

A Little Escapade

"What's the point of inventing stories when reality is already so unbelievable?"¹ This is the question that a prisoner asks Nancy Houston, and upon which Jean-Charles Hue, along with his Mexican and Gypsy protagonists, ponders. "A little escapade"² is the borderline that he criss-crosses with them. In the films he makes, he tells stories by venting the languages and phrasing of Gypsies. He moves forward with equal ease in orality and writing. Going beyond the self is adjusted to the body's ordeal. Death is invariably flirted with in a situation of constant danger. "All these black gloves make us a real team, with a bit of uniform shared... That way death will be better than ever if it comes without consideration. Seeing us, death will say to itself that those people are people who know, they will not go off like vagabonds... One way among others of showing that one doesn't go up there totally unwittingly."³ For some years now, Jean-Charles Hue has been sharing colourful moments of life with a Gypsy/Yeniche (Jenische) family. He had himself "adopted" by the Dorkel family, in a quest for his own roots, and not knowing how to find them. Regularly spending time with this family on society's fringe became like a breath of fresh air in his life. Five films have been made so far: *Quoi de neuf docteur ?*, 2003, *La BM du Seigneur*, 2004, *Perdonami Mama*, 2004, *Un Ange*, 2005, *Y'a plus d'os*, 2006, plus a full-length film in 2010 which borrows the earlier title *La BM du Seigneur* and the plot of *Un Ange*. Jean-Charles Hue introduces us to worlds kept to one side, and which keep just as intentionally to one side. "A traveller must only ever reproduce himself between travellers"^{*}, grumbles Maurice in *Un Ange*. Closed, impenetrable circles which the artist ventures into, spends time in and uses. He reveals their harshness and frankness, and clings to the tipping moments of a reality involuntarily gripped by embellishment. A real familiarity and proximity are called for to grasp the overspill: being there, being of it and reacting instantly at the precise moment. Joël Bartolomeo emphasized the whole grip of anticipation in the making of his family films: "When there's a storm, things heat up on every side, you can cut the atmosphere with a knife. If you feel there's going to be a storm, you get the camera ready. From then on, you anticipate the movements and you frame things based on that."⁴

Jean-Charles Hue applies this anticipation and himself regards his films as somewhere halfway between the documentary, for the exploration of an environment, and the family film, in the proximity it introduces. He mingles interpretation and the real situations which step up the intensity and verge on fiction. He also remains off screen, but the protagonists sometimes seek out his agreement in their untimely exchanges. He only rarely takes part in their conversations, and even less so in their altercations. He is a witness who nods his approval when necessary, relaunches or at times supports and at best hails the smallest. In *Quoi de neuf docteur ?* Maurice, at the wheel of his car, in close up, excitedly describes an escapade in the woods and his terror in the face of some unidentifiable fluorescent green marks which grow larger as they are approached. An animated and whimsical narrative which verges on the fantastic, but all of a sudden the tone changes: "Charles, put your camera down, the cops are behind us....I don't have a licence... If they try and stop me, I'll have to crash into them... Charles put your thing down..."^{*}

The image slows down slightly. The cop on his motorbike overtakes the car. Maurice immediately steps on it, he gets rid of his apprehension and instantly regains his gusto. In a sequence shot, the camera records the narrative of an old escapade, the direct rise of a tension that is as quickly defused. Past, present and future all jostle together for Maurice, based on Saint Augustine's conception of time in his *Confessions*. "But what now is manifest and clear is, that neither are there future nor past things. Nor is it fitly said, there are three times, past, present and future; but perchance it might be fitly said, there are three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future. For these three do somehow exist in the soul, and otherwise I see them not: present of things past, memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation".⁵ Life passes by like a succession of clashing, malleable emotions. Maurice plays with his nieces, teases his pitbull bitch and by night poaches rabbits which are blinded and petrified, and killed before they can possibly get away. The blood does not flow, it drips, spurts, and bespatters Maurice who grabs the remains and gets them to say, like a ventriloquist's dummy: "What's new doctor?" The blood is also that of the dogs killed with a knife in *El perro negro*, 2009. Captain Angel Soto, in Tijuana, in his watch tower on the border between the United States and Mexico, deals the death blow to the roaming dogs run over by vehicles, and puts an end to their pain. He listens to this song which tells of the death of the black dog and a crime of passion. The captain brandishes a knife made of pitbull bone and, as he wipes off the blood soiling the blade, declares: "A dog doesn't eat another dog, it kills it".^{*} Armed with the knife, he follows the dog: "After its death, this dog still goes on killing other dogs".^{*}

Reincarnation is under way. The electoral campaign of Jorge Yank, mayor of Tijuana, who has his eye on the governor's job in *El Puma*, 2009, walks through a bull fight. The bull's carcass is being cut up, the dismembered flesh bleeding. This time the blood lies on the ground in puddles, impregnates the butcher's clothes, stains his skin. The camera mingles the colour of the blood with that of the colour of the campaigning mayor's leather jacket, pointing out that his hands are dirty, too. *El Puma* is also a love song, the syrupy melody of an "executioner of hearts". Flesh takes over this film. The candidate's reception happens as if on a generous and overflowing young woman's bosom. The camera makes out the bull's remains between the legs of another sensual silhouette. In these last two films, Jean-Charles Hue introduces an element of fiction: the knife made of pitbull bone. Angel Soto and Jorge Yank take turns to hold it in their hands and embroider their tale using effects of transmutation. The knife comes from a previous stay in Monterrey in Mexico, which gave rise to the filming of *Pitbull Carnaval*, 2006, with dog fights as backdrop. Mario and his wife, who are pitbull trainers, deliver their conception of life, divided between violence and ardent love. The promiscuity between man and beast is experienced as a sharing of destinies. The blood spilt reveals the sacrificial dimension of Jean-Charles Hue's filmography, which borrows from the litany.

