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Ce gigantesque retournement de la terre

This Gigantic Furrowing of the Ground

Claire Angelini

Production Claire Angelini. **Production company** Albanera Production (Paris, France). **Director** Claire Angelini. **Screenplay** Claire Angelini. **Director of photography** Claire Angelini. **Sound** Claire Angelini. **Editor** Claire Angelini.

DCP, colour & black/white. 71 min. French.

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Normandy is a place steeped in history – after the Allied landings on 6th June 1944, it became one of the Second World War’s most hotly contested territories. Making direct reference to Jean Grémillon’s film *Le six juin à l’aube*, which was shot in 1944/5 under the direct influence of the total destruction of the region, this documentary essay carries out an inspection in search of the traces left behind by history 70 years later. But landscapes are silent. They tell us little of themselves. The scars of the past are not revealed unasked. So how can history be made visible in the present through film? To begin with, an old man affected by the war in his youth formulates his memories. Then the locations from Grémillon’s film are shown in their current state, augmented with the dramatic music and narrator’s commentary from the original film. Then there are off-screen reflections about post-war architecture and images of buildings that represent “urban modernity”. The three-part structure and the precise use of sound and image expose the different temporal strata and historical sediments, which, newly visible, are inscribed into the terrain.

Birgit Kohler

Layers of time and history

For *Ce gigantesque retournement de la terre*, I deliberately chose three cinematic styles, each representing a unique kind of expression. Together, they compose the facets of a reflection 'in action' – that is to say, in images and sounds – aroused by Jean Grémillon's film *Le 6 juin à l'aube* (France, 1945), which is about the landing at Normandy by Anglo-American forces, and the resulting consequences for the region. Grémillon, who was born in that region, refers in his film to the recent past ('happy Normandy'), a distant past (the landing of Edward III of England in Barfleur in 1346), an 'immediate' past (fighting) and a present characterised by ruins and a devastated countryside.

In *Ce gigantesque retournement de la terre*, I make use of layers of time and history by retracing Grémillon's footsteps and recreating his geographical journey through the towns and villages he filmed in September of 1944 and in July and August of 1945.

The first part features a farmer in Normandy. We show this man today as he remembers the events of the past; at the same time, we see the past seventy years inscribed upon the body of this eighty-four-year-old man. He mentally runs through his three weeks of wandering in the countryside while shells landed around him, past the dead and the ruins. He evokes all that he and his family had to face following the invasion, a time marked by destruction, injury and death. 'In that corner of our Normandy, he concludes, everything was destroyed...'

In the footsteps of Jean Grémillon

The second part of the film follows in the footsteps of Grémillon's film, showing current images of the places he recorded for *Le 6 juin à l'aube*. Like in the story imagined by François Rabelais in the fourth book of his pentalogy of novels *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel* – where sounds and words frozen during severe winter battles are brought alive a year later by melting heat, to the amazement of travellers – the historical gap between two different times that concern the same territory is recorded in *Ce gigantesque retournement de la terre*. But is this ground, where so many lost their lives during the war, still the same seventy years on? The third section focuses specifically on the reconstruction of the post-war era and the architectural principles that inspired and formed it. Planners and architects commissioned by the Minister of Reconstruction, Raoul Dautry (former president of the French Mutual Aid, which came to the aid of disaster victims), established rules for the whole country, and led projects aimed at giving Normandy a new look. And what about today? In reality, such a 'gigantic furrowing of the ground' couldn't be magically filled in, the way the poet Jules Supervielle imagined it.

What do the cinematic images tell us? How can we perceive the result of these projected buildings, houses, and cities? And what logic does this new era inevitably follow in the on-going and still crisis-ridden urbanisation of the countryside, and the mechanisation of agriculture?

The three chronological levels of this film (a story of the past filmed in the present, a past story in the present, and a possible story) are related to three modes of historical discourse (living contemporary witness; factual description of events, planning for the future). They are made tangible by a film that is interested in a contemporary space-time.

Claire Angelini

In the wrong place at the wrong time

In 1944 and 1945, French director Jean Grémillon went back to his native Normandy to record the destruction of the region caused by the still-raging war. What he saw was terrifying: destroyed towns and 'damned landscapes', one of the greenest regions in France suddenly swallowed by death. But he also saw the vital force of the people at work, for survival and reconstruction. The resulting documentary, *Le 6 juin à l'aube*, reappeared only recently in the French cultural landscape, after a poor reception at the time of its release and almost seven decades of obscurity. The testimony of the 'collateral damage' undergone by those rural areas remained invisible in the face of the winners' history of the war and the arrival of modernity.

