

Institute of Contemporary Arts

Movie Crush: Chick Strand's *Cartoon le Mousse* Genevieve Yue

Twenty years ago, *Film Quarterly* published a collection of 'Filmic Memories' written by filmmakers, critics and scholars. Many contributors recollect the moment when their film viewing passed from idle entertainment into something more significant. Most mention their ages: Les Blank is characteristically straightforward when he begins his piece, 'Pinocchio started it all for me in 1940 when I was four years old.' Kevin Brownlow was a lonely eight-year-old, newly arrived at boarding school, and Yvonne Rainer was a 'moody, solitary, asocial sixteen-year-old'. Chris Marker, thirty years before *La Jetée* (1962), considers the 'egoistic pleasure' of constructing his own Pathéorama viewing device, while Eliseo Subiela likens cinema to the acquired tastes of 'tango, Mozart, and red wine'. James Benning and Barbara Hammer both mention Maya Deren.

Only Chick Strand writes as though memory belongs as much to the present as it does to the past. Her piece starts like the others: 'I got my first movie crush one Sunday afternoon on a beautiful young man in a cowboy suit ...' She was eight. Then she shifts into the present tense: 'I dream of the man with the crazy blue eyes ... Depardieu in his Lou Lou clothes, I can smell that leather flight jacket ... I think of Paul lighting two cigarettes, handing one to Bette.' These aren't memories so much as visions as vivid as the day Strand first saw them, or was struck by them, and toppled head over heels. She just about swoons as stars and characters from all eras and genres sweep across her attention. 'Oh, Sabu, Ducky Louie, Mifune, Ricardo, Mad Max, Jean Gabin, Marlon in his snakeskin jacket, goofy Oscar drowning in his glass church, Tony Quinn weeping on the beach, Brakhage, beautifully bewildered when his first child is born.' Their faces shine, cry and scowl. In a single, breathless paragraph, Strand seems to pack every film ever made into one brilliant, infinitely crowded room, or a kind of cinematic heaven; that is what Strand's memory is like.

The most recent film to appear is *Titanic* (1997), which was released the year before the piece. Strand actually mentions it twice, first describing 'Jack flying on the prow of the big ship', and later, unambiguously, 'Leo and Kate'. It's as if she's daring you to admit you've seen the film and that it stirred something in you. In the piece's climax, Strand gets confrontational: 'Yeah, I'm talking to you. Confess! Surely you had a movie life before you started analysing foreign films and *Dog Star Man*, before you couldn't cop to it for fear of being thought of as not hip or a fool.' (Somehow I feel this is specifically addressed to Susan Sontag and her list of highbrow favourites from 1977, most of which seem cribbed from Anthology Film Archives' *Essential Cinema* series.)

This kind of challenge could only come from someone like Strand. She was one of avant-garde film's true cinephiles, a voracious and fearless viewer with a keenly tuned bullshit detector. With Bruce Baillie, she founded Canyon Cinema in 1961, which in its early days was a backyard gathering around a makeshift screen and somebody's borrowed projector. She did not begin making films until

her mid-thirties, when she was a mother of two. There was no money to make, no prestige to desire – Strand was proud to be ignored by much of feminist and experimental film history. ‘The older I get, the more I know I want to be totally forgotten’, she declared in a 1998 interview. Obscurity meant the freedom to ‘damn well do what I please’.

Trained as an anthropologist, she never saw filmmaking as her sole vocation, but a way of getting closer to the lives that interested her. But hers are no ordinary ethnographic films. They collapse distance, often quite literally in the extreme close-ups that flutter across her frames, seductive hints of the bodies just out of view. Strand doesn’t attempt to ‘know’ or reveal anything about her subjects (even when she has, in fact, cultivated decades-long relationships with them), nor is she concerned with the conventions by which such epistemologies are produced. Instead, she pursues something only the camera can see, not so much the essence of a person as the lyrical potential of light-lined profiles, enigmatic voices or tiny hairs softly raised on a forearm. Hers is a cinema of sensual surfaces, of free-floating desire. Like that of a greedy bird, her eye is drawn to the shimmering water of the night bathers (the effect of solarised film stock) in *Kristallnacht* (1979) and the deft hands of women workers in *Fake Fruit Factory* (1986). Much of the time the camera is so close that it can be difficult to tell what you’re seeing. The image verges on abstraction, restlessly moving in and out of focus. But had Strand taken even a half-step back, the spell would have been broken.

