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# Memory, language, utopia: deferred idylls in three films by Jacques Rozier

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Thesis

**MEMORY, LANGUAGE, UTOPIA:  
DEFERRED IDYLLS IN THREE FILMS BY JACQUES ROZIER**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyzes three films made by director Jacques Rozier in the decades following the French New Wave: *Du côté d'Orouët* (1971), *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* (1976), and *Maine Océan* (1986). I pay special attention to the development of the theme of illusory or unreachable idylls and utopias over the course of the three films. Paralleling Rozier's status as a late modernist, kept due to bad timing from profiting off the New Wave boom, the films center on the frustration of utopian dreams. They conceptualize various idylls, ranging from perfect times in one's life to imagined paradises of self-sufficient labor, as being distant and impossible to realize through the use of various cinematic techniques to simulate memory, create distance, or establish a parodic sensibility. Then, in the last of these films, Rozier finally envisions a utopia that can exist, one of cooperative labor among workers that transcends linguistic boundaries. This thesis employs close analysis based on the work of celebrated film theorists like Siegfried Kracauer and Stanley Cavell to better understand the modernist techniques employed to develop this theme and to make the case for Rozier as a neglected master of cinematic modernism.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction: A Modernist Left Behind

The capacity of film to reflect upon itself, to conceive of itself in relation to an intellectual past that long predates it, has been for decades the subject of intense analysis and contentious philosophical debate. A thinker as illustrious and eclectic as Stanley Cavell (2005a) aptly described the cinema's intense philosophical allure as well as its more elusive quality of energetic, restless modernity: "What I found in turning to think...about film a dozen or so years ago was a medium which seemed simultaneously to be free of the imperative to philosophy and at the same time inevitably to reflect upon itself—as though the condition of philosophy were its natural condition" (41). In this conception of cinema, the dense, all-consuming power of philosophical reflection does not weigh it down, even as cinema naturally assumes the habit of self-reflection. This apparent paradox can best be demonstrated by looking at the work of a paragon of modernism, one of the cinema's most intellectually rigorous, but also irreverent (and, unfortunately, neglected) artists: Jacques Rozier.

In major works like *Du côté d'Orouët* (1971), *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* (1976), and *Maine Océan* (1986), Rozier explores an eclectic array of ideas, including the distortions of memory, the tyranny of language, the fear of encroaching adulthood, bureaucracy, colonialism, female friendship, leisure, and democracy. All the while, he employs a demotic, seemingly improvisatory style that takes full advantage of film's indexical capabilities and the immense humor and energy of his actors, while also embellishing it with brilliant formal effects. Rozier masterfully shifts emphasis from the meaning of utterances onto their material characteristics, decentering our interpretive

faculties so as to better engage our sensory perception. He also employs self-reflexive strategies like fourth wall breaks and intertitles in order to highlight processes of identification and storytelling. All this serves to enhance and enrich the poignancy of his central theme: the elusive nature of utopia. All these films center on the loss or deferral of idylls, whether they be an ideal time in one's life (the exuberant youth of *Du côté d'Orouët*) or an imagined paradise of self-sufficiency (the desert island of *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue*). Rozier engages with various conceptions of utopia and derives the emotional power of his narratives from the impossibility of reaching them. Only in *Maine Océan* does Rozier finally locate a real utopia on Earth in the form of cooperative labor.

Rozier's films plainly exhibit debts to various filmmakers. In his work, we can frequently locate the carnivalesque humanism of Jean Renoir. He shares Jean Epstein's preoccupation with the poetic possibilities inherent in the sea and in the lives of sailors. Like René Clair, he is interested in drawing the viewer's attention to the formal qualities of speech, so as better to exploit cinema's faculties of recording fine details. He also sometimes adopts Luis Buñuel's anthropological posture and surreal treatment of his characters as beasts. However, no single influence seems more crucial than that of Jean Vigo. It is that master's facility in weaving the dreamy and inexplicable into the fabric of everyday life that Rozier excels most at recreating. In the 1960s, Rozier directed an episode of the documentary series *Cinéastes de notre temps* on Vigo, which he describes (2001b) as a tribute to the director, as well as a sort of correction of the record on his brief career (111-112). Rozier's early short films, *Rentrée des classes* (1955) and *Blue Jeans* (1958), are obviously in the vein of Vigo's anarchic boyhood fantasy *Zéro de*



*conduite* (1933). As scholar Jacques Mandelbaum (2001; my translation) explains: “The obvious affinities that exist...between these two films [*Zéro de conduite* and *Rentrée des classes*] concerned with childhood cruelty and school-skipping anarchy, make Rozier, three years before Truffaut’s *Les Mistons* (1958), the intermediary that links Vigo to the New Wave, in this new genealogy of French cinema that was then being written in the columns of *Cahiers du cinéma*” (11).<sup>1</sup>

Rozier’s early work fits broadly into the French New Wave, though he was never one of its more famous exponents. Scholar Sylvie Blum-Reid (2016) describes Rozier as “a traveler within French cinema, part of the New Wave but also a loner” (158). He was certainly appreciated by some of the New Wave’s leading lights, though. Jean-Luc Godard wrote about *Blue Jeans* for *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1959:

*Blue Jeans* belongs to a category of short film which is false in principle, being half-way between documentary and narrative fiction...Rozier has staked everything on lucidity within improvisation. *Blue Jeans* is consequently a short film as fresh, young and handsome as those bodies of twenty-year-olds which Rimbaud spoke of. Here the truth of the document makes common cause with the grace of the narration...True the dialogue and the attitudes; graceful the realism of the photography and the shutters which poetically scan the afternoon on the warm sand. (114)

Godard also gets at one of the central themes of Rozier’s early work, which will be most stunningly realized in *Du côté d’Orouët*, the fear of aging and becoming an adult:

“Jacques Rozier’s *Blue Jeans*...is a film about time passing—in doing what? In

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent quotations from French sources are my translations unless otherwise noted in the bibliography. I provide the original text of each quote I translate in footnotes: “Les évidentes affinités qui existent...entre ces deux films sous le signe de la cruauté enfantine et de l’anarchisme buissonnier, font de Rozier, trois ans avant *Les Mistons* (1958) de Truffaut, le trait d’union qui relie Vigo à la Nouvelle Vague, dans cette nouvelle généalogie du cinéma français qui est alors en train de s’écrire dans les colonnes des *Cahiers du cinéma*”

exchanging kisses. So its moral, both gay and sad, is that of Louis Aragon's quatrain: 'In the crossways of kisses/The years pass too quickly/Beware beware beware/Shattered memories'" (114-115). Clearly, the theme of the lost idyll was present in Rozier's work from the very beginning. Godard's admiration was fortunate for the young director, as the success of Godard's first feature empowered Rozier to make his own. As Mandelbaum narrates: "it was Godard, who had just made *Breathless*, who enabled him [Rozier] to get his foot in the door by introducing him to his producer, Georges de Beauregard" (12).<sup>2</sup> With de Beauregard, Rozier made *Adieu Philippine*, an epochal work that, unfortunately, missed out on its epoch.

In sensibility, Rozier could be perceived as more commercial than many of his compatriots in the New Wave or in post-New Wave French cinema. His films are broadly comic, if not outright farcical, and are typically very light on the surface. His first two features focused on young women navigating relationships and young adulthood while on vacation—not a subject typically afforded the weight of major arthouse fare but also not alienating to a general audience. His films do not announce themselves as being serious or rigorous in the way that Godard's, Resnais's, or Rohmer's typically do. Rather, he seems to take his place alongside the likes of Truffaut, Demy, Varda—the sunnier, more conventionally entertaining side of the young French cinema. However, until *Maine Océan* in 1986, his films were less commercially successful than just about anyone's. In fact, the history of Rozier's career is one of near-constant setbacks and missed chances. It

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<sup>2</sup> "c'est Godard, lequel vient de tourner *A bout de souffle*, qui lui met le pied à l'étrier, en lui présentant son producteur, Georges de Beauregard"

ultimately forms a striking, if rather dispiriting, parallel with his persistent theme. Just like all those unattainable utopias, commercial success eluded him, until the film where he determined utopia to be in reach.

As Mandelbaum narrates, *Adieu Philippine* had an extended post-production, as Rozier had to overdub dialogue that had not been recorded on set. As much of the film had been improvised, he typically had to rely on lip-reading to determine what actors had been saying. This laborious process, which took half a year, resulted in a two-hour cut. De Beauregard demanded further cuts, Rozier refused, the distributor they had contracted backed out, and de Beauregard washed his hands of the film. It premiered at Cannes in 1962, where it found no other distributor (12). The film was finally released, to little fanfare, in September of 1963, by which time the New Wave was already receding, many of its brightest luminaries having fallen off commercially.

Mandelbaum situates Rozier among a whole generation of modernists who missed out on the initial burst of the New Wave: “Released too late to coincide exactly with the political and artistic upheavals of the period, *Adieu Philippine* placed Rozier under the sign of the continuity error and the delayed effect. The solitary fate that followed paradoxically made this pioneer of the New Wave a prophetic figure of the great orphans who succeeded the movement, Jean Eustache and Maurice Pialat” (13).<sup>3</sup> Like Eustache and Pialat, Rozier got little recognition and little opportunity to make films during the

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<sup>3</sup> “Sorti trop tard pour coïncider exactement avec les bouleversements politiques et artistiques de l’époque, *Adieu Philippine* place Rozier sous le signe du faux raccord et de l’effet-retard. La solitude de destin qui s’ensuit fait paradoxalement de ce pionnier de la Nouvelle Vague une figure annonciatrice des grands orphelins qui succèdent au mouvement, Jean Eustache et Maurice Pialat”

New Wave proper. It is also true that Rozier's improvisatory style, respecting the spontaneous outbursts of his actors, resonates to a degree with the very actor-centric work of these directors. However, he shares none of the ugly rawness that characterizes their films. Indeed, he stands out among the crowd of post-New Wave French filmmakers for how much he eschews the darker side of humanity, filtering it, when it does surface in his films, through irreverent parody. Even so, Rozier has missed out on the acclaim that even these challenging auteurs received in the 1970s. Blum-Reid notes of Rozier that "his original film style and approach to filmmaking have slowed down and affected most of his film production and distribution throughout his career" (159).

*Du côté d'Orouët* was Rozier's first feature since *Adieu Philippine*. Embarking on it, Rozier was not in any danger of failing to replicate a past commercial success. Still, the degree to which *Du côté d'Orouët* limped into the world without plaudits is dispiriting and would belie the film's true status as a major masterpiece of French cinema. Its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in 1971 was, Rozier (2001a) later reported, a disaster, due to problems with the sound, which had been recorded directly onto the sixteen-millimeter film stock. The experience was evidently so traumatic, that when the film finally got a limited release in 1973, Rozier claims he did not even want to attend the second premier. Only in 1996 was a version released, blown up onto 35 millimeter, that satisfied the director (42). Critic Isabelle Regnier (2001) interviewed the film's assistant director, Jean-François Stévenin, who describes the philosophy with which Rozier approached it: "He rewrites to suit the people and according to the goodwill he has for them. Then, like a head chef, a skipper, he creates an atmosphere. All of a

sudden, without knowing why, while the wind in Orouët blows and two girls recount childhood memories to each other underneath a quilt, we want to cry” (65).<sup>4</sup> Stévenin’s description here does not correspond exactly to any scene in the film, but it speaks very well to its overall effect of melancholy, capturing on film moments so ephemeral they seem in danger of dissolving before our eyes. Unfortunately, this dissolution mirrors the film’s commercial fate.

Rozier’s next feature, *Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue*, suffered an equally disastrous fate. Plagued by production problems, including the defection of its star, Pierre Richard, midway through the shoot, the film nevertheless seems like it should have been successful. Richard was a popular comic actor, and the film has an appealing comic premise. It tells of how a couple of travel agents come up with a scheme to sell vacation packages to desert islands where clients can live out their dreams of being like Robinson Crusoe. However, the film hardly made it to screens. As Jacques Mandelbaum recounts: “*Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue* ended up being forbidden exhibition due to the bankruptcy of its production company” (13-14).<sup>5</sup> For a film in which the promise of utopia is vulgarized by commercialism, having no commercial release whatsoever is a fitting, if deeply unfortunate, end.

Rozier and actress Lydia Feld began working on the script for *Maine Océan* in

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<sup>4</sup> “Il réécrit en fonction des gens et de l’amitié qu’il a pour eux. Puis, comme un chef-cuisinier, un skipper, il crée une ambiance. D’un seul coup, sans savoir pourquoi, alors qu’à Orouët le vent souffle et que deux filles se racontent des souvenirs d’enfance sous une couette, on a envie de pleurer”

<sup>5</sup> “*Les Naufragés de l’Île de la tortue* finit par être interdit d’exploitation pour cause de faillite de sa société de production”

1980, after Rozier was seized by a sudden impulse to make a film set on a train. In their original conception, it was intended to be a telefilm, as most of Rozier's time after the debacle of his last feature had been taken up with television work. This never came to fruition. However, a series of meetings with producer Paulo Branco in 1984 renewed the idea, and the project went into production as a feature film (Rozier 2001a, 44-45). Thanks to Branco's stewardship, *Maine Océan* was a first for Rozier: a relatively organized production and a finished product that received proper distribution. It even achieved the commercial success that had always eluded Rozier. Mandelbaum explains, comparing this film to Rozier's earlier disastrous flops: "Only *Maine Océan*, made in 1985, is an exception, reestablishing—thanks to the devil-may-care effectiveness of Paulo Branco who decided, as frugally as possible, on the crew, the budget, and the schedule—the conventional system of production and distribution, which was surely not for nothing given the film's very respectable reception from audiences" (14).<sup>6</sup>

Though *Maine Océan*'s production was considerably more organized than that of any of Rozier's prior films, it still proceeded according to some fairly unorthodox methods. Critic Emmanuel Burdeau (2001) draws from the testimony of some of Rozier's collaborators: "Stévenin says it well: the exhausting shoot of *Du côté d'Orouët* quickly erased any reasonable distinction between work time and leisure time. [Yves] Afonso goes further: so that Rozier's system functions fully, the actors must be available twenty-

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<sup>6</sup> "Seul *Maine Océan*, réalisé en 1985, renoue exceptionnellement—grâce à l'efficacité cavalière de Paulo Branco qui en détermine au plus juste l'équipe, le budget et les délais—avec le système de production et de distribution classiques, ce qui n'est sûrement pas pour rien dans l'accueil très honorable du film par le public"

four hours a day” (151).<sup>7</sup> Not only did Rozier expect his actors to make themselves fully available in terms of scheduling, he also expected it in terms of bringing their authentic personalities to bear in the performance of their characters. Isabelle Regnier also interviewed Humbert Balsan, who would later produce Rozier’s TV series *Joséphine en tournée*. He describes Rozier’s filmmaking philosophy and its consequences: “In order to get big results from his actors, he sometimes exacerbates real life situations. After a while, it becomes difficult to discern what is intentional and what isn’t” (66).<sup>8</sup>

Actor Bernard Menez had this to say about what it was like acting for Rozier: “Generally, we don’t have a script in hand. Rozier gives the actors a general direction. Most of the time, we only learn the lines the day before or even the morning of the shoot. Of course, this isn’t ideal for putting yourself in the character’s skin. But at least, no one can hold us responsible for not knowing our lines. The actors are released from their responsibilities. They leave them entirely to the director” (66).<sup>9</sup> This lack of responsibility fosters an openness to spontaneity consonant with Rozier’s improvisatory style. Collaborator Pascal Thomas described Rozier’s approach towards film direction and his interest in preserving chance and surprise: “He doesn’t want to manage

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<sup>7</sup> “Stévenin le dit bien : l’harassant tournage de *Du côté d’Orouët* a vite effacé toute distinction raisonnable entre les moments de travail et ceux de repos. Afonso va plus loin : pour que fonctionne pleinement le système de Rozier, il faudrait que les acteurs soient disponibles vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre”

<sup>8</sup> “Pour obtenir des choses fortes de ses interprètes, il lui arrive d’exacerber des situations réelles. Au bout d’un moment, il devient difficile de discerner ce qui est intentionnel de ce qui ne l’est pas”

<sup>9</sup> “En général, nous n’avons pas de scénario entre les mains. Rozier donne aux acteurs une direction d’ensemble. Le plus souvent, nous ne prenons connaissance des dialogues que la veille ou le matin même du tournage. Bien sûr, ce n’est pas idéal pour se mettre dans la peau du personnage. Mais, au moins, on ne peut pas nous tenir responsable de ne pas savoir notre texte. Les acteurs sont dégagés de leurs responsabilités, ils s’en remettent entièrement au réalisateur”

everything in advance like Fritz Lang or John Stahl. He doesn't make studio cinema. In his films, each element counts: the mood of the actors, their physical state, their relationships, the weather. The film is created in the moment. Rozier perceives everyone's state and reacts quickly, more quickly than the majority of directors" (65).<sup>10</sup> Many of the most poignant emotional climaxes in Rozier's films can be credited to this quick reaction time. It became particularly necessary for Rozier given the many obstacles faced during his chaotic productions. As Burdeau recounts: "For his part, the director himself recounts how his film's scripts had to be modified due to the defection of this actor or the premature departure of this other. This is obviously one of the laws of 'modernity': every film reproduces the conditions of its production and direction, becoming the faithful diary of the incidents that occurred in the course of its making" (151).<sup>11</sup> The "defection" of Pierre Richard during the shoot of *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* was one such disaster which ended up determining the shape of the film.

This brings up a key issue though, and what qualifies Rozier as an exemplar of cinematic modernism. What Burdeau describes as a "law" of modernity, wherein the conditions under which a film was made are inscribed into the text itself, is not just an effect of spontaneity leaving its aesthetic imprint on a film. As Burdeau further elucidates: "We lend 'modern' cinema a too-convenient mystique of the unplanned.

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<sup>10</sup> "Il ne veut pas tout maîtriser à l'avance comme Fritz Lang ou John Stahl. Il ne fait pas du cinéma de studio. Dans ses films, chaque élément compte : l'humeur des acteurs, leur état physique, leurs relations, le temps qu'il fait. Le film se fabrique dans l'instant. Rozier perçoit l'état de chacun et réagit vite, plus vite que la plupart des metteurs en scène"

<sup>11</sup> "En retour, le cinéaste lui-même raconte comment les scénarios de ses films ont dû être modifiés en raison de la défection de tel acteur, du départ prématuré de tel autre. C'est évidemment une des lois de la 'modernité' : tout film devient le calque de ses conditions de production et de réalisation, le fidèle journal des incidents survenus en cours de fabrication"



Something else is in play here: the dream of a film's perfect adhesion to its shoot" (152).<sup>12</sup> The shoot here is conceptualized as a distinct moment in time, a period that, rather than being lost like Rozier's other lost idylls, is recorded and preserved for all time. We may return again and again to a Rozier film like we return to a fond recollection. Just as the memory may be faded with age, so too may the film enact processes of distance that simulate memory's failure. Yet, it enacts those processes in perpetuity. A film like *Du côté d'Orouët* is a snapshot of a moment capturing everything from its writhing internal anxieties to the external vicissitudes that make it more distant and difficult to relive through memory.

Stanley Cavell has described the artistic condition of modernism: "From such a view of philosophy I have written about something called modernism in the arts as the condition of their each yearning for themselves, naming a time at which to survive, they took themselves, their own possibilities, as their inspiration—they assumed the condition of philosophy" (41). The films I analyze are animated by a positive lust for the possibilities of cinema, for its abilities to analogize or elicit rarefied modes of perception. In fact, the layers of perception superimposed in these films qualify Rozier's artistic project as a monumental example of modernism in the cinema, even if he missed out, commercially, on the modernist moment, the 1960s boom of new waves.

The chapters that follow analyze, in detail, the processes enacted to solicit highly nuanced and emotionally layered forms of spectatorship in *Du côté d'Orouët* as well as

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<sup>12</sup> "On prête au cinéma 'moderne' une trop commode mystique de l'imprévu. Autre chose est en jeu ici : le rêve d'une adhérence parfaite du film à son tournage"

the strategies used to realize the diverse goals of the director's next two features. In chapter two, I explore how *Du côté d'Orouët* thematizes the utopian idyll as an ideal time in one's life that is always subject to destruction by the inexorable passage of time. The melancholy of childhood's loss combined with the wonder of revelatory moments in which characters display previously unexpected capacities for imaginative empathy both contribute to the intense poignancy of this utopian theme. In chapter three, I further consider how Rozier's exploitation of film's indexical capabilities in *Du côté d'Orouët* solidify the viewers' retrospective vantagepoint and how other filmic strategies analogize the process of remembering. Chapter four examines *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* in relation to *Robinson Crusoe* in order to expose how Rozier's cinematic self-reflexivity furthers a critique of the European colonialist mindset as it persists in the modern era. In this desert island castaway story, imperialist and commercialist thinking is reproduced even as society is supposedly left behind, vulgarizing utopia and making authentic idylls illusory. Chapter five turns to *Maine Océan*, wherein Rozier finally defines utopia as something real and achievable, locating it, in what constitutes the climax to an extended exploration of film sound and the utopian possibilities that inhere in finding new uses for it, in the idyllic cooperation among a group of workers.

Throughout this thesis, I place Rozier in conversation with the ideas of major film theorists. I use Jean-Pierre Meunier's concept of the "home movie attitude" to understand how, in *Du côté d'Orouët*, the actors' seemingly accidental breaking of the fourth wall evokes an intimate sense of their personalities that stretches beyond the bounds of what they do in the film. By analogizing the experience of watching our friends in home

movies—where we are constantly reminded, as they smile into the camera, of a host of experiences shared with that person—we are brought further into the story world.

Consequently, we are more susceptible to profound shocks when the characters challenge that intimate relationship by having entirely unexpected and revelatory reactions.

I use Stanley Cavell, firstly, for his vivid definition of the modernist condition in all its self-reflexivity and its relation to philosophy's all-consuming gravitational pull. This definition is the key criterion by which I understand Rozier as a cinematic modernist *par excellence* for his highly imaginative juggling of cinema's profound reflective capabilities and indexical affinities without succumbing to a crushing self-seriousness. Rather, his parodic, humanist sensibility enables him to evade philosophy's overwhelming weight even while reproducing extremely rigorous reflections on the nature and possibilities of the medium all throughout his body of work.

I also use Cavell's writings to conceptualize one of the strategies by which Rozier, again in *Du côté d'Orouët*, uses objects to invoke our vicarious experience of the process of remembering. Cavell's writing on the slapstick comedy of Buster Keaton provides an excellent framework for conceptualizing how the persistence of objects, in spite of how the vicissitudes of time affect them and ourselves, demonstrates the existence of an external world that rarely meets our preconceived expectations. The unequal relations between the verbal realm, wherein characters share their memories with us, and the physical or visual realm, where those memories are tested by the permanence or impermanence of objects, are a melancholy testament to the failings of memory and the disappearance of the past.

I use Richard Dyer's writing about the utopianism of popular entertainment, especially film musicals, to analyze how *Maine Océan* evokes, through an explosion of baroque visual detail accompanied by ecstatic music, the soaring bliss of utopia without clearly delineating how an ideal social arrangement could be achieved. In his conception, by not offering a real, actionable challenge to the dominant social order, this just serves to reinforce it. However, Rozier's film complicates Dyer's formulation by ultimately locating an authentic utopia on the margins of society.

Finally, I make extensive use of Siegfried Kracauer's theories. I look at *Du côté d'Orouët* as exemplifying a trend Kracauer identifies in realist cinema that employs loose narrative structure enriched with a wealth of observation about real life. However, I also point out the limits of Kracauer's rather prescriptive conception of what makes a film cinematic. In particular, *Du côté d'Orouët* disproves his sense that overarching structural conceits are anathema to the non-artificial depiction of life, in part because they eliminate the role of chance. Rozier's film represents a potent synthesis between loose, casual observation and more rigorous structuring principles whereby running thematic threads are interwoven and strategies of audience distancing are employed so as to maximize the emotional resonance of fairly innocuous interactions. The intimate understanding of characters' emotional turmoil that we come to have in certain privileged moments is a strong rebuke to Kracauer's caution that such films are ill-equipped to handle interior conflict. In fact, these strong structural principles make us into *more* observant viewers, rather than hindering the film's ability to record fine details, as Kracauer warned. Ultimately, the film establishes a strong tension between pure happenstance and

deliberate authorial intervention, resulting in a multifaceted viewing experience whereby our relations to the characters—our level of closeness or distance—shifts repeatedly and poignantly throughout the narrative.

