



DOSSIÊ: FRENCH CINEMATOGRAPHY: FROM THE LUMIÈRES & MÉLIÈS TO VR & AI

Ecological experimentations: the films of Rose Lowder

Experimentaciones ecológicas: las películas de Rose Lowder

Experimentações ecológicas: os filmes de Rose Lowder

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is to highlight the ecological aspect in the works of filmmaker Rose Lowder. Her films are shot outdoors, in nature, and aim to modify visual perception and image-based representation, foregrounding the materiality of the filmic medium. Her filmography, characterized by its use of unique shooting and editing techniques, is remarkable for its calculation regarding creative possibilities. The parameters of investigation outlined in this study are the filmic procedures that stress the aesthetic and ecological qualities of this artist's work.

Keywords: french cinema; experimental film; ecology.

Resumen: El objetivo de este artículo es resaltar el aspecto ecológico en las obras de la cineasta Rose Lowder. Sus películas están rodadas al aire libre, en la naturaleza, y tienen como objetivo modificar la percepción visual y la representación basada en la imagen, poniendo en primer plano la materialidad del medio filmico. Su filmografía, caracterizada por el uso de técnicas únicas de rodaje y edición, es notable por su cálculo en cuanto a posibilidades creativas. Los parámetros de investigación descritos en este estudio son los procedimientos filmicos que enfatizan las cualidades estéticas y ecológicas de la obra de este artista.

Palabras clave: cine francés; cine experimental; ecología.

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é destacar o aspecto ecológico na obra da cineasta Rose Lowder. Seus filmes são filmados ao ar livre, na natureza, e visam modificar a percepção visual e a representação baseada em imagens, colocando em primeiro plano a materialidade do meio filmico. Sua filmografia, caracterizada pelo uso de técnicas únicas de filmagem e edição, é notável por seu cálculo em relação às possibilidades criativas. Os parâmetros de investigação delineados neste estudo são os procedimentos filmicos que enfatizam as qualidades estéticas e ecológicas da obra desta artista.

Palavras-chave: cinema francês; filme experimental; ecologia.

Introduction

[...] the fact that the health of life on earth is directly linked to the environmental biodiversity is one of the main reasons that led me to develop my cinematographic work with nature. In contact with it, I also came across a considerable artistic challenge: the unpredictability of the subject. So, I moved away from the description and narration so they could not absorb attention to the detriment of the sensitive qualities of the image. My intention is to give importance to the imagination arisen from the poetry of cinematographic qualities and call attention to the theme of nature, a foremost subject (Lowder, 2022, p. 127-128).



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France boasts one of the world's strongest traditions in experimental filmmaking. It has been home to several distinct movements, collectives,

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and styles. A distinguishing feature of the last few decades in French experimental cinema is the fact that artists and filmmakers are not only concerned with making new works (films, videos, installations, audiovisual performances), but also helping to establish a solid ground for the French experimental scene through the creation of institutions for the diffusion and promotion of this type of cinema. Some important figures in this recent history, such as Yann Beauvais, Jean-Michel Bouhours, Christian Lebrat, Claudine Eizykman, Gisèle Rapp-Meichler, Patrice Kirchhofer, Martine Rousset, Gérard Courant and Emmanuel Lefrant, were responsible for creating distribution companies (*Light Cone*), cooperatives (*Paris Films Coop*, *Collectif Jeune Cinéma*, *Coopérative des Cinéastes*), publishing houses (*Paris Expérimental*, *Light Cone Editions*), screening events and festivals (*Scratch* and *Festival des Cinémas Différents et Expérimentaux*), among other initiatives which currently place France as a major location in the worldwide experimental film scene.

This paper will center the work of Rose Lowder, a filmmaker born (1941) in Lima, Peru, and who has lived in Europe since the 1960s. It is important to highlight her work spearheading the *Archives du Expérimental d'Avignon* (AFEA)². Lowder founded this institution alongside Alain-Alcide Sudre in 1981, in Avignon, in the South of France, where both artists live to this day. AFEA was a research center and archive for experimental film. Lowder and Alcide Sudre have also organized film screenings and festivals in the region. Between 1996 and 2005, the filmmaker taught Film Theory and Practice at *Université Paris 1 – Pantheon-Sorbonne*. Before making her own films, Lowder studied at the *Regent Street Polytechnic* (1960-1962) and later at the *Chelsea School of Art* (1962-1964), both in England. She then worked as an editor for the British film industry between 1964 and 1972, in movies made by the BBC. Her interest in experimental film started in the late 1960s, thanks to screenings organized by the poet Bob Cobbing in the London bookshop Better Books.

