


 FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Fantasies of the Institution: The Films of Georges Franju and Ince's *Georges Franju*

Michael du Plessis
University of Southern California

Kate Ince (2005)
Georges Franju
Manchester: Manchester University Press.
ISBN 0719068282
172 pp.

With the exception of *Eyes Without a Face* (*Les yeux sans visage*, 1960) and *Blood of the Beasts* (*Le sang des bêtes*, 1948), almost none of Georges Franju's 14 short films and 8 features is currently available in the US on DVD or video, where he is now known only, if at all, as the director of a scandalously unwatchable documentary about the abattoirs of Paris and a moody (but supposedly minor) horror film about a deranged doctor who tries to graft a new face onto his disfigured daughter. Given the oblivion that surrounds this director in English-speaking countries, Kate Ince's recent monograph on Franju in Manchester's French Film Directors series (which includes studies of directors as varied as Georges Méliès, Jean Renoir, Marguerite Duras, and Claire Denis) serves, at the very least, as a new consideration of a significant figure in cinema history. Ince emphasises that Franju's links to cinema as an institution go beyond his own films: he was a co-founder with Henri Langlois in 1936 of the Cinémathèque française and served as secretary of the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film. While his involvement with the Cinémathèque may not have remained as central as it was at the beginning, Franju was made an honorary artistic director of the Cinémathèque in the last decade of his life (Ince, 2005, 1).

Despite, or because of, his links to the public institutions of cinema, Franju's films sometimes occasioned scandal—*Blood of the Beasts* required the critical intervention of Jean Cocteau to speak up for its merits against controversy (Ince, 32), a defense which recalls Cocteau's defense of Jean Genet, perhaps. (The letter Cocteau wrote with Jean-Paul Sartre, in defense of Genet, addressed to the President of the Republic, appeared in the same year as his defense of *Blood, White*, 1993, 334-335.) Nonetheless, Franju would later be dismissed as too ensconced inside the institution of culture, the view of some New Wave directors and the generation after 1968 (Ince, 7-8), for whom he was outmoded, a fuddy-duddy who favored literary adaptations and was part of a film establishment. His relation to what we might now, anachronistically, call *splatter* (for example, on-camera slaughter and dismemberment of a horse, cows, calves, and sheep in *Blood*; the notorious face removal in *Eyes*, the lingering depiction of a patient in straitjacket being force-fed in *Head against the Walls* [*La tête contre les murs*], 1958) apparently currently disqualifies him from any consideration other than as a cult film maker. Yet, one might argue that it is exactly his anomalous identity, part *provocateur* and part archivist, his lifelong alliance with a militant avant-garde while working in the mainstream of national cinematic culture, as well as his uncertain positioning between the institution and what it expels, that makes Franju a director who can speak with particular eloquence to contemporary concerns about social ambiguity and cultural ambivalence. While Ince's monograph rescues Franju from a contemporary neglect at least in Anglophone contexts and while she does signal some ways of understanding Franju both as individual stylist and creator as well as figure in a series of systems, aesthetic, economic, technological, national, and international, her reluctance to deal extensively with surrealism, the particular nationalism of the *cinéfantastique*, and the question of genre in any other than a narrow and reductive way limits the monograph. One might even wonder if a certain squeamishness about fantasy does not inform Ince's desire to legitimate Franju by linking his work to other 'higher' genres (oddly, *film noir* and melodrama) and even to movements such as the still culturally prestigious New Wave and to directors such as Claude Chabrol or Jean Luc Godard instead of Duras (with whom he collaborated) or to the directors he overtly cited as influences—Luis Buñuel, Fritz Lang and Friedrich Murnau (all, tellingly, non-French).