Cartoon Le Mousse (1979) combines Strand’s sensibility as both a viewer and maker of films. In its many images of tributaries joined together, the film suggests the unification of these ordinarily distinct modes of cinematic encounter. Arguably, it is Strand’s most cinephilic work: she uses footage from 1930s educational films and cartoons found in the archive at Occidental College, where she taught film for over twenty years. Aside from the warbled theme song from Disney’s *Snow White*, her sources are obscure, or clipped to the point of unrecognisability. From an opening compilation that cites the prehistory of cinema – the optics of the camera obscura, a horse galloping in a zoetrope, a model of Muybridge’s studies in animal locomotion – the film switches to the natural world of childhood imagination, specifically as rendered by animation. We see shots of an old house shuddering so hard the steps on a staircase jump off their frame, torrents of rain and wind, repetitively rolling seas and a circling shark. One subtitle reads, ‘rituals involving the mediation of pure light trapped in a ridiculous image’, a phrase adapted from P. Adams Sitney’s seminal text *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–1978* (1979). These are elements that would normally be relegated to the background, and in Strand’s montage, they become part of a living but undetected world. Among the few characters that do appear, there is an animated prisoner – perhaps a reference to Jean Genet’s *Un chant d’amour* (1950) – who reaches for a flower just beyond the bars of his window, only to watch it trampled by a passing elephant.

During the first section of the film – what could be regarded as its cinephilic half – archival educational footage describes a lens’s ‘circle of confusion’ (the spot that describes the sharpness of an image relative to the shape of the lens) before cutting to a shot of a man’s bare and slender torso. A hand draws two parentheses over the black dotted lines encircling his chest, suggesting the enigmatic but persistently throbbing heart of any film. This is the beat Strand tracks in the film’s second half, a gorgeous dance of barely-there wisps of light, lens flares, and silhouetted lines set, like the bodies in *Kristallnacht*, against a darkened space. The images are among the most captivating that Strand – or anyone else for that matter – ever shot. Out of the deep come startlingly crisp details like stiff eyebrow hairs, the delicate threading of a silk scarf, or the mushroom cap of a woman’s nipple. If this second section is a response to the first, it is the reverie induced by the earlier images. However ‘ridiculous’ they may be, they have turned Strand, the exuberant viewer, into a maker who understands and intimately knows the revelatory possibilities of ‘pure light’.

Cartoon le Mousse is framed by scenes of a woman in a beaded dress, presenting the show to an offscreen audience. At once overacting and apparently unrehearsed, the woman stumbles over her lines. When in the opener, she retreats to the curtain behind her, she has to step over a small object lying just beyond it. At every second, it seems like she might lose her composure, an uncertainty that must have appealed to Strand. Even if she didn’t care what other people thought of her, Strand knew full well how much it mattered to almost everyone else. Catching this woman in those off-kilter moments is, perhaps, akin to the startling ‘Confess!’ of ‘Filmic Memories’. She seemed delighted to throw her viewers (and readers) off balance.

At the start of the essay, Strand refrains from naming John Wayne because ‘it wouldn’t be cool’, though it’s not for her own sake that she holds back. Instead, it’s a jab at her close-minded and ultimately timid readers, the art house snobs who would dismiss whole styles and genres and makers – like Strand – because they don’t know how to fit them into their narrow aesthetic categories. Meanwhile, for Strand, to love cinema requires surrendering yourself to its entirety. It’s not a matter of picking and choosing, right or wrong politics, pleasure or disgust, but ingestion: it is about what becomes a part of you and what, ultimately, you need to survive. Strand ends her piece citing Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s delirious ‘Alabama Song (Whiskey Bar)’: ‘Show me the way to the next pretty boy, or I shall surely die. I tell you, I tell you I shall die!’ Forget what’s cool or uncool – in Strand’s hands, and through her eyes, film could be more alive than life itself.

This essay is commissioned for
the Machine That Kills Bad People screening
Where I am is Here, on 30 January 2019,
at Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.