Guy Gilles or the Cinepoetics of Presence

HUGUES AZÉRAD & MARION SCHMID

Abstract: If the relations between cinema and poetry have been well explored by critics and artists since the advent of the avant-garde of the 1920s, evincing multiple affinities in terms of techniques and aesthetic objectives, the intermedial nature of poetic cinema remains less well defined. This article aims to address this omission by focusing on the 'secret child of the New Wave', the French filmmaker Guy Gilles (1938-1996), whose intermedial work is only now being rediscovered. Guy Gilles's film *Au pan coupé* (*Wall Engravings*, 1967) in particular instantiates a complex interweaving of poetry and cinema, as much in its form as in its content. Gilles's poetic film calls for a closer analysis of how both media are entangled, reaching a state of photogenic intensity (Jean Epstein) that evades narrativity and denies conceptual categories, ushering in what the authors, drawing on Yves Bonnefoy's theoretical texts, call Gilles's cinepoetics of presence.

Keywords: poetic cinema, intermediality, presence, Guy Gilles, Yves Bonnefoy

> Poetry is what affords the world the face of its presence.
>
> Yves Bonnefoy[1]

To what extent can media other than literature become vehicles for poetry, and what does it mean for a film to be considered 'poetic'? Ever since the first French avant-garde of the 1920s, filmmakers, theorists and critics – many of whom, like Germaine Dulac, Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein, occupying several of these positions – have thought about the interconnections between cinema and poetry as part of a broader reflection on the specificity and expressive means of the new medium film (Wall-Romana 2013b). Highlighting cinema's 'ability to juxtapose, within several seconds, on the same luminous screen, images which are generally isolated in time or space', critic Emile Vuillermoz enthused: 'all this could permit a poet to realize their most ambitious dreams' (Vuillermoz 1988 [1916], 131). Upending traditional definitions of poetry as a verbal art, Jean Epstein, together with Abel Gance one of the pioneers of poetic cinema, asserted: 'The cinema is poetry's most powerful medium, the truest medium for the untrue, the unreal, the "surreal" as Apollinaire would have said' (Epstein 1988 [1924], 318). Along with painting and music, poetry became an important source of inspiration and model for the avant-garde's quest for a 'purer' form of cinema, less driven by the demands of realism and narrative action, and more attuned to formal experiments and stylistic innovation. Some forty years later, the poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini similarly insisted on the subversion of traditional narrative conventions in what he termed a 'cinema of poetry': 'for the most part, the films of the cinema of poetry are not made according to the ordinary rules and conventions of the screenplay, they don't obey the usual narrative rhythms. On the contrary, disproportion is the rule, details are greatly dilated, and points traditionally considered important are very quickly recounted' (Pasolini 1965).[2] Whereas the first avant-garde privileged montage as a tool of poetic expression, Pasolini, on the other hand designated 'free indirect

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point of view' – the filmmaker's exploration of characters' inner worlds and mental states – as the main feature of a cinema of poetry (Sitney 2015, 7). Poetic cinema, then, seems to be first and foremost defined by its shift from action and plot to the exploration of subjective states such as dreams or memories, its puncturing of traditional notions of time and space, as well as the heightened form of perception and greater attention to detail that it affords spectators.[3] Just as, in the words of Alain Badiou, 'poetry is an arrest upon language, an effect of the coded artifice of linguistic manipulation' (Badiou 2013, 91), so the poetic in cinema divests the medium of its merely dramatic character, opening it up to a deeper experience of viewing and sensing.