Her career as an artist in her own right started in the late 1970s. She has since then made over 70 films in 16 mm. Her output is notable for its "bouquets of images", a method of composition she has named after her own films. Her cinema raises ecological awareness through its unique aesthetics. Her film style is deeply sensitive to the experience of place, specifically to its locations in France, where Lowder has lived and worked since the 1970s. Her films prominently feature natural, rural and maritime settings, as well as the elements that make up those landscapes (trees, plants, gardens, boats). The filmmaker always shoots alone and in locations near her home in Avignon, or on trips, which make the production logistics easier. About the centrality of ecological themes in her work, Lowder says: "since the state of the world's natural elements is deteriorating to an alarming degree, it seems important to draw attention to our environment, hoping the role of art is to make sensible the essential difficulties" (Ortega, [2016]). Her experimental style aims to marry political progressivism with an equally progressive film form. The founder of the *Archives du Expérimental d'Avignon* is engaged in artistic activism as ecopolitical practice. Her life and her work are interwoven with this cause. The relationship between her experimental film practice and commercial cinema is analogous, she says, to the relationship between organic and industrial agriculture. Lowder explains:

[...] to survive today in France, an organic farmer has to be much more technically knowledgeable than an industrial scale farmer. The traditional farmer will be comparatively uneducated on the whole and will have technological sales representatives come along and tell him what to do, and when to do it. To reduce the number of people working on a farm, you need a tremendous amount of heavy equipment. You depopulate the countryside; you do very little manual work; and you produce a tremendous amount of food too much, so much that you have to throw some of it away (the government pays you to throw it away so that the prices stay up). Now if you look at the organic farmer, besides having to have more education, he or she will have to do more manual work. The field will need to be dug up by hand, or by more gentle machines, three or

² The history of this institution can be found in Rose Lowder and Alain-Alcide Sudre (2002).

four times. The organic system requires that people are brought back to work on the land. Actually, in organic farming, there are more pieces of machinery, but smaller, more precise, and designed to accomplish particular tasks (Macdonald, 1998, p. 238).

Improvised composition: shooting and editing

Lowder has developed her own particular techniques of filmmaking, the result of intense empirical and theoretical investigation³. Her style is built on a frame-by-frame methodology. She assembles the films in the camera itself. Her equipment – a Bolex H16 – is very important in this sense. This camera, specifically, allows going back and forth on unexposed film, and so to shoot in any order one chooses. To avoid re-exposure of already exposed photograms, Lowder closes the shutter as the film moves on the spool while she chooses the next unexposed photogram. In other words, instead of editing the film after shooting is completed, she arranges the scenes in the very act of filming. It is a technique not unlike that of a painter in front of a canvas. When painting a picture, the artist may follow whatever order they wish. They may start from the center and move outwards, or vice-versa; they may fill out the canvas from top to bottom or the other way around. In Lowder's method, the Bolex takes on a new life as a paintbrush for visual experimentation. The image is made complex through combinations of different photograms; in other words, filming becomes a system of composition. She defines her own style as "improvised composition" (Lowder, 2015, p. 17). When a film shot in this manner is projected, it creates a rhythmic experience of light, color, and expressive movement. This manual process is perceived as an intensive accumulation of visual qualities. One of these qualities is a flicker effect, which film theorist and curator Philippe Alain-Michaud describes in an interesting manner: "in the flicker film, shot frame by frame, projection is no longer a recons-

truction of the recording: perception of the real, discontinuous *défilement* replaces the illusion of continuous movement" (Michaud, 2014, p. 139). For Lowder, however, plasticity is what really matters, not the flicker effect (Delgado, [2018]). The real presents itself to the filmmaker-artist in a way that is similar to the work of a painter. In her opinion, "the advantages of this way of working are that it allows you to develop ways to interweave frame by frame, a variety of images taken at different times in different places (Murari, 2017, p. 38). The problem is that this method makes the act of creation much more meticulous.

