



L'Origine de la tendresse and other tales: The World According to Shorts

Director: Various
(The World According to Shorts, 2008) Rated: N/A
US theatrical release date: 30 May 2008 (Limited release)

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Worlds Apart

The people you've been before
That you don't want around anymore
That push and shove and won't bend to your will
I'll keep them still.
—Madeleine Peyroux, "Between the Bars"

"My mother lived in a city washed by the sea, but she never went bathing. She looked at the sea from afar." As remembered by Felipe Canales (and narrated by Farida Hamak), her mother appears in a still photo, gazing from a shore. The image, however illustrative and even nostalgic, is also impressionistic, allusive. "Ma mère: Histoire d'une immigration" ("My Mother, Story of an Immigration"), Canales' 15-minute contemplation of her mother, an Algerian living in France for most of her adult life, is comprised wholly of black and white photos, moments frozen in time that speak to the inexorable process of time, telling a story of loss and resilience, adjustment and resistance.

"Histoire" is one of six French shorts gathered together in *"L'Origine de la Tendresse" and Other Tales, for The World According to Shorts*, which runs through 5 June at Cinema Village in New York. The collection, programmed by Jonathan Howell, offers a range of experiences, including fiction, animation, and documentary, mixed up, discrete, and intersecting. Canales' film is part nostalgic reverie, part rueful remembrance, as much about daughter as mere, and yet barely a peek into a family making sense of its dislocations and immersions. Focused through the immigration of her parents, Zehira Talantike and Ahmed Hamak, from Algeria to Paris, the short explores possibilities as it excavates facts—dates and documents, photos and more photos. Zehira's move to join her husband in 1956 is marked by a snapshot of the couple in front of the Eiffel Tower, an image conventional and also poignant. She brings along the filmmaker and her three brothers, then "has five girls after me," in successive years.

While the film's narration mostly feels observational, even removed ("The living room is the TV room, where all problems are solved. There are always lots of people with lots of problems to be solved"), it also slips occasionally into something like poetry, whether setting up typical-seeming family tensions ("My parents speak Kabyle when they don't want us to understand") or recalling childhood homes: a stay at a convent has the six girls wearing strings on their wrists to distinguish them from the "abandoned children," as they wait each day for their mother to retrieve them; the move to an apartment produces this resonant memory: "The windows look out on the housing development as if I came from nowhere." As a group, the children are defined even as they seek to make their own meanings, Canales suggests, "We live in a world apart. Outside, France, inside, Algeria."

Oblique and insightful, "Histoire" recalls the difficulties of her mother being Algerian in France (Canales and her sisters rebel by dating French boys, the tensions and burdens inherent in Zehira's arranged marriage don't become clear to Canales until much later, following years of resentment, argument, and strained communications). The fiction that begins the program,

Guillaume Martinez's "Gratte-papier" ("Pen Pusher") imagines the chance start of a romance, between a young woman (Gaëlle Brunet) and man (Benjamin Bellecour) dans le metro. Each reads a book, and as they steal glances at one another, they begin to communicate by underlining words and phrases in their books. The eight-minute film hints at the pair's building mutual interest by approximate point-of-view shots, words on pages, eyes seeking and pretending not to seek. As tentative as their curiosity may be, the film's deft rhythms—almost rocking with the train's movement—are simultaneously seductive and ironic.

Another sort of indefinite relationship is suggested in "Je suis une voix" ("One Voice, One Vote"), directed by Jeanne Paturle and Cécile Rousset, which uses simple-seeming animation under audiotaped ruminations on democracy by two politically active individuals, during the run-up to the 2007 French Presidential campaign. Comments from Martine, who came of age during May 1968 ("I don't see my political involvement as a duty. It's something that's in my blood"), are juxtaposed with those of Arnaud, whose investments might be described as less intense ("I went to demonstrations to be with my friends," he says, "I never knew what they were for"). The drawings indicate their looks and movements—Martine in a large orange sweater, working at her sink, Arnaud with headphones, listening to Martine's voice as he contemplates meeting her ("She's wrapped up in politics, she likes using political words"). Martine holds fast to her commitment: "What I call a participative democracy," she says, "listening to people in order to change their reality. It's not only words. It's very doable."

Olivier Bourbeillon's "La Dernière journée" ("The Last Day") reveals the effects of another sort of generational shift, documenting the closing of Schneider and Co.'s power hammer on 1 July 2005. The three-man team who worked it describe their experiences with the hammer ("I could tell you it was a hard job. Indeed, the heat alone, the direct contact with the heat") and one another ("More than anything, it's teamwork, everything is synchronized"), while brief, hazy, evocatively mobile images suggest not only the huge size of the hammer (used to produce metal parts), but also the difficult labor involved. The warehouse housing it is cavernous, the walls stained, and the hot orange blocks of molten metal: each component carries its own literal weight, its own metaphorical significance. Amid the apparatus and architecture, the men become additional mechanisms, even as they walk away from the hammer at film's end.

Two fiction films close out the program, "L'Origine de la Tendresse" ("The Origin of Tenderness"), directed by Alain-Paul Mallard, and Alice Winocour's "Kitchen." In the first, Élise (Isabelle Nanty), a museum attendant appears among her work environment (statues white and looming, huge classical heads and abstract figures), and then in her apartment, washing her lonely plate, deciding to rip up a chain letter (the punctuating sound comes, very effectively, from off-screen, after she's spent long minutes reading the letter, pondering its dire-seeming warnings not to break the chain). During her days, Élise listens patiently to stories of romantic travail told by her coworkers, seeming genuinely mystified by their efforts to please and keep male lovers. Surrounded by emblems of an increasingly automatic and isolating culture—banking by phone, escalators and elevators, a prisoner's wife having trouble communicating with her husband—Élise is by turns durable and vulnerable, getting through her days by sheer will.

This film's exquisite compositions—stark interiors, evocative portraits, a lingering shot of diurnal debris tapping gently at the top of an escalator—set up Élise's eventual, more or less titular question: "I've given much thought, without finding any solution, to the origin of civility and of tenderness." The notion serves as apt bridge to "Kitchen," which has a woman (Elina Löwensohn) faced with cooking lobsters for her man (Bernard Nissile). Spending the day in their white-white apartment with the creatures, she is increasingly vexed by the project. Unable to stab them outright, she tries other means of killing the two writhing, black-green forms, from blender to electrocution in the bathtub. Each attempt (or contemplation of an attempt) is rendered in gorgeous, grim images (see especially her long, painful minutes spent on her perfectly tasteful sofa, lobster at opposite end).

Each provocative in its own way, these shorts all circle around the concept of communication. However difficult, the exchange of desires, complaints, and generousities remains imperative.