In several of her films, Claire Angelini has addressed these impossible historical situations in which people get trapped in silence, their stories untellable because, whether on the 'right' or 'wrong' side of the official history, they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Collateral damage: a really terrible notion. So Claire Angelini literally followed Grémillon's path, making a film out of the previous film. She went back to Normandy, and filmed again every village that appeared in *Le 6 juin à l'aube*. She filmed houses and tractors, roads and fields, peasants at work and the empty spaces of modern urbanity, what is and what is left. The spectator is guided three times through this historical and geographical journey, three movements across image, sound and imagination. In the first movement, we follow another guide, an eighty-four-year-old man telling his story of surviving through these dreadful times of the summer of 1944 and the winter that followed. He was fourteen, and here he tells his story for the first time. His memory reconstructs the succession of names, places and events step by step, throughout his speech – small events that marked him forever: the lice where they slept that night, the raw cabbage they had to eat, the wounded cow, the sadness of their mother when she came back from the hospital... In the darkness of his kitchen, with the small noises around him of life going on, we plunge with him into a past defined by the litany of his 'there was nothing', 'we had nothing left', 'there was nothing around', 'nothing at all', 'no, nothing'... Nothing but the dead, lots and lots of them – French, German or American, that doesn't make much difference.

History, a deeply incarnated process

After this initial, mental return to the scene of the crimes, the second movement of *Ce gigantesque retournement de la terre* comes back to Grémillon's film. Claire Angelini's work then cannot but evoke a whole history of film, including *Le 6 juin à l'aube*, in a tradition that would mobilise also Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's *Trop tôt, trop tard* (1982) as well as Marguerite Duras' *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta desert* (1976). Grémillon's soundtrack accompanies images of present-day Normandy; each village mentioned appearing in the prosaic reality of its contemporary state. The film then questions precisely what cinema can do to record what is as what is left, to see through the green pastures and ordinary houses the traces of the past disasters. What if they became invisible? What would that tell us of our history – or of the limits and possibilities of film as a witness to the movement of history? But the tragic music of Grémillon's film accompanying a young couple of joggers through the streets of a small Norman town still reminds us of both the past dramas that occurred here when they were not yet born, and of the vital force that runs through these bodies and ours. From the wounds described by the old man

with his soft voice to these joggers and to the slight trembling of the handheld camera, history appears here as a deeply incarnated process, inscribing itself in the bodies of the people, as well as in the trees and buildings. The 'furlowing of the ground' is already a bodily description of the rape that this countryside has undergone.

Soulless urban sceneries

The third movement leaves Grémillon behind, to question the processes that governed post-war reconstruction – or that would govern it, to adopt the strange conditional mode adopted by the narrator, a mode intermixing the fiction of what was with the sense of totalitarian ineluctability. What is left to the eyes today, after that destruction to nothing, is what has been reconstructed. Claire Angelini shows us another Normandy, devoid of true life and imprisoned in the standardisation of architecture, in concrete and plastic, in soulless urban sceneries. The 1950s reconstruction has been indifferent to rural culture, and urbanism has largely remained so until today. The destruction of Normandy has made it a perfect field for the early experiments of this modernity. Having, as it were, no history left, it could start again from scratch in the new world. It takes the three movements of Claire Angelini's film to show us that Normandy does have a history, forgotten though it may be, or hidden underneath the green and the concrete. Its traces are still perceptible in the bodies of old men and old trees. Seeing them requires attentive eyes sustained by both patience and the sense of emergency. What makes *Ce gigantesque retournement de la terre* particularly moving is that these qualities have emerged here from Claire Angelini's constant and modest dialogue, through her art, with her colleague Jean Grémillon, who died in 1959. Walter Benjamin once wrote that the problem with today's bourgeoisie is that they lived in houses where nobody had died before. Claire Angelini lives in a cinema full of dead people, and her art is thick with that incredible richness.

Benoît Turquety



Claire Angelini was born in Nice, France in 1969. She studied at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, the Université Paris-Sorbonne and, from 2003 to 2004, the University of Television and Film Munich. In 2001, she founded the French-German collective Laboratorium Geschichte ("history laboratory"). Since 2001, her films, installations, photos, and drawings

have been shown in solo and group exhibitions, in galleries, and at festivals. Claire Angelini is also a writer, editor and lecturer. She lives and works in Munich and Paris.

Films

2002: *Réciprocités/Reciprocities* (60 min.). 2004: *Un trou dans le gant/A Hole in a Glove* (32 min.). 2004: *Hier liegt die Grenze des pädagogischen Bemühens/The Limit of the Pedagogical Effort Has Been Reached Here* (22 min.). 2005: *Es geht eine dunkle Wolk' herein/A Dark Cloud Is Coming Inside* (20 min.). 2007: *Loci soli/Soliloques* (24 min.). 2007: *She/See* (22 min.). 2009: *Par l'eau et par le feu/On Water and Fire* (11 min.). 2009: *La mémoire n'est pas un jeu d'enfant/Memory is not a Child's Game* (49 min.). 2009: *Le retour au pays de l'enfance/Back to the Land of Childhood* (100 min.). 2010: *Marche/Aragon* (23 min.). 2011: *La guerre est proche/War is Looming*

(80 min.). 2012: *Et tu es dehors/Und raus bist Du/And Out You Go* (85 min.). 2012: *Jeune. Révolution!/Young. Revolution!* (13 min.). 2012: *Brise la mer!/Break the Sea!* (11 min.). 2015: *Ce gigantesque retournement de la terre / This Gigantic Furlowing of the Ground.*