By way of recognising the peculiar placement of Franju as outsider in the institution, Ince makes much of Franju's ability to work at once in a '*cinéma de commande*' (commissioned cinema) and a '*cinéma d'auteur*' in the shorts that made up his filmic work for approximately the first decade of his career, 1948-1958 (Ince, 9). The Franju that Ince proposes to examine would be a 'Franju,' constructed by a number of cultural systems:

Ince seems somewhat skeptical of any take on Franju that would only stress originality or individuality: 'he has always been received as an *auteur*-stylist—without the links between his deserved reputation as a "film poet," *auteur* theory and the timing of his contribution to French film being interrogated' (Ince, 9). Implicitly, social, technological, and aesthetic histories, the advent of certain critical mechanisms (such as the *auteur* theory), and the persistence of certain other critical forms (the valorisation of 'poetry' among the avant-gardes at mid-century) coincide to construct 'Franju.' This is promising terrain—part introductory contextualisation and part cultural historiography, something like the work of Pierre Bourdieu. However, it remains indicated rather than explored in Ince's work here.

Investigating, or rather, as Ince has it, *interrogating* (with its somewhat unfortunate ring of juridical and disciplinary compulsion) the conjunction of practices and discourses that allowed Franju to emerge in a particular way in French cinema history will be the project of her book. It is curious, then, that Ince neglects any discussion of Franju's work in television in the last decades of his life, beyond remarking, in passing, that *Red Nights/Man without a Face* (*Nuits rouges/L'Homme sans visage*, 1974) is a feature film edited down from an eight-episode commissioned television serial (Ince, 58). Franju filmed *White Curtains* (*Les rideaux blancs*, 1966) from a script by Duras for German television and, for French series, documentary shorts about the engineer Gustave Eiffel, the writer and creator of *Fantômas*, Marcel Allain, and about the city Amiens (1966-1967) (see Gabriel Vialle, 1968, 186-187). Given Franju's start in commissioned documentary shorts and his final work in television, an analysis of his *oeuvre* between these institutions of visual culture would have greatly strengthened or qualified Ince's argument. Moreover, a consideration of the particular national qualities of television such as its construction of an imaginary national community would have illuminated Franju for an Anglophone readership. Franju's relationship to French national identity, which his film and television work simultaneously reinforces and questions, celebrates and defaces, seems strikingly ambivalent; so the television programs alone move from French icons (the Eiffel Tower, the Liberation as the background of *White Curtains*) to their possible opposites (the boy in *White Curtains* ominously dresses in a German occupier's uniform to suggest, at the very least, some questions about triumphalist national narratives).

Ince seems to promise that her analysis of Franju and his contexts will examine the dissemination of an aesthetic discourse about 'film poetry,' which served to cement Surrealism in cinema as a practice of image creation. Here, one might think of Vialle's linkage of 'Surrealism and the seventh art': '...one is lead quite naturally to consider cinematography as the privileged vehicle of surrealist thought and surrealist creation. The

richness and suppleness of its expressive means, the possibility it provides for a creator to make light of time, of space, of weight comes to corroborate such an appreciation' (Vialle, 8, my translation). Moreover, the notion of 'film poetry' effects a fairly bland legitimisation, perhaps, of the new medium of cinema in terms of an artistic and literary hierarchy where 'poetry' serves as a kind of unexamined trump. 'Film poetry' announces a critical discourse that attempts to master the unruly energies of cinema in terms of aesthetic individuality and the language of 'high art.'

Yet more historical and aesthetic consideration of how exactly the term 'film poetry' came to occupy a key place in mid-twentieth-century considerations of cinema, especially cinema that challenged the conventions of realism, would have made Ince's work much more valuable, not only as a study of Franju, but also as an analysis of high and popular cultures. Fascinatingly, Franju was able to negotiate between high culture, with adaptations of novels by Cocteau and François Mauriac, *Thomas the Impostor* (*Thomas l'imposteur*) and *Thérèse Desqueroix*, and low or popular culture (serials, *feuilletons*, *Judex*, detective stories, serials, horror films or *cinéma d'épouvante*, even *Grand Guignol*); indeed, Franju drew attention to the continuities between one and the other, so that an unrealised film project for which he wrote a screenplay was *La Princesse et le comédien*, based on the German Romantic E.T.A. Hoffmann's novella *The Princess Bambilla*. From Hoffmann to Franju via Poe, Baudelaire, and even Freud, a genealogy unfolds that joins the Gothic to the self-reflexivity of Romantic irony.