Rozier's film does, however, realize Kracauer's enthusiastic belief in the immense value of capturing the contours of sensory phenomena, the finest details of human experience. For Rozier, the pursuit of capturing these details often reveals the medium's technical limitations, which analogize the limitations of memory to record the details of the past. Kracauer's observations about how the verbal component of sound cinema opens up a whole new realm of reality also resonates with Rozier's representation of memory and the past through language, which is then tested against the changed physical reality. The articulateness of physical reality, of the objects that persist, is also theorized by Kracauer in his writing on the depiction of the inanimate as a worthwhile component of film's indexical faculties. His writing on film acting, and the necessity of evoking a vast dimension of personality through oblique reference, is relevant to how Rozier breaks the fourth wall to solicit our intimate, interior relations with the characters.

Kracauer also theorizes how our perception of speech can be shifted from the meaning of utterances to their material qualities. In his prescriptive conception of cinema, this can be employed to avoid overwhelming the imagery with the verbal content. This has implications for several Rozier films, which variously use nonsense speech and communication across foreign languages to make us receive speech not as a carrier of meaning, but as another sensory phenomenon to be observed. In the case of *Maine Océan*, this shift in emphasis is part of Rozier's thematization of the historical moment

when sound arrived in cinema as an iconic example (at least, within the discipline of film history) of the loss of a utopia. The positioning of words as sensory matter also forms a part of Rozier's critique of bureaucracy and the legal system, where those who cannot speak the official language correctly are bound to be victimized. Also, Kracauer understands musical accompaniment as something that risks detracting from film's observational faculties by turning our attention towards our internalization of the music's rhythm. *Maine Océan* challenges this notion by skillfully employing this internalization, in its soaring evocation of utopia, as a means of making the viewer burrow deeper into the blissful state depicted. This interacts with the baroque detail on display to enhance, not hinder, our observational abilities, making us active in the pursuit of utopia as it is called into being by the film.

In addition to these theorists, I also make extensive use of the writings of the relatively few French film critics who have already written pieces on Rozier's films, many of them collected in the 2001 *Cahiers du cinéma* anthology *Jacques Rozier: Le funambule*. Like Rozier's television documentary on Jean Vigo, this thesis should serve as a correction of the record on this unjustly neglected auteur, as well as a tribute to his unique mastery.

## Chapter 2. *Du côté d'Orouët*: Threads of Intimacy, Points of Distance

*Du côté d'Orouët* (*Near Orouët*, alluding to a village near France's west coast) is loosely the story of how the friendship and harmony shared between three young women start to corrode as they meet the harsh light of adulthood. In its quasi-documentary casualness, Rozier's film profits from cinema's facility at capturing spontaneous moments, for documenting unplanned incidents and accumulating masses of uncoordinated detail. This qualifies it as an example of what Siegfried Kracauer (1960) calls an "episode film"—a film loose in structure and slack in momentum wherein "environmental life" outside the bounds of the story intercedes and even overwhelms the film's ostensible subject (255-256). It is also important to recognize the limits of Kracauer's prescriptive notions about film's ideal usages, so I pay special attention to the ways in which Rozier diverges. To the observant eye, it is evident that the whole film is organized by structural principles that demonstrate a great deal of intellectual rigor.

Rozier solicits our investment in the inner lives of his protagonists by carefully interweaving thematic threads, like Joëlle's insecurity about her weight and the frequent comparison of Gilbert to beasts of burden, that clearly indicate authorial intervention. Moreover, he constantly reasserts his presence as author by commenting on the characters, usually with an air of mockery, but sometime a tinge of dreamy surrealism, reminiscent of Rozier's great cinematic forebear, Jean Vigo. He thus maintains a distance from the characters when he so chooses, as well as a tension, in many of the film's events, between authorial intervention and pure accident. The additional tension between

intimacy and distance enables Rozier to create some extraordinary revelations for us, what I call “behavioral revelations,” where our understanding of a character’s emotional range or their capacity for empathy is seriously upended. In these moments, the painful conflict between youth and adulthood comes into focus.

### **Rozier’s Double-Sided Style**

The most obvious aesthetic feature of *Du côté d’Orouët* is its scrappy spontaneity. One gets the sense while watching that one is seeing casual footage of some friends on vacation, haphazardly assembled into a semi-coherent whole. Joël Magny, in a *Cahiers du cinéma* article coinciding with the film’s 1990s rerelease, pinpoints how this feeling of spontaneity produces a distinct effect. He asks rhetorically, “Why does Jacques Rozier’s cinema always appear to us as a nascent cinema, hatching before our eyes, in an eternal renewal? One does not see a Rozier film ‘again.’ Each time is like the first time.” Indeed, Rozier’s films, in their improvisatory appearance, have an almost *trompe l’œil* quality, defining the diegesis, no matter how artificial it is in actuality, as real. Consequently, its filmic representation must be the largely unmediated depiction of a real event. According to Magny, “This feeling, which anyone can experience for himself, certainly comes from Rozier’s way of seeing the shoot as utterly contemporary with the invention of the script, and the finished film as a trace of this shoot and the surfacing of truth.” There is some truth in Magny’s description of Rozier’s shooting methods. The impression that the film was largely improvised is accurate. Rozier (2001a) has indicated that the film’s “script”



consisted mainly of settings—“‘meal in a creperie’, ‘horse riding’ etc.” (39).<sup>13</sup> The content of the scenes was mostly conceived on set. Speaking to Magny’s identification of “the surfacing of truth,” it is true that many conflicts or other interactions were apparently drawn naturally out of the personalities of the performers. The director notes: “All the actors were, incidentally, very close to their respective characters” (42).<sup>14</sup> Magny’s characterization of the film seems like a natural reaction to the scrappier, less obviously planned sequences in Rozier’s films, usually shot with handheld camera and muffled or cluttered direct sound recording.

This approach to filmmaking, establishing situations, placing actors into them, and letting drama emerge more or less organically, corresponds to notions of cinema that place the highest value on film’s ability to record and reveal reality. Siegfried Kracauer has argued that “film, notwithstanding its ability to reproduce, indiscriminately, all kinds of visible data, gravitates toward unstaged reality...staging is aesthetically legitimate to the extent that it evokes the illusion of actuality” (60). Based on the evidence of its production, and from what we can see in the film itself, *Du côté d’Orouët* would seem to be an ideal example of this type of film that favors the depiction of unfiltered reality, or at least aspires to simulate it. Like most of Rozier’s films, *Du côté d’Orouët* broadly falls into Kracauer’s category of the “episode film.” Kracauer identifies “episode” films according to their eschewal of complex, preconceived narrative structures in favor of respecting, through the elucidation of diverse and loosely connected incidents, the “flow

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<sup>13</sup> “‘repas dans une crêperie’, ‘les courses’, etc.”

<sup>14</sup> “Tous les interprètes sont d’ailleurs très proches de leurs personnages respectifs”

of life.” As he explains: “The episode film, then, is full of gaps into which environmental life may stream” (255-256). By evoking this sense of life in all its constant vicissitudes, the film acquires an appearance of vivid authenticity. It appears to document reality, so we naturally assume that everything that happens is genuine, untainted by preconception.

However, Rozier’s film is somewhat more tightly constructed than this. Rozier does not respect the integrity of the performances elicited so much that he refrains from adjusting or commenting on them. As he relates: “For the preparation of [Gilbert’s] meal, it sufficed to shoot it whole. The *mise-en-scène* interceded, rather, at the moment of cutting” (42).<sup>15</sup> Although the actual playing of scenes was apparently highly improvisational, the later intercession of Rozier’s own structuring sensibility gives the film a striking tension between spontaneity and construction. In fact, it balances its apparent looseness with some fairly rigorous organizing principles. Kracauer does have a category for this: “Once a story is used to string episodic units together, the idea of giving it more scope suggests itself immediately. There are films which mark a transition between an aggregate and a coherent whole” (254). Kracauer lists the example of Tati’s *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* (1953), a film where more or less unconnected gags ultimately lead to a statement on middle-class malaise. Rozier’s implementation of structuring principles adds layers to the film’s depiction of a particular phase in its character’s lives, allowing us a window into their inner struggles with maturation.

In *Du côté d’Orouët*, narrative threads tend to grow, like invasive plants, thrusting

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<sup>15</sup> “La préparation du repas [de Gilbert], il suffisait de la tourner en continuité. La mise en scène est plutôt intervenue au moment du montage”

their tendrils through every part of the film until it comprises a dense weave of thematic lines. As Kracauer observes: “This raises the question as to how the elements of an episodic unit and, in a complex episode, the units themselves are interrelated. Sure enough, they do not implement pre-established story patterns or else there would be no air between them” (256). Rozier points to a way that film can balance the spontaneous “flow of life” with “pre-established story patterns.” Rather than diminishing the effects of both, the film synthesizes their respective powers to form a more emotionally resonant and psychologically complete whole. It is worth examining the early evolution of one narrative thread to see how it dovetails with the film’s larger theme of the fear of aging. This also reveals how Rozier continually asserts his authorial presence, placing himself in a position to critique his characters. In revealing the limitations of their youthful viewpoints, he situates them firmly in the transitional state between youth and adulthood. This makes their emotional mindsets legible to all viewers regardless of their own vantagepoints, young or old.

On arriving in the seaside commune of Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie, Joëlle is introduced to her friend Kareen’s cousin Caroline. Rozier has recounted that the film’s original intended title was *Journal de vacances d’une grosse fille* (*Vacation Diary of a Fat Girl*) (38). We learn that Joëlle (apparently the titular “*grosse fille*”) is on a diet and will not eat for the rest of the day. The scene immediately following this begins with a suggestion of food, as the girls question a fisherman whose boat they travel in about whether he eats the little shellfish he catches. This scene also introduces Joëlle’s recurrent sense of being left out, in this case from the intimate bond of familial memories shared

between the cousins. In the boat, Caroline practically cradles Kareen like a child between her legs, as they gawk at their surroundings. We can begin to see how her sense of being left out is thematically linked to her own insecurities about her weight. Joëlle does not partake in the interaction with the fisherman, preferring to stare into the distance, as Rozier frames her prominently in the foreground. She is just slightly on the sidelines, but she is not, at this stage, offended to be excluded.

As the girls stagger up a sand dune towards their house, Kareen, with her bags, exclaims that she is dying and asks if the others are hungry. Joëlle reminds Kareen she is not eating till tomorrow. Rozier then immediately cuts to Caroline opening the front gate while she and Kareen are both clearly eating something. Meanwhile, Joëlle is struggling with bags in both hands. Caroline then jumps over the garden wall. Rozier cuts just as she executes this unencumbered movement, adopting instead a vantagepoint that foregrounds Joëlle. It is a glancing comment, not given so much weight that its importance immediately proclaims itself. It emphasizes Caroline's carelessness towards Joëlle. This is an example of an abrupt comical edit that, in its coordinated quality, benignly mocks the characters. A film that merely wished to present authentic improvisation, driven democratically by what the actors choose to do, likely would not submit them to such mockery. Rather, it is a sign of the film's hybrid character and, more generally, of Rozier's parodic tendencies. Here, he asserts his authorial presence to humorously point out flaws in the characters' behavior. He highlights their youthful thoughtlessness, the blinders which prevent them from acting caringly towards their friends. Joëlle is dieting, but why should the others exercise the same self-control? Joëlle is struggling, but why

stop to help? This is the crux of the film's conception of aging, as these blinders will eventually be removed and the young women brought face to face with their own failures of empathy. Right now, we are getting a sense of this transitional phase in the characters' lives.

One morning begins with Kareen out on the promenade, yelling for Joëlle, advertising some treat the snack bar offers: "*Chichis frégis*." Joëlle emerges on the balcony, with the snack bar's sign, reading "*Gaufres*" ("Waffles"), framed beneath her as though it were a cruel comment on her appetite. The framing is casual and unassuming. Rozier does not make a big show of, say, tilting down so the mocking word comes into sight. Still, it has a gently ribbing quality that betrays purpose, a gentle reassertion of directorial presence. Not everything here is being dictated solely by chance, we come to understand. Kracauer has noted the "affinity of film for haphazard contingencies" (62). In Rozier, the accidental gets a particular pride of place, with many scenes collapsing into a chorus of apparently genuine laughter. This is the trouble, though: it is frequently impossible to determine which accidents are genuine and which are simulated, actually exemplifying authorial intervention. Critic Emmanuel Burdeau (2001) compares the impressive, concerted effects of Hollywood films with the more "modern" tendency in cinema towards the unplanned, observing: "The categories taken for the most distant are sometimes the closest: in Rozier, we see that Hollywood's law of the spectacle and the modern law of the accident are almost Siamese twins"<sup>16</sup> Blurring the line between

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<sup>16</sup> "Les catégories tenues pour les plus éloignées sont parfois les plus proches : chez Rozier on voit que sont sœurs presque siamoises la loi hollywoodienne du spectacle et la loi moderne de l'accident"

chance and predetermination, Rozier sews his own directorial signature, his commentary, into a web of random incident. When the commentary is so subtle and casual, we barely recognize it as such.

The three girls head to the snack bar, where Didi, the woman working the counter, objects rather acidly to being called “Madame.” She is, apparently unhappily, single. She struggles at the crank of a machine that produces dough while Caroline and Kareen just gape hungrily at a steaming waffle press. Didi complains about her dislike for the job before handing them over a treat. The heedless girls call her “Madame” again. They have no sympathy for the sorrows and anxieties of older adults. They seem in a state of denial, unwilling to recognize that those concerns may well become their own before too long. Right now, they are too busy thinking about food to notice. At points like these, relatively early in the film, we are still kept at arm’s length from the characters’ just post-adolescent mentality. We understand their level of emotional maturation but can only appreciate it from the outside. We cannot yet see through their eyes. We need the narrative threads to develop further in order for Rozier to bring us in, so we can really understand them, and feel the intense pain of disappointments and perceived slights the way they do.

### **Patrick Enters the Scene**

According to Kracauer’s definition, the episodes of an “episode film” can be strung together into “a story of a sort...What matters is that the units follow each other uninterruptedly, not that their succession implements a plot. To be sure, they frequently happen to develop into a halfway plausible intrigue, yet the intrigue is never of so

exacting a nature that its significance would encroach on that of the pieces composing it” (253). In the episodic film, incidents have their own individual life, while evoking a reality existing beyond themselves. Kracauer cautiously offers a rather conservative estimate of how far episode films can go in communicating the characters’ internal dramas: “It is [episode films’] bearing on camera-life which accounts for their adequacy to the medium. This implies that otherwise episodic films become problematic aesthetically if they feature some unadaptable inner conflict or thought instead of that life; their uncinematic content threatens to overshadow their cinematic form” (251). Rozier nevertheless enables us to follow his characters’ interior sensations (the “unadaptable inner conflict”) through the careful interweaving of thematic threads and the solicitation of close scrutiny of actors’ performances. This produces a much richer, multilayered impression of the film’s events than Kracauer’s more distanced and objective approach could have allowed for.

Conflicts between the three girls continually surface throughout the film, none more painful than the one that develops over a young man named Patrick who owns a small sailboat. In one scene, having made up after a brief spat, the girls run along the beach with a kite. It dives into dunes, bouncing against the grassy sand. Then, the kite string gets tangled around a boat’s sail. The convenient placement of some yellow changing sheds initially hides Patrick from us. Then, Rozier cuts to a view from between the sheds where the dashing sailor is framed by their walls on each side of the image. Distractedly, he notices the kite as the girls wander over. Rozier is highlighting that this is a momentous meeting. Patrick will function as a dividing wedge for the three girls,

exacerbating the discord lurking among them. When he turns back to his boat, only Joëlle goes up to him, leaning over the boat like a *femme fatale* might lean over a smoky bar. She is taking on a new social role, projecting a self-confidence she has hardly displayed before. In the moment, Patrick is too busy to pay her much mind.

Later on, he finally goes to meet the girls. They are all seated on the sand, leaning against the wall of a changing shed that is the same shade of yellow as the identical yellow shirts they all wear underneath a big yellow blanket. They look rather like infants, all tucked under their covers in matching bodysuits of bright monochrome, yellow on yellow on yellow. Patrick tries to take a seat, facing the girls, on some grass directly across from them, but some prickles pinch his rear, and he stands up. The girls laugh. They (particularly Kareen and Caroline) extend to him the same mocking attitude with which they attack everything, including each other. Patrick plays it off with grace. He offers to take the girls sailing and they respond, in unison, with a resounding “*Non.*” They have the same answer for all his questions, much like infants just learning to speak. Rozier uses this very conspicuous stylistic choice to associate his youthful characters with babies, directly mocking their childish attitudes to romance. It foreshadows how this will in fact threaten to break up their friendship.

As the girls perform this quasi-ritualized rejection of Patrick, their individual attitudes stick out. Caroline smiles openly, in a manner consonant with her general air of not taking anything too seriously or letting anything really get to her. Kareen is more closed-off, wearing a subtle, frozen grin that implies experience and the attribute of not being easily impressed. Nevertheless, she seems indulgent, as if not yet willing to



discount the possibility of being interested in Patrick. Here, her tether to a childish sort of cruelty and her encroaching maturity about sex seem clearly juxtaposed. Finally, Joëlle cowers under the blanket giggling, a burlesque of her habitual insecurity. Here, she redirects it in order to tease her new object of affection. All three cast mocking aspersions on Patrick, pretending to be afraid he has sinister designs on these *pauvres enfants*. In this way, they covet their childishness, making a show of their (assumed) innocence. At this stage, we continue to regard them from the outside, recognizing the fatal immaturity that plagues them without quite feeling the intensity of emotion that attends it.

They make an appointment to go boating with him the next day. As they drag Patrick's boat along the sand, Patrick confides in Kareen, who happens to be standing closest to him, that the wind is too weak for four passengers. Kareen decides that she'll be the one to stay on shore. He asks, familiarly, if that does not bother her at all. She coldly admonishes him for using the informal "*tu*." After all, they have only just met. He seems drawn to her immediately; or, at least, the film draws him to her, placing the two of them next to each other and having him "slip up" with his pronouns. Patrick is rather opaque, more so than the girls at this stage, so any designs he may have on Kareen are up to guesswork. The operations of chance seem as paramount as any intentions he might have. Once again, the lines between accident and intention are blurred, and the authorial hand is camouflaged in a field of random happenstance. We can easily imagine Rozier, donning fate's cap, guiding Patrick and Kareen together so as to inch the tension between Kareen and Joëlle towards a climax. Yet, he covers his tracks too well for it to stand out. This is all prelude, anyway, setting the stage for the real emotional climaxes. It is the

central sign of the film's hybridity that, even as it sets the stage, it retains the quality of appearing unstaged. Patrick asks if the others feel the same way about informal pronouns. Joëlle, a bit saucily, says it depends on the person. She telegraphs her interest in Patrick to an almost comical degree here. Even if Rozier is not pulling the strings, she is still trying her best to.

On the boat, Joëlle has to sit, hunched over, underneath the boom of the sail, but evinces no discomfort. She remains cool, giving the impression that she might be trying to impress Patrick. Caroline, meanwhile, shrieks every time a wave comes up and splashes them. The difference in mentality between the two girls is highlighted here. Caroline lives for shallowly chasing fun, while Joëlle is animated by a solitary determination to get what she wants (whether that be a relaxing vacation or a romantic partner). Joëlle comments seriously about the lack of wind while Caroline makes fun. Caroline is then nearly concussed when the boom swings round in her face. She just narrowly ducks down in time. Then, she almost slips off the side of the boat, squealing as the boat tips and waves lash against her posterior. Caroline is made to seem childlike here while Joëlle is the adult. Joëlle and Patrick watch her and laugh while laying almost flat, stretched out over the upward-tilting side of the boat. They project over the water with an almost lazy casualness, even as they tug hard against the boat to hold themselves up and use their weight to keep it from capsizing. Caroline, on the downward-tilting end, complains of being cold. Throughout this sequence, she is obviously placed in a position to be mocked. It is difficult to call this accidental as the whole scene is obviously constructed. Any viewer with the slightest knowledge of filmmaking must recognize the

difficulty of shooting a scene on a small boat, particularly for such a shoestring production. The specter of intent hovers over the film at this stage.

Back at the house at night, after partaking in a horse-riding session, Patrick and Kareen are once again driven together when Joëlle arbitrarily suggests that the two of them sit beside each other at the table. Kareen displays no particular affection towards him as he saunters over, not even meeting his gaze at first. She warms up a little to him, though, as they all begin to talk. Joëlle cuts herself trying to open an oyster, and Gilbert (Joëlle's boss, and an interloper trying to capture Joëlle's affection) seizes the opportunity to lecture her on proper oyster protocol. In the meantime, Kareen and Patrick start whispering to each other. Joëlle's happiness instantly fades, as if she sees all her chances with Patrick instantly snatched from her. She casts a few quick glances up at them, not listening to Gilbert and not paying attention to her oyster. Finally, she stops altogether and glares at them brazenly. We learn at this point that Kareen and Patrick are discussing going out on his boat. Joëlle half-covers her face with her hands, looking devastated, perhaps trying to disappear. She stops eating, having lost her appetite. Of course, it also resonates with her insecurities about food and her weight. We get the impression that she has decided, like a displeased child, to forsake food until she gets what she wants—or, that she is so embarrassed that all her insecurities are crowding together.

She interrupts Kareen and Patrick to say that she would like to go riding again the next day. They blithely dismiss the suggestion on the grounds that they will all be too stiff in the morning. Then, agonizingly, Patrick comments that Kareen's skill is natural

given her light weight. The implication is not lost on Joëlle that she is too heavy for the horses. It is met with silence. Joëlle glances around at the others in the wake of the accidental slight and absently returns to her oyster. Patrick's insult is inadvertent, even involuntary. The film, through little accidents mimicking the spontaneity and randomness of real life, guides its characters towards their emotional apotheoses. This is the great virtue of accidental moments: they are so casual, the viewer barely realizes how loaded with feeling they are under the surface. By reminding us of Joëlle's insecurity about her weight, by constantly reasserting his authorial presence in order to make us understand it as the pivot on which so much discord between the characters hinges, Rozier gives the viewer all the emotional background they need to understand why this moment registers, to Joëlle, as a devastating refutation of her hopes.

Gilbert, probably in play, drunkenly struggles to pour wine for Patrick. The others laugh. Joëlle looks on, unamused. Gilbert suggests that he, Caroline, and Joëlle go fishing while Patrick and Kareen go sailing. Caroline is amused and readily assents. Joëlle, barely admitting a smile, says, "Maybe. We'll see." Kareen laughs at something or other; Patrick looks obliquely at Joëlle, then looks away and smiles; Gilbert chuckles as he continues planning their fishing excursion. Everyone suddenly seems conspired to rob Joëlle of her happiness. Rozier has effectively taught us to be extra-sensitive to perceivable slights against her, such that we are now scrutinizing everyone's reactions and facial expressions for further cruelty, as well as Joëlle's own for further signs of distress. Rather than detracting from the cinema's capacity for recording detail, as Kracauer warned it would, the implementation of a narrative structure has actually

enhanced our own receptivity to the finer details.

The next day, Kareen and Patrick go boating together. That night, they are late in returning. Joëlle expresses her worries to Caroline. It is not made clear whether she is worried for Kareen's safety or about the extent of the pair's intimacy. Caroline jokes that they must have capsized. Joëlle, in a moment of sudden passion, rushes over to the mirror, stops just short of banging her head into it, and then falls back against the side of her bed. Caroline, obviously, asks if she said something to upset her. Joëlle, without answering, runs off to the window, apparently to cry. Given what we have learned not just to understand but to *feel* by carefully scrutinizing her reactions, we are naturally inclined to feel some sympathy with her. However, her actions, particularly with the mirror, resemble a child's tantrum. Rather than journeying into an idyllic place where desires can be fulfilled, as they may wish, the characters are being returned to childish states of mind; or perhaps, young as they still are, these childlike mindsets have not fully left them. However, we are no longer comfortable judging them for this from our customarily omniscient vantagepoint. Having felt vicariously the intense pain of such a small, unintentional slight, we can no longer go back outside the characters. Rozier has transferred us firmly into Joëlle's camp. We, too, feel the agonizing anxiety over the loss of youth, in all its simplicity, as emotions get more and more complicated.

