenades and shouting “Attack!” In *Les maîtres fous*, the *let’s pretend* comes out in the ceremony reproduced in the forest by the Haouka sect, which was originally a ceremony performed by English soldiers in the capital of Ghana. With Bérard’s films we find the same chaos of acuity, the overthrowing of behavioural guidelines. The Haouka, like the actors in Bérard’s films, have that same

desire to be *things as they are*. But that is inevitably unrealistic since the point is to be like things. Some are a general in chief, but also a station, a train, a governor and the governor’s house; others are a killer, a legionnaire commander, a DJ musician, a Romanian émigré and a parachutist, with the same detachment. Bérard’s characters behave like the Haouka in their forest. For example, in *Mortinstein* the parachutist makes a false jump with a sheet on his head. He rolls over and folds up his parachute just like a real parachutist would. Just as one of the Haouka plays the locomotive and another the wagon, his hands on the other man’s hips, while another is the governor’s house, holding out his hands to make a roof for the governor. To conclude with this first part, I can therefore say that Bérard’s films show us rites of possession. They put the moving image through a regressive ritual, go back to its abysses, probe the gulf of its innards, its slobbering pangs, treating them with the dirty white of their image. Know then that you may find a Haouka in the forests of Ghana, on the garden paths of a psychiatric hospital, in a playground and in the Alps of Provence, near Bérard’s place.

The other similarity to Rouch is where he shows himself to be a faithful champion of the oral tradition as a specific form of popular expression. Bérard’s films also obey a will to narrative rupture, not only because they are dislocated into a host of jigsaw pieces (like a kind of cut-up, in a way), but also by their will to challenge the forms of narrative and literature applied to cinema. Bérard creates an *oral* work of cinema. All the events are related and not directly presented in the theatrical action. To be more precise, the actors tell the story (and convey it to us) by acting it. The film is composed by talking. And the action is composed by walking. It may be an improvisation. But the general form of the composition is closer to sound poetry—another indirect link with the Lettrist Isou. There is no rightness of tone in the actors’ performances, and their diction is full of false notes. There is no mannerism (as in the case of the “slipshod” image), but instead a real determination to take *sounds as they are*. Each film is received as a heterogeneous aural combination. A set of sounds perceived without hierarchy, from voice to music to everyday noises. Bérard critiques the visual by fragmenting sound and written languages using a kind of domino effect. For example, the sound of a phone ringing is made off-camera during the shoot by the mouth of the cameraman. This out-loud ring by a cameraman playing the sound effects person can only be perceived as the joyous mockery of cinema. And, consequently, as a burlesque effect put in by the scriptwriter. The script is composed by speaking out aloud. “Dring, Dring, Dring” is the written form of the sound, and it becomes a spoken line in the film. Sound effects are also produced during the editing. The information on the police trap is given directly by commenting on the image of the scene itself (in the cutting room) in order to give the impression that the sound is produced live by a walky-talky. This example goes

to the heart of the film. It is its general principle, its diegesis (to use a word that was created for aesthetic experiments in film). The sequence with the policeman and the cleaning lady in *Les Ongles noirs* is a documentary scene shot in the United States, perhaps when on holiday. The image is a high-angle shot, we can imagine it being taken from a hotel room. This POV camera observes, or rather steals, an insignificant scene. A woman is cleaning the pavement while a policeman on the other side of a gate watches over a parking lot then comes over to chat. In the film, this real scene becomes a fictional scene in order to trap a pervert (the policeman). The two characters are transformed into actors in the film by the effect of an off-screen voice.

Bérard's three films use these manipulations of images in order to produce stories that are invented out of real events—documentary images. Images of travel, of tourism, of friends, of drinking sessions, of gigs—images from home movies that, like a photo album, follow and capture real-life events. All these images that are used are images of the private sphere, sometimes of a rather intimate kind but appropriated for other purposes. They are diverted from reality in order to bring out their fictional potential. For every image carries within itself a hidden fiction.

This is the observation on which Bérard builds his films. He starts with personal films and makes them public by changing their status by means of a semantic shift, thereby upending the set of effects of meaning. We are thus witnessing an operation of transformation, a disguising of the image. Bérard does not believe that the image is fixed, with a clear distinction between documentary and fiction, as some allow, but sees it as variable and liable to be transformed from one to the other, from man to woman.

Let us take another example, for these intrusions by documentary-type images in Bérard's films can have several consequences. Let's take the sequence of the forest fire, which in the film is preceded by the image of the hero lighting the fire (*Les Ongles noirs*). We witness a reversal of causality. During the shoot it was the images of a forest fire, filmed by chance, which belong to the category of stolen images, that trigger (that are the cause of) the shooting of the images of the hero lighting the fire. The order of the shooting of the two sequences is the inverse of the order in which they were edited. In the film, we see images of the fire being lit first. The hero of the film becomes the pyromaniac behind a real fire for which he has no responsibility outside the film. The editing together of the two sequences in this order is the proof of a misdemeanour and also the beginning of a fictional structure for the film. The forest fire is the consequence of a condemnable action by the hero.