The question of film style is one that has persisted in critical presentations of Franju. Raymond Durnat's monograph, which was published much earlier than Ince's and which used to be the only English monograph on Franju, makes style central to its analysis. Durnat's discussion of style in relation to the contrast between Cocteau's writing and his films and the difference of both Cocteau's writing and films from Franju's cinematic adaptation of *Thomas the Impostor* (Durnat, 1968, 124-128) still seems challenging, almost forty years later, in its engagement with questions of medium, signature, and translation. One effect of Ince's work is to make the reader wish for a new edition of Durnat's now out-of-print work, which, for all its overly enthusiastic linkages of Franju to literature (again, figured as a high art) and its correspondingly perhaps naive *auteurist* assumptions, communicates the vitality of an intellectual and aesthetic tradition in which Franju's work took its place.

Ince states her thesis in a more lapidary manner when she claims 'Franju's displaced relation to cinema history has become something of an enigma...The task of opening up

the Franju enigma is one I set myself when I decided to write this book...’ (Ince, 9). For all its ambitions and its useful and extended scholarship (especially about the history of *courts métrages* or shorts in the 1940s and 1950s), Ince’s monograph feels like something of a missed opportunity. Her approach to Franju consists of stressing the significance of his short films, which were mainly commissioned work on specific topics (11-44). Because most of these films were, at least in their commissioning, conceived as documentaries, Ince seizes on this as evidence of Franju’s underlying commitment to reality, a commitment which she will assert at length. Her next chapter on genre in Franju’s work (for genre reading is ‘an approach that has never been applied to most [of his films],’ she claims, Ince, 9) follows on logically from this first chapter by arguing that Franju’s films should *not* be understood in relation to the genre that they have most commonly been assigned to, namely that articulated by the French term of *cinéfantastique*, but are best understood as examples of *film noir* and/ or melodrama. The last two chapters—respectively on particulars of Franju’s style and on ‘gender identities, the structure of the family, and sexualities’ (Ince, 9)—read and feel like afterthoughts. Ince’s take on Franju has already been set up and these two chapters simply reinforce that take—which is that Franju can best be placed in relation to reality, and that his links to cinema of fantasy should be questioned or underplayed. While Ince does belatedly consider Franju’s not inconsiderable ties to Surrealism, she does so fairly late in the volume, presumably to minimise the impact such consideration would have on the development of her argument. Indeed, Ince’s account of Franju feels less like an argument and more like the assertion of questionable personal preferences for realism over the apparently troublesome aesthetic interzone constituted by Franju’s work.

Ince repeatedly seizes on Franju’s own fairly ambivalent statements about reality and fantasy as evidence that Franju never entirely identified with the genre of *cinéfantastique*. Thus she writes, ‘Despite his links to the *fantastique*, he had no interest in the excesses of fiction and the imagination usually associated with horror and science fiction cinema’ (116). As support, Ince cites Franju’s saying: ‘Pierre Kast asked me the other day why I didn’t make a science-fiction film. I told him that I liked science, but not fiction’ (quoted and translated in Ince, 116). Likewise, Ince cites the following statement from Franju, ‘dream, poetry, and the “insolite” [the “unusual” or “unwonted”] must emerge from reality itself. All cinema is documentary, especially the most poetic’ (translated in Ince, 118). In the third chapter of her work, Ince discusses Franju’s cinema at length as what she designates ‘the art of the real,’ with the somewhat awkward nominalisation of an adjective to betoken that particularly French use of ‘*le réel*,’ which is not quite ‘reality’ (Ince, ‘The Art