### **Dreaming of Youth: Rozier's Surrealism**

Even as Rozier uses thematic threads to help us understand and inhabit the characters' inner lives, he still employs some stylistic strategies to keep us at a distance. The film's

general arc does not simply describe the gradual wearing-down of barriers between viewer and protagonist. True, we come to feel Joëlle's emotions vicariously, but moments of connection like this are martialled selectively, not universally, as the film heads toward its conclusion. Rozier opens windows while he closes doors. Another process he undertakes is to transform the initial distance we feel towards characters, a critical distance established by those little mocking authorial comments already discussed, into a different, dreamier kind of distance. Rozier's boldest flashes of style register as fleeting glimpses of surrealism. Numerous times, the film performs little feats of magic, disrupting our sense of what is going on. This disruption analogizes our own sense of disruption from the characters, whose actions and reactions sometimes take their place along a dreamily opaque continuum of what I term "behavioral revelations." Characteristic of these revelations, which appear almost like mirages, is for people to behave in unexpected ways. The foundations for our recognition of these revelations are in the faint airs of fantasy that run throughout the film.

Rozier's most evident cinematic debt is to Jean Vigo, who, in *L'Atalante* (1934), mastered the delicate art of sewing fine threads of high artifice and oneiric magic into a sort of practical, workaday quilt. After the girls visit the snack bar, Rozier cuts to a shot of Caroline marching down the steps from the promenade to the beach, her nightgown flapping like a ghost in the wind. She exclaims definitely that she does not feel like swimming, yet she walks blindly towards the water. This funny, faintly surreal moment visually resembles the famous image of Dita Parlo, in her wedding dress, tiptoeing over the titular barge of *L'Atalante*. Later, as the girls and Gilbert are driving one night to the

local casino, Rozier includes a shot of a sign reading “*Au Casino d’Orouët*” that is knocked askew such that it points skyward. This could be a hint to the casino’s ultimate phoniness (they will find it to be considerably less *chic* than imagined) but also an intimation of fantasy, whimsically implying a dream casino hovering in the clouds. In addition to placing Rozier in a long line of French filmmakers who merge realism with poetic surrealism, moments like these elevate the matter of daily life. It is true, capturing details on film transforms them individually, turning them into the material of art. The film purports to do just this by giving the appearance of documenting unmediated reality. Meanwhile, these intimations of surrealism, another kind of authorial intervention, perform a different type of transformation, elevating the whole fabric of reality. This lays the groundwork for the revelations that will come, radically altering our understanding of how the characters behave.

One of the most pronounced instances of fantasy erupting into reality comes on the first night of the girls’ vacation, with Kareen and Caroline’s strange animalistic game. The horizon is completely black, but all the windows of the house are lighted. Waves crash in the darkness. Though the lights are on, Joëlle is trying to sleep. She stretches in her bed as voices coo in other rooms. Rozier then cuts to Joëlle’s apparent point of view: the head of the stairs as seen through the open door. This proves deceptive, one of Rozier’s disorienting editing tricks, as the shot is actually taken from Caroline’s room. Then, Kareen pokes her head just above the head of the stairs. Rozier cuts to a pair of legs cautiously descending the other flight of stairs. Kareen inches farther up. The camera moves to follow Kareen as she coos to her partner in the game. Caroline keeps slowly

descending, and begins to slip her shoes off. The object of this game is never made clear; the two end up getting distracted and abandoning it. It is such a strikingly inexplicable sequence, and it exemplifies how the characters' behavior sometimes ranges beyond what we can account for.

After the girls first meet Patrick and make plans to go boating with him, a last segment is inserted into the sequence, depicting the other side of the yellow changing shed in the foreground (hiding the girls). In the background, a little pink sun sets over a nautical horizon that looks faintly purpled, as if by a few delicate drops of Crème de Violette. Invisible to us, the girls are putting on a private show. Caroline is announced and sings through laughter a song about marrying a queen or a whale. Like the imaginary casino in the sky, this is another bit of evocative verbal fantasy. Gilbert is then seen from another angle waddling up the beach to the shed. Rozier cuts between the two angles, implying that Gilbert will come upon the girls singing in the same spot where Patrick left them. However, their apparent simultaneity is shortly disproved. By the time he arrives, the girls are all changed out of their swimsuits (save Caroline who hides on the side of the shed opposite Gilbert to hike up her pants) and beginning to head back to the house. This offhand trick of montage, all suffused with the purple fading of the day, serves to embody the sense that Gilbert is being left out or behind. He approaches the girls while they are in a state of private bliss, and by the time he gets there, they have already long since left it. It is analogous to our own relationship with the girls, getting to see their private fun from our privileged vantagepoint but never able to join in.

Gaps in scenes or in storytelling need not necessarily conflict with the



verisimilitude of the “episode film” and its evocation of the “flow of life.” As Kracauer observes, “the random way in which the elements of the story succeed each other stirs us to imagine, however confusedly, the circumstances responsible for their succession—circumstances which must be traced to that flow” (256). However, the opacity of these disruptive moments in Rozier’s film highlights the authorial intervention involved. Because they draw attention to themselves by disrupting our sense of the logical succession of scenes, these kinds of elisions definitely betray the presence of an author. The matter being elided may well have been completely plausible and realistic, but the way in which it was elided has put us in mind of artificiality. We are particularly made conscious of the element of surprise involved in these scenes, where we realize we have been tricked and we are not seeing what we thought. Rozier trains us to be attentive to these kinds of surprises such that, when the characters’ behavioral revelations come later in the film, our reactions to them fall on a continuum with our reactions to these bits of montage trickery. Characters behaving in unexpected fashion is another type of movie magic.

Behavioral revelations are even more surprising given how much Rozier works to typify his characters, giving us the illusion that we will be able to predict their choices. With Gilbert, Rozier leans even more heavily into his mocking, superior authorial position than he does with any of the girls. In fact, the director takes on virtually the role of an entomologist, examining a species of insect life under glass. This posture directly recalls that taken by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí in their early surrealist films, like *L’Âge d’Or* (1930), which begins with documentary footage of scorpions and then

proceeds to apply the same entomological gaze to the brutish and beastly bourgeois who occupy the rest of that film. Like Buñuel and Dalí, Rozier frequently compares his characters to animals, though Gilbert gets the brunt of it. Essentially an unwanted guest, throughout his time with the girls, he camps out in a tent in their yard. His first morning there, they wake him up with toy drums and a horn, knocking over the sticks holding up his tent so that it falls on his head. They fall on him like bratty children tormenting a pet. Kareen and Caroline trap him with shrimping nets, calling him a sandpiper. Then, the girls pretend to be matadors taunting a bull, to which fiction Gilbert readily plays along, apparently glad for the attention.

Later that morning, Caroline sits down on a deck chair and falls right through the fabric. Gilbert offers to help her up, but she declines as if unwilling to let him touch her. Finally, she assents to his offer, and the shirtless Gilbert makes a show of feeling his bare chest after this display of strength. She walks far away, amused at this comical pet's pitiful show of manliness. Gilbert flutters around the girls purposelessly, apparently looking for something to do. The cousins find that he will answer their beck and call, like an obedient dog, so they get him running around to fetch things for them. Kareen climbs on his back. He protests that he is not a nag and jokes repeatedly about Kareen being too heavy. Yet, at the same time, he laughs a great deal, and does not seem too eager for her to get off. Essentially, Gilbert relishes his subservient role; he is an eager pet. A later scene begins with Gilbert, in long shot, running along the beach towards an unseen object. In reverse shot, a beach ball rolls, unattended, over the *plage*. We cut back to Gilbert, in this moment resembling a dog galloping excitedly towards the toy that has

rolled a little too far away. The editing highlights Gilbert's comic desperation, making him seem a little subhuman. Then, a bit of movie magic occurs when the ball rolls out of frame and in its wake, our three girls suddenly materialize, in bikinis, also running after it. Dogs chase balls while men like Gilbert chase girls—there is, we gather, little other difference. Gilbert catches up to the ball first, but loses a shoe and has to hang back while the girls get in place to play, heedless of his shoeless plight.

Later, as everyone drags Patrick's boat to the water, Gilbert, in the back, protests about having to carry all its weight. He seems to be struggling to keep up, and the camera stays on him as it travels, parallel to the boat's path, towards the shore. Just as he was burdened with Kareen's weight in play, so too is he burdened, like a farm animal, with the weight of their recreation. He will not even be in the boat, but he has to carry it. While Joëlle and Caroline put on their buoyant vests, Kareen consents to help Patrick and Gilbert hold the boat steady for the passengers to board. Once the others set sail, Kareen hoists herself onto the trailer they used to haul the boat across the beach, clinging to the bar like a monkey, while Gilbert pushes it up the beach. He is her personal carriage driver, her tamed horse.

The horse-riding scene, though relatively light and uneventful in itself, serves as a kind of climax to the theme of Gilbert being "ridden," so to speak. Gilbert, comically dressed in cowboy plaid with a pink bandana tied round his neck, makes a show of being an expert as he helps Caroline and Kareen onto their horses. Despite his claims of expertise, and the film's association of him with beasts of burden, Gilbert has no rapport with his horse, and even, humiliatingly, needs help from Patrick when the horse will not

pass him the reins. Then, while riding, he whoops like a cowboy, even though everyone else remains silent. Kareen is a little slow, lagging slightly behind the others, but she looks back to see Gilbert much further back, struggling to get his horse, Begonia, to pick up the pace. He tries to play it off, though, saying “It’s lovely, isn’t it, Begonia?” as though they are taking a leisurely walk through the forest. Gilbert insists on maintaining a front of perfect contentment. It remains unclear whether it is a deliberate action or just, rather animalistically, second nature to him. It is a fragile front, though, just waiting to be brought crashing down in the film’s climax, which comprises a cluster of behavioral revelations, all brought about by a disappointing meal.

### **A Few Words About Gilbert**

A more thorough explanation of Gilbert and the arc of progressive humiliation and disappointment that defines his character is necessary in order to discuss the film’s central examples of behavioral revelation. Gilbert is Joëlle’s boss back in Paris. He also harbors an unrequited affection for her, which leads him to follow her to Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie in the hopes of spending time with her. He first arrives at the girls’ house during a windstorm. Taking pity on him, they let him in and offer him tea and cookies. He tries to ingratiate himself into their circle and win a place in their house. Staying with them would be preferable to camping out in the cold, and it might also give him a chance with Joëlle. He is very circumspect about asking for a room, drawing out the question at great length. Finally, he gets it out. Because Caroline’s mother has forbidden the girls from inviting men into the house, they can only offer to put him in the yard, like a dog.

He somewhat gloomily accepts. They seem already to be having fun at his expense, though Joëlle thinks him a pest.

When Gilbert, Joëlle, and Caroline return from their fishing trip, Gilbert pours wine for everyone. Caroline leaves to wash, so he and Joëlle are left alone. He looks at her, red with drunkenness, wearing a serious but also drained expression. She just laughs and tells him not to look at her like that, because it makes her feel like she is back at the office. Joëlle seems to fear that their time together is distorting her and Gilbert's typical workplace dynamic. He tells her not to think about the office, as they are on vacation. Gilbert would have this whole trip be a departure from their traditional roles, into an alternate, perfect world where they can freely fulfill their (meaning *his*) desires. He moves over to sit by her. They share a moment of real warmth and tenderness. He gulps down a glass of wine and makes his lips squeak against the glass. Joëlle bursts out laughing. Within this small interaction there seems to exist a whole universe of possible happiness. This is not to say that Joëlle should settle for being Gilbert's girl. Rather, by trying so hard to evade that fate, by putting up so much emotional and (sometimes) physical distance between herself and Gilbert, she is cheating herself of moments like this. Joëlle and Gilbert have visions of happiness that are fundamentally incompatible. These fleeting glimpses of accord and pleasure between them are minor examples of behavioral revelation. For all the friction between them, they can unexpectedly share a really loving moment now and then.

Gilbert decides to cook up a special meal for the girls. Because he is drunk, it is a disastrous endeavor. Morose, flushed Joëlle and yawning Caroline, bedecked with hair-

curlers, come downstairs and sit at the table. Gilbert's special dinner is received with all the excitement and fanfare of the viewing at a funeral. Caroline spits a mouthful of fish back onto her fork when Gilbert looks away. Pathetically, quixotically, he tries to make light conversation, but the girls are miserable and will have none of it. We find ourselves really pitying this clownish figure. Once again, because Rozier has woven this theme of Gilbert's mistreatment throughout the film, the compounding indignities add greater weight to the insult, and we find ourselves vicariously experiencing his humiliation. The sequence is viscerally painful to watch. The girls seem to have no regard for Gilbert's feelings. Caroline thinks nothing of pushing her plate aside and resting her tired head on the table. As before, she seems rather like a thoughtless, spoiled child. In a sad echo of the warmth they shared just a little while ago, Joëlle can now just barely muster a polite smile for Gilbert. In a moment of silence, it seems to be on the verge of dawning on him then how badly he has fouled all this up. In the next shot, taken from outside the windows of the dining room, accompanied only by the low hum of the wind, we see Joëlle leave the room. Gilbert keeps eating in silence. With Caroline evidently asleep, he seems profoundly isolated in his little space in the window's grid pattern. Finally, Joëlle returns with a blanket. She smiles at him again. He smiles back. Shortly thereafter, she falls asleep in the chair.

An increase in the volume of the wind indicates that the door is opening. It slams, rousing the two girls for just a second. They sink back into sleep as they see Kareen walk in. She asks what happened. Gilbert explains, tiredly, dejectedly, but also peacefully, hiding any resentment he might feel. He is proud he caught the conger eel they were

dining on. Kareen acts impressed. Then, he admits that it took too long to prepare, and they were all too tired to eat. Perhaps, for the sake of his ego, he has sanitized his account of the evening. It is impossible to say whether he is deluded about the quality of his meal—his ultimate gift for the girls, on which his whole image of capability and intelligence was riding—or he has realized that it was inedible. The workings of his mind, at this stage, are impossible to parse definitely. We are still examining him like entomologists, and we understand how he is handling his emotions about as well as we might understand how a cockroach is handling his. Only through a sudden revelation will his feelings become legible.

By the next morning, the vacation is winding down. Most of the pleasure has dissolved from it. Joëlle and Caroline head out, leaving Gilbert in the kitchen, looking serious, wounded. Kareen comes in and kisses him on the cheek rather like a wife kissing her spouse in the morning. In an earlier scene, Gilbert had entered the house rather like a husband returning home to his dutiful housewife, hanging up his coat and asking what is for dinner. In retaliation, Kareen and Caroline threw food at him. We can interpret that moment as the characters fending off their anxieties about maturation—settling into domestic, married life—with irreverent play. Now, noticing Gilbert's moroseness, Kareen starts teasing him again. She pinches his cheek like he was a child, trying to make him laugh. Rather than playing along, he shatters our sense of his character by abruptly turning violent. He smashes plates on the floor and swears. Rozier cites this as an example of reality determining the direction of the film and its characters: "When Gilbert has a nervous fit and breaks some dishes, it's very close to the reality: he [Bernard

Menez] had sort of become the lapdog of these young ladies, who...teased him all the time...Menez channeled that into the scene with the dishes. I sensed that latent irritation, even if he didn't dare say anything" (42).<sup>17</sup> By sensing, Rozier was able to lay the groundwork for a genuinely shocking revelation that transforms our understanding of Gilbert. Before, he had been a fairly one-dimensional clown. Even our pity for him when his dinner was a failure stopped somewhat short of the respectful sympathy he now commands.

Yet, Gilbert's sudden explosion is itself not as surprising as the reaction it inspires. Kareen is incredulous and asks if he has gone crazy. Then, stunningly, instead of being angry, she shifts immediately into a sympathetic register, asking what has upset him. He says everyone takes him for an imbecile and sits down, depressed, in the doorway. She puts her things down and sits beside him. Her demeanor contrasts sharply with the general, blind insensitivity of the previous night, where no one seemed clued in at all as to what anybody else was going through. Kareen's sudden warmth and empathy comes off like a genuine human miracle. Behavioral revelations such as this differ from the intimate understanding Rozier enabled us to cultivate with Joëlle. We do not feel we understand Kareen, or why she reacts this way. Rather, our sense of who she is becomes radically enriched. She proves herself more adult, more caring, than we could have expected.

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<sup>17</sup> "Quand Gilbert pique une crise de nerfs et casse des assiettes, c'est très proche de la réalité : il était devenu un peu le toutou de ces demoiselles, qui...le taquinaient tout le temps...Menez a canalisé ça dans la scène des assiettes. Je sentais cet énervement latent, même s'il n'osait rien dire"



Nevertheless, sulking Gilbert flicks her commiserating arm off his shoulder. Finally, she gets him to open up. He admits his feelings for Joëlle. In an elegant, rather moving understatement, he simply says that he had hoped things would go differently. Finally, he insists that he has to leave Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie. Kareen tries to dissuade him. She reveals the very human limits of her own ability to emotionally connect by finding no better show of friendship than to muss his hair and tell him they have fun with him. It seems almost an admission that, really, they have fun at his expense. Central to the revelation is the fact that it does not represent the norm. Kareen is not a gifted empath by nature. Some miracle, which we might call instinct, led her to break through her typical barriers and reveal a loving fondness she had kept secret. Gilbert looks unconvinced and, evidently, leaves.

Joëlle and Caroline, returning after dark, find Kareen still outside, as if she had been there all day, as if Gilbert's leaving made it impossible for her to reenter the house. Joëlle reads Gilbert's somber note, wherein he opines that he is probably just too nice to everybody. He still fatally misses the point: that Joëlle dislikes him for his clinginess, not his niceness. Both Kareen and Caroline express regret at Gilbert's departure. Joëlle is utterly unsentimental and claims she is glad to be rid of him. Then, in another surprising revelation, another spontaneous miracle of human feelings, Caroline is shown to be crying. Caroline always displayed a certain insensitivity, an inability or unwillingness to respond sympathetically to others' feelings. This was crystallized on the first day of their vacation, when she almost demanded that Joëlle trade bedrooms with her. Originally, Caroline was to get the sea-facing room, but she could not bear the sound of the sea.

Symbolically, she has always wanted to close herself off from her surroundings. Now, this least sensitive, least vulnerable of the three girls, has a sudden epiphany and is overcome with pity for Gilbert. As she observes, it was his vacation, and they were meant to him. It is a surprising and moving pay-off for Caroline as a character. It is also another of the most poignant behavioral revelations in the film.

Now, it is worth emphasizing that nobody has done anything to anyone in this film that is beyond the pale of human decency. Rozier seems even to stop short of condemning Gilbert for his blind pursuit of Joëlle to her vacation spot. At worst, he is, as Joëlle notes, a pest. No one has been so obviously cruel as to warrant tearful repentance. Rather, a microcosmic universe of little offenses, little wordless dramas, has been playing out among this tiny friend group. Evidently, at least one of them knows it. Everything anyone has said or done has cast a series of delicate ripples over the fine surface of experience. By the time those ripples have reached another person, they have grown into towering, destructive waves. No one meant to hurt anyone, but people were hurt, mostly by the resounding echo chambers of their own minds, amplifying small, even accidental slights into devastating, insurmountable hardships.

This last revelation, with its sobering implications, would seem to prime the film for an elegiac ending. In fact, Rozier grants his characters one final moment of sublime sympathy and understanding. When first trying to convince the girls to let him stay with them, Gilbert explained that he brought a tent with "*petites sardines*." The girls were alarmed at the image of the little fish, but he explained that he meant "tent pegs." Later, on the first day of Gilbert's cohabitation with the girls, Joëlle danced with him. She

seemed to really enjoy it. The simple pleasures of vacation then overrode more complicated feelings. Regardless of the fact that Gilbert's presence annoyed her, that he was encroaching on her private life, she was able to enjoy a moment with him. During this sequence, the camera briefly tilted down to observe a little statue of a boy with a horn, a spirit of song leading the dance in its frozen pose. Both of these details are recapitulated in the profoundly moving scene where Joëlle and Caroline leave the house for the last time. Kracauer's comments on the particular genius of the Italian neorealists seem apposite here: "A straight line seems unimaginable to them; nothing really dovetails in their films. At the same time, however, it is as if they possessed a divining rod enabling them to spot, on their journey through the maze of physical existence, phenomena and occurrences which strike us as being tremendously significant" (256-257). Rozier proves to have a knack for capturing perfectly articulate details. In this scene, a pair of inanimate objects, by their interaction, evoke a universe of sympathy and regret.

After Caroline has shuttered all the doors, Joëlle reveals that she has found one of Gilbert's tent pegs, one of his "*petites sardines*." It seems to please her: a reminder of those few warm, happy exchanges they had. Rather than taking it with her, she decides to leave it there, a memorial forever tied to this place. She tentatively assents to Caroline's assertion that their vacation would not have been nearly as fun without Gilbert. After the girls have gone, in a moment of immense stillness, the camera holds for a while on the waves slowly washing over the beach. Then, Rozier gives us one last image of the vacation spot: the statue of the boy with the horn, the spirit of song that had (figuratively)

accompanied Gilbert and Joëlle dancing together. Joëlle has placed the “*petite sardine*” in its horn, muting it for the time being. It is a sentimental choice, but a fitting one for a young woman, still childish in certain ways, struggling with the pain of becoming an adult. Part of being grown up is realizing the humanity of those one would like to dismiss. The weight of this troubling knowledge is enough to make one want to disclaim all responsibility. Meanwhile, this little stone boy, this eternal spirit of youth, does not have to worry about such things. He will be the same, should she ever see him again, though she, inevitably, will not.

Through this melancholy veil, tinged with fatalism from our knowledge of how aging ineluctably erases our psychological links to childhood, we begin to identify traces of utopia in the moment the film depicts. This brief epoch in the young women’s lives, a transitional phase between adolescent self-absorption and the painful knowledge of adulthood, unites the virtues of two separate periods. First is the carefree exuberance of youth, the echo chamber created by constant, self-furthering joy. At the same time, Rozier gestures towards another, more adult, sort of utopia through the characters’ behavioral revelations. In these moments, the film posits an idyll of empathetic cooperation, where the characters rise above their petty differences to forge profound connections. However, these are not lasting, concrete impressions for us. When Caroline cries for Gilbert, her reaction stands out as much for its humanity as for its dissonance with her prior behavior. Moments like these, then, are fleeting, brief glimpses into a whole world of quivering possibility that, by the time the film ends, will still not be concretely realized. Utopia seems to intercede, canceling a character’s expected behavior

and replacing it with a hint of how they might best behave. Poignantly, though, the dissonance gives these intercessions an illusory quality. The utopia seems unreachable.

The film managed to hold, as if in its cupped hands, the most exalting pleasures of childhood and adulthood. Now, like fine grains of sand, the simple, self-indulgent joys of childhood run out through the gaps between the fingers. The sublime empathy of maturity also takes on a painful cast. The weight of being grown-up, with its understanding of things that would be more happily left obscure (like how one's own words and actions can hurt others), takes over. The whole film dramatizes the loss of an idyll and its replacement with a more complex and troubling reality. Rozier enables the viewer to feel that loss, in all its profound melancholy, through his marshalling of thematic threads and fine details. The latter range from the subtleties of loaded interactions that make us identify with the characters to the hints of surrealism that keep us distant. The tension that inheres, where we can feel both near to characters and far from them in practically adjacent sequences, lays the groundwork for the most powerful behavioral revelations. In these, the film reminds us of humanity in all its wondrous emotional capability

### **Chapter 3. Vicariousness and the Simulation of Memory in *Du côté d'Orouët***

There is at least one other dimension of *Du côté d'Orouët* that merits extended analysis in a chapter of its own. The film employs an eclectic range of strategies to present itself as not just the document of a vacation but specifically a retrospective document. The film is unusually attentive to sensory phenomena and uses them either to solicit our participation in vicarious remembering or as an analogy for how certain sensations overwhelm memories of events. We get the sense of fondly recalling the events from some later date, with such intimate knowledge of and sympathy for the characters that we feel as if we are a member of the friend group. Rozier solicits this by recurrently breaking the fourth wall, creating an intimate space of connection with the viewer, and recalling the property of home movies to evoke a wide range of personality beyond the bounds of how a character appears in the film. Speech, as it collapses into a series of essentially meaningless phrases that are nevertheless the source of humor for a group with privileged knowledge, allows us to experience the fond remembrance with which the film's characters might look back on its events years later. Finally, the film's gradual drawing back from the characters at the end simulates looking back affectionately at something that one cannot really enjoy in the same way anymore, something lost in the passage of time.

