

A SOUND FILM BY DUFRÊNE

Eugeni Bonet / Eduard Escoffet

Tambours du jugement premier is the first film to probe the depths of “imaginary” film and the most significant cinematographic contribution of François Dufrêne (Paris, 1930-1982), a poet whose work stood out in the field of sound poetry and who had joined the lettrist movement in 1946. This is a work without screen or film, which eliminates not only the dictatorship of the image over the word, but abandons the projected image altogether, “because it’s no longer a matter of perceiving it passively, but rather one of imagining or recreating it.” A little later, Dufrêne distanced himself from Isidore Isou and his circle, whom he had met when less than twenty years old, and finally left the group in 1954, from which moment he would apply the adjective “ultralettrist” to his works of poetry, above all the phonetic pieces, at the same time as he plunged more deeply into the plastic arts, forming part of the *Nouveaux Réalistes* group.

Originally however, Dufrêne had indeed anticipated a visual part of the film, never taken to fruition, which was not even complete when the script was published in *Ion*. The images had to be animation and details of objects - “squares and other geometric shapes”, but the weight of the work lay clearly in its soundtrack, which is all that the initial project finally became. It could therefore be considered a piece of sound art rather than a film in the conventional sense (it has, of course, already been made perfectly obvious that lettrism has always been at odds with conventions), but given that it was conceived as such, we shall speak of a sound film in the strictest sense of the term.

The first presentation of the piece as an “imaginary” film without screen or film took place once again in Cannes in 1952, at the Alexandre III cinema. The scant resources it required enabled the session to be improvised – the voices were situated in the four corners of the hall and while the performers recited the texts the lights flashed on and off and the stage curtain opened and closed repeatedly. “I shall go in four different ways, allowing myself to be swept along by the proposition of not taking into account the camera’s real, technical possibilities, because this should only satisfy conditions based on ideals and ideas. According to the programme handed out at Cannes, “François Dufrêne’s imaginary cinema proposal systemises to the highest degree the exhaustion of cinematographic mediums, situating itself beyond all their machinery”. It is at the same time the frustration of the public’s expectations and an invitation to the viewer’s imagination; another rupture and another liberation, this time from the impositions of the image.

As previously mentioned, the original script was published in *Ion* preceded by a brief text on theory that succinctly outlined Dufrêne’s lines of work: the autonomous input of voice and sound (with express recognition of Artaud’s influence); the organisation of the squares in the image; the reciting and its tonal intensities; and removal of the aphorism to the cinema. It also made a theoretical attack on the concept of “imaginary film” in the form of a critique on the perfection of cinematographic machinery, admitting however a certain incapability to develop

this concept further. Following its “live” performance at Festival de Cannes in 1952, *Tambours...* was aired in a radio broadcast in 1973 in the framework of programmes organised for the blind by France Culture, with the participation of former lettrists such as Gil J. Wolman and Jacques Spacagna. A third version was recorded in 1981 which has since been included in several exhibitions and a number of film screening sessions, in addition to forming part of the collection held by the Musée National d’Art Moderne at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris.

According to the script, the image was based on geographical shapes inside which appeared animated objects in movement: the screen was transformed into a draughtboard on which the objects changed position and thus altered their meaning; occasionally, the squares were transfigured into everyday material objects such as French windows, clovers, fans and even two small islands “linked by a coming-and-going of macaronis”. Thus, an intersection was formed between geometric shapes (squares, rhombuses, hexagons, letters) and fanciful objects, everyday articles, with certain possible erotic connotations (a woman’s legs, high-heeled shoes...). Dufrêne’s project therefore distanced itself from the outset from the chiselled recycling presented by Isou, though it would, on the other hand, be in consonance with his ideas on metaphoric narrative and hypergraphic super-writing, which were also carried into the domain of film.

The soundtrack contains an important phonetic work which includes, in fact, almost all of the compositions and scores that Dufrêne had produced up to that time in the form of “lettrist poems” and “sung aphorisms”. These are two highly distinct axes – supporting sound and text (in many cases a play on words) – which combine and respond to Dufrêne’s experimental concerns, one of the references of sound poetry. It was he who developed, around 1953, the *Crirythmes* – score-less sound compositions which, following in the lettrist wake, put forward a new poetry rooted in expression and primitivism. These compositions renounced any type of discursive content and, like Wolman’s *megapneumes*, consisted in improvisations recorded on a tape recorder employing all the possible capabilities of voice and body and based on a certain phrase by Antonin Artaud which asserted that “in Europe, people no longer know how to shout”.

Years later, in the sixties, Dufrêne published several of his pieces in *OU*, the record-magazine published by Henri Chopin, included among which were “Paix en Algérie”, a 1958 *Crirythme* which conserves certain memories of his period in lettrism. Together with Wolman and Jean-Louis Brau, Dufrêne was one of the first to use the microphone to investigate the full potential of the voice, once it had been categorically separated from writing (the sound recording as the only transcription possible).

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