



JEAN PAINLEVÉ

Feet in the Water

Exhibition Texts



Introduction

An internationally renowned filmmaker, Jean Painlevé (1902–1989) specialised in scientific documentaries and cinematic techniques. Associated with the avant-garde, he used cinema as a tool for exploring and revealing mysterious and unknown aspects of living organisms. His descriptive and informative account of his work accompanies the spectator, while the images constantly switch from full-scale observation to microscopic analysis and back again in most of his films. Painlevé's films were produced in close collaboration with his life companion and collaborator Geneviève Hamon, whom he met through a fellow student, Geneviève's elder sister, Maryvonne Hamon. Geneviève Hamon assisted him in the late 1920s and early 1930s and was officially credited as co-director from 1960 onwards.

Painlevé quickly became well known and his work featured in the illustrated press of the 1930s, contributing to his notoriety. Between the wars, his work was screened outside the scientific domain in avant-garde cinemas and film clubs. His playful spirit and non-conformist attitude were undoubtedly the driving force behind his lifelong engagement with documentary cinema. The ease with which he moved between scientific and artistic fields most probably sprang from his close friendships with artists such as Jacques-André Boiffard, Alexander Calder, Ivan Goll, Fernand Léger, Eli Lotar, Pierre Naville, Pierre Prévert and Jean Vigo.

From the 1950s onwards, Painlevé and Hamon produced a number of research films while they pursued their personal work enriched by the advanced research of the zoologists and biologists with whom they worked. The exhibition focuses on four major aspects that showcase the specificity of his oeuvre: the foreshore as his terrain of predilection; the scientific and pedagogical approach; the links with the Surrealist movement; and the cinematic dimension, with the role of movement, rhythm and dance as a characteristic and motif. This exhibition places Painlevé's work in a historic and scientific context, revealing the strength of his poetic images and their resonance with the period in which they were made. It also stresses how important film was to Painlevé, who believed in using it as a medium to transmit knowledge for tuition and popular education.

The Foreshore

The foreshore, the fringe between earth and sea, alternately covered and uncovered by tidal waters, formed Painlevé's initial field of exploration. It was with the modest means of a makeshift film studio in the Hamons' family home, *Ty an Diaoul* (The Devil's house), at Port-Blanc, Brittany, that Painlevé, assisted by Geneviève Hamon and camera operators such as André Raymond and Eli Lotar, shot the first ten films on marine fauna. His oeuvre is composed of over two hundred films, of which twenty are documentaries for a broad public. They cover a range of familiar creatures, such as crabs, shrimps, sea stars, urchins and hermit crabs, which inhabit the shallow waters of the rocky Breton coast.



Painlevé's style of documentary cinema is marked by an organic vitality obviously inspired by scientific films. Produced independently, his public films, halfway between art and science, bring to light a range of contrasting qualities presented as complementary aspects of the same reality leaking into each other, like a *visual osmosis*: the interweaving of the visible with the imaginary, the unknown with the enlightened, the recognisable with the microscopic, the still photographic detail with the moving images of mobile macroscopic organic bodies.

Scientific Objectivity

In its early years, cinema was used as a tool for exploration and observation, recording the movement and evolution of living organisms at different scales, graduating from a microscopic level to astrophysical dimension. This enlightening macro and microscopic vision promulgated by film irrevocably changed public interest in documentary cinema. As science and technology became progressively familiar, notably due to the industrial growth affecting all levels of society during the twentieth century, the moving image also became an important educational tool. Using slow motion, time-lapse and other micro-cinematographic techniques, Painlevé and Hamon plunge the viewer into a realm of organic life and strange bodies.

The use of light, scale, rhythm and abstract forms in perpetual motion are all prominent factors in their work, which reflects their insatiable curiosity and experimentation with film. This section highlights research films as well as educational ones. Commissioned by zoologists, mathematicians, physicians and medical doctors, this work covered a wide range of subjects echoing the rapid advance of scientific research and technology from 1927 to the late 1970s.

A Political Surrealism

Among a whole network of avant-garde artists, photographers and filmmakers who were close to Painlevé in the 1920s and 1930s, a few were members of the dissident branch of the Surrealist movement. Although Painlevé himself never actively engaged in any political movement, he nurtured close friendships with many artists and believed in film as a tool for education and a means of expressing critical thought. Painlevé contributed significantly to establishing international organisations for the promotion of scientific documentary cinema and as a filmmaker he engaged with issues of his time. For example, his most politically evident work, *The Vampire* (1939–1949), shows scenes from Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) edited into his own footage of a blood sucking bat, which can be read as a metaphor for German Fascism.

In addition to his firm stand against a certain type of commercial cinema, the resonance of his work with the avant-garde lay in his ability to obtain a form of abstraction, imbuing his creatures with poetic and fantastic realism. Painlevé filmed animals outside their environment and mixed macroscopic scale with microscopic details that introduced a



form of abstraction. His hybrid documentary and poetic style combined educational information with images of his 'protagonists', those living organisms that were impossible to stage and direct. This is the point of friction that may have intrigued the avant-garde, and the Surrealist movement in particular, the most. Painlevé justified his cinematographic work through the important role of film in scientific experimentation and education. In this sense, he wanted his work to be 'true to life' or proof of reality. Or as Patrick de Haas puts it in his book *Cinéma absolu*, 'Film is the most realistic art there is, pure art ... Film works with raw material: real things.'

Astonishing Dynamics

'It is obvious', writes Jean Painlevé in the undated text 'Formes et mouvements dans le cinéma scientifique' [Forms and Movements in Scientific Cinema] kept in the filmmaker's archives, 'that movement, which is specific to cinema, adds a grace or astonishing power to forms... Simple or complicated, the lines and rhythms are recorded like a form of the eternal. It is one of cinema's missions to communicate to man what is most ineluctable and cosmic about this evocation of Nature.' Other than scientific research itself, studying and recording movement through film were probably Painlevé's greatest source of inspiration. Cinema fascinated the avant-garde because of its capacity to convert different scales of time and space and to render them perceptible to the human eye.

After the Second World War, Painlevé's work expanded into several new areas: he filmed works by artists such as his friend Alexander Calder and gave lectures all over the world. He pursued work on microscopic organisms and aquatic fauna, supporting research by over twenty scientists. The colour films of the late 1950s and 1960s that Painlevé and Hamon made for the public were inspired by early research and used old and new footage of urchins, jellyfish, shrimps and starfish. In the 1970s, alongside his work as a scientific filmmaker, Painlevé notably made a film on liquid crystals, which, with its abstract forms in perpetual motion, is similar to experimental cinema of the time.