

Valérie Mréjen: On her film work and new projects

I. Presentation and Q&A at Durham University, 24 April 2011¹



The French artist Valérie Mréjen is both a published writer and an established filmmaker, and both media often overlap and interrelate in her work. Solo exhibitions of her visual art practice have been held at Tramway, Glasgow in 2000, Centre pour l'image contemporaine, Saint Gervais, Geneva in 2003 and Galerie Serge Le Borgne, Paris in 2004. In 2008, a major retrospective of her work, *La Place de la Concorde*, was held at the Jeu de Paume, Paris. She has just finished her latest project in Japan (villa Kujoyama, Kyoto). Her books include unusual 'autobiographical' portraits, *Mon Grand-père* (Allia, 1999), *L'Agrume* (Allia, 2001) and *Eau sauvage* (Allia, 2004). Short blocks of text that read as anecdotes characterize her writing, and they also inform her videos, which typically involve a fixed camera on a single subject who is relating a story.

Mréjen's early work is most interested in stereotypes, the banal, minute details of the everyday. Her short films, as seen in *Une noix* (1997), *Sympa* (1998), *Le Projet* (1999), *Portraits filmés* (2002), often seem intimate, featuring universal conversations or monologues, and they have been characterized by their aesthetically rigorous style, intensity, and thought-provoking dark humour. Her film shot in Tel Aviv with a confessional format, *Pork and Milk* (Aurora films, 2004), as reviewed by Richard Brody in *The New Yorker*, 'raises provocative questions about enlightenment and art' while offering 'a documentary of the rarest kind, in which the subject and the form converge. She interviews ten Israeli Jews who traded their ultra-Orthodox traditions for secular ways, and conveys their stories with long, unbroken takes, filmed at incisive angles using natural or available light. The technique holds at an analytical distance such moving tales as that of the young man who, as a child, rummaged through public garbage cans in order to read forbidden newspapers. The intimate, minimalist touches suggest the great, underlying themes without presuming to resolve them'.

In *Dieu* (2004), exhibited in 2009 at elles@centrepompidou, eight Israeli men and women recount their memories of the specific moments that led them to abandon their Orthodox Jewish faith. The incidents are ordinary – the switching on of a light, eating hummus in a restaurant, dancing at a party. As acknowledged by Valérie Mréjen herself, she is fascinated by such apparently trivial instances that have an irrevocable impact. ‘I find that in what people call the everyday or banality, there are hundreds of details which make everything and nothing’, she has noted. ‘It’s precisely these minute details which reveal everything that can be behind them.’

Marie-Claire Barnet [MCB]: Could you tell us about one of your latest projects in Japan, as you were the invited artist-in-residence at the villa Kujoyama, in Kyoto from September 2010 to January 2011. You had mentioned this was to be a filmed diary and to be inspired by Sei Shonagôn’s *The Pillow Book*, her famous notebook and diary of observations and musings (early 11th c), with her celebrated sense of philosophical depth and stunning images.

Valérie Mréjen [VM]: Our project in Japan (with Bertrand Schefer) changed actually. We became interested by young girls dressed as dolls that we saw in the streets. We found their costumes and make-up, the whole ritual fascinating. We ended up doing a series of portraits of these women; they were very strange and very sweet-looking. It will be an experimental film diary. I may add music and sound but that will be a short film, about 15 minutes. [Précisions et ajouts, septembre 2011² : Leur look extravagant évoque des fillettes de dessins animés (Candie) et les geishas, à cause du maquillage et des artifices (faux-cils, extensions capillaires...), en version très sexy. Elles ont quelque chose de très candide et innocent, bien entendu jamais vulgaire. Elles ne cherchent pas les regards ou la séduction : cette façon de s'habiller correspond à un moment de liberté assez court, entre le collège où il faut porter des uniformes, et le moment où elles commenceront à travailler. Le titre choisi, *Exercice de fascination au milieu de la foule*. Voir illustrations ci-dessous]



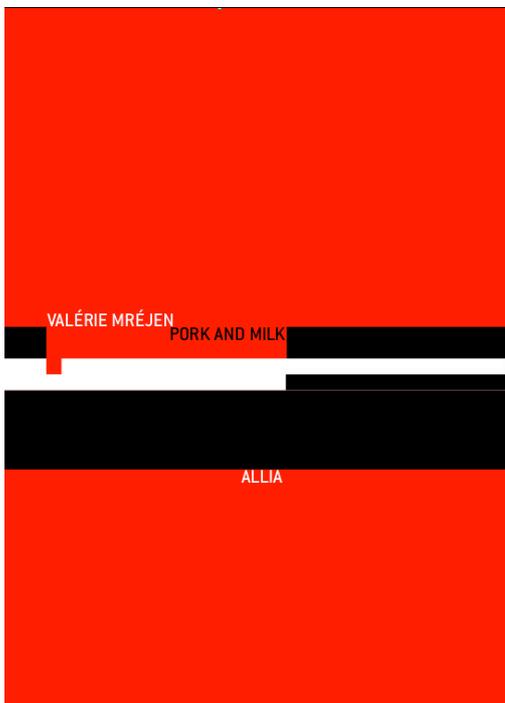


Pork and Milk

52' / 35 mm couleur / 2004

Production: Arte France, Aurora Films, Ina





MCB: Could you tell us more about the origins of one your celebrated films, *Pork and Milk* (2004), which was awarded several international prizes and was based on other ‘unusual’ encounters with people in Tel-Aviv. The filmic style may also remind us of your autobiographical writings, with the strongly paradoxical sense of intimacy and distance, all mixed and mixed up at the same time³.