The visual model created by Lowder engages directly with the mechanisms of perception. Film technology creates the illusion of movement thanks to the phenomenon of retinal persistence, which consists in the ability of the human retina to hold on to an image for a fraction of a second, even after it has been replaced by another image. The speed of several frames per second at which a film is projected obliterates the individual existence of each frame. Cinema, generally speaking, uses this optical "defect" to enforce a degree of transparency and realism on the spectator. Image movement is synthesized by the brain due to a psychic (not optical) phenomenon discovered in 1912 by Max Wertheimer, which he named the *phi* phenomenon: "if two stimuli are placed before the eyes in different positions, one after the other in rapid succession, observers will perceive a single stimulus moving from the first position to the second" (Machado, 2014, p. 34). Rose Lowder's style, however, does not rely on such psychophysiological "failings", but on the small units from which visual experiences are built. The filmmaker explains how she arrived at this particular style:

One of the reasons I started to work that way was that I had studied certain problems in perception. We have two eyes, but the camera has only one eye. I'd looked into the different stereo processes, which try to create volume artificially. I'm not trying to do that. If you put a camera in front of a scene and let it run

³ At the invitation of French ethnologist Jean Rouch, Rose Lowder submitted part of her visual research as a PhD dissertation at the Université Paris Nanterre (previously known as Université Paris X) in 1987. The work was titled *Le film expérimental en tant qu'instrument de recherche visuelle* ("Experimental film as a tool for visual research").

normally, what you get is something which is visually poorer than if you you'd been sitting looking at the scene yourself. You've got two eyes, so you experience volume; and you're aware of a lot of things which would normally be outside of the film frame: when you're seeing a film, you're in a dark room where all your other sensory input is cut off, and you're looking at one isolated little rectangle out of all there is to see. It seemed to me that if you wanted to create, not reality--that's not interesting at all; you might just as well see reality--but if you want to make a work of film art that is as rich as what one is used to in reality, you have to enrich the film image somehow (Macdonald, [1997]).

Theorist Peter Gidal (1989) identifies her work within the tradition of the materialist film. What makes Rose Lowder's work unique among other materialist filmmakers are her themes. Her filmography concentrates on "aspects of the reality" (Lowder, 2015, p. 13), that is, the world in all its natural diversity. Even when shooting in urban spaces, she emphasizes ecological elements. Other filmmakers who worked systematically within a frame-by-frame methodology, such as Peter Kubelka, Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, and Tony Conrad, to name a few pivotal artists from the 1950s to the 1970s, tended to privilege metaphors for the cinematic apparatus itself as subjects. Lowder attributes her preference for "reality" to the fact that she grew up in South America, where interaction with the environment is more direct, in her evaluation (Macdonald, [1997]).

The first film she made using the frame-by-frame method was *Les Tournesols* (1982), a visual study of a sunflower field. It was made entirely using this technique. Its entire runtime is three minutes, but it took four hours to shoot. The recorded units follow the flowers in a zig-zag motion. The monomorphic structure is repeated but reveals a reality in development. This way of filming creates an impression of vivacity in the flowers. Although the camera is still, the frame pulses with the condensation of time. The result is a hypnotic experience in visual rhythm. *Les Tournesols* was shot in Arles, in the South of France. This region was meaningful for several avant-garde painters. Artists like Paul Cézanne,

Pablo Picasso, Paul Signac, and Vincent van Gogh painted landscapes inspired by nature found in the area. The filmmaker acknowledges her indebtedness to this artistic heritage (Lowder, 1995, p. 147). Since the 19th Century, many artists have labored to develop graphic and plastic means to manifest the surface of the canvas. It should be noted that Rose Lowder's first creative outlet was in the fine arts. She started painting when she was nine years old (Macdonald, 1997; Murari, 2017). She studied painting and sculpture at the *Escuela Nacional Superior Autónoma de Bellas Artes del Perú* (1957 - 1958). Being the daughter of British parents, she moved to England to further her education. At the Peruvian art school, one of her main themes of interest was *plein air* painting. The experimental film style she has developed furthers the pictorial aesthetics of the landscape, but in film form⁴. French filmmaker and curator Yann Beauvais (2018) comments on this influence on her filmography: "Rose Lowder continues an impressionist tradition: working in nature rather than in the studio; like Cézanne, working on site is the sine qua non condition in order to reveal the 'little sensation' and represent it".

