

# Small Paths, Complex Stories

*by Madeleine Bernstorff*

**Rêves de Ville** directed by  
Dominique Cabrera, France 1993, 26 min.





## Les trois cousins (The Three Cousins)

directed by René Vautier, with Mohammed Zinet, France/Algeria 1969, 20 min.



by Madeleine Bernstorff

The French militant film director René Vautier was born in 1928, fought in the Resistance in Brittany as a teenager and made the first French anti-colonial film, *Afrique 50*, in 1950. His *caméra citoyenne*—the citizens' camera which also formed the title of his autobiography<sup>1</sup>—took him from the IDHEC film school to the dockers' strike in Brest where the young union activist Edouard Mazé was killed. Vautier shot a film about the incident on 16mm reversal stock called *Un Homme Est Mort* (A Man Is Dead), the only copy of which

was shown on the streets and at meetings until it finally disintegrated after 40 days. He was sent to Africa in the same year to shoot a film for the Liga d'enseignement, but soon came into conflict with the colonial administration for his views on forced labour and colonial exploitation. His friendship with resistance activists contradicted the 1934 Laval Decree, regulating all film recordings in colonial francophone Africa. "We practically allied ourselves with the dissidents. Out of professional honesty and because the censorship was just so stupid.... I think what gave me strength during this period... was

anger." Equipped with 60 rolls of black and white film and a small 16 mm camera, he faced numerous hurdles and endured confiscation and condemnation in order to make *Afrique 50*. The film could only be shown and discussed unofficially in film clubs, and did not receive an official stamp until the 1990s. In 1958 René Vautier directed *Algerie en flames* (Algeria in Flames) with the support of the East German DEFA documentary film studio. The filming was preceded by discussions with Frantz Fanon and the FLN strategist Abbane Ramdane on the boundaries between committed solidarity and



**Le glas** (The Death Knell)  
directed by Ferid Dendeni/René Vautier,  
Algeria/Rhodesia 1964, 5 min.

the propagandistic functionalism of political filmmaking. Vautier was the first director to film the bombing of civilian refugees near Saket Sidi Youssef in Tunisia. In the post-production phase, Vautier's supporter Ramdane was killed when he got caught in the front line of the FLN battles, and Vautier himself was held prisoner in Tunisia for two years. In 1969 Vautier worked on the development of *Les trois cousins* (The Three Cousins) in cooperation with Algerian immigrants and the actor Mohammed Zinet. The film is set in the *bidonville* of Nanterre, based on a real event. "They weren't initially overly enthusiastic about the idea of putting their problems on film, and they wanted to avoid one thing above all else: being *miserabiliste*." Three cousins—Faruk, Hamid und Mohammed—set forth for Algerian Paris, the Paris of the *bidonvilles*, in order to find work. "There's no need to show the misery in order to convey how we live. We don't need any sympathy." The cousins' deaths by strangulation in their barracks is based on authentic events.

René Vautier's programme for an activist cinema took the following form: "Write the story in picture—now, straight away! Take the side of the underdogs!" Vautier cooperated with ZAPU (Zimbabwe African Party for

Unity) to make the film *Le glas* (The Death Knell) in 1964 under the name Ferid Dendeni, which he had adopted while a prisoner in Algeria. The film tells the story of three African freedom fighters who were executed upon the order of Ian Smith's white Rhodesian government. This visual requiem lives from the paintings and the African sculpture which represent the colonial power, from the voice of the Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambety, and from a Black Panther funeral march.

Whether to intervene or to record? In *Le remords* (Remorse) René Vautier plays a filmmaker who has initially decided to hold his tongue. When he witnesses everyday racism in front of a café in Lord Byron Street, he seeks to purge his guilty conscience at a friend's place by trotting out all manner of excuses and justifications. But he announces his intention to make a film about the incident nevertheless, although there would be reason enough not to, he claims, but in five or ten years, he fully intends to take

that risk, stating, "It will be a masterpiece, an accusation, a cry for help!... I will make a film about the fact that I was not able to take action now." Vautier wrote in his autobiography, *Caméra citoyenne*:

*Where is the history of censorship recorded? Or that of self-censorship? Nowhere, undoubtedly. When I gave this film script to a few actors I know, asking them to play the role of the director, they all chickened out: 'you must be joking René, I can't do that to my director; I can tell it's supposed to be him, he would take it really badly.' Yet each actor interpreted it as an accusation against a different filmmaker! After all that I played the role of the director myself... 20 years later.*

<sup>1</sup> Vautier, René,  
*Caméra citoyenne: Mémoires*,  
Rennes, 1998.