VM: I was invited by a gallery in Tel-Aviv to make an exhibition. I was trying to find an idea for the project. I had the idea to interview people brought up in very religious circles, and who had left their faith ad these Ultra-Orthodox secluded communities. I made 12 minute interviews - very anecdotic and video formatted - where I'd asked people to tell me a memory (*Dieu*). I asked them to tell me about the first time they transgressed Jewish rules, like when they switched on a lamp or something, an everyday gesture which had a very strong meaning in this context. These encounters made me feel like doing a longer film since it was so interesting. These people also had a strong personality.

MCB: What you don't say, Valérie, is that it is extraordinary how these people reveal absolute taboos and deep secrets in front of your camera. It is an amazing project. How did you choose the title, *Pork and Milk*?

VM: it's because mixing these two, pork and milk, in a meal, it's the *summum* of transgression for Jewish people. [15 minutes of the beginning of the film are shown]

[J'ai repris une expression qu'avait employée une jeune femme rencontrée pendant les repérages, une jeune femme volontaire dans cette association qui aide les jeunes issus de milieux orthodoxes. Elle m'avait dit "when they arrive, they want to eat pork and milk NOW".]

Lucille Cairns [LC]: Was it a choice of having no women?

VM: No, it's only the beginning of the film we saw. There are a few women, only 3. But it's not balanced, that's right. I don't know if that was complete chance or representative of an imbalance. I met more men when I was prospecting for the film. Maybe it's more difficult for a woman.

LC: I wonder if it's easier for an Ultra-Orthodox man to become secular than for a woman?

VM: It's a very hard decision. They have to lose everything, their family warns them: they give up everything. Later in the film, we see a cook. He says he left home at the age of 14. He worked on the street, doing deliveries for a grocer or whatever, and he really slept on the street. I can imagine a young girl trying to do the same. Also, most of them leave before they get married because they realise that as soon as they are engaged or married, it would be too late. They have kids very soon afterwards. Some leave after a few years but for a woman who has a family, it may be more difficult.

MCB: For the cook, for instance, I remember his sisters who left afterwards to join him, precisely, as they had a basis with their brother.

LC: I don't mean there's such a 'group' or association as such, but I wonder, how did you find these 'escapees'?

VM: Well, actually, such a group exists. There is an association which helps them, the one I just mentioned. They try to find a welcoming family for some of them, because they're really all alone. Also people who can provide a psychological support and try to tell them not to hurry too much, in particular. Some do join these associations, and they used to go to a café on Friday night, where I went. You have to be together, and experience this. Actually, not on Friday, the Sabbath, on Thursday! For some of them, it was not that easy to give up the past. Some of them expect to still practise in a way.

Jan Clarke [JC]: Can some of them continue to practise as secular Jews? How many just reject their religion altogether?

VM: I think they don't really practise. And their notion of 'secularity' is very different from ours in this context. For them, it's really a question of doing or not doing certain things. Sometimes, I wondered if they believed in God. It wasn't even a question for them; it was much more about respecting the rules rather than 'secularity'. The people I met had kept a link with their origins, some with their family, when the families are open-minded enough (which is very rare).

MCB: It's a question of your editing too. Here we have a series of portraits, going from one person to the next. We meet one, and then, we'll see him again. The cooking scene also appears symbolically after the cook. How much detail did you keep? Did they say much more, and then you selected?

VM: I had prepared a lot with them before. Because I knew the shooting would be short. We also shot in 16mm so you couldn't use too many reels a day. They had prepared a lot and I knew what I wanted

each to repeat for the camera. But later in the film, I asked the one who's an actor to sing a religious song in a synagogue. It was important for him and for me to show that he was completely clear with his choice, happy in his new life, but still, also torn, all very close to something sentimental belonging to his past. He was so used to singing these religious songs. He was sad to be unable to see his family anymore. So yes I met people who completely rejected religion and their '*revendication*' came across in a very aggressive way too. I preferred to film people who were on the edge. For the anecdote, as it is funny: the last man we saw on the screen Hagai Levi: he used to be a projectionist (NB: to censor films too for his Ultra-Orthodox community) and he is now a producer. He had the idea for the TV series, *In Treatment*, by HBO. He wrote a series shown in Israel and then sold it to HBO!

LC: I found the first scenes stunning visually. I was struck by the frames. And that someone was so reluctant to show his face in case his family would recognise him because surely they could tell from his voice.

VM: of course, I was very surprised too. There is another couple at the end of the film. They were OK, everything was settled before, but at the last minute before shooting, they said it's too dangerous, we don't want to appear in the picture, so I filmed them in front of a window. But of course, if you know them, it's very obvious. You can recognise their voices and them. He had this '*exigence*' finally, at the end. It was also interesting for me to have this challenge about how to show only parts of someone. I realised it was telling something about someone: just bits of somebody, someone without a head. It was disturbing for me. I realised he really doesn't want to be identified.

