
The story, such as it is, is a vaguely autobiographical one about a young man who briefly met the eponymous Sylvia in a Strasbourg bar six years previously. (In real life, Guerin returned to Strasbourg 22 years after the initial encounter.) He has now returned to the city in the hope of finding her, or at least seeing where his obsessive return to their meeting will lead him. He sits at a café, follows a woman whom he mistakenly believes to be Sylvia, and revisits the bar where he encounters another woman. End of story.

Guerin, who introduced the film when it screened at the Hong Kong Film Festival recently, said that he wanted to take narrative and character psychology out of the film, so that the audience would be forced to concentrate on gesture and the processes of watching and listening.

The nameless protagonist, played by Xavier Lafitte, spends most of the film simply watching women. He is equipped with lightened contact lenses so that he appears to be a pair of shining eyeballs. The erotic power of looking is clearly important here. Women repeatedly stare down from advertising posters, returning his look, and challenging that of the camera. When the man has a sexual encounter with the woman he meets at the bar, all we see are the two looking at each other. We don’t see them having sex, or perhaps we do in this exchange of looks.

It is, of course, one of the banal commonplaces of bad film theory that movies are all about voyeurism, particularly male voyeurism. Guerin is clearly interested in this proposition but also in going beyond it to explore the ways in which looking is a vital part of our spatial orientation to the world and to the cinema. The opening sequence, in which the central figure sits at an outdoor café looking and sketching, becomes a rich forest of glances performing a multitude of functions.

The astonishing thing about the scene is the way it sustains and varies itself while little or nothing of narrative interest occurs. The man barely speaks, and only shifts position once, though in the minimalist context of the film, be assured that this is a moment of some excitement! He mainly looks from place to place, inviting us to look, really look, at the images.

My emphasis thus far on looking risks devaluing the importance of the soundtrack, which provides a primary means of interpreting the denseness of the physical environment. As the man follows the woman he thinks might be Sylvia through the labyrinthine alleyways of the city in the middle section of the film, we start to concentrate on the sound of trams, street musicians, bottles rolling on the pavement—the everyday transformed.

These are all sounds which would normally be relegated to the peripheries of our attention but as Guerin puts it: “When the figure disappears, the surroundings appear.” The lack of dialogue and non-diegetic music focuses attention on the soundscape. At one moment I was shocked to hear non-diegetic music fade up, until a car drives through the foreground, and with a sudden shock of recognition, you see that its radio is the source of the music. Guerin uses devices such as this explicitly to draw our attention to the interaction of picture and sound.

A drunken old woman sits on the footpath and kicks away a bottle. Some time later we return to the same framing, and though the old woman is now absent, we hear someone off-screen kicking over a bottle. There is a thrill of recognition here. Passersby in the street start to appear as choreographed performers and recurrent characters, such as an African man selling odds and ends, take on the significance of a chorus.

The effect is something like Jacques Tati’s masterpiece Playtime, in which the world is made strange and wonderful by the play of form. It is a vision of a world transformed not merely by male desire, but rather by looking and listening closely—by cinema.
When I suggested the comparison with Tati to Guerin (who also teaches at the Pompeu Fabra University in Spain), he accepted it enthusiastically. He is that rare type of filmmaker—certainly if we compare him to most of his Australian counterparts—who speaks knowledgably about a wide range of films. There are rich echoes of Hitchcock’s Vertigo here too, not to mention Chris Marker’s Sans Soleil.

The film is often screened (though unfortunately not in Australia) with its companion piece/predecessor, Some Photos in Sylvia’s City, which began as a video journal kept by Guerin. The resultant piece is composed entirely of still images in the style of Marker’s famous La Jetée. This totally silent, black and white film is something like the sketches which the protagonist scribbles in the first sequence of Sylvia. It is at once a blueprint for the latter film and in a kind of dialectical opposition with it.

While In the City of Sylvia remains resolutely within the minimal nature of its story, some Photos in Sylvia’s City uses intertitles to establish a didactic comparison with the motif of the male artist’s obsession with women in the European literary canon from Dante to Petrarch to Goethe. In Guerin’s latter film, the down-scaled version of this literary precedent becomes the graffiti “je t’aime Laure” (the subject of Petrarch’s passion) repeatedly spray-painted on the walls of Strasbourg.

Guerin’s triumph is the transformation of urban space into an eroticised aesthetic space through a rich variety of artistic practices, including writing and filmmaking, but in both instances, a world transformed and animated by desire.

En La Ciudad de Sylvia [In the City of Sylvia], director, writer José Luis Guerin, 84 mins, 2007; 32nd Hong Kong International Film Festival, March 17-April 6, www.hkiff.org.hk/eng/; screening in the Sydney Film Festival June 8.