

CANTON, LA CHINOISE / 2001

CO-DIRECTED WITH ROBERT CAHEN

An aesthetic of confusion

Made with Robert Cahen, the celebrated pioneer of video art in France, *Canton, la Chinoise* attempts a synthesis of two universes, two approaches, two working methods and, in the end, two styles. Co-directing is always a perilous exercise, which requires, if the obstacles are to be overcome, a solid relationship between the partners. Rob Rombout first met Robert Cahen in 1987, at the video art festival in Montbéliard – Cahen was a member of the jury that awarded the grand prize to *Entre deux tours*. Since then, a long and solid friendship has bound the two directors together. In 2001, Cahen telephoned Rombout and proposed that he should come along as his assistant on a video that he was about to shoot in China, a country that he knew well and where he had already worked. One remembers in particular such splendid works as *Sept Visions fugitives* (1995) or *Hong Kong Song* (1989), a tape that can be set alongside *Canton, la Chinoise*, since in both cases the aim is to make a portrait of a city. Rombout accepted his friend's proposal with pleasure and accompanied him to Canton for two weeks. They worked in Cahen's manner, with a small DV camera, without any authorisation, at the whim of their wanderings. Rombout made a great many suggestions for images. Back in France, Cahen then embarked on what had always been the decisive phase of his work: post-production. He processed his images by exploiting a wide range of special effects, and transformed the recorded sounds in order to create a true musique concrète. Taken together, all these means give his works the fluidity that is characteristic of his style. But, this time, it did not work. He could not find what he needed, and he realised that the material he had filmed bore the mark of Rombout's choices more than of his own. He called his friend back and proposed that he should be no longer his assistant but his co-director, and that they should make no longer a video work but a documentary. For Rombout, however, things were not so simple. During the shoot he had worked in Cahen's style, adopting a working method that was not at all his own. Taking on the direction meant, for him, reorienting the project towards his own



preoccupations, doing a new shoot that he would prepare in his own way, and filming certain carefully selected city-dwellers who, under the eye of his camera, would become “characters” whose paths could cross and converge at the end of the film. Above all, he refused any recourse to special effects. Cahen agreed, and so did his producer, and the two companions went back to Canton to shoot again for another two weeks. Inevitably, the editing was long and laborious, each of the two directors having to accommodate the demands of the other. The result is neither a Cahen video (no slow motion, no superimpositions in several layers, no oscilloscopic effects that make the lines ripple) nor a Rombout film, whose visual style is nowhere to be found in it: no fixed shots, no symmetry, no receding perspectives, no play on depth of field. As in any hybrid work, the mixture of the two styles is undeniable. What is most surprising, for anyone who knows the backgrounds of the two authors, is the absence of music, essential though it is both for Rombout, who carefully chooses the composers for each one of his films, and for Cahen, who, throughout his video work, transforms the sounds recorded by his camera into *musique concrète*, just as he transforms his images into what might be called “concrete painting”. It should be remembered that Robert Cahen studied at IRCAM (the Institut de recherche et de coordination acoustique/musique, founded by Pierre Boulez), embarked on a career as a composer of electro-acoustic music and, like many other pioneers of video art, produced his first videotapes with a synthesiser designed on the model of those used in electronic music.

There are films that have to be watched twice. *Canton, la Chinoise* is one of them. The first viewing disappoints by its overabundance: too much to see, too many words to hear, too many subtitles to read over Chinese voices. The film’s argument heads off in all directions, and one hesitates to say what it is really about: Canton, China, the Chinese woman, literature and art in China? The *voice-overs* of the various characters speak a little about all of this, too little for us to learn anything from it and too much for us to consider their words to be without importance. The ordinary viewer, in a hurry to understand the meaning of the film, to find a particular angle on Canton or the point of view on which the documentary gaze is founded, is very soon disappointed. Little concerned with theoretical distinctions between video art and documentary cinema, he looks for “the message”, forgetting that a film cannot be reduced to words alone. Like water running downhill, he chooses the easy path: listening to the words supposed to carry the meaning before looking at the images. Among the various voices that can be heard in the film, that of Christian Mérier, cultural attaché at the French Consulate General in Canton, is dominant, as much by the social position of the character as by the speaking time the film grants him. Unquestionably, the man takes pleasure in showing that he knows China well, its literature and its philosophies, Taoism and Confucianism, whose authors he likes to quote. But his pedantic discourse, affecting literary airs and strewn with hollow phrases, leaves the viewer perplexed: “Canton,” he says, “is a sensual city, even an erotic one. [...] It is there, but it is in people’s bodies.” Rombout and Cahen are not taken in by this kind of talk,