By constantly presenting events as if viewed from hindsight, we feel as though these perfect moments cannot be recaptured. We witness the fragility of the present, which seems to dissolve into memory before our eyes. The film straddles two separate

perspectives and their attendant sorrows – the anxiety of the young who fear adulthood and the melancholy of adults recalling their lost youth. It performs an extraordinarily complex juxtaposition whereby very fine processes of identification and distancing occur simultaneously. I use the writings of film theorists Siegfried Kracauer, Stanley Cavell, and Jean-Pierre Meunier to demonstrate how the film analogizes filmmaking processes with the act of remembering.

### **A Cinema of Sensations**

In *Du côté d'Orouët*, Rozier creates an index of experiential phenomena and, in doing so, makes the matter of everyday experience into an artistic object with a transformative power of renewal over our own perceptions of the world. Indeed, this seemingly inconsequential story of the vacation of three young women and two male hangers-on impresses the viewer as a matrix of sensation. The cataloging of sensation and its renewal through film are central to Siegfried Kracauer's conception of film's most powerful application. Kracauer (1960) believes that "films conform to the cinematic approach only if they acknowledge the realistic tendency by concentrating on actual physical existence—"the beauty of moving wind in the trees," as D. W. Griffith expressed it" (60). Of course, this "beauty" can comprise more dimensions of sensation than just vision. For a film to be "cinematic," it is thus a necessary precondition for it to constitute a reproduction, or at least an evocation, of actual physical sensations. Again, Kracauer's notion of the flow of life is relevant as the "concept 'flow of life,' then, covers the stream of material situations and happenings with all that they intimate in terms of emotions,

values, thoughts. The implication is that the flow of life is predominantly a material rather than a mental continuum, even though, by definition, it extends into the mental dimension” (71). I have discussed in the previous chapter how Rozier brings viewers into the emotional dimension of the film, variously allowing us to experience his characters’ feelings vicariously or keeping us just distant enough that their unexpected actions impress us like miracles. However, Rozier is also interested in invoking the viewer’s participation in other mental processes, particularly the act of remembering. He achieves this by exploiting film’s indexical abilities.

Though built around a fictional narrative, Rozier’s film bears some comparison with what Kracauer calls a “found story.” As he explains: “The term ‘found story’ covers all stories found in the material of actual physical reality. When you have watched for long enough the surface of a river or a lake you will detect certain patterns in the water which may have been produced by a breeze or some eddy. Found stories are in the nature of such patterns” (245-246). Even as structural principles lurk under the surface, the improvisatory, even documentary style of *Du côté d’Orouët* qualifies it as an imitation of the “found story.” To the extent that the fictional conflicts may have emerged from real life tensions between the actors, the vicissitudes of reality have determined its dramatic arc. More important, though, is the sheer volume of material the film offers to the senses, all of which seem to be engaged at various points throughout the film, sometimes all virtually at once. Rozier uses the film’s lightness and unpredictability, mixed with dashes of surrealist rupture—all the things which distance us from the characters—to decenter narrative as well as all signifying content. The viewer eventually learns to listen not for



meaning but for sounds. Some of the film's most prominent sense impressions, threading their way throughout its entire length, are the sounds of waves and of the sea wind. These score many scenes, particularly at night, suffusing the whole atmosphere with saltwater the viewer can almost taste.

Also prominent is the sunlight, which impresses its almost tangible heat on the viewer, as well as its ability to completely overwhelm the grainy sixteen-millimeter filmstock, washing everything in a hazy yellow blaze. Then, in scenes depicting later hours, the image is often thoroughly steeped in the deep blue or purple of the fading day. During the sequence where Joëlle and Caroline go boating with Patrick, we are treated to some particularly striking effects of sunlight. In apparent bliss, Joëlle leans out almost parallel to the water. Patrick matches her as the blazing sun makes dazzling golden light forms on the waves, and a lens flair (hazy coins of warmth all floating in a row) passes clockwise over the image. On shore, Kareen rushes across the beach to where the boat is coming in. The cameraman runs behind her, with a diagonal line of lens flares cutting across the gleaming sand. It is one of the most beautiful shots of the film, driving home a sense of headlong motion into the dreamy horizon. The sunlight is so brilliant, it is distorting the medium which documents it. The sixteen-millimeter film stock is not capable of faithfully capturing the look of sunlight, particularly when the lens is pointed directly at the sun. It can only be overwhelmed by it. We can see how this explosion of light parallels memory's imperfections. Shapes, having receded into the past, become indistinct.

Kracauer makes an injunction to all filmmakers: "The true film artist may be

imagined as a man who sets out to tell a story but, in shooting it, is so overwhelmed by his innate desire to cover all of physical reality—and also by a feeling that he must cover it in order to tell the story, any story, in cinematic terms—that he ventures ever deeper into the jungle of material phenomena in which he risks becoming irretrievably lost” (255). This sense of getting lost recalls the idea of getting lost in a reverie, fondly remembering the past. When the sunlight washes everything out, distorting human forms into blurry silhouettes, or dropping a line of coins on the image when it produces lens flares, it performs an operation analogous to how memory can be distorted by particularly strong sense impressions. The picturesque, sunny quality of this blissful moment is so strong that memory falters in capturing it. All this golden sunlight really serves to remind us, in gorgeous melancholic fashion, of things that cannot be recaptured, of lost time, and idylls to which we can never return. This celebration of a time to which once cannot return is the source of the film’s poignant, elegiac quality. As critic Jacques Mandelbaum (2001) observes: “Rozier’s films...are...of a humor and a melancholy that, in celebrating life even in the fragility of its passage, in the fugitive, unpredictable grace of the moment, touch the heart of the human condition” (14).<sup>18</sup> Rozier appeals to the universal experience of realizing that the best time of one’s life has probably passed.

The way all these sensory experiences are catalogued is analogous to how a vacation diary catalogues events. The film is a record, not just of what was physically done on a vacation but of all the subtle things that were perceived as well. The jaunty,

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<sup>18</sup> “Les films de Rozier...sont...d’une drôlerie et d’une mélancolie qui, en célébrant la vie dans la fragilité même de son passage, dans la grâce fugitive et aléatoire de l’instant, touchent au cœur de la condition humaine”

stylized title cards—informing the viewer of the day, and sometimes the hour or location of scenes—also clue us into this idea of the film being a kind of diary. They are personalized just like how diary headings might be decorated with little drawings or hearts dotting the *i*'s. The film makes recurrent use of postcards in order to impart narrative information but also to contextualize the film as the equivalent of a postcard, a pictorial keepsake of the vacation. Early on, we see Kareen and Caroline lying in a sand dune. Kareen looms over Caroline's shoulder as the latter writes a postcard, apparently to her boyfriend. Kareen makes her read aloud her letter and comments somewhat caustically on it. The fact that this scene serves the narrative function of letting Kareen articulate her discontent sort of obscures its other purpose, which is to make us view the whole film as a kind of memento depicting the joys and sorrows of leisure time by the sea. It is also worth mentioning that this shot plays out against more golden sunlight, emerging over dune grass and casting everything in amber. The memory is frozen, overwhelmed by the hot and blinding sun until it becomes an image of pure warmth. Later, just before their horse-riding excursion, there is another scene mirroring this one where Caroline is writing to her mother. These scenes further cast the events of the film as a story being recounted or remembered to somebody else who was not there.

This brings up the question of how the film solicits vicarious remembering on the part of the viewer. There is a distinction to be made between the sensations Rozier can record and those which he can only evoke. The blinding light of the sun can be recorded (at least, as well as the technology can capture it) but its warmth cannot. In the latter cases, Rozier relies on the strength of our memories to fill in the sensations which film

cannot directly reproduce. One early scene finishes with a close-up of Kareen in profile, wind blowing strongly in her face. The viewer can practically feel the intense wind, as it batters against her face, blowing her hair back. Then, the film cuts to a handheld travelling shot of the girls hunched over, combing the waves with nets (they are looking for shrimp). The two juxtaposed shots are united in that both dramatize bodily resistance, Kareen to the wind, and all the girls to the waves. Rozier has chosen to punctuate the transition between scenes by evoking a physical sensation, which we experience vicariously. In fact, the film constitutes an archive of these sensations, which are frequently, forcibly brought to our attention. By ending this scene with such a sensation, Rozier suggests that these tangible feelings may be more lasting and defining of a moment than the emotions contained within the narrative. In merely suggesting this, he also crystallizes our vantagepoint with regard to the characters and their epoch. Setting the two types of sensations against each other, to see which best stands up to the distortions and omissions of memory, solidifies our retrospective point of view.

*Du côté d'Orouët* is also a film obsessed with food and eating. It is difficult to imagine a viewer who is not affected by the sticky, glistening frosting on the pastries the girls greedily devour, or, conversely, by the sad sight of Gilbert's tragic dinner, with its sloppy mess of eel and overcooked potatoes. According to Rozier (2001a), one of the early working titles for the film was *Chi-chi frichi*, after the delectable pastries depicted (38). In one scene, taking place on the stormy night where, later on, Gilbert will appear at their doorstep, Joëlle brings out a box of pastries. Each of the girls grabs one and eats ravenously. Caroline declares that the first one done will be the first to get another, so

they double their speed. In the end it is Joëlle—the only girl positioned, in the foreground, with her head facing away from the camera—who finishes first. Given the blocking, she seems more like a spectator than a participant. Her enjoyment of the sweets can thus be considered an onscreen representation of our vicarious enjoyment of these sticky, gleaming mounds of sugar and cream. Of course, the taste of a chocolate éclair cannot be captured on film directly, but it can be evoked in memory. The camera tracks in to better capture the cousins' sloppy decadence, even cutting to a close-up of Caroline with chocolate cream smeared all around her mouth. Kareen, accurately, calls her cousin "disgusting." As the scene veers from delectable to grotesque, we find ourselves overwhelmed to the point of revulsion by the sticky, sweet sensations our mind conjures up. Moments like this are a testament to film's power to record, through evocation, sensations that range beyond the limits of what film can actually capture. Simply representing these pastries visually brings with it a host of potent sensations in the viewer.

### **The Chamber Pot: A Revenant**

Apart from soliciting our faculties of memory by evoking physical sensations, Rozier also explores the actual process of remembering. In fact, it is dramatized in one of the film's most striking scenes: Kareen's monologue to the viewer. The girls spend their vacation in a house once inhabited by Kareen and Caroline's grandparents. For these two, but especially for Kareen, the domicile houses a host of objects practically writhing with memories. After the girls first arrive at the house, they slump onto the chairs in the dining

room, exhausted. It is not long, though, before they get the urge to explore. Kareen announces she is going to go see her room and rushes out. A cut takes us outside the dining room, suddenly joined with Kareen in her frenzied excitement to reenter the past. An unusually smooth tracking shot then follows her into her room. She looks around while the other girls rush up the stairs in the background, as if swept away from Kareen's private moment of rediscovery.

Shortly after crossing the threshold into the room, she pauses. The strength of her memories evidently stops her in her tracks. She steps cautiously into the room, penetrating through the thick atmosphere of the past like she was wading waist-deep through resistant water. She flops onto the bed, looks around, and begins to speak to the camera. She begins, "It's like I never left. It's 1954." This sequence, wherein Kareen delivers a monologue straight to the camera, reveals that the house is a kind of nucleus for Kareen's memories, a place she can go to get back in touch with her childhood self, even inhabiting that self for fleeting moments. Rozier has brought us extremely close to Kareen's face, which fills the frame. The soundtrack, formerly full of the sound of feet hurrying up the stairs, is now mostly silent. Only the wind and waves outside are still faintly audible. The smell, she notes, is the same as in 1954, when she was 5. It is significant that this scene reverts, for the only time in the film, to a monologue form that blatantly shatters the fourth wall. If these memories had been communicated through dialogue, they would have been circumscribed by the film's objective viewpoint. They would have remained the memories of a character, narrated so we could listen, but cut off from us. Instead, Kareen's monologue evokes a verbal reality which Rozier situates in an

intimate realm shared between Kareen and the spectator. By sharing this moment with her, where she addresses her recollections directly to us, we share a realm of private communication. We might even say, since it is a kind of soliloquy, which the other characters cannot hear, that this is a realm of communication prior to speech. From the perspective of the diegesis, Kareen is not narrating her memory to anyone. She is remembering only for herself, but we are let in on it.

She speaks in the present tense, as if actually becoming a child again through remembering. This is another process of vicarious experience, now modelled by a character in the film instead of being enacted by the viewer. In her whispered voice, she almost puts us into a trance, bringing us back to that time, inducting us into a world where every tangible object seems to quiver with a host of living memories embedded into it. Rozier cuts to the oil lamp on the bedside table, then to Kareen's face in profile, gazing at it. She reminisces about the lamp, how she always wanted her grandparents to light it. She recalls a chamber pot that used to be in the cabinet. She laughs at the thought it might still be there. The film here superimposes two levels of reality, a verbally evoked past and a visually depicted present, linked by certain objects that have tenaciously persisted from the past into the present. Kracauer explains how the addition of dialogue to the silent film opened up a whole new dimension of diegetic reality, a verbal reality, superimposed on top of the visually observable reality of cinema. He explains:

it is inevitable that out of the spoken words definite patterns of meanings and images should arise. They are much in the nature of the loving memories which Proust's narrator retains of his grandmother and which prevent him from realizing her crude physique as it appears in a photograph. Evoked through language, these patterns assume a reality of their own, a self-sufficient mental reality which, once

established in the film, interferes with the photographic reality to which the camera aspires. (104)

The Proust comparison is apposite as Rozier has reflected on the resemblance between the film's title and those of Proust's masterwork: *À la recherche du temps perdu, Du côté de chez Swann, Le Côté de Guermantes* (38). Kareen's past is really defined for the viewer in terms of a few significant objects that, by bridging the gap between the verbal and the visual, enable her a window back into her past. It is a very Proustian notion of how we interact with memory, albeit with physical objects replacing Proust's more fleeting sensations of perception. Kareen is able to enter the past by communing with these objects, anticipating their presence, recalling their past significance.

She is disappointed on finding the chamber pot gone. She had really wanted to see it again. Rozier makes sure to show the point at which memory falters, at which objects fail to persist, rather like the sunlight distorting our vision. There is another imperfection in the way the persistence of objects vouches for the veracity of this verbal, remembered realm. Each time Rozier cuts to them, they seem distinctly dumb, none more so than the portrait on the wall that, presumably, depicts Kareen's grandmother. Kracauer is sensitive to the power of objects on film, noting that "it is a painter—Fernand Léger—who judiciously insists that only film is equipped to sensitize us, by way of big close-ups, to the possibilities that lie dormant in a hat, a chair, a hand, and a foot...In using its freedom to bring the inanimate to the fore and make it a carrier of action, film only protests its peculiar requirement to explore all of physical existence, human or nonhuman" (45). Indeed, the objects in this scene are profoundly articulate. Yet, the tone of their articulations is elegiac. They mostly memorialize a dead past. Incapable of averring



Kareen's testimony except by their presence, these objects are reduced, in these pitilessly exacting close-ups, to revenants, signposts demonstrating the past's continuity, but never more effectively than a gravestone demonstrates the continuity of the dead, through memory.

None of these objects are to Kareen now what they were to her at five years old. They are not like a set of dancing woodland creatures, ready to line up and entertain her at a moment's notice. They are, in fact, objects chained to routines of utility—particularly the oil lamp and the chamber pot. Stanley Cavell (2005b) argues that, when objects tied to specific uses are removed from those uses, they can be revealed to us anew. As he explains: “It is upon the disruption of such matters of course (of a tool, say by its breaking; or of someone's occupation, say because of an injury; or of some absence of material) that the mode of sight then brought forth discovers objects in what Heidegger notes as their conspicuousness, their obtrusiveness, and their obstinacy” (2).

In this case, now that the objects are out of use, Kareen's only desire for them is out of nostalgia. Finding the oil lamp, we are fixated not on its usefulness, but its persistence – what Cavell calls its “obstinacy.” Kareen then closes the cabinet and sits on the bed, letting her gaze wander to the left of the frame. Rozier then cuts to another, almost jarring, straight-ahead close-up. She reminisces about a little prank she pulled once, replacing the chamber pot with a can of something. Now, it has been permanently replaced with nothing, as though she were vaguely complicit, perhaps just by aging, in the elimination of these manifestations of her childhood. When these are absent, our link to the past becomes considerably more tenuous. Suddenly, there is nothing to bridge the

gap between the verbal, imaginary domain and the visual, tangible. Cavell, writing about Buster Keaton's silent comedies, comes to the crucial point about what it means when the relation between humans and objects fails:

We have here to do with something about the human capacity for sight, or for sensuous awareness generally, something we might express as our condemnation to project, to inhabit, a world that goes essentially beyond the delivery of our senses...The most common conclusion among epistemologists has been some kind of skepticism—a realization that we cannot, strictly speaking, be said to know, to be certain, of the existence of the world of material things at all. (3)

It might be that all the material that meets our senses is made up of ghosts, that nothing is tangible in the sense that it firmly links us to a past that really existed. This has special resonance with this scene given the fact that we experience the memories vicariously and, thus, they are at a further remove. In fact, they are in danger of disappearing into thin air.

Kareen looks up to the left. Rozier cuts to a portrait on the wall of a stern-looking youngish woman, presumably Kareen and Caroline's grandmother. It is an almost comical juxtaposition: the long-gone youthful version of the grandmother looks disapprovingly on her granddaughter's antics. Ghosts from the past are thus enabled to communicate by tricks of editing. However, we are cognizant that there is no more communication taking place than this. It is only an illusion, not a real connection. As the camera stays on this image, one of the other girls, tearing through the spectral, diaphanous fabric of memory, calls for Kareen. She continues to stare absently. They ask if she is sleeping, and her reverie is interrupted. She gets up and walks off, only to stop and gaze back, now framed tightly in profile. Something is attracting her, like a magnet, to this room. The desire to grasp the past is almost too great. Finally, she leaves. Meanwhile, on the second floor, Caroline and Joëlle open a set of doors leading onto a

balcony to let in more sunshine. Not sensitive to what the house is enabling Kareen to experience, they freely expose these dark old rooms to the revealing light of the present.

### **No Home Movie (But a Touch of Attitude)**

The film employs several oblique filters of perception, causing us to reconsider what we are seeing and what responses it might be evoking. One of them, which serves to mimic or model our experience of remembering someone, is the repeated inclusion in the film of what would appear to be outtakes. Frequently, characters collapse in fits of laughter or, in later, less concerted acts of fourth wall breaking than Kareen's monologue, look straight into the camera. Like so many of Rozier's bolder effects, these moments complicate the illusion that we are viewing real people rather than deliberate performers. The performative facade is momentarily lifted, cluing us in that we are getting a glimpse of the real individual behind a performed version of themselves. At certain points while the girls are laughing, we sense that we are not seeing an actorly laugh, but an authentic scream of hilarity. This lifting of the veil performs what Jean-Pierre Meunier, as summarized by Guido Kirsten (2019), calls "the home-movie attitude" of filmic reference, wherein "the consciousness of the home movie appears as a constitutive activity: it looks beyond the image, to the person-in-general that it depicts, in order to produce and maintain his existence even during the screening" (88). The person's identity—that nebulous mass of behaviors and ideas that constitute personality—is referenced in these moments. When watching real home movie footage of our friends, a whole matrix of experiences shared with that person, of everything we know about them,

is evoked, as though it were barely visible just below the surface. Likewise, we sense, by inference, an authentically human, complex emotional range in each of these people from the way that they reveal themselves during these outtake sequences.

Kracauer's writing on the sort of acting ideally suited to cinema is relevant here. According to Kracauer, "the film actor must seem to be his character in such a way that all his expressions, gestures, and poses point beyond themselves to the diffuse contexts out of which they arise. They must breathe a certain casualness marking them as fragments of an inexhaustible texture" (95). This "inexhaustible texture" constitutes an individual's whole personality, the complete spectrum of possible behaviors nested within their nature. It is the film's gesturing towards these dimensions of identity not directly depicted in the film that give us such a strong sense of the characters, and what makes the behavioral revelations discussed in the previous chapter so affecting. It has nothing to do with our knowledge of the performers. We may well know nothing of their personal lives or careers. Indeed, only Bernard Menez went onto a substantial career in film acting, and it was very much in its early stages when he appeared in *Du côté d'Orouët*. Rather, we again get the sense of looking retrospectively at these characters, now from the position of a member of their inner circle, fondly recalling the comical misadventures and running in-jokes shared among the group.

During the horse-riding sequence, once they all get to the beach, Patrick rides majestically, handsomely, at the fore. Then Rozier cuts back to Gilbert, nearly falling off his mount, and then absurdly play-whipping his horse in admonishment. As he prods the horse to gallop, he finds that she just slows down to a lazy trot. He looks up and meets

the camera's gaze, breaking the fourth wall for a moment, and temporarily aligning the film perfectly with the sort of home movie footage where a subject, realizing they are making a fool of themselves, might turn to the camera (or its operator) and laugh. The film thus, again, becomes a document of memory. Gilbert's tentative step out of the diegesis is akin to a ghost's step out of the past. Impressed by the sudden presence of this ghost, we complete in our minds the picture of the full man implied by his sudden revelation. Suddenly, his presence is more authentic and real. The way we know him now is analogous to how it would be he were an old friend or relative, captured in our home movie footage. This flash of intimacy goes beyond our interest in him within the bounds of the narrative and into a realm like the one we share with Kareen when she addresses us during her monologue. As Kracauer observes, many filmmakers "value projections of the unconscious. What they want to get at, Hanns Sachs, a film-minded disciple of Freud's, spells out in psychoanalytic terms: he requests the film actor to advance the narrative by embodying 'such psychic events as are before or beyond speech'" (95). Our relations with Gilbert are on a whole other dimension from the rest of the fictional narrative. We feel the force of his personality as strongly as if we knew him, just by this trick of breaking him through the barrier of fiction.

The morning after Gilbert's departure, the girls return to the snack bar. We see Didi, the woman who runs it, for the first time since early in the film. She seems happier now, and gently mocks Kareen's bad mood. Then, in what could pass for an outtake, a laughing Joëlle finally gives up on trying to uncork a bottle of cider with her teeth and asks for a corkscrew. This unexpected moment once more effects a momentary

dissolution of the fiction and exposes the reality underneath. All this contributes to a larger sense that the film is gesturing towards a reality beneath the surface of experience. According to Kracauer, “cinematic films evoke a reality more inclusive than the one they actually picture. They point beyond the physical world to the extent that the shots or combinations of shots from which they are built carry multiple meanings. Due to the continuous influx of the psychophysical correspondences thus aroused, they suggest a reality which may fittingly be called ‘life’” (71). Our sense of this almost tangible subterranean reality is foundational to our sense of the film’s realism. At the same time, it is an important part of our coming to feel intimately tied with this group of friends, of sharing their memories.

The girls’ nocturnal visit to the Gruette farm, where they pick up some eels that they are ultimately too afraid to eat, stands out as the film’s most striking appeal to the “home movie attitude.” In its staging, it actually models amateur filmmaking. The first shot is of a silhouetted figure standing in front of the blue evening sky. She holds a flashlight pointed towards the camera. This sole point of light on the black lower half of the screen itself resembles a lens, making her into a surrogate camera operator. The next shot, from the surrogate camera’s point of view, depicts a man hauling an eel trap onto the grass. He is lit only by the small circle of light from the flashlight. A thick wall of darkness stands just a couple feet behind him. The minimal field of action, circumscribed by the flashlight’s paltry field of illumination, seems to locate the scene not so much at the Gruette farm specifically as in the selective and imperfect domain of memory. They are encountering this object of fear, the disgusting eels, in a nocturnal realm of recorded

memory. Kareen's use of the flashlight-as-camera to stage the recreation of a memory (they are, after all, at a farm she used to frequent as a child) introduces this childhood terror.

Like the sunlight washing out all detail, so too does the darkness, relieved only by one small light, abridge the moment, reducing it to its few most prominent details. This analogizes both the imperfections of memory and of film, as we have already seen Rozier thematize the failings of sixteen-millimeter film stock. Joëlle and Caroline walk into frame with a bag to collect eels. The farmer offers one to them and they scream. The holder of the flashlight (now identified, by process of elimination, as Kareen) jumps too, in reverse-shot, bouncing the beam of light. It produces an effect almost like film jumping in its sprocket, or skipping frames. As she bounces in fright, the light shines right into the camera a couple of times, producing fleeting lens flares that blind our perceptive faculties. Rozier puts front and center the parallel between memory and filmmaking processes, underlining how the film engages our faculties of memory. The cinematic means by which Rozier makes us vicariously enjoy the fun of the girls' vacation and the means by which the girls, years later, may look back on these events in fond recollection are thus made equivalent.