But what forms and figures does the poetic take in cinema? How does a language associated with literary writing find expression in the filmic medium? And what hybrid forms in-between the verbal and the visual emerge in a cinema of poetry? In this article, we will focus on French director Guy Gilles (1938–1996), a marginalised filmmaker who is slowly gaining in recognition in France and beyond (Forret 2022a, Schmid 2019, Lépingle and Uzal 2014), as a particularly original practitioner of poetic cinema. Born in Algiers, Gilles made his first short, *Soleil éteint* in 1958, before moving to Paris two years later, in the midst of the Algerian War. Though aesthetically innovative and highly prolific – he directed eight features, more than a dozen shorts and some forty works for television, including essay films on Marcel Proust and Jean Genet – he remained in the shadows of French New Wave and Post-New Wave cinema, his melancholy, uncompromisingly personal films failing to resonate with contemporary audiences. Trained at the School of Fine Arts, Gilles's creative practice was above all influenced by poetry and painting: 'I make films as one writes verse, as one uses paintbrushes', he declares in a 1968 interview (Lépingle and Uzal 2014, 48). The art of poetry is evoked in film titles such as *Le Clair de terre* (*Earth Light*, 1970), named after André Breton's 1923 poetry collection; *Au biseau des baisers* (1959), after the first line of Louis Aragon's poem 'Elsa je t'aime'; or *Chanson de gestes* (1966), a pun on the genre of the Old French epic poem. If *Soleil éteint* recalls a line from the Parnassian poet Catulle Mendès, whose 'Spleen d'été' rather aptly characterises the characters' morose mood, the title of his short TV documentary *La Poésie est dans la rue* (1970) sounds like the poetic manifesto of a director intent on capturing the beauty of faces and places in films resolutely grounded in the everyday.[4]

For Gilles, 'a flower, a wall, a street or the face of Greta Garbo are [...] equally "vehicles" of poetry and sources of emotion. It all depends on how you look at them' (Gilles ca. 1967). If poetry, for the director, is essentially a question of looking, its cinematic expression by necessity relies on a certain quality of the image: 'I think it's impossible to translate cinematic poetry, in the Wellesian sense of the word, using anything other than images and plasticity: "the camera is an eye in the poet's head"' (*ibid.*). Poetry, as filmmaker Yann Gonzalez points out, permeates all aspects of Gilles's cinema: 'every photogram is a model of composition and framing, beauty bursts forth in a deluge of formal discoveries and moving gestures, the slightest shot [...] asserts itself as an incandescent poetic act' (Gonzalez 2003, 259). While some contemporary critics mistook his preoccupation with form for futile aestheticism,[5] most reviewers hailed the poetic dimension and profound sensitivity of his films, culminating in Jean-Claude Guiguet's homage to this 'messenger of a cinema of poetry' (Guiguet 1996, 19) in *Cahiers du cinéma* after the filmmaker's death from AIDS in 1996.

Shattered memories

Gilles's wistful *Au pan coupé* (*Wall Engravings*, 1967), the second film of what could be called his trilogy of errancy,[6] can best be described as a poetic attempt to keep present – through the resurrectional powers of the moving image – those who have departed. Seven minutes into the film, the rebellious protagonist Jean (Patrick Jouané), one of the many hypersensitive, searching young men that populate the director's work, runs away, leaving his partner Jeanne (Macha Méril) grieving about his disappearance. His camaraderie with a group of beatniks seems at first to chart a journey of self-discovery in the style of Jack Kerouac, the 'father of the Beat generation', whose rejection of

American middle-class values and restless wandering, manifest in the many alter-egos of his books, resonate with Jean's uncompromising quest for freedom. Yet *Au pan coupé* is a far cry from Ray Smith's search of spiritual enlightenment in *The Dharma Bums* (1958) or Jack Duluoz's boozy retreats in the Californian canyons in *Big Sur* (1962). Affirming 'I am not a beatnik' – rather like Kerouac himself in an interview shortly before his death (Lelyveld 1969) – Jean embarks on a solitary journey, succumbing to fever and hunger, not unlike Mona (Sandrine Bonnaire) in Agnès Varda's better-known *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985) some twenty years later. The remainder of the film will be devoted to remembering and understanding Jean, as Jeanne – unaware of her beloved's demise – is beset by memories of their shared life. Unburdened by any conventional demands of plot development, *Au pan coupé* in minute detail charts the emotional pain of a young woman faced with an unexplainable loss.