In *Un Ange*, 2005, the very first rabbit poaching scene is repeated, the way the trigger is squeezed, the final images of *Quoi de neuf docteur?* At daybreak, this time, in a fairer hunt, the creature is surprised in a frenzied and syncopated escape and snared in a private residence, killed and retrieved by a child weaving between nettles over the gates to the

property. The hunt is a collective one, involving breaking and entering, and the gang of kids looking after the rifle is delighted by the sustenance improving the usual daily round. "We've got a rabbit, we've got a rabbit!"* A girl violently grabs the booty. We hear, in voice-over: "She was crying because she was never on camera."* Judging by the message, it is evident that Jean-Charles Hue is thoroughly adopted by the community. The recognition of membership in the clan proceeds henceforth by way of the proof of enrollment. "Are you filming?"- "Yeah, I'm filming."* She sticks out her tongue while brandishing the trophy and hops up and down, conscious of finally having a part to play. In this world of grown-ups, the camera skims the ground, clinging to the dogs' muzzles and the children's faces. The film opens with a rainbow in a reddish-brown, Eden-like colour which magnifies the rubble on the ground. But the untimely exchanges immediately challenge any vision of paradise: "Hey! Wanda, I'm going to smash your face! - The old woman wants to smash his face, the old woman does. - As for you I'm going to put a bullet in your leg."* This verbal joust is re-examined in the full length film *La BM du Seigneur* and the rabbit hunt is replaced by a rodeo through the caravans. In *Un Ange*, Fred is filmed five years on. The film, split in two, starts again, this time around, with the view of a puddle splattered with light in a directional reversal of the camera. Jean-Charles Hue films in circumvolution, in reverberation, in low-angle shots, as if sky and ground were parabolas. He shows us in different ways what he sees in different ways. What might be akin to desolation is transformed by the way he sees things. Beauty is captured in the raw state, with nothing mawkish about it. Breathing and traces of life are immortalized. Grass, flowers and the gravel of wasteland plots which he skims stand out and acquire greater breadth. Seen from below, obliquely, Fred's physical metamorphosis and weight gain, and the way his belly spills over, are dumbfounding. The camera weaves its way, recording daily life in the caravan. It clings tightly to the episodes of the daily round which are ordinary for them and extremely colourful for us. "Huge men don't hesitate to go anywhere. They distort themselves when asked by contracting their muscles which stretch the sides of their bodies."* A laconic voice on TV comments on an animal report where the reds and greens illuminate Maurice's captivated and candid face, just as he has painstakingly rolled a joint. This commentary could just as well have accompanied the images filmed by Jean-Charles Hue, of Fred and an extra flexing their muscles with electrical discharges. The editing of the two independent scenes is dovetailed. The animal and the human share the same world and the same fate. Then an evangelical church gathering dispenses entreaties and hooting announcing the film's switch. At the back of the congregation, Fred is aware that he is being filmed. Seeing the camera, he opens the window and a whiteness comes over the image, a stylistic effect, an annunciation. It is time for his own confession. But he addresses his clan and not this praying gathering. His voice over recites the questions and the answers and is imprinted on his diaphanous face. "I'm waiting for someone. - Who are you waiting for?... I can hide you if the cops are looking for you - He looks at me, and says: No, I've got nothing to hide... And one day there won't be anything to hide any more."* Fred is surprised by the particular way this intriguing stranger talks. "In his gaze nothing scared, no fear."* This statement merges with the translucent white appearance of the dog which has already appeared in the film, from which just the eyes tinged with invocation piercingly emerge.

The flash back is interrupted. Fred is sitting in the caravan, the testimony carries on in live speech. He addresses his nearest and dearest and forces respect, through his unexpected transformation which is re-enacted. "I push him and say to him: Go away! – Would you really like people to do to you what you've done to me?"* The disappearance of the man encountered has something mysterious about it, tinged with the wit of the person who does not let himself be immediately carried away by the metaphor. The sky, an evocation of "something up there" is firstly for him an airplane actually passing overhead. "In the sky, at evening time, we see an airplane pass... From the airplane, you know, you've got a big spotlight in front. – The light, that's where I'm going!" A last piece of somewhat significant information before obliteration: "He said to me 'I'm catholic'".* In this somewhat unlikely conversation and conversion there soars a belief where the realism of the ideas goes beyond the incarnation of a faith made to measure. Fred's earlier words in the film bounce back: "I'm not a true Christian yet, I'm starting to go towards the Lord, I'm doing my utmost...". Fred is immediately put in his place by his brother who turns his dogged brutality, violence and racism back against him: "Fred: I'm doing my utmost all the same, brother. – Maurice: You're only doing your utmost."* With the narrative of the appearance of this Angel, the film aims at the quest for a redemption which is still only temporary.



Y'a plus d'os, the next, and very short, film, actually once again crackles to the point of a fit of unbridled violence. The remission is postponed. It is night, a fire splutters, it is a boozy evening. It could be a party, apart from the fact that real bullets are being fired and the soundtrack backfires. Lethal orders merge: "There you've got instant death, buddy, it's a P38."^{*} The over-excited atmosphere puts the finishing touches to a settling of scores, where masculine honour is at stake. "Who's the guy? That's him!" The camera is not there to unravel the matter, but grasps the way the scene takes off. The woman comes forward: "What have you been doing since this morning, drinking your dead people's wine cellar?" It is a question of extracting the father from the revved-up bunch, it is a question of a sick child. "Who thwacked him with his dick?" The invective is somewhat futile. "You've got a dick? - No I don't have a dick!" The man roughed up by his family entourage is escorted by sidekicks swearing and singing canticles in the same tone, shocked at the insult to him. He denies the suggestions of the hysterical woman who is beside herself. Maurice screams and looks for his gun. Fred, for his part, very tipsy, has gone beyond words. Armed with the P38, he casually aims at the woman, the way you shoot a rabbit willy-nilly. Then all of a sudden the gun is turned round. The bullet skims past the camera and the artist. Jean-Charles Hue interprets this slip as a warning.