JC: I thought it was really effective, how you could see his uniform and him breathing. You got the feeling that there's a real human being trapped in that uniform. Did any of them regret their decision?

VM: No, I don't think so.

MCB: To come back to the format: why did you choose to approach this topic as a documentary rather than a fiction, or another type of artistic project with short films?

VM: Because it was a complete *néophyte*. Well, it's hard to tell. I didn't know anything about this topic before. Then I had this idea and felt I had to meet these people. For me, it was natural to make a documentary to film them in their environments.

MCB: So, you had not thought of the format before? You had thought about the subject and the whole topic matter, but not the format it would then take, that's interesting.

VM: Yes. But I also had this idea because I met these people. That was very natural for me to have them in the film. Many people then told me about *Kadosh*, by Amos Gitai, which is a fiction. For me, it was much more powerful to record their testimony in a very frontal and direct way; the way I put the camera in front of them. They're also very direct and nice people.

MCB: With a confessional mode?

VM: Yes. It's not a 'pure' documentary in a sense because I had prepared, told them I would work with them as if they were actors, in a way, repeating sometimes we had simultaneous conversations then a cut, then I'd say OK, do it again, when they would add too many details on things. Because I wanted one shot for one story. It's also like people being actors of their own life stories. It's a lot about how we can work together, how to choose the way we can tell their story, and can rehearse before. Nothing too emotional, they have to have some distance from their own experience.

LC: Do you speak Hebrew?

VM: No, but I had taken lessons to learn before the shooting. Of course that wasn't enough to speak fluently. For me, it was important that they spoke Hebrew in the film. I found this assistant who translated for us.

Voilà c'est tout (That's All Folks)

6' / video colour / 2008- shown at the Jeu de Paume, Paris.

MCB: Where does this title come from? Tell us about the magic in a title. There's a quote from the filmed interviews or portraits.

VM: It's a series of interviews with teen-agers. I asked them questions, big questions about life, their future, very basic questions⁴. I had the opportunity to work with 2 classes in a *lycée*. They're 15-16. [One of them always ended his phrases with "that's all".]

MCB: I was struck by the gap, the *décalage* between expectations, appearances and the content of some answers from these very young students. The gap between, say, what one may expect, in a maybe very naïve way, from them and what they actually say, which could be so profound. It's not really irony here or only stereotypes, which you practise a lot. I am really struck by the type of *décalage*: what I mean is that one would expect more superficial comments, the big clichés as we have on music and so on, and then, all of a sudden, you've got deeply philosophical statements, very contradictory. I like the hybridity of it all. As I don't know how to read them anymore, what's coming next. I like that element of *décalage*, that element of surprise. Sometimes I feel like I know what's coming next (another music reference) but no, that's not that at all.

JC: I got the impression, for some of them, they told you what they thought you wanted to hear.

VM: I hope not!

JC: Some of it is conventional, Jimmy Hendrix, Bob Marley.

MCB: stereotypes, which they say they are themselves.

LC: One exception was the young black guy who didn't have any role model, and almost suggested, why do you need any role model?, like throwing back the question at you. Then, at another level, he was very tense. What made him afraid was, as he said, 'not being scared anymore'!? He looked terrified.

VM: to me, it was very moving. They were all sincere, even if they were using clichés. Take the question about role models, when you're a teenager, you're almost interested in more or less the same. You can read it like that, at some level, well, at this age... I don't remember exactly but I interviewed like this maybe 30 students. Some of them had answers like '*J'ai peur des araignées*', so I tried to find some more interesting answers.

LC: Did some of them become distressed? Like the little boy who sounded so sad, he said 'I have no good memory'.

VM: Maybe it was his personality. He was absent-minded.

David Cowling [DC]: A comment: the questions you were asking them, in a sense, superficially the kind of conventional questions - what's your best memory? And so on, the *mise-en scène* kind of emphasized this more - they were also soul searching questions and very personal. Because my best memory might be very personal, I might not want to tell you, have that recorded. What interested me in both your films is your own interest in autobiography and autobiographical narrative. As Marie-Claire pointed out in her introduction, you have 3 volumes of autobiographical writing. I'm very interested in the way in which you put each in a situation where they are kind of required to talk about intimate details. In the case of the Israel people, you said you practised with them and rehearsed their lines. In the case of school children, I'm assuming that in a sense, we are experiencing their answers in real time (VM: yes). You can see them, in a sense, struggling.

JC: That's why I said I thought they were not being completely honest.

DC: What they're having to do is, first of all, answer a question like that: they get floored, you see them think, what on earth was that, and think about what you also need to filter out, the stuff you don't really want to share with somebody. It was all challenging for them, let's put it like that, but I thought they did rather well. In terms of what you're interested in as a film maker, for what I have seen, it seems to me you're getting people in a position where they'll have to talk about themselves and looking at the mechanisms that come into play.