In a vertiginous criss-crossing between past and present, Gilles interweaves images of Jeanne grieving for the departure of Jean with her reminiscences of privileged moments of the couple's happiness. While the present is filmed in a mournful black-and-white, rendered almost spectral by the persistent over-exposure of the image, the flashbacks of memory are in lush, vibrant colours evoking the cinema of Jacques Demy, one of the directors – along with Godard, Varda and Bresson – that Gilles admired most (Lépingle and Uzal 2014, 42-3). The film interpolates different time frames in rapid montage sequences where past and present are increasingly intermeshed, then collapsed into one another. At times, as is emblematised in a sequence where we see Jeanne walking alone in a wooded street, followed by a jump cut to a similarly composed shot of the two lovers kissing, the flashbacks to the past are so rapid that they seem to tear the image open, making it porous to different temporalities, snippets of lost time recovered through memory. Named after the café where the two lovers used to meet, *Au pan coupé* is originally an architectural term, referring to the 'slanted connection replacing the angle of two walls' (Larousse). Truthful to its title, the film's architecture establishes connections between two temporal planes by means of a montage practice that one is tempted to call 'au plan coupé', that is, a cutting up of the narrative into multiple shots that capture the fleetingness of time. Montage, in Gilles's work, unlike the dialectical montage of Eisenstein or Godard, does not juxtapose to create meaning, but, rather, conjures up poetic moments in a shattered mosaic of time. Each shot signifies for itself – an evanescent moment of living is turned into an instant of pure poetry. Gilles's cinema does not order, impose or enclose; it does not aim to shock, illustrate or represent, but creates moments of 'time in its pure state' (Proust 2000, 224) that at once invoke the immediacy of presence and its inherent transience. Like an extension of the 'image poem' (Thiher 1976, 955-56) sequence of Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), whose coda shot of Anna Karina looking out on the city with a copy of Paul Éluard's *Capitale de la douleur* pressed against the window-pane is referenced in the opening shot of *Au pan coupé*,[7] the entire film becomes poetry. Or rather, it invents a new form of cine-poetry that enshrines the evanescent moment in the seemingly permanent film image.

Figure 1. Natacha (Anna Karina) in *Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965)

Figure 2. Jeanne (Macha Méril) in *Au pan coupé* (Guy Gilles, 1967)

Freed from the linear strictures of narrative, *Au pan coupé* is acutely attentive to the gestures and bodily postures of the lovers, forming what, in a variation on Barthes, one could call 'fragments of a lover's gestures' (Barthes 1978). In images of their happier days, we often see their hands in close-up, tenderly interlocked or caressing, in stark contrast to Jeanne's listless gestures in the present, such as when her hand comes to rest on a bag replete with objects that belonged to their shared life or pensively strokes her furrowed brow. At first glance, Gilles's predilection for close-ups of faces and body parts such as hands and feet recalls Godard's almost abstract, tableau-like compositions of the female anatomy in *Une femme mariée* – the film that launched Macha Méril's career. Yet whereas Godard's film indulges in a purely formal exploration of the painterly possibilities of the cinematic medium (Schmid 2019, 110–11), here the close-up is used to give full expression to the characters' most intimate states, to the fragmentation of existence, and to the heightened sense of inescapable finitude.[8] Though similarly underpinned by a painterly, plastic conception of the image, Gilles pays attention to the fleeting gestures, postures and facial expressions of his characters as an outward projection of their inner emotions. Macha Méril's subtly expressive face in particular becomes the vehicle for 'speaking' the demise of their love. As Marguerite Duras, an early supporter of Gilles's work, comments:

> Here, finally, love isn't shown from an embrace-in-a-hotel-bed. Its evocation by the face – the face of a woman fifty times repeated, but for a shadow, a glance, a contraction under the stress of the wound – is quite simply admirable (cit. in Forret, 2022a, 182).

