

CONVERSATION WITH PIERRE COULIBEUF

How was born “Balkan Baroque” ?

The story of the film wasn't first a relationship with the work. My first meeting with Marina wasn't with Marina-putting-on-a-performance, but with Marina as a woman. Straightaway I was attracted by a personality and a character. I saw and understood immediately what I could do with her, cinematographically speaking. For me, Marina was potentially an actress. She had a very striking physical presence and in front of the camera she was able to maintain that very very strong presence.

This is where you've drawn closer to fiction.

That film isn't particularly documentary or fictional. I see film above all as a search. Working with film, in a certain relationship with contemporary creative work, and the visual arts specifically, but literature as well, and music and dance. In a project that cuts across artistic disciplines. In a creative way, in a project opening up artistic practices. What can you update by comparing artistic practices, what unknown thing can emerge from such encounters between film and the other arts ? I use the expression “Becoming-film (devenir-film) of the visual work”. What interests me is how to shift from one world to another, from a visual world to a filmic world that's totally original and independant in relation to the other, but in a relationship of many different kinds of chords with it.

Have you still held on to your subjectivity ?

I've had to, or rather I've had to fight to cling on to it because, as I just said, when you “confront” (in the combative sense) other art worlds, what often happens is a real clash between individuals with their own interests, practices, protocols and work habits, projects that are quite personal, and so it can be quite violent, this kind of encounter. There's lots of tension, but this is the price you pay for producing something new. It's invariably a matter of making a film that belongs to the cinema — I hope — something that hasn't been seen before — which is neither documentary nor fiction in the traditional sense, nor experimental cinema, to take all the categories in the “system” — which is a kind of quest with the cinematographic instrument.

As far as the making of certain “difficult” scenes in the film is concerned — I'm thinking, of course, of the scene with the razor blade... — did you rehearse these scenes several times ?

It's clear there's a take involved here that couldn't be shot twice. We knew long before shooting the scene that we had just the one chance. We had to totally anticipate everything that could happen, so we could do it in the best possible conditions. It was a high risk scene for the cinema. Something can always go wrong. That's why you usually have several takes, and here there was no way we could, from the outset.

Did the performance force the filming ?

It forced it to a maximum rigour and maximum risk, yes. Because, despite all the precautions you can take from the technical angle, there can always be an accident on the part of the artist turned actress in front of the camera. It's tricky, because she really does what you see, there are no special effects, and I think you feel that in the film.

And yet you're not capturing a performance.

No, not at all, because she repeated it under the conditions of a film take, with cinematic framing and lighting. It was a lighting system I'd devised at the start, for a cinematographic working method, in front of a camera, whereas performances are on the whole put on in front of an audience. We're dealing here with a specifically cinematographic space-time concept. The performance turns into a role, Marina is a "performer". She plays the part of the artist putting on a performance. In the film these particular images are like mental pictures, like the imagination of a performance, or the remnants of one in a performance recollected, in what may remain of it in the memory. So it's a pure image, it's become a pure film image.

In the film we feel an enormous pleasure on your part, as director.

Yes, but you must also sense a lot of tension. It's true I was a bit stressed-out on that shoot, and the "confrontation" I just mentioned was real. We weren't always on the same wavelength, in fact there were two levels of subjectivity, each one hooked up to an idea about the film being made. In relation to her vision of things or what I had in mind for it, it's obvious that I was slightly in the background, I was a bit out on a limb, and I think she sensed that, wittingly or otherwise. In any event, she sensed it, and that's what created quite a high level of tension on the set throughout the shoot.

Some scenes are pure document, in spite of your subjectivity.

A non-documentary film "documents" things in a different way. This is why I always say that the best document you can have of a work is a new work made on the basis of the first one. There's still the example of Godard's film *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, which is perhaps one of the finest films made about suburban life. A lot of fiction films in the history of the cinema are in the end of the day much better documents about certain subjects than actual documentaries that have been made about the same subjects.

Yes, because Marina's scenes here are live, and they're filmed in a way that's close to being documentary.

No. Marina's "scenes" are acted out through a cinematographic vision ; they're adapted for the film, and not merely recorded or represented. All these images, needless to say, were shot in a studio. The artistic action is mixed in with the "performance" of an actress ; it's become an imagination and an attitude. Because my project was never to record Marina Abramovic's artistic work, but first and foremost to make a film constructed with, among other things, this type of imagery. In this sense, *Balkan Baroque* can produce a "documentary" effect...

In Marina's case, there's not just the idea of making a film, but the idea, too, of getting a character across, and telling a story. The story of the Abramovic character.