### **Nonsense and Nostalgia**

Another sense impression that recurs throughout the film and helps situate us in a retrospective vantagepoint is the frequent use of nonverbal or non-signifying speech. It is present even in the title, which refers to how the name "Orouët" becomes a sort of

nonsense phrase repeated by the girls, always to howls of laughter. The film could be said to model an echo chamber, with these kinds of phrases, as well as other repeating themes and resonances, perpetually reverberating through it. Moreover, the strong textural sense, the almost grain-like quality of all the rhyming or punning dialogue that runs like a vein through the film, is another phenomenon captured in the film's index of sense experiences. Our attention is diverted from the content of utterances and towards the way they sound. Kracauer views this as high objective for film sound. Referring to the same passage from Proust as before, he explains:

This shift of emphasis is cinematic because it alienates the words, thereby exposing their material characteristics...Remember the Proust passage in which the narrator looks at his grandmother with the eyes of a stranger: estranged from her, he sees her, roughly speaking, as she really is, not as he imagines her to be. Similarly, whenever dialogue is diverted from its conventional purpose of conveying some message or other, we are, like Proust's narrator, confronted with the alienated voices which, now that they have been stripped of all the connotations and meanings normally overlaying their given nature, appear to us for the first time in a relatively pure state. (109)

Kracauer credits this strategy with enabling a film to balance image and sound such that neither drowns out the other. In addition, the film locates, within diegetic scenes, a space for the kind of preverbal communication we otherwise experience only through instances where the fourth wall is broken.

On their first full day in Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie, the girls sit outside with a spread of food on their table and a craving for fresh eggs. Caroline says there are many farms nearby. Kareen asks about a particular farm they used to visit as children. Caroline says it is "*du côté d'Orouët*"—"near [the village of] Orouët." They laugh at the village's name and take turns pronouncing it with an exaggerated uvular trill. Caroline reveals, to



further laughter, that the farm has a rhyming name: the Gruette farm at Orouët. This is the central example of speech being repeated without meaning, as “Orouët” becomes a sort of password within this small group, frequently inspiring laughter. Hunger intercepts and distorts their speech when Kareen mispronounces “Gruette” and Caroline corrects her, explaining it is not “*Gruyette* like *gruyère*” cheese. Joëlle then proclaims she is going on a fish diet. Kareen is skeptical, but Joëlle insists. Kareen mocks her bad eating habits. Joëlle watches her with a smile, but perhaps a hint of resentment. Kareen collapses into laughter, disrupting signification in speech. Joëlle, in response, sticks her tongue out. This light and faintly self-parodic performance of in-group dissent is analogous to retrospectively regarding one’s younger self, and the follies of falling out with one’s friends. Associated with irreverent humor, the running theme of nonsense speech dovetails with a gently parodic sensibility that simulates nostalgia, looking back at something with fond bemusement. We feel ourselves inaugurated into this group because of our privileged knowledge of its in-jokes. It distinguishes itself from Rozier’s authorial mocking in that it engages us intellectually, through mental processes like remembering or listening for the sounds of words, rather than emotionally.

Joëlle describes her diet book as “*for-mi-dable*,” drawing out each syllable with that same spirit of dissolving language into amusing sounds. They continue riffing on the title and publisher of the book. Caroline suggests shrimping as a form of exercise (for those most coveted parts of the body: the ankles). At the word “*crevettes*” Kareen pipes in with the rhyming “Orouët.” These rhyming sounds coarse like rushing streams throughout the scene. Kracauer observes the potent effect of such aural stimulation:

“Emphasis on voices as sounds may also serve to open up the material regions of the speech world for their own sake. What is thought of here is a sort of word carpet which, woven from scraps of dialogue or other kinds of communication, impresses the audience mainly as a coherent sound pattern” (110). This “word carpet” is one of the central types of matter comprising the film’s index of sensory experiences. Hearing the name “Orouët,” and the laughter which attends it, ends up being one of the defining sensations of the film. It functions like a cherished memory of a specific time in one’s life, constantly reasserting itself throughout that epoch. Even as we watch the film, we view this recurring phrase from a retrospective, even nostalgic vantagepoint.

One evening, when they plan to visit the local casino, Kareen dons a rather hideous white jacket and trousers with a ceinture of silver medallions, then stomps up the stairs intoning that she has nothing to wear to go to Orouët. She makes this complaint into a couplet, rhyming “*mettre*” (“to wear”) with “Orouët.” Caroline, appearing from the doorway to her room, mirrors her intonation and rhyming. They continue the bit, stomping over to Joëlle’s mirror where they rub their heads like cavewomen. This distinct evocation of preverbal humanity resonates with how, by decentering the meaning of speech and inducting us into this private joke, Rozier has brought us into an intimate form of communion with the characters that precedes verbal understanding.

At this point, Kareen remembers her grandmother’s clogs. In the midst of their cooing game on the stairs (as described in the previous chapter), the cousins located their grandmother’s outrageously loud wooden clogs. Kareen then wanted to perform a “folk dance” with them. Now, they stomp around in the clogs and intone random phrases. Their

ritualistic gestures and speech are rather like those of Noh theatre performers. Shortly thereafter, Joëlle gets her own pair of clogs. Rozier then cuts to a view from outside the house. The camera comically tilts up and down, following the commotion from a lighted window on the second floor to the first and back again, in time with the sound of their stomping and moaning. Back inside, the trio has formed a line led by Joëlle, donning a poncho and newly crowned as the high priestess. They march out onto the balcony, where Joëlle proclaims, “Orouët is this way,” like a prophet gifted divine guidance. Outside on the still beach, a solitary figure is milling about as the sun goes down in the purple sky. Punctuating the scene in this humorous fashion, Rozier jocularly highlights the girls’ isolation. They have retreated into this private joke. We react to them as though we were looking back fondly at our own youthful mischief.

### **Like All Good Things...**

Chronologically, the last strategy Rozier uses to simulate a retrospective vantagepoint relates to the film’s storytelling. Late sequences favor elision and ambiguity where earlier scenes had mostly elected to let situations play out fully before cutting away. The new strategy is clearly enacted in a scene where the girls team up to get back at Patrick for missing a date with Kareen. We are not treated to any exposition indicating how their plot will work. Rozier even elides the missed date, so that we do not realize they have any reason to want to trick him until they explain themselves. First, we see Caroline, writing another postcard to her mother, which should clue us in on the relation between this narrative move towards opacity and the sense of experiencing a vacation vicariously or

through memory. On the sound of an approaching car's horn, she swiftly launches into her part of the plan.

So much happens in this short sequence, that a close reading would take up several pages. Most striking is the overwhelming sense of synergy between the girls, as though the whole fallout over Patrick's non-appearance has brought them closer in sync. However, this is just speculation. By not explaining the plan before we watch the girls carry it out, Rozier is beginning to take us out of the story, to limit our access into the inner sanctum of this small group of girls. The insights we were able to gain about their interior lives are largely in the past (this scene takes place after Gilbert has left). We are slowly being brought back to reality, to our lowly role as spectators of a film, and no longer privileged intruders into the lives of others. The folly of vicarious enjoyment, where we know we can never really join in the fun, models the melancholy of memory, where the past cannot be recaptured.

After a disastrous date with Patrick (the boat capsizes), Kareen goes back to Paris. Next, we see Joëlle and Caroline, clad in blankets like a pair of cozy children, eating yogurt. They are sitting on the floor by the window overlooking the sea. Lazily, the waves roll over the surface of the water, purpled by the setting sun. For a while, the two women sit in silence. It is a deeply restful moment, like all conflict has vacated the film. Eliding more contentious scenes like the boat's capsizing and Kareen's actual departure has left us with a fractured impression of the vacation's last few days. The characters have seemed almost to play at dramatic situations rather than really experiencing them. This, of course, fits in with how our perspective is moving further away from these

characters, but it also parallels fractured memory. Our recollections are always selective. Now, in concert with the general sense of fun and excitement dissipating in these late scenes, so too are their distinctness and the full depth of their emotional resonance fading away into the obscure, unreachable past.

Following this meditative sequence, Rozier gives us a similarly placid extended close-up on Caroline's face, wearing a vacant expression. She begins writing a letter to her parents and reveals in it that Kareen has been gone now for several days. Rozier has evidently given up on keeping us apprised of the date. A solid sense of time, too, has slipped away. Joëlle interrupts her, and Caroline looks up, almost into the camera, as if she were conversing with us. She makes plans with us to get coffee and skip breakfast. We can do nothing but assent, as Joëlle does. In one shot, the film synthesizes its earlier usage of fourth wall breaking to simulate the authentic spontaneity of home movies with the more esoteric usage of the technique to inaugurate us into a private communicative space, as it was previously used during Kareen's memory-monologue to induct the viewer into the space of her childhood memories. Though we have effectively lost the plot at this point (the close-up is so tight we do not even know what time of day it is until the dialogue reveals it to be the morning) we, as if by magic, suddenly find ourselves able to commune with a character. Then, however, the camera zooms out, and she gets up and walks away. Rozier cuts to a medium shot of Joëlle, shattering this fleeting illusion. This sends a pretty clear message about our increasing distance from the characters.

Joëlle and Caroline are in Joëlle's bedroom, getting ready to leave. We can see nothing, as the room is unlit, and only the patchy purple sky through the small square of

an open window allows us to make out their silhouettes. It is another sudden reminder of the camera's fallibility at capturing reality. Caroline checks her hair in the mirror, somehow managing to see well enough to make adjustments. The characters see things that we, having to rely on a light-sensitive apparatus, cannot. We are even subject to perceptual trickery, as we do not initially realize the camera is pointed into the mirror. This is yet another disruption that upends our sense of the reality of what we are seeing. Rozier is terminating our ability to experience the vacation vicariously. Memories are faltering. There is so much tension in the film at this point, it feels like it could burst. We have effectively lost our grasp on the characters. First, their behavioral revelations complicated it. Now, their increasing distance makes them really opaque. In the confusion, every moment seems to hum with a magical sense of possibility that is nonetheless drowned in the inescapable knowledge that all is winding down.

Joëlle returns to Paris. Back at the office, the old order reasserts itself. Gilbert is back in his stiff suit, flirting with the girls. The one significant change is that he has apparently realized Joëlle will not return his affections, so he turns his attention elsewhere. Joëlle is seen having lunch with some coworkers at a café. Rozier then cuts to a close-up of Gilbert, suggesting he is at the same table with them. Cutting to the reverse angle reveals, however, that he is at another table with another woman. Gilbert and the woman discuss their vacations. He spots Joëlle, seated just a few feet away, and starts talking about his experiences with her, Kareen, and Caroline. He embellishes to make a better story, to make himself see more impressive, not like an oblivious clown. Already, he is reliving the experience and finds himself able to change it in the telling. Gilbert's

abbreviated, exaggerated version of the story certainly may have its flaws. Yet, what we saw was also distorted, passed through several oblique filters of perception and memory. As the past experience is further transformed, before our eyes, in the retelling, its utopian quality becomes crystallized. We realize that what we have seen is an idyll of perfect bliss, that in between the fraught moments of conflict and anxiety, there has been a paradisaical pleasure.

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the film creates out of human behavior—out of childhood joys and adult revelations—a sense of utopia. Our experience of it in the moment (or as near to the moment as Rozier allows us to feel) is distinctly fleeting, with even the most beautiful behavioral revelations threatening to expose a whole world of painful adult concerns, of a universe of hurt that lurks beneath every interaction. Jacques Mandelbaum describes the ending: “This return to the ridicule of reality is so much more poignant that each of the characters who feel it—and the spectator with them—has been transformed by the poetic and liberating experience of the film” (18).<sup>19</sup> For its gorgeous revelations, its poignant defeats, and for the purple of the evening sky reflected on the water, the film has poetically grasped at the ideal, the sublime. For its unapologetic indulgence in the joys of youth, in nonsensical in-jokes, and in the irreverent mischief that staves off adulthood, it is liberating. Rozier’s film testifies to cinema’s power to break through barriers and invite the audience in. It also reveals how all the meaning in our lives can hinge on what might seem to be the most frivolous

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<sup>19</sup> “Ce retour au pilori de la réalité est d’autant plus pathétique que chacun des personnages qui l’éprouvent—et le spectateur avec lui—a été transformé par l’expérience poétique et libertaire du film”

moments.

The film's tremendous sensitivity to sensory phenomena qualifies it as a vivid evocation not just of a specific time and place, but also of the act of remembering. Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie, in the summer that the film takes place, seems already on the cusp of fading into the past. All the hazy golden sunshine and the intoxicating evening purple dissolve the "presentness" of what we see. Rather than giving themselves to the camera to be captured, these visual phenomena overwhelm it. Technology fails, just like memory falters as time passes. In addition, everything that the film evokes vicariously—the taste of pastries, the feeling of robust wind on one's face, of the rolling waves lapping against one's ankles—analogs the process of memory and solicits our own faculties of memory, remembering our own experience of like sensations. Speech which fails to signify—which, in fact, collapses into nonsensical running jokes and bursts of ungovernable laughter—performs a similar process and also makes us feel part of a tight-knit group of friends, sharing in their private jokes. Through these strategies, Rozier makes viewers into rememberers. As the film winds toward its conclusion, we feel ourselves growing more and more distant from the characters, whose inner feelings now seem opaque. This all contributes to the profound sense that the present is something impossibly delicate. We can only really recognize once it has gone, saying to ourselves, "There it was." By the time the utterance is complete, the moment has already passed. Only years later is it possible to see the utopian beauty of that lost time.



#### Chapter 4. Les Vacances de M. Crusoe: *Les Naufragés* as a Parody of Colonialism

*Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* (*The Castaways of Turtle Island*) places itself into an ironic, even parodic, relationship with one of contemporary Western culture's most ubiquitous and powerful narratives, *Robinson Crusoe*, as well as its host of mythic and philosophical resonances. Unlike other adaptations of Defoe's novel that adhere to the realist representational codes of most commercial cinema, Rozier's film meditates rigorously on questions of filmic reality and narrativity. In addition, the film applies Rozier's typically irreverent sensibility towards critiques of European commercialism, colonialism, and tyranny more generally. In the process, it reveals itself to be a work of complex, thoughtful modernist critique that replaces political rage with parody and a passion for cinema's possibilities.

To begin with, I venture an allegorical reading of the basic plot of *Robinson Crusoe*, with reference to Hans Blumenberg's study *Shipwreck with Spectator*, in order to demonstrate some of the text's major ideological underpinnings. Then, I examine how Rozier's interest in utopia sees perhaps its most pessimistic iteration, with the idyll of self-sufficiency and harmonious cooperation among workers being cancelled or refuted at every step as human folly and arrogance continually get in the way. I use the writings of critic Stéphane Bouquet to the comparisons Rozier draws between his comical characters and more sinister figures of imperialist oppression. In the end, the film suggests that an uncorrupted childhood gaze, not yet tainted by the cruel value system of commercialist, colonialist Europe, might be able to evade these evils, finding a pure-hearted possibility

of adventure where the warped adult gaze might only see an opportunity for exploitation.

### **The Meaning of Defoe's Island**

In Daniel Defoe's novel, Robinson Crusoe undertakes his first ocean voyage against the clearly expressed wishes of his parents. His journey is motivated by nothing but his own will and ambition, an impractical and even perverse desire to flout his apparent destiny (taking up a legal practice in accordance with his father's wishes) and take to the sea and live out his fantasies of a sailor's adventurous life (4-7). Crusoe's heterodoxy characterizes him, from his first deliberate choice in the book, as a self-determining hero. Shortly after he does take to the sea, a violent storm kicks up. Crusoe immediately conceives this situation as a battle between his will and God's. Providence is punishing him for his impudence. Predictably, his back against the proverbial wall, Crusoe tries bargaining with the higher power, pledging that he will abandon his vain seafaring pursuits if his life is spared (7-8). When Crusoe's life *is* spared, however, this promise is swiftly forgotten. His feeling of subjugation to a divine authority comes to diminish, at least for the moment. He defies Providence's apparent will and continues sailing (12-14). In consequence, he suffers a far greater misfortune, the ultimate retribution for his independence and self-determination. This is the island shipwreck that is the most famous part of the book's narrative and which takes up most of its length.

In the allegorical sense, Robinson Crusoe's fate, following the loss of his battle with Providence, is to be imprisoned in a place where his own will can be enacted freely, with nobody to oppose or oppress him. However, in such a controlled environment, none

of his exertions can be to any greater effect than simple self-preservation. Crusoe is constantly occupied with menial tasks just to ensure his survival. Yet, as critic Emmanuel Burdeau (2001) observes, “the legitimate, albeit somewhat abstract, justification first given for this continual occupation, the fear of being attacked by men or beasts, always ends up falling before the pure pleasure of day labor” (151).<sup>20</sup> There is a positive side to this laborious existence, in that Crusoe comes to feel an ennobling freedom and a sense of self-sufficiency from performing all these tasks himself. Ultimately, insofar as it is paradisaical, the desert island of Defoe’s novel is not a paradise free from work but rather a paradise of work. This isolated land is a domain free of ambiguity, where everything is just what it appears to be, and one can tell that one has really spoken (and that speech has not fallen on deaf ears) by the echoes that resound in the silence.

The island’s dual nature, at once the ultimate realization of Crusoe’s dream of independence as well as a sort of living perdition, qualifies it as a vision of utopia and dystopia superimposed. As Burdeau elucidates: “The island is a utopia: a good place, where what one does, what one sees, and what one says coincide exactly. One by one, Robinson performs and notes in writing the gestures of the society he has left behind him” (151).<sup>21</sup> Still haunted by the rituals of European society, Crusoe finds he cannot totally leave them behind, cannot fully reinvent himself as a thoroughly self-determining

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<sup>20</sup> “la justification légitime quoiqu’un peu abstraite d’abord donnée à cet affairment continu, la peur d’être attaqué par des hommes ou des bêtes, finit toujours par tomber devant le pur plaisir du travail des jours”

<sup>21</sup> “L’île est une utopie : un bon lieu, où coïncident exactement ce qu’on fait, ce qu’on voit et ce qu’on dit. Un par un, Robinson accomplit et note par écrit les gestes de la société qu’il a laissée derrière lui”

individual, free from the shackles of custom and orthodoxy. On the contrary, Crusoe ultimately creates a model of his idea of “civilization” on the island, reestablishing all that he needs to feel continuity with his former existence, including a makeshift calendar and a private form of religious observance. He even enslaves a native man (Friday) to reassert the prevailing hierarchies of European society. Thus, removed from the “civilized world,” the educated, self-determining man still imposes its order onto the unspoiled wilderness.

Perhaps most telling is the process of narration that Crusoe feels compelled to perform. Crusoe filters the entire experience through a lens of European values, translating, as it were, for the European readers towards whom he directs the narrative. This reflects just how deeply these European values—of Christianity and white supremacy—have ingrained themselves within Crusoe’s psyche. Though he is leading a life radically different from the one he led in Europe, with wholly new freedoms and responsibilities, he can only conceptualize it in European terms. Though the island itself is free from moral codes and ambiguities, he reintroduces them through his translation. Burdeau relates this notion of translation to the image of the sand on a beach, always being kicked up by passing feet, and always resettling into a newly constituted whole. He explains: “The island frees one from the obligation to translate since it itself becomes, day after day, a good copy, a cast of the world. It also frees one from the obligation to advance or to articulate. The overactivity one knows there is without purpose, explanation, or background” (151).<sup>22</sup> Unlike the social rituals, the continuous labor

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<sup>22</sup> “L’île libère de l’obligation de traduire puisqu’elle devient elle-même, jour après jour, une

necessary for self-preservation on the island does not need a larger schema, a metanarrative like religion, to justify itself. It is self-justifying. Yet, for Crusoe, it is insufficient. He needs to impose his Christian values onto it.

Consequently, Crusoe embodies a certain ideal of the European Enlightenment: the man in whom all the material needed for the establishment of European civilization is ready and waiting. In this philosophical conception, the free-thinking individual comprises all that is necessary to create an enlightened society. Of course, the “enlightened society” of the eighteenth century had not yet reconciled itself to such moral dilemmas as the enslavement of other races, so this ideal must be firmly placed within its historical epoch. Daniel Defoe’s novel, in addition to being an adventure yarn, functions as an explication of this ideal even before the likes of Rousseau and Kant had fully articulated it. The book’s dual status as an entertaining narrative and an extended philosophical investigation opens it up to having two contrasting levels of import. In addition to its value as a light and diverting story, it also carries with it the ponderous weight of a philosophical tract. Stanley Cavell (2005a) explains how this sort of weight arises and defines the pursuit of philosophy: “Philosophy’s all but unappeasable yearning for itself is bound to seem comic to those who have not felt it. To those who have felt it, it may next seem frightening, and they may well hate and fear it, for the step after that is to yield to the yearning, and then you are lost” (41). In this conception, philosophy is like a black hole, sucking in all interested participants and observers by the power of its

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bonne copie, un moulage du monde. Elle libère aussi de l’obligation d’avancer ou d’articuler. La suractivité qu’on y connaît est sans but, explication ni horizon”

gravitational pull—or, more specifically, the pull of its self-motivated, self-interrogating seriousness. Philosophy might be thought of as a magnet, attracting in its course various discrete ideas which adhere to it (pursuing that enticing seriousness and determination it has) and collectively add to its total mass. In any case, philosophy cuts an imposing figure. Its presence in *Robinson Crusoe* gives the novel a sense of importance it might otherwise lack, a sense that Crusoe's life matters beyond its mere entertainment value, and that some greater lesson, relating to the world at large, lurks within it.

Still more weight is added to these ideas by their resonance with some of the oldest traditions in European culture. There is a threatening specter looming over Defoe's text which could be called "the force of the natural order." Crusoe Sr.'s stance against sea voyages is motivated by his belief that young Robinson should not stray from the Crusoe family's social stratum. Their comfortable existence, right in the middle of the European social hierarchy, without the responsibilities of the higher classes or the hardships of the lower, ought to be proof against any such reckless fancies. By entering into a profession as dangerous and untethered as seafaring, young Robinson is flying in the face of the conservative common sense of the time and forging a path into an almost perverse individualism. This act, and its explicit connection with taking to the sea, has a direct parallel with age-old mythic conceptions of the sea.

Scholar of myth Hans Blumenberg (1997) asserts that foundational to the body of Western myth is the idea of the sea as something vast, alien, and inviolable. This enormous, uncontrollable realm serves as backdrop for the greatest legends of human endeavor, from the Greeks and Romans onto more contemporary cultures. According to

Blumenberg, “there is a frivolous, if not blasphemous, moment inherent in all human seafaring, on a par with an offense against the invulnerability of the earth” (10). It is the invulnerability of social norms in eighteenth century Europe that Robinson “blasphemously” challenges. The punishment for challenging divine authority has long been analogized in European legend with disasters at sea. It is a realm where humans are alienated from their homes and placed at the mercy of other, larger forces, easily conceptualized in terms of omnipotent beings. For his blasphemy, Crusoe is punished in an intensely cruel manner that recalls the fate of such mythic figures as Sisyphus, who likewise saw his sphere of influence and room for ambition in the world diminish to an absurdly minuscule size. These parallels further enhance the weight of Crusoe’s story, bringing him into continuity with a vast body of tradition pertaining to the same general themes and tropes.

The richness of *Robinson Crusoe*’s philosophical side does not, however, mean that it is lacking from a formal perspective. Indeed, many of the stylistic features of the novel are remarkable for how precisely calibrated they are to mirror and support these ideas. In fact, Defoe’s prose style embodies Crusoe’s self-determination by dramatizing his internal struggles in Crusoe’s own extremely subjective voice. In Crusoe’s narration, reality and, especially, time are often radically distorted by the first-person perspective. In describing his mental state during and after his first experience with dangerously inclement weather at sea, Crusoe amply demonstrates various ways of playing with time in narration—slowing it down or accelerating it; achronologically overlapping or separating events: “These wise and sober Thoughts continued all the while the Storm

continued, and indeed some time after; but the next Day the Wind was abated and the Sea calmer, and I began to be a little inur'd to it: However I was very grave for all that Day, being also a little Sea sick still" (8). Here, Crusoe rushes through a whole day in a few words, giving his ultimate sense of it, before pausing and going back to describe his ephemeral feelings through its duration. Immediately following this passage, Crusoe then notably slows the pace of his description down to suit the feeling of serenity being described: "but towards Night the Weather clear'd up, the Wind was quite over, and a charming fine Evening follow'd; the Sun went down perfectly clear and rose so the next Morning; and having little or no Wind and a smooth Sea, the Sun shining upon it, the Sight was, as I thought, the most delightful that ever I saw" (8). This part of the narrative even plays with temporal ambiguity and diffuseness, as Crusoe's reflection that the sunlit sea is so "delightful" is not clearly located in any one moment of time. Apparently, it applies to a general, prolonged sense of delight carrying from one evening into the next morning.