Fred is giving him a lesson. The Gypsy life is not risk-free. There's a price to pay. Stealing, the main lucrative activity (Maurice and Fred are filmed at night stealing metal from a building site) regularly ends them up in prison, where they negotiate their day-to-day life with the guards. By way of another "dick" joke, dunked in a cup of coffee by a guard, and despite five and a half years of a sentence served, and eight more to come, Fred recalls good times had. But even more to the point, getting offed is no less imaginable than offering someone. The artist is indebted in his search for adrenalin, paying with his own person. He too has to "pay his due" through his own fright by leaving the comfortable place of the simple witness without ever being touched. The camera records this unforeseen thing, the explosion of the powder, this unexpected infiltration of reality, an almost ejaculatory blast, because with Gypsies you're not just a simple "guy", but "my buddy" (in French "ma couille", meaning ball, testicle). There are also luminescent streaks, final drawing before the twilight and last likely glimpse of life, privilege of whoever has the luck to glimpse death and come back unscathed to talk about it. From that inconceivable extreme instant, which could not have been acted like that, Jean-Charles Hue will take an un hoped-for photograph. Here again, Fred's words, trying to decode the Writings of *Un Ange*: "Their death was just the payback", take on depth. Fright always postponed but inevitable in the end of the day.

In the Gypsy/Yeniche films, the protagonists evolve without Jean-Charles Hue necessarily introducing the course of the narrative. The camera records, held at the shoulder, and sometimes set down somewhere, in the middle of the scene, on a table or stand. The Dorkels tend to forget about him, wrapped up in their own ideas, in the heat of the action. Jean-Charles Hue slips in and does his thing in a given context. He grasps and chooses the moments of slippage, excess and overspill, confession, take-off, and entrancing stories where the part of humanity and vulnerability is highlighted more than



the debasement, in spite of a shell apparently up to any ordeal. In the following films, on the other hand, he directly provokes situations. He makes his way into the underbelly of Tijuana in Mexico and tries to penetrate the nightlife of Utrecht in the Netherlands, the better to transcribe its vibrations and negotiate behind his camera the compatibility between his world and theirs. He carries a knife made of pitbull bone to Tijuana, an object ready for creating legends, and in Utrecht he wants to link back up with tattoo fighting practices, which happened in Paris in the 1950s. He attempts a transposition. He senses the atmosphere of the places where addicts, dealers, prostitutes and outcasts hang out, he locates and engages people who will become his characters, without really removing them from what they really are. These people are inclined to fuel his promptings with their own stories, in arrangements set up which, nevertheless, thanks to the author's suppleness, deal with improvisation and thus the unforeseen. The last mexican films called for Jean-Charles Hue to make a prolonged physical plunge and involvement. No question of getting out of it and going home after a shooting session, while being thoroughly aware of being the only person to have a return air ticket and consequently being the only person capable of leaving. The onomastic series *Yvon*; *David et Angela*; *Angel*, made in 2009, is a tribute to every candidate whose closeness he shared. The film's title tallies with their first name, even if Nancy Huston, in *L'espèce fabulatrice*⁴, again, reminds us of the fictitious share that this nominal attribution hides. Impossible not to have in mind the reference of *Un Ange*, in this repetition. The other two titles, *El Puma* and *El Perro negro* come from metaphor. The heroes are endowed with the strength of the animal they describe, and given the role of hunters looking for a prey.

In *Angel*, the knife hanging from the ceiling of a motel room releases a fluid into the middle of the room, and means it has to be walked around at every move. Nothing to do with the switched-on electric saw in Leo Coppers's installation *Electrical chain saw*, 1997, which is hung from the ceiling and attacks a beautiful parquet floor. The potential protagonist-less danger has no currency here. The mixture of fiction and experience in Jean-Charles Hue's films concertinas the effect of reality. The "magic knife" is drawn on the actual wall by Angel, identically. It is he who thus incidentally names it and contributes to the story being written together. Yvon's healer does it. The knife is painted on his truck associating canine and human backbone. After telling the tale of his first murder, using a knife, to escape from a sexual attack, the blade pointed at the end of his arm tracing out the space opposite a petrified Yvon, Angel looks out over the city of Tijuana, from a roof terrace: "I can't fall in love with life... because I'm already engaged to death: And with the knife still in his hand: "You see it's like this dog, it's lived a given moment, but now it's dead." His friend retorts: "No, it's still alive because people use its bones to defend themselves, cut up food, or gut a fish. That's the secret. This bone is still alive because it's useful. These bones, the death of the dog..."*. The dialogue drifts towards assisted reincarnation. "For a transplant, you give your heart just as you die, and it's transplanted to someone who needs it to live. It goes on living. It lives in order to protect you." Then Angel says: "Part of me will go on living when I'm dead?" His friend continues, emphatically: "Of course, that's the legacy. That's what creates legends. D'you know what a legend is? A legend appears..."*. And the life that catches up with him is what is likely to tip over into imminent death. "If I die in this coming year, I want to be incinerated and my ashes scattered over the city, that way I'll go on living like this dog..."*. The city is bewitched by these consumed lives that are too short. In the film *Yvon*, we rediscover the slender, sensual young woman, in a Tijuana bar, where she is a hostess. Her beauty and refinement are arresting. Before lying down in Charly the healer's truck, she lays a bunch of flowers by a dead dog on the roadside, echoing *El Perro negro*. She spreads the petals which follow the outlines of the dead body. With his oily fingers, Charly massages and relaxes her back. With the "magic knife" he squeezes the lines of her spine. She immediately identifies with the dog. "I feel like a dog, with my backbone sticking out. On the dog it's very visible because it's old and thin. And me, because I'm slim"*. During these confidences, the phantasmagorical vision becomes more defined: "I can see a black dog, a big dog, with staring eyes. I'm dreaming that it's near me, always opposite me, its eyes staring hard at me..."*. The animal becomes confused with the lover, to the point of copulation: "We were intimate. That's what I feel..."*. The engineer Jorge Hank Rhon pursues this animist spirit in *El puma* and declares in his turn: "If you ask me what animal I prefer, it's woman..."* after recalling the three-part composition of the world, animal, vegetable and mineral. Might this dovetailing of animal and human solve the question of the soul? Jorge Hank Rhon attempts an answer: "For me, the soul has no link with memory. I've got several stuffed dogs. They die of old age. When they die, given all the love I have for them, I stuff them, and there they are. They're very lovely memories. It reminds me of good memories. That doesn't mean that I still have a relationship with them and their souls..."*. Jorge Hank Rhon holds the knife made of pitbull bone in his hand, looks at the blade, and slips it back into its sheath.