**Le remords** (Remorse)  
directed by René Vautier, France 1973,  
11 min.



**Aubervilliers** directed by Eli Lotar, script by Jacques Prévert, music by Joseph Kosma, France 1946, 24 min.



In the summer of 1945 Luis Buñuel's onetime cameraman Eli Lotar filmed the industrial Parisian suburb of Aubervilliers, with its waste incineration plants, improvised housing, and employees in the chemical industry who had suffered caustic soda burns. Pierre Laval was the mayor for 20 years, during which time he had "promised heaven and earth—modern, sunny and cheap housing, running water, a model school and nurseries." Pierre Laval was the originator of the colonial Laval Decree and was executed in 1944 as a Nazi

collaborator. The film presents the squalid living conditions alongside Jacques Prévert's comment, "Everything must change!" The film uses animated montage to recap on his perspective of living and working conditions and the promises of modernity.

The *Deutsche Wochenschau* newsreel from occupied France in August 1940 deals with the "squalid quarters in Paris, the so-called 'city of light'", with the intention of making 20 years of French democracy appear disreputable. This is directly followed by a report on a model

German housing estate with large numbers of blonde children on show, a "homestead for workers who use their brows and their fists", as the commentary goes.

**Deutsche Wochenschau**  
no. 521/36/1940, 4 min.







**Prises de vue** (Archives de la planète)  
France 1912, 8 min.



**Les événements au Maroc** (Pathé)  
France 1907, 9 min.

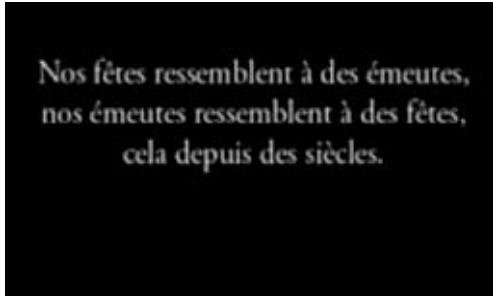
In 1907 the Algerian-born cameraman Felix Mesguich brought the Pathé film company some material showing the start of the French intervention in Morocco. He later wrote in his 1933 biography *Tours de manivelle: Souvenirs d'un chasseur d'images*, "When we arrived the city was smoking and under fire. A naval unit escorted us to the French consulate, where we hunkered down. I filmed as some troops moved through the deserted streets, strewn with foul-smelling corpses which had attracted clouds of flies. Then I filmed scenes from the camps of the Algerian colonial soldiers and the foreign legionnaires." The only surviving copy of *Les événements au Maroc* from the Finnish Film

Archive bears the fragmentary Swedish title *Ruins in Morocco*. The camera follows the conquest of the battleship *Gloire* and the rocket attack on the city, from the burning ruins through to battle zones in the country's interior. The invisibility of the enemy at the staged parades and battle scenes is balanced out by the repeated appearance of a photographer who records the colonial demonstrations of power.

The pacifist banker Albert Kahn and his employees had been putting together the encyclopaedic collection of images entitled Archives of the Planet since 1912 with the goal of documenting "the surface of the planet inhabited and shaped by mankind at the start of

the twentieth century". To this end, photographers and filmmakers were sent all over the world. Autochrome colour photographs, stereoscopic plates, and approximately 180,000 metres of film from 48 countries were assembled in the Musée Albert Kahn. They comprised *vues*, uncut material and multi-perspective shots of everyday life. The *prises de vue* contain pictures showing a camp with colonial troops in the background, in front of whom are manual workers digging trenches. In the foreground are a group of women cooking, selling, trading—rare images of the market sellers and supply staff who accompanied the skirmishers and colonial soldiers.

**Carnet d'un arpenteur** directed by Michel Ganozzi, Christophe Pornon, Jérôme Leguay, Natacha Flandin, Raphaël Kuntz, France 2006, 44 min.



*Carnet d'un arpenteur* (Notes of a Land Surveyor) tells its story from the microperspective, taking the ZUP (zone à urbaniser en priorité) of les Minguettes as an example through which it attempts to decode the implications of the urbanist *banlieue* policy.

*The status of the little things seems to result naturally from the role they play in the real actions of the land surveyor. They underpin the political view of the banlieue*

*as a battlefield where an attempt has been made for the last 30 years to chase away an unwanted section of the population—the poor, of whom a great number are immigrants or have an immigrant background. Feeding from the collection of 'small things' and from the everyday habits is an overriding framework which is evoked at the end of the film: 'They are the problem of the banlieues; we are the solution to that problem.'*

(Statement by the film's authors in 2008)



### Maskan Al Rijal/

### Le logis des Hommes

directed by Larbi Bennani, Morocco 1964, 20 min.



### La Fugue de Mahmoud

directed by Roger Leenhardt, Morocco 1951, 32 min

The teacher in *La fugue de Mahmoud* takes the tale of Maurice, a truant from the Parisian *banlieue*, as the starting point for his narrative on Mahmoud ("I won his trust") from the Mid Atlas Mountains. Maurice and Mahmoud represent two sides of the same problem. "He was probably looking for work. He was certainly wandering through the giant "barrack estates" which have spread out like oil around modern, white Casablanca.