The project is straightforward enough. It's a chronologically structured autobiography, like a long narrative made up of more or less significant events and, at the same time, in the evolution of this autobiography, the film brings out a certain number of things imagined or represented by Marina herself. During this autobiographical narrative, she imagines herself at moments in other identities. Any autobiography would be impossible from this angle, it would always be imaginary after all. In this movement to "recapture" the past, in

this kind of anamnesis or return of memory, there was no way you couldn't dream and "perform" your own life. Gaps are filled in, there are things overlooked, and these gaps are filled with pure self-representations. In other words, in Balkan Baroque fantasy is mixed into the chronological, factual autobiography, using a process that's really quite natural. Fantasy and imagination interrupt and shatter the chronological series of events.

Did you suggest making a chronological narrative to her ?

She suggested it to me. When we decided to make a film together, she told me about Biography : "I've got this performance, I tell my life-story..." The idea behind all my films is "documentary", in the sense that I always start from reality or from a convention. They often involve making a portrait. What might a portrait of Marina Abramovic be like?

She was the first woman you'd worked with.

It was the first time I'd worked with a woman artist. Several months after we met, I got in touch with her. I told her that her proposal to make a film using her world interested me. First, I interviewed her on tape. I asked her to recount her life, to try and bring out some original material, every which way — material which I could have reworked later, and which might have given me ideas for scenes and takes... but we gave up on that. I decided against that methodology pretty soon, in favour of the chronological, autobiographical narrative which seemed more interesting to me. I started to think about the film's structure, and that factor suggested a rhythmic thing, even before getting into meaning.

What suggestions for images did you make to her ?

Fantastical images, above all, shot in the home, in particular. Everything that wasn't shot in the studio. First we drew up a listing of performances together — those that would inspire the images made in the studio. And I suggested a certain number of quite different images to her, based on life rituals. I wanted to have attitudes that might form a "life aesthetic", where artistic rituals would almost blur with everyday life rituals (in the dining room, gym, kitchen...). The artist should be part of life, there shouldn't be any separation, and all the activities in Marina's life would be ritualized in the film. To the point that you no longer know what stems from the performance and what doesn't. So everything's performance and nothing is ; above all, you see a sequence of roles and attitudes. What was important for me was not the performances but the rituals.

Marina as a little girl, Marina with her parents...

Yes, that too. All that thoroughly amused her. I suggested a game, because I always suggest games to artists. Artists like games. Art really is a kind of game, so she was interested by my game, and she wanted "that" game. A strong desire to be the actress, the star, and she acted wonderfully throughout the shoot.

You act too, and you enjoy it.

Manipulating images, representations, yes, you really get the impression of manipulating a character, all the more so because Marina couldn't be aware of everything that was going on. So between us there was a sort of pleasure-pain-suffering thing, very weird, very tense, very dangerous and, at the same time, like in any dangerous game where you risk a whole lot, there's pleasure. It's true that there was a risk attached to doing this. What's

more, she does video-performances, she directs herself, so I found myself at an extreme point where I'd never been before. I was in a high risk situation.

Yes, and at the same time there's no voyeurism.

There's no voyeurism because what you see is never realistic. My intent isn't realistic, my aim isn't to film blood in close-up, or film violent actions in close-up, or force things from that angle. I don't try to ill-treat the viewer, or put him/her in a painful state, or even shock him/her. We have to get back to the formal principles of film : we're always at a distance. There's one formal principle that's very clear : frontality. The camera is frontal, head-on, and fixed ; it's the character who changes in the shot. Conversely, it would have been possible to film some of Marina's attitudes in a very violent, very brutal way, by playing on the maximum impact effect, as she herself may sometimes seek it out in her art performances. It's true that Balkan Baroque has an aspect of "stylization". What it constructs are rituals — life rituals — and what typifies these latter is cold — but intense, very intense cold.

The hair scene, with the hair brushes going every which way...

This image plays on both sides : it's imagery with a disjunction. At the same time it refers to a performance, to things artistic, and it refers to things private, like Marina in her dressing room. It has to do with a boundary, the two images are overlaid : the artistic image and the private image. The film is constructed in this way. Another example, the meal with the gold balls : this particular ritual refers, obviously enough, to the artistic ritual. It was really my basic idea. Marina didn't at all imagine what I could get out of the house. I look at working with an artist in this particular sense. In the film, the artist introduces a vision of the world — his/her artistic work —, but I ask him/her to give it to me to produce it within the perspective opened up by the film project. So the artist has to agree to relinquish his/her work, so that another artist, with a different means of expression, takes it over and lends it a different existence.