The belief which runs through the filmed narratives prompts us to address the Scriptures like Fred in *Un Ange*, and in particular the Book of Ecclesiastes which liken man and beast⁷. So the end of Claude Chabrol's film *Que la bête meure*, 1969, refers to this: "There is a serious song by Brahms which paraphrases Ecclesiastes: "The beast must die; but man too. Both must die." The dying, killed, slain beasts which punctuate Jean-Charles Hue's films remind us of our mortal condition, and resurrect the memento mori that is peculiar to us.

But death, according to the artist, is just a stage, the stage that gives access to sensuality. *Tattoo Fight*, 2011, two stout men, tattoo's all over get involved in a strange and magical parade to attract the magnetism of the needle covered with grease looking for North. It floats between them in a glass of water. This is a fight without physical contact, with no punches below the belt, and no sweat - everything is elegant. In a warm light, the camera keeps filming low-angle shots. It rolls over on itself, skims their saturated epidermis, accompanies their carnal, sensual ballet. Each one proudly displays the valiant, indelible parts of their bodies. In this impressive display, the eyes look the other up and down, but remain polite and engaging. They prescribe the coded movements which match the rhythm of Dr. John's *Litany of Saints*, to get to North. This fight, with nothing incautious or gory about it, stems essentially from the attraction of desire. The two men fairly deliver the best part of their beings. In this saturation of impregnated inks, they are condensed versions of lives, experiences, choices, tastes, belonging and endurance, all on show and challenging each other. Between all these stakes and past implications, the needle wavers and decides. Its final orientation sticks to that of the clock hand on the cathedral, which gives in to the ritual. Through these striking parables, wanting to be vulgar is certainly not the most appropriate way of broaching Jean-Charles Hue's films. He doesn't try and expose decline. It is not the accursed part of beings, in these illicit places, which he delivers but above all their clear-sightedness. Like Fred's white light, the spark springs from the depths. The conception of the mortal state, with Jean-Charles Hue, taps grace at the expense of dread, which he tracks down around him. From excess and overkill springs happiness. The attraction of extreme states does not come from a desire to get lost, but attests to the complexity of the essentially dual human condition. Eclat, with him, is to be taken in the twofold sense of the term: shard and brilliance.

Mo Gourmelon

Growing a cathedral in a puddle

Mo Gourmelon: You've made four films with the (Yeniche or Jenische/Gypsy) Dorkel family, taking us into a special territory which we wouldn't venture into on our own. How did this ongoing project come into being?

Jean-Charles Hue: First of all I travelled in India, for several reasons, including music. Indian music, as well as Tzigane ((Hungarian) Gypsy) music, puts more emphasis on silences than sounds. One probably puts more of oneself into a silence—a vacant place, or void—than into a solid. When I got back from that journey, I saw one of my uncles (from the United States) again; he'd found traces of part of our family—on my mother's side—which has remained nomadic. The vacant place or void of our family, it just so happens. So my uncle had met a family of travellers with the name of Dorkel, who came from Vallet, where there's a well-known Gypsy cemetery. After some discussion and swapping a few photos, my uncle realized there was a blood bond between them. So I started looking for my family of Gypsies. I finally found a "Dorkel" family, the one I'm filming today, which has the same name as my family, just one letter different. It's not the group of travellers my uncle met, and they probably don't have the same blood as I do, but they took me in. These "Dorkels", who have adopted me as one of theirs, are Yeniche (Jenische). Which means they are not Tziganes. The Yeniche people doesn't come from India, but from the middle of Europe. They started to become a nomadic people in the Middle Ages, and adopted the lifestyle of the Tziganes. They're a European people, they're our ancestors... Our very own (French) Gitans in a way. Their language is made up of Old German and various kinds of slang. The wars and famines of those times, plus certain trades, turned them into nomads. These days, it's usually them you see most often by the roadside, but little ethnological and sociological research has been carried out on them. To start with I was upset not to find myself with real Tziganes... The music and everything that goes with it... But today I'm proud to be with Yeniche people. I like their reputation of being a tough people, inured to evil and suffering, who, in the past, made their tattoos with coal mixed with schnapps. Apart from one or two sound recordings in the tent of some evangelical Tzigane priests, I didn't film them for seven years of friendship spent in their company. I was there above all to change my life and finally experience something poetic, in the sense that Genet defined poetry: "The poet deals with evil and suffering. It's his role to see the beauty in it, to extricate it and use it. Mistakes interest poets, because mistakes alone inform truth".

MG: I'm thinking about Tony Gatlif's movie, *Transylvania*. From one film to the next, one might think that before this director depicts the Tzigane or Gitan people, he's more trying to get across his own fascination and to this end he composes a lyrical image. Your position is quite different. Could you tell us something about it? Was this involvement spelled out from the word go, or did it impose itself on you?

JCH: Like Genet, I hope I've got a certain inclination towards enchantment, which I always experience in a place frequented by vagrants and down-and-outs filled with people



who might be likened to a clan or tribe. I think this is the result of being something of a film buff, with a film like Pasolini's *Accatone* and films which marked my childhood, like John Huston's *Moby Dick* and Comencini's *Pinocchio*. And above all I'm thinking of the vision of certain images created by artists like Brueghel, Goya and Gauguin. The point that is shared by some of these works would be, as for Rimbaud, the attempt to get a cathedral to grow in a puddle of water. Otherwise put, starting from a primitive environment or at least a somewhat gregarious reality, but one filled with signs, and then in the end draw close to the sky and touch it with your finger tips, before tumbling back down into this same primitive world. I particularly recall the reproduction of a work by Brueghel in a holiday house rented by my parents. I can still see the madness of that popular feast with those ugly mugs and those abrupt switches of scale, which obsessed me and scared me all at once. I felt that out of reality there could loom up something totally unknown. I think I've been forever rediscovering the mystery that informed that image. And it's this desire that led me to the travellers, the Yeniche. This is one of the last places for vagrants where you can still find a few people who know how to live and are at the same time consumed. Unfortunately, things have already changed for the new generations, who are used to comfort and already compromised to the hilt with the world