beneath which, ironically, they slip the image of the urban motorways that have invaded the city. The eroticism of which the diplomat speaks resurfaces in his constant allusions to his own experiences with Chinese women whom, beneath the affectation of his words, he reduces to their bodies: “I very much like the flesh of the Chinese woman’s body, which is a very smooth flesh. And I very much like the sleep of the Chinese woman, which is a total sleep, deep, curled up.” [QR29] His verbal tics betray the implicit and constant lewdness of his discourse. He uses the verb *pénétrer* incessantly, omitting the preposition that normally introduces its complement of place: “When one penetrates China,” he says, or again: “When one penetrates a landscape, one only enters the landscape.” Further on: “I like to penetrate the landscape with a woman.” He invokes Lao Tzu, who said: “The world is feminine. The world is a woman.” This dominant voice suggests at first sight that the Chinese woman might be the film’s principal object. But there are not very many women in this film. Only Mérer’s Chinese assistant, of whom he speaks with condescension, is heard at certain moments. She has adopted a French name, Carine, in addition to her Chinese name. In impeccable French, she speaks of her mother, who supports her, of her father, who refused to let her study at university, of Mao’s China where “people were poor but happy”, whereas now “people are rich but have become bad”. She dreams of a beautiful wedding like those one sees on television, of a family life, of two children, whereas the regime enforces the one-child policy. We hear Carine’s words, but we never see her from the front. Always filmed from behind, in profile and even from above when she stands at the window, she is often no more than a faceless black silhouette. Other women are glimpsed in certain sequences, they too in the shadow of the cultural attaché, but they do not speak. Apart from a woman singing in a park, the Chinese woman in the film is in reality reduced to the role of a foil for the French diplomat. Even the Chinese men, when they speak of women, give a negative image of them. One of them says that they have “big heads but small bodies [...], small buttocks and small shoulders. They have yellow complexions and emaciated bodies.”

Men, on the other hand, are very much present, in the image and on the soundtrack, even if the Chinese are often filmed from behind or in silhouette against a window. All of them practise a profession in the field of the arts and of literature. Chen Tong, a publisher and bookseller, translates and publishes the great texts of twentieth-century French literature, those of Beckett or Robbe-Grillet. He speaks of Beckett, who writes about solitude and absurdity. A photographer takes portraits of nude women, regarded in China as “women of ill repute”. As Rombout likes to do, he also photographs from a train. He says: “Many sociologists and artists think that art can change society. But I am isolated.” A visual artist whose works we do not see takes brick as his material because of the history of his parents: his mother, who worked in a brickworks, fell ill from breathing toxic dust, and his father was condemned by the Cultural Revolution to labour on a building site. He says of Canton, which Mérer called “sensual”, that it leaves him more and more indifferent. “It is a city in disorder”, which he



neither likes nor hates. The publisher, the photographer and the artist meet around a table, in a restaurant, in the company of the cultural attaché and Carine. We then understand that they are all beholden to the Frenchman, who hands out the subsidies.

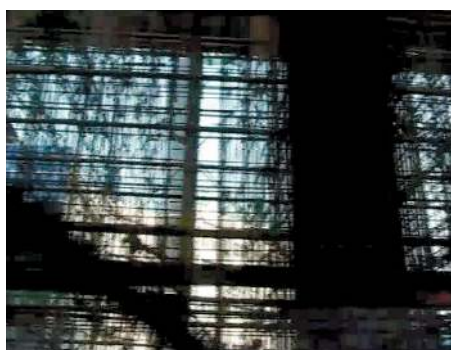
Listening only to the disjointed words of all these characters, who talk a little about everything, the disconcerted viewer loses his way in a confused film whose purpose he does not grasp. He must therefore see it again, or rather see it differently, attending more to the images than to the words. He will then observe that there are two very different ways of filming, and a few intermediate ones. The first, classical but minor, respects the proportions of space, gives it depth, situates the characters in their environment. Long lateral tracking shots from a car accompany motorcyclists on the expressways; others, filmed while walking, follow a character from behind through the alleyways. The figures in the foreground stand out clearly against the urban background. But sometimes the chosen point of view produces the opposite effect. Backlit shots draw the characters as silhouettes. Others are filmed through an obstacle: Christian Mérier is glimpsed behind the blinds of his office or between the bamboos that enclose the terrace of the café where he converses with a Chinese woman. The depth of the image is obstructed and the viewer's gaze impeded. The filmed subject is now merely "glimpsed", *entraperçu*, to borrow the title of a celebrated videotape by Robert Cahen.