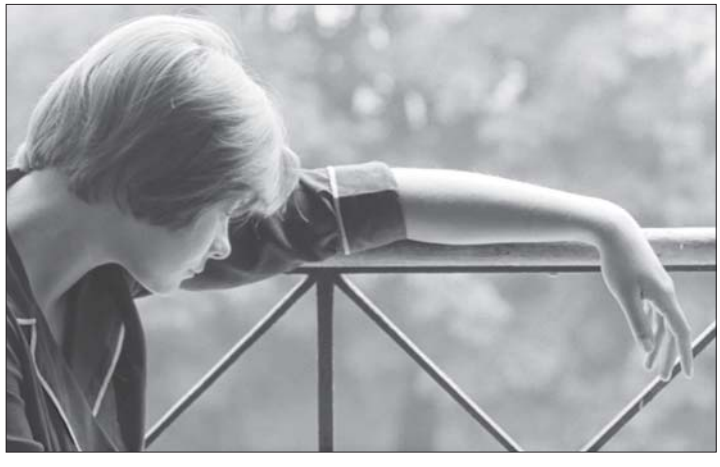

Figure 3. Gestures of Interiority (Guy Gilles, *Au pan coupé*, 1967)

About two-thirds into the film, in the sequence of the lovers' retreat to Provence, over a shot of the Mediterranean, suffused in the reddish-gold hue of the rising sun, we hear the two lovers citing fragments of poetry in voice-over. Jean's evocation of Rimbaud's 'Bateau ivre' ('The Drunken Boat', 1871), preceded by a direct address to the poet as 'Arthur my brother', places him in the legacy of the rebel-poet and former run-away, who gave up his art at the age of 23, leading a life of errancy until his premature death aged 37. His Rimbaldian quote 'The Dawns are heartbreaking' testifies to the state of lucid disillusion that has taken hold of the young man. By contrast, Jeanne's quote is an assemblage of lines from the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas's 1934 'Light breaks where no sun shines', a poem tracing the inner workings of hope as images of light break through when 'logic dies' (v. 27) and 'the dawn halts' (v. 30). Underpinned by these two opposing but magnetically complementary poetic imaginaries, the film is constructed around the tension between Jean's inability to accept the possibility of happiness and Jeanne's attempts to re-kindle his love for nature to bring him back to life.

If on the surface, poetry is called upon as a separate medium to be used in concert with cinema, to reinforce characterisation and implicitly develop themes such as death, self-discovery and the quest for freedom, it is never merely a source of citation or external referentiality in Gilles's work. Rather like in Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965), similarly shot through with Rimbaldian moments, it is a mode of seeing and of reaching, albeit transiently, authentic being, what Yves Bonnefoy calls 'presence' (Bonnefoy 2010, 136). The poetic in Gilles's work intimates a mode of (un-)inhabiting – together but on one's own terms – the world that the director intermedially re-creates in cinematic form.[9]

Textures of seeing and feeling

Poetic cinema, we noted earlier, is characterised by a heightened attention to detail, which affords spectators alternative experiences of viewing and sensing, liberated from the demands of plot. In *Au pan coupé*, as in his cinematic œuvre more widely, Gilles shifts the emphasis from shots supporting the narrative to more poetic images that engage viewers in an affective dialogue, drawing on association rather than logic or conceptual reasoning. Less preoccupied with the poetics of everyday objects evinced in works like *L'Amour à la mer* (*Love at Sea*, 1963), *Le Clair de terre* or *La Loterie de la vie* (1977), the film is attentive to the poetic potential of architectural forms that are repeatedly summoned in montage scenes devoid of human presence.[10] The sequence that recounts the discovery of Jean's body in an abandoned garden in the suburbs of Lyon is emblematic of Gilles's poetic exploration of the forms and textures of the material world. Metonymically displacing Jean's demise, the camera cuts to mournful images of peri-urban decay – a ramshackle shed, shattered glass roof, dangling telegraph poles, accompanied by a voice over spoken by Gilles himself. For a few brief moments, we seem to behold the world as seen through the eyes of Jean, the abstract shots of lines of electric wires cut out against a hazy grey sky allegorizing human destinies separated by social determinisms, but also perhaps the lovers' lives running parallel but never able to join. A similar architectural montage punctures the narrative in the later scene when Jeanne collects photos and objects associated with Jean from her flat: a quick assemblage of shots capturing the entrance hall, fissured ceiling, and a banister framed from different angles, heightened by a sudden surge of dramatic music, poignantly conjures Jean's presence through the very absence of human figures in the architectural space. 'Poetics creates (in the spectator) an imaginary world open to the senses, allowing us to experience a presence in/to the world', writes Patrick Brun in an attempt to define the poetic in cinema (Brun 2013, 12). It is precisely this presence, this making present or immediacy of the image, that is at the heart of Gilles's cinepoetics. As in Proust, to whom Gilles has dedicated a poetic documentary, *Proust, l'art et la douleur* (1971), and whose imaginary – at once mournful and salvific – is often evoked in his films, objects and places in Gilles's works preserve the traces of human existence long after those who once owned or inhabited them have departed. Connecting past and present, the material world carries a particular poetic charge in the director's cinema: not only for its stark plastic beauty, but also for its mnemonic qualities and its capacity to heighten our perception.