LC: As they are young children, I'd thought it would be natural to them in the context of reality TV and the idea of exposing yourself, having no boundaries.

VM: When I prepared this work I told them it wasn't going to be any kind of interrogation or exam but some questions about them. The questions were open enough for them to realise what they wanted to say. For instance, what are you afraid of? It could be anything, like spiders, or something more metaphysical. But they didn't have the questions before.

MCB: did you feel it was rehearsed?

Amanda Thomas: Not at all. I loved the way you can see them thinking.

MCB: I am thinking of the parallel to your whole series of *Portraits filmés* (2002). Can we talk about this effect or technique of *décalage*: I'm thinking of the way you frame them, all so controlled, with the effect of proximity and close-up on the face, they seemed so close too, literally, some of them so huge on the screen, or even entrapped; and yet, interestingly, there may be a distance, in the sense that they escaped by not telling what they thought, or thought what you wanted them tell, as we said.

JC: I was interested in the way some of them repeat the question. You could see actually they're thinking, ok, how am I going to respond to this, you could see the thought process working.

DC: That's also the editing technique, isn't it, without the benefit of the extra parts.

VM: Actually I didn't always know how I'd frame this. Some of them repeated my questions, I noticed. [Afin de varier les cadres, j'avais filmé en plans larges, moyens et serrés, en me disant qu'au montage nous pourrions ainsi alterner différentes valeurs. C'était aussi une façon de montrer le décor, qui était celui d'une salle de classe. Mais finalement, en voyant ces jeunes visages filmés en gros plan il s'est avéré qu'on avait plutôt envie d'être tout près d'eux plutôt qu'un peu plus loin ou beaucoup plus loin. Le hasard a voulu aussi que les jeunes qui avaient donné les réponses les plus intéressantes avaient plutôt été filmés en plans serrés. A une étape du montage, il restait encore quelques plans larges de deux élèves qui disaient des choses très bien, mais finalement nous avons choisi de les couper

pour que l'ensemble, formellement, soit plus homogène. L'impression qu'ils se répondent les uns les autres est renforcée par l'unité des valeurs de cadre. En fait un seul plan large au milieu de tous ces plans rapprochés devenait très dissonant, nous faisait bizarrement sortir du film.]

JC: There are some slips. Not mistakes, but some points when you think they'd be answering the questions that you've just heard said but it turns out that it's something else, and that's interesting. As a viewer, you're watching it, and you're trying to work out the questions they're answering. It draws you in, it sort of brings you into it.

French Courvoisier

15' / 35mm couleur / 2009

Production : Aurora Films. Scénario : Valérie Mréjen, Bertrand Schefer.



MCB: This had strong echoes, to me, Raymond Carver's style with his dark side and corners in the short stories. It's hard to avoid a heavily loaded question about the creative process, but how do you start inventing these stories and fictions for the screen. Is it visual at the beginning, or is it a narrative driven process? Or can the format be the basis? For *French Courvoisier*, was it a very well written plot before you started filming? It struck me again a bit like Rohmer, that type of intricate dialogues at times with the philosophical depth, something you'd never or hardly say aloud, and then, all of a sudden, we've got 'Passe moi la mandarine' too, I love that contrast.

VM: For this short film, it was a proposal from my producer because she had money to make a short film, so she asked me if I had an idea to do something quite quickly. It's a fiction but it's really

inspired by the main character, Édouard Levé, the absentee. This is inspired by a friend who committed suicide 2 years before, who was a writer and a photographer and who played in my first short films, *La Défaite du rouge-gorge* (Red Robin's Defeat) and *Il a fait beau*. I had this idea to do a tribute. It was something I wanted to do with Bertrand Schefer, my friend. We wanted to experiment and think again about 'la scène du repas' too because it's very difficult and we didn't want something too prepared. We wrote the dialogue. It was quite precise but we made a few readings with the actors at home and changed the dialogue a lot with them. When we could hear some lines, which were too long obviously, we adapted the scenario with them. And we also thought of this *dispositif* [filmic strategy] around the table with 2 cameras on our shoulders. I didn't want to cut and interrupt. I wanted the actors to keep all the energy of the performance, like on a theatre stage. I wanted to integrate the moments when someone would improvise, add something, for instance, there'd be no reaction, a total blank like during a dinner party sometimes. Or, on the contrary, they had learnt their lines but they could improvise, and I wanted to integrate when they'd laugh and so on. We shot the scene 6 times. That was the idea.

LC: Did you find that what they improvised you didn't like, is it the reason why you cut it?

VM: Yes, that's why we made it 6 times! To have more choices too.

[Mais il était intéressant aussi d'utiliser certains moments de gêne, ou l'un des comédiens par exemple avait tenté une improvisation qui était tombé complètement à plat...et de garder le léger flottement qui s'ensuivait. C'est le cas à un moment de la fin du film, ou on sent qu'un "ange passe".]

LC: Did you give them any framework or just let them improvise and say whatever they want?