Bérard composes his films backwards. In other words, the maker of *L'Écart*, *Mortinstein* and *Les Ongles noirs* takes the opposite path to the one he imposes on his spectators. Composing films backwards is Bérard's great creative system, the organic law of his films, his solar system. Bérard starts with a

number of events of which he has captured images in the course of his life, images described above as home movies, and using them he then invents and orders their causes. To this end he uses several tricks, including off-camera sound (mentioned earlier). Above all, he shoots complementary scenes that can be related to the scenes from the home movies. Another consequence of this is that the films can never again be home movies. The fictional mechanism thus created is the most incisive cinematographic element of Bérard's diegesis.

He makes antedated films. Cheating. This is not just a way of rejuvenating an image. Pushing back its use-by date a few days. Its freshness date. He antedates these images, not in order to give himself an alibi, as someone might with a letter; on the contrary, he does so in order to make them all guilty of a misdemeanour. However, his impostures are based on editing, on shot and reverse shot. An unidentified person filmed getting into a car in the street becomes the DJ Philippe (shot) and in the next shot the driver (Xavier Boussiron) replies to him (reverse shot); we will never see the two figures together in the same shot. To have filmed a stranger to get him to play the role of Philippe means being constantly on the lookout for "chance". It is to conceive cinema the way Mallarmé conceived of poetry. And to be always searching for that miraculous fictive cause that occurs for no apparent or explicable reason in a film. Here, then, is the definition of cinema given by Bérard.

With this approach to chance, I am going to consider the third and final point of this demonstration, which establishes the "proof" of cinema.

On this point, Bérard is an heir to the Romantic tradition of the nineteenth century. André Breton was the spiritual son of Fourier, and Bérard could be Mallarmé's. Romanticism still provides the answers to just about everything for a good number of our contemporaries. It is just that modern information structures are impelling Bérard to seek out that "chance" in a CCTV-style stolen image, in the image of a forest fire taken in the manner of a home movie camcorder shot, or in a television shot. He seeks out the disorder of life in current documents in order to better manifest the very radiation of the image, the unexpected. Where is the unexpected? Bérard makes this question his principle, his starting point. For this artist, film is an instrument of chance. He creates accidental encounters that look like intentional encounters. The fire filmed by chance becomes an intentional, pyromaniacal action by the actor. The involuntary—a stranger coming down a staircase—simulates the voluntary. A voice-off says "Send Hervé to the escalator" and the stranger descends. The antedated images continually produce effects of chance. The images of crowds in the street—French football supporters after the victory of their team in the world cup—become a political demonstration after a coup d'état. The interference between these mutually independent human actions produces this fortuitous result.

Bérard uses documentary images because the notion of chance in fiction films is rather paradoxical. The main role of the actors is to make us believe that the destiny of the actors is dictated by chance—in other words, that there is no pre-established script. The worst thing of all is to know how the action will end. Fiction films play on the notion of chance above all as the translation of *what was not foreseen*. The rare things that are considered to be matters of chance in a fiction film are the death of an actor, or a political or climatic phenomenon, a catastrophe calling the script into question. The fiction industry thus preaches mastery of the notion of chance in the script while banning it in the production of the film itself. In Bérard's films, we see a much more refined use of that notion. He is indeed interested in the production of chance during the shoot. An aeroplane flying past behind the actors in a mountain scene engenders a crash scene in the next sequence. Thus the chance events occurring during the shoot feed new scenes into the film. This is always the principle of a film conceived backwards. The script can be written once the film has been edited (this is the principle of Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven"). The principle of constructing films backwards produces chance that "behaves as if there



Stéphane Bérard, *Les Ongles noirs*, film, 1999-2004.

was an intention" (Bergson). Here is another proof of Bérard's cinema: the system put in place gives this feeling of "programmed chance".

Another use of chance effects in the editing: the editing brings together scenes in an unexpected way, but each action carried out towards a certain end also produces effects that are not included in their end. For example, the image of Rambo the war film hero is the unintended effect of filming Sylvester Stallone at the Deauville Festival. In this sequence we witness a visual accident. We see Rambo instead of Stallone. As in Aris-

totle's definition, which links the word chance to that of accident. But what governs the film in the world of chance is this mechanical need to create in all his films scenes of fiction with insignificant causes and incalculable effects. The first two films were written in accordance with this principle. *L'Écart* is the story of two lovers breaking up and the man travelling round the world to be with the woman again. In *Mortinsteink* the accidental murder of a nightclub bouncer sees the hero taking refuge in the mountains. Like Camus' *Outsider*, he is not in control of his destiny. A tussle with a woman in the street (in the foreground) produces incalculable effects: the death of the bouncer and the murderer's flight into the mountains. And so one could go on citing examples of the way "chance" is produced in Bérard's films, for all the elements within them click into place with the feeling of confusion that characterises random experiments.