the way it is. But fifteen years back, and especially with the Dorkels, living like a Gypsy was all I was looking for. But you can't be content with this encounter to grab hold of a certain lyricism and a certain loftiness/elevation. As Fred puts it: "You've got to pay your dues, Charlie...". You don't just stumble into making images, and then show them in fancy neighbourhoods, without doing what has to be done... Paying something in return for this whole gift that has been given to you, and only then, after avoiding being killed by a bullet two or three times, can you hope to meet something truly lyrical on your way. Perhaps even a revelation, no less... So after that you can have your lyricism, your enchantment, and do whatever you want... You're entitled to that, it's even a duty. But before all that, it's necessary to smell and breathe in the terrain. The more arid the terrain, the stonier it is, the more you'll have a chance to see a few sparks of wonder. Just a little way from the natural, you'd have thought you were seeing that... But it's awesome when you really do experience it. It's this "lyricism" that I'm after, something that's more like a Rossellini miracle.

Needless to say, miracles and lyricism don't just belong to Gypsies. But in this civilized world, they're more or less the only ones left who still believe in those things. And above all they're the only people who regularly work a miracle for you, when it's not on a day-to-day basis. You either have to believe or abstain. In my family, there are always a few



miracles knocking about. Like the day when my grandfather, who was a scout in the French army in 1940, found a reproduction of St. Teresa and a wooden rosary attached to a wall in a farm building. That blackened wall was the only one still standing in that farm that had been destroyed by fire, and the flames stopped just around the rosary, thus preserving the image of St. Teresa. That object and that image helped my grandfather later on when he was imprisoned in Germany during the war. That's how St. Teresa made her way into our family, and my brother told me just the other day that he was going to pray to her as often as he could. These are objects halfway between Catholicism and paganism, found in time of war: which means in those cases of mental and physical fragility, where you're capable of having a different vision of the world. You have to cross your wilderness and see... But God also moves about among the cooking pots, as Teresa of Avila put it. The miraculous, and no matter what name you give it, can be encountered in daily life too. I just think that this way of looking at things, which helps us to glimpse it, is not always sharp enough. Too many things prevent us from glimpsing it. So my way of depicting this Gypsy world with my camera probably comes from my family, and also from having sometimes being in the position of people being filmed... The position of having seen.



MG: You don't appear in the picture, and yet we feel that you are very present. Fred and his wife sometimes talk directly to you, and seem to use you as a witness. You describe your videos both as documentaries close to the filmed diary, because of their length and the frequency of filming, and as family films, with regard to your position as filmer. In the family film, however, people try to offer a good image of themselves: a presentation of happiness. Let me quote you: "What they give is life, sweat and stupidity"...

JCH: My position as filmer is a special one. After several years, they no longer think about the presence of the camera itself, even if Jo still likes calling it the "Poukaveuse", meaning the thing that denounces, the thing that slobbers, because it gives you ... your image. So I'm able to film them in their everyday schemes and machinations and words, without any lie or trick aimed at the camera being slipped in. They often use me as a witness, not as a filmer but as "Charlie", the friend of the family. With this "home movie" method, it can happen that I film them when they're not at their best. Sometimes I catch them red-handed being stupid... They show the human side with all its shortcomings, without trying to put themselves right. Maurice is unbelievable in this respect. Every joke is an invention, even with language, like when he comes out with "Figure of anxiety" (figure d'angoisse), for example. With him, stupidity takes on another dimension... Full of cruelty and laughter at one and the same time. He puts his finger on our idiocy, and we laugh about it with him. With Maurice it's a continuation of childhood... Something innocent, which touches me. So I'm surprised sometimes when people talk about the things they say, and their physique, in derogatory terms. People sometimes ask me why I've shown their big paunch, or whatever!? Big paunch or not, I find them beautiful because they're in harmony with their lives. In any event, the natural pause is the hardest thing to keep up. I also think that I've always wanted to have that type of physique, Fred's physique. I'm thin and I film lots of big, tough men. I think a man must be virile, which is to say he shouldn't pay too much heed to fashion criteria. But above all it's a matter of defining beauty... It's even a matter of aesthetics. For me, nothing is beautiful if a price isn't paid. Beauty is a trace, a (hi)story. A tooth that's fallen out tells a story, just like a tattoo. You have to be damaged to live, it's the proof we're alive. Paying dues to mother nature. All the rest is just magazine cover stuff. In any event, it doesn't interest me.

MG: What you've felt, placed between life and death, is the basis of *Y'a plus d'os* ?

JCH: *Y'a plus d'os* (literally: No More Bones) is the film that I had to make in my lifetime. It alone recounts everything I'm looking for. There we are, glass in hand, swearing and blaspheming in the midst of popular sayings, just like with Brueghel, when the world tips... We start getting into incantations... So we summon the presence of Madam Death around a gun laid on a table, when the woman appears and slaps her husband because he's drunk. That's when things start to go wrong... As father Céline said: "I only enjoy the grotesque state on the verge of Death". Human stupidity suddenly crops up again within range of the great metaphysical questions. This is when Fred, drunk as a skunk, asked me to pay my dues for having the moral right to bring back such images.

Then he took the pistol, a P38 laid on the table... It's our piece, the one that must always stay in the family, as Fred told me the other day. Then like the Grim Reaper, Fred pointed the P38 at me, while forcing me to film him... before opening fire. He was drunk and I was in the half-light, so the bullet just skimmed me. But I was so sure that I'd been hit by that bullet when I saw the direction of the barrel, that you can hear me emptying my lungs in the film. That's when I realized that an incredible light came out of the barrel. In the video, that light exposes the whole image like a sun. I was quite sure it was that light that we see before we die... But I wasn't dead. The powder built up in the barrel caught fire to create that epiphany, that light, my light. I really did have the amazing luck to have a glimpse of something from the other world, and be able to come back from it.