How could he know that squalor is not only at home in small, isolated villages, and that it is possible to go hungry despite huge machines." The colonial educational film was commissioned by the Ministère de l'Agriculture.

An educational process is also taking place in *Le logis des hommes*. A young family moves from the countryside to a *bidonville* which is soon to be demolished (the accompanying

commentary states how, "with powerful blows they demolish the barracks they had built with their own hands."), and is given new council housing. "Soon the white houses spring up which are fit for modern mankind."... and the husband prepares a meal for the working woman, "And the city spreads out to the point where a last image of rural life remains."



The singer Mohamd Mazouni and the Algerian/French band Les Abranis from

## Trésors Scopitones Arabes, Kabyles Et Berbères

directed by Michèle Collety, Anaïs Prosaïc,  
France 1999, 52 min.



In a Scopitone called *Clichy*, Mohamed Mazouni, a dandy of the Algerian Yé-Yé music scene, sings of working on a building site in France. Scopitones were visual 16 mm music "videos" which were produced especially for the jukebox in French Maghrebi cafes in the 1960s and 1970s. A great number of them dealt with the theme of migration. "Tell my aunt that I'm tired of the building sites. I'm fed up of building streets for the godless. The boss is always picking fights with me, he has no respect. And unemployment is spreading like a plague. The answer to us Arabs is always no. We're not taking anyone on, you're too late, the boss isn't there right now.... Oh, why isn't my name Bernard!"



**Rêves de Ville** directed by  
Dominique Cabrera, France 1993, 26 min.

Dominique Cabrera's *Rêves de ville* presents a montage of the viewpoints of the inhabitants of high-rise blocks on the Val Fourrée estate contrasting with staged shots of the official representatives and their visions of urban development. The residential high-rises were demolished in September 1992.



It was an article in the Moroccan literature journal *Souffles* about the experimental urban portrait *Six et douze*, made by MA Tazi, Ahmed Bouanani and Adelmajid Rechiche in 1968 and produced in the Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM), which also provided the inspiration for the title of this film series, *Small Paths*. We were literally telling the stories of paths, alleys, dirt tracks and even building boards, and by extension what connects these diverse locations



**Six et Douze** directed by  
Abdelmajid Rechichem Mohamed Tazi,  
Ahmed Bouanani, Morocco 1968, 20 min.



and eras—how modernism circulated in Europe and North Africa in the period before and after Morocco's independence in 1956. Cinema was an integral part of this colonial development, forming the lines of conflict between urbanisation programmes and informal construction. The individual programmes in the *Small Paths* film series interwove the stories and images concerning the narrativisation of colonial and migrant urban spaces. The film programme also provided an opportunity for hegemonic and oppositional film languages to come together. The films, which were sourced from film archives in Morocco and Europe, grant us historically accurate access to the non-simultaneity of colonial and migrant, local and international experience which criss-crosses the chronology of the colonial and post-colonial.

*Machines and skyscrapers. The masses. An anonymous stream. The well-regulated order, flanked by yellow barriers and loud advertising. Cellular organisation. Businesses, company signs, gimmicks. The land of contrasts. Yes, that is definitely the case, at least what we were allowed to film. On no account the bidonvilles. No filth. No shoe cleaners. Only what is decent, or tourism would suffer. Yet everywhere the camera approaches, a sign appears. A call. No exhibition. Everything is fine. People eat, they play, they travel. The climate remains the same. Difficult.... This is not some futuristic city. No science fiction here. The person is from 1968. He accepts, he keeps on rolling forward, he functions, he consumes in line with a silent code. Sanctioned without any interjections. An Occident made of bric-a-brac. Octopus-like. Sanctioned, continued and glorified. Airless, voiceless*

*alienation. Swallowed greedily. On the other side, small paths leading to the general filth. Wedged in. A place to stay for the everyday exile leading towards the craft of subservience.... This is the spiritual and physical atmosphere between 6 and 12.*

This visual essay is based on the film programme *Small Paths, Complex Stories* by Brigitta Kuster and Madeleine Bernstorff which accompanied the *In the Desert of Modernity* exhibition in September 2008. Research was conducted in the following archives: Centre Cinématographique Marocain in Rabat, Cinémathèque de Bretagne in Brest, Archives de la Planète/Musée Albert Kahn in Paris, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv in Berlin, Kansallinen audiovisuaalinen arkisto in Helsinki, Forum des Images in Paris. With thanks to Elsa de Seynes, Lamia Chebbi, Ana Hoffner, Kamal Mouline and René Christoph.

Translated from the German by Nicola Morris