Chance is the director's military wing. Bérard's films are anarchic worlds in which phenomena follow on from one another by their own caprice, but are objectified by the filmmaker's decision. Through the editing, among other things, and by the nature of the images themselves (notably in the home movie-type images), Bérard simply "objectifies the inner state of the person (the spectator) who would have expected one of the two types of order, and encounters the other" (Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice*).

The effect produced by the films is a kind of intense suddenness. Suddenly, we see an image that connects with nothing we have seen before. Shots follow on just as "the song flows from the innate source: anterior to a concept (...). What instinctual thunder enclosing, simply life, pristine in its synthesis and far illuminating all" (Mallarmé). The time of films endures only by dint of inventing. By using chance to propel these films, Bérard calls into question the very nature of art: vision or fabrication?

In this regard it is amusing to compare Bérard's films to those of Alfred Hitchcock. Take an identical scene from their films, like the aeroplane scene in *North by Northwest*. Both have the same mathematical, demonstrative rigour. For Bérard, a simple plane filmed in the sky becomes a supply plane for his heroes. For Hitchcock, a simple crop-spraying plane becomes a plane out to kill his hero. As André S. Labarthe reminds us in his film *Hitchcock, Frame by Frame*, the films of the Master of Suspense "are the demonstration an operation with no leftovers" like a meal. Bérard's films also centre on this question which is constantly active: how does the cinema machine work? For Bérard's films, Labarthe would reply, "it is the cinema machine at work"; "a beauty that is increasingly conscious of its genesis", said Valéry. These films present us with a discourse on method.

Hence all this cinephile rhetoric!

Bérard is therefore an artist who develops projects through drawings and models and who, in the case that concerns us

here, makes films. We could go on redefining this word forever in order to determine what cinema is. But in the case of Bérard's films there can be no doubt: the problems he claims to solve are cinematographic.

Unlike certain artists who, since the 1930s, have tried to make film into a field of application for their theories, concepts and artistic models, Bérard takes on board the specificity of cinema to unfold his own artistic questions, which are plastic, musical and literary. It is in this sense that he has a filmmaker's sensibility. For all that, though, he should not be linked with certain artists who use cinema as a postmodernist object of meditation, slowing it down to an extreme degree. Bérard proposes the resurrection of a hen from the *Muppet Show* as a riposte to Ann Lee's emergence from her coma.³ He has the burlesque syndrome, the way others have the Stockholm syndrome. He is not totally lucid in the way he makes cinema his hostage. The proof of cinema must be sought elsewhere. Bérard plays on the duality and distance between his diegetic universe, the fruit of an untrammelled imagination, and the world where we live, which for us is a documentary aesthetic given. He maintains this duality in a chaotic universe where relations between living beings nourish chance. The films take place, therefore, in a world analogous to our own, with the same natural laws, including that famous chance. The events there are more stylised, more fantastical; the characters are often reduced to types. But everything that is supposed to exist in the same way as we do, in these immediately familiar documentary images—all this is in a sense recounted in an unreal way.

But the most important thing in Bérard's films is this involuntary inscription in an avant-garde movement, by calling into question forms of language and the hierarchy of established values. For the fundamental postulate is that art is a linguistic phenomenon, and is only that. As regards cinema, the critical apparatus has too systematically installed it in the sphere of literature, and too durably: the phenomenon continues! It is to combat this persistence that Bérard's films use orality.

They are composed by speaking, a kind of recorded discourse, between bar-room conversation and (African) storytelling. It is not plausible. The story is as "slipshod" as the image of this story. Bérard envisages fiction as a fiction that is articulated as such and seems to deconstruct itself in order to manifest Nothingness.

Consequently there is no event to talk about in these films because the (narrative, dramaturgical, psychological) elements are Nothingness. There is just an intuitive reasoning through the image that is simply the way Bérard has of organising "chance" in his films. Bérard is aware that "pure" chance taken as such produces nothing of interest. It would be naïve to count on it. Bérard therefore uses this principle of antedated shots to organise very precisely what will engender chance. We should of course believe the opposite. He shows viewers the opposite of that. The three films merely reveal a little more of the mechanics of cinema. For Bérard is

aware that the films are conceived backwards. The second aspect and ultimate proof of his cinema is that it presents itself as one big phrase, a single musical phrase. It makes visible a score. That is to say, the film is conceived the way Mallarmé conceived his poems within music. In these terms: "At bottom, prints: I think that every phrase or thought, if it has a rhythm, must model it after the object that it aims to reproduce, put down there naked, immediately, as if shooting forth in the mind, a bit like the attitude of this object [...] Literature thus *proves* itself: there is no other reason for writing on paper." Bérard's cinema thus proves itself. There is no other reason for filming.

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72 projets pour ne plus y penser, CNEAI, FRAC PACA, Espace Paul Ricard, 2004.