VM: No, there was that precise grid. They know what to say when, at what moment, for example, when the character Antoine says, I read something in the newspapers, the one who then starts to say, 'what did you see?', a very hairy man etc., that was improvised. After that, he was supposed to tell the story. It was just to give extra little windows of freedom inside the script. The reason I wanted to experiment this style was because I had shot a lot of static, fixed shots before. It was very composed. I used to control everything. I liked the idea to let things happen. With Édouard, we shared this common taste for 'neutrality'. He used to make photos of people, looking completely unnatural, *figées*. Also, this was a reaction, not against, but to go in the opposite direction and have something lively. It's a mix between actors and friends who are not actors. Some of them knew Édouard, some didn't, but for me, it was very clear that this was a fiction. It was difficult to call the character with another name, so I kept 'Édouard', but it could have been any other name. [Il y a aussi, sur le générique de fin, un extrait lu par Bertrand Schefer du livre d'Edouard Levé, *Autoportrait*. Son nom et le titre du livre sont cités avec un remerciement à son éditeur, P.O.L., donc il me semblait aussi logique de garder le vrai prénom pour pouvoir faire le lien avec cette mention. Ainsi, en découvrant "extrait d'*Autoportrait*" par Edouard Levé au générique, on comprend, si on ne connaissait pas déjà cet auteur, qu'il existait vraiment et a inspiré le film.]

MCB: I was quite stuck by the colours, I don't know if you had the same reaction. The ladylike girl with the pony tail and glasses, a very salmon pink shirt; and another woman with a green dress. Some blue there stands out.

JC: There was something very painterly about the blue of the walls. Also I was struck by the fact it didn't feel like a room to me. A box, an enclosed space with a table, no decoration, and very cramped. You said

you had 2 hand held cameras, I was wondering, where were you? You must have been walking in that tiny space between the table and these walls.

LC: Space and time too. I had the feeling it was a period piece, something like in the 80's. As Marie-Claire said, there was the association with Rohmer, that type of scene, but was it meant to be in the contemporary period?

VM: I wanted it to be artificial, in an artificial place where you couldn't tell if it takes place in an apartment or elsewhere, because I don't want to give precise signs about their social context either. [Sinon, pour répondre à la question de ma place pendant les prises, j'étais dans le bureau attenant à la pièce principale, avec une partie de l'équipe (scripte, assistant...maquilleuse) en train de regarder les écrans de contrôle, car il était impossible de rester à côté de la table de peur d'être "vue" par l'une des deux caméras.]

JC: Though I spent 5 minutes thinking, where is a pharmacy next to la rue Saint Fiacre, because there isn't. Bizarre!

VM: It's a gallery. We just painted the walls blue. The reason why all the characters are simply around the table? They're in their 40s, very Parisian, you know. So I didn't want to put them in a 'Parisian' flat, with books, vintage furniture, it would have been really too much. It was to avoid being relegated to that type.

JC: it was very much like a painting.

DC: The set up immediately evokes Rohmer, but the tone of the thing was completely different. I found it a very uncomfortable environment to be in actually, because of the very un-homely nature of the walls. The proximity of the walls, the lack of feeling at home, and the person is living out of cardboard boxes. Was it conscious? Did you set it up to be an anti-Rohmer meal scene, in a way? His meal scenes are characterized by greater expansiveness of space and light, and the open air. This was much more closing on itself, and rather an uncomfortable experience I found.

JC: I kept thinking, can they open a window, but of course, they couldn't. The reference to boxes you don't actually see, it's almost an explanation, but not really.

LC: Like almost as if we're waiting for death, waiting for Godot, talking about this man who committed suicide. They were all in a very close and uncomfortable environment too. It was uncomfortable but fascinating.

MCB: Was it one of your expressed intentions, or do you leave it for free interpretation, as you don't control reactions obviously.

VM: That's the part I decided in fact, but of course, I can't tell how people will feel or react.

MCB: So many of your short pieces are full of humour, irony, all these labels critics have used to characterise your work, and the sense of the flagrant artificial too has been well stressed.

VM: Yes, I wanted them to have colourful clothes to have the opposite effect, *le contrepied*, to make a clear contrast to being so grey and sad about the very topic. This blue colour was also a way to enhance like in a portrait. They speak about somebody we never see, and it's more a portrait of this group in a way. They want us to be distracted by such objects. It has to be seen as a distraction.

JC: I kept thinking about still lives, there was something very painterly about it, especially with the bowl of fruit you've got on the table, all these shots with the fruit, at one point handling and stroking it. What I particularly love was the shift in the motion. We've got points when they are being reflexive, then you've got this kind of group hysteria arising and laughing, then it falls flat again. That was so natural. They each had their characteristics, as well as within the group identity: the girl in pink much more reflective and serious, and the one in purple slightly more hysterical, making gestures with her hand to her face. You've got individual identities but they also came together as this group identity, that was really interesting, the crescendos and motions.

MCB: Is that what reminded you of plays too? There're so many elements of the stage.

JC: Precisely, it's like a scene, it has this concentration and the single décor. There was a kind of classicism about it too in many ways.

VM; I wanted the conversation to have these modulations sometimes they burst out laughing, sometimes they reflect. [Lorsque nous avons répété le texte avec les comédiens, nous avons beaucoup redistribué les répliques en fonction de leurs caractères et de leurs personnalités, par rapport à notre scénario d'origine. Ainsi, chacun, d'une certaine manière, joue son propre rôle. Nous n'avons pas cherché à leur demander de composer un personnage ou d'être à contre-emploi par rapport à leur nature profonde.]