Not only is this intense subjectivity a strategy for embodying Crusoe's sense of individualism within the text, but it also has a striking resonance with one of the primary roles that the sea and seafaring have taken in Western myth. As Blumenberg notes, quoting Michel de Montaigne's essay "*De la solitude*," "Just as it seems to seafarers that mountains, fields, cities, the sky and the earth draw away as they themselves move away from the land, so 'our vision when altered, represents things to itself as being likewise altered, and we think they are failing it in proportion as it is failing them'" (15). The experience of the seafarer leaving land is thus one of the primal moments wherein



humanity comes to realize the subjectivity of its own gaze. Crusoe, in his narrative, also employs repetition to hypnotic effect, in concert with the subtle overlapping and rushing of different spans of time, within the length of long and winding sentences. These techniques have the effect of isolating every deed as an instance of Crusoe's will being enacted within the larger stream of passing time. The action generates reverberations, or ripples, throughout the stream. As Crusoe narrates: "I found indeed some Intervals of Reflection, and the serious Thoughts did, as it were endeavour to return again sometimes, but I shook them off, and rous'd my self from them as it were from a Distemper, and applying my self to Drink and Company, soon master'd the Return of those Fits, for so I call'd them, and I had in five or six Days got as compleat a Victory over Conscience as any young Fellow that resolv'd not to be troubled with it, could desire" (9). Here there is a distinct feeling of intensity periodically rising and falling in this long and winding passage, making Crusoe's mastery over his own fear come across as a resounding triumph. Thus, even as Crusoe ascribes his destiny to Providence, thus adhering to Christian orthodoxy, still the traces of his own decisions echo throughout. The impact of the island, and the freedoms it offers, on Crusoe's imagination is considerable and threatens to overwhelm his European values.

### **Self-Reflexivity and Critique**

All of these textual features and larger resonances point to *Robinson Crusoe* being a text of unusual, undiminished power. It is a canonical work with a continued presence within the popular imagination. In particular, it retains its relevance and currency within the

discourse of colonialism, even (perhaps especially) in a post-colonialist era where the mechanics of oppression have taken on quite a different cast from how they appeared in Defoe's era. The modern commercial ambitions that are at the center of the narrative of Rozier's film, touched up with pretensions of culture by the literary association, are exactly those of the contemporary colonialist mindset. Given how firmly Rozier situates his critique within a *modern* framework for colonialism, it merits consideration using a framework that centers modernity. We recall that Stanley Cavell has written about the modernist condition in the arts in a light that is influenced by the rather ominous condition of philosophy he described: "From such a view of philosophy I have written about something called modernism in the arts as the condition of their each yearning for themselves, naming a time at which to survive, they took themselves, their own possibilities, as their inspiration—they assumed the condition of philosophy" (41).

This suggests that a more contemporary, distinctly modernist reimagining of Defoe's novel might be a particularly effective foundation for a critique of European colonialist values. Rather than being a straight adaptation, made to conform to the realism of commercial cinema, *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* engages with Defoe's narrative and ideas in a fashion that is simultaneously parodic and intellectually rigorous. The film deploys cinematic techniques of self-reflexivity in service of a critique of prepackaged "utopias"—advertised escapes from tedious, bureaucratic modern life that covertly rely on colonialist ideas about Europe and its relations with the rest of the world. Just like Crusoe's consciousness is split between European orthodoxy and individualist heterodoxy as a result of living on the island, the protagonists of Rozier's film are also

infected with this way of thinking (though in the latter case, the legacy of the Enlightenment has made them individualists before they get to their island).

*Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* is interested in exploring exotic locales as much as Defoe's text is. Indeed, Rozier has a special interest in travel, a central theme in his films. As scholar Sylvie Blum-Reid (2016) explains: "The distinction between writers as historians or geographers extends to filmmakers whose work exhibits an interest in the topography of places visited by their camera. Rozier is firmly grounded in the realm of geography and travel. His films pull the trope of travel and displacement in an unconventional way" (159). The undertaking of a voyage is a momentous occasion in Rozier. Such moments are usually the inciting incidents of his films. As critic Stéphane Bouquet (2001) observes: "Rozier's films are, it is quite clear, successive manifestos in favor of geography, lines of convergence, nomadic wanderings, random spaces" (92).<sup>23</sup> Wandering through such spaces is, in this film and throughout Rozier's body of work, a transformative experience—sometimes for the characters, but always for the spectator. These journeys enable us to see things anew. Rozier lays the groundwork for this transformation of perception by taking special care to highlight the apparatus of cinema.

One aspect of the film that distinguishes it, in its explorational impulse, from straightforwardly colonialist travelogues is its more open engagement with the conflict between the imaginary and reality. Bouquet notes "the twofold motion that *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* will not stop perpetuating: the force of imagination which

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<sup>23</sup> "les films de Rozier sont, de toute évidence, des manifestes successifs en faveur de la géographie, lignes de fuite, parcours nomades, espaces hasardeux"

offers a solution to wearying everyday life versus the backlash from reality, which indicates that freedom is not without its price, and even that it has the highest price”<sup>24</sup> (93). Even as Rozier indulges in utopian fantasies, he is careful to ground them within a larger realist narrative that leaves space for harsh, demystifying truths. In fact, the entire premise of the film hinges on the false promise of utopia. It tells the story of a couple of huckster travel agents who come up with the idea of selling “Robinson Crusoe tours”—a vacation package where customers are dropped off on a supposedly deserted island and left to fend for themselves with no amenities. The critique of how European capitalism exploits our parochial ideas about foreign lands and commercializes revelatory art experiences, like a reading of Defoe’s novel, is clear. According to critic Jacques Mandelbaum (2001), the film attacks “the hypocrisy of an economic and social order that has successfully taken over, tarnishing and transforming the dream into its market value” (14).<sup>25</sup> In fact, the falsehood of this commercial vision of a utopian desert island is thematized in the very first scene, where it is implicitly connected with the mechanics of filmmaking.

The film opens in darkness, while the camera slowly tilts up the length of a poster depicting a nude Black woman. We eventually discover that this poster hangs in the bedroom of protagonist Jean-Arthur Bonaventure (Pierre Richard). Contrastingly tinted lights slowly pass over the image, turning it blue then red. This is accompanied by a

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<sup>24</sup> “le double mouvement que *Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue* ne cessera de reproduire : tension de l’imaginaire qui offre une solution à l’épuisant quotidien / retour de bâton du réel qui signifie que la liberté n’est pas sans prix, et même qu’elle a le plus haut prix”

<sup>25</sup> “l’hypocrisie d’un ordre économique et social qui a réussi le coup de force de galvauder et de transformer le rêve en valeur marchande”

mechanical cranking noise that implicitly links the shifting lights with the mechanism of film projection. That there is no apparent source in the room for the cranking sound marks it out even more distinctly as coming from someplace external to the diegesis. Rozier thus aligns the source of the sound with the creation of the filmic image, whether by recording or projection. In fact, while the lights being cast on the poster bring projection immediately to mind, the operation of the camera is recalled by the way this sequence plays with subjective gaze. The film cuts to Jean-Arthur lying in bed staring intently to the left, presumably at the poster. The reverse-shot implicitly links his gaze to that of the camera. Right from the start, Rozier's film recalls Cavell's comments about film being "a medium which seem[s] simultaneously to be free of the imperative to philosophy and at the same time inevitably to reflect upon itself—as though the condition of philosophy were its natural condition" (41). In its very first moments, the film trains its gaze intently on the workings of its medium.

Then, the camera pans left, following Jean-Arthur's gaze, and reveals that the colored lights are emanating from a decorative colored lamp in the corner. Dozens of long, hair-like strands sprout from a bright central orb and sway in gentle, Brownian motion. These strands seem to be the real objects of Jean-Arthur's intense stare. The camera lingers on them as the ambient noises of a jungle begin to appear on the soundtrack. The strands start to resemble swaying plant life, now standing in for an exotic fantasy realm in miniature. Of course, this miniature paradise is plastic and false, just like the vacation idyll Bonaventure tries to sell will be. To recap, in this sequence, a mundane household object first mimics the mechanism of film projection. Then, it foregrounds the

mechanism of film recording. Finally, it undercuts the ideal of an exotic adventure destination by locating the inspiration for the fantasy in the tiniest, most unexotic space. There is a further connection between cinematic self-reflexivity and the larger critique Rozier is offering here. As Blum-Reid observes: “Rozier critiques packaged exoticism and adventures peddled to contemporary travelers as well as the concept of ‘organized travel’—all indexes that travel and activities must be prepared, thereby not retaining any spontaneity. This speaks to film productions as well, then and now” (167). The process of filmmaking, as it is brought to our attention here, is thus a perfect parallel for the rigid organization that contributes to the falsehood of these travel packages. Rozier employs the most innocuous elements to craft a cinema that is at once profoundly self-reflexive and pointedly critical. All the while, it still remains on a small enough scale to feel unburdened by the weightiness of philosophical reflection. The film’s intellectual rigor feels effortless.

### **Fractal Storytelling and the Utopian Ideal**

All throughout this sequence, the film begins to inaugurate us into its narrative by means of a series of text inserts, styled to resemble the intertitles of silent films. The on-screen texts are just the first example of this shaggy dog story’s sly foregrounding of the process of constructing narratives. The self-reflexivity of the opening, in its precise and purposeful style which will prove uncharacteristic of the film as a whole, clues the viewer in on how to read the rest of the film. Like *Du côté d’Orouët*, though it frequently appears to be a product of genuine improvisation, *Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue* is

rather a highly constructed simulation of spontaneity. In this film, with its extremely digressive, seemingly shapeless narrative structure, one could say that the plot proceeds by means of fractals, endlessly blossoming out of the story's original shape and thrusting it into surprising new directions. As Blum-Reid notes, "Everything in [Rozier's] films moves according to a law of disorganization, impromptu decisions, and improvisation or the semblance of such" (167). In its essence, Rozier's film thrives on the spontaneity of improvisation and unanticipated plot developments. Yet everything is constructed, whether it is a deliberate narrative detour or a bit of play-acting by the protagonists.

The film effortlessly resembles a house of mirrors, evoking the layers of falsehood and truth, discursiveness, and shifting registers characteristic of high modernist and even postmodern art. Yet, it is weighed down by little of the sense of immense exertion and esotericism endemic to those kinds of works. Instead, all elements seem to align themselves perfectly in the furtherance of the film's critical perspective. Defoe's telling of Crusoe's life is disordered and rambling in a not entirely dissimilar fashion. After all, Defoe predates nineteenth century standards of how a well-crafted novel should be structured. Still, Rozier's film stands out for its apparently improvisatory nature, almost resembling an "Exquisite Corpse" narrative. Rozier's foregrounding of narration ultimately bears thematic fruit in that the scheme Jean-Arthur cooks up is essentially a false narrative presented to whatever gullible individuals will pay up for it. He will later go so far as to read aloud from *Robinson Crusoe* as a way to mollify his displeased clients when the vacation is not going as promised. He attempts to take the narrative into his own hands, shaping it to serve his own purposes.

We see Jean-Arthur in the throes of tedium, muddling his way through his unfulfilling job as travel agent. We learn of his ultimately purposeless plot to make his girlfriend jealous by inventing a fictitious rival. This leads, accidentally, to his meeting with an African woman who coincidentally shares a full name (Lisette Benoit) with the fictional mistress. After conversing with Jean-Arthur for just a few minutes, Lisette suddenly and improbably proposes that they have sex. He is all too happy to oblige. While they are in bed together, Jean-Arthur receives a call from his girlfriend, who hears another woman's voice in the room. He claims the other woman is his sister, but Lisette snatches the phone from him and answers, claiming to be his wife—once again, for no particular reason. Lisette also seems a bit offended by Jean-Arthur's apparent fetishization of Black women, as demonstrated by his wall poster. This seems to derive from the same impulse to fetishize non-European, and particularly tropical, cultures that propels the whole travel scheme he concocts. Still, she invites him to a local bar with live samba music, frequented by many of her immigrant friends. They go, Jean-Arthur invites his work colleague, who in turn brings his fiancée, and there the two men hatch the plan for the travel package that will set the film's real plot in motion. Of the three women that have so far played a role in this story, only the colleague's fiancée will be seen or mentioned again.

All these developments, in addition to introducing the film's discursive approach to narrative, also establish Jean-Arthur's quotidian reality. It is Rozier's narrative project, embodied by the film's central journey, to break him out of that routine. First, we get a sense of the protagonists' harried working lives. This is characteristic of Rozier's cinema.



Both *Du côté d'Orouët* and *Maine Océan* also depict their protagonists in the stultifying throes of modern bureaucracies—in *Orouët*, urban office culture, in *Maine Océan*, the ignoble life of the ticket inspector. It is from these dull existences that the characters must be whisked away. As Blum-Reid explains: “The main protagonist—usually a working class character (male or female), mostly trapped in an office job...decides on some impulse to drop everything and travel to a distant location in order to escape the boredom or routine of their job” (160). Of course, this situation directly parallels that of the ideal customer of Jean-Arthur’s travel agency. Rozier self-consciously shapes his narratives to mirror culturally (and commercially) prevalent notions of vacationers who have once in a lifetime experiences on holidays. Yet, the vacationers in Rozier experience revelations of a different sort.

Critic Emmanuel Burdeau (2001) asks: “Who is interested in desert islands? Not the idle, who can waste their time just as well at home. But the great frustrated workers. Those who want a job that finally matters, one which is, in itself, its own continual repayment. In Rozier, one doesn’t leave on vacation, one leaves to conquer a still more quotidian life” (150-151).<sup>26</sup> By prevailing over rigid, bureaucratic tedium and escaping into “a job that finally matters,” these characters are modelling the same escape that Robinson Crusoe performs. The vacation destination in Rozier, like the desert island in Defoe, is a domain where the troubles, the tedium, and the ambiguities of daily life can

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<sup>26</sup> “Qui s’intéresse aux îles désertes ? Pas les oisifs, qui perdent aussi bien leur temps à domicile. Mais les grands travailleurs contrariés. Ceux qui veulent un emploi enfin efficace, qui soit à lui-même sa propre rémunération continue. Chez Rozier, on ne part pas en vacances, on part pour conquérir une vie plus quotidienne encore”

be left behind. In its place is constant mutability—both in the physical make-up of the island, with its shifting, rearranging piles of sand, and in life on it, where labor is constant and always self-justifying and fulfilling. Jacques Mandelbaum discusses this recurrent theme of escape: “Each Rozier film dramatizes this revolutionary operation, more or less consented to by the character, in accordance with which its heroes cut ties with their terrestrial attachments, to drift in the company of infernal naiads, atrabilious sailors, or Brazilian dancers on the high winds of utopia and digression” (16).<sup>27</sup> In addition to the ideal of utopia and the digressive storytelling, the theme of community becomes important here. The group of vacationers ends up creating their own discrete sort of nation amongst themselves. Their conflicts and moments of harmony can thus analogize those of nations and other hierarchical groups of people.

The ultimate disharmony between Jean-Arthur and the customers becomes a crucial component of the film’s critique of this ideal of utopia. Within the context of a commercial vacation package, the idyll of continuous, fulfilling, cooperative labor is doomed to be illusory. Discussing the applications of this theme of community in Rozier, Mandelbaum quotes Gilles Deleuze, and observes that the “idea is that the proletarian or the worker reestablishes everywhere...the conditions of a floating population, of a people of the sea...on the condition, following the Marxist formula, of ‘cutting the umbilical

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<sup>27</sup> “Chaque film de Rozier met en scène cette opération révolutionnaire, plus ou moins consentie par le personnage, en vertu de laquelle ses héros coupent le lien avec leurs attaches terrestres, pour dériver en compagnie de naïades infernales, de marins atrabilaires ou de danseuses brésiliennes au grand vent de l’utopie et du coq-à-l’âne”

cord that links it to the earth”<sup>28</sup> (16). This is another kind of mythic application of the sea. We could argue that the film is a literalization of the idea that any group of workers recreate a miniature society when in some form of isolation from the larger population. Here, Jean-Arthur is advertising it as a utopian cooperative where workers who have escaped the larger economic entities that would control their lives establish, together, a free society where they support each other through labor.

However, this film is not simply some utopian call to workers. In fact, it is mostly taken over with critique, and the “floating society” it creates is a subject of constant mockery. Rather than being harmonious, most of the time spent on the boat (which, in lieu of the initially unreachable island, serves as the nucleus for this floating society) is taken up with harsh bickering. Far from attaining the status of a utopia of labor, as embodied by Crusoe’s island, the boat in *Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue* is an abrasive nightmare of discord. It hovers perpetually just too far from the island to let its passengers swim ashore, like an unfulfilled promise, causing constant frustration. On the boat itself, instead of modelling idyllic cooperation, the miniature society reproduces the same hierarchies of oppression that prevail in society at large.

### **Colonialism and Authoritarianism Rear Their Heads**

Given the associations with Defoe’s novel, a monument to European colonialist thinking, it should come as no surprise that colonialism hangs, like a specter, over Rozier’s film.

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<sup>28</sup> “l’idée...c’est que le prolétaire ou le travailleur reconstitue partout...les conditions d’une population flottante, d’un peuple de la mer...à condition, suivant la formule marxiste, de ‘couper le cordon ombilical qui le relie à la terre’”

As Sylvie Blum-Reid explains: “Nostalgic undertones as well as colonial inferences taint *Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue* in terms of the location itself...a former French colonial island close to Haiti—and the use of ships, which recall colonial times and maritime navigation routes, reinforced by the constant references to *Robinson Crusoe*” (165). To his credit, Rozier is highly critical in his use of these references, so it never feels as though he is straightforwardly reinforcing the values of colonialism. Where *Crusoe* depicted man, in an isolated domain of pure will, reasserting the primacy of European civilization and social hierarchy, Rozier depicts the quest to do similar as pathetic, quixotic and little more than a form of playacting or self-mythologizing. *Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue* shares the same parallels to Western myth as Defoe’s novel, but to the opposite effect. Robinson Crusoe’s life story is emboldened by the way it resonates with foundational myths of European culture. Jean-Arthur’s story, meanwhile, is made all the more farcical and pathetic by the comparison. Rozier presents the elements of myth in the most irreverent light possible. Seafaring no longer suggests humankind’s bold journeying into the unknown or warring with Providence. Here, it seems more like a deluded effort to live out an artificial fantasy (derived from novels like *Robinson Crusoe*) that does not exist in reality. The protagonists cannot even locate a real deserted island.

Jean-Arthur, meanwhile, is a vain, weak man. Crusoe’s explicit racism is transformed by Rozier into Jean-Arthur’s comically fraught relations with people of color, which range from his fetishization of Lisette to other forms of unthinking insensitivity. The latter is most clearly exemplified when Jean-Arthur’s extended riff, on

discovering a possible desert island, about colonizing a savage land is obviously performed in the presence of a young Black boy. This seems to evoke the whole network of oppression that undergirds European society and its relations with other peoples. Stéphane Bouquet compares this scene, where Bonaventure arrogantly plants his flag in foreign sand, to an earlier scene where the two travel agents met with the owner of their company to propose the idea of the Robinson Crusoe tours: “The corporate hierarchy then explicitly gives itself up to be seen for what it is...a non-democratic space of which the political model is rather, all things considered, that of a barely constitutional monarchy” (95-96).<sup>29</sup> There are distinct parallels between the business world and the world of the explorer-colonizer who claims foreign lands in the name of a king or queen. Of course, in this case, it is all a kind of ironic pageantry. Bouquet astutely observes how Jean-Arthur’s performance of colonization confines itself to a verbal dimension of fantasy: “Bonaventure’s appropriation is, for its part, solely linguistic, performative, as it were: I say, ‘this land belongs to the king,’ and it belongs to the king” (96).<sup>30</sup> Here, the enactment of colonialism, by virtue of being a verbal gag, is limited to the realm of parody. Jean-Arthur is not a literal colonizer, just as Petit Nono, his right-hand man who continues the bit into the post-colonial era, is not literally a democratizing presence. Still, Rozier encourages us to notice the parallels between this commercialized approach to island-hunting and the system of values that would enslave a race of people for monetary

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<sup>29</sup> “La hiérarchie d’entreprise se donne alors explicitement à voir pour ce qu’elle est...un espace non-démocratique dont le modèle politique est, à tout prendre, plutôt celui d’une monarchie à peine constitutionnelle”

<sup>30</sup> “L’appropriation de Bonaventure est, pour sa part, uniquement linguistique, pour ainsi dire performative : je dis ‘cette terre est au roi’ et elle est au roi”

gain. Bouquet's analysis of the underlying motivations here is trenchant, but potentially too generous to Rozier, given that this scene does not play as any kind of forceful statement. The film is light and parodic, not indignant.

Jean-Arthur's performance of tyranny does extend further than the playacting of royalist pageantry, though in other cases, the tyranny is leveled mostly at his own clients. He develops an almost messianic fury in his quest to model the whole vacation package after Crusoe's story. Perhaps the best encapsulation of Jean-Arthur's petty tyranny is the image of him reading aloud from Defoe to the others. Standing tall in front of a monumental waterfall, over which he has to shout to make himself heard, while everyone else sits or lies, listening, at his feet, Jean-Arthur temporarily assumes the image of a firebrand, an ideological agitator (exactly the kind of indignant mouthpiece for ideas that Rozier, in his parodic attitude, is not). Some of the travelers try to argue with him, and he fires back by quoting from the book, which might as well be the bible of their little utopian experiment.

By this point in the film, his clothes are disheveled, his beard is unkempt, and he has developed a taste for waving around a machete. Mandelbaum asks, "doesn't he end up evoking—in the splendor of his progressive dishevelment and in the raging obstinacy with which he imposes on his clients the ordeal of the disorganized trip he has conceived—the terrifying silhouette of the anarchists and bloody bandits of the Brazilian Glauber Rocha?" (16).<sup>31</sup> Rocha, a leading light of Brazil's politically radical Cinema

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<sup>31</sup> "ne finit-il pas, d'ailleurs, par évoquer—dans la superbe de son débraillement progressif et dans l'obstination rageuse avec laquelle il impose à ses clients l'épreuve du voyage désorganisé dont il

Novo and a director responsible for films of eclectic, avant-garde style and intensely anti-colonialist sentiments, might seem an unlikely comparison with the lighthearted and humane Rozier. One would have a hard time arguing that *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* is a political film in the same way, animated by the same fury. Rather, the association is another example of Rozier's status as a late modernist. He belongs on a continuum with radical filmmakers on the margins of cinematic modernism, who are themselves left behind by its mainstream, though he is in a somewhat parodic relation to them. As Mandelbaum observes, "with this film, we find Rozier, the man of all delays, at the forefront, the jocular fellow traveler of these new revolutionary cinemas that have sprung up practically everywhere on the planet in the wake of the New Wave" (16).<sup>32</sup>

Bouquet also picks up on the idea of Jean-Arthur as a tyrant, and in doing so, hits at the true nature of the "floating society" that Rozier's film conceives: "Never, however, will Bonaventure dream of resorting to that method best shared among democratic regimes: majority rule. Because the art of democracy is difficult, is not learned so quickly—and we know that Bonaventure will end up, as tyrants often do, in prison" (96).<sup>33</sup> Jean-Arthur, being an egomaniac who would force a whole group of travelers to bend to his private fantasy, is the last person to uphold democratic values in a society when he has a chance to be its despot. Whatever notions of cooperation and equality may

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est l'inventeur—la terrifiante silhouette des anarchistes et sanguinaires cangaceiros du Brésilien Glauber Rocha?"

<sup>32</sup> "avec ce film, on retrouve Rozier, l'homme de tous les retards, aux avant-postes, compagnon de route rieur de ces nouveaux cinémas révolutionnaires qui ont éclos un peu partout sur la planète dans le sillage de la Nouvelle Vague"

<sup>33</sup> "Jamais pourtant Bonaventure ne songera recourir à cette méthode la mieux partagée des régimes démocratiques : la règle majoritaire. Car l'art de la démocratie est difficile, ne s'apprend pas si vite—et on sait que Bonaventure finira, comme souvent les tyrans, en prison"

have existed in the initial concept, they are pretty far gone by the time the boat comes in sight of the island. Jean-Arthur then crosses a distinct line when he throws his clients' suitcases overboard. He is incensed that they are not taking the Crusoe fantasy aspect of the vacation package as seriously as he does. He thinks that a reasonable way to get back at them for this is to simply throw all their amenities, all their luggage, over the edge of the boat. Valuable items were in those bags, they protest. He refuses to apologize. Instead, he broadcasts again the Robinsonian ideal to which he insists on adhering. In a true desert island, one does not get to have toiletries or a change of clothes.

