



MEETING WITH GAËLLE CHOISNE

about her project CRIC CRAC

Tuesday 22 March 2016 at 2 pm
ESA, 36 bis rue des Ursulines, Tourcoing
free access

INTERVIEW

The Cric Crac project produced by the artist, takes the form of an environment, with media, forms of matter, and textures from which emerge images and films; in the form of a trilogy, these question the existence of the figure of zombies and werewolves, along with their origins and their continued existence, in contemporary Haitian culture.

"Cric Crac" is a trilogy with an 11-minutes prologue made in Haiti, a central section lasting 88 minutes made in France and Canada and with the Internet, and last of all an epilogue. "Cric Crac" is a title taken from quite an old Haitian tradition which invites a storyteller to say 'Cric' to the assembly. Through this title, Gaëlle Choisne clearly suggest an invitation to listen to old and more contemporary stories.

For Rendez-vous | 15, IAC Villeurbanne, Lyon Biennale, 2015, Gaëlle Choisne, born in Cherbourg in 1985 and living in Lyon since she studied at the ENSBA-Lyon (National School of Fine Arts) presented the Cric Crac film trilogy, within a sculptural installation. This part is made up of documents about origins and various genres where there is a cross-fertilization between local Haitian traditions and western influences.



Mo Gourmelon: How did your specific interest in Haitian voodoo come about?

Gaëlle Choïne: First and foremost, my deep interest in “cultural postcolonial studies” very quickly took shape in the country of Haiti, thanks to the exemplary nature of its itinerary. It was in fact the first colonized country in the world, and the first independent country in the history of humankind: one of Napoleon’s striking defeats, and one that is left out of our reading of Western History. This independence, reduced to nothing by the imperialist slave trade, prompted me to try and understand this process of failure, because today Haiti is still the poorest country in the American continent.

My mother is of Haitian origin, which is what led me to take a trip there. At the time I was very coyly involved in experimental video, dealing rather with the manipulation of animated images, close to found footage. This is still the case, but with a greater scope and assertiveness. I’ve also watched a lot of horror movies, and films about cannibals, and my master’s thesis steered me towards this avenue combining horror and colonialism. The zombie figure is an extension of this.

MG: How did you decide about the form? Was it planned in advance based on your earlier experiences and works, or did it become defined during these new investigations? How did you situate yourself in the investigation of this project? Is it your voice we hear during the interviews, for example? What status do you give to the René Depestre quotations, in the prologue, like inserts of static, silent texts?

GC: I made those first images quite by chance during a meeting, on a visit to a museum that was formerly a colonial mansion converted into a place of memory for slavery. In my sculptures I often work with coarse cooking salt and I knew that this kind of salt had a mystical dimension. So I put the question to those two men, who were quite prepared for me to film them. The quality of the image is incidentally linked with that haphazard encounter, and not connected with any anticipation of the images and works to come. What’s more, I intervene as the first viewer of my own video, unlike a documentary where absence and hindsight put a form of objectivity at some remove. I took up a position so as to incorporate an assumed subjective familiarity. The form came quite naturally with an exemplary admiration for Pasolini’s film *La Rabbia*, and those many different voices, lyrical, official and poetic, which collide with the retrieved archival images. So I wanted to include different voices and images which, for me, are documents. The novelistic and pseudo-historical and scientific voice, that of René Depestre, the voices of the two men and my own voice, the voices of undoctored testimony, and the official voice, that of television.

I’ve been working on this subject since 2012-2013. The first finalized editing of “Cric Crac-Prologue” dates from June 2013. Then I worked on the second part, because I was also envisaging an autonomous part that was at the same time dependent on a whole. Technically speaking, I didn’t have the patience to wait for another trip to Haiti (I only finally made it two years later). In the end I got a research residency in Montreal where I was able to work on a new part with the Haitian diaspora and above all the CIDIHCA (International Center for Haitian, Caribbean and Afro-Canadian Documentation and Information). Things were constructed in a gradual way. Perhaps there’ll be a short version of the trilogy.

MG: So the second part was partly made in Montreal. Did the fact of no longer being in Haiti for the filming, and of being at a geographical distance, have any effect on the new sequences shot, and on the editing?

GC: Yes, of course. To begin with, the fact of not having images of Haiti was a problem. And in the end that constraint became rather interesting. So the editing was done by using even more external sources, overlaid imagery, and found footage. Finding Haiti elsewhere than in Haiti, through colonial signs and symptoms in colonizing countries, probably calls for a new way of thinking about the subject, without recourse to an illustrative method or traditional editing.

MG: In Montreal, in the second part of your trilogy, your method of questioning becomes different. You deliberately cut your questions to Frantz Voltaire and Monique Dauphin, whose identities and functions we learn about after the credits. The connections of the cuts are visible. On the other hand, you share the same space in the vehicle with the students and your voice is once again audible and accomplice-like, as in the garden of the museum dedicated to slavery in Haiti, which you refer to at the beginning of the interview.