MCB: that put me really ill at ease sometimes. I had a sense of pervading unease underneath. What did you think? Was it an uneasy piece to watch? [Uncanny, but not another déjà vu: I thought too very strongly, because of the colours and setting, the subject matter, of Bill Viola redoing some classic paintings in videos]

Virginie Sauzon; I was interested in the language and the conversation. How it is linked to memory and how it is used to express memory or cannot express memory. It also means it's all over when you tell again, all the stories, but it's fascinating.

LC: uncomfortable, to use David's word. It was almost a kind of embarrassment, feeling there was an effort to be humorous. This was to make a special occasion, to mark and honour this dead man, who presumably would also value humour, and yet, the sadness that was there on them all- just like this oscillation, between the laughter, the flippancy, and the hysteria, and then, the glum, with lots of pessimistic reflections, the sense that this is the end.

VM: I think that on the set, the actors laughed and were a little hysterical also because they were tense. Because of the topic, because some of them knew where it came from. I was interested in using this element. Of course, the Courvoisier was apple juice at first. For the last take, they told me, OK, you can put real whiskey now.

LC: Tell me, the guy who died, was he English? A slight confusion. Or did he like to imitate the English?

VM: No, no, he just liked to imitate the American accent!

MCB: to conclude, can we just ask about the latest film selected for Cannes festival. Can we safely say it's probably not going to be a comedy? Is that in that style, that similar vein?

VM: It's hard to put into a precise category. No, it's not a comedy. It's not a documentary, it's a fiction. There's a mix again. It's a story of a teen-ager, a young girl meeting a photographer; he takes pictures of industrial landscapes.

LC: Is it a *long métrage*? What's the title?

VM: Yes, the title is *En ville*.

MCB: is it like a *filature* then? With a stalker, or is she the stalker, which could add a twist?

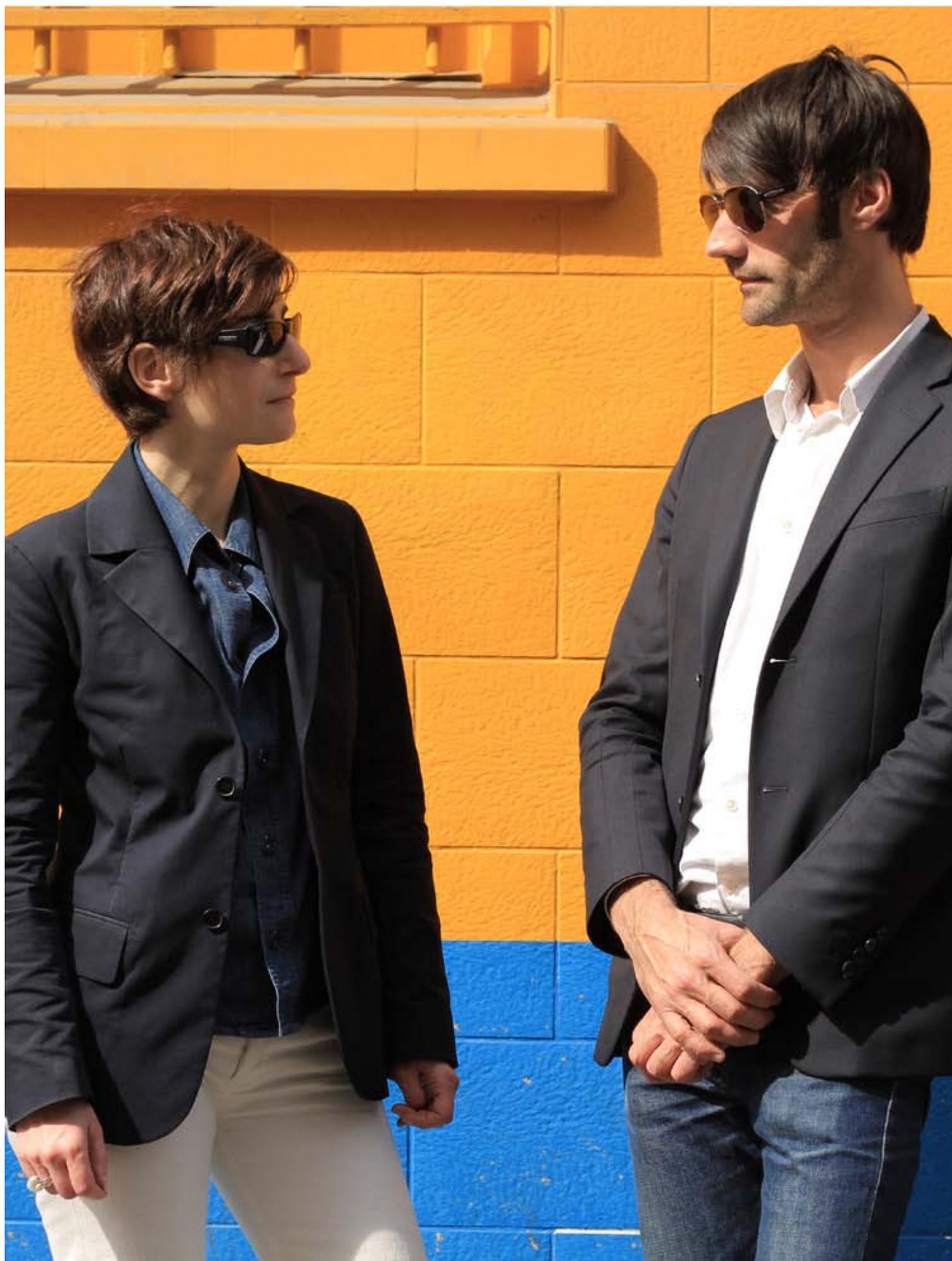
VM: No, but how can I say that? It's *une amitié amoureuse*, but it's completely by chance. They meet and meet again. A series of encounters, when he takes pictures. It's not really 'a love story'. We don't know what happened. We leave it like that: it's more about this girl, the teen-ager and her friends, there are many young actors again!