Not all my films talk about a state between life and death, but they do always stay on a borderline between two states. Emilio tells how monsters are born after an accidental mixture of substances between animals and humans. *Un Ange* tells how Fred shifted from evil to good, and *Pitbull Carnaval* tells about a couple who involve the love and sexuality of their couple in the violence of dog fights. I like finding myself just there at that indecisive split second, and filming, so as to bear witness. I am also looking for my own borderline. The passage from one state to another. The passage from my persona,



which I like sometimes more than others, to another thing which still has to be defined. I do sincerely think that life is not enough. I often feel a deep-seated boredom and I quickly lose all desire to live, and love... I'm looking for life possibilities which will leave traces in my head and even on my body. I even make tattoos which represent the things and people featuring in my films. This helps me to remember, not forget that I've experienced that, and thus not denigrate my life or my body unfairly. One day I'll have achieved my transformation, and in the end I'll like my life and my body. Only people like the Dorkels, or Mario and Emilio can give me the illusion of being a bit like them. So being placed between life and death can be a blessed moment which helps to leave behind all those horrid rags and tatters that encumber my life... A moment when I leave what I am to get a glimpse of the being to come, which one always hopes will be better.¹

MG: The recent release of your feature film *La BM du Seigneur*—which revisits the video *Un Ange*—brings back to the fore your earlier filming sessions with the Dorkel family. In this film, the angel is incarnated by a dog. This animal appears in all your films: an affectionate companion, or a fighting pitbull, dead (turned into a knife in the Mexican movies) or alive... What is the attraction of this animal? What does it embody for you?

JCH: If you try to find a primitive image, it's highly likely that an animal or something akin to an animal will come in between you and the object being filmed. As if it were enough to get involved in an incantation, which for me is the act of filming, to bring forth not man's docile companion, but his equal, that being who for a long time remained undifferentiated between animal state and being deified. The totem is that object which brings us close to the animal. So I approach certain people the way you approach a totem. The human part or the animal part emerges from this situation.

When I film *Pitbull Carnaval* and when I make the portrait of Mario Gomar and his wife, that couple who earn their living by dog fights, I'm not trying to say a good word about those fights. On the other hand, when his wife tells me in front of the camera the pitbull pups, because the mother could not feed them and those same pups, once grown, will fight for her and her family, and will in their turn provide food for their table, while at the same time fighting... I can't be anything other than disturbed by this truth. It simply helps me to think that life is complex and rich in possibilities. So I can understand that beauty, generosity and love, to use the words of the Gomar family, can be found precisely where man knows violence and even where he provokes it. And if I were an animal, I wouldn't hesitate for a single second between the life of a fighting dog who's been loved and suckled by that woman, and the industrial life of a neutered animal, fattened up and then taken off to die without a hint of love, unless there's some kind of associative respect which promises it a decent and legal death.

I have no doubt at all about who's going to win this fight between the so-called civilized man and that old immemorial man who's always accepted the animal that was in him and who has seen in that animal the beauty of this world. I have no option but to go on tirelessly seeking out a few people who are reinventing their relationship to the world, to God, to people and animals, without being followers, but artists in charge of their own lives. And yet I know that, for me, everything should have gone in another direction if goings-on



in my life as a child had not included the loss of some of those animals, like those white doves and those white rabbits which my grandfather had reared and which always lived at the bottom of the garden. Animals that were spotlessly white, like that "Moby Dick" looming up from a film I saw at that time in that same house. An initial impact of the image came to me with that Captain Ahab who nailed that shiny piece of gold to the mast of the whaling ship Pequod as a reward for the man who would catch sight of the white creature, or should I say his "white self", sparkling, utopian, like Fred's white dog in *La BM du Seigneur*. After my grandfather's death, and this is something I still can't explain to this day, my grandmother asked our neighbor to come and kill all our white rabbits. At a very young age, without anyone worrying about it, I witnessed the way each white rabbit's throat was painstakingly cut. The sight of that red blood on the white fur, the knife, life, and above all the memory of my grandfather that surged up from each one of those rabbits, I experienced all that like a final cut or break with my childhood. A few days later, I was suddenly hurriedly taken away—not to say wrenched away from that place—by my godfather and my aunt, who took me back to my parents. Needless to say I was, at that tender age, still shattered by the death of "my rabbits", and the pain I felt in leaving that house, the way you leave your childhood behind. But while my godfather's car drove by night through the middle of Paris, I woke up in the Pigalle neighbourhood, in the midst of those women and those multicoloured neons advertising new desires. In my case, the blood of those creatures opened straight onto the promise of a new life. The rabbits having their throats cut mattered more to me than plenty of other things. I know very well that I re-enact that event through stories that other people

make me experience, and that I can thus rediscover that child I once was, who's still waiting for the sacrifice to come forward, be it that of a pitbull or that of a rabbit (*Quoi de neuf docteur ?*), which will end once again with life, and desire. Like Franju, I take the deaths of animals too seriously to leave it up to the professionals in the trade. In the end of the day, I only like wizards and other magicians who manage to make us believe, like Fred Dorkel in *La BM du Seigneur*, that the animal is an important enough being to think that its death can cause the smiles and anger of the gods.

So the animals in my films have the same place, in terms of importance, as the "objects", at least those which stem from this same alchemy. So I lived as a child in that house built by my mythical grandfather, who had brought back all those miraculous things from the war. But my grandmother also had a mystical relationship with certain objects. Every morning she would measure the nighttime movement made by a vase on the wax cloth on the kitchen table. She would patiently measure the centimetres covered and, for me and my grandmother, that activity was the day's first task. But the most important object in that house was the military quart or beaker (the French soldier's mess tin), made of aluminium, which had belonged to my grandfather during the Second World War. It is my first mythology. There's a custom that exists among certain Manouche Gypsies (Gitans) that objects that have belonged to a deceased person become "Mulo" (dead) objects. This means that these objects inherited from the deceased person must carry on their life as objects, and no one, apart from the family, can see them as sacred, as being "Mulo". So the absence of sacredness conveyed to the object lends the deceased person himself a certain life, as if his death could not be altogether achieved, because he dodges the burial of a sacred rite. On that army beaker my grandfather had engraved all sorts of things (dates, initials) like any old prisoner would have done. But on the less visible part of it he had also engraved the plan of the Stalag (the POW camp) where he was held prisoner in Germany. That plan enabled him to make three escape attempts, though none of them was successful because he was invariably caught by the German patrols and their dogs. Despite that story, which lent that mess tin an incredible value, I was always surprised at seeing my grandmother tossing the used matches which lit the gas stove into that family Holy Grail. For her it was the "Mulo" object of her late husband. That object was the presence of my grandfather in that house. Every time my grandmother threw a match into it, I waited to see my grandfather step out of it. So I think that, today, I'm filming certain people in a moment of belief, with which I can identify. I take my camera the way my grandmother took her tape measure and I note the movement of a vase, or the appearance of an angel who takes the shape of a white dog.