Jean-Arthur's performance of despotism adds a further dimension to the imperialistic undertones that were present in the flag-planting scene. It seems that, instead of just playing a royalist colonist for a laugh, he really fancies himself as the royalty for whom the land is being claimed. Bouquet expands from this observation: "The relation of the travel agent to his clients is not commercial, it is only political. The Robinson of Defoe also dreamed of himself 'just like a king.' It is therefore clear that what interests Rozier in the Robinson myth is less the economics of survival put into place by the castaway...than the scenario of the island's political appropriation" (96).<sup>34</sup> The whole travel scheme is thus, pretty blatantly, the enactment of an imperialist fantasy. This constitutes another jewel in the crown Jean-Arthur imagines for himself. What begins as a way to get more recognition (and better pay) in his company has become a sandbox in

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<sup>34</sup> "La relation du voyageur à ses clients n'est pas commerciale, elle est seulement politique. Le Robinson de Defoe aussi se rêvait 'ainsi qu'un Roi'. Il est clair dès lors que ce qui intéresse Rozier dans le mythe de Robinson, c'est moins l'économie de survie mise en place par le naufragé...que le scénario d'appropriation politique de l'île"



which he can play out his fantasies of domination. As Bouquet elucidates: “The film’s other great interest is to be a clever and skewed reflection on democracy, authority, and liberty. Rather than plunging directly into the philosophical tale that offers itself to him—people united by circumstances, how they live together happily or unhappily—Rozier skirts expectations...*Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue* is not the study of a community of equals, but one of chains of power, of hierarchical structures, of forms of control” (95).<sup>35</sup>

The film will take two more major shifts in its narration before it ends, at one point abruptly taking on a first-person voiceover and later slipping into the narrative mode of the very kinds of stories, like *Robinson Crusoe*, that Jean-Arthur seeks to emulate. Just as Jean-Arthur makes his utopian promise to the clients, the film finally makes its utopian promise to the audience in the scene where Petit Nono and the girl (Caroline Cartier, a refugee from *Du côté d’Orouët*) manage to escape the boat and go off on an island adventure together. However, just as Jean-Arthur’s promise is unfulfilled, so too does the film dodge its promise by almost immediately extinguishing the spirit of adventure. The two of them promptly realize that their “desert island” is actually inhabited, and they reenter civilization. The film abandons a false, commercial utopia in favor of a real one, founded on a childlike excitement for the unknown and adventure.

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<sup>35</sup> “L’autre grand intérêt du film est d’être une réflexion astucieuse et biaisée sur la démocratie, l’autorité et la liberté. Plutôt que de plonger directement dans le conte philosophique qui s’offrait à lui—des gens réunis par les circonstances, comment ils vivent et mal-vivent ensemble—, Rozier contourne les attentes...*Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue* n’est pas l’étude d’une communauté d’égaux, mais celle des chaînes du pouvoir, des structures hiérarchiques, des formes du contrôle”

Regardless of what Jean-Arthur and other colonialists want this island to be, it is still a desert island to explore, and uncorrupted eyes should be able to see its unspoiled splendor. Yet, in the end, even this “real” utopia is proven false. There is a jovial mood to the ending but underlying it is a melancholy sense that there are no uncorrupted eyes. As Bouquet observes: “What makes this film so powerful is that it bonds together a poetic and a political art, just as it also combines the imaginary and the real” (97).<sup>36</sup> European values have effectively poisoned us all.

One can draw a connection from the fear of aging in *Du côté d'Orouët* to this film's elevation of a childlike perspective in favor of the destructive, anti-utopian adult one. In this film's rather pessimistic view, utopia is destroyed the moment we try to conceive it. Not only is there no room for it in reality, but there is little room in our imagination. We find no behavioral revelations in *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue*—another sign, perhaps, of how the corrupting force of adulthood has closed off the emotional potentialities of these characters. In fact, they have been directed to the self-serving ends of imperialism and commercialism. As vacationers or mid-level employees, they only want to benefit themselves. Rozier is ultimately too humane to attack them viciously for it. Instead, his parodic sensibility prevails, along with his modernist passion for the possibilities of the medium.

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<sup>36</sup> “Ce qui fait la puissance de ce film est donc qu'il colle ensemble un art poétique et un art politique, comme aussi il ajointe l'imaginaire et le réel”

## Chapter 5. Image and Sound in Conflict: The Road to Utopia in *Maine Océan*

With Rozier's fourth feature, *Maine Océan*, the director makes a radical shift in perspective and offers a stunning conclusion to his investigation, over the course of these three films, of the possibility of utopia. *Du côté d'Orouët* captured the present while putting the audience in mind of two separate irrecoverable pasts: the protagonists' childhoods, to which they try to return while staving off the changes of adulthood, and the very incidents we watch, contextualized as a document or memory of a time now ended. That film straddled childhood and adulthood, looking at the period of transition between them with a combination of nostalgia and regret. Its utopia was that mythical age called "the best years of one's life" that can never be located until they are already past. *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* posited the clichéd ideals of Crusonian self-sufficiency and communion with nature as elements of a fraudulent sales pitch with dark colonialist undertones. Meanwhile, it located the true idyll in a childlike sense of wonder and adventure. Finally, *Maine Océan*, reaches for utopia in yet another way and, unlike the earlier films, actually seems to grasp it, filtered through neither memory nor irony.

My analysis of *Maine Océan* centers on how the juxtaposition of sound and image, and how the film encourages us to scrutinize the relation between the two, allows us to access first its critique of the real world and then its conception of utopia. I use Siegfried Kracauer's writings on film sound to analyze how the film thematizes the arrival of sound and, more pointedly, the ascendance of dialogue to a pride of place in cinema. This functions as an analogy for the loss of a utopian idyll and its replacement

with a dystopian reality. I further explore Rozier's utopian ideal, evoked a few times in this film, of a different kind of sound cinema wherein images and music work together to evoke or even create states of bliss. I consider how Rozier solicits close attention to the interaction between sound and image by using techniques of reflexivity and digression to cultivate an aesthetic distance which the viewer must consciously bridge. Finally, I compare how utopia is evoked in the film to Richard Dyer's writings on the utopian qualities of popular film forms.

### **Linguistic Polyphony**

Like *Les Naufragés*, *Maine Océan* depicts a motley assortment of characters undertaking a journey. Yet it is even less of a conventional road movie than the prior film, travelling far afield of typical genre markers, and embracing an eclectic array of styles and tropes. Critic Jean-Pierre Rehm (2001) notes: "if, as they say, every film is a journey, *Maine Océan* has already, before even starting, bidden goodbye to the genre's various categories. A story of initiation, an ethno-geographic exploration, a melancholy drift sprinkled with ocean spray, a wandering gaze, etc.—we will be able to entertain ourselves in finding its [the genre's] traces" (100).<sup>37</sup> The film's road movie foundation is only faintly legible as it partakes in more radical diversions and digressions than are typical of road movies. The film has little narrative momentum, as a concrete destination

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<sup>37</sup> "si, dit-on, tout film est un voyage, *Maine Océan* a déjà, avant même de prendre le départ, fait ses adieux aux diverses catégories du genre. Récit initiatique, exploration ethno-géographique, dérive du vague à l'âme saupoudrée d'embruns, errance du regard, etc., on pourra s'amuser à en retrouver des traces"

only materializes in the last thirty minutes or so, as *Le Garrec* has to avail himself of the aid of some sailors to get to work on time. But even more than that, the whole film proceeds from its starting point along a series of increasingly wild diversions, like fractals growing and mutating into infinity out of one initial shape.

The strategy of digression, modeling narratives on the disorganized expanse of a shaggy dog story, is not new to Rozier. The organization of a filmic narrative is, as critic Jacques Mandelbaum (2001) observes, “for Rozier, a methodical disruption of common sense, in favor of improvisation, of fantasy, and even the most exhilarating regression” (15).<sup>38</sup> Logic is secondary to this sense of exhilaration which Rozier’s films aim to achieve. Meanwhile, critic Emmanuel Burdeau (2001) links the plot’s chaotic, unpredictable progression to the themes of language and translation: “A body, a shot, in Rozier, does not succeed to another by a logical development, a shift from A to B. Rather, by searching for a shared language: by an attempt at translation” (149).<sup>39</sup> According to Burdeau, by progressing more discursively (one might say, by lateral moves) than linearly, the basic cinematic language Rozier uses to tell his story parallels the process of translation. Indeed, the act of interpretation recurs frequently through this film which features dialogue in four languages (French, English, Portuguese, and Spanish) and nowhere does it take center stage more blatantly than in this first sequence.

The first scene on the train covertly brings three of the main characters together—

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<sup>38</sup> “pour Rozier, un dérèglement méthodique du sens commun, au profit, de l’improvisation et de la fantaisie, voire de la plus jubilatoire régression”

<sup>39</sup> “Un corps, un plan, chez Rozier, ne succèdent pas à un autre par développement logique, glissement de A vers B. Plutôt par recherche d’un langage partagé : par tentative de traduction”

covertly because none are yet identified, nor are their entries here given much weight. Déjanira (Rosa-Maria Gomes) buys a soda, has a slight, cheerful misunderstanding about payment with the boy who sells it to her, bumps into a seated Mimi (Lydia Feld) and narrowly avoids bumping into Le Garrec (Bernard Menez), who is striding soberly down the aisle. This whole sequence, in which Déjanira conducts three interactions without the aid of language (we will learn in the next scene that she speaks little French) models an idyll of nonverbal communication. Her transaction is carried out with an amiable smoothness on both sides to which more verbally complex interactions could hardly aspire. It recalls the quasi-universal language of silent cinema where, barring the occasional intertitle, the audience was routinely asked to play a game of interpretation, guessing at characters' unspoken intentions using the limited available evidence.

In the next scene, Déjanira enters into a dispute with both of the train's ticket inspectors. The first, nicknamed Lulu (Luis Rego), trying to be gentle, informs her that she forgot to stamp her ticket at the station. To her confusion—she hears “*composté*” (stamped) as “*composé*” (composed or dialed)—he explains, onomatopoeically, that she hasn't gotten the “*chtonk*” (the stamp). The onomatopoeia has a faintly legalistic overtone, just in the sound of the word. Like so much of the nonsense speech in *Du côté d'Orouët*, it performs what Siegfried Kracauer (1960) calls the “Shift of emphasis from the meanings of speech to its material qualities” (109). As he explains, “Words presented this way lie in the same dimension as the visible phenomena which the motion picture camera captures. They are sound phenomena which affect the moviegoer through their physical qualities” (109). We sense the bureaucratic finality of *chtonk*, like the cold,

metallic machine that administers it. It functions as a metonym for the larger bureaucratic system that organizes our modern lives and to which Déjanira has failed to submit herself. As Jean-Pierre Rehm explains: “*Chtonk* is the sound the law makes, the slamming of its stamp, the grotesque access code to its language which pretends to be universal...*Chtonk* is the shibboleth of a language that no one speaks, but that everyone must understand...A barely intelligible jargon that demands, however, that we submit to its dictates” (100).<sup>40</sup>

A critique against the treatment of those who cannot speak the dominant language is implicit here, and will be more fully explored in the courtroom scene that comes soon after. The rather dystopian concept of the law’s cryptic and inaccessible “language” recalls Franz Kafka’s nightmarish parables like “Before the Law.” Indeed, Rehm explicitly draws a connection to Kafka. This may seem a slightly exaggerated point of reference, given that Rozier’s film tends toward airiness and exuberance rather than gloom and desperation. Another, perhaps more fitting point of comparison would be to the vaguely surrealistic quasi-police states of silent slapstick comedies like Buster Keaton’s *Cops* (1922), wherein an army of police officers seems to lurk behind every blind corner, on the alert for the smallest infraction. The ticket inspectors, Lulu and especially Le Garrec, likewise present themselves as steadfast upholders of an intractable Law.

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<sup>40</sup> “*Chtonk* est le bruit que fait la loi, le claquement de son poinçon, le code d'accès grotesque a sa langue prétendue universelle...*Chtonk* est le sésame d’une langue que personne ne parle, mais que tous doivent comprendre...Jargon à peine intelligible qui exige pourtant qu’on se soumette à ses prescriptions”

Déjanira is amused by Lulu but still does not understand what is being asked of her, so Le Garrec, *en passant*, tries to intervene. He explains her problem, in thickly French-accented English, which is equally incomprehensible to her. To further confuse things, he merges “stamp” with “stomp” in his imperfect pronunciation. As Déjanira continues not to get the message, he speculates that she is perpetuating the misunderstanding deliberately, to make fun of them. Incomprehension engenders suspicion, a feeling that others might be plotting against you. We ourselves start to wonder if she is not perpetuating the misunderstanding so she doesn’t have to pay the fine for not stamping her ticket at the station. Is Déjanira’s laughter here a sign of bemusement at the situation, or is it satisfaction at getting one over these petty bureaucrats of the rails? Rozier, by asking us to look beyond language (which here fails completely) thus coaxes us into being suspicious and observing more carefully. This means of engaging the spectator, where we are encouraged to scrutinize the performer beyond just what they say, but also to see how their face or body might betray how they really feel, recalls some of the more poignant, closely observed scenes in *Du côté d'Orouët*. Here, though, instead of inspiring sympathy or pity, it just cleaves dialogue from imagery, inspiring us to interrogate the relations between the two. When language can be dictated by the Law, we may want to explore alternative forms of communication. By scrutinizing body language, we may be able to read outputs that are forbidden or otherwise cannot be translated by spoken language.

Mimi arrives, taking a seat just behind Déjanira. Since she can speak some Portuguese, she offers to interpret for the inspectors. Le Garrec instructs her to return to



second class, where her ticket says she belongs. She protests, saying she wants to help Déjanira, but the bureaucrats insist they have things under control and need no assistance. She becomes more strident, speaking more loudly and switching from French to Portuguese to English. The harried Le Garrec, answering in English, waves an emphatic hand with every over-enunciated syllable, as if in broad parody of an insistent Frenchman. Through this disorienting mix of languages and heightening of vocal registers, the meaning of speech is dissolved into qualities of sound. Kracauer quotes Ruskin on the effects of this verbal chaos: “‘There is something peculiarly delightful,’ says Ruskin, ‘...in passing through the streets of a foreign city without understanding a word that anybody says! One’s ear for all sound of voices then becomes entirely impartial; one is not diverted by the meaning of syllables from recognizing the absolute guttural, liquid, or honeyed quality of them: while the gesture of the body and the expression of the face have the same value for you that they have in a pantomime’” (109-110). Within this linguistic polyphony, physical gestures and tones of speech become paramount, rather than the content of the utterances. It forms an energetic cacophony, hilariously demonstrating the limits of speech and the possibilities of nonverbal communication.

The inspectors having left, Déjanira and Mimi speak privately, in a mixture of French and Portuguese. The Francophone but non-Lusophone viewer can follow this scene only by catching the occasional cognate word or, more pertinently, by following the pronounced facial expressions and gestures made by the speakers. Laughing through their words, pointing fingers at each other in sly agreement, the two women enact a

burgeoning friendship in a way that is legible without language. Kracauer has considered the injunction that dialogue in film should not detract from visual content, pointing to one of the iconic auteurs of early sound cinema for a positive example of sound on film: “René Clair’s Paris comedies...the dialogue in them is casual, so casual in fact that their characters sometimes continue to converse while disappearing in a bar...It is as if Clair wanted to demonstrate *ad oculos* that the spoken word is most cinematic if the messages it conveys elude our grasp; if all that actually can be grasped is the sight of the spectator” (106-107). Again, the visual is given pride of place here over the content of the dialogue but not out of any criticism of language itself. Rather, the cinematic possibilities of speech deferred or transformed outweigh the value of verbal expression. There’s a strange sense of exhilaration when all speech is filtered through some prism or other, like the filmmaker is trying to make us listen in new ways to all the matter surrounding speech (including its material qualities) rather than its content. Just as Clair was able to sidestep the pitfalls of sound cinema, so too is Rozier looking to expand the aural expressivity and sensitivity of the medium.

Mimi, perhaps reaching the limits of her abilities in Portuguese, starts speaking in slow and simple French, supplemented with gestures. “*Rencontrer*” (to meet) she explains by bringing her hands together. Déjanira nods in apparent understanding. Other times, Mimi is able to supply a Portuguese translation for a single word—sailor: *marin*: *marinheiro*. In reality, Mimi’s switch to French here is probably motivated by the need to give the viewer some important information: Mimi explains she is going to meet a client who is a sailor. At the same time, the two women are explicitly modeling a form of

communication that either transcends linguistic boundaries through gesture or reduces it into simple and easily comprehensible units. Like the earlier scene with Déjanira buying the soda, this recalls the quasi-universal language of silent films, which chiefly rely on gesture to impart emotional meanings. Though they are supplemented with concise intertitles that describe plot information, all that verbiage belongs in a distinctly secondary plane, removed from the action. Likewise, the women's speech seems to detach itself from the exchange. It floats freely, superfluously, as their gestures (more easily comprehended by each interlocutor anyway) do most of the talking.

Still more striking commonalities exist between the forms of communication employed by Rozier's actors and those of the silent cinema. In order to validate her identity and explain her profession to the inspectors, Déjanira hands them first her passport, and then a magazine with a photo of her posed nude or semi-nude (though she will show the photo again, by way of introduction, we will never see it clearly). First, she proves her official identity through official, bureaucratic means, then she displays another kind of identity by showing a document of her body. Similarly, Mimi has to prove to the inspectors that she is, in fact, a lawyer by donning her robes in the train. Both reflect the women's submission to a bureaucracy that needs validation of their identities before it can leave them be. Also, both could be devices from silent films, which, wanting to spare the viewer an intertitle, instead have their character make these gestures of introduction, displaying some visible proof of their identities. The universal language of silent film, lost with the arrival of sound technology, thus acts as another idyll deferred, another unreachable utopia, like those of Rozier's previous features. Its juxtaposition with the

coldness of modern bureaucracy (something that will be explored further in the courtroom sequence that follows this) positions it clearly as a bright contrast with that unpleasant reality.

### **“A Sailor Versus a Shop Owner Isn’t Good”**

The subsequent courtroom scene opens with a legalistic low angle shot of the judge, seen only from the shoulders up behind the tall and rigidly symmetrical bench. This semiotically potent image could easily be something out of a silent comedy by Keaton or Chaplin. Through this clichéd iconography, it is overloaded with a sense of the Law’s imposing, draconian might. As the judge reads out the details of the case, Rozier cuts to a long shot of the courtroom, revealing it to be quite shabby, with conspicuous splotches of white on the walls. The effect, though, is not to undermine the seriousness of the proceedings but rather to contextualize them, returning us to the film’s predominant realist mode. Indeed, this whole sequence mostly eschews bold effects of cinematography or *mise-en-scène* as it allows words to take the center stage, naturally leading us to the debate about cinema’s visual primacy. Kracauer has gone so far as to warn against overloading scenes with dialogue, lest one risk straying too far from film’s essentially visual nature: “One might argue that the addition of speech would seem to justify attempts at an equilibrium between word and image, but it will be seen shortly that such attempts are doomed to failure” (103). Given the example, harkening back to Clair, that Rozier has provided in the earlier scene, it is obviously possible for a talented filmmaker to complicate our reception of dialogue such that it becomes cinematically vital. In this

scene, however, Rozier holds back a bit. In allowing voices to come to the fore, he also makes plain his social critique.

It should come as no surprise that the courtroom scene is probably the most overwhelmingly verbal in the film, as it pairs the loquacious Mimi with one of the few characters in the film who can potentially out-talk her: her client, the sailor Marcel Petitgas (Yves Afonso). Moreover, it takes place in a setting where strict ritual circumscribes the characters' movement, meaning there are fewer gestures available to them. Indeed, Petitgas just gazes helplessly as the proceedings begin, then straightens up in indignation when he hears the (false, he insists) accusations against him. While the courtroom is precisely the kind of uncinematic, theatrical setting that Kracauer warns against (104), anxiety about the arrival of sound in cinema is here an analogue, a comparatively fanciful reflection, of a much greater worry. This has to do with the principle of equality on which the French legal system (and every legal system which purports that justice is blind) is founded. In fact, Rozier exposes the ingrained bias against certain lower-class accents and dialects. As Rehm explains: "In one sequence, the train's first stop at a courthouse near Angers, a manifesto makes the trend clear, in a loud and intelligible voice, on a stage where the rules have decided, from the outset, both the game and its winners" (101).<sup>41</sup> Certain prejudices about "proper" forms of speech, reinforcing social hierarchies, have effectively rigged the game from the start.

Called on to speak, having been accused of attacking a man in a fit of road rage,

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<sup>41</sup> "En une séquence, premier arrêt du train à un tribunal près d'Angers, un manifeste affiche la tendance à haute et intelligible voix sur une scène où les règles ont pourtant d'entrée décidé et du jeu et de ses gagnants"

Petitgas immediately announces, “It’s a pack of lies.” The judge asks him to modify his language, to describe the events in a way suitable for the court. He stammers, impassioned, through his account. The judge expresses disbelief that the accuser—an “honest shop owner and father of three”—would have falsified his story, implicitly denying the sailor the same respect. As Mimi explains to Petitgas later, “a sailor versus a shop owner isn’t good.” Sailors, particularly those whose passions flare up in the tightly controlled environment of a courtroom, are not likely to garner much sympathy. This harsh reality puts the lie to the assumption of equality that reigns in such courts. We can easily identify how the inequality arises just by comparing voices. In moments of heightened aggravation, Petitgas’ voice is remarkably rhythmic, like a Gatling gun. The relatively measured, clearly enunciated French of the judge, the prosecutor, Mimi, and the accuser all contrast distinctly with Petitgas’ rapid patter. This ungovernable temper, so clearly demonstrated in the way he speaks, combined with his violent hand gestures, mark him as vividly out of place. He cannot conform to the decorum of the court; therefore, he is at the mercy of its prejudices. Rehm explains, with reference to Roland Barthes’ analysis of an infamous French murder case, how this sequence challenges the myth that language is universal and transcends systems of power. He sees it as “perhaps resonating with Barthes’ famous remarks on the subject of the Dominici affair, directed according to Barthes in the name of ‘an intermediary myth, for which officiality is still put to good use, be it the officiality of the criminal courts or of the opinion columns, that myth being the transparency and universality of language’” (101).<sup>42</sup> The “official” screen,

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<sup>42</sup> “En résonance peut-être avec les célèbres remarques de Barthes au sujet de l’affaire Dominici

embodied in that ominous, overloaded opening shot of the judge, covers up the base inequality of the system.

Finally permitted to defend her client, Mimi begins her lengthy, discursive speech by observing that “the French language is not eternal, nor unique, but is definitively codified.” With that statement, she proves herself to have a finger on the pulse of the system’s innate unfairness. However, she does not really manage to put the criticism to the judge. All at once, while Mimi makes (or nearly makes) some cogent points regarding the legal system’s biases, she presents her argument in such a confusingly roundabout fashion that she sabotages herself. Meanwhile, Petitgas and the judge make faces of confusion and frustration. Her discourse’s connection to Petitgas and his alleged infraction is all but inscrutable, given the lack of set-up. Instead of provoking serious reflection on what Barthes called the myth of “the transparency and universality of language,” she makes her own argument virtually impossible to follow. Rather than drawing the listeners’ attention to ideas, she draws it instead to the nature of her speech. The discursive forms Mimi employs, which become paramount here, clearly parallel the material qualities of speech that were emphasized in the earlier sequence. We hardly hear what is said because we are so busy listening to *how* it is said. It recalls the postmodern anxiety over meaning, and the way that postwar French philosophers like Jacques Derrida would couch their arguments in the most obscure language. It could also be metonymic with Rozier’s own approach in this film and in *Les Naufragés*, employing a heavily

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menée selon lui au nom d’ ‘un mythe intermédiaire, dont l’officialité fait toujours grand usage, que ce soit celle des cours d’assises ou celle des tribunes littéraires, et qui est la transparence et l’universalité du langage”

digressive and somewhat ironic sensibility that complicates our access to his real critiques. Because of that complication, we are encouraged to be unusually observant, to see through the many layers of parody and misdirection. This posture of aesthetic distance makes us more attuned to the effects of Rozier's formal conceits, such as this film's abundant play with the relation of sound and image.