MCB: Rohmer echoes again? We may think about Jacques Doillon too of course, with the focus on teen-agers. This reminds me also of Christophe Honoré, *La Belle personne*, the linguistic gap in the lycée atmosphere, another type of *décalage* and *cinéma décalé*.

VM: Yes, there are influences by Rohmer in the film, because I really like his films, some aspects, especially the dialogue, the use of language. For instance, in our film, the teen-agers don't express themselves the way they do in most films, *en verlan par exemple*. Here they are very *posés* or proper, a little artificial in a way, but not too much. They were really thinking about serious questions. The new film is out in July (2011). [See photos from *En ville*, and at Cannes]







II. Questions-réponses, 2 ou 3 choses que l'on aimerait savoir en plus⁵ :

1- CANNES

MCB : Une question sur *En ville* et l'expérience de la sélection à Cannes, et post-Cannes : en quoi la sélection officielle change-t-elle l'expérience du film, ou ton regard de cinéaste ? Un passage obligé ? Un tremplin pour une autre distribution ?

VM : Le film a été sélectionné à la Quinzaine des réalisateurs, qui est donc l'une des sélections parallèles à la sélection officielle. Cela a bien sûr été une grande joie que de se retrouver dans cette programmation. C'était d'autant plus important que nous venons, Bertrand et moi, d'univers un peu parallèles justement (arts visuels et littérature), et pour nous il y avait l'idée d'une reconnaissance par le milieu du cinéma d'un objet un peu différent, ce qui a énormément compté. C'était comme d'avoir réussi notre examen d'entrée dans ce monde-là. Ensuite, Cannes est aussi un peu une épreuve malgré la satisfaction et la fierté d'y être. Il y a une telle disproportion entre le temps qu'on met à faire un film et sa réception au milieu de l'hystérie (c'est le règne du "j'aime / j'aime pas"), que tout est fortement accentué. Même si bien sûr, on sait que celui qu'on présente n'est qu'un film parmi des milliers d'autres, on est directement et assez violemment confronté à la façon dont sont consommés ces objets, et à leur appréciation expéditive. On entend les gens parler des autres films, et on se dit que forcément le notre est traité à la même enseigne. Nous avons vécu ce séjour comme un super ciné-stage de ce qui nous attend dans les années à venir si nous continuons à faire des films : il faut se préparer à cette chose dont parlait si bien Truffaut, lorsqu'il disait "les gens ont deux métiers, le leur, et critique de cinéma".

2- LANGUES & LANGAGE

MCB : La question des emplois plurilingues. David Cowling a souligné, par ailleurs, le sous-titrage en anglais, qui paraissait parfois décalé dans le registre. Le 'f word', par exemple, qui ne sonne pas exactement juste pour rendre le français: 'je n'ai rien foutu'. Que penses-tu de ce stade de ton film, traduit dans une autre langue ? Pourrais-tu clarifier le processus et tes choix. Y-a-t-il eu de nombreuses recherches et palimpsestes pour traduire *Pork and Milk* ? Et pourquoi le choix d'un titre en anglais, ou parfois bilingue, pour un tournage sans frontière linguistique ?

VM : La traductrice qui a fait les sous-titres de tous mes films jusqu'à présent, Sionann O'Neill, est américaine et je pense que ses adaptations sont naturellement plutôt inspirées par des tournures typiquement américaines. Par exemple, lorsqu'une des filles demande "est-ce que quelqu'un peut ouvrir la fenêtre?" et que l'un des garçons lui répond "oui, toi" (déclenchant l'hilarité générale), nous avons remplacé sa réponse par "Yes we can". Quant à *Pork and Milk*, c'était un étrange cas de figure pour nous deux puisque ni elle ni moi ne comprenions tout à fait la version originale...en hébreu. J'avais une traduction française sous les yeux, et à force d'entendre les paroles au montage j'étais devenue familière avec ces sonorités, mais nous devons nous fier à la première traduction en français. Là aussi, comme à beaucoup d'étapes d'un film, il s'agit d'une collaboration et nous effectuons les choix bien sûr pour respecter le sens d'origine, mais aussi selon un certain état d'esprit. Je pense qu'avec Sionann, nous sommes sur la même longueur d'onde pour ce qui est de privilégier plutôt une

formule décalée (on y revient!) ou qui "claque" de manière efficace, quitte à prendre des libertés interprétatives, plutôt que simplement littérale.