GC: In fact words are being continuously offered, they never stop, and I make cuts in the editing. There are actually so many things to say about what is true about that country, that the voices are interrupted. What's more, the students' voices keep on talking at the end, even if the film was meant to end. At times there are even kinds of vocal collisions, like in forced discussions during which, obviously enough, those taking part talk on their own, without hearing the other. Everyone has an interpretation, a word to say; in particular, nobody listens to the leaders, the people in charge, and the private companies setting foot in Haiti, who don't take the population into account. In addition, my own position shifts. In the first part I'm almost an actress. Then I gradually fade myself out. This was caused by the circumstances of the interviews. I also liked the desire to sometimes flirt with somewhat classical kinds of documentary interviews. But my voice quickly appears in the slightly chaotic flow of discussion between the two students, which lasted nearly two hours. What was involved, above all and in relation to the people I encountered, was setting up a relation of exchange and knowledge, linked with their positions, their desires, and their ways of being. It was also important that everyone's names and statuses should appear at the end, because I was keen to put everybody on the same level. Emphasizing the fact that the historian's words are every bit as valid as those of the person concerned by the subject, although that person will possibly have a more sensitive and affective way of referring to certain specific aspects of this subject. This is a way of re-using a more chaotic but less hierarchized historiographical method, which permits a friction between the subjectivity and a form of distance pertaining to a scientific, anthropological and historical study.

MG: At the beginning of the interview you make mention of “found footage”, referring to the use of found images, and images used for other purposes as factors of a new narrative. Some experimental film directors reject this narrative development and focus on an imagery and editing processes that are visually abstract, rhythmic and dynamic. The issue of the narrative in these re-utilizations is thus a subject of debate in certain circles. How did you choose the film excerpts and the clips, as well as the sequences which appear simultaneously on your computer screen?

GC: I think that in the second part of the film the found footage is used to question the use of the image today. Access to imagery is now easy. Our ways of using the digital media, and our access to information are saturated and overloaded with true and false information through the Internet. The manipulation of images is part of the documents which I sought out for the film, and which have become fully-fledged material. The way I see it, some images are thus documents which express lots of things about our societies. The film made with a laptop and posted on Youtube, as well as video clips, for example, have a significance for a contemporary anthropological study.

Technically speaking, it was important for me to find a way of not having to export all the film excerpts. This is actually a monster job which calls for sophisticated equipment. So I decided to see my video in a very straightforward and very empirical way, by simply re-filming the passages in the screened sequences which interested me. Sometimes with traces of that distance which is created, as, for example, with the excerpt from John Waters's *Mondo Trasho*, where the beginning of the sequence is repeated like an involuntary bug. Making these traces visible is important. Even if one makes use of tricks, not hiding those tricks sheds light on a different dimension of the person directing. In the same way, and to get back to the editing, I use the equipment that anyone might use for editing. Amateurism becomes a real assumed stance, with all its qualities and its shortcomings, and above all its limits. But that tended to make me laugh, editing an 88-minute video with amateur, family, accessible software, and pushing the paradox of technique, know-how and DIY, with not much wherewithal, at home. What's more, I don't think technique really interests me. All of a sudden I'm using this gap to find experimental subterfuges.

The choice of selected sequences came to me in quite a logical way. After watching a few films about voodoo, those American blockbusters, obvious images echoed the words I'd collected. At times I relied in particular and directly on the words of the historian Frantz Voltaire to feed the idea. Then there was a construction game in the manner of the “marabout/piece of string”. In Montreal, thanks to Optica and Arts3, I had time to meet people, find documents, and look at quite a few films. Then certain images came later, during my travels, my discoveries on the Internet, and discussions, added to my personal film references.

To take the precise example of the sequences which appear at the same time on the screen, first and foremost I had the feeling of having such a large amount of found images which I did not necessarily want to abandon. That sensation of having so many things to say had a tendency to spin off in every direction. With computer searches, a lot of imagery and information is available, but, in the end, you don't have access to anything, or anything much, in any depth. All these impressions prompted me to make certain selections. I used an extract from Arnold Antonin's unfindable documentary film *Le Chemin de la liberté*, made in 1974, humanity's first zombie figure, and I did it wittily, Jesus come back to life, in an American-style religious epic film adapted in Haitian creole, an amateur video of a voodoo follower slowly filming the altar of a voodoo ceremony posted on Youtube, a video game *Tuto*: young Americans make comments as they kill some zombies on an island. This produces a general atmosphere, that is far from being Manichaeic, of a mass culture, religious ideas which have been following us for decades, subtle bludgeoning attacks on ways of living and ways of resisting. As far as clips are concerned, Michael Jackson is the perfect representation, from a racial and industrial viewpoint, of a form of contemporary zombie figure. As a victim or maker of this zombification, the fact that the zombie figure is paradoxical, as resistant as it is alienated, particularly interests me. The video clip of Michel Martelly is funny. As the present-day president of the country, since 2011, he used to be a singer. Once and for all, the boundaries are very porous between the different social and political spheres, the knowledge of the élites, and popular culture.