MG: You mention Franju's *Le Sang des bêtes*, and I'm also thinking of Ali Kazma's film *Slaughterhouse*, which is closer to your work, recently screened at the Espace Croisé. If Ali Kazma focuses on work, and the conditions of work, with you the salient erotic dimension encompasses the flesh. I'm thinking of that scene where the blood flows in *El Puma*. You are in effect close to Bataille in his conception of the slaughterhouse and sacrifice.¹ Another important object crops up in your Mexican movies, something that Angel calls the "magic knife". Where does this come from?



JCH: The rabbits of my childhood having their throats cut was followed by my sudden return to my parents. That trip meant that the child I was had to spend the night in the Pigalle district, with those women and those neon lights. All those erotic images have certainly been mixed in my mind with the bloodier events that took place that same day. Over and above that childhood anecdote, that mixture of different kinds of flesh is also, for me, the very definition of sacrifice, which is there so that life will never end. It's the life cycle. The knife that's present in the Mexican portraits is precisely the object that can be found where all these concerns meet. That knife was made with the bone of a dog buried in the desert on the border between the United States and Mexico. As I wished, it has become the liturgical object of a ceremony that we have gradually set up in our lives, and the Tijuana portraits are the evidence. All the characters have experienced and seen this knife in relation to their own past and above all in relation to their needs of the moment. It has been through the hands of the butcher in the "carniceria" by the Tijuana bullring just as much as through Yvonne's delicate hands, or those of the mayor of Tijuana, which are said to be blood-stained. What's more, I've always seen that character as the last priest of that ancient religion, Mithriacism: Mithra, a god of light for whom people sacrificed a bull whose blood had to flow like a shower over the person about to be baptized who was in a ditch dug beneath the animal. For everyone, this knife had become the go-between object, between its shortcomings and its desires, between past and future, between sickness and health. In any event, that knife, and especially its bone handle, carried symbolically within it all the value of those beings placed between life and death in that city of Tijuana. In that motel, we formed a group, which temporarily saved us. The knife, like so many other things, is just a fetish, whose powers, great or small, depend solely on what you invest in it. With the knife, we went



to the remains of things by burning the little we did have... And of course, for reasons I don't want to go into too much, all that was incredibly erotic.

MG: In the series of "Gypsy/Gitan" films, the actors are "given": Fred and his brother Maurice, their wives and their neighbours. I'm not claiming either to minimize the time it took to approach the community, or the decisions to set the camera rolling. Certain unforeseen things are, furthermore, beyond anyone's control—I'm thinking of *Y'a plus d'os*. With the Mexican movies and the last one shot in the Netherlands, *Tattoo Fight*, the way the actors are directed is quite different. In fact, you have to find "characters", then direct them, while at the same time making sure that the story you're writing with them doesn't stray too far from theirs. So a share of improvisation and improbability is always involved. These protagonists, who aren't professional actors, always act—and play—with their own lives. How did you get to Tijuana and Utrecht? And what were your stays there like?

JCH: Tijuana and Utrecht are two very different situations. For Tijuana it was pure desire on my part. I went there not knowing a soul and I met my friends Abraham and Ingrid, who, as good Mexicans, offered to put me up in their home for the next six months. For Utrecht, it was an artist's residency with an apartment for me to use, as well as a sum of money allocated for my stay. For Tijuana I went with the knife as the only synopsis of my project, and for Utrecht there was my wish to present events that had taken place in Paris in the 1940s. In both cases, I was looking for people for my



movie, who would be capable of contributing what they are, while at the same time embracing my project which represents what I am.

It must nevertheless be said that the most vulnerable people are often the most accommodating, or at least the most likely to take risks for other people. In Utrecht I had a serious problem finding a few people (apart from the people organizing my stay: Impakt Festival) who would deign to take any interest in my project and share it to a point where it would also become theirs. In the end, at the last minute, I was lucky enough to find two people capable of becoming involved in that project, who also talked about tattoo fights.

I think that if I had more difficulties in Utrecht with my project, that had to do once again with a matter of belief. In the west, by dint of only living through a certain reality devoid of its share of magic, some people can no longer see me as anything but the video artist or film-maker. This sets up a trade relationship, one of professionalism. In Tijuana, and with the Yeniche travelers, they understood that my approach also had to do with a more or less sympathetic (lunatic!) visionary trying above all to experience something powerful by forming a kind of family. It's a form of utopia which can be scary for some people. In any event, I know that living through this type of adventure is intense and beautiful, but that It's also painful, because, when everything stops, everyone leaves something of themselves behind them.

MG: The policeman, the campaigning governor, the outcasts—prostitutes and dealers—... how do you deal with these worlds, and why these particular worlds? They're almost

stereotypes of a contemporary western. You arrive with a knife which isn't a Tijuana custom. How did people see you, and how did they adopt you once and for all?

JCH: First off, I'm delighted you can see in it a sort of contemporary western... Incidentally, I'm writing these few words listening to the original soundtrack of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, written by Bob Dylan. I'm not an unconditional western fan but some of them are among my fetish films. I think I'm looking for a certain moral clarity, which you can find in westerns. In them, good and evil are redefined through goals to be achieved and ways of doing that. And then it's all played out somewhere absolutely else, a form of orientalism that is always a source of visual pleasure and desire. I'm probably also nostalgic, like we all are, for a lost golden age, even if it never really existed. My relationship to art pushes me to shuffle the cards, interweave things, and make morality less clear. Normally, I ought even to flee from naturalism like the plague, because it's not a buddy of art. Today, though, I have less and less trouble making my ideas clear, and thus avoiding creating a film language, experimental or otherwise, naturalist or otherwise, a sworn foe of art. Similarly, I enjoy playing with fire by making certain portraits peculiar to film of the sort like the "baddie", perfectly incarnated by the campaigning governor, or the dog-killing cop, but without hiding from the image my desire to be possessed by the magnetism of these beings with their accursed part. I like to think that with the camera I spin around a not altogether good or reassuring totem, but I can't stop spinning around it... Perhaps this is tantamount to putting the notion of art in a loss of control, a loss of morality, the better to re-establish it. It seems that the same applies for memory which passes through phases of vulnerability, which nevertheless make it more lasting. Reactivating a memory makes it momentarily more fragile, and if



this old memory is less powerful than a more recent memory, it will then be replaced. But if it remains powerful and important for you, it will be kept and even strengthened. So, like memory, we have to take risks with our art and confront it with new things and, why not?... with archetypes of the western.

MG: *Carne Viva* has just been released as a feature film. What link does it have with those Mexican movies? What does cinema bring to artists' films? Likewise, what links does the other feature film *La BM du Seigneur* have with the "Gypsy" films?

JCH: At the beginning of that project to go and film the itinerary of that knife in Tijuana, I thought I would be making, as ever, a series of portraits, and showing them for the first time at the Michel Rein gallery. At the end of my first stay, which lasted three months, I'd made three portraits. It was at that moment that a documentary film producer called Elisabeth Pawlovsky found me some funding. So I was able to go back to Tijuana and carry on with my work, but this time around with some money, which would be used to make a short experimental documentary film helped by the CNC (Centre National du Cinéma). So I had a lot more money than usual, and the opportunity was a wonderful one for quenching my "desire for cinema" and launching me into a longer time-frame by making a feature film... I returned to Tijuana fourteen months later. That's film, too...

Time passing because, for example, of looking for funding from TV channels, which take time answering. Meanwhile, my future film hero had lost all his teeth and had narrowly escaped death. He'd become a strange cross between Popeye the Sailor and Antonin Artaud. And when I think about it, I think he was both characters for the film. The film became a full-length feature even if there were already shorter versions in existence, in portrait form. I also think that it'll be the only film in my life to have a possible double length. The short versions that I'm showing today in exhibition venues have contributed towards a real change in my life as an artist. I also think that the two forms have contributed reciprocally to each other. But I think this will be the only example, because, already, the feature film *La BM du Seigneur* is not included in this example. There's the film that circulates almost essentially in the film world, and the shorter portraits filmed with the same people but constructed from other images which are only visible in the art world. Recently, as if I were discovering it for the first time, I saw the film *Un Ange* again, which is the documentary counterpart to *La BM du Seigneur*. Some people have liked both, while having a marked interest in *Un Ange*, which they found rougher and rawer, more natural, more sincere. I don't want to come down on one side or the other, and deny one of my babies, because I like them all the way they are.

MG: To take up the issue of language mentioned earlier—"Their language is made 'up of Old German and various kinds of slang"—the terms of *La BM du Seigneur* can be eloquent: "My brother"... almost apostolic. In *Un Ange* and *Y'a plus d'os*, on the other hand, they're more virile—"Ma couille" (literally: my testicle, ball), meaning "my buddy".

JCH: Even more so than blood, language doesn't lie. It betrays what we are, our way of telling a story or our way of putting a vulgar word right beside a word that's respectful says a whole lot about us. We can even see a social and political vision here. Just like

the beggars who used to sleep in richly decorated churches, we stick things counter to nature, we say that the top can indeed rub shoulders with the bottom and come out of it okay. The travellers I've filmed are in this primordial state of innocence where you can still make this mixture that's become counter to nature ever since culture put its filters between us and the others. Unfortunately, we're like onions with lots of skins. We protect ourselves and this comes across in our language, like the one used in politics. But that's what paradise was... being naked without feeling any shame. Once thrown out of paradise, you have to put all your clothes back on, and your make-up. Nothing comes out of our gut without having been packaged. "Ma couille"... "my brother"... Everything is mixed up, it's impure... It's like when Céline introduced orality into French literature. The proof that it's scandalous, and not appreciated at all... He hasn't been forgiven for wrecking our beautiful French language "in its bones".

MG: You've had a chance to talk about how you're attracted to certain archival images.

JCH: If film (fiction and documentary) and painting have influenced me in the making of my images and in my decision to create images in my turn, I should add to this list archival images, which are primitive images informed by ghosts from the past. As a teenager, with my father, I discovered, watched and tirelessly recorded those images, to garner one or two special moments from them, which gave me something I can't explain. Today, I know that the images which affect me the most are those which sow confusion between reality and the making of things. For this is where the unknown springs from. An instant suspended between fiction and documentary, between reality and imagination, between glass and smoke... A close shave with time, a vacant place that might betray all the power of images, which would then not be just the images of a thing, but the thing itself. So the most emblematic archival image is that of the German soldier on the Russian front, who throws himself on the ground and with his spade digs a hole to bury himself in and protect himself from the attack by an enemy he knows to be close by. Then, in an almost imperceptible way, you can make out the wavering light of a reflector which comes down over the soldier and lights him up, or rather illuminates him. Many archival battle scenes may be just reconstructions, but that shot seems to me taken on the spot, live, and, at the risk of his life, the cameraman took the time to frame and even light his subject. There's everything in that image. Some images can only be made at the price of that risk you take, like Brueghel's *Mad Margot*, when you go bargain hunting, gathering your pittance at the gates of hell. That's what I experienced with *Y'a plus d'os*... Just when I was shot at, I found my flickering little light. I'm increasingly sure that I'm not looking for something lethal. What I'm pleasurably looking for is a chance to rediscover those moments when everything was possible, and when letting my eye come to rest on the merest brilliance was pure discovery, pure affirmation of the simple fact of being alive, of being surprised and lastly of seeing the world every day in a new and different way. The image in motion, just like memory, is the only living refuge of the brilliances of the past.