During her speech, Mimi refers to different levels of communication, of decorum and vulgarity, and even to regional accents, though she stops short of making the connection with Petitgas' accent. Rehm explains: "The heterogeneity of speech, the levels of languages, the importance of context, the defense and demonstration of a living tongue, Rozier paces all this learned artillery in the mouth of a lawyer who seems to be repeating a lecture" (101).<sup>43</sup> Not only does she digress, but she does it with a detached, oblivious tone of voice. She ends up implicitly arguing (through the vivid image of Victor Hugo noting a baker's bill in his records) that demotic, even vulgar speech should not be dismissed as beneath anyone's dignity, much less the court's. Again, however, the message falls on deaf ears. She hilariously closes by explaining that all this is just the preamble to her introduction. The judge, dumbfounded, accuses her of having wandered off the subject. He has not—and who could blame him?—recognized the substance of the critique being made against the legal system due to the "obscurities," as he puts it, of the critique itself. Finally, most ridiculously, Mimi abandons her whole rhetorical strategy

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<sup>43</sup> "Hétérogénéité des discours, niveaux de langues, importance du contexte, défense et illustration d'une langue vivante, Rozier use de toute l'artillerie savante placée dans la bouche d'une avocate qui a l'air de répéter sa leçon"



and essentially beseeches him to find Petitgas innocent. Surely, she says, in his wisdom, he has seen through the accuser's lies. Interestingly, she pivots here from talking about modes of speech to ways of seeing past speech, of scrutinizing nonverbal, and even unconscious, forms of communication. As a closer to all this rather aimless critique, Rozier turns our attention once again—perhaps definitively—to form rather than substance. It is through form, and a surrender to pure aesthetic bliss, that the film will evoke its utopia. Any analysis of the film must, then, eventually turn away from its initial argument towards the consideration of its form. From here, I discuss how *Maine Océan's* form, as well as the historical parallels undergirding it, impresses the viewer.

### **Yves Afonso as Marcel Petitgas**

Mirroring the debt of so much early sound cinema to theater, Rozier is interested in playing with theatricality in a cinematic context. It is no wonder his next two major projects, *Josephine en tournée* (1990) and *Fifi Martingale* (2001), both centered on the theater. Still, he undercuts and enriches the theatrical focus on dialogue by inserting a wide range of non-verbal, visually received pieces of communication. First, he allows dialogue to reign supreme, so oversaturating the spectator with disorienting speech that they must turn elsewhere to follow along. Understanding the film thus ceases to be a matter of receiving verbal information and instead starts to center on the observation of performance. As Kracauer succinctly explains: “Dialogue films either reproduce theatrical plays or convey plots in theatrical fashion. This implies that they automatically turn the spotlight on the actor” (104). Given how Rozier has riveted our attention onto his

actors' performances—their gestures and the qualities of their speech—it is worth examining Yves Afonso's performance as Marcel Petitgas in greater detail.

According to Afonso (2001), before production began, Rozier instructed him to spend time with actual sailors from Île d'Yeu, the island from whence Petitgas hails. Over time, these men came to embrace Afonso as one of their own and admired his performance. The film remained for decades after its release Afonso's most popular role, and the one people most frequently complimented him for. He claimed that, even fifteen years after the film's release, he continued to be approached by strangers and asked about the film at least once a week (54). It is a highly stylized performance, with a marked theatricality in gestures and speech. Burdeau describes his affectations, associating them with the concept of translation through a play on the French word "*interprète*," which can mean both actor and interpreter. (Interestingly, Rozier seems to have anticipated this association, as Mimi earlier had offered Déjanira and the inspectors her services as an "*interprète*.") According to Burdeau, Afonso is "Rozier's best *interprète*. Listen to him get inflamed...The words come to him too numerous and too fast, so much that he sometimes has to keep quiet for a bit in order to contain the flow" (150).<sup>44</sup> Petitgas races through each sentence so quickly he seems to leave out whole words. As he arrives at the final syllable, he lays such a pronounced emphasis on it that it seems like a comical affectation.

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<sup>44</sup> "le meilleur interprète de Rozier. Écoutez-le s'enflammer...Les mots lui viennent trop nombreux et trop vite, si bien qu'il doit quelquefois se taire un peu pour en contenir le flux"

At the end of the courtroom scene, as the judge's verdict sinks in, Petitgas' initially appreciative smile recedes and, in a comically animalistic move, he violently juts out his chin, letting out an indignant grunt. He proclaims his innocence, even violating court protocol to approach the bench and show off some phantom bruise he claims to have received from his accuser. The judge, having none of it, gives him a deferred prison sentence and a fine. The display of the imperceptible bruise stands as yet another example of the kind of demonstrative performance characteristic of silent film. Meanwhile, the grunt, perfectly articulate though no words are used, clearly represents the (amusingly anticlimactic) climax to the glacial heaving of thought we can tell preceded it. Afonso's constipated stammer makes almost tangible the mass of different possible utterances, looming just under the surface, all fighting with each other to be spoken. As Burdeau observes: "In him several voices jostle each other, all demanding to speak at the same instant. [He is] always in the process of self-translation" (150).<sup>45</sup> When he can muster nothing but a grunt, we sense how ungovernable these internally warring factions of articulation really are. Translation, then, becomes impossible.

The merging of the two meanings of "*interprète*" suggests that performing itself may be a form of interpretation or translation. Indeed, through the example of Petitgas, Burdeau relates internal language processes to filmmaking and spectatorship: "His goal in life: to place in his one mouth a laboratory of languages, a control room, where the canon of three voices would constantly play: the one which formulates what he has to

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<sup>45</sup>"En lui plusieurs voix se bousculent, qui toutes demandent à parler au même instant. [Il est] Toujours en séance d'auto-translation"

say, the one which speaks, and the one which can see what to say but keeps it to himself. The filmmaker who arranges, the actor who executes, the spectator-critic who comments” (150).<sup>46</sup> These three components of the cinema map precisely onto the three components of utterance. This places Afonso’s performance as Petitgas into a continuum of cinematic self-reflexivity. The role enacted by the spectator is subsumed by the actor’s performance. In this way, Rozier deepens his exploration of film history by adding another theoretical dimension.

Regarding how Petitgas fits into the divide between silent and sound cinema, Kracauer’s writing on the logorrhea of Groucho Marx may give us an idea of what kind of role Petitgas plays, particularly with regard to the other characters. “Groucho Marx too undermines the spoken word from within. True, he is given to talking, but his impossible delivery, both glib like water flowing down tiles and cataclysmic like a deluge, tends to obstruct the sanctioned forms of speech” (108). Admittedly, in his accented, lower class speech and lack of self-awareness and self-control, the character of Petitgas may actually more closely resemble Chico Marx. However, his positioning, and how he compliments the other characters, is pure Groucho. By the sheer volume of speech he can let loose, particularly in inappropriate situations, Petitgas does not just shift focus away from the content of utterances; he practically renders them meaningless. Just like Groucho, Petitgas “contributes to the running dialogue without really participating in it...his

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<sup>46</sup>“Son but dans la vie : installer dans sa seule bouche un labo de langues, une régie totale, où jouerait en permanence le canon des trois voix : celle qui élabore ce qu’il y a à dire, celle qui dit, et celle qui voit ce que je veux dire mais n’en pense pas moins. Le cinéaste qui ordonne, l’acteur qui exécute, le spectateur-critique qui commente”

repartees are bubbling self-assertions rather than answers or injunctions...his utterances...disrupt the ongoing conversation so radically that no message or opinion voiced reaches its destination. Whatever Groucho is saying disintegrates speech all around him” (108).

Kracauer goes on to argue that this quality of verbal excess makes Groucho a suitable partner for Harpo. The latter is a slapstick comic and thus, “a residue of the past,” who keeps alive the anarchic, destructive tradition of silent cinema slapstick (108). This compares to Petitgas’ relationship with Déjanira who, while not mute, relies heavily on her body (a bit more sexualized than Harpo’s, it must be admitted) to get meaning across. Given the necessity of showing off her risqué photo in the magazine, she even needs to display her mostly nude body as a proof of identity. According to Kracauer, “the world in which [Harpo] appears is so crowded with dialogue that he would long since have vanished were it not for Groucho, who supports the spectre’s destructive designs. As dizzying as any silent collision, Groucho’s word cascades wreak havoc on language, and among the resultant debris Harpo continues to feel at ease” (108-109). Petitgas almost protects Déjanira from the oppressive force of language, in stark contrast to the role played by her other suitor, Lulu. The latter is an agent of bureaucracy and, by extension, of language’s oppressive force. Thanks to his disruption of that force, Petitgas makes for a somewhat more appealing partner, and he actually slides into this benevolent role with ease.

Although he is enraged after the verdict comes in his accuser’s favor (he announces his intention to strangle the accuser), his rage does not extend to Mimi. Even

as she faults him for making a bad impression in court, he never thinks to lambast her for failing to adequately defend him. Although the tale of Déjanira's mistreatment at the hands of Le Garrec hardens his heart against the man, he winds up softening completely, weepily commiserating with Le Garrec over drinks. Petitgas is possessed of a deep well of sentimentality that is thrown into sharp relief by the brimming rage that usually guides his speech. In fact, even as Afonso employs the exaggerated inflections and gestures of a caricature, we come to sense that the man contains multitudes. The observation that is asked of us here, collating all these data points that compose Petitgas' personality, is based on a robust comprehension of the relations and oppositions between film sound and imagery. This comprehension we have developed will now be put to the task of detecting how Rozier evokes utopia and enables us to conceive of it.

### **The King of the Samba & Grasping Utopia**

The way that Rozier evokes utopia, and its basis in the union of visuals and music, is best explained by briefly returning to the very beginning of *Maine Océan*. The film opens with a long shot of various people milling about a train station. As they funnel onto an escalator, we notice many inquisitive faces turned toward the camera, highlighting the filmmakers' presence and complicating our sense of the diegetic space. As with many New Wave films (not least Rozier's own *Adieu Philippine*) we get a sense of the fictional narrative taking place within a real world that has just to challenge the fiction—by, for example, having real people interact with the film's characters—or it to be plainly revealed as fiction. A bouncy samba plays, non-diegetically, throughout this whole

sequence. The camera dollies left to follow Déjanira hurrying to the ticket counter, where she frantically buys a ticket. She then rushes through a crowd of people to get to her train, the camera hurrying along right behind her. As random non-actors move out of the way, they often look right into the lens. Already, throughout this initial sequence, Rozier is establishing a link in our minds between music and some form of spectatorship—in this case, an acknowledgement of the camera’s and, by extension, the viewer’s presence. As with Yves Afonso’s performance, we can see how the act of spectatorship is baked into the film, here spun around and literally pointed back in our direction. It clues us in, quite early, to the film’s engagement with the medium, its properties, and its history. There is also an internal-external dichotomy at work here. We internalize the rhythm of the music, and may tap our feet or nod our heads along, while our attention to viewership (both our own and that of all these curious non-actors glancing toward the camera) puts us in mind of observable, external details. This dichotomy will come to a head in the most overtly utopian and blissful scene in the entire film: the “*Roi de la Samba*” song and dance sequence, where even the straitlaced Le Garrec lets his hair down as everyone—Mimi, Lulu, Le Garrec, Déjanira, and her Mexican impresario (Pedro Armendariz, Jr.)—abandons themselves to the orgiastic enjoyment of music and drink.

Fittingly, *Maine Ocean* is the only one of the three Rozier films I have discussed where the sense of utopia is not illusory. Rather, it repeatedly emerges in waves throughout the film, sometimes cresting, other times ebbing away. Just like the best screwball comedies sustain a fever pitch of madcap farce, so too does Rozier’s film sustain an infectious pitch of warmth and expectation. Possibilities are limitless. The “*Roi*

*de la Samba*” scene is the highest peak of jubilation. It is no wonder Rozier lingers on it so long. As Burdeau explains: “The joyous and motley assembly that convenes in the multipurpose hall in *Maine Océan* has no unity other than the island where it stops that night, the theater that hosts it for a unique gala. To the tune of *Le Roi de la Samba*, each one signs and dances to their own untranslatable rhythm” (149).<sup>47</sup> The untranslatability, that same ultimate inability to articulate one’s inner thoughts that led Petitgas to emit nothing but a grunt, seems paramount. Each character, reflecting in their outward behavior their unique inner nature, is enjoying themselves in their own way, ways that diverge sharply among the people present. This gives a sense of baroque complexity to the scene, where there is so much to look at, it could be enjoyed multiple times, each as if it were the first viewing.

Kracauer has complained of the uncinematic quality of most filmed musical performances, while he has also detected their peculiar, two-fold power: “It need hardly be stressed that films featuring music for its own sake are inconsistent with the medium. As we listen to a musical production number on the screen, we cannot help exchanging the dimension of outer impressions for that of inner sensations aroused by the inflowing rhythms and sound patterns” (146). Kracauer is pessimistic and ultimately regards the internalized pleasures of listening to music as counterproductive to creating films that fully realize the powers of the medium. Yet, we can easily see how such internalization might considerably transform a scene, enabling it to appeal to the viewer on two wholly

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<sup>47</sup> “L’assemblée joyeuse et disparate qui s’invente dans la salle polyvalente de *Maine Océan* n’a pas d’autre unité que l’île où elle s’arrête cette nuit-là, le théâtre qui l’accueille pour un unique gala. Sur l’air du *Roi de la Samba*, chacun chante et danse à son intraductible rythme”



different levels. The juxtaposition of these levels might allow for the evocation of some pretty rarefied sensations. Kracauer observes how scenes of musical performance are especially potent at dividing our attention between sound and image, causing the two elements to compete for our interest: “We hardly ever listen to a musical performance in films partial to camera-life without being challenged to divide our attention between its revelations and the executants—their hands, their faces...What seems to be idle curiosity, an unwarranted preoccupation with the nonessential, thus gets the better of intense listening” (151).

Film’s capacity for capturing small details of action is paramount here, as our observation of this orgiastic party in all its intricacies challenges our enjoyment of the music. We may even start to scrutinize these details for larger meanings, what they reveal about the characters. Le Garrec’s behavior is sufficiently uncharacteristic to warrant notice. The petty bureaucrat, sober enforcer of the letter of the law, is now a drunken reveler, who apparently improvises a song (*Le Roi de la Samba*). This detail that conveys some information about character stands out from a larger mass of detail that yields little or nothing to a narrative analysis. Because of the sense of escape in this scene, of abandoning the world of bureaucracy and legalism in favor of a domain of pure sensuous pleasure, the whole musical sequence functions similarly to how a song and dance number functions in a Hollywood musical. Thus, it merits consideration in the context of Richard Dyer’s writing on the utopianism of musicals. Dyer (2002) discusses the codes of representation that enable us to acquire a sense of utopia from films, even if these films do not spell out the kind of social organization necessary to achieve utopia: “This code

uses both representational and, importantly, non-representational signs...we also recognize qualities in non-representational signs—colour, texture, movement, rhythm, melody, camerawork—although we are much less used to talking about them” (20). These signposts of utopia, these formal elements that feed into our sense of aesthetic delight and even bliss, defy narrative or symbolic analysis by virtue of being too abstract. They are mostly just elaborate intricacy for the sake of itself, for the pure aesthetic enjoyment of it, standing in for the pleasures of utopia. Just as Rozier has made us pay attention to the material qualities of language, we are now made to gaze at the rich texture of the imagery.

The internalized, bodily component of our spectatorship serves as the (more or less literal) steady pulse underlying this scene. At the same time, the scene solicits visual engagement just by virtue of its being projected on the screen for us to examine. We feel vividly that our attention is being split, that sound and image are appealing to us in different ways, the first by its consistency, its hypnotic drive into bliss, and the latter by its overflowing, baroque detail. The dual nature of this scene has an all-encompassing effect. It seems almost to be appealing to all our senses at once, virtually drowning us. Kracauer suggests that the combination of these two processes, of intense visual observation and internalizing music, give us a sense of burrowing into the images, of connecting more deeply with what is onscreen: “Having penetrated the images, we find at their core, waiting for us, the very music we were forced to abandon” (152). Here, the “core” is conceptualized as a more essential version of what is on the surface. Kracauer pursues, in this form of viewership, a kind of mythic sense of music as having not just an

internal pulse but an internal essence. This illusory essence, like the lost idyll of silent cinema, could be the utopia we reach for, long for, without ever really capturing it.

As Dyer has explained: “Entertainment does not...present models of utopian worlds...Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised” (20). Dyer’s definition of cinematic utopia as something aspired to and evoked but never fully developed or attained, lest it risk posing a real, irresolvable challenge to the dominant social order, would seem confirmed by this scene. However, it receives a challenge from the ending of *Maine Océan*. According to Dyer, “Class, race and sexual caste are denied validity as problems by the dominant (bourgeois, white, male) ideology of society...with the exception perhaps of community (the most directly working-class in source), the ideals of entertainment imply wants that capitalism itself promises to meet” (27). Dyer, of course, refers principally to American capitalism, and France’s differing attitudes to workers’ rights may be a factor in what makes *Maine Océan* diverge so remarkably from this typical limitation on entertainment cinema’s capacity for societal observation. In fact, the ending of Rozier’s film feels vaguely like a manifesto. Here, Rozier boldly elects to present a kind of utopia based around the cooperation of workers, again without recourse to language.

The film’s ending leans heavily on references to the historical moment when sound eclipsed silence in film. First are the comparisons made between Le Garrec and Maurice Chevalier, the star of some of the first Hollywood musicals in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Le Garrec’s quixotic dream of emulating Maurice Chevalier is ultimately

thwarted. This emblem of sound's arrival is finally left, humiliated, standing on the runway watching his plane take off without him. It is as if Rozier wants to change history and prevent the stars of early talkies from ever making it to Hollywood. Following this, the other major allusion to the period is to Jean Epstein's Brittany films—like *Finis Terrae* (1929) and *Mor'vran* (1930)—both in the northern setting (the abandoned Le Garrec is trying to get to Nantes) and the realistic depiction of sailors. Epstein, like Clair, was a French director who, at his peak, straddled the silent-sound boundary and whose films represent unorthodox means of combining images with sound. *Mor'vran*, a short documentary and early sound experiment, incorporates a synchronized soundtrack composed of music and ocean sounds. The apparent intention is to give the viewer the sense of having been soaked in seawater for several days, so complete is the immersion in the marine setting.

Mandelbaum describes “the sublime ending of *Maine Océan*, where Bernard Menez, in a very long and beautiful voyage, returns to land and the night returns to the dawn, split between the loneliest disenchantment and the mark of collective solidarity from the sailors who transferred him to solid ground” (18).<sup>48</sup> Le Garrec, in these last moments, when he is trying to get to shore, becomes integrated into a kind of subterranean network of sailors, who are up before dawn and work out of the sight of most people. Having entered into this secret world, he experiences a utopia of collective labor, of workers who cheerfully cooperate, even with those whose speech they can

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<sup>48</sup> “la fin sublime de *Maine Océan*, où Bernard Menez, en un très long et un très beau voyage, retourne vers la terre et de la nuit vers l'aube, partagé entre le plus solitaire désenchantement et la marque de solidarité collective des marinières qui le transbordent jusqu'à la terre ferme”

hardly understand, just for the sake of brotherhood. The sequence practically effects a nostalgia for incomprehension, as one's efforts to communicate with those whose language one does not understand, like Déjanira and Mimi's cooperative dialogue on the train, seem purer than others. The idea of communication through universal sympathy and aid comes into focus.

Having effectively returned to the moment where silence in cinema gave way to sound, Rozier has first sabotaged the rise of the talkie, and then linked his admiration for a more experimental approach to film sound (practiced by the likes of Epstein and Clair) with the utopia of cooperative labor. Finally, having finally made it to shore, as a charitable motorist drives Le Garrec off into the early morning horizon to start another working day, "*Le Roi de la Samba*" plays again, bringing the digressive narrative full circle. After playing with notions of illusory utopias for some two hours, Rozier locates an authentic one, at dawn, among some old sailors. The culmination of Rozier's multi-film examination of the theme of utopia—its elusiveness, its commercialization, its vulgarization—finally reaches its apotheosis and reveals Rozier as more of an optimist than the earlier films may have suggested. The melancholy tone of *Du côté d'Orouët*, followed by the irreverent but bitter satire of *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue*, sets one up to expect that the director may never locate his ideal in anything achievable. Instead, Rozier seems to work under the sign of the deferred idyll. Contrary to these expectations, however, *Maine Océan* does finally locate its utopia in the communication between laborers that transcends linguistic and class boundaries. Le Garrec and the other men may have trouble understanding each other verbally, but their cooperation goes beyond words.

That this sort of utopian society exists on water rather than land is not insignificant and recalls the “floating society” of *Les Naufragés de l’île de la Tortue*. In that film, of course, the aquatic collective merely reproduced the hierarchies of European society, with all its bitter inequality. In *Maine Océan*, that inequality is evaded. There is hardly even a hint of the class difference that had asserted itself between Le Garrec and the sailors on land. On the water, it seems, differences disappear. This new group of sailors (to which, it should not be forgotten, Petitgas, Le Garrec’s former enemy, introduced him) is all too happy to help and forebears from mocking or belittling the fussy bureaucratic. There are greater concerns to worry about than these petty differences. Kindness and decency prompt the sailors to help Le Garrec get to shore, to lend him their wading boots so his pants do not get soaked. Regardless of whether they think that is terribly important, they recognize its importance to him, and are willing to set aside any objections and help him out. Their cooperation models a utopia that transcends boundaries of class, of different professions, different dialects, different lives and values.

The way Rozier skillfully plays sound and image against each other enlists our own close attention to their complex dynamic. In examining it carefully—in tandem with Siegfried Kracauer’s writings on film sound and Richard Dyer’s on utopia in commercial cinema—we uncover another pointed societal critique, brightened by Rozier’s most optimistic statement on the possibility of utopia. Thematizing the historical replacement of silent film by the talkie, and analogizing that development to the loss of an idyll, Rozier locates the idyll’s reclamation in the forging of a sound cinema that profits from a

dynamic relation between sound and image. This approach can put the audience into states of ecstatic bliss while also cultivating intellectual distance. Once again, Rozier takes cinema, and its possibilities, as his subject and inspiration. In doing so, he again conforms to Cavell's definition of the modernist condition. *Maine Océan* is another chapter in the modernist project that Rozier's filmography represents.

This project reveals a body of work that examines a wide range of utopian concepts—from the melancholy sense of looking back at one's past joys to the political possibilities that inhere in utopian entertainment. Rozier's films may, in fact, be able to reveal to us generally unknown powers of cinema to evoke different kinds of idylls and the political implications that follow from them. Despite taking an irreverent, parodic stance, *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* and *Maine Océan* do both drive home their respective political arguments, perhaps even more effectively by being so wonderfully palatable in their provocations. It may be that Rozier can serve as a model for a political cinema that does not eschew commercial appeals to the audience or forms of address, but rather embraces them. Meanwhile, in *Du côté d'Orouët*, he demonstrates a gorgeously observational humanism, enriched by the fluent employment of ingenious cinematic devices that enhance the emotional weight of certain moments and broaden our sense of wonder at the amazing robustness and reach of human empathy.

Rozier's current state of critical (and commercial) neglect, contrasted with the theoretic valence and thematic poignancy of his work, points to the need for more thorough scholarship on French cinema of the New Wave and post-New Wave periods—both eras unfairly dominated, in critical discourse, by a handful of disproportionately

represented auteurs. I hope this thesis is also a persuasive argument for the need for further work on Rozier, covering in more detail his life and working methods as well as the films I pass over. More scholarship could be done in a political vein also, looking at whether Rozier's irreverent, humanistic sensibility lends itself to, for example, a reproduction of the kind of cooperative utopia depicted in *Maine Océan* within the audience. Other scholars could also fruitfully address the question of how much Rozier, in encouraging the spectator's close, laborious scrutiny of small details of performance or disjunctions between image and sound, represents an alternative to mass entertainment's tendency to instill complacency in the spectator. A more historically or sociologically oriented study could consider more thoroughly the background of the French colonialist mindset underlying *Les Naufragés de l'île de la Tortue* or how French attitudes towards women's liberation play a role in the behavior of the young women in *Du côté d'Orouët*. The possible directions for Rozier scholarship are, at this stage, uncharted territory. The author of this thesis hopes that some more intrepid adventurers are willing to explore.



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**VITA**