3- INFLUENCES

MCB : Un auteur sous influence(s), et le travail à quatre mains ? Pourrais-tu nous dire ce qui varie, change radicalement, et les effets de co-signer un script, tout un film, à 2 ; ou n'est-ce pas si étranger de l'expérience de travailler toujours en équipe ? Les 'auteurs' ont fortement marqué la notion du cinéma français, que penses-tu de ces 'anciens' labels, leur pertinence aujourd'hui ? Quels sont les autres 'auteurs' qui continuent d'influencer ta démarche et tes expérimentations, ou est-ce aussi un facteur changeant et volatile ? Une de tes questions : 'Quels sont tes modèles ?'...

VM : Pour ce qui est de l'écriture en effet, ce n'est pas si différent du fait de travailler avec un monteur, un chef opérateur...c'est pour moi une façon d'avancer plus vite en se renvoyant la balle, c'est plus stimulant et efficace : on abandonne sans états d'âme les fausses bonnes idées sans avoir à se les traîner pendant des semaines, et on rigole, notamment en écrivant les dialogues! Cela participe de cette remise en question permanente qu'il faut effectuer à chaque étape quand on fait un film. La personne en face de vous dit "ah quelle bonne idée, faisons ça" ; on est doublement content. Elle dit au contraire "ah non, franchement, ça fait téléfilm..." on est un peu vexé, mais on reconnaît plus vite ses égarements.

Pour ce qui est des modèles, cela change en fonction des films que je vois et revois...même s'il y a un panthéon indéboulonnable (Eustache, Akerman, Garrel, Cassavetes, Cavalier, Wiseman...). Par exemple, pour *En ville*, nous avons beaucoup repensé à *Alice dans les villes* de Wenders, et aussi à *Dans la ville blanche* de Tanner. Deux films très représentatifs d'une même époque, sur l'errance, une forme de liberté, l'attente, les rencontres de hasard...

Rohmer reste aussi bien évidemment une référence que je ne pourrais pas renier, même si je le voulais! J'aime notamment beaucoup *Ma nuit chez Maud*, *l'Amour l'après-midi*, et *Les Nuits de la pleine lune*.

4- CONCLUSION: *That's All Folks, Part II*

MCB : En renvoi de ping-pong, 3 questions de tes portraits filmés. A/ De quoi as-tu peur ? B/ Quel est ton meilleur souvenir ? C/ Ce que tu attends de l'avenir ? Avec 2-3 questions tirées d'*En ville* : 1/La qualité que tu préfères chez un homme/une femme? 2/ Ce que tu détestes le plus? 3/Quel est le don que tu aimerais avoir ?

VM : A : J'ai peur de me répéter, ou de ne plus me rendre compte de si ce que j'ai fait est bien ou pas. (Grande angoisse lorsque les gens n'ont pas aimé un livre ou un film : on se dit "si ça se trouve, j'ai fait un pauvre film / livre et que je n'ai même pas conscience").

B : Récemment, lorsqu'Alain Cavalier m'a appelée pour me parler d'*En ville*, qu'il venait d'aller voir. Il est vraiment d'une générosité et d'une gentillesse...

C : Continuer à produire des choses, livres, films, projets, en essayant d'aller chaque fois plus loin que là où je m'étais arrêtée la fois précédente.

1/ chez un homme : la douceur

chez une femme : la force d'arriver à tout faire en même temps

2 / la lourdeur, le manque de sensibilité

3/ une forme de culot qu'il m'arrive d'admirer chez certaines personnes et qui me fait défaut.

Dernières annonces:

Ecoutez les archives en podcasts de *France Culture*, *Pas la peine de crier*, de Marie Richeux, 20/06/11 : <http://www.franceculture.com/player?p=reecoute-4271471#>

Parution du prochain livre de Valérie Mréjen en mars 2012

(P.O.L.) : *Forêt noire*

¹ Organized by Marie-Claire Barnet, Durham University. My warmest thanks to Valérie Mréjen's generosity, her time with us made this most enriching contribution possible. I am also deeply grateful to participants and colleagues who contributed to our lively and thorough discussion of Valérie's films presented, Lucille Cairns, Jan Clarke, David Cowling, Virginie Sauzon and Amanda Thomas, quoted in the transcript of the event (LC, JC and DC).

² Note the added details & *précisions* given by Valérie in writing, September 2011, all further comments indicated as such in brackets and in green.

³ See full bio and biographical references above.

⁴ Questions such as who are your role models, what are you afraid of, what are your hopes for the future, or what is your best memory, are answered by a group of teen-agers, shot as fixed and enlarged talking heads. We only hear their answers but, at times, some repeat the questions implicitly asked.

⁵ Extra questions with written answers, September 2011. Mes remerciements à Valérie qui s'est laissé prendre au jeu.