In her film *Impromptu* (1989) Rose Lowder focuses exclusively on three trees in a poppy field. All inanimate objects, but the aesthetics of the landscape manage to energize the image. The location and the framing are always the same; only time varies. The alternating moments make natural substances such as light, shadow, and wind produce visual modifications inside the frame. They make the botanical elements generate expressive movements. The result is defined thusly by Scott MacDonald (2001, p. 85): "it is as if the time-condensed imagery of the tree reveals the remarkable but normally invisible energy of photosynthesis". Lowder first shows her filmed landscapes under the aegis of her technique, and then in the traditional manner. In this sense, the film invites the viewer to rethink perception, to come up with different strategies for looking at experimental film and at nature.

⁴ The film Lowder made following *Les Tournesols* is called *Les Tournesols Colorés* (1983). The original footage is appropriated, and its colors are reworked, generating different visuals.

When we look repeatedly at the same environment, during different moments of the day or of the year, our understanding of this environment changes drastically. *Impromptu* was shot in the South of France, in three locations: at the Fort Saint-André, in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, and in two communes in the department of Vaucluse: Carpentras and Brantes.

Quiproquo (1992) deals with the convergences and divergences between the environment and industrial society. The opening sequence is a symptom of this relationship: a man is shown in a river, walking upstream with great difficulty. In the bottom of the frame, a swan allows itself to drift with the wind. The following scene shows a plastic bottle and litter on the ground. The filmmaker isn't concerned with erasing the traces of human intervention, but with showing how nature and culture are intertwined. Scenes swing between one pole and the other. On the side of industry there are shots of nuclear plants, factories, cars, and trains. On the environmental side, we see trees, gardens, flowers, and rivers. These elements sometimes share the same space, and sometimes are shown separately. Lowder (2011) explains: "*Quiproquo* is a dialogue on the balance to be found between nature and social-industrial technology [...]. It is a question of limits and possibilities, the beauty and tragedy of the world, with a critique of contemporary society's dominant choices constantly in the background". This film was also shot in the South of France, in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, more precisely at Mont Ventoux and in the Berre-l'Étang commune. In this film, her method of in-camera composition is responsible for some of the most striking images of nature to be found in all her vast filmography. Katie O'Looney's electronic score is in dialogue with the oddness of both image worlds.

The *Bouquets* series, made up of over 40 works, is a good synthesis of her aesthetics. It was started in 1994 and comprises films with a duration of one minute. They are all silent and were all composed

in-camera during shooting. The first images in *Bouquets 1-10* (1994-1995) are about the diversity of the natural world. They show landscapes filled with flowers, rivers, trees, forests, and waterfalls, usually located in the French region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur. The frame-by-frame technique intercuts these nature shots with scenes of everyday life. This results in an accumulation of visual information. The editing organizes the material as if it were a garden. In this series, Rose Lowder privileges natural environments. Colors are highlighted in rich interactions. A few seconds of dark screen form the transitions between each film. Even the titles cards showing Lowder's name, year of production and the film title, are shown as isolated photograms, using a flicker effect. Her style intensifies not only the experience of space, but the very configuration of filmic time: "There is the time of filming, the time of the subject that is filmed, the time of the film's duration in its projection, and what is most important in relation to the work: the time perceived or felt before the screen" (Lowder, 2022, p. 125).