The second way of filming proceeds in the opposite manner to the first: it flattens perspective by resorting to the telephoto lens, which makes the spatial interval between people and things disappear. A shot of the mass of bicycles moving through the city, filmed from

low down, makes feet, wheels and pedal cranks interpenetrate. Another, of the cyclists, composes a tapestry of faces. The filmmakers exploit every possible subterfuge so that the figures overlap, intermingle, liquefy. They film the reflections cast on the glass of an aquarium, where the fish seem to glide between the people passing in the street; the iridescent shimmer of vehicles on the noise barrier running along the motorway; the sooty forms of a few coloured silhouettes running through the downpour, seen through the windscreen of a car drowned in rain; the bright, coloured flashes of a discotheque; the city lights and the illuminated signs that glitter on the dark silhouettes of the cultural attaché and his latest conquest seated in the back of a taxi; and night itself, quite simply, which reduces space to a few lit zones and passers-by to cast shadows. A lateral tracking shot with a long lens, at night, accompanying the artist as he walks past the variously lit shops, makes all sense of space disappear in favour of a long series of coloured patches, flashes of light, more or less formless figures that appear and vanish at once. These effects, produced during the shoot without recourse to electronic trickery, merge the character with the background from which he no longer stands out, accentuate the pictorial quality of the images and verge on abstraction. Now, at this very moment, the young artist is speaking of his father, who did not understand his art and wanted him to devote himself to traditional painting. The relationship between speech and image becomes a dialogue on art between the artist being filmed and the two artists filming him.

Despite their differences, these two ways of filming produce common aesthetic effects, clearly sought by the two filmmakers, who give precedence to movement, line, texture and colour. The mobile camera films mobile objects: the bus seen from another bus, the many





motorcyclists in accompanying tracking shots filmed from a car, Carine or the artist walking in the street, followed by the shoulder-mounted camera. The urban motorways, the viaducts, the pedestrian footbridges, the hoardings, the advertising screens draw complex forms whose lines intertwine, form and come undone with the movements of the camera. Blinds, scaffolding, corrugated-iron fences, rows of identical blocks of flats, skyscraper façades, the bamboos between which the French diplomat and his girlfriend take a stroll, or again a vivarium in which snakes are heaped on top of one another: everything is conducive to creating grids of parallel lines or textures of entwined lines. Each shot catches vivid colours that stand out sharply against the surrounding greyness: the red of a motorcycle helmet, of Carine's dress, of a plastic cape protecting the motorcyclist from the rain; the blue of a box on the luggage rack of a scooter or of a night-time building site whose lighting casts the immense shadow of a worker onto a tarpaulin; the white of the sheet of paper that the publisher is reading, which invades the whole field of the image; the yellow line of a horizontal metal railing running along a viaduct, filmed in a long lateral tracking shot, and which the rain flooding the vehicle's window makes buckle like a stroke of paint barring the image [QR21].

If *Canton, la Chinoise* is a film to be seen and seen again, it is also one to be listened to again, the better to hear certain fragmented and scattered words. Speaking of traditional Chinese painting, in which the landscape dominates the figure, the cultural attaché says: "One loses oneself in something else." The viewer too loses himself in the excess of images and words that dominate him. At the very end, the cultural attaché utters these strange sentences: "China leads to emptiness. It is very physical. There

comes a point where it is truly a matter of whether you survive it or not. It is very full. It is full to the point of nausea when you live it day by day. It is by physically experiencing [...] this fullness that we ourselves are emptied by this fullness. [...] In the end, all these signs empty us of our own signs. But perhaps there is an emptiness deep within ourselves as well.” [QR22] These remarks would seem abstruse did they not echo a sentence spoken in Cantonese at the very beginning of the film: “Humanity is a well with two buckets, one going down to be filled, the other coming up to be emptied.” The sentence might pass for a Chinese proverb if one did not recall that it was in fact written by Samuel Beckett, in *Murphy*, one of his first novels in English, whose character is at once empty and emptied. The viewer understands that the feeling of confusion that cluttered his mind after the first viewing was precisely the effect sought by the film, which wants him to run up against the screen of images, “full to the point of nausea”. Like the old man with the carrying pole wanting to cross the incessant flow of vehicles, the viewer cannot cross the incessant flow of images and try to understand what might lie hidden behind them. But behind the screen of images there is nothing to which he could gain access. He will know no more about China than Saint Francis Xavier who, as Mérier recalls, died on an island off Canton without having been able to “penetrate” China. The viewer finally understands that this over-full film is also an over-empty film, one that shows him there is something insurmountable, beyond which he cannot “penetrate”. *Canton, la Chinoise* is a well with two buckets. To be seen twice.