of the Real,' 115-123). Yet Ince never entirely convinces. When Franju, for instance, observed that the film that he loved the most was a medical documentary of brain surgery, *Trépanation pour une crise d'épilepsie Bravais Jacksonienne* (*Trepanation for a Bravais-Jacksonian Epileptic Seizure*), he may well have been signaling a preference for 'the real' over the fantastic and Ince accordingly discusses the film in relation to 'the cinema of science' (107-114). Yet what Ince neglects to consider is the Surrealist tradition of valorising science as a form of lucid delirium, a mode of displacing the real. One may as well consider the Comte de Lautréamont's notorious simile, '...fair...above all, as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella!' (Lautréamont, 1994, 193), as an instance of greater scientific exactitude in prose. Whatever Franju's intentions may have been, discursively, his appeals to science in interviews, as well as his basis in documentaries, form part of a very precise questioning of the real that characterises, for example, the work of other dissident or later Surrealists, such as Georges Bataille's calling his journal *Documents* (rather than overtly calling up dreams and the imaginary), or Michel Leiris's scientific practice of ethnography, or Roger Caillois's notion of diagonal sciences that would fuse dream with external reality with exactitude and objectivity (Hollier and Caillois). While Ince does eventually place Franju in relation to Surrealism, she does fairly late in her work, with the result that Surrealism appears inessential (118-119). While she may very well be underplaying the significance of Surrealism in order to distinguish and differentiate her work from previous studies of Franju, such as Durgnat's or Vialle, who make Surrealism crucial and central, she does so at the expense of placing Franju fully in a conceptual and political, as well as aesthetic, context. Indeed, the assumption that Surrealism is solely a set of aesthetic procedures, and not a politics or an epistemology, seems to be one of the most Anglo-Saxon aspects of Ince's work.

A connection might be made between Ince's minimisation of the place of Surrealism and her consistent discomfort with Franju as director of the *cinéfantastique*. The latter leads her to some odd claims in her discussion of genre. She argues against what she calls, bizarrely, 'the straightforward, essentialist understanding of Franju as a director of the *fantastique*' (48), without explaining how a genre category can come to be 'essentialist.' She separates Franju from the *fantastique* for two reasons, she explains, namely that the category itself is confusing, ranging from 'science fiction, horror, [to] pure fantasy and the fairy tale' (48) and that, moreover, 'as a genre label it simply does not describe most of Franju's *oeuvre*, in which...there are strong elements of *film noir*, of the thriller, and of melodrama...' (48). To be sure, genres are never pure nor entirely stable and coherent.

While Ince alludes to Jacques Derrida's essay, 'The Law of Genre,' in establishing her discussion of genre, she quotes Peter Brunette and David Willis, perhaps somewhat out of context, on the genre markers of the Western: such genre markers 'will, unlike the texts in which they appear, themselves never belong to the genre of the Western...A specific text containing these marks of genre will never simply belong to a genre because these marks refer to a system of difference outside any given genre' (Brunette and Willis quoted in Ince, 46). Yet Ince fails to develop Derridean insights: if genre markers never entirely belong to any one genre, it is because as marks, they are simultaneously inside and outside any one particular context. In order to exist as marks, they must appear in more than one context—the very mark of genre, of appurtenance and of belonging, itself does not entirely belong to one single fixed genre. The mark of genre thus designates identity as well as difference and multiple, improper belonging. Why, in the understanding of Franju, such filial impropriety and improper affiliation could not be designated as *cinéfantastique*, seems to be a matter of Ince's *fiat* rather than of her analysis, especially since *cinéfantastique*, despite its avowed Frenchness, marks an affiliation with German expressionism or Romanticism. In a fascinating manner, the *cinéfantastique* then troubles national narratives of cinema.

The reasons Ince advances for the marked generic presence of *film noir* seem less than persuasive: 'My exploration of noir elements in Franju's early films will concentrate on two aspects: the theme of criminals and criminality, and the visual marks of *noir*—chiaroscuro and low-key lighting, the pervasiveness of the dark and shadows and the prevalent atmospheres of claustrophobia and despair' (67). One hardly needs the Derridean point about the instability of genre markers to think that these marks could equally well designate horror or psychological fantasy and that any unequivocal designation based on these signs would come short. One imagines, briefly, that Ince might seize on and cite Alida Valli's famous black leather trench coat as indisputable mark of *noir* in *Eyes without a Face*. (Black leather trench coats occur again not only on one of the victims in *Eyes*, but also on Anouk Aimée in *Head against the Walls*, a migrating sign.) Likewise, when Ince discusses melodrama, she omits any consideration of how melodrama and *Grand Guignol* might coincide in Franju's work. Again, it is not that melodrama and *noir* might not be present; it is that they are unstably so, as well as several other genres are. By stabilising Franju's work in relation to critically more accepted and canonised genres, Ince is able to assert the filmmakers' continuity with the New Wave directors from whom he appears to depart: she describes a 'parallel between Franju's early features and those of Godard and Chabrol, in whose films the generic marks of gangster movies, the musical and