Figure 1 – Stills from the series *Bouquets 1-10* (1994 – 1995), by Rose Lowder



Source: Images available on the Light Cone distributor website.⁵

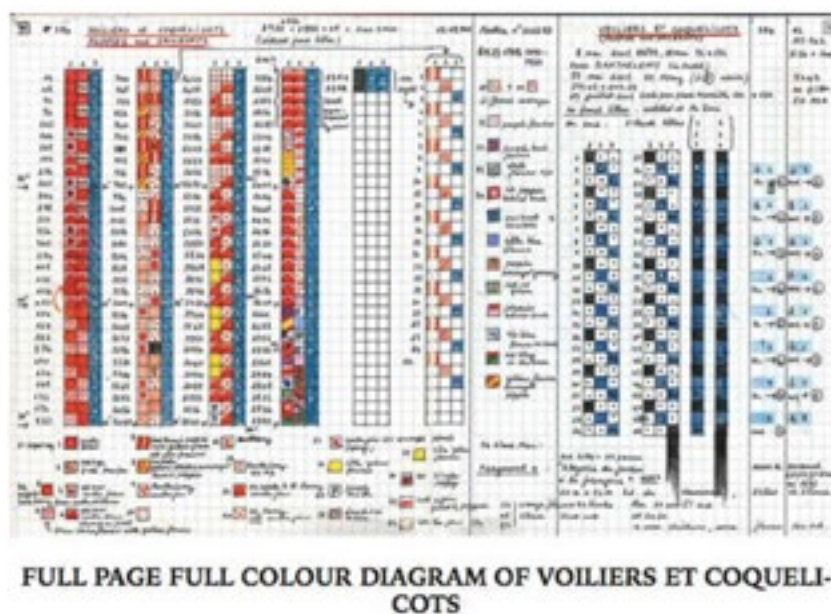
⁵ Available at: <https://lightcone.org/fr/film-920-bouquets-1-10>. Accessed in: Aug. 29, 2023.

The experimental notebooks

Rose Lowder's notebooks are a great resource for understanding the frame-by-frame method she has developed. They are filled with handmade drawings, graphs, and charts. The filmmaker uses two types of notebook. The first type is for jotting down field notes on the shooting process. Once a film roll is entirely shot, the information written in pencil on the graph is copied to the second notebook using black and colored inks, making it easier to consult. This second notebook features detailed descriptions of the final images, in an analytical transcription scrutinizing the techniques utilized to arrive at the results. Lowder identifies specifics (number of rolls, frame rates, transitions, durations), numbers each shot,

determines the location and duration of the gaps between sequences and describes the content in the material. It is a process akin to scientific observation: data transcribed into a system. Each page corresponds to twenty-four frames, which, in turn, correspond to one second of screentime. For each minute of film, the notebooks render 1440 photograms. As her film career progressed, her annotations grew more sophisticated: "I needed to know what I was doing when I was shooting and also be able to check later what had been done" (Lowder, 2015, p. 18). The filmmaker uses this material mainly as reference points for her work, but she also shows the notebooks during lectures and courses, as a way of displaying the complex materialist structure present in her films.

Figure 2 – Rose Lowder's notebook



Source: Images available on the Light Cone distributor website.⁶

Final thoughts

The style developed by Rose Lowder explores the potential for an ecological cinema. The filmmaker draws on the legacy of the visual arts and the experience of growing up in South America to record landscapes through meticulous methods of creation and composition. She comments about it:

I was born in Miraflores, in the province of Lima in Peru, and I lived there all my childhood and teenage years. During that time, I pursued many outdoor painting courses and made several trips across the Andes, equipped with the necessary to paint landscapes. If I take the environment as a subject in my films, it is because very early, as I walked along the peasant paths in the Andes Mountains, I understood the importance of our relationship with the environment (Lowder, 2022, p. 126)

⁶ Available at: <https://lightcone.org/en/film-2855-voiliers-et-coquelicots>. Accessed in: Aug. 29, 2023.

Her technique does not aim to hide the 16 mm film stock, but to reveal the potentialities of visual experimentation. Lowder's cinema explores the mechanisms inherent to the film apparatus, manifesting the aesthetics of the landscape in a register that's alien to the human eyes, thus inventing new ways of seeing. In this sense, her instrument, the Bolex H16 camera, is no mere recording device, a "window into the world", but a place of indeterminacy for the sensible universe, that bears witness to a direct grappling with the world, especially her southern France settings. Lowder does not wish to mimic reality, but to transfigure reality. Although most of the shots are figurative, the results rob the image of representative function. She explores with it how physical (during shooting) and psychic (during screening) perception takes place in the film medium.

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