From left to right and top to bottom. 1. Christian Mérier, the cultural attaché. – 2. Chian Tsi (Carine), his assistant. – 3. Zhang Haier, the photographer. – 4. Chen Tong, the publisher and bookseller.

COMMENTS

❑ Hired by Robert Cahen as his assistant on *Canton, la Chinoise*, I had shot some footage (normally, as an assistant, I never shoot anything) that he found good, but too strongly marked by my style. He insisted on keeping it; but I was not co-director, and had I known, I would have worked differently. When I explained this to him, he proposed that we should go back to China. We set off again for two weeks, just as for the first shoot. I had set out my conditions. We talked things over a great deal.

From the first shoot we kept quite a lot of footage; we looked at what was still missing. Before the second trip I did not yet have a script, but I had an idea: to film artists, people who are lost, in China, in a world interested only in money, and which is in the midst of change.

❑ We had agreed to keep as the main character the French cultural attaché, a cultured man, well surrounded (above all by women), and a very smooth talker. He knew both Chinese and Western artists (among others, Alain Robbe-Grillet). Among the secondary characters, there were also a publisher of French books, a very well-known photographer who essentially films naked women and trains, and a Chinese artist who made installations out of bricks in homage to his mother, who had been forced to work hard during the Cultural Revolution... each one of them had his story.

❑ We had a single camera, a camera with a great many flaws. In fine weather, the image was ugly, too contrasty; when the weather was grey, the colours started to come out. Saturated colours. In Canton it rains a great deal and it is often grey. We turned this flaw to our advantage. In post-production, I accentuated the primary colours, as in Chinese drawings.

❑ Co-directing means two worlds having to work together.

Cahen really wanted to make a documentary, and was asking me for advice. As for me, I

wanted to free myself and make a video art film, to experiment with something. Cahen shoots somewhat by improvising, and reworks (like a true sculptor) in post-production. I prefer to have a structure beforehand: no effects in the film until the film is there.

❑ The shoot was a pleasure, and the editing a total nightmare. I spent four days a week, for six weeks, in Strasbourg. When I went back to Brussels, we had often edited less than two minutes. What is more, we were not being paid.

The editor, Maureen Mazurek, was literally caught between Robert and me. We contradicted each other constantly. Nothing moved forward. But we laughed a lot.

The producer, Philippe Avril, took us to the best restaurants.

The film turned out well; it won a prize in Canada.

I put on ten kilos.

❑ But the process, and the clash between two approaches, enriched us both, and we went on to do presentations and exhibitions together.

CREDITS

Original idea: Robert Cahen.

Written and directed by: Robert Cahen and Rob Rombout.

With: Christian Mérier, Chian Tsi (Carine), Chen Tong, Lin Yilin, Zhang Haier.

Camera, sound: Robert Cahen, Rob Rombout.

Editing: Maureen Mazurek.

Post-production assistant: Gontran Froehly.

Assistant, first shoot: Emanuele Da Vincenti.

Sound editing, mix: Gilles Marchesi.

Sound design: Robert Cahen and Rob Rombout.

Foley: Marie-Jeanne Wyckmans.

Foley recording: Jean-François Duchateau.

Colour grading: Michael Faber.

Translation: Lai-Ying Salin, Wang Xiaojie

Production delegate for RTBF:

Nicole de Schreider.

Production coordinator for CICV: Yasmina Demoly.

Production manager: Marie-Michèle Cattelain.

Producer: Philippe Avril.

Production: Les Films de l'Observatoire.

Associate producers: Boulevard des productions

(Evelyne Noiriél and Georges Prats) – CICV

Pierre Schaeffer (Pierre Bongiovanni) – Lamy

Films (Benoît Lamy) – Images Plus (Dominique

Renauld) – RTBF

(Claire Colart, associate producer, and Ives Swennen, head of documentaries).

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Format: Digital Betacam.

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