the thriller abound' (66). For whatever reasons, Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Chabrol are more canonised directors, especially in Anglophone considerations of the New Wave, than is, say, Alain Resnais. One exception here is Joan Hawkins who has a wonderful chapter on the links between *Eyes without a Face* and *Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais, 1959) in her study of art and horror films (Hawkins, 2000, 53-64). Given also that Franju worked with Duras, some consideration of what common ground exists between them (investigations of female insurrection, for example) might have served readers better than vague evocations of Godard and Chabrol.

The last chapter of Ince's book examines gender and sexualities, which constitute, as she puts it, 'an area of film criticism that hardly existed when the first books on [Franju] were written in the 1960s, but which is now an indispensable part of the theoretical study of French cinema in its cultural context, that is to say, of most Anglophone writing on French film' (9). This certainly seems like an odd statement and the disappointingly limited way in which Ince carries out her examination does not mitigate its oddness. There is some consideration of lesbianism as a subtext in *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (147) and a listing of somewhat kinky images (145), as well as a consideration of the family, but none of this really illuminates gender and sexuality in Franju's films on more than a thematic level. What about his use of voice-over, for example, like the framing female voice over in *Blood of the Beasts*? How is his thematic of 'faciality,' which Ince does discuss at some length (100-107), albeit not in the chapter on gender and sexuality, specifically gendered? Given the paradoxical affinity Cocteau declared with Franju, when he remarked that he entrusted Franju with film adaptations of *Thomas the Impostor*, since he would rather be betrayed by Franju than anyone else (Ince, 80), and given Franju's use of Cocteau's lover, Jean Marais, as the voice-over in the posthumous adaptation of Cocteau's novel, one imagines that Ince might have something to say about male-male desire, but on that subject she stays silent. Here, Durgnat in 1968 was much more radical: at least he could articulate that gayness would make some difference (see Durgnat, 1968, 124-128). So much for the advances of the past decades in scholarship.

'Franju's enigma,' in Ince's phrase, can be playfully read as a challenge to our imaginations: picture it as a mysterious inscription or an intertitle. One thinks of the enigmatic and terrifying bird-masked man in *Judex* who arrives at the masked ball bearing a limp white dove in his hand which he then appears to bring back to life. The bird mask cites, among others, Max Ernst's *Lôplôp*, while the white dove forms something of a signature of Franju's: the scene thus marks a double affiliation, a disclosure and a concealment. When, at the end of that film, the eponymous hero appears, now unmasked,

on a sunny beach and sets white doves to fly, Franju seems to acknowledge playfully that cinematic enigmas may be nothing more tricks of misdirection. While Ince's text, for now, provides one set of answers, one can only hope that Franju's enigma, indeed, the enigma of his cinema, will continue to provoke.

Bibliography

- Caillois, Roger (2003) *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*. Ed. Claudine Frank. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Durgnat, Raymond (1967) *Franju*. London: Studio Vista.
- Hawkins, Joan (2000) *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Hollier, Denis, ed. (1988) *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*. Betsy Wing, translated. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lautréamont, Comte de (1994) *Maldoror*. Cambridge, MA: Exact Change.
- Vialle, Gabriel (1968) *Georges Franju*. Paris: Editions Seghers.
- White, Edmund. (1993) *Genet: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Filmography

- Franju, Georges (1948) *Blood of the Beasts (Le sang des bêtes)*. France.
- (1960) *Eyes without a Face (Les yeux sans visage)*. France.
- (1963) *Judex*. France.
- (1965) *Thomas the Impostor (Thomas l'imposteur)*. France.
- (1966) *White Curtains (Les rideaux blancs)*. Germany.
- Resnais, Alain (1959) *Hiroshima mon amour*. France.