Halting the flow of the narrative, the architectural montage sequences invite spectators to open themselves up to the manifold textures of life, normally covered by distorting habits of seeing. Gilles gives a texture to emotion, laying it bare in its multi-layered flesh.

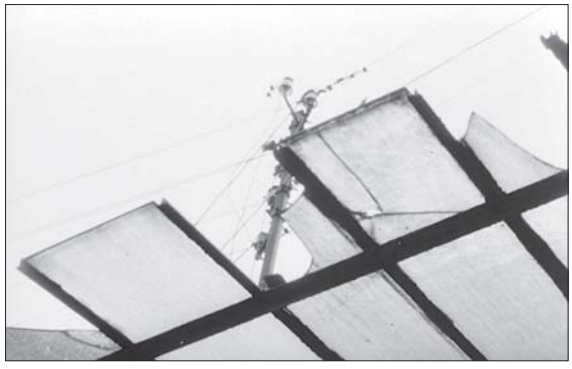

Figure 4. Architextures (Guy Gilles, *Au pan coupé*, 1967)

In the director's work the poetic is inseparable from the painterly, the photographic or the architectural, which become vehicles for poetic exploration. Just how porous these various arts are in Gilles's intermedial cinema can be gleaned from the sequence that has given the film its English title, *Wall Engravings*. Struck by the raw beauty of fissured walls covered in peeling paint, Jean encourages Jeanne to paint the textures of the walls identically as they are found in the urban fabric. When she objects that such attempts already exist in painting and even in photography – in all likelihood an allusion to Jean Dubuffet's 1945 series of lithographs entitled *Les Murs* [Walls], inspired by Parisian graffiti as well as Eugène Guillevic's eponymous poem, and to Brassaï's photographs of wall engravings and markings of the early 1930s – he retorts: 'It doesn't matter. Otherwise there's no point in writing poems either; they're already on the walls'. Poetry, then, is not confined to one – exclusively verbal – medium. In Gilles's fluid understanding of the interconnections and pathways between the arts, poetry has the capacity to migrate into other art forms such as architecture, painting, or indeed, film. This interchange between the arts is signalled at various instances in the film, for example when the drawing of a reclining young woman showcased in a cut-away shot is emulated in filmic form in the subsequent shot, capturing Macha Méril in a similar posture. Or in Méril's framing against a portrait of a young woman – in fact the portrait of Gilles's mother, which also makes an appearance in *L'Amour à la mer* and *Le Clair de terre* – which reveals a striking resemblance between the woman in the picture and the actress. Refusing any kind of spectacular images, the director seeks to convey his personal experience of apprehending the world through the expressive means of cinema: 'It's like trying to show a landscape as you've seen it yourself, trying to translate the poetry of light, a very subjective poetry that needs to be objectified' (Lépingle and Uzal 2014, 49).

Figure 5. Wall Engravings (Guy Gilles, *Au pan coupé*, 1967)

Gilles intermedial practice disenclaves the arts, showing the potential of each of them for poetic expression as essentially a form of vision conveyed through the specific properties of each medium. The director's predilection for close-ups, long takes and repeated use of blur effects – the latter giving an impressionistic, painterly quality to some of the shots in *Au pan coupé* – divests the images of their mimetic function, freeing their plastic and poetic potential. Whereas these explorations of cine-poetry and cine-plastics remain within the confines of narrative cinema in his features and documentaries, his work gestures towards abstraction in its emphasis on abstract patterns, such as the play of shadows of Jeanne's straw hat on her delicate face or the abstracted lines of the stair railing (in emulation of the photogenic shots in avant-garde cinema as set out by Epstein and Dulac).[11] Gilles was to pursue these experiments further in a film entitled *Poèmes électriques*, on which he was working during the last twenty years of his life, but which sadly remained unfinished. Stripped of any narrative, this experimental work, according to the testimony of one of his closest collaborators, Jérôme Pescayré, was to capture the lights of the nocturnal city, reflections of shop windows and luminous signs of bars, especially in the Pigalle district: 'The film's conception was quite loose, it rested only on the neon lights of Paris and people met by chance at night' (Lépingle 2005).

A poetics of the real

In Gilles's cinema, everyday reality, rather than merely being a signifier of the banal and the humdrum, is at the very source of his poetic vision of life. In the tradition of Eugène Atget and the Surrealist photographers, the director is attentive to the poetic quality of shop windows, mannequins, photo albums, and all sorts of bibelots and bric-à-brac – objects that, in the very absence of humans, capture our sometimes futile, often sentimental, attachment to material things that will outlive us (Schmid 2019, 117–20). This poetic quality is akin to buried memories that cinema can disclose, bring back to life in all their living textures. Yet the real also punctures his fictions in a more direct way in the numerous cutaway shots to documentary-like scenes that punctuate the fictional narrative. Thus, a shot of Jeanne looking out of the window of her flat introduces a sequence of images of an elderly woman sitting on a bench, holding on frailly to the backrest. The scene recalls Baudelaire's 'Les Petites vieilles' ('The Little Old Women'), one of several poems dedicated to the marginalised figures of nineteenth-century Paris from his *Flowers of Evil* (Baudelaire 1998, 181–86). Through the eyeline-match, we see Jeanne seeing, but as in Baudelaire's poetry, we become spectators of what urban modernity seeks to hide from our sight: the destitute, the elderly and the poor. In a later scene in a parc, Jeanne's eyes come to rest on an adolescent boy slumbering in the shade. A series of shots, from different angles and distances, capture the adolescent's face as he sleepily opens his eyes. Who is this boy on the cusp of adulthood? What is his destiny? What are his dreams and aspirations? We will never know, but the short sequence has afforded us a glimpse of his life and an aperçu of reality, seemingly unstaged and poetic in its ephemerality. If in documentaries such as *Chanson de gestes*, *La poésie est dans la rue* or *La Loterie de la vie*, Gilles captures the poetry of the quotidian, in brief documentary scenes like this his features also become porous to real life, which intermittently makes an entrance into the fiction. This poetic conjuring of the real goes beyond the oft-evoked documentary quality of New Wave cinema, where the spectacle of the street – though unadulterated and beguiling – tends to form a mere backdrop to the fictional plots or acts as props to the narrative arc, producing what Barthes calls a 'reality effect' (Barthes 1989 [1969]). Unlike, for instance, in Godard's iconic Champs-Elysées sequence in *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960), where the presence of anonymous passers-by – caught unaware by Raoul Coutard's hidden camera – adds to the quasi unmediated feel of the characters' interaction, in Gilles's work the documentary micro-sequences are imbued with a genuine interest in the filmed subjects for themselves.

Expanding on the photogenic moments of faces, landscapes and objects that would define Epstein's films in particular, Gilles's cinepoetics resonates with the real rather than aims at expressing or showing it through a mimetic camera eye. Jean, Jeanne, and every detail of the film are woven into

the living texture of his images, what Pierre Fédida called the 'indistinct breathing of images' (Fédida 1995, 188). The rhythm of *Au pan coupé*, whose title itself suggests a halting pattern of breathing,[12] syncopated or endowed with seeming diuturnity, slow or accelerated, is not mechanical or symbolic but is close to breathing, either anxious or elated, panting or arrested. Never continuous, the rhythm follows the characters' physical gestures, which vacillate between the mechanical and the organic, and alludes to their states of mind and shades of emotion, immediately creating an atmosphere of intimacy between the viewer and the viewed, a bond and not an injunction. Hence the use of childhood photographs of Macha Méril and Patrick Jouané shown in rapid succession and interpolated with the proper names of actors and film crew in the opening credits, bringing us closer to a stage of life that is probably the most proximate to poetry, that is, of pure potentiality and creation before conceptual thought takes hold of our perception of the world.[13] This rhythm (a sensitive montage, more caress or lyrical-like than the spectacular montage of attractions theorised by Eisenstein, or the elliptical montage propounded by Bresson[14]), is crucial to understand Gilles's cinepoetic approach to the real, through the very means of illusion embodied by the film image. Profoundly anti-ideological but situated during the heyday of ideologies (1960s-1980s) in politics and in the arts (and never more so than in cinema and poetry via the post-Marxist structuralist turn), Gilles's work, at once pure poetry and pure cinema, rejects the main ideological aesthetics of the time (formalist versus realist; avant-garde versus mainstream). Gilles playfully mixes what he finds adequate to his own vision of what cinema is, which is how he apprehends the real, fully experienced in its own being, and not in its predicates, dreams, or fantasies. Not only the real that he sees, witnesses and experiences himself, but how he sees people around him live or recount it, through their own – often silenced or belittled – stories, gazes, gestures, or everyday banter and yatter, rendered in all its raw immediacy. Gilles's cinema ushers in, celebrates even, what cinema, but also poetry, have often deemed unworthy of attention, including sentimentality and the constant flux of everyday, quotidian, banal, and therefore commonly shared, emotions.

Figure 6. Snippets of the real (Guy Gilles, *Au pan coupé*, 1967)

This reawakening, memory even, of the real through the mediation and rhythms of the everyday aligns Gilles's aesthetic with that of the poet Yves Bonnefoy. For the latter, poetry is not specific to any art (it could be found in a poem, prose, but also in a song, painting, film, landscape etc), but it is always an act of presence, a way of transgressing conceptual thinking, language and images to recover a more authentic approach to the real – imbued with what has been lost, but always itself evanescent; anchored in times and places, open to chance, but always fully aware of finitude itself, and fearlessly so. This approach is never ending and never fully achieved, being wholly bound up

with finitude, but all the more alive to social and personal existence as it is forged through a willing alliance of purpose, a common attention to the living. The rhythm of *Au pan coupé*, unique to this film as other rhythms will be to his other films but also to any being, becomes a living sign of the presence the film strives to attain, make us see, sense, and share, beyond any moral judgement or ideological grid. Jean and Jeanne's story is uniquely theirs as it could be anybody's, at a particular juncture in time, culture, language. Contrary to how many critics ascertained his films as idiosyncratic and self-indulgent, mawkish or effete, Gilles's cinepoetics – for his work is conceived at once as poetry and as cinema, intermedially fused and transmuted into the breathing / living rhythm of its images – divests our habitual gazes of their habits of seeing, judging and thinking, to make us perceive the real as it truly is, at once translatable and untranslatable, but always constitutive of a sharable moment, an evanescent, but how promising, moment of common living. As the director states in a 1968 interview:

> Cinema is a plastic, autonomous art. The image must express thoughts, feelings, sensations... A good image is more expressive than any word or sentence. Sound becomes an integral part of the image content. Proust said that everyone has a book written inside them and that the author is the one who tries to read this book and copy it. Taking up this idea, we could present the filmmaker as someone who has images inside them (images taken literally) and who, using a camera, tries to make them real. These images will then be vehicles of poetry, that meeting point between the translatable and the untranslatable (Baby 1968).

This translatable and untranslatable facet, this Janus-like dyad that seems so characteristic of Gilles's films, characters, vision, could be more simply put through the Proustian notion of 'intermittences of the heart' (Proust 1992, 174), that is, the sudden bouts of reminiscence that bring a lost person back to life, but also the painful awareness that oblivion will erode the work of memory. Having understood that Jean's journey must end in death, withering away in her turn, at the end of the film Jeanne asks poignantly: 'Jean, all is fragile, can one live on a memory?'

Towards a cinepoetics of presence

In his article 'The False Movements of Cinema', in line with Bresson's assertive remarks in *Notes sur le cinématographe* (Bresson 1975, 47-48), Badiou cautions against the idea of a genuine movement between the arts:

> there really is no way of operating the movement from one art to another. The arts are closed. No painting will ever become music, no dance will turn into a poem. All direct attempts of this sort are vain. Nevertheless, cinema is effectively the organisation of these impossible movements (Badiou 2013, 92).

Figure 7. Jean (Patrick Jouané) and Jeanne (Macha Méril) (Guy Gilles, *Au pan coupé*, 1967)

While it is indeed arguable whether there can be any direct transfer from one art to another, a director like Gilles clearly shows that an aesthetic category like the 'poetic' is in no way confined to the single medium of literature. As Bonnefoy, who shares with Gilles a similar vision of the poetic as reaching beyond the verbal sphere, reminds us: '[w]orks of cinema show in their own way that the poetic perception of the world is still possible outside the realm of literature [...] with the same intensity as *Werther* or *Nadja*' (Bonnefoy 2010, 130). In the tradition of Epstein and Dulac – who both advocated cinema as the privileged poetic medium (Aumont 1988 and Dulac 2021) – Gilles explores cinema's profoundly poetic potentialities. Jean and Jeanne, his two allegorical yet fully fleshed expressive figures of creation, become the vehicles of cinepoetics, one face turned towards the fugitive, the transience of life's immediacies and absolute revolt, the other turned towards the fullness of the living moment, the patient recording of what has been irrevocably lost, and absolute, yet unyielding, melancholy. Jean and Jeanne retrace their own steps and as they are doing so, recreating each moment for themselves, as if filming themselves endlessly, they invite viewers, on their own and collectively, to join in, to bring their own inner images, and create their cine-poems. Gilles's richly intermedial films create a porous space where poetry and cinema – but also the work and the audience – are able to fuse; where the poetic can breathe freely in narratives unburdened by teleology and plot, or by the fixities of concepts; where the world that we share, to cite Yves Bonnefoy's quote from the epigraph, can regain 'the face of its presence'.

University of Cambridge & University of Edinburgh, UK

Notes

[1] Bonnefoy 1990, 58. All translations are ours, unless otherwise indicated.

[2] See also Pasolini 1976.

[3] For an excellent overview of the interactions between poetry and film and of historic and contemporary conceptions of 'film poetry and the poetic film', see Bollig and Wood 2022. For a wider exploration of the cinema of poetry, see Sitney 2015.

[4] For the poetic in Gilles's films, see also Forret 2022a, 267–71 and *passim*, and Forret 2022b.

[5] See for instance Moullet 1965.

[6] Composed of *L'Amour à la mer* (*Love at Sea*, 1963), *Au pan coupé* and *Le Clair de terre*, three films centred on drifting young male characters.

[7] Godard's influence as a tutelary figure reverberates in other aspects of the film, not least the casting of Macha Méril, who came to prominence in Godard's *Une femme mariée* (1964), and the brief idyll of the two lovers in Provence, evoking the lyrical sequence on the Île de Porquerolles in Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965). Yet if Gilles is often compared to Godard – one commentator calls him 'a Godard with a heart' (Coppermann 2008) –, the tone and sensibility of his films are distinctly different, shaped by an acute awareness of the transience of all things.

[8] For Yves Bonnefoy, finitude is what is denied by conceptual thought or language, and what is intrinsically dependent on time, place and chance (Bonnefoy 2010, 136).

[9] For forms of inhabiting the world and the poetic in a 'cinema of the real', see Maury 2011.

[10] It should be noted that in *Au pan coupé*, everyday gestures or objects differ from Ponge's and Bresson's poetics of cinema, and from Jean-Daniel Pollet's poetic film inspired by Ponge, *Dieu sait quoi* (1994). On Ponge, Bresson and Pollet, and their more radically conceptual aesthetic of the poetic image, see Met 2019.
[11] On *photogénie*, see Thiéry 2016 and Wall-Romana 2013a and 2013b. On Epstein and Gilles, see also Forret 2022a.
[12] 'Souffle coupé' in French refers to a condition of breathlessness.
[13] On childhood as a moment of plenitude and pure presence, see Bonnefoy 2013, 129.
[14] See Arnaud 2016 and Chevallier 2016. On Bresson, see